NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010)

Senior teachers guiding the IMS three-month retreat — vipassanā and mettā across a long retreat

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Contents

THREE-MONTH RETREAT (IMS, 2010)

Starting A Long Retreat	54 min	4
Mindful Living: Sīla as Part of Our Practice	57 min	19
Foundations of Practice	59 min	35
Awareness Is The Path	52 min	49
The Sources of Happiness	58 min	65
Am I OK?	54 min	81
Morning Instructions – Day 10 - Standing Meditation	58 min	97
Mundane Right View	57 min	105
Working with Difficult Emotions	1h01	118
Acceptance	55 min	136
Mettā	1h03	148
The Factors of Awakening	1h03	166
Unentangled Knowing	1h00	183
Simplicity of Non-Reactive Mind	59 min	200
The Buddha's Question	1h06	218
Q&A: Faith, Effort, Mettā, Lay Practice, and Fear	59 min	234
Courage and Compassion	1h03	248
The Great Question, Investigation and Doubt	41 min	267
Guided Mettā Meditation For All Beings	46 min	277
Compassion	55 min	283
Buddha's Advice on Becoming Free from Latent Tendencies	1h04	296
Part 2 Instructions - Day 1	1h06	316
Mindfulness	1h02	325
Wise and Balanced Effort	1h02	341

Body and Mind	1h00	355
Pith Practice Teachings	40 min	361
The First Noble Truth	1h01	370
Gratification, Danger, and Escape	56 min	384
The Spiritual Compost	48 min	398
Not-Self and Selfing	57 min	408
The Seven Factors of Enlightenment	57 min	421
Guided Meditation: Relaxed, Open Awareness	41 min	436
Wise Effort	55 min	440
What versus Why	1h00	450
Patience - The Art of Caring Slowly	57 min	465
Gratitude and Generosity	1h00	481
Three Kinds of Craving	56 min	496
Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)	1h00	506
Identity and Identification	57 min	520
Equanimity	1h02	530

CHAPTER 1

Starting A Long Retreat

Guy Armstrong · 54 min

> *In this opening talk for the three-month retreat at IMS, Guy Armstrong offers guidance on approaching an extended period of intensive practice. He begins by honoring the profound choice participants have made, noting how contemplative traditions throughout history have revered long retreat as one of the greatest undertakings a person can make.*
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> *Armstrong explores the interconnected qualities of inspiration and aspiration, tracing the etymology of 'inspiration' to the Latin 'spirare' (to breathe), connecting breath with spirit across cultures—from the Pāli 'pāṇa' in the Ānāpānasati Sutta to the Hawaiian 'aloha' and Sanskrit 'prāṇa.' He invites practitioners to reflect on pivotal moments that sparked their spiritual journey and to consider their deepest aspirations, noting the Buddha's own aspiration for the complete end of suffering.*
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> *The talk addresses the practice of renunciation (nekkhamma), one of the ten pāramīs, acknowledging both the sorrows and joys of the renunciate life. Armstrong offers practical guidance on 'taking what's given'—accepting conditions as they are, releasing communication and digital connections, and maintaining noble silence. He emphasizes that beneath all techniques, what truly matters is the silence and one's presence within it. Drawing on T.S. Eliot, Thoreau, and the poet W.S. Merwin, he frames the retreat as learning the art of living wisely, concluding with Bhikkhu Bodhi's teaching that liberation requires only two things: to start and to continue.*

I hope you had a pleasant day today. In terms of an ordinary start of retreat, was this perhaps a little more pleasant than usual? You got a few extra things to do—talking to each other, getting to know some people, picking apples. I think we're going to be eating apples for the rest of the three months. You did a great job.

But it is a special time starting a retreat like this. Whether you're here for six weeks or three months, it's a big undertaking. Tonight I want to talk about this approach of starting a long retreat, because it's like nothing else in our lives and nothing else in the world.

I think we all believe that this is one of the greatest things a human being can do. There are many cultures throughout history who have revered this practice in that spirit. When you practice in Thailand or Burma or other parts of Asia, you practice in a culture where this has long been understood as one of the greatest undertakings a person

can make. Meditators who undertake it are really respected—more highly than government officials or well-paid generals or politicians. It's very unusual to be practicing in a culture where a meditator is at the pinnacle of status, because as you know, it's not like that in our culture. Rather the opposite. Our culture doesn't really have any frame of reference for what we're doing.

If you look from the outside with modern Western eyes, this looks pretty strange. The only thing I could really compare it to, in order to get any respect in this culture, is like an extreme sport. You're doing one of the most extreme things you could possibly do.

A few years ago, I went to Burma and ordained for about six weeks and practiced with a very wonderful meditation master named Pa Auk Sayadaw. The conditions were difficult. I lost, on average, about half a pound a day while I was there—eating just one meal, not a lot of protein, rainy season. When I came back after six weeks, I met some people I've known for many years. One of them, a friend—not a close friend, but a friend—is an ex-Navy SEAL. For those of you who aren't from this country, the Navy SEALs are a very elite part of the fighting force. They're the kind of people who get dropped off from submarines in James Bond–style operations, climb up on the shore, and do battle in foreign lands. They're trained to do that kind of work. Their training is very intense, physically demanding. Sometimes people die in the training.

So I came back. I'd lost a lot of weight. My head was still pretty shaved. I looked pretty bedraggled, to tell you the truth. The monastery didn't impress him. Buddhism didn't impress him. Meditation didn't particularly impress him. But what he was really impressed by was that I sat still for eight hours a day. Because he knew that was not an easy thing to do. And it's not an easy thing to do, as you all well know.

There's this combination of extreme effort required in doing this practice fully, with wholehearted commitment, but you also know the incredible benefits that come out of it. I don't know any other path to get to this range of benefits so directly and have them be developed so strongly and so reliably. We heard a number of them this morning as you were stating your intentions: the development of peace, of compassion and love, of wisdom, of coming toward the end of suffering, of healing, of equanimity, of spaciousness, of inner strength and balance. The benefits, when you stop to think about it, are really unmatched—but the effort is also kind of unmatched. We are fortunate enough to know that it's worth it. A lot of people don't.

I want to appreciate again the challenge that you're all undertaking and also the possibilities, which are really tremendous here. Given this very unique and fruitful situation—and I know it's going to be fruitful and a wonderful experience for everyone, be-

cause that's been our experience through so many of these retreats—I want to talk about how to approach it. Both in very practical terms, what to do with the body; in heart terms, what to do with attitude and motivation; and also just some information, conceptually, about undertaking a long retreat. Those are the three areas I want to address this evening.

I want to start by touching on two things Carol mentioned last night: inspiration and aspiration. The first one, inspiration, is a very important element of why we're here. I was curious what the dictionary had to say about it. When I looked it up, I found, as many of you know, that it's from the Latin word *spirare*, which means to breathe. This word is also the root of the word *spirit*. So inspiration and spiritual are linked in their root meanings, and both are connected to the breath.

You'll find this connection between breath and spirit in a number of cultures. It's in English and Western culture, of course. In the Hawaiian language, the word *aloha* means the breath of life. It also means love or affection—it has broad meaning. When someone in Hawaii says *aloha* to you, they may be saying hello as a greeting or goodbye as a greeting, but they're also saying love, affection, and life in that word. In Pali, the language of the old suttas—

The famous sutta about breathing is called the Ānāpānasati Sutta, the discourse on the mindfulness of in and out breathing. So breath here is *pāna*. Of course, it's central in our meditation practice. In Sanskrit, which forms the basis of a lot of Hindu thought, that word becomes *prāna*. And again it means the breath of life. So breath and life are closely associated.

And now here's the payoff. Inspiration is defined as being filled with an exalting influence. So you can sort of feel like the breath of life and all that life means fills us. And that's what it is to become inspired—to be full of the breath of life.

Carol touched on this last night, and so I wanted to bring it in again. Often these moments of inspiration are very central to our dharma life, to our path. And so I wanted to ask you again to reflect on what have been some of the inspiring moments in your spiritual life. They may have been things that happened before you knew about practice. They may have been things that came through practice. They may have been the things that started you on a path. It could have been a book. It could have been an experience when you were younger—children have lots of very inspiring experiences. It could have been meeting a teacher, someone who's being inspired you. It could have been an experience in your own meditation or hearing about a friend's experience.

So as you think about those experiences that maybe are at the base or kind of underlie your understanding of spirituality, your understanding of your own potential, what comes to mind?

Someone shared that at the conclusion of a mettā retreat here, the person sitting next to her and she exchanged blessing cords. She was so full of love at that moment, crying from happiness, perhaps a little sadness, full of love. They tied the cords on each other, so she tied it on her partner with the utmost love and affection, and her partner did the same for her. She still wears it, but that moment was so explicitly clean. Beautiful—speaking with a partner and tying a red blessing cord around each other's wrist and doing it with a real spirit of care and openness of heart and loving kindness. Moments like that can move us and stay with us and show us a human possibility, a possibility that's real within our own hearts.

Another person shared that on his first ten-day retreat here, he was really struggling with a lot of inner suffering through his mind going over and over. And what happened? He was carrying around a history of suffering, coming into the present moment, touching a railing, just feeling the freedom in the here and now, and that whole cloud of mental construction just evaporating, opening into freedom. Beautiful.

So I'm sure all of you have your moments, near or far in time, that in some ways maybe inspire your whole path. I'll just share one from my own history. I was in my early twenties, and I was out in a forest in Texas. I was living in Texas at the time. And it was late afternoon, the sun was setting, and I was surrounded by these tall pine trees of East Texas. And the light coming through the pines was so beautiful—you know, the green of the pines and the kind of streaky sunlight coming through them—that I just said to myself, I mean, I don't even know where this came from because I'm not particularly theistic, but the thought came: God is love. And just that there's this kind of ecstatic and exalted feeling of touching something really divine. And in some ways that moment has always provided inspiration for me on the path—that there's the possibility of feeling that degree of love so directly. And I wanted to live with openness to that, availability to that.

So in some ways, these moments of inspiration, when our heart responds to them, form what we want from spiritual life, or what Carol called our aspiration. And this morning, many of you shared your aspiration for this retreat, which were all lovely, beautiful to hear, and I could relate to all of them. I'd also invite you to think about your aspiration over the long term. You know, I hope you think about your spiritual practice as a lifelong thing. For me, I consider it extending beyond one lifetime, possibly to many lifetimes. So when you think on that bigger scale, where do you want to go?

Where do you want your practice to take you? I'm not going to ask you to share this because it can get quite personal. But to think on a really big scale—what's possible for you? What would you really like to realize through your Dharma practice?

Just to mention that the Buddha's aspiration when he started his journey was for the complete end of suffering. He was convinced that there had to be a way, and he didn't care what it took to find it. That's what he dedicated his journey to—finding that complete end of suffering.

Aspiration is an important thing. I work out in a gym near my home in California, and there was a guy who used to work there who was one year a competitor in the Mr. America contest. This was back before it became Mr. Universe and Arnold won it—things changed after it got into the movie world. But back in the days of Mr. America and that level of competition, this guy who worked at our gym was a Mr. America competitor. They had a photo of him in the window in his Mr. America outfit—you know, the skimpy bathing suit, body oiled, striking one of those poses where all the muscles stand out in great relief. He was very impressive.

I had been working with him; he was giving me some pointers on a couple of exercises. I happened to put my hand on his shoulder, and it felt like touching a brick wall. He was so solid—no soft give there at all. Very solid. His name was Lance.

One day I was in the gym, and two teenagers were working out together, spotting each other on the machines and helping each other with the heavy weights. I was eavesdropping on their conversation, and one of them said, "Did you see Lance in here the other day? He pressed 515 pounds." For me, that's an inconceivable amount of weight. At my level, it's considered really good if you can press your own weight, which for me would be about 160—and I'm not quite there. So Lance pressed 515 pounds, and these young guys had witnessed it.

These were teenagers, not highly developed in their physiques yet. But the way they talked about their hero Lance really indicated to me that they were basing an aspiration on that. Something about Lance had inspired them with a sense of what was possible, and because of that, their motivation was somewhere up here, whereas my motivation was somewhere down here. It's a different kind of inspiration than we're interested in here perhaps, but for them Lance was really inspiring, and he changed where they aimed their workouts. They had a different idea of what was possible.

So I encourage us all to think high in our aspiration. There's no downside, as long as it doesn't come with expectation in a certain amount of time. But as we aspire to something like the compassion, the clarity, the wisdom of the Buddha, or the Dalai Lama, or Thich Nhat Hanh—or whoever is a great being for you—that can only uplift us and move us down that avenue. It's a beautiful thing.

With aspiration, a few people mentioned it this morning and I wanted to draw it out: whether we consciously include it or not, it's always helpful to remember that as we develop our own hearts and minds, as we develop our practice, we touch and benefit many, many other beings—through our example, through our kindness, through just our way of being in the world. So we can take that into account. We never know how far those ripples will go.

We say—it may be a little inflated, but we like to say—we practice for the benefit of all beings. Because we may inspire friends who then might take up practice, open their hearts, touch many other beings, and we never know how far it goes. So we like to remember that our practice is never just for ourselves but always for the benefit of many, many—we could say countless, we could say all—sentient beings.

From this beautiful aspiration, from the inspiration it came from, and from a great deal of faith—everyone here has a lot of faith. To put yourself in this situation for six weeks or three months, there's a lot of trust, a lot of faith. It's a beautiful quality.

We come here and leave behind our normal life. We leave behind our friends and our family, the comforts of our home, our choice in food, our cars, our choice in music or movies or books or television—all the pleasures of our daily life—to come into this very spartan environment. The word for this classically in the tradition is renunciation. We let go of all those pleasant things of our daily life in order to come into a situation which is not so gratifying on that level. This is not an easy thing to do.

Of course, we're really reenacting what the Buddha did when he left his very comfortable home life—his palaces, his family, the wealth of his family—at age twenty-nine and embarked on six strong years of spiritual practice.

We're reenacting that in our own way.

This quality of renunciation, an important step in any spiritual life, is in our tradition one of the ten pāramīs. The pāramīs are the qualities that when fully developed lead to complete freedom and awakening. They're qualities like loving-kindness and equanimity and patience and determination and effort. And one of them is this factor of renunciation—the willingness to let go of our usual comforts.

But it's not an easy thing to do, and in the Buddha's discourses he sometimes talked about the sorrows of the renunciate life. You may feel those in the early days of the retreat. You may feel the missing of what you left behind at home—comforts, friends, family, food, chocolate, all those things. You may miss that, and there may be a little bit of grief. This is part of the adjustment to this life, the sorrows of the renunciate life. The Buddha said that in the end, these sorrows, these forms of grief, are overcome by the joys of this life. I'll talk about that more in a minute. But just to acknowledge that there is some difficulty in making this shift. The transition is usually felt quite keenly in the first several days, where the contrast is more apparent.

Sometimes this word *renunciation* doesn't sound so good in our culture. It seems like something really unpleasant, like a hair shirt being forced on us. And so some of the synonyms that are also used are simplicity, voluntary simplicity, letting go, relinquishment. It's said that the proximate cause for this letting go is spiritual urgency. There's something we really want to understand, and that urgency allows us to let go. So it's important to stay in touch with the urgency of why you're here. It all has a purpose.

This is from Thoreau, Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*: "I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach me and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

In a way, you could say we're here in order to learn how to live. Sometimes all the vocabulary of meditation doesn't make that connection so apparent, but that is really what we're all doing here. We're learning how to live wisely and with love.

The world has both beauty and pain, and a big part of the spiritual life is opening to both those dimensions of what life contains. We'll find that also in our retreat experience. A lot of it is about opening to the joy and the love that's available, and also the dukkha, the difficulty that is an essential element of life. As we open our hearts, we feel the beauty and love more directly. We feel the pain more sensitively too. But it's through our capacity to open, to feel both of those, to continue to open and hold them, that we grow and that we learn. That's an integral part of our journey.

It's such an interesting choice to come into this renunciate situation. I feel we're very lucky today as lay people. We have the chance to do this. In many cultures, even in Buddhist worlds, one is either a nun or a monk choosing the renunciate life, or one is a household person with family and responsibilities and work. In order to taste the beauties of the renunciate life, one has to abandon that daily life completely. But our situation is different. We can live a full daily life, a rich daily life, and come into a situation like this and in a way feel what it's like to live as a true renunciate.

I think on shorter retreats—like a week, ten days, even two weeks—we get a little taste of that. But as you settle in for six weeks or three months, you get to really explore that terrain. In the first week, you sort of settle in. And then—this has been my take on it—you're really living here. As you really live here, you're adjusting to this new life, this new style of life that is like a monastery, a temporary monastery. And then you get to experience that opening time, the opening to the beauty and the difficulty that's always been integral to deep spiritual life through many cultures, across traditions.

It's such an interesting choice. And the riches of this life are often just covered over by the busyness of our daily life. I think it was T.S. Eliot who described life in the twentieth century, normal kind of busy daily life, as "distracted from distraction by distractions." We don't even notice we've become distracted because the distractions have carried us away again.

In this life, there's only the essential activity to occupy us: sitting and walking and breathing and eating and sleeping and working and taking care of the body. Then that richness opens up out of that simplicity.

I don't know if you all tuned into this, but two weeks ago in California there was a very lovely event: the ordination of a bhikkhuni—that's a word for a Buddhist nun, a fully ordained nun—in the Theravadan tradition. That's the Southeast Asian tradition of Buddhism that our practice comes out of. It took place in California, and it was the first bhikkhuni ordination in our Theravadan tradition to happen in North America. There have been many legalistic complications and obstacles that prevented it from happening, but the first one took place two weeks ago and four women were ordained. That means they took the 254 precepts of a fully ordained Theravadan nun. So it's quite a step forward, I think, for the Dhamma in the West.

Our good friend Sylvia Boorstein was there. Sylvia teaches at Spirit Rock, an old student here, a friend of all of ours. She wrote about it for the Huffington Post—when you get home, you can look up Sylvia's article. It was a beautiful description of the event. Afterwards, we were at a couple of days of meetings together at Spirit Rock, and Sylvia was just reflecting on that experience. She said, "You know, I could have been a nun." She isn't—she has a family with a husband and four children and lots of grandchildren, very involved in an active daily life. But that call to a kind of quiet contemplative life was really speaking to her, as it has spoken to all of us.

As you make this transition from busy, active, engaged daily life into this simple way of living, there are often a lot of different feelings—especially when you're looking at six weeks or three months ahead. I just want to name some of these to let everyone know they're included and just part of the normal process, part of our practice at this point.

A common one is exhaustion. Often people come in from their busy lives thinking, "I just need to sleep for two days, then I'll be ready to go." There can be some nervousness, some fear—such a long time, maybe you haven't been in retreat for such a long time before. There can be inspiration as you reflect on the possibilities, and a sense of excitement. Often there can be self-doubt: "Am I going to be up to this? Am I going to be able to do it?" Based on our experience with many, many people, the answer generally is absolutely. There can be some loneliness, and also some confidence—"Yeah, I can do this. I've done days and days. I've done weeks. I can do this." All those feelings may be at play and may alternate during the early days of the retreat. We just take them into account. Notice that they're present. Don't resist. Don't hang on. They're all part of the heart's opening.

In terms of living in this renunciate way, I'd say—especially having practiced as a monk in Asia where conditions are a little tougher than this—the essential spirit of that life is to take what's given. We have lost control of our outer situation. We have surrendered in being here. We have thrown ourselves on the mercy of strangers. In some cases you may know the staff, and you may know they're really lovely strangers, but in many ways we're at the mercy of the cooks and managers and teachers and housekeepers. We've surrendered in a big way.

So in this spirit, we take what's offered to us. We take the food that's served—it may not be our first choice; we may have many good ideas on how the cooks could improve it. We generally refrain from expressing those. We accept the room that we're given. We might like one with more sunshine or a better view of the forest, but we accept where we have been offered to stay. We notice that the clothing we have with us is what we'll be working with and living with for the time that we're here. When we're a monk or a nun, we accept the medicine that's offered by the monastery. We work with these conditions, whether they're to our liking or not. Most of the places that I practiced in Asia as a monk, we received just one meal a day.

Usually it was at breakfast. And I have to tell you, if you haven't had a red fish curry at eight o'clock in the morning, you really haven't lived. So it's a little easier here.

In Zen, they have a saying: the mouth of a renunciate should be like a furnace that can burn the finest sandalwood or dried cow dung with equal ease. I don't think you'll be served dried cow dung, but just in case—with equal ease.

The Spirit Rock cooks have a sign on the bulletin board that says, "When we prepare a delicious meal, that's our practice. When we prepare an undelicious meal, that's your practice."

Along with the renunciation of our control, we also give up communication. We settle in here and, in the spirit of noble silence, we make a commitment not to communicate with our friends and family back home unless there's an emergency. We make a commitment not to communicate with one another, with other yogis who are on the retreat. We give up conversations. We give up different forms of contact. We recommend that even through the process of snail mail, you keep your letters to what's really necessary and urgent. No need to check the mailbox every day. No need to send outgoing letters every day. They'll know if they don't hear from you that you're doing fine.

This also includes all these new forms of communication that are multiplying at such a rate in our culture today—cell phones, text messages, instant messages, email, Facebook, Twitter. You may be used to following two dozen friends' activities through social media. All those things stop when we come here.

It's so interesting because five years ago, we didn't have to say much about this. Cell phones didn't work so well here, and there weren't smartphones, so people couldn't really check their email. Now you bring in a smartphone or a tablet or a netbook, and you could be running your own internet business from the annex for all we know. But we recommend that you don't. We ask that you not.

Really, for the sake of your own practice, we recommend that you give up all those forms of outside communication. It's not necessary to check your email or text messages or IMs or Facebook and Twitter while you're here. And if there's a continuing temptation to do that, Marilyn is really happy to receive your smartphone or tablet or netbook—whatever it is—and keep it under lock and key for the duration. This is what's going to make the kind of space and simplicity that lets those beautiful qualities of heart and mind unfold. It's the lack of complication that allows this flowering. I really encourage you to be very careful and follow this kind of guideline.

It's getting harder and harder to unplug from this always-connected world. Nielsen, the company that used to rate who was watching what TV programs—they're still a media rating company, but they've extended it beyond television—just released a report saying that American teenagers on average send or receive over one hundred text mes-

sages a day. The actual number was 3,146 a month. So those images you have of teenagers wandering through the malls with their thumbs never stopping? That seems to be fairly accurate—over one hundred a day.

One of our teachers works with a lot of young people and commented that this year, unlike any other year, it was harder for that group to unplug from all these different forms of connecting. She said the young people on this retreat seemed more afraid of the silence and solitude than in any other year. When they unplugged, they reported feeling a lot of fear of the emptiness.

This is a great place, as Thoreau said, to get back to the essential facts of life. What is it to just face life in its bare and simple form? What we often find is that we have a lot of self-identity based on this frequency of contact. It's sort of like: Is somebody talking to me now? Is somebody being aware of me? Is somebody messaging me? Because every time that happens, we get affirmed in someone's eyes. We get validated and appreciated, at least recognized that we exist. We've in a way started to construct our identity—a different kind of identity—on the frequency of these contacts. It's a new kind of phenomenon.

Based on this, I think we need to do an update of Descartes' famous posit of *cogito ergo sum*: I phone, therefore I am. This is the new rendering.

We're in a place where we're not looking to build up the self. We're looking to decrease the formation of self. Letting go of all those connections will help with that.

We also really request, in the spirit of this renunciation, that you not communicate with one another. This is so central for keeping an even keel in our community. As you know, when you drop into the silence and start to open up, you become really sensitive. A little bit of contact from someone else, especially when it's not expected, can be very disturbing.

Maybe somebody just wants to say, "I love you, I really think you're cool." Even that can set a lot of thoughts off. But what's more problematic is—let's take it from the other side. Let's say you found someone's behavior annoying. God forbid it should ever happen during these three months. But just occasionally, sometimes one yogi doesn't one hundred percent like what another is doing, and they feel the need to let the other person know where they are falling down. So they'll write them a note expressing this level of irritation. It's always signed "Metta."

But if you're the receiver of a critical note in this silence, with this sensitivity, it's like a bomb has gone off in the middle of your body. People are thrown into tumult by that for days—literally days—because we hear about it and we track its effects and its progress. It's one of the most difficult things that people can deal with on a retreat like this.

So please be kind to one another. Please don't send notes to one another. If there's something that someone else is doing that you feel is inappropriate—maybe annoying you, maybe annoying other people—please tell one of us and leave it to us to work it out with that person. We'll try to smooth the situation out in the way that seems most appropriate, and you don't need to try to work it out on your own. If there's one request that I would make, that would be it: if you're having a problem with someone else, please let us know.

I wanted in this spirit to say a little bit about the many different ways to communicate. You can write a note. You can touch someone. You can make gestures, pantomime around somebody. All of these are different ways of communicating, of connecting with someone here, that can feel intrusive if you're on the receiving end. It feels like somebody's coming into your space or making an inappropriate communication with you. So please refrain from all those different ways of communicating.

Sometimes in seeking to communicate, we might look to make eye contact as a way of starting a communication, initiating something. So again, I would refrain from using eye contact as a way to start communicating with somebody—hoping to catch someone's eye and maybe a spark will fly and then you'll be married by the end of the retreat, or whatever.

But if we were to say, "Don't make eye contact with anybody," then it would feel too frozen, too rigid. So it's not like that. Looking at people's faces in the middle of the retreat can be very heart-opening. I've learned a lot and opened to a lot of compassion and affection through just noticing the expressions on other people's faces while sitting a retreat. And if somebody happens to open their eyes and you make eye contact, it's not a problem. It's not that we always have to go around eyes downcast, never looking at another person's face. Just be sensitive—eye contact sometimes can be a little electric. Some people may prefer not to have any and may want to keep their eyes down. But if your eyes are up and someone else's eyes are up and they cross, it's not a big deal. Don't worry about it. But also don't use it as a way to say, "Now we really have something going together." Just simple. Keep it simple.

Remember that the purpose of living so simply as we're doing here is so that the mind's activity gets laid bare. We're not really so concerned with the things that the mind is fastening onto—whether it's the food or the bed or the noise or the teacher's in-

structions that day or the Dharma talk that didn't work for us. Those are the outer places where our movements of mind land and sometimes fixate, but we're more interested in the movement that's landed rather than where it's landed. Movements of liking and disliking, greed and aversion—that's what we want to understand, not the external circumstance so much.

The simplicity here lays bare those workings of the mind. It's like, as we're here over these six weeks, most of the leaves will come off these trees. And then you can really see how the limbs are filling the space that the leaves are currently covering.

The leaves obscure the structure of the tree. When the leaves fall, that structure becomes really clear. So when we take away the busyness of life, the bare movements of mind stand out like those limbs in fall. And that's what we're here to learn about, because that's where the freedom comes.

This is from T.S. Eliot: "Quick now, here, now, always—a condition of complete simplicity costing not less than everything, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." It's this complete simplicity that allows the wisdom and the love to grow. These are the deep sources of happiness that come through in an experience like this.

And that's why the Buddha said in the Dhammapada: "If by renouncing a lesser happiness, one attains to a happiness which is greater, then the wise pursue that happiness which is greater." That's what you're doing here. By letting go of the lesser happiness of our daily lives and all the pleasures and comforts of it, you're all pursuing a happiness which is greater, deeper, more reliable and lasting. This is why, for me, it's so inspiring to see all of you here, wanting to do this work, wanting to undertake this.

Just a couple more things to say before I finish. I want to talk a little bit about what really matters during your time here. You're going to hear from us lots of Dharma talks—most nights of the retreat there will be some Dharma talk. You'll hear lots of instructions. At times they'll sound really complicated, and you'll probably go crazy trying to figure out which one you should be doing at any given point in time.

I just want to say that all the techniques are really secondary. They're refinements that are very helpful, good skillful means. But the two primary things for me are the silence—and I don't mean the external silence, but the silence that you feel as you stop and listen—the silence and your presence within it. If you carry on and return to those two elements, your retreat will unfold. That's our baseline. So even though the instructions may get complicated, the techniques may get complicated, just keep coming back to that: the silence and the presence.

Silence has so much to teach us. This is from Walt Whitman: "There is that in me—I do not know what it is, but I know it is in me." That's sort of what we hear when we touch into the silence. There's something there. I can't say what it is, but there's something there. And that's what we want to let unfold in us.

Another beautiful quote I love on silence is from W.S. Merwin—a very handsome man; any biography you read of Merwin will always talk about what a good-looking guy he is. He's in his eighties now, lives on Maui. I got to meet him once when he was doing a book signing and autographed a book. He's a very lovely, gentle presence. It turns out he practiced Zen Buddhism, I believe with Aitken Roshi, who lived on Hawaii and taught for many years but recently died. So Merwin practiced Zen for many years under Aitken Roshi. And a line from one of his poems is: "Now all my teachers are dead except silence." All my teachers are dead except silence. So this continues to teach us, continues to inform us.

And the quality of presence, awakeness—it leads to the more specific forms of mindfulness and awareness that we'll be talking about. Just that sense of being awake and present in this moment. This we can trust in; this we can always come back to. It's very, very simple.

Really what we're learning is to live well, to live wisely. And there's an art to this. It's not really a science; it's an art. When I first started meditation practice, I was very focused on the technical aspects of meditation and the technical descriptions of the progress of the Buddhist path—things like the possibility of enlightenment, the stages of concentration referred to as jhānas, stream entry, arahantship, and so forth.

Those really called me. And I didn't realize that when I was going through the long retreat experiences here, what I was really learning was how to live—artfully, skillfully, wisely, compassionately, and lovingly.

But over the years, as I've taken the practice back into daily life and applied it and grown in the Dharma and grown in my daily life, it's really clear to me that I learned all those things here. In silent retreat, I learned how to listen. I learned how to open to what was difficult. I learned how to have compassion for myself and acceptance and loving kindness. I learned to wait before I spoke. I learned to know whether my mind was in a loving place or an angry place before I acted. And then all those flowers have come over years of carrying these teachings back into daily life.

This is from Alan Watts: "The art of living is neither careless drifting on the one hand, nor fearful clinging to the past on the other. It consists in being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique, in having the mind open and wholly receptive."

Does that remind you of meditation? That's a lovely description of meditation. That's what we're learning to do here—how to find that place in the mind and then how to meet each new moment from that kind of place. We discover it here because it's easier to discover it in the simplicity. We get grounded in it, we get steeped in it, so that when we take it back home, it becomes our baseline. That is what more and more over time we live from. And that's the place that allows all these beautiful qualities to flower.

I'll close with a quotation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the great translators and teachers of our time: "Liberation is the inevitable fruit of the path and is bound to blossom forth when there is steady and persistent practice. The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue. If these requirements are met, there is no doubt that the goal will be attained. This is the Dhamma, the undeviating law."

The only requirements for reaching the final goal are two: to start and to continue.

CHAPTER 2

Mindful Living: Sīla as Part of Our Practice

Sky Dawson · 57 min

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Sky Dawson illuminates sīla—ethical conduct—as an essential and often overlooked aspect of the threefold training alongside samādhi and paññā. Drawing from the Dhammapada's teaching that "if one is friendly by habit and skillful in conduct, one will have much delight and bring an end to suffering," she explores how mindful living bridges the gap between formal meditation practice and daily life.*
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> *Dawson shares her personal journey of discovering that meditation alone felt incomplete without the foundation of ethical conduct. She examines the five precepts not merely as rules to obey but as trainings that cultivate kindness, generosity, compassion, truthfulness, and clarity of mind. Drawing from her experiences caring for her dying husband and aging mother, she offers alternative framings such as "training in supporting life" and "speaking with openness and possibility" that bring the precepts alive in complex real-world situations.*
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> *The talk addresses practical aspects of sīla in retreat settings: how we speak to ourselves in our inner dialogue, how we communicate with teachers and community members, and the importance of pausing before speaking. Dawson emphasizes mindfulness (sati) as the crucial factor that enables ethical living, helping us remember to be present and respond appropriately in each moment. She concludes with the reflection that "as we think, so we become," encouraging practitioners to let their thoughts spring from love and concern for all beings.*

For those of you who don't know me yet, my name is Skye, and I'm the one from Australia, as you can probably tell from my accent.

This evening I'd like to talk about mindful living—about sīla as part of our practice.

Perhaps by now you may be feeling more settled into being here on this retreat, and you might be noticing that this is offering a wonderful opportunity to develop a sense of seclusion, a letting go of a lot of the busyness of your lives, to come actually here into your body and start to explore what's going on in your mind as well.

This retreat really offers us a lot of support to start to see clearly what's been happening in our lives and the sort of things that we might want to explore in making changes. We can really begin to examine these things because we're not so caught in all the distractions of our generally busy lives.

I don't know what happens here, but I imagine it's the same as in Australia, where so many people are so busy, so full of activities, full of work and families, so many commitments. It's very difficult to find any time at all to just sit down and look at what's happening. I'm sure some of you have felt that, and then suddenly you come here and it offers this wonderful opportunity to be quiet, to be free from so many of those distractions, and to start to see what's happening—to start to see what's actually happening in your life without all this busyness, to start to see what your habits are, how you go onto automatic pilot and live as best you can from day to day without really considering any of this.

This is such a great opportunity to allow the truth to unfold very naturally in a setting where we can actually sit and just be with ourselves and get to know ourselves directly. Now that can have some positives, but it can also bring up difficulties when we start to see that perhaps how we've been living is not exactly what we wanted, not exactly what we'd like to be doing. What we can do here is get a really different perspective on what's actually happening, what's really important in our lives. It gives us a great opportunity to explore this openly and perhaps honestly.

I find in my own life I'm often so busy, and when I go on retreats, I've been thinking that certain things are important and certain things are not, or that other things are huge problems in my life. When I actually go and sit on a retreat and enter a much quieter space, things get completely turned around. The things I thought were major problems perhaps are not so significant, and other things I thought were important perhaps are not. I find a different perspective. I start to see where I'm caught, and I start to see issues that are painful and need to be looked at, as well as other things about my life that are working really well. That's helpful.

So what does the retreat offer? Perhaps it offers a powerful way to explore the things we do and the way we think. We can start to find how to develop healthy mental patterns such as patience, kindness, and wisdom, and also develop positive skills so we can become more deeply connected with our life, with our way of living.

This is a path of practice, and what we're doing is exploring and perhaps looking at the possibility of making changes. We might want to change some unskillful habits that we have, and we might want to strengthen more skillful habits and see how we can do that. This is about developing right understanding, really connecting with this first

aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. As right view and right understanding grow stronger, so does our commitment to live a life of awareness and clarity, and we can choose our actions with care.

Recently I was thinking more about this practice of sīla, and I read an article with some quotes by Guy Armstrong. Tonight I'm going to share a few things he mentioned that support my practice and my talk. He said, "From the time of the Buddha, the path has been understood as a threefold training in ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. This is sīla, samādhi, and paññā, leading to an unconditioned inner freedom. At a time when every corner of the globe seems to be unraveling, it is auspicious that we explore the meaning and practice of the least glamorous and possibly most necessary of the three trainings: sīla."

That's what I think is so important to talk about tonight. It has particular relevance for me because for many years, in my first training, my first practice, my first retreats, it was really only about meditation. It was only about sitting on the cushion, actually. There was no walking meditation—it was sitting hour after hour after hour. It was very difficult, and as Sally mentioned, quite a challenge for the body and mind to stay sitting for long periods of time.

But I started to think it didn't seem very good. It seemed to be out of balance. What I found over several years was that I was having a completely different experience when sitting on retreat for long periods of time compared to when I would go home. There seemed to be a huge gap between the two, and I couldn't seem to bring them together. It was like I felt like a different person. I felt really calm, deeply concentrated on retreat, but there wasn't a way of bridging into my life as a whole. I kept wanting to go back on retreat and feeling that there was a disconnect, and I couldn't work out how to resolve this.

Later on I moved into other practices where walking meditation was incorporated into sitting meditation. Just as Joseph was explaining with the instructions for walking meditation, this is a profound practice. It opened up a whole different way of moving from sitting to eating or moving from sitting to my room. It meant that I could start to see a connection between my sitting practice and perhaps my engagement with family or my work.

I found that what I wanted to explore more was a way of living. How does this practice reflect in my life? And this is where I connected deeply with sīla.

This discovery of Sila felt so important to me—it was definitely the key.

The Dhammapada, that book of such succinct teachings, offers a wonderful phrase for this. It says: "If one is friendly by habit and skillful in conduct, one will have much delight and bring an end to suffering."

Now that's pretty interesting. It's so simple and so clear. If one is friendly by habit and skillful in conduct, one will have much delight and bring an end to suffering.

So have you found this in your own practice? That's the question. Have you had this sense of delight? Have you seen that the practice may bring an end to suffering? That's what we're here for, isn't it? It's really to explore suffering, the causes, the end, and the path—the Four Noble Truths. And this deeply brings us to connection with Sila.

In this path of practice, we're learning new skills. And for every skill in all of our life, we need a lot of practice, we need deep concentration, and we need constant repetition —whether it's learning to play a piano or, for me, doing something extremely difficult like learning to use a new cell phone. These things take a lot of practice and repetition. And of course we need to really pay attention; we need to have good concentration. Just think about all those things you may need to do in your life that are new and how you actually learn these skills.

Recently I read an article about leadership. The author had given a lecture to young potential leaders in the US, and he was encouraging them to include solitude in their leadership. These two things may not seem to go together very well, but he was saying that one of the most important things for a great leader is to have time of solitude—to develop introspection, concentration, and some really deep consideration about things.

He was also talking about thinking, about what thinking actually is. And I'm sure over the next weeks, you'll start to really explore thinking. But this is what he wrote:

"My first thought is never my best thought. My first thought is always someone else's. It's always what I've already heard about the subject, always the conventional wisdom. It's only by concentrating, sticking to the question, being patient, letting all the parts of my mind come into play, that I arrive at an original idea. By giving my brain a chance to make associations, draw conclusions, take me by surprise. And often even that idea doesn't turn out to be very good. I need time to make mistakes and recognize them, to make false starts and correct them, to outlast my impulses and to defeat my desire to declare the job done and move on to the next thing."

Perhaps that's the sort of thing we're practicing here. We're practicing really looking, concentrating, being patient, and exploring all parts of our lives—taking time to make mistakes and then recognizing and correcting them, making false starts and really exploring in this environment.

The teachings from the Dhammapada put it in more traditional terms: "Watchful in speech and well restrained in mind, doing nothing unskillful with your body, purify these three courses of action, fulfill the path taught by the sages."

This path is the Noble Eightfold Path, of which Sila is the foundation.

So when we use this word Sila, what does it mean? How do you think about this word? How do you actually come in contact with this? How do you live in this way?

For me, it's about living with care. It's often translated as morality or ethical conduct, but when I think of living with care, I also find the word integrity very powerful. Living with integrity—it really speaks to something for me. It's really connecting with how we live our lives, whether we live them mindfully or mindlessly, whether we're connected or disconnected. This is what it's about.

It's really about waking up to what's happening, waking up to everything that we do. It's about being fully engaged in meeting each moment of life with care. It's about deeply connecting with each situation, with each relationship that we're in.

And it's about learning not to cause harm to ourselves as well as all beings, as best we can.

So really, when we talk about living with care, it's about expressing and connecting with and exploring our actions of body and mind, our reactions and responses. It refers to body, mind, and speech, and it also includes all of our life, including our work, our livelihood.

This path, as Guy said, is threefold. Sila refers to right action, to speech, and to livelihood. It's interesting when we use this word "right." I've noticed that some teachers use "skillful" instead of right, or use "wise speech," "wise action," or "skillful speech," "skillful action." But when we use this word "right," it's really strange when you think about it being opposed to wrong. That's really not what it's about. It's really about a skillful way of acting, a skillful way of being, a wise way that leads to happiness, leads to peace, leads to freedom from suffering, leads to compassion.

Guy says that sila is often expressed in codes such as precepts, vows, and the monastic rules, and it can quickly become complicated. Our aim is to combine outer impeccability with inner relaxation, but that outcome is not always easy.

These two words are very powerful: impeccability and relaxation. Here in our practice, we're always trying to find a balance, aren't we? And it takes days, it takes a lot of sensitivity to find that balance.

But also, thinking of that word impeccability, what does it mean for you? Just think about it for a moment. Does it create a sense of respect? Think about somebody that you may know who you would describe as living impeccably. Is there someone you know? Or is there someone you know of that would represent that for you?

When I explore that word, what immediately comes to mind are some of my travels through Asia over many years. Sometimes I reflect on people who I've seen living a life of sila, really deeply connecting with this path of practice in whatever way they can.

One of the images that first comes to mind is from a couple of years ago when I was in Sri Lanka. I'd returned there after over twenty-five years, having been there when I was very young, and it had made an enormous impression. I went back not long after the tsunami, and so a lot of areas had been quite devastated. But I saw an enormous amount of commitment among people to support each other, to rebuild their lives, to actually share, to rebuild their communities.

One place I went was a wonderful temple in Kandy, in the center of the island in the mountains. It's an incredibly beautiful temple, and it was a full moon day. There were thousands of people there, all dressed in white. For these special moon days, people come to the temple and they take the eight precepts. They practice and take time to reflect and to support each other, to support the monks that are there. They really, for that day, bring all of the practice into being. It's a very special experience. For me, it was like they were creating a deep sense of ethical conduct for that day that was very powerful.

The other place I've seen sila lived very deeply and clearly is in my travels to Burma. I was very hesitant to go there. I didn't want to really acknowledge the political situation that seemed so opposed to the teachings of the Buddha. But when I went, I saw that against great adversity, these people were living in such a profoundly wonderful way. It was totally inspiring. They were offering such generosity and care. They were so gentle to each other and to their children and to me.

When they would ask what I was there for, and I would say that I was there to do a retreat, to practice meditation for three weeks, they would just have such joy. It was like they were expressing such mudita, such happiness that I was able to do that. They probably would never have the opportunity to actually go for a week, let alone three weeks, let alone three months as we're doing here. But what they could do instead was live their practice, and live it with such gentleness, such simplicity, and such care.

There are so many stories about my time there that really opened me to the most powerful aspects of sila—very, very deeply—really looking at how we can live this life in this way.

So it brings some questions to mind when we think about sila. It really is: how do we want to live our lives?

What do I need to do to change my life, perhaps, to reflect intentions of non-harming, of care and kindness? How can we live in line with our values? And what is helpful in our life right now, and what is harmful? What can we support and hold and encourage, and what can we let go of? What's important right now?

This is what's important to hold in this practice. This is what I'd like to support and develop more in this evening's talk—how to bring it into living with you on this retreat at this time. I loved hearing you the other day when you all shared your aspirations, what was important for you in coming on this retreat, because it was almost like you were articulating some of this in what you're actually wanting to bring here now.

So keep looking at this, asking: Is my life clear at this point? Or is it confused? Or is it a little bit of both? Where are we coming from at this moment?

When we start to explore this—when we're living in this community or we're living outside in our own communities, in our work situations, perhaps here as well, in our relationships with this community that we've got here, as well as in our world around us—we start to see that things aren't quite as simple as we would imagine. Things get a little murky, don't they? It's not as easy as just saying, "I'll never do this." Sometimes we need to really reflect on what's happening in this situation. What's the most skillful thing to do right now? How can I do this without causing harm? It only arises in the situation. And sometimes it is clear. Sometimes it's very confusing. Sometimes it's just a little murky.

When I connect with that, I often have this image of the Buddha, and a very powerful description that comes to mind is the Buddha seated on a lotus flower. Now, the lotus is a real symbol of purity, and the funny thing was that I hadn't actually seen one. I'd always seen this representation. I'd always read about the most beautiful aspects of the lotus and how it blossoms in the murky, muddy waters and thrives in that environment. And it's always been quite symbolic for me, a lovely thing to reflect on.

When I was doing my teacher training here at IMS, we went once to spend time at Bhavana Society with Bhante Gunaratana. When we arrived, one of the first things he showed us was this very murky water and this beautiful lotus bud that had just come up the day we arrived. And he said to watch this. For me, it was actually quite beautiful because I hadn't seen one before, really. And by the time we finished, the last day we

were there, it burst into flower. It was such a lovely thing. It was almost like this beautiful blossoming. And I saw why people use this as such a symbol—coming out of murkiness into this power of blossoming and beauty.

So sometimes our lives do get a little murky. Sometimes we need to practice to really have and develop a sense of clarity. And what we can do is explore what's happening with us here and now. We can start to notice and explore our relationships as we're living here. We think, "Oh, this is such an insular practice, everything's quite peaceful," but we actually find that we're constantly engaging in many different relationships—be it in the line to go for lunch, be it sharing showers, be it wherever around this environment. It can become quite close in, and this is something that you can really bring to your practice.

How do we respond when we feel a little closed in, when we feel the situation becomes a little difficult? How can we live with others here in harmony? Or do we find sometimes we feel there's a sense of disharmony and disconnection, of disagreement? Or do we feel in agreement with what we're being taught, what others are saying? How are we responding to these situations? Can we explore them with honesty and trust rather than judgment and distrust? How can we do that?

To settle into this community and to live in harmony, we need this underpinning of sila. As Joseph mentioned the other night, when we take the precepts, for example, it creates a level of safety, and this can help us to feel confidence and trust in those around us that we're being supported. Now, we explored this the other night very deeply. Sila is about actions in body and mind, moment to moment, living—as we said—with integrity, engaging in living.

And when we took the precepts, this is what we were doing. They're often referred to, I've noticed, as gifts. We're offering the gift of freedom. They're called the five gifts because they're providing a level of safety. So you took them the other night.

And just to recap, they're about refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, false speech, and using intoxicants that cloud the mind. We use the words *refraining, refraining from*. And so it's not about forcing, and it's not about obeying rules, but it's really finding a way to work with these.

I've found that reflecting on these precepts daily really helps guide my practice, guide my living. But sometimes, in certain situations, I find it very helpful to look at them more as aspirations—really deeply connecting with an inner knowing, a way that reflects how I truly wish to live, out of compassion and consideration and kindness.

So in certain situations, perhaps it isn't so important for me just to think about refraining from killing or refraining from stealing. It may be more helpful to look at ways of living with these that are much more relevant to my immediate life, my environment. I needed to find a way to bring them alive that had meaning for me in situations I've been in over the last couple of years.

A couple of years ago, I spent a year living with my husband as he was going through the end stages of a very difficult cancer. And then after that, I've been living with my mother, who is going through a very, very old age process. She's extraordinarily old, and she says she's gone way beyond her use-by date—that anything over ninety is it. She's still living, and she's really struggling with all of this.

A couple of months ago, her heart started to fail. She had enormous complications and ended up in hospital. They thought she wasn't going to make it. This happened twice, and she was in hospital for several weeks. Afterwards, she could not remember anything about it other than that it was a really difficult situation to be in. She just blanked it out. But she kept asking me what happened.

This is the sort of thing I needed to work with over and over again. How was I to honor the fact that I would speak openly with her, honestly with her, tell the truth? But how could I do that without causing harm, without causing her more distress—offering her compassion and honesty at the same time? These are situations we find ourselves in. I found this constantly with my husband, living through all of this as well. It needs a way of working with these precepts that works for us.

So I would deeply recommend finding your own way around this, working with words that suit you at times. At other times, these precepts as they are, in that sense of refraining, are so simple and so pure—all we need. But when I was working in these difficult situations over the last few years, words that helped me more than *refraining from* were *training in*. I was actually training in these things.

Words that were helpful for me, and perhaps would be helpful for you at times: *I will take up the training in supporting life.* This is about cultivating kindness. This was so important in my life of caring for others—cultivating kindness for myself as well.

The next one: *I will take up the training of taking only what is freely offered and giving of all that I can.* Many of you may have been carers in some way, and this is so important, isn't it? Just taking what is freely offered, but also giving freely of all that I can. This is about developing generosity.

Taking up the training of engaging in intimacy respectfully and with an open heart. Constantly exploring with the people we love, and also with others who come into our lives, how we can engage in intimacy with respect and with an open heart. This is really, for me, developing compassion.

Taking up the training in speaking with others with openness and possibility. This was very helpful for me with my mother—speaking with openness and possibility, cultivating as best we can truthfulness in the moment, in each situation as it arises.

And finally, the one I think is most important: *taking up the training in cultivating a clear mind.* The key for me is mindfulness—cultivating mindfulness. This is so important. This practice of sīla goes so deeply alongside this cultivation of a clear mind through mindfulness.

So we've talked about the five precepts, and this is a very important time to also move and consider the last three. We're considering the eight precepts in practice. We've all taken the five, and tomorrow morning there will be the opportunity to consider whether you'd like to take the three additional precepts: refraining from eating after midday, refraining from dancing, singing, music, entertainment, and adornments, and finally, refraining from using high and luxurious beds and chairs.

Not such a problem here—we are living quite comfortably, in fact. When I think of my trips to places like Burma, where I was sleeping on these incredibly tough mattresses...

And when I made up my mind that it was probably better to sleep on the wooden bed rather than those strange mattresses.

But really, it's actually looking at simplicity, at just moving a little further into bringing a sense of simplicity into daily life and deepening that renunciation that Guy talked of the other night. Is this important? It certainly can be. It can be a little bit deeper, just adding a little bit more into our practice. And sometimes it's really a powerful shift. At other times it isn't something that you need to do in your practice. The five precepts may be enough to work with right now.

On my early retreats, I didn't know about the five precepts. I thought everyone took eight, and there wasn't really an option. So for many years, eight precepts was it. And it was interesting for me to then, later on in my training, experience five precepts. I decided I liked five better, actually. So I used to come to every retreat, and I'd watch myself go, "Ah, do I really want to take eight or shall I take five?" And I'd sort of watch the mind justify why I thought it was a good idea—whether it just takes away the added stress I

have to go through when I'm on eight precepts around food, whether my diet is better if I eat three meals a day, whether I can actually maintain this practice with eight precepts. What works better for me?

And again, it's actually only something you can make a decision about in the moment. This is when you can choose by reflecting deeply on what it feels like for you now, connecting in with that wisdom and connecting also with your intention around that, with openness and honesty about what works best.

Sometimes it may be that meal times become such a distraction. They can become quite stressful. They can also become quite an entertainment, actually, going into the dining room. And sometimes food can create a comfort that's really important, or it can actually support our practice in many ways. Reducing one meal can cause more difficulty, or it can support our practice in deepening further by just dropping all of that necessity to deal with one extra meal through the day.

Also, by looking at refraining from things that are really perhaps distractions in our life, again it's about simplicity. Sometimes just having to make a decision about what we're going to wear every day can be a distraction and can take quite a lot of time—whether we can match our clothes, whether we've got clean clothes, what clothes we can wear, whether we wear earrings, whether we do our hair in a certain way. All of these things can take up a lot of time. Sometimes just by simplifying this a little can be really powerful.

An example of this, again, was when I've gone to Burma to do three-week retreats with Carol and other teachers. I found there's something very special about that. What it is, is that we're actually invited and offered the opportunity to come with very few clothes at all. We were told that all we need to bring is a couple of cool white shirts. My husband was the same—he would take white shirts. I would take white shirts that were very simple, very cool. And when we arrived there, we were offered our brown sarongs and a brown sash to wear. I call them sarongs; I'm not quite sure what they're called—lungis or something in Burma. For me, they're sarongs.

It's really beautiful that we're offered these to wear. Often they don't fit very well and we all have to try them on. We're all different sizes and we have to learn how to tie them. The most important thing is to find a way to secure them, so when you go in to see the Sayadaw and you bow down and sit back, the whole thing doesn't fall to pieces, which is really likely to happen. So you have to find a way of tucking them into a cord or having lots of safety pins just to feel secure.

But other than that, it becomes very simple. It's really so refreshing to not be comparing what others are wearing, to not think, "Oh, I wish I had one of those jackets. I wish I had those pants. They look so comfortable." Just knowing that we're all wearing the same—we're all just wearing the same white tops, brown bottoms. Nothing looks different. And the relief is enormous. It takes away so much of the decision making. We're not comparing ourselves. We're not feeling different. We're not getting caught up in appearances at all in that way.

It's so opening. It was also such a powerful thing to really be able to embody and offer respect for the traditions of that culture, to wear the clothes that were more in line with that culture.

Sayadaw also offered something that I thought was very important at this time. He deeply encouraged us to maintain a conscious commitment to a neat appearance, to take care in how we looked, ensuring that we wore the clothing well, ensuring that we wore it in the right way so the sash was in the correct position. It was about taking care. It was about expressing respect for ourselves and others through our appearance. And what he was encouraging in us was again, I felt, that word impeccable. It was about impeccable conduct and respect for the Burmese culture. It was a very powerful lesson, and it was very simple.

So when we reflect on these precepts, it's very personal. How you hold them is your way of holding them. How you really connect with them is very deep. Explore for yourself how you do this. Also notice if we judge others, if their holding of these precepts lapses in some way. But the key thing here is: what are you learning about suffering and happiness? What are you learning about the end of suffering? How are you holding this in this practice?

Sīla helps us to inquire deeply, pausing first to bring awareness to each situation as we meet it, until insight and understanding starts to emerge. Sometimes we don't notice this at all, for hours perhaps. Sometimes it can be very immediate. Sometimes we need to reflect to understand what's happening, always coming back to what was my intention in that moment.

As I mentioned before, mindfulness is very important. We need a clear mind for the practice of meditation so we can see clearly, so we can meet each moment clearly. We need repetition. The more often we practice these precepts, this way of living, the stronger they develop. And this reinforces our intention again and again. Out of this grows right understanding of causes and results, of kamma and the Four Noble Truths, and out of this, confidence and wisdom grow.

The Buddha offered clear guidelines with all of our actions in life. He said, when contemplating an action, pause and ask yourself, based on my knowledge and wisdom: Will this action be harmful to anyone, including myself? If it's going to cause harm, then don't do it. Is this action helpful or beneficial to anyone, including myself? And if it is, then do it. This requires close attention and care, and reflection is needed to see results. This is very deeply about mindfulness.

So let's connect a little more with mindfulness at this time. It's such an important aspect of ethical living. It guides us in how we act in our daily lives and helps us to restrain from acting foolishly.

Now, mindfulness comes from the Pali word sati, and sati is such a powerful expression of recollection and not forgetting, about remembering. It's this factor that really enables memory to function well. It's about remembering to be present, remembering what is easily forgotten. It's about remembering to connect in every way that we can so we're not careless, we're not distracted. And something I love—it's about not having fuzziness and confusion. I used to be very fuzzy and confused, and I found that this level of mindfulness helps me be much more clear, constantly present with awareness of the various things that I connect with in my life. I'm learning more and more to respond appropriately.

As Sally mentioned, by being here, by developing this mindfulness, developing this way of living, it's a gentle process. It's a lifelong process. And as you're here for this period of time, we're going slowly. We're finding that we're taking care gently. It's more a marathon, as she said, than a sprint. This has allowed me to settle back much more, to really open gently, to train gently in everything we do, because we're building such a strong foundation. This foundation is important to be deeply established, finding the truth in each moment. Out of this comes wisdom.

This is the third aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path that we refer to as paññā. So we've talked about sīla, talked about samādhi, and out of this grows much more wisdom. We've talked deeply now about actions, skillful actions, right actions in connection with sīla, but I haven't yet talked about speech.

And I would like to just mention this to finish, as another aspect of sīla, because the Buddha was so clear about the importance of speech and all verbal interactions in every way. This was really important to him.

From my perspective now, it seems that speech is also starting to include things like text messages, cell phones, Twitter, and so on. It's a way of communicating that can cause enormous harm, as well as cultivating very skillful and harmonious relationships. It is so powerful. It's about the training of speaking with openness and possibility, as I mentioned earlier.

I think speech gets overlooked a little when we come on retreat because we actually think we're in silence. But I'd like to suggest that we're encouraging an environment of silence here, and regardless of that, there are certain situations that may arise where we actually do communicate in some way or another. What comes to mind first is when we're doing yogi jobs, perhaps, and there is some interaction between different yogis or with the staff. There may be other times as well when you need to relate to the staff. And there are also times, like you've been discovering today, when you may come to talk to the teachers, to do interviews or to share what's happening for you.

These are times when speech comes up, and it can be quite difficult when you've really deeply connected with silence. Sometimes it can bring up a feeling of stress. Sometimes you can come to have an interaction with one of the staff members or a teacher and feel, "Oh my goodness, I wish I'd never said that. I wish I'd just stopped and said nothing." And so we need to be aware of how to use those words gently.

The Buddha offered ways that we might be able to hold in our time here that are really helpful and essential in our lives and practice. He offered four qualities to reflect on about speech. He said develop speech that is truthful, uplifting—so it's not malicious or unkind—gentle, not harsh, and moderate, not useless or meaningless. So it's about being gentle, truthful, uplifting if possible, and moderate. These are lovely ways of connecting, lovely ways of thinking about how we use communication, how we use speech.

Here are some ideas I would like to suggest. Watch how we speak to ourselves. You've probably already been aware—some of you have mentioned to me—that you're finding you're negotiating with yourself about whether you'll get up in the morning and come to the early morning sit. You're having conversations about whether you'll stay up for the last sit of the night. You're actually communicating with yourself and having discussions. And sometimes this can turn into very harsh language. Sometimes we can be very critical of ourselves and what we're doing.

So I'd like to suggest: watch how you talk to yourself. Offer a level of patience and kindness. See whether you can observe the tone of voice you use in your thoughts about yourself. Is it harsh? Is it gentle? How do you handle this? Are you open or are you closed? Patient or impatient? Explore how these thoughts, these dialogues you

have, these comments that you make to yourself cause suffering. Also, explore how honest you are about yourself, to yourself—just as I mentioned about how I negotiate with myself about whether I'll take the five precepts or the eight precepts.

The next area is speaking with teachers. This can suddenly be difficult. You've been quiet for a day or so and then you come in to see us, and suddenly it feels hard to say anything at all. Perhaps you're at a loss for words, or it almost feels impossible to speak. It's so important to just say what feels right, to really be there with gentleness and honesty as best you can, to report what you're experiencing, to share what's important for you at this time. We're not there to judge you. We just want to develop trust and confidence in yourself in this situation.

What I've noticed often is that I edit what I talk about in practice. I don't always report what's actually happening. Sometimes I want to make a good impression, so I tell what's best in my practice. And this can often lead to missing something that perhaps I need to hear more about.

An example of this was on one retreat I attended, an eight precepts retreat, many years ago. I had been fine, and then suddenly on this retreat, I was starving. I was so hungry I could not get enough food. I would be first in line for lunch, I would eat as much as I possibly could, and then I'd feel quite overwhelmingly full and have to take a nap. But for the rest of my day and night until breakfast the next morning, all I could think about was food. I was consumed by hunger.

I never reported it to the teacher. I couldn't believe it. I would share with him what I was doing in my sitting practice, but I never mentioned this whole craving for food. It took days and days, and somewhere along the line I learned to turn and look at this, to see what was going on, to see this wanting food, this desire, this craving.

And I started to explore craving, and my whole understanding shifted about something. But what was interesting to me was that I never told the teacher anything about this. And I should have, I think. In retrospect, in reflection, it was quite important.

The final thing I'd like to mention is this: notice when you have a need or desire to say something to someone else. Pause, as we mentioned before. Pay attention. Bring mindfulness to that desire to say something to somebody else. You may think it's helpful for them to know that, but come back to: Why do I need to say this right now? And then connect with and consider: Is it necessary? What is my intention here?

Really pay attention to that just-about-to-say-something moment, and pause, and hold it. Do I really need to say this? It may pass, or you may say it. Just watch what happens and then reflect on the results. Somehow, what we're doing with all of this is developing a profound ability to listen deeply to what's needed in each moment—the power of speech.

So from exploring sīla, I think what we're starting to deeply explore as well is the truths of our life, the nature of how we live, the nature of restraint.

And I'd like to offer some beautiful words to finish, which are very powerful and I think really represent this importance of sīla:

The thought manifests as the word.
The word manifests as the deed.
The deed develops into habit, and the habit into character.
So watch the thought and its way with care,
and let it spring from love, born out of concern for all beings.
As the shadow follows the body, as we think, so we become.

So I hope these words have helped, perhaps, to see sīla in a different way, and to perhaps really bring it into a living practice as part of our time here.

CHAPTER 3

Foundations of Practice

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min

> *In this foundational talk, Joseph Goldstein shares his personal journey to the Dhamma, from Peace Corps volunteer in Thailand to student of Anagarika Munindraji in Bodh Gaya, and introduces the core qualities necessary for awakening as taught in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). The Buddha's bold declaration that the four foundations of mindfulness constitute "the direct path for the purification of beings" serves as the framework for exploring what it truly means to practice.*
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> *Goldstein examines three essential qualities the Buddha repeatedly emphasizes: being ardent (ātāpī), clearly knowing (sampajañña), and mindful (sati). Ardor is compared to the passionate energy of first love—a sustained warmth and enthusiasm for the Dhamma that can be nourished through reflecting on impermanence, the rarity of human birth, and the priceless value of understanding the mind. Clear knowing involves comprehensive awareness that includes context and suitability of action, not merely narrow focus. Mindfulness, the Pāli term sati, is explored in its full depth—not simply "living in the present" like a black lab following its nose, but present-moment awareness coupled with understanding and wisdom.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing mindfulness in the moment of awakening from distraction, guarding the sense doors to prevent mental proliferation (papañca), and distinguishing between genuine relaxation and casual practice. Drawing on teachings from Ajahn Mun, Shabkar's dialogue with a flower, and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche's ode to mindfulness, Goldstein illuminates how this practice transforms not just meditation but our entire relationship with experience. The talk concludes with touching letters from second-graders discovering mindfulness, reminding us of its universal accessibility and power.*

I first became interested in the Buddha's teachings when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. This goes back quite a few years—it was in the mid-60s, and I spent two years there. Just as a kind of introduction, I would be going to discussion groups at some of the temples.

When I came back to the States after my two years in Thailand, I tried to practice by myself and realized very quickly that I needed a teacher. I hadn't gotten much meditation instruction, and trying to figure it all out by myself led to a lot of confusion. So I went back to Asia, stopping in India on the way, going to various places and teachers that I had heard of, a couple of ashrams in northern India. I finally ended up in Bodh

Gaya, which, as you know, is the place of the Buddha's enlightenment. And it's there that I met my first teacher, Anagarika Munindraji. He had just returned from nine years in Burma, practicing and studying.

At one point, very early on, we were sitting on the roof of this place called the Burmese Vihara. It was a place made for Burmese pilgrims, but at that time Burma was closed, so there weren't any pilgrims, and only the few Westerners who were there at the time were staying. We were sitting on this flat roof, a few of us with Munindraji, and he went around asking each one of us why we wanted to practice, why we had come to India. At that time there were very few Westerners who were there to study meditation. People gave various reasons, but for me the reason was very clear. It really was the possibility of awakening. That's what drew me to go back to India to study the teachings.

Then Munindraji went on to explain the basic Vipassana practice. As soon as he started talking about it and just giving the outline of the meditation, I felt immediately at home. It was such a direct, simple, common sense approach to understanding. Something he said really captured my interest and fueled my commitment. He said, "If you want to understand the mind, sit down and observe it." It seemed so obvious—how else can we understand our minds except by observing them? There were no rituals, there was nothing to join. It was just: sit down and look at what's happening.

So it's this very simple, direct, immediate approach to understanding the nature of our minds. What are the patterns that cause suffering? What are the patterns that lead to peace, that lead to happiness? This is what inspired me to really devote many years to this practice—the simple but not always easy practice of Vipassana. Vipassana is a Pali word which literally means "seeing clearly." When people ask what kind of meditation you're practicing, you can say, "I'm practicing seeing clearly meditation," because that's really what it's about. And that has many important implications, which we'll get into.

All of the practices of Vipassana are rooted in one discourse of the Buddha. It's called the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Satipaṭṭhāna discourse. Satipaṭṭhāna, a Pali word, is often translated as "the four foundations of mindfulness," or it can be translated as "the four ways of establishing mindfulness."

The Buddha begins this discourse, this very fundamental teaching of meditation practice, with a very bold and unambiguous statement. I'd like to read these first lines of this sutta:

"Bhikkhus"—and again, bhikkhus refers to anyone walking on the path, so he's really talking to us here—"Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha, of suffering and discontent, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbāna, namely the four satipaṭṭhānas."

This is a very simple, direct statement of what this practice is about. Given the magnitude and the import of this declaration, I thought it would be useful to explore some aspects of this teaching from the Satipaṭṭhāna discourse in some detail.

What's amazing as we either hear or read this teaching is that we find all of the quite vast amount of teachings of the Buddha really are contained within it—and it's only a few pages long. One of the amazing aspects of the Buddha's genius is that when you open any doorway into the Dharma, you approach it from any side and open the doorway, and as you enter, all of the aspects of the Dharma are revealed. That's very obvious as we read and study this particular discourse.

So the Buddha began the sutta by declaring, "This is the direct path to awakening." He then goes on to point out what the four fields are—they're called the four pastures—for our mindfulness. Where do we apply our mindfulness? What are the areas that we should be looking at and exploring?

So the Buddha goes on, and it's very explicit. He says, "What are the four? Here, bhikkhus, in regard to the body, abide contemplating the body, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to feelings, the second satipaṭṭhāna, abide contemplating feelings, ardent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to the mind, abide contemplating the mind, ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world. In regard to dhammas"—which here means the different categories of experience, like the hindrances, like the factors of enlightenment, like the Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths—"in regard to all these categories of experience, abide contemplating dhammas, ardent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent in regard to the world."

So what do our minds do when we hear this? I've found that as part of our cultural attention deficit disorder, often in reading or hearing the suttas, whenever I come across a lot of repetitions where the same phrases, the same words are repeated again and again, my mind tends to skip over them. I think, "Oh, I've heard that already. I heard it with the first foundation, and the second, and the third, and the fourth, repeating the same thing."

But there is another possibility. When the Buddha repeats some phrase—the same phrase—with each of these four fields of mindfulness—"the bhikkhu abides ardent, clearly knowing and mindful, free from desires and discontent"—perhaps he is trying to tell us something, that these qualities are important and that we need to develop them in our practice. So I'll go with the second assumption, that there's a reason the Buddha repeated them again and again: because they are important. We need to understand them. We need to integrate them into our practice.

So what does "ardent" mean? Think of the feeling of ardor the first time you fell in love, or you thought you did. Just that feeling of ardor—there's that powerful, sustained energy, and there's this tremendous warmth of feeling. There's a passionate and strong enthusiasm and interest. We can't stop thinking of the person. The mind is consumed in a way by the ardor, by the passion. Can we cultivate those very same qualities in our love of the Dharma, in our love of the truth? Can we be ardent in this practice and generate that feeling of passion, of enthusiasm, of warmth?

The question is, through all the many ups and downs of practice—times when it's easy and times when it's difficult and challenging—how can we sustain and nourish this feeling of ardor? How do we have this feeling grow in us, given that the Buddha said it was such an important component of the spiritual path?

There are a few reflections which help to generate this spirit, this ardent energy within us. The first is to reflect on the purpose and benefits of our practice. The Dharma and the teachings are a jewel of priceless value. When we understand the lawful unfolding of conditions—which is really what the Dharma is about, that conditions in ourselves, in other people, in the world, in life, things are happening lawfully, conditions are arising because of certain causes—when we understand this, then we see that the Dharma, the understanding of this lawfulness, is the source of every happiness in our lives. We understand what conditions bring about worldly pleasures. And the Buddha talked about this as well. He didn't only talk about renunciation of sense desire; he talked about the delights of worldly pleasures, and then went on to discuss the drawbacks of them. But there is a way of understanding what brings worldly happiness, worldly pleasure. And there's a way of understanding what brings the highest realization of peace.

This is from the writings of a monk in the Thai forest tradition in Thailand, Ajahn Mun, who was one of the very great masters. He was the grandfather, in a sense, of the Thai forest tradition, a reputed arahant and quite a remarkable being. He said, "Of all the many things that people value and care for in the world, the mind is the most precious. In fact, the mind is the foremost treasure in the whole world. So be sure to look

after it well. To realize the mind's true nature is to realize the Dhamma. Understanding the mind is the same as understanding Dhamma. Once the mind is known, then Dhamma in its entirety is known. Arriving at the truth about one's mind is the attainment of nibbāna. Clearly the mind is a priceless possession that should never be overlooked."

So this is not something outside of us that we have to look for.

I presume we all have minds. The mind is there already. It is this priceless jewel, this priceless possession. And understanding it is the understanding of the Dharma. Reflecting on this generates tremendous interest and fascination. How is this mind working?

We can also reflect on the rarity in the world of connecting with and having the opportunity to practice teachings that lead to liberation. Not many people in the world have the conditions come together where they even hear the teachings or have the opportunity to practice them. One of the great Tibetan masters of the last century said, ask yourself how many of the billions of inhabitants on this planet have any idea of how rare it is to be born a human being. Just that—how rare it is to be born a human being. How many of those who understand the rarity of human birth ever think of using that chance to practice the Dharma? How many of those who think of practice actually do practice? How many of those who start continue?

It's quite amazing when you reflect upon what we're all doing here. Reflecting on our commitment to practice, we can begin to appreciate the strength of the paramis, that powerful inner urge that brought us all here. This is not many people's idea of a vacation. If you go up to people and say, "How would you like to spend six weeks or three months in silence, eat two meals a day, and not speak?" So there's something going on that makes us all value this as much as we do. There's some powerful force in the mind. It's rare. This is not a usual undertaking.

When we reflect on this, it really can bring about a lot of joy, a lot of self-respect, a lot of respect for our fellow yogis. We realize the depth and the strength of this urge, this desire, this willingness to practice. Even in times of difficulty, in times when you feel challenged, reflecting on this strength that is there—it's what brought you here—arouses this feeling of ardor, of passion, of connection.

We strengthen the quality of ardor by reflecting on and seeing clearly the transiency, the impermanence of all phenomena. When we look at all of the things that we identify with, when we look at all of the things that we think are important and become attached to—could be people in our lives, maybe it's possessions, maybe it's certain feelings or emotions, maybe it's different states or conditions, experiences in the body—

when we look at that but then put it in the context of the understanding of impermanence, we see that nothing we have, no one in our lives, no state of mind is exempt from this great truth of change. No force in the world can prevent the process of growth, decay, and death. Because that is the Dharma, that is the lawful nature of things.

When we don't understand deeply, when we don't see clearly the transiency, the changing nature of all conditioned things—that whatever arises internally, externally, in the body, in the mind, whatever arises has the nature to pass away—then we devote ourselves and our lives and our energies, and even our meditation practice, just to wanting to collect things, to desiring other people or possessions or meditative experiences. We get caught up in the various appearances of samsara, in the movie-like dramas of our minds. How many have arisen in just these few days? We're sitting here with the intention to pay attention, the intention to be aware, and yet we see how seductive are all these stories. And in that seduction, we are solidifying even further the sense of self, the sense of "I."

There's a wonderful dialogue between one of the very great Tibetan Dzogchen masters, I think of the 18th century—some time ago. His name was Shabkar. A conversation between Shabkar and a flower. It's a little long, but it's really a lovely conversation.

Another day I went for some fresh air to a meadow covered with flowers. While singing and remaining in a state of awareness, I noticed among the profusion of flowers spread out before me one particular flower waving gently on its long stem and giving out a sweet fragrance. As it swayed from side to side, I heard this song in the rustling of its petals:

"Listen to me, mountain dweller. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but in fact you even lack awareness of impermanence and death, let alone any realization of emptiness. For those with such awareness, all phenomena teach impermanence and death. I, the flower, now will give you, the yogi, a bit of helpful advice.

"A flower born in a meadow, I enjoy perfect happiness with my brightly colored petals in full bloom, surrounded by an eager cloud of bees. I dance gaily, swaying with the wind. When a fine rain falls, my petals wrap around me, and when the sun shines, I open like a smile. Right now I look well enough, but I won't last long—not at all. Unwelcome frost will dull the vivid colors till turning brown I wither. Later still, winds violent and merciless will tear me apart until I turn to dust."

You, hermit, are of the same nature. Surrounded by a host of disciples, you enjoy a fine complexion. Your body of flesh and blood is full of life. When others praise you, you dance with joy. Right now, you look well enough, but you won't last long—not at all.

Unhealthy aging will steal away your healthy vigor. Your hair will whiten and your back will grow bent. When touched by the merciless hands of illness and death, you will leave this world for the next life. Since you, mountain-roaming hermit, and I, a mountain-born flower, are mountain friends, I have offered you these words of good advice."

Then the flower fell silent and remained still.

In reply, I sang, "Oh brilliant exquisite flower, your discourse on impermanence is wonderful indeed. But what shall the two of us do? Is there nothing that can be done?"

The flower replied, "Among all the activities of samsara, there is not one that is lasting. Whatever is born will die. Whatever is joined will come apart. Whatever is gathered will disperse. Whatever is high will fall. Having considered this, I resolve not to be attached to these lush meadows, even now in the full glory of my display, even as my petals unfold in splendor. You too, while strong and fit, should abandon your clinging, meditate in solitude, seek the pure field of freedom, the great serenity."

I love that. Everything is teaching us. If we really open our eyes, everything is teaching us. So the awareness of change reminds us of the purpose of our practice. What are we doing? What choices are we making?

One time, years ago, I was doing a long retreat and I got into a little pattern of getting lost over and over again in recurring fantasies. And it was kind of nice. When you're lost in fantasies, you forget the discomfort in the body and the time goes quickly. That was fun. But at a certain point—it just kept going on and on—I remember I said, "Joseph, do you want to think or do you want to get enlightened?" It's just a way of reminding ourselves: What am I doing here? What's the purpose in my being here? Do I just want to keep indulging in these thoughts and fantasies? Or do I really want to see clearly? Do I want to wake up?

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves, and the awareness of impermanence can be a prompt for that reminder. What is our purpose in being here? What really creates that sense of ardency?

The second quality the Buddha emphasized—beside ardor, by contemplating the four satipaṭṭhānas with ardor—is called in Pali *sampajañña*, which means "clearly knowing" or "fully aware" or "seeing something precisely or thoroughly from all sides." This clearly knowing means the ability to comprehend in a full way, in a comprehensive way, what is taking place.

So again, from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta:

"Again, bhikkhus, when going forward and returning, act clearly knowing. When looking ahead and looking away, act clearly knowing. When bending or straightening the limbs, act clearly knowing. When wearing robes and carrying bowls, act clearly knowing. When eating, drinking, consuming food and tasting, act clearly knowing. When defecating and urinating, act clearly knowing. When walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, talking and keeping silent, act clearly knowing."

Did you get it? Act clearly knowing.

I think it might be helpful, being on retreat, to explicitly add or include some activities that either impact our fellow yogis or are places where we often get distracted. So we might add to the Buddha's words here: when opening and closing doors, act clearly knowing.

When entering or leaving the hall, act clearly knowing. When doing the yogi job, act clearly knowing. When alone in one's room, act clearly knowing. When going from one place to another, act clearly knowing.

When clear comprehension is present, when we're cultivating this aspect of the teaching, it enables us to assess the suitability of an action. What is the motivation? Where is this action leading? Is it beneficial or not? Is it the right time?

As an example, in one context you're doing walking meditation, walking very slowly and feeling just the most subtle changing nature of the sensations. It can be so precise and exact and soft and easeful. But when you're on the lunch line and there are fifty people behind you—moving, moving, moving—that's not clear comprehension. We've lost the context of the experience.

So this is what clear comprehension means. It enlarges the scope. It's not only that we're narrowly focused; we take in the bigger picture. It begins to include the context of our actions so we can see what is appropriate at this time, what is suitable.

In the sutta, "a bhikkhu abides ardent, clearly knowing, and mindful." Mindful is the third of these qualities that the Buddha mentions which are necessary for awakening. And in fact, mindfulness is really at the heart of all Buddhist practice. Mindfulness is the translation of the Pali word *sati*. This quality of *sati*, or mindfulness, holds a central place in every Buddhist tradition. It's not limited to Theravada or Vipassana practice. Mindfulness is the key quality in every path of awakening. It's what makes any spiritual path possible.

For some time, I was practicing a little bit in the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition with a very great teacher. His name was Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. And he wrote this kind of ode to mindfulness. So this is from another whole tradition:

Mindfulness is the root of Dharma.
Mindfulness is the body of practice.
Mindfulness is the fortress of the mind.
Mindfulness is the aid to the wisdom of innate wakefulness.
Lack of mindfulness will allow the negative forces to overcome you.
Without mindfulness you will be swept away by laziness.
Lack of mindfulness is the creator of evil deeds.
Without mindfulness and presence of mind, nothing can be accomplished.
Without mindfulness, you are a heartless zombie, a walking corpse.
Dear Dharma friends, please be mindful.
By the aspiration of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, may all Dharma friends attain stable mindfulness and ascend the throne of perfect awakening.

Without mindfulness, we are just caught up in the stories of our mind. And so it's the key element. It's the root of every practice of awakening.

But this function, this *sati*, is a very nuanced and powerful mental factor. The word mindfulness in English really doesn't do it justice because mindfulness is kind of a prosaic word. And yet the function of this factor in the mind is tremendously powerful.

Most literally, *sati* means remembering. That's the most literal meaning of the word. And this remembering can refer to different things. It can be remembering what is wholesome and unwholesome—so that's a powerful function of *sati*, enabling us to remember and make wise choices. It can refer to the recollections, the meditative recollections of the Buddha or the Dharma, the Sangha, or the remembering of one's past skillful actions, both of which become means for arousing energy and rapture within us, different ways of uplifting the mind.

Of course, sometimes the powerful Western habit of self-judgment can co-opt these very skillful reflections. One time I was in Burma, and I was there for a while, going through a hard patch. I was just kind of slogging away day after day, and nothing much seemed to be happening. It was hot, and it was just difficult. So Sayadaw U Pandita, hoping to lift my spirits, said, "Joseph, you should reflect on your sila."

Thinking, yeah, I'd reflect on my past wholesome actions, and I'd feel good. Well, he said, reflect on your sila. And my first thought was, what did I do wrong? My immediate response was a kind of self-judgment. So we need to use these reflections skillfully.

But most fundamental to our practice, sati, or remembering, is really the remembering of the present moment. This is how we apply mindfulness in our practice. Mindfulness means present moment awareness, presence of mind, wakefulness. It's the opposite of being absent-minded or forgetful.

So how do we recognize—how do we get very specific in our recognition of what this experience of mindfulness actually is? Because we hear the words, and we may try to fit them somehow to our experience. But how can we know very specifically, yes, this is what mindfulness means?

It's actually very simple. I'm sure you're familiar with the experience, whether sitting or walking or going through the day, of being lost in a thought. Is there anybody here who hasn't been lost in a thought? Doubtful. So we all have that experience. We're lost in a thought, lost, lost, lost. And then at a certain moment, we awaken from being lost. We remember that we've been thinking. You're familiar with that moment of waking up from being lost.

That moment is very important. Don't rush back to some other object of meditation. Don't rush back to the breath or the body. In that transition from being lost to being awake, right in that moment, the nature of mindfulness, of awareness, of wakefulness is totally illuminated because the difference in the experience is so clear. We've just gone from being lost and then in a moment we're awake. Take a moment to recognize that—oh yes, this is what awareness means, this is what mindfulness means.

This happens many, many times a day. So instead of the usual pattern of being lost, lost, and then we're awake, and then we have a self-judgment about having been lost—instead of going down that track—lost, lost, lost, awake, take delight in the moment of wakefulness. Take delight in the recognition of wakefulness. Then many times a day you will be having moments of delight instead of moments of self-judgment. Because for as many times as you get lost, that many times do you awaken.

So it's a powerful moment. Generally, people skip over it. Really take the moment to see, to recognize, oh yes, this is the experience of awareness. Use it. It suffuses the day with these moments of wakefulness and recognition and appreciation of them.

In yesterday's instruction on the mindfulness of breathing, the Buddha emphasized yet another aspect of mindfulness. We talked about the different kinds of remembering and the remembering in the present moment. Sometimes we say that mindfulness means living in the present, living in the moment. That would be a common understanding of mindfulness, but it is not really enough. It's much more than living in the moment.

There's a state of mind that I call black lab consciousness. Do you have a picture in your mind of black labs, the dogs? It could actually be any dog or animal, but I like black labs because they're just so funny. They're totally delightful creatures, kind of going along totally led by their nose, here and there. But you could have that same understanding watching squirrels or any animal, the birds. They're living in the moment. They are in the present. They are knowing the present moment experience. But they're not being mindful. I don't know of a single mindful black lab.

So it's more than simply living in the present. We need to understand what that "more" is.

That's why in the Buddha's instruction on the breath he gives an indication: when breathing in long or breathing out long, or short, the instruction was, "I understand I'm breathing in long, I'm breathing out long. I understand I'm breathing in short, breathing out short." It's that word *understanding* which suggests that mindfulness has a very close association with wisdom. It's not just going through life like a black lab living in the moment. We have to be in the moment with understanding. That's the great gift of mindfulness. That's the power of mindfulness. It's not simply being in the moment—it's understanding the momentary experience, understanding what is happening.

There's a Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa. I was reading a collection of his poems and there was one which totally captured my interest. The title of the poem was "Live, You Say, in the Present." I thought, oh, that's a good Buddhist poem. These are the first four lines:

Live, you say, in the present.
Live only in the present.
But I don't want the present.
I want reality.

That's a whole other dimension, and this is the dimension of yes, live in the present, but it must be associated with understanding. It must be associated with wisdom. That's the nature of mindfulness.

So you can see, I hope, that this is a very rich and powerful function of the mind. This is what we're cultivating. And it's this difference which points to an important distinction in how we practice—the difference between being relaxed and being casual.

We've talked a lot about the importance of relaxation, that really settling back, relaxing, opening up, that this is a foundation of the practice. But people, often for quite a while, can confuse relaxation or get it mixed up with a casual attitude toward the practice. It's what I call "more or less mindful"—I'm kind of there. It's like we're skimming the surface, connected somewhat, but with a somewhat casual attitude.

It's the difference between a rock which drops to the bottom of a pond and a cork which bobs along on the surface. The casual attitude is like the cork—yeah, I'm here. But mindfulness is like the rock that drops to the depth.

So as you're moving about or sitting, it can be very relaxed. You want to cultivate that relaxation, the letting go of the grip, the striving, the expectation. But in that relaxation, settle deeply into your experience. And you will see very clearly the difference.

When you're walking—and you can especially notice it walking from place to place—so often the mind is just ahead of itself. We're walking and we're kind of aware that we're walking, but we are not feeling each step as a unique experience. We're walking with a slight inner lean to where we're going.

So keep in mind this meaning of mindfulness. It's the sinking into the depth. And it really just comes about from remembering. It's not hard to do. It's just remembering to do it. And so that's how all these aspects of *sati*, the meaning of *sati*, come together.

This mental factor of mindfulness has a tremendous power in our lives, and there is a long list of its benefits. One of the benefits of being mindful is that it acts as a guardian of the sense doors. It restrains the mind from—this is the Pali word—*papañca*. And *papañca* means all of those proliferating thoughts in the mind.

You know how one thought leads to the next, to the next, to the next, and before we know it, we're engrossed in some story. Guarding the sense doors does not mean closing the sense doors down. It's not closing the senses. Rather, mindfulness serves the function of being aware of what's arising at each of the sense doors. We're actually there for the experience.

I'll give you an example of the power of mindfulness in this aspect of guarding the sense doors. For many years, when I was on retreat in various places, I would notice that whenever I went into the dining room at mealtime—where there's a lot of activity, a lot of people, a lot going on—I would notice the tendency of my mind to go out through the eye door, landing on everything I was seeing, whether it was other people or the food or whatever. My attention was going out through the eye door, landing on these different objects, and then having all kinds of comments and judgments. There

was a certain period in my practice where I noticed my mind had a comment about almost everybody—about what they were wearing, how they were walking, how much food they were taking. Ridiculous. But that's what I was doing.

After a while of noticing this was happening, I tried to understand why. It's so fruitless. And I realized it was happening because I was not being mindful of seeing. All of that was happening because the mind was going out to what was seen, landing out there, creating all of these thoughts. All I had to do was settle back, let mindfulness exercise its function in the sense of guarding the sense door, and notice, note, that I was seeing.

So I would go into the dining room, and I made this a practice the whole time, from the moment I went in until I sat down at the table with my food. I would simply note seeing. That's all I was mindful of. Seeing, seeing, seeing. It was amazing. First of all, my eyes were not popping out of my head. The eyes got very soft and relaxed, and I was just receiving the sights rather than going out to them. I was just seeing color and form, and I would recognize what it was. It cut the comments, the judging, the desires by ninety-nine percent—because I was being mindful of that particular sense door. You can do the same thing with hearing, with tasting. This is a function of mindfulness. It brings us back to the very basis of our experience, and it guards us from this tremendous tendency toward proliferation.

Besides being a guardian of the sense doors, mindfulness also has the function, it's said, of standing near the mind, of serving and guarding the mind. I just like the image. Think of the mind as the royal presence within us, and mindfulness serves and guards and protects this precious mind of ours. Mindfulness brings us face to face with whatever's arising, with whatever is appearing—rather than just these sidelong glances about what's happening. Mindfulness is right there. We see so clearly the thoughts and the emotions and the intentions and motivations, whatever is arising in our mind.

In street talk, we might say that mindfulness is watching our backs. It's protecting us. But in reflecting on this, I thought more accurately we should say it's watching our front, so that we're not so seduced by all the arising appearances and phenomena.

With mindfulness, we become more aware of what's arising in our hearts and minds, and we're able to make wiser choices. Otherwise, without mindfulness, without sati, without this function in the mind, what happens? We're just living out, acting out our own particular habit patterns, our own particular conditioning. That's what our lives are. Mindfulness is this tremendously liberating force because it enables us to see: Oh, this is arising. Is this a benefit? Is it of none? Do I cultivate it? Do I abandon it?

Ajahn Sumedho, the wonderful American monk in the Thai tradition, had a great expression, and it really runs counter to so much of new age spirituality, where the message is often, "Follow your heart." Ajahn Sumedho had a different take. He said, "It's not a question of following your heart, it's a question of training your heart." And anybody who has watched their hearts for any period of time will know that our hearts are not—I think I speak for most of us—they are not unalloyed goodness.

We have a lot going on in our hearts—a lot of beautiful qualities and a lot of things that are not so beautiful. So it's not simply a question of following our hearts. It's a question of understanding, of seeing clearly, and then training our hearts in goodness.

All of this is the power of mindfulness. This is the function of mindfulness. And it's why the Buddha gave so much emphasis to this as the quality to cultivate in our practice. Nyanaponika Thera, who was one of the very early Western monks in Sri Lanka—he was from Germany—wrote a classic book called *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*. It's a book about mindfulness, because this is the heart of all our practice.

I'd like to close with some comments written in letters from second graders who were part of a program called the Mindful Schools Program in Petaluma, California. A friend of ours went into the schools and started teaching mindfulness, in this case to second graders. Some months later, he went back for a follow-up and received letters from these young children. Here are a few excerpts:

"Mindfulness helps me get better grades."

"I enjoyed mindfulness. Mindfulness helps me calm down when I get upset. It also helps me with sports and helps me to go to sleep at night."

Just remember, these are second graders.

"Thank you for doing mindfulness. I love it."

"Mindfulness helped me to be more happy at school."

"Thank you for teaching mindfulness. Mindfulness changed my life."

"Mindfulness makes me calm and feel nice. It is so very fun."

"Mindfulness is the best thing I have done in my life—my long life."

"Mindfulness really gets me calm. I love mindfulness."

CHAPTER 4

Awareness Is The Path

Carol Wilson · 52 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Carol Wilson investigates the essential nature of awareness as the path itself, building on the distinction between merely being present and truly knowing what is happening in each moment. She emphasizes that all vipassanā methods serve to support our recognition of and trust in the purity of awareness—not to create better states or make us good meditators, but to facilitate moment-to-moment surrender into mindful knowing.*
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> *Wilson explores how the mind's natural luminosity, as described in the Aṅguttara Nikāya, is only temporarily colored by the kilesas (defilements) that visit it—greed, hatred, and delusion do not actually stain awareness itself. She connects this understanding to the four agati (wrong courses of behavior): chandāgati (prejudice from desire), dosāgati (from hatred), mohāgati (from delusion), and bhayāgati (from fear), showing how these distort our perception and lead to suffering on both personal and collective scales.*
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> *Drawing from her visit to Dachau and reflecting on human capacity for both tremendous suffering and awakening, Wilson grounds this teaching in the recognition that the forces we observe in our own minds—however small their objects may seem—operate by the same mechanisms that shape the world. She offers Ajahn Chah's teaching on the relationship between sati (mindfulness), sampajañña (clear comprehension), and paññā (wisdom), emphasizing that wisdom arises naturally when we simply show up with committed, non-judging awareness. The talk culminates in the understanding that saṃsāra and nibbāna are known by the same awareness—liberation is available in any moment through the simple recognition: "It's like this."*

Last night Joseph was talking about mindfulness, the difference between just being in the present and mindfulness—actually knowing clearly what's happening in this moment. The difference between awareness and just kind of hanging out.

In some ways, all the different techniques, the different methods that we've offered here, and there are many, many more—all the methods of Vipassana are not about trying to create some better state or to make you good meditators. They're all methods to support, to enhance our recognition, our familiarity, our trust in awareness itself, in the purity of awareness. The way we come to understand how our minds work, as Joseph talked about, is not by sitting down and figuring it out and making charts and graphs,

though God knows that's been done enough. It's by the moment-to-moment, absolute surrender with total commitment into awareness of whatever happens to be arising right now.

So in a way, awareness—mindfulness with clearly knowing—is the path. Not even to talk about goal, but moment to moment, it is the path.

Awareness that is mindfulness is all about the attitude, what qualities are in the mind, in the consciousness at the moment with awareness. That's really what I want to talk about.

We're not here to cultivate a particular experience. I mean, you might be here to cultivate a particular experience. And maybe you'll get it, and maybe you won't. And then if you do get it, you'll find out it really didn't matter. It came and it went. And then here we still are.

Here we still are with—the word that comes to mind is "task," but that's not inspiring enough. Here we are with the joyful and at sometimes daunting and vast life path of exploring the nature of reality, the nature of suffering, and the nature of peace and freedom. And finding that the recognition, the understanding of both—freedom and suffering—is right here, right now, in what's arising in this moment, how it's observed through the quality of the purity of mind of awareness or the confused, deluded mind. We take turns experiencing one or the other.

That's what we're studying. We're studying the deluded mind, as Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche once said, and we're studying the awakened mind. And it's not like here's all the deluded and somewhere else is the awakened. It's back and forth, back and forth.

We're here to reintroduce ourselves to—there's no "our," of course—our own awareness. Just the natural, pure knowing quality of mindfulness. When the knowing faculty, when consciousness is not colored by, when we're not identified with the qualities of confusion, of wanting, of craving, of ill will, of fear. They could even be present, but not when we're identified with them.

When purification of mind or cultivating the pure heart is spoken of, I used to not like that term because it brings up all that pure-impure, good-bad stuff. But if I think of pure as squeaky clean—which is how someone once in an interview described it to me. She'd had some moments of just this really pure moment-to-moment awareness, and that's how she described how the experience felt: just like the mind and heart is squeaky clean. Whatever is arising is just this. Nothing in excess and nothing lacking. Just this with wholehearted presence.

This is not some unattainable, esoteric state up on Mars somewhere. Something that really makes this whole path workable for me is the understanding, the knowing that there's only moment-to-moment arising and passing experience, that there's nothing that lasts for more than a fraction.

Knowing that, what we call "my mind at this moment, my mind filled with greed"—have you had that experience at all of your mind being filled with greed? And how one might call it that: "I'm such a loser. My mind is filled with greed." That's become very solid, very temporal, lasting in time, and something really difficult that we have to do a lot of stuff to change and become a person whose mind is not filled with greed. Of course, the trouble really is as long as I'm "a person who"—that's really the source of it. But we'll get there later.

If you notice, in that moment, what's happening is that in a moment of what we call mind or consciousness, this knowing quality arises. And all different mental states or mental factors come and go with it. So a moment of greed is really that: a moment of consciousness, a moment of other mental factors, and coming together in that moment, there's also greed. That doesn't mean it's steady state.

Now, if we get a "Yeah, I do want that, I do need that, let's really crank it up"—well, that moment of greed strengthens the next moment of greed. But it's very cause and effect, very rational. If with awareness there's "Oh, greed feels like this"—what's being fed in that moment? Not the greed.

In that moment, the interest, the attention, the ardency, if you will, the love is going into the awareness. Wow, awareness of greed. Greed feels like this. Greed doesn't last so long in that moment. It's not being fed. The awareness, the mindfulness gets stronger. And you might very well discover the next moment is a moment of just this. And then the next moment is, "Wow, I had a moment of no self and no greed. I want another one." And then there's a moment of greed. That's how it goes.

How can we take this personally? We do take it personally—that's why we're all suffering here. We react to each of these moments like, "What does it mean about me? I'm so bad. I'm so good. I'm so liberated. I'm so lost." It's exhausting. It's a moment of greed, a moment of pure mind, a moment of delusion. I mean, it's not so clear cut, I realize that. But it's not unattainable. That's what I'm trying to say.

And our path is this ardency Joseph talked about last night—of total commitment, of interest. I like to use the word love, really. Love of awareness, of this process of just being willing to be totally here and see what's happening without our interference. It sounds easy. We know it's not, because we are schooled to interfere. Because we're

schooled to think that somehow we can fix it. We can decide to be a better person. We can decide to stop being greedy. We know that doesn't work, right? Because if it worked, we wouldn't have to come do this. But we don't really know it doesn't work.

So as Joseph said last night, what we're doing here—and we're quite privileged to have this opportunity, also privileged in that we're interested, that we care enough to explore this way—because as you already know, it's not always enjoyable or easy. It really requires, in some ways, the strongest commitment of our life. Because everything's included. Everything. There's nothing outside of this exploration. How can there be? Because in each moment, everything is here. That's all there is. Anything we try to exclude is delusion pushing away the reality of the moment.

So we're privileged. And it is somewhat rare. But what I really wanted to get to tonight is this: it may be rare, but it's not some esoteric thing that's somehow divorced, separated from the way we live our lives, from the way everyone lives their lives in the world. What we're watching and learning about, hopefully, and suffering from and feeling joy with in our own minds here in little things—this is the exact same processes that go on in all human minds. Which is both beautiful and, to me, extremely frightening.

I think Sally read from the Dhammapada. I just want that last line: "With our minds we make the world." This world, this whole world—with our minds, we make the world.

This summer I was in Munich for a few weeks, longer than usual. So I had time to do something that I've wanted to do for many years but never had the personal time for. I went to visit Dachau, one of the concentration camp memorial museums from the Nazi wartime. This was for me a really powerful experience. Grounding. Very grounding. And unexpectedly powerful. It kind of brought me home even more deeply than usual to the vastness of the human mind, the vastness of what we're doing here, and the reality of what the mind can create in the world. It aligned me with what's really important in this world and how completely out of whack the world can get.

And it's not just about concentration camps in the Nazi time. I don't have to even run through the list of things—I'll say some in a minute.

But the memorial sits in really quite a lovely park, and it's really big. That's one thing that surprised me. There's a couple of buildings that are still standing, and in one of them, they made a museum. I think they did a really good job. It's just lots of big bulletin board placards with different information—different aspects of Dachau all through the years, and really very broad. Almost too much information to take in because it was room after room.

But the way they did it that I thought was so skillful was that they'd give an overview—maybe medical testing, maybe that one was about that—and they'd give an overview, but they always made it individual. There was always a picture of some particular people. It would say their names. It would say a little bit about them. Whether it was a guard or whether it was an inmate, there was a way that it made it—you couldn't just say, "Oh, it's some vast other there thing." It's a really individual person after person after person.

I think that's what grounded me in what's really important in this world, in this life, and not in some kind of la-la-la, "Oh yes, compassion is the natural state of the pure mind." I say that all the time. In a place like that, looking at the vastness of how many people were involved, I can't just so easily go, "Well, as soon as you see how much suffering aversion causes in your own mind, the wisdom naturally arises and compassion is there." I mean, I do believe that. I have experienced that. But that's rather glib in the face of whatever we might be confronted with. And we never know what we're going to be confronted with in life.

So when I say the vastness—beyond the individuals, that's why I thought their approach was so wise. Because otherwise, you just get lost in the bigness. Then out behind, there were just the foundations where other barracks had been, but they were gone. So it made it like a nice park. It was huge. I don't know, twenty or thirty barracks had been there. And when I came back into Munich and talked to friends, they all said, "Oh, that wasn't even one of the big ones." And that just kind of—I don't know—it made it all more real.

In my life, I've done tons of reading about the whole gulag system under Stalin, a lot about Chechnya, Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, racism and sexism and bigotry in this country. I mean, you can look around anywhere. It's not a one-off. And when you look and see how many people and individuals, there's no way my mind could say, "Oh, these are just the bad, weird people. These were all monsters." Can't be so. Can't be so. So many people involved in so many ways. They have to be pretty much regular folks, most people.

And it makes me look in myself. I don't know what I would do if I was in a situation where each person has to make, in some situation, a small choice. We can make choices from greed, from fear, from denial, from looking around—"Well, everyone else is doing it, it must be okay"—or the denial that we just don't see what's too painful to see. I'm sure you've recognized that in your own personal experience. And you can't see it till you see it. You can't talk your way out of it. Or fear, or wanting to protect someone, or

being afraid of losing something. Who knows? And each decision might be as good as one can make, not knowing how to work with greed or fear or denial. We don't know what we'd do in a situation.

It makes me think of a book I read a few years ago by a doctor named Hassan Bayev. He's a Chechen, and he had come back from Russia. He's a surgeon, and during the height of the war between Chechnya and Russia, he came back just to work in the hospital. He was the only surgeon in all of Grozny, doing operations on both sides of people in the conflict for some years.

It's quite a story. Because he wasn't taking sides—even though he said, "I'm a Chechen, I'm a patriot, but I'm a doctor first"—the situation was very intense. The name of his book was *The Oath*, the oath being his oath as a doctor.

I don't have time to get into it anymore, but the thing I always remember him saying was that his oath was to cause no harm, to help as a doctor. And he said, "I was in a situation I'd never been in. I'd never held a gun. I'd never been in the face of violence." He was threatened and attacked from both sides. And he said, "When you're in a situation you've never been in before, you don't really know ahead of time how you're going to act, how you're going to respond."

I really can relate to that. I don't know how I would respond.

Somehow this being in Dachau and connecting me with all these other strands of study grounded me in a way that actually gave me a stronger sense of commitment to this path, commitment to understanding our mind. I saw even more profoundly the strength, the power of these habits in our mind—fear, greed, wanting power, ill will, aversion. So much of that impulse to "get rid of all this group of people" comes out of fear of the other, out of wanting something the way it used to be. Doesn't that sound familiar?

Seeing the vastness of it, rather than getting completely discouraged, was like, "Yeah, let's get real about this." I know that we don't have to be driven by these forces, that it's possible to be filled with anger, filled with fear, filled with greed—to really feel it and not act in that way. But the only way it's possible isn't to have some idea, "Oh, I want to be a good person. I won't act from anger anymore." I tried that one.

The only way is by really knowing, fearlessly, how greed and hatred and anger and fear work. How do they arise in our mind and heart? How do we experience them? How strong can they be? What's the effect of acting on them? The only way we can know that is by being so interested, with awareness, with kindness, that we just sit back and watch it all happen here.

Granted, we're in a situation where we're not going to be challenged in a life-threatening way. We are in a special situation. The situations that come up where we feel filled with fear and filled with greed are going to be less intense than being life-threatened or having your family threatened. But that doesn't make the way these habits work in our mind any different.

So don't just say, "Oh, well, I'm filled with greed, but it's just about wanting another helping for lunch, and it ran out, so I'm just a greedy person." Sit down. Don't judge it. Watch. It's about a stupid thing, but that's not the point. Watch how strong it can get. The greed can be so strong that even though I have the full intention to be fully present with, "Oh, greed is like this. Greed is like this. I'm feeling it in my body. I'm noticing the thoughts"—and then suddenly, I'm out in the parking lot with my car keys thinking, "Where can I go get some ice cream?" How did I get here? Oh, I think greed was kind of the intention. But then at least, thank God, I noticed it.

So it's little. And it's okay that it's little. But the force of how these habits work is working in the same way. And seeing how even an example like that—the greed, or the not getting what we want, really. If there's greed and then we can get what we want, we don't have to actually look at how much suffering there is in the greed, because we got what we wanted. That's how samsara works. You want it, you get it. You want another thing, you get it. Or you get it, and then it's not doing it anymore, so you want another thing. And you can get that, and samsara just keeps rolling.

You don't get it, and you're stuck here on retreat, so you can't really distract yourself. And you have to just sit there and feel: greed feels like this. Then you start to see why most people don't want to look at greed.

Better to act on it than feel it. My god—talk about masochism. And greed is nothing compared to how much suffering there is in hatred and fear. Greed gets under the radar, though. Don't kid yourself if you're a greedy type rather than an aversive type that you're somehow better. Don't kid yourself. It gets under the radar and you think, "Oh no, everything's just nice." Everything's just nice until you can't get that thing. Then you're in trouble.

So what we're doing here, it may be relatively rare, but it's, in my opinion, so important. We can't change anybody else's relationship to their experience. We know that. I mean, within our close intimate relationships, we may not know that—we keep trying—but you can't. But we can work with understanding our own. And then that's what we can bring to the world: who we are and how we respond and how we relate. And it does make a difference. So it's so important what we do.

When I was telling some of these guys what I was going to talk about tonight, they asked, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Oh, you know, awareness and Dachau." That's kind of a leap, isn't it? But I don't think it's a leap. At all, I don't think it's a leap. I think that's what this world is. And what we're doing here isn't just some intellectual, interesting thing we're doing because we have a few months. This is really the heart of freedom and suffering, not only for ourselves, but for what we can bring to the world.

And I say that because hopefully when you touch into that for yourself, if you believe it—you don't have to believe it, it's up to you—that gives me, when I remember that, when I believe that, when I know it's true, the courage that it takes to keep waking up into this moment. Because at least fifty percent of the time, it's not going to be a pleasant moment. There are phases when there's more pleasant than unpleasant. But if you think awakening is about getting more pleasant moments and fewer unpleasant moments, you can throw that idea out the window. Because that's really where these deep habits come from.

And it sounds so clinical and technical. How can the sense of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral lead to concentration camps? That's the genius of the Buddha, in my humble opinion—that he was brilliant and obviously had quite a bit of mindfulness, that he could really see this moment-to-moment way the mind was working and the cause and effect relationship. But we don't have to be the Buddha. We can take what we've learned and then just take it on trial and look in our experience and see: Is it so? Does this happen for me? As I said, it's on a smaller scale, but it's the same habits. And they're just as strong.

So we really need this ardency, this commitment, this courage to show up with this simple, non-judging, committed awareness. Our path isn't to make ourselves different. Awareness is our path. This pure, simple awareness of what is.

I know you're probably all familiar with this quotation. It just kind of turns things on their head, the Buddha. I know you know this: "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it." And I say the attachments, the aversions, the kleshas, the torments, the distortions of mind. It is colored, this luminous mind, by the attachments that visit it—that *visit* it. "This, unlearned people do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This, the noble follower of the way really does understand, and so for them, there is cultivation of the mind."

To me, that kind of turns our unexamined assumptions of the world on their head. What I'm calling unexamined assumptions, what the robot mind acts on, what the normal world acts on. You want something?

Get it. Greed is good, right? If there's wanting, that means you need it. If you get it, you'll be happy. And that's just the normal way of things.

With unpleasant experience, naturally there's ill will and aversion, or anger, or fear. What else? Unpleasant is bad and pleasant is good—that's just the unexamined assumption about things. And if something is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, well, we just don't even notice it. That's delusion.

The other aspect of delusion, and again the unexamined assumption, is that basically it's all about me—what we call identification. The pleasantness, we want it because it gratifies me. Unpleasant, ill will comes up because it's not nice for me. And even neutral—it's like, I'm bored, I need something to happen. Because it's a little scary if there's not something to react to. Then there's no me to really suffer.

So what this quotation is saying is that the attachments—which I'm calling greed, hatred, and delusion—they visit the luminous nature of a moment of awareness, a moment of consciousness. But they do not touch it, color it, stain it, harm it in any way. But the kleshas—the greed, the wanting, the aversion, the fear, the me, me, me—are just basically so much louder, you could say. So much more obvious. We're so much more trained to give all our interest and energy to that, that that's where we go.

We forget to notice, "Oh, greed is like this." Well, that's not—what good is that? Greed is like this. Give me a break. Ill will. Ugh, ill will feels like this. Yeah, well, something better should be happening than that. We want to get in, focus on the experience, focus on what we can get, focus on what we can get rid of.

Turn around. What we're doing here is turning around and recognizing a moment of awareness, a moment of pure conscious awareness. That's all. It's not about changing the experience. It's just about re-recognizing, over and over and over and over, mindful awareness and the steadiness as we're doing. That's what we're doing here. I'm sure you know—anything we're talking about is trying to support us to do.

At first it's some work, and we forget. And we don't know how to just let awareness notice what's happening. We think we have to do it. That's why it's so exhausting. You're trying to relax and be present with just this. No, not this—this. I'm trying to be present with the breath. No, not that way, this way, right? No, I don't want to be present. If I was really present, this wouldn't be happening. This would be happening, right? And then you wonder, how come we're all knotted up?

Awareness is awareness of—doesn't matter. Whatever's arising does not stain or color or tear or damage awareness or mindfulness in any way. In any way. That's what's turning it on its head, so to speak. Because the moments of mindful awareness, they're not flashy. Much more subtle than all this stuff that's going on—beautiful, ugly, lovely, whatever.

It's just much more subtle. But it's available in any moment, regardless of whatever experience is happening. Pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Sense of self, not sense of self. Sense of self is just another arising experience in a moment.

So our practice is really to strengthen this interest. That's why Joseph was talking about last night—ardency, clearly knowing, mindfulness. Then whatever is arising, as the mindfulness develops... it's difficult in the beginning, but gradually we learn how to just be here for this moment, be here at this moment, with a little less striving. And you find magically the awareness starts to get a momentum of its own. If you're doing metta practice, it's the same. The awareness of the metta starts to get a momentum of its own. And in that more steady awareness—not 100% steady, as Sally said, but more steady—wisdom, paññā, arises by itself.

It's not our job to figure out what wisdom is, how it should arise, and make it come. No way. Because we can only think about what we already know, or what we've heard, or what we think wisdom should be. Actually, it would be helpful if you look in your mind and see what thoughts you have about what wisdom should be, so you know what not to believe. Because any thought is too limited. Any thought is too limited. So our doorway to wisdom, our doorway, is just this simple, steady awareness that allows for accurate recognition of the way things are in this moment to arise.

The habits of wanting that come with pleasant—we're caught in them, but they're fairly observable, no? At times when the mind is somewhat quiet, we can see we're not really wanting unpleasant experience. Just noticing: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thoughts, moods—they can have a little tinge, as the Buddha said, of being pleasant or unpleasant or neither one to us. We mostly don't notice this. It's a feeling, a mental quality. It's not like a thing in the experience. But we experience any sense experience with just that tinge. It's quick, it's gone, it's very fleeting.

And the habits are so strong that when it's pleasant, the mind just leans in a little bit, once more. And that assumption—oh, this is right, this is good, this is the way things are supposed to be—it's just so ingrained.

With something unpleasant, a sound just comes. We experience a really strong, shocking unpleasantness, or even just mildly unpleasant. And it's not the same for everybody. And it's not the same for any one person all the time. It's changing in every moment. A little bit unpleasant, just the tendency to shrink back a little bit. If it's stronger, a tendency to get rid of it. And if we're really lost in it, it goes into ill will or it goes into fear. We're not saying you should go and make yourself suffer or hurt. We think, of course, it's normal—it's unpleasant, it should be gone. That is just the way of things. Of course it's suffering.

And in the neutral, we just space out, go to sleep, look for more intensity, or make up a daydream.

The assumption is that it's these experiences that are in the way of peace or happiness or freedom, right? And I don't have to tell you that we get caught in the same patterns in our meditation, do I? I talk about this stuff all the time. On a mental level, I really know it, but that's not enough. On a cellular level, sometimes I really know it. And then the times that I don't really know it—because everything is only this moment—I find I'm practicing away, or I'm in my life, and all of a sudden I'm suffering, I'm struggling, and I go, what's going on? And then I realize, oh, I think this thing shouldn't be happening.

There's a teacher, not a Buddhist teacher, in California—Byron Katie.

She has a great line. She says, "When you fight with reality, you lose." It shouldn't be happening—but it's happening. This is what's happening. Oh, it's like this. And then it's okay.

The block to the freedom, the peace, the ease—the natural peace and ease, this luminous mind—that's what turned it on its head. What if, as Ajahn Amaro says, this luminous mind, the natural peace and ease of mind, is what's really natural? We just don't remember to notice it. And the kleshas, the attachments that visit, that color, that seem to block the natural peace and ease—they're adventitious. They come and go. We don't need to give them all the attention. We can notice them, but come back and turn around and notice the awareness, the natural peace and ease in this moment. We can really learn to shift.

And so when the Buddha says that for those unlearned people there's no cultivation of the mind, you're just like a victim. It's unpleasant—it's bad, what can I do? It's pleasant—I need more, I can't get it, what can I do? And it's all about me. There's no way out of that. But this is offering us a chance to really turn that on its head and explore.

So the work of our mind, the work of meditation, is to see both how the mind's working when the natural peace and ease is observable, accessible—and when it's not, what's going on? How does suffering arise in the mind? How does it cease? We can see this moment after moment. When we get caught in hating the suffering and taking it personally and blaming ourselves, we're missing—just in that moment we're missing—oh, look how it works. But then you're blaming yourself, and suddenly you go, "Oh, blaming myself is like this. That's aversion." And here it is again. Natural peace and ease available. That's our path.

So the assumptions that pleasant is good, unpleasant is bad, neutral we don't see, and it's all about me—they're not subtle. And we do get caught. But in some ways, I think they're easy to recognize. Sometimes they're easy to recognize. It's certainly workable.

But an even more profound and subtle level of the way that these kleshas, these distortions of mind, work when we're not aware of them is this: when there's wanting, greed in the mind and we're not aware of it in a moment of consciousness; when there's fear or aversion and we're not aware that it's there; when there's delusion, confusion, and we're not aware that it's there—it actually colors perception so that we do not perceive what's happening in this moment accurately.

And that's when we talk about the delusion of "it's all about me," that I'm the separate, lasting, temporal entity. It's not like that's an idea we can talk ourselves out of. I bet you've tried. Doesn't work, does it? In fact, the more you think about it—"Yes, yes, I really get it. It's all conditions. It's all just arising. We're all part of the great net of Indra, and there's no separation here. Therefore, from now on, I will just respond with compassion, knowing that we're one"—and then, you know, two minutes later somebody gets in front of you in line and you're like, "I can't believe—oh, I'm responding with compassion, responding with—" and then, "Why can't I respond with compassion? I'm so greedy, I'm so deluded, I'm so selfish," and then you're beating yourself up. All this in service of seeing that there's no self, right? Because it comes right back, recycling it all around me, me, me.

Because it's not something we can talk ourselves out of. It's a deeply rooted moment-to-moment perception—because there's only moment to moment. It's the perception that without wisdom, we don't perceive accurately.

We cannot will ourselves to perceive accurately, because we don't even know that we're not perceiving accurately.

There's a famous quotation from Einstein that exactly fits this. He wrote: "A human being is a part of a whole called by us 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. She experiences herself, her thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of consciousness." It's exactly that—an optical delusion of consciousness that we're something existing in time and space, separate from other things. "This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for the few people nearest to us." He goes on to say, "Our task is to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

But I would also add that the simplicity and commitment to moment-to-moment pure awareness—when it's possible, and when it's not, in the next moment we remember again—also frees us from this optical delusion, from this prison. Because the prison is a delusion of recognizing wrongly. The genius of the Buddha was to see through this.

I'll give you an example of all the delusions. There's something called the four agati, the four wrong courses of behavior or prejudice, from the Vinaya, from the rules of the monks in the Pali canon. The first is chandagati, which is prejudice or seeing wrongly that leads to wrong action caused by desire, by partiality. We see wrongly—the desire causes us to perceive inaccurately, which causes us to have prejudice, which causes us to make decisions that aren't based on the way things really are. That limitation, that optical delusion. Dosagati is the same thing—prejudice caused by hatred, enmity, ill will. Mohagati is prejudice caused by delusion, by not seeing clearly. And the fourth, bhayagati, is fear—prejudice and wrong action, wrong choices, wrong decisions caused by fear.

When you say it, this is kind of obvious, isn't it? When we're really afraid, doesn't everything look fearful? And even if you tell yourself it's not, it's the actual perception. You really can't tell what's what. They say that in the Sotapanna stage, when practitioners have a first taste of awakening, those four prejudices are seen through.

The genius of the Buddha was recognizing that mohagati, delusion, really underlies all of them—continuing to have that optical delusion of me, the center of everything. Don't judge it, but notice how it acts when it's here, when it's not. How any sense experience immediately becomes "me hearing." Or "what does that sound mean about me?" You see somebody walking in the distance and right away it's like, "Oh, they're walking better than me. What does that mean?" Or they're sitting: "Oh, I'm sitting better than them." Or, "Oh, that's a really pretty pair of socks. I wish I had them. Oh, I'm so greedy." Me, me, me, me. Just noticing that.

The genius of the Buddha was to see through this. And in the moments when there's not that me and other, when there's just not me as the center of things, there's accurate recognition. It happens by itself. We can't will it, but it happens quite naturally because the perception, the clarity, the awareness isn't colored by confusion. But we can't do it from some ideal, even with the best of intentions.

There's a great story I heard on the radio. They were talking about economic policy of enlightened self-interest, which as we know doesn't actually work. But they were using this example, which I loved. Apparently some footbridge had been built recently over the Thames River in London, a big footbridge. Soon after it opened, hundreds of people were walking over it—maybe right after it opened, just getting used to it. The radio said it was like two hundred or three hundred or four hundred people on this bridge. And the whole bridge started to really shake. It was like too many people on this bridge. Everyone got scared, and each person did what seemed like the appropriate thing to do—the bridge was shaking this way, so each person stepped over that way. All four hundred of them stepped over that way, which of course made the whole thing worse.

You're acting from the best of intentions, but it's limited by just me. And we can't will ourselves out of that. In a moment of sampajañña, what Joseph was talking about last night—clear comprehension, the whole big context, mindfulness in context—would say, "Oh, what's going on here?"

It's shaking. Some would go that way because it's not this reference point of "me," which is our natural reference point. So that's an example of sampajanya and how it happens quite naturally when we're not locked into this optical delusion.

I just wanted to offer this. I read in a great book that came out recently from Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno, who are two Western monks in the Ajahn Chah tradition. They brought out this book—it's a compilation of sutta references and some material from Ajahn Chah. It's called *The Island*, and it's all about aspects of awakening, of nibbana. It's quite wonderful. They've done a great job of compiling all these references, and of course it's for free distribution if you write to them.

This is from Ajahn Chah talking about, in his very pithy, earthy way, the relationship between sati, sampajanya, and pañña—sati being mindfulness, sampajanya the clearly knowing, and pañña wisdom, that Joseph talked about last night. I liked it. It sort of fits in here.

He says sati is like the hand—like our hand that simply picks things up and cognizes them. Sampajanya, clearly knowing, is like the arm. The arm is what enables the hand to reach for objects, to move objects around. So sampajanya, the clearly knowing, refers to seeing an object in its bigger context, how it relates to its surroundings. And pañña, he says, is like the life source—it's like the body. For him, pañña is the seeing of things in terms of anicca, the impermanent nature; dukkha, the unreliable, unsatisfactory nature; and anatta, that there's no intrinsic, self-existing, separate entity here. Seeing things in that way—that's pañña.

He says that while a hand and arm have their functions, without the body they are powerless. And it's like that with sati and sampajanya. That's what we practice. The pañña—seeing clearly, knowing, seeing through our optical delusions of permanence, of "this thing is going to make me happy," of separate entity—that happens naturally and spontaneously because that's just the nature of things. We don't have to create it. It's how it is. We're just setting up the conditions where we stop feeding the habits, and instead we feed the awareness. And it allows the Dhamma to reveal itself. In that self-revealing Dhamma, our heart and mind is free.

There's still unpleasant in the world. Don't think there's not. The suffering, though—the suffering doesn't have to be there in that way. And we can experience this just in a moment. Whether you're hurting, or you're down on yourself, or you're just feeling lousy—in that moment: "Oh, feeling lousy is like this." And all that extra just goes away.

Someone was telling me about feeling really sick, and when they were feeling really caught—trying to be mindful of it, but really caught, and knowing they were caught, feeling kind of reactive to the symptoms and the physical experience, noticing that struggle. And then at another point, just completely opened into: "Oh, heat is like this, tingling is like this, burning is like this"—not even getting put together in a sense of "I'm sick," but just experience. There was no more suffering about it. And then there were even moments when you couldn't even say you were sick. You didn't even feel sick at all. There are moments when you're sick, moments when you're not, and it's just what it is. That's quite knowable for all of us.

This wisdom, to me, is like such a huge relief—to know that with the steadiness of awareness, wisdom is inevitable because nature is how it is. We don't have to create it, thank God. In fact, we only make a mess when we try to create it. All we have to do is settle back, bring our interest, our love, our commitment, our courage, and just let it rip. It's ripping anyway. All we're doing is just showing up and being here with it.

Ajahn Chah says: be the knower, the knower of experience, not the owner of experience. Just loving the knowing, loving the awareness. It's like a Tai Chi move from being caught in this.

Oh, it's like this. That's John Semedo's language. "It's like this." It's helped me so much—in daily life, in meditation, it's the same. You're all caught. You're liking. You're not liking. You can't even say what's happening. But you know something is going on that you wish wasn't. What is it? Oh, I don't know. It's like this. That's all. Stop trying to fix or own or be or figure it out. It's like this. It's really powerful.

So I just want to end with another statement from Ajahn Chah, which I'm dropping in for your reflection. Just see how you think about it. He says in his way: samsara and nibbana are like the front and back of the hand. They happen in the same place and are known by the same awareness.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 5

The Sources of Happiness

Guy Armstrong · 58 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines the Buddha's teachings on happiness, presenting five progressive sources of joy available to practitioners. Beginning with the Pāli terms for happiness—sukha (contentment), pīti (meditative delight), ānanda (bliss), pāmojja (joy), and somanassa (gladness of mind)—he references Bhikkhu Anālayo's commentary that the entire gradual training can be understood as "a progressive refinement of joy."*
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> *Armstrong methodically explores each avenue: sense pleasures (kāma), which while limited and transient, are not condemned for lay practitioners; merit (puñña), consisting of generosity (dāna), virtue (sīla), and mental development (bhāvanā); concentration (samādhi) and the jhānas, which bring seclusion from the hindrances; insight (vipassanā) into the Four Noble Truths and three characteristics; and finally awakening itself, which removes the fetters binding us to suffering.*
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> *Drawing from personal observations of an unnamed Buddhist teacher whose brain scans showed remarkable happiness, Armstrong illustrates how these qualities manifest in a developed practitioner. He emphasizes that happiness is not random or elusive but follows predictable causes—when we understand these causes, we can cultivate them. The talk concludes with the profound teaching that happiness itself becomes the main cause for liberation, as all these sources of joy channel toward the possibility of awakening and the final end of suffering.*

The subject of this talk is the sources of happiness.

The whole point of the teachings of the Buddha was for us to find happiness. Although he often talked about it in terms of the end of suffering, the outcome is the same. The Buddha often used this kind of negative language in his teaching, so the end of suffering is consistent with his terminology. But he also used many very positive expressions for different kinds of happiness.

In the Pali, I'll mention a few words and their sense in English. One word he often used was *sukha*. I really like this word because it sounds a lot like "sugar," and it has that kind of sweetness. It means alternately happiness or pleasure. I think of it as a quiet kind of contentment. The word *pīti*, which many of you are familiar with, refers to a happiness specifically associated with meditation. There's a kind of delight when

you really connect well with your meditation focus, whether it's the breath, the body, or a mood, and you're really present with it, meeting it with a fullness of attention. There's a delight, a meditative delight in that.

The word *ānanda* means bliss, and it's used in many names. The Buddha's attendant was named Ānanda. You see it often in monks' and nuns' names in Asia. My preceptor was the Venerable Paññānanda—the bliss of wisdom. The word *pāmojja* means joy; it's one of the factors in what's called transcendent dependent arising, the increase in joy. *Somanassa* means a gladness of mind. I believe it's mentioned in the Satipaṭṭhāna in a few places. One contemporary scholar and commentator, Venerable Anālayo, wrote a wonderful book called *Satipaṭṭhāna*, a book-length exposition of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. He put it this way: the entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy.

So really, that's what we're here to do. We're here to refine the sense of joy and happiness that we experience both in our retreat life and in our daily life. That's what the path is about.

This summer I was sitting with a Buddhist teacher who is a monk, and I've decided not to name him because I want to be able to speak freely about him based on my own suppositions. I may or may not be right, so I don't want to taint his name with my projections. I also don't want to create expectations in you. There's nothing worse than being told somebody's a fantastic teacher, and then you meet them and think, "What a disappointment." So I'm not going to share his name, which will enable me to speak more freely about him.

In spending time with him—listening to his teachings, being around him personally outside the formal teaching role—I was really struck by his happiness, his degree of contentment and joy. This wasn't a purely subjective impression, because he'd been through those machines at Madison. The University of Wisconsin does MRI tests scanning people's brains, and his happiness quotient in the brain scan was kind of off the chart. He had been coined by some there as "the happiest person in the world." Though they haven't tested everybody yet, even at Madison, so we won't call him that for certain.

As I observed him through many different situations, I watched how this happiness had different facets. If he was not called on to do anything, it wasn't like he was always bubbling over with some kind of cheerful, smiling delight. Often, if he wasn't being interactive, he'd be very quiet, peaceful, very low-key. You could sort of overlook his presence. If he was in a room with people but wasn't called on to do anything, he was very simple and modest and humble. But when he taught, and often when he interacted, he

was really playful. He'd break into smiles and laughter very easily, and it was contagious. Being around him for a while, one tended to soak up that happiness through his manifestation of it. He was quite charismatic.

As I spent time around him, I started to wonder: where did his happiness come from? Because I wanted some also. And I thought, if he developed it, that means any of us could develop it to that extent. That's one of the promises of the path. As I reflected on it, it seemed to me that in the teaching of the Buddha, there are basically five avenues or five means to developing happiness. I reflected on each of them in relation to him as I observed him and listened to him teach. So that's what I want to talk about tonight: these five sources of happiness in the teachings of the Buddha.

But first, why is this of interest to us? Because happiness is the destination of the path, it's something I think we're all interested in. Once we learn what the causes of it are, we know how to create it for ourselves. Happiness is a mental factor like any other. It's a conditioned state that arises based on prior causes and conditions and comes into being when those conditions are right. It's very scientific.

So if we go through the steps to prepare the mind for happiness, happiness is the inevitable result. This is not a whimsical thing. It's not a random thing. It's not an elusive thing.

As it often feels in Western literature, it's really hard to figure out in Western life why some people are happy and some are not. But in the Buddhist teachings, it's very predictable, you might say. Now, of course, we're all starting from a different point, and so it's not possible to predict the timing of the development of happiness in anyone's practice. But the eventual outcome, if we persist, is inevitable. And that's one of the things that I love about the Buddha's teachings. There are very predictable ways for us to get where we want to go. Happiness in its various gradations are points along this route. And if we know the causes, we know how to reach that destination.

So in my understanding of the Buddha's teachings, there are five avenues to happiness, each one a kind of set of practices. Again, it's not random. It's something that we can practice and develop. Four of them can be taken to a lot of depth—you could almost say unlimited depth of development. And one of them is always going to be shallow and superficial, so we don't worry as much about that one, but it's available also.

The other thing I want to say is this is just in our tradition of Theravadan Buddhism and the Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the ways to happiness. I looked up the word happiness on Amazon just this evening, and the response came back with 18,000 books dealing with happiness. So there are a lot of other ideas out there. The Buddha's list is not exhaustive, but it is reliable.

Just to name some of the others that are common in our culture: psychotherapy, exercise. There's a new formulation of exercise that some of our friends are into called "the happy body"—I don't know if you've heard of that one. There's a whole system to make the body happy, which makes the mind happy too. Developing creativity. Spending time in nature. And I'm sure you all have your own lists as well.

The five that I'm going to talk about tonight from our tradition are sense pleasures, merit, concentration, insight, and awakening. I'll talk about each one a little bit as we go, in the order that I gave them. Each one is a progressively more refined, more reliable, and more satisfying form of happiness.

The other thing to say about all five of these avenues is that they rest on a common understanding in the Buddhist tradition of what constitutes genuine happiness. And that is that the forces in the mind of greed, aversion, and delusion are reduced and eventually absent. So this is the sense of when we say in our practice that the mind becomes more pure—we mean something pretty precise by this, which is that greed, aversion, and delusion decline over the course of our Dharma practice. I'll talk about how each one of these contributes to that sense of decline.

So the first one is sense pleasures. This is from the Buddha talking to his attendant: "Ananda, there are these five cords of sense pleasure. What five? Forms"—which is a synonym for sights; often when the Buddha says form he also means sights—"cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing." Isn't that nice to think of all the sights in the world that have that combination of qualities? "Sounds cognizable by the ear that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, and tantalizing. Odors cognizable by the nose. Tastes cognizable by the tongue. Sensations cognizable by the body. Similarly, the pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on these—that is called sensual pleasure."

And what came to my mind when I read this was a trip that Sally and I took to the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. They were showing a quite wonderful exhibition of Impressionist paintings.

The Musée d'Orsay in Paris was undergoing renovation, and so they were lending out quite a large body of their works. They were doing it in two stages—the first was called "The Birth of Impressionism," featuring the early stages of the movement and leading into its more mature expression. As the exhibit progressed, it moved through time, and you could see Impressionism develop from the early paintings by Manet and Degas, which were really more realistic, into the later paintings by Renoir and Monet that became much more plays of light and color.

As we walked through the exhibit, the further we got and the more impressionistic the paintings became, the smile on my face just kept growing and growing. I wasn't even thinking about it, but as I looked at the beauty of these Monets and Renoirs and Pissarros, I felt this sense of joy, and the smile just started to grow until I noticed it—then I became a little self-conscious. But it really is a delight to see beautiful things, to hear beautiful music like a symphony in concert. I've thought that if an alien came to this planet and wanted to see the greatest thing that Western culture had produced, I would take them to a symphony hall and let them hear a concert of something like Beethoven's Fifth. The interplay of all the instruments and the harmony is just magical.

So we can have very high degrees of pleasure and bliss and joy through exposure to the pleasures of the five senses. This is a natural part of life for laypeople. When you think rather longingly about your life outside, I bet it's the sense pleasures you're thinking of: having a good meal with friends, enjoying your favorite latte, making love, listening to your favorite music at home or driving in your car. These are the things that make our lay lives delightful in many small moments. They create moments of uplift through pleasurable experiences of the five physical senses.

When we come into this environment, as I mentioned in my previous talk, one of the sorrows of this life is the loss of those kinds of pleasures. We feel that for a while until we adjust, and then the joys of the renunciate life tend to make us not worry so much about that part.

Now, I'm sure you've heard that in the Buddha's teachings there are many warnings about the dangers of sense pleasures. Generally in Buddhism, sense pleasures get a bad rap—I'm sure you've tuned into that. Here's a classical statement from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness and sensual pleasures, which is the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbeneficial. And the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbeneficial. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, knowledge, which leads to peace, to enlightenment, to nibbāna."

But notice the preface: "for one who has gone forth into homelessness." The teachings warning about sense pleasures are mostly given to monastics—people whose whole lifestyle is giving up access to sense pleasures. That's the foundation of the renunciate life. It's also a foundation for our life here. We don't make the pursuit of sense pleasures a big part of your being here, and it's not highly recommended. It tends to distract the mind from our essential concern, which is observing the mind and its movements.

In other suttas, the Buddha compares sense pleasures to a dry bone, because ultimately there's no real meat or sustenance there; to a dream, because they're so fleeting they can almost seem illusory and not so worth pursuing. But it would be wrong to believe that the Buddha condemned sense pleasures for laypeople. He didn't. In fact, in one sutta he said that one enjoying sense pleasures may be praised if the wealth they depend on has been acquired lawfully and is shared to make oneself and others happy. So there's this link between sense pleasures and wealth, which is logical if you think about it—a lot of sense pleasures cost money. The Buddha was making that connection: it's what we use as laypeople. We use money and we enjoy sense pleasures.

But of course we all know that sense pleasures are not the final word. They're a limited kind of happiness, temporary. They come and go, and their satisfaction is transient—good for a bit, but ending very quickly. I remember Sally and I were eating lunch one day this summer at our kitchen table. We had homemade chocolate chip cookies, and I was eating one of these fresh-out-of-the-oven chocolate chip cookies. I remember saying to her, "You know, it's really hard to be unhappy eating a fresh chocolate chip cookie." But then the problem is it ends so quickly—the cookie is gone.

And so the Buddha continued in this same statement where he talked about sense pleasures and the joy that arises based on them. He continued, telling Ānanda this.

Though some may say, "This is the supreme pleasure and joy that beings experience," speaking of sense pleasures, "I would not concede this to them. Why is that? Because there is another kind of happiness more excellent and sublime than that happiness."

So then we move on to this next kind of happiness, which exists at a higher level. I want to mention that when I reflected on the enjoyment of sense pleasures in relationship to this teacher I mentioned, as a monk, sense pleasures didn't make up a huge part of his life. All I really saw was that he enjoyed some meals, but he seemed to enjoy every meal equally. Whatever he was served, he ate it with an equal degree of happiness or equanimity. I didn't see any particular preference or craving—it simply wasn't a big deal for him. For him, sense pleasures were not a significant component. For us, they make up a bigger component of our daily life.

The second of the sources is a word that carries some ambivalence among Westerners. That word is *merit*. It's a translation of the Pali word *puñña*, and it basically means wholesome action or skillful action. But this term "merit"—I don't know—it's tied up with merit badges, and maybe with the idea of bringing an apple to put on your high school teacher's desk, and then you're a good kid or good student. There's something a little too goody-goody about the word, and many of us don't feel comfortable with it. Unfortunately, there's no other word in common use to translate the term, so I'm going to use it. You'll read it often in Buddhist teachings. If you simply think of it as skillful action, hopefully that will take some of the strange vibration away from it.

The understanding is that when we engage in skillful action, it brings positive results back into our life. Some of these results may be experienced on the physical level, some on the mental or emotional level. But at any rate, the results tend to lead to happiness. This is the basic law of karma.

One quotation that has been mentioned a couple of times is the opening of the Dhammapada: "All states come from mind, are preceded by mind, are ruled by mind. Speak and act with a pure mind, and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable." This is the sense of merit—that when we act from a purity of mind, happiness and good results come back into our life.

I think it's really interesting to take in this understanding. If you understand karma in this way and have a degree of faith in it, you start to realize that this provides the lever, you could say, or the engine for us to build happiness into our lives. We can control, to some degree, the future outcome of our life by looking at the intention we act upon now. If we make an effort, if we make a regular practice out of doing things from a beautiful or wholesome intention, that lays the groundwork for happiness coming back into our life on both a physical or material level and an emotional or mental level. This understanding of karma gives us a certain degree of power around our life and takes away some of the seeming randomness of it.

This concept of merit is what most lay Buddhists in Asia practice for. Most lay people in countries like Thailand and Burma don't do a lot of the kind of meditation we're doing here. Some do, but the majority of Buddhists don't go into intensive retreat the way you're doing it. Rather, they feel that their happiness will be generated by an ongoing series of wholesome actions. That's what they structure their relationship to Buddhism around—offering food at the temple to the monks or nuns, making prayers, developing in loving-kindness, observing the five precepts or the eight precepts. This is considered in Asia, and the roots are in the Buddha's teachings, a good lay path. Someone following this course is considered to be carrying out a good path of lay practice.

Because we have a foot in both worlds, I think it's really wonderful if we undertake both the monastic practices, which I'll talk about later—those based on insight and concentration—and also the lay practices based upon carrying out wholesome action. This is a teaching we have not always stressed over the years of the Dharma being in the West, but I think it's truly important for us who live most of our lives in the lay world.

The Buddha said there are "streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishments of happiness, which are heavenly, ripening in happiness, and which lead to whatever is wished for, loved, and agreeable to one's welfare and happiness." Part of the understanding of merit is that the development of wholesome action leads to realizing your aspiration—it leads to whatever is wished for. Because different people have different aspirations, the outcome of wholesome action can vary depending on what the person's heartfelt aspiration is. If your heartfelt aspiration is liberation, this practice of merit will conduce to liberation. If your aspiration is simply to live more comfortably in the world with more prosperity, health, or ease, then the development of wholesome action can lead in that direction as well.

The Buddha talked about three particular practices that form the basis of this wholesome action, the basis of happiness for lay practitioners: generosity, virtue or integrity, and what's called *bhāvanā* or mental development. The Pali terms for these three are *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā*—generosity, virtue, mental development.

Generosity is a huge part of the Buddha's teachings for lay people. It's the first of the ten *pāramīs*.

So in some ways it's considered the foundation for developing the qualities that bring one to awakening.

Generosity is a very powerful practice because it cuts across the assumed separation between ourselves and others. Generosity is about tuning into someone else as a being—like ourselves—who has happiness, unhappiness, wants and needs, and wanting to take care to satisfy the other person's needs the same way we take care of our own needs. The act of generosity is based on seeing through this assumed duality, through the force of empathy, feeling what another feels, and then acting in a way to share, which also breaks down the assumed division or separation.

When we have an understanding of non-separateness with one another and then act based on that, the action in a way plants that truth of non-separation in a deeper place in our heart, our mind, and also in our karmic stream. So it's a wonderful thing to carry out acts that bridge the divide between ourselves and other beings—human beings, animal beings, any other beings that you may encounter.

And we notice something of that in the joy we feel in giving. When you think about a time that you've given freely—not because you had to, not because your uncle's birthday was coming up or something, but simply a freely given gift—there's a lot of joy in thinking about making that gift, feeling into what would make the other person happy. Then when you find the right gift, there's a lot of joy in offering it. It just feels beautiful. And when you reflect on it afterwards, there's a lot of joy in thinking about the gift, the person receiving it, and the happiness that hopefully it brought to them. So you can feel how this happiness builds from the act of giving. And you also understand that it leaves a karmic imprint that will bear good fruit in the future.

One of the great things about being around the Dharma for a long time is that you meet people doing extraordinarily generous things. Of course, a lot of you are devoting your lives to serving others. And it's always inspiring to meet people on retreat who serve in this way—serve at Dharma centers, serve as nurses or therapists, serve as teachers in schools, caregivers to aging parents, parents to young children. So many people I meet in the Dharma have based their life around giving of their time and their energy and their skill. It's beautiful to be in the presence of that.

I was teaching a retreat in New Mexico one time, and I was driving in the car on the way home with a woman who had recently returned from Thailand. She had gone to Thailand a relatively wealthy person. She had worked as a management consultant for many years and built up savings, invested in some real estate and various properties. She went to Thailand with the intention to give it all away and to retire to live in a monastery or nunnery.

She got to Thailand and made connections with different places, both monasteries and nunneries. While there, she sold her properties in the States and channeled her money to these different places she'd visited that she wanted to support. She sold all her properties except one and just gave the money away—hundreds of thousands of dollars that she gave away.

She moved into one of the monasteries or nunneries and got sick. She could no longer really practice and needed to return to the States to look after her health. She only had one property left. She came back, sold that, got enough money to live on for a while, looked after her health, and went back into her job as a management consultant.

The beautiful thing was she had no regrets. She'd given away almost everything she owned to support the Dharma, and she had no regrets about it. I just know that the fruit of that giving was going to enrich her for years to come. It was very inspiring.

That's dana. Sila—integrity or virtue—Skye talked about a lot in her talk earlier this week, so I won't go into that in great detail. I'll just mention one thing that Skye said and repeat it here.

When we observe our sila closely, keeping the spirit of non-harming and really being conscientious with that, we're also giving a gift in that observance. The Buddha said that what we give to countless beings is freedom from fear. And that's a wonderful thing. When you know somebody who has really good sila, there's a real feeling of trust in that person. It makes it very safe to be around them. And you can feel that atmosphere influencing the other people who come into their orbit, so that those people create a kind of zone of safety. The people who move in that zone are all receiving this gift of fearlessness. It makes a safe place for countless beings.

In terms of the benefit of observing this kind of integrity closely, the Buddha said that it brings a certain kind of happiness which he called the bliss of blamelessness. When we know that for a long time we really haven't harmed another being intentionally, there's a wonderful feeling of relief, a kind of lack of guilt or inner pressure or regret or uneasy conscience—a real feeling of purity and ease. The Buddha called it the bliss of blamelessness. That's a fruit of integrity.

And this third word—dana, sila, bhavana—is very interesting. Bhava means being or existence or becoming, so bhavana means bringing into being. It's sometimes a synonym for meditation.

A common translation is mental development. And I love this sense that we are bringing into being our own hearts and minds. That's really the sense of bhavana—that we learn how to shape our heart and mind in a beautiful direction.

The French poet Paul Valéry kept a series of notebooks that became his spiritual practice at a certain point. I don't think he published them during his life; they were published posthumously. But he wrote for one or two hours every morning in these personal notebooks, which were a kind of diary of his inner exploration. He'd write on many different themes. It wasn't poetry—it was simply reflecting on what he read and his own understanding of it. It was his spiritual practice. And he said of it: "Other people write books. I am making my mind."

That's what we're doing here. We're making our minds step by step, moment by moment. We're fashioning what's in here.

When the Buddha talked about bhavana as a form of merit or wholesome action, he tended to speak of it specifically in terms of developing the practice of loving-kindness. So in terms of merit, the sense is something that laypeople, people in daily life, can

easily access and build—the sense of loving-kindness, compassion, connection. You could put gratitude in there as well. And the other quality he talked about often was the development of faith. So in this dana-sila-bhavana combination, I think of it as developing loving-kindness and faith. When faith is strong, life goes more easily, practice goes more easily.

This is not an exclusively Buddhist law, as you must know. Think about people in your life whom you feel are truly happy. Just run through your acquaintances, see who comes to mind among the people you know who seem genuinely happy, and take a look at their lives. See if they aren't characterized by generosity, integrity, and some degree of loving-kindness.

You could say that these are the requisites for normal human happiness—not happiness that even conceives of a spiritual path, but simply what it is to be a good person in the world, in human society, across cultures, across religions, across any part of the globe. You'll find these people everywhere. Generosity, integrity, loving-kindness. That's what makes for a normal, happy human life. As we develop these three in our lay life, we also will be generating the conditions for such a life.

I think it's interesting—just one final note—what all three of these have in common: they're all based on empathy and caring for others. It's so interesting to me that the basis of a happy human life is caring for others and then expressing that.

When I thought about this in relation to the teacher I was with, the connection was very apparent. His conduct was very, very blameless. I'd never seen him do anything that would in any way give offense to someone. A very gentle person, he spoke kindly when he spoke. Of course, he was practicing a lot of precepts, but you could feel there was a genuine intention of kindness and compassion behind them.

The next avenue to happiness is concentration—the third, after sense pleasures and merit. Now we're getting into the realm of what you're doing on this retreat. This is something special. This is not something that many people in normal daily life have access to or are able to develop strongly, but it's one of the key things we're doing here.

Concentration is the common translation of the Pali word samadhi. It really refers to a mind that has gathered itself into the present moment, that has become, as Carol said the other night, one-pointed in its awareness of the present moment. This gathering into the present moment brings a lot of strength to the mind. Normally in daily life, we're distracted by thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, by what we have to do

next, by running here and there. In this situation, because our activities become so simple, it enables us more and more to gather our full attention and place it into just this moment.

When that happens, you'll feel it. You'll feel the mind really collect upon the breath or body or sound in a very wholehearted way. And then you'll find the mind has a lot of strength. When the mind collects in this way, it becomes still, and you can feel, in that place, that it's hard to shake. When the mind is distracted, any little sound might throw us off or start us down a path of thought and papañca. But when the mind really comes together in this way, it acquires a strength that lets it stay connected to the present moment. And that brings a sense of stillness, peace, and well-being.

This unification of mind, this strengthening of mind, brings with it automatically a sense of well-being. If you look back over some of your fondest memories in meditation, or what you might say are some of the happiest moments you've had, I bet they'll exhibit this factor of concentration.

This is one of the things that put the dharma hook in me and made me keep coming back—because I tasted some peace through meditation I'd never felt before. And I kept coming back because I wondered: if a little bit feels like that, what would a little more feel like?

So this cultivation of peace brought me back again and again.

One of the things that's so satisfying about this state of concentration is that when it's strong, the hindrances don't arise. This is one of the hallmarks of strong concentration. The hindrances are temporarily at bay—they haven't gone away for good, but these movements of liking and disliking and sleepiness and restlessness and doubt have temporarily subsided. The mind then feels a certain kind of freedom. It's a beautiful experience not to be assaulted by these crazy movements of our own mind.

So it's said that this state is a state of some seclusion. We're not only secluded from outer distraction, but we're secluded from the impact of our own kilesas to a large extent. And that's part of the beauty and delight.

The concentration can develop further into these states called jhana, which are described as absorption states of concentration. This is the Buddha's description of the first of the jhanas—there are seven states beyond this, but this is the first one: "The meditator enters and abides in the first jhana with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. She makes the rapture and pleasure born of seclusion drench, fill, steep, and pervade her body so that there is no part of her whole body unpervaded by the rapture and pleasure."

The development of this kind of joy and pleasure in meditation, of course, reinforces our ability to stay present, because now the present moment experience is satisfying in itself. This concentration enables the mind to just relax into its own experience of the moment. And so it can become a little bit self-supporting because the mind's not being drawn out through likes and dislikes, through wants.

One of the other things that happens as the mind comes to settle into itself more and more is that the body also starts to settle. I think for most of us in the West, we've grown up in a very busy culture and our body reflects that. When we come to meditation, often we've picked up the energy of the fast-paced society that we're in the middle of. I know I often felt in the early years of practice that that energy was vibrating my body and was kind of rising up, coming into the head a lot. And it was hard for me to settle in a relaxed way lower into my body because I felt I was still reeling from all the busyness that my life had picked up. And especially if there's any injury, trauma, or deep hurt, that kind of buzzy energy gets even stronger.

So a lot of what happens as we calm the mind in meditation is that the body also calms, and lets go of that unnecessary, frantic energy that's so prevalent outside. Sometimes it can take a long time for that calming to happen, but it's part of the natural process. And when the body does start to calm, it's much simpler for the mind to rest because it's not meeting the jangly energy in the body.

The practices that you're doing, the practices that we've been instructing in the mornings, all develop this quality of concentration and samadhi. You don't need to do anything differently. Sometimes people want to develop concentration very strongly and go in a particular direction, and a few people on the retreat may end up doing that. But for most of you, the practices that you are doing through the Vipassana instructions will lead you to deeper and deeper concentration as you go through the retreat, and that will be sufficient.

The next of the avenues is insight. This is basically the growth of wisdom or understanding. This is what all our instructions are pointing to. This is what most of the evening talks will be pointing to. This is really what the retreat is structured around. I don't have to talk about this a lot tonight; I know you're very familiar with this ground. I'll just recap.

Insight is really around understanding what it is that we do with our minds that leads to suffering, and what we can do through our minds that leads to the end of suffering or to happiness. This is what we're here to understand.

The Buddhist formulation of this question came in two or three different main paradigms. The first, and probably most important, is the Four Noble Truths: to understand suffering, its cause, its end, and the path to its end. In this, we spend most of our time on the second and third noble truths—how do we understand the arising of craving, which is the source of suffering, and how do we release that craving to come to the at least temporary end of craving and to that place of freedom?

This is really the crux of our meditation practice. If we're caught in something, there's some kind of craving at work. How do we release that and return the mind to a place of freedom—relative freedom, ease, relaxation, well-being? There's a central investigation that goes on through the Four Noble Truths.

Another insight that's commonly talked about is the insight into the three characteristics: the understanding of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. But these insights are very closely related to the Four Noble Truths. As we understand that everything is in the process of change, we don't tend to hang on or grasp as much.

So we move through life more easily, letting things come as they come and letting things go as they go. As we learn this rhythm of allowing, there's less clinging and therefore less suffering. We learn not to hold on, and then the craving and clinging don't arise so much in the first place.

The third area the Buddha speaks about is the direct investigation of clinging or grasping itself. We learn to notice when there's clinging in the mind through some form of contraction, either through liking or disliking, and how to release that. So all these insights orbit around the same core issue: How do we get caught? How do we release? How does the mind get stuck? How does the mind free itself?

The understanding of not-self is so helpful in this because we start to understand that all the different phenomena that come along are not really commentaries on me, myself, or I. Everything arises according to its own causes and conditions. Everything passes away according to its own causes and conditions. This kind of understanding seeps in gradually through our practice, but it has a deep and lasting impact.

I have a friend who's an old student of meditation. He was interested in coming to a longer retreat next year and emailed actually a few of us here with reports of a difficult health condition. He's about my age, and his body is starting to break down in different ways. He said, "You know, this may be the last long retreat that I may be able to come on." He's somebody who's come on long retreats for many, many years with us. And he said, "But you don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body." So even in the midst of that health crisis, even in the midst of seeing the end of his life kind of on the

horizon—you don't need to feel badly for me. I know I'm not this body. There's so much freedom and lightness when we let those truths of not me, not mine, not I, let them in and let them grow slowly, slowly.

When I reflect on the teacher I was with this summer, one of the things that was most enjoyable about watching him was the kind of lightness with which he approached everything. I just didn't see stickiness or grabbiness in his mind. He was someone who really seemed to have understood the fleeting nature of everything in this world, and he wasn't getting too caught up in any of it that I could see.

The fifth and last avenue to happiness is awakening. You could say that this is another form of insight, but because it's an insight on a deeper level, I put it in its own category—awakening or enlightenment. This is a pointer to the realization that it's our human potential, through meditation practice, to discover a peace that's beyond time, beyond conditions, beyond change. There's a dimension within us that has this kind of absolute purity. It cannot be corrupted or made imperfect by anything, no matter what happens to us.

The discovery of this, whenever it happens in practice, is at least one stage of the awakening process. And this discovery gives us a truly unshakable faith in the end of suffering as a possibility for ourselves. We know it because we've experienced it directly. Nothing can take away that knowledge. Nothing can take away that faith.

In addition, that realization, when it happens, takes out some of what are called the fetters in the heart and mind—some of the very structural elements that lead the mind into suffering. They can be removed once and for all. This happens, it's said, in different stages, so different fetters come out at different points in the journey. But ultimately, the Buddha said, all the tendencies of mind that can possibly lead us into suffering—that means all the forms of greed, aversion, and delusion—can be taken out of the mind so that there's no longer any potential for suffering to arise in the mind stream.

This, the Buddha said, was the highest happiness. He said that the happiness of sense pleasures was not one-sixteenth of the happiness of this kind of awakening. And it's hard to imagine what that would be like, because we're buffeted every day as we live, as we sit, as we practice. We're buffeted by these forces in our own hearts and minds—the forces of wanting, of not wanting, of not seeing clearly. This is our normal human life. To come to a place where we knew that those forces could not come again to harm us, to injure us—what a relief, what a blessing, what happiness.

So in closing, I just want to mention that this monk who seemed to know what he was talking about said that the main cause for this kind of freedom is happiness. That is, the development of sense pleasures in moderation, of merit, of generosity, of virtue, of cultivating the heart, of concentration and discovering an inner peace even if it is conditional, of the growth in wisdom through understanding clinging and its release. The happiness from all those sources then becomes the main cause for liberation.

So as we practice all the different avenues to happiness, if we practice them all, they all channel toward this possibility—a real human possibility of awakening and the final end of suffering.

CHAPTER 6

Am I OK?

Sally Armstrong · 54 min

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Sally Armstrong addresses one of the most pervasive yet often unexamined aspects of meditation practice: the restless, thinking mind and its underlying question, 'Am I OK?' Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she illuminates how the Buddha identified this pattern of unwise attention—dwelling on questions of past, present, and future self—as a direct cause of suffering that strengthens the āsavas (taints) of greed, aversion, and delusion.*
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> *Armstrong examines how restlessness (uddhacca) functions as both cause and effect of the hindrances, noting its particular prominence for Western practitioners immersed in a culture of constant connectivity and distraction. She offers practical guidance for working with this energy: recognizing it, feeling its quality in the body, and getting curious about what lies beneath. The talk explores how unresolved experiences from the past inevitably surface in meditation, requiring a four-stage process of acknowledgment, acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion. Similarly, she addresses our obsession with future planning and fantasy, encouraging practitioners to see the suffering inherent in living outside present reality.*
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> *The heart of the teaching points toward a fundamental shift: rather than trying to resolve 'Am I OK?' through endless mental machinations, we can learn to trust mindfulness itself as the light that allows us to open. By showing up fully for whatever is present—including the restlessness itself—we discover the profound acceptance that leads to freedom. As Armstrong emphasizes, we already have everything needed for awakening: a mind, a body, and the willingness to stop telling ourselves stories.*

So here we are on what's about the tenth day or so of the retreat. We've sat up here a lot in the mornings and evenings, giving instructions and exhortations about practice, offering many options—talking about awareness of the body, of the breath, using the breath to calm ourselves, being aware of emotions, moods, and mind states. This morning, or was it yesterday, Joseph gave the more subtle meditation object of vedana, or feeling tone. All of these are venues for our mindfulness, ways we can develop this continuity of awareness.

But what's actually happening most of the time, especially in the non-formal meditation periods? What's your predominant experience? Are you thinking a lot?

This is what happens. This is what we see in our practice. We have this intention to be present. We follow these instructions. And again and again, the mind goes off into thought, into fantasy—particularly, if not entirely, thoughts of past and future. Sometimes we have thoughts of the present. That's actually a bit of an advanced practice, thinking about what's happening now. But it's still thinking—thinking about our practice, thinking about the breath. Still thinking.

I wanted to talk about this tonight so we can be really honest about what's actually happening, so we don't deny that this is a big part of many of our experiences on retreat, and also so you get a sense you're not alone. If you're feeling that everyone else is zooming around in blissful peace and quiet—I don't think so. I actually think there's a lot of this going on.

In meditation, we get to see the nature of our mind. It's a little humbling, isn't it? We try to follow these instructions, try to sit down and be calm and quiet, and zoom, zoom, zoom—off we go.

One of my favorite cartoons recently is from that strip *Rhymes with Orange*. The little subtitle reads "As Medicine Advances." The scenario shows a patient sitting in the doctor's examining room, wearing that thin paper dress they make you put on so you know who's got the position of authority in the relationship. The doctor has come in with a clipboard and is obviously reading the results of a test. The doctor says, "The MRI confirms it. Your mind is full of dumb and repetitive thoughts."

We don't need an MRI to see that. We just sit here and the mind goes around and around and around. It's what the mind does.

Now, in speaking about it like this, I don't want to give the impression that thoughts are the enemy, that a good meditation means getting rid of thoughts, being blank, being in some kind of zoned-out place. It's not that at all. Rather, it's about really seeing the power of our thoughts.

You might remember in my talk a week ago, I started with that quote from the Dhammapada: "Mind is the forerunner of all things, mind is chief." This points to the fact that through our thoughts we create our world, we create the reality we live in. So it speaks to the importance of looking at the very nature of these thoughts, because they're so important.

What we see when we look at the realm of thought is that it's often really chaotic—this jumble, this push and pull, this field of the kilesas, this relentless alternating of greed and aversion with a good dose of delusion thrown in for good measure. This is what we're in most of the time.

I was thinking about how we can go back and forth so quickly and easily between wanting and not wanting, greed and aversion. I was reminded of one of my favorite childhood stories from a long time ago. Do you remember Dr. Doolittle, the man who could speak to animals? He had this amazing menagerie of creatures he had relationships with. One was the pushmi-pullyu—an antelope-like being that had a head at both ends. They were always arguing: Which way should we go? What should we do? Where should we eat? What should happen now?

This is what it's like in our minds a lot of the time—this tug of war, this struggle between wanting and not wanting.

Now, the thing is, this is actually pretty normal. This is the human condition. We've had years of practice thinking this way, relating to our experience in this way. It caught my attention the other morning when Joseph, responding to a question, said, "Distraction is the habit of the mind." We've trained in distraction. We've got PhDs in distraction. We've spent years cultivating this kind of mind that goes back and forth about everything we experience.

Actually, a few of us teachers were talking the other day about how hard retreats are, and really appreciating your practice, the sincerity of your practice in settling in for all these weeks. Retreats are difficult mainly because of the craziness of our minds, this pushing and pulling that's always happening—especially in the beginning of practice, but really in the beginning of any retreat. And by "beginning," I'm taking a very big picture view of what that means. I don't mean a few days or years. I mean the long-term view. It's tough.

Joseph said he can still remember the first time his mind settled down a little, and he had that taste of peace or calm. He just said, "Ah, this is what they're talking about." It was such a revelation, such a difference from his normal way of being with his mind, with his thoughts.

So this is what we work with a lot in our practice. It's the nature of the mind to think. Again, it's not that this is bad or wrong. We can't expect it to stop or change. The ears hear, the eyes see, the mind thinks. But here, as meditators on a retreat like this, we can begin to get curious about what we're thinking about—especially on a retreat where we don't actually need to think about very much.

How much thinking do you really, literally need to do to get through a day here? It's not very much, is it? Wake up, go sit, shower, eat. No one's expecting you to write an editorial about current events or a synopsis of your day, or have some witty repartee to

offer at the next meal, because it's in silence. You don't need to be creating and coming up with opinions and ideas the way we often do in our lives. Whether we need to or not out there, here we really don't need to.

Joseph has this great line: "Nothing is worth thinking about." Two meanings to that, obviously. But just to start looking at how much we fill our minds up, how much is extra, how much is just this relentless pushing and pulling—greed and aversion and delusion cycling around in our experience.

So we start to look at the very nature of thought. What is a thought? It's a string of words in the mind, perhaps an image. Some people are more visual than others. We hear it, don't we? It's curious sometimes to even wonder: whose voice is that? Is it our voice? It's not quite our voice. A thought is actually just a blip of energy in the mind.

What's interesting about thoughts is they have the power that we choose to give them. If we believe them, as the Dhammapada says, they create our world. If we notice that they're there and let them go, they're like a stone falling into a pool—they just drop in and disappear. We have this choice about cultivating a different relationship to thought, once we get curious and start to see how much of it is extraneous, isn't necessary for our moment-to-moment functioning.

When we look at thoughts and start to see them more clearly, pay attention as we do in meditation, it seems that they're very random, and certainly that we don't have any control over them. They're just arising, they're coming. It's like, where did that come from? But there actually is a conditioned nature to them. We might not be able to understand it, because it works through all the circuitous pathways of the mind and the little things that can trigger a stream of association. We might not understand it, but there is a lawful nature to thoughts—they are arising out of our conditioning.

You probably know this: if you have an experience and aversion arises and you dwell on it and think about it, it's likely the next thought will be an aversive thought. We can see how they get conditioned. Sometimes we can track a sequence of thoughts. You're sitting there thinking, how on earth did I end up thinking about this? And then you trace it back: oh yes, I thought of that, and then that. There are leaps from one thought to another. There was a reason, but from where you started and where you ended up, it's worlds apart.

I'm not encouraging you to do this—I actually think it's quite futile most of the time—but sometimes it's fascinating to see how we weave this world out of very disparate bits of information that we dredge up from our memory banks. Just to see that this is what the mind does. It's like a machine that captures all this information, tracks it, and

keeps throwing it back up—especially when we're not asking for it. You're trying to remember something and it's gone, and then an hour later up it pops from the retrieval mechanism.

But what's more important about thoughts and the nature of thought is to begin to understand—and you've probably seen this already, it's really rather obvious—that whatever is unresolved for us, whatever has uncertainty about it, this will come up in our meditation. It's inevitable. This is just the nature of our experience.

And our willingness to be with this uncertainty, this unresolved experience, this worry, anxiety, whatever it is—our willingness to be with this, to get curious about this. As Pema Chödrön said (I quoted her in my last talk also), practice is learning to stay, to be with these places of tension in our experience. Willingness to be with that is what allows the practice to deepen and unfold. Unwillingness to be with it, or identifying, making a story out of that, is what leads to restlessness, what leads to this tumbling of thought, these floods of thinking.

And as I was thinking about this, I really saw that the core aspect or movement of mind, the series of thoughts that cause this type of thinking, this obsessive thinking, this flood of thinking, are these variations of the thought: Am I okay? Am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay? This is actually, to a large extent, at the core—it's the seed energy behind this fluttering nature, these floods of thoughts that can come.

So much of our energy, our time, is spent pondering, wondering, exploring, worrying about these questions. Am I okay? Will I be okay? Was I okay? Encapsulated in that is all of our regrets about the past and our anxiety about the future. And again, this is the push and pull that we often find ourselves in.

Now this tendency of mind, of course, we didn't invent it in the twenty-first century, or the twentieth, or the nineteenth, or any thousands of years before that. It's been a part of the human condition for a long time. The Buddha talked about this a lot, saw it as very central to our suffering—as really a cause of suffering. He said this kind of thinking, this kind of dwelling on our experience, leads to an increase of desire, leads to the solidification of a sense of self, and leads to an increase of ignorance.

There's this great passage in the Majjhima Nikāya, sutta number two, the Sabbāsava Sutta, which goes like this. Pay attention, it's a little complex:

This is how she attends unwisely. Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How

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

The Buddha called this unwise attention, and said that it leads to all kinds of suffering—that the unarisen taints arise. And taints is another variation of the kilesas, of the greed, aversion, and delusion. And arisen taints get stronger through this paying of attention.

Yet it's what we do a lot of the time. How was I? How am I? How will I be? We see this mind. And it's kind of deep in our culture.

As I was thinking about who I could give as a modern-day example of this kind of mind, this worrying, fretting kind of mind, I thought of Woody Allen. He's kind of our exemplar of the neurotic mind in our culture. So I found this little quote. It's a little different, but it's kind of how we dwell on things. You don't need to listen as closely as when I read the Buddha, but it still bears close listening. This is a direct quote from Woody Allen:

To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering one must not love. But then one suffers from not loving. Therefore to love is to suffer. Not to love is to suffer. To suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love.

To be happy, then, is to suffer. But suffering makes one unhappy. Therefore, to be unhappy, one must love, or love to suffer, or suffer from too much happiness. I hope you're getting this down.

But this is what we do, isn't it? We obsess, we worry. What about this? And if I do this, then that has that impact, and then I could do this, but no, what about that? And I did that in the past. This is the nature of our experience. We're always trying to figure it out. We're trying to fix it. We're trying to fix ourselves through these machinations of the mind.

Has it worked yet? Yet we keep doing it. It's all we know to do sometimes—to gnaw on past and future, trying to figure it out. And so we see how much in meditation our mind is going between these two. It's a huge cause of restlessness.

I actually think that restlessness—not accepting what is—is one of the biggest hindrances for Westerners. You know, of all the hindrances, I actually think restlessness is the one. If we could really work skillfully with that, it would be huge for us. I've seen in my practice in Asia and being with Asian teachers that they don't seem to have so

much of that tendency of mind. They're much more accepting of themselves and their situation. And if their teacher says, "Sit down and stop thinking," they do it. That doesn't work for us here. We just have this obsession with our experience.

I really see that restlessness, in a way, is both a cause and an effect of all the hindrances. And I think this is interesting or helpful for me to see, because you need to know all the aspects of these experiences to be able to work with them skillfully. Just see the amount of restlessness that not getting what you want causes. The amount that getting what you don't want causes. Yes, there's the aversion, there's the wanting, but there's restlessness there too—some level, whether superficial or quite deep, not allowing us to settle. And of course, doubt. Central to doubt is restlessness: not being able to land, not having confidence. And so we keep skimming off. It brings agitation to the mind and the body.

We need to look at this pervasive nature of restlessness and really start to know it so that it doesn't push us off our cushion, our meditation, our mindfulness.

I see this restlessness woven through so many of the ways we relate to our moment-to-moment experience. How often are you waiting for the next thing to happen? You're sitting, waiting for the period to end. You're sitting, wishing you could be walking. The bell rings, you go out and walk. How long does it take before you start thinking, "Boy, I wish I was sitting instead of walking. Sitting is much better than walking"? You come in and sit, and you want to get up and walk again. This is the mind doing this movement over and over again—dissatisfaction.

How many mind moments do you spend waiting for lunch? And then lunch comes, and you're not quite fully present because you're already thinking about going and having a nap or going for a walk or whatever you like to do. There's this constant not actually being present for what is. We're searching here and there for a resolution to this problem that we feel, this suffering that we feel, and we don't actually know what the problem is or what we're looking for. We just know that it's not here. It's not in this moment. It's somewhere else. This vague sense of dissatisfaction, things not being quite right.

It's really important to see if that's there for you—to recognize it, to use your mindfulness to understand it the way we do: naming it, feeling it in the body, seeing the thoughts that are associated with it, just getting to see its nature and knowing that it's not the voice of wisdom. It's not what will lead you to more presence. It's actually going to take you off your meditation seat.

Because I've been thinking about writing this talk and this whole area of restlessness, I realized that I had some insight around it for myself. For me, like all of you, we've come away from home.

I mean, I'm away from home for the six weeks that I'm teaching here, and I realized that underlying my being here was this sense of being in suspension—not quite limbo, but suspended. My life is back in California, and I'm here, and it's kind of this interruption of my life. I'm not quite fully here. This is just something that I'm doing, but I keep thinking back to California, to life there, my friends and connections.

And I just had this realization, actually this morning as I was sitting here, that that's suffering. That my life is here. It was while I was sitting here—my life is here, sitting in this meditation, feeling my knees on the cushion, taking the next breath.

It sounds obvious. It's what we talk about all the time: being here, being here now. But there are ways we delude ourselves about these very obvious truths. And as I said, for me it was an insight that allowed me to become more fully present here and really realize: this is my life. My life is wherever I am. My home has to be wherever I am.

Maybe you're feeling a little bit the same, that this retreat is kind of an interlude in your life, a stepping out of your life. This is your life. We need to be alive for it and know it. And I know you've had those moments. You feel the beauty and the power there is when we connect in that way. This is it. There is no other "it" elsewhere—in the future, in the past, somewhere else. It's really here. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we get to experience the miracle of mindfulness that reveals our experience in this way.

As we pay more attention to our mind, as we get a little clearer, a little more connected, it can actually seem that our practice is increasing this restlessness, these movements of mind. I don't think that's true. I think it's just revealing what's so often there. Restlessness is actually really endemic in our culture—this busy, connected, wired, instant, "got to happen yesterday" culture. It's a culture of restlessness.

A guy mentioned this statistic about teenagers these days sending three thousand text messages a month, sending or receiving. That's a hundred or more a day. We were talking about it at lunch, and someone said they'd just read an article about college-age students who've gone back to school. There are students sitting in their dorm rooms trying to work out their new living arrangements with their roommates—on their beds, texting each other. There's just something about that which has a restlessness in it, just that thumb thing. It's a culture of restlessness.

So we really need to get curious about this. I started thinking about restlessness and how endemic it was a couple of years ago. I was seeing how pervasive it was for me and in the people I talked to. One of the things you might know is that restlessness is one of the last fetters to go before enlightenment. In our system, there are four stages of enlightenment, and restlessness—a very subtle kind of restlessness, not the gross kind—is one of the last to go. So it's really very deep within us. Getting to know it in your practice, being able to work with it, see its nature, see its presence—this is really important, really helpful for most of us.

For me, a key is seeing its suffering nature. This very quality can be unpleasant in the body, in the mind. It doesn't allow us to find ease or peace. It doesn't allow us to settle. And it keeps us superficial. I keep saying this: restlessness is like a pinball machine. You're always ricocheting off into the next thing, looking forward or into the past. Restlessness keeps us superficial.

Then, as we start to see that, we need to be aware of our relationship to it. We can often be really averse to it, really upset with it. It shouldn't be like this. I shouldn't have restlessness. Well, hello—it's here. It's here. It's our reality.

We need to practice with it. So we get curious about it. What is restlessness actually like? What's its energy like? We can tell ourselves a story about it where it's very unpleasant, intolerable. But it is just energy. We can know it like any other experience.

In this process of getting curious, if we make a big story about it, label it as restlessness that we can't tolerate, of course the mind will reinforce that. But if we get curious about it and see it as energy, can we use that energy for practice? Because restlessness often happens as an uplifting kind of energy. Can we actually use that? Is there any pleasantness in it?

We were talking about this very thing this morning, how to work with it. Someone suggested seeing if there's any pleasantness in the energy. It's interesting, again, how our labeling of something really determines what our experience is. We say it's unpleasant, and by God, it's unpleasant—we're going to reinforce that. So we get curious about it. If we have the sense it's not okay, it won't be okay. If we get curious about it, it's just another place to explore with our mindfulness.

So there's working with the energy itself, but really at the heart of this talk what I want to keep pointing to is: what's underlying the restlessness? What's this issue that's always bubbling up there? As I said, for me it's some variation of "Am I okay? Am I okay now? Am I okay before, in the future, whatever?" I really see this as a seed issue.

This reminded me of the piece of grit that gets in the oyster—the one that actually ends up making the pearl. In the beginning, it's an irritant. We don't like it, and that's what causes the restlessness. It really is preventing us from deepening because we're always going off in different directions; the mind moves into past and future so easily, so quickly. But if we're willing to stay with this—both the energy of the restlessness and also looking a little deeper into what this core issue is, this underlying issue—this can lead to a profound deepening in our practice as we become more able to be present. This is the pearl that gets created out of this initial irritant.

Anything, if we turn to it with mindfulness, can lead to understanding. This particular area, if we start to really look at this core question—am I okay?—can lead to a profound acceptance of who we are and what our experience is. This is so essential for our practice.

As I've been saying, out of this issue, "Am I okay," the mind moves in three ways. I was going to say main ways, but it's pretty much what the mind does. I think it's just three ways: past, present, and future. What else is there? I want to talk a little bit about all three.

A huge one for us is the mind going into the past, just bringing up stuff from our history. It's actually a natural process that happens in meditation, and there's something important happening in this. As I said, whatever is unresolved—whether it's a huge life issue, deep trauma, or the smallest thing, the littlest incident—if there's some way emotionally or psychologically that we haven't come to terms with it, haven't fully accepted it, this will come up for us. Whether it's something that happened yesterday or in the long distant past that we thought was well over and done with.

These experiences can bring up a whole range of difficult emotions: guilt, shame, fear, anger, blame, judgment, irritation. For many of us, we go through this process we call a life review, where over time every experience of this nature, every unsettled, difficult experience comes up, and we have to experience it again.

It's the work of a lot of therapy, but I think there's a real wisdom to the way it happens in meditation—this very organic way where the material, the memories, we don't go looking for them, no one's telling us to talk about them. But in this way, when we're ready, this material surfaces. Sometimes memories are overpowering and you need to work really skillfully with them. I'm not talking about needing to go into these things and bearing down on them. Really trust the practice. Talk with your teacher if you have strong memories coming up that are challenging, difficult, because this can be an important place of healing and learning—but it needs to be worked with skillfully.

It can be on a lesser level than that too. Times we weren't there for a friend, kind of disappeared from their life when they needed us. Or we were mean to our sister when she was ten years old.

We didn't let her play with us. Or something quite recent. Ways we weren't there for ourselves. Many of us have had the experience of actually abandoning ourselves, and there can be a lot of regret, remorse, and shame about that.

It can feel at times like we've gone through this—we've been on many retreats, been through this process—but I see there's always new things to add to this list. Whatever is unresolved in my life, when I sit down to meditate, whether it's just what email I need to send or what business needs to be taken care of, it will come up. And the longer we sit, the more space there is for this kind of process.

It can be things recently happening on this retreat, or what was happening just before you came on retreat. You don't leave your life at the door here. It's all here with you. And if it's unresolved, if there's some lack of acceptance or some uncertainty about an experience, it will be here sooner or later with you on this retreat.

Right here on retreat, all of our different interactions with your fellow yogis—the way we can get irritated with them, impatient with them, annoyed at them—we can feel the impact of that. And the way we judge ourselves, the way we're critical of ourselves, we can feel that coming up.

So we have a memory, and then there's a response to it. I think it's interesting to notice, again, as part of the mindfulness, part of getting curious. What we often do in mindfulness is unpack experience. When we take it as a solid thing, it's not very workable. But if we can see the layers of experience, the nature of experience, the components of experience, then it becomes workable.

Fear, for example. Fear is just thoughts in the mind and a feeling in the body. But if we get caught in it, believe it, it's really difficult. In this way, with everything, we start to unpack.

So notice what kind of energy comes with these memories. Is it a downward kind of energy of sadness, regret, shame, or guilt? Or does the energy move up? Is it more anger, irritation, fierceness about the memory? We pay attention to that and respond appropriately in our mindfulness.

I really see there's a whole process we need to go through in working with these memories from the past, and we can't circumvent it. We might often think that we should not have to go through this, but I've seen for myself and so many other people

that it's really necessary. We need to acknowledge what's happened, accept what's happened, forgive whoever we need to forgive—ourself or other—and then develop compassion.

These four parts are so important. The acknowledgment is really just recognizing that whatever happened, happened. Recognizing the unskillful nature, the harmful nature of whatever we did to ourselves or to others, and not denying or minimizing it. The fact that it's up means it's meaningful for us. We don't need to say, "Oh, I should be over that by now," or "I should be able to deal with this," or "I should have gotten beyond that." It's here. Let's pay attention to it. It's part of this little seed of restlessness.

We need to accept that whatever happened, happened. Yes, I did that. Or that happened to me. They did that to me. She said that to me. This is the acceptance.

And in that, we really need to understand the difference between guilt and shame on one hand, and remorse on the other. In guilt and shame, there's an identification with the action as being me—that I'm the one who's bad or wrong. And there's always a tendency to want to hide away. This is not so helpful, really not a skillful way to relate.

Remorse looks at the same event and says, "Yes, I did that," but sees the action as unskillful, not the doer, and makes a determination to learn from that, to have more understanding, to have acceptance about that experience. Remorse can be helpful. We can learn from remorse.

Guilt and shame tends to keep us stuck.

And then forgiveness. There's this great quote: "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." How much of your time have you spent trying to redo the past? Taking back something you said, doing something you didn't do, not doing something you did do—all the if-onlys and I-should-haves. We can spend hours doing that. It's futile.

When we're ready—and again, you could give a whole talk about this; it's such a deep area—forgiveness comes when we arrive at true acceptance. What happened happened, and we let go of the resentment and the blame and the judging and the feeling victimized. We're really ready to move on.

And then compassion—really bringing a tenderness to this experience, really opening to it with love. Understanding why whatever happened happened. I saw for myself, moving through all those stages, how at first when these memories would come up I

would just cringe. There was this pushing away: I don't want this, it's so horrible, it's so painful. And a lot was things I did to myself, not taking care of myself. I just couldn't understand the person who would act like that.

And then gradually there came acceptance, and then the real forgiveness. And then ultimately this sweet compassion of just: this is the human condition. That poor frightened girl or teenager, whatever she was going through—she did the best she could. So there's really a different relationship to those experiences now.

These are the four stages that I think are important to go through as experiences from the past come up. The smaller ones perhaps not so detailed, but the larger ones—the ones that really trigger us—this process is really helpful. Acknowledgment, acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion. This allows that seed worry of "how was I in the past" to resolve a little.

And then there's the future, the other huge arena for our mind's activity. So much worry, anxiety, and planning. I don't know about you—how much time do you spend planning? I mean, planning everything. Planning how you do the laundry, planning when you pick your laundry up. What's the best time? Is it better to get there first or to get there last? Should the laundry be in bags or not in bags? All of these conundrums that we face, the challenges of yogi life—we can spend hours dwelling on them. When to take a shower? Is it better before or after, this time or that time? Planning the next hour, planning our next lifetime. How many of you have been on this retreat planning your next retreat?

We just spend hours in this mind state. This scenario, that scenario, what about this? Add that factor. What about this person? What about that? It's endless.

What kind of energy, what's the feeling in the body when you notice this kind of planning? It's agitation, isn't it? Even if what we're thinking about is somewhat good, notice what it is. Sometimes there's a real anxiety. So again, in this unpacking, see the aversion that's there, or the fear. Really notice that.

Sometimes we're thinking about things we're excited about in the future, things we want. Notice that energy. In that, there's grasping. There's a lot of wanting. And it's the actual pleasantness of the fantasy that keeps us obsessed, keeps us stuck in it.

It's really helpful when you notice these planning thoughts, these future thoughts, to notice the vedanā of them—as Joseph was talking about yesterday, the pleasantness or unpleasantness. You'll find that will be a key to just unsticking quite a bit from them.

And really, start to feel the suffering in this obsession with the future, in this fantasy of the future. It's not reality, is it? It's some imagination. For me, it was a big

I could spend hours happily in fantasy on retreat. It really makes the time go by very quickly, doesn't it? Decorating your fantasies, because you're in charge. You're running the show, and everything's kind of working out well, adding a bit of this and a bit of that.

So after one retreat, I determined that I would compare my after-retreat life with my in-retreat fantasies to see how many of them actually came true. What do you think my hit rate was, my success rate? About zero. Literally none of them came true in the way that I thought. The things that I thought I wanted to do, I didn't want to do. The conversations I thought I would have didn't happen. The way I related to things wasn't what I thought it would be. Nothing was what I was fantasizing about.

So next time I was there fantasizing, it's like, why do it? Why create these fantasy worlds that don't really have anything to do with reality? To really see that—there's a pleasantness there, but it has nothing to do with reality. And to feel the impact living in this fantasy world has on your present moment experience.

As I was saying before, compared to the great fantasy, this—you know, rice cakes for dinner, tahini and peanut butter. What do I choose? I choose fantasy. But there's no reality there. We really need to see this obsession with this daydream. It's a dream. It's an illusion. And it takes us out of being present for what is. After a while, rice cakes start to look pretty good, actually. But if you're in your fantasy, you can't enjoy anything that's here. So really see that, see what it does.

And then there's the present moment, really the heart of "am I okay." I think it's helpful, if this speaks to you, to get a visceral sense of that mind state, that mind moment of "am I okay?" For me, it's a little jittery because it's kind of looking around, checking out everyone else, how they're relating to me. Am I doing it right? Am I doing it as good as the others or better than the others? Am I better than yesterday? How will I be tomorrow? It's all of this agitated comparing and judging.

What do the teachers think of me? As I leave the room, what are they thinking about me? Do they talk about me? You know, when they get together... I mean, we do talk a little bit because we need to share some information. We don't talk a lot about what's going on with you. It's not the top of our priority. We care. We don't obsess.

And you can really see what you're often comparing yourself to is a made-up story. It's a made-up story of what we think. It's a made-up story about what the other yogis think about you. And we all do this, where we think everyone is noticing what we're doing. How am I walking? How much food am I taking? How long am I sitting? The truth is, most people are obsessed with themselves.

They're not paying attention to you. I hate to break this to you, but they're not paying attention to you in the way that we think they are, in the way that leads to this sense of agitation.

There's this great Zen teacher, Yvonne Rand. She's very earthy. She has this quote—it's a little strong language, but you'll forgive me, I'm just quoting her. Her line is: "I'm the piece of shit the world revolves around." And it just captures how we're often judging ourselves while simultaneously wondering, "Are they looking at me? What are they thinking about me?" Carol was saying it perfectly: "It's all about me." I hate to break it to you—it's not. Everyone's in their own world.

But to see how this obsession creates anxiety, we need to see it. We need to see this core of it, this "Am I okay?" and move to another way of relating to that question. Because it is a central question. We want to be okay. The heart of this practice is about becoming okay. But we don't get there through this restless agitation, these kinds of mind states I've been talking about.

We get there by coming into accord with reality, with things as they are. It comes about by minimizing projection and story, and actually deepening a true sense of connection—to ourselves, to our inner knowing, to others, and to reality—by knowing the truth of things and beginning to actually trust ourselves.

We have everything we need here to awaken. That's what I talked about last week. We have a mind and a body. That's all the Buddha said we need to come to awakening. And here, not only do we have a mind and a body, we have supportive conditions. We have the retreat container. We have the teachings. We have the Dharma. It's just what we do with that.

My good friend Sylvia Boorstein, a great teacher, says her main practice is just sitting down and not telling herself stories. Not telling yourself stories—stories about yourself. How are you? How was I? How will I be? It's as simple as that. We do it by being willing to be with what's here. And even if what's here is restlessness, we can know that. We can get interested in that. We can accept that.

Of course, we need to acknowledge the places in our experience where there is contraction, where there's pushing away, where there's holding on. But it's by turning towards, going towards, getting curious about, getting interested in—this is where the shift comes. This is where the mind actually begins to become our ally rather than this source of frustration and resentment and worry and anxiety.

We don't need to be a victim of this restlessness of the mind, of this obsession with who am I and how am I and how was I and how will I be. We start trusting that. Trusting the simplest way of practice: being present, showing up. Then things can really begin to unfold in a very natural, gentle way. We don't have to push. We don't have to have an agenda. We just need to show up.

I want to finish with a really short poem by Hafez called "It Felt Love." It goes like this:

How did the rose ever open its heart and give to this world all its beauty? It felt the encouragement of light against its being. Otherwise, we all remain too frightened.

And when I read that, what I thought is that what we're feeling is the encouragement of mindfulness, allowing us to open—to open to what is true, true in both a personal sense, but also in the deepest impersonal sense, the nature of reality. And this mindfulness brings that light that allows us to unfold to the deepest places of our being.

really these core issues. And as we open to that, explore that, as we turn towards what's difficult, see the places that we contract or hold on or grasp or are filled with restlessness—as we turn towards that and explore—it leads to a deep and profound acceptance of who we are and our experience. And that is what allows the freedom that's possible in this path and this practice to be known and tasted. And the only place it's tasted is here and now. Not past, not future.

So let's just sit together.

CHAPTER 7

Morning Instructions – Day 10 - Standing Meditation

Sally Armstrong · 58 min

> *In this morning instruction from the three-month retreat, Sally Armstrong introduces standing meditation as an essential yet frequently overlooked aspect of practice. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, she reminds practitioners that the Buddha emphasized mindfulness in all four postures—sitting, walking, standing, and lying down—yet standing and lying down meditation rarely receive adequate attention on retreats.*
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> *Sally offers practical guidance on establishing a comfortable standing posture: feet hip-width apart, spine upright, shoulders relaxed, chest open, and arms resting naturally at the sides. She explains that standing meditation can serve as a powerful antidote to sleepiness by bringing energy into body and mind, while also helping to balance restlessness through increased physical engagement. The practice itself can take various forms—continuing breath awareness, mettā, or adopting a more body-based approach similar to walking meditation, noticing the constant subtle movements required to maintain balance.*
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> *The talk includes a guided standing meditation and addresses questions about noticing thought-energy before thoughts fully form, and working with intention in movement. Sally encourages practitioners to explore standing meditation creatively throughout their day—while waiting in line, during walking periods, or whenever the body needs relief from sitting. She also discusses lying down meditation as another opportunity to extend mindfulness, offering techniques like whole-body breath awareness or body scanning to maintain wakefulness in this relaxed posture.*

As you know, we've been gradually expanding the instructions to include all aspects of our experience. The intention in this practice is that our mindfulness can open to and include everything, that nothing needs to be excluded from the field of our mindfulness. By doing this, we can develop a continuity of practice that really supports the deepening, the sense of presence, the sense of acceptance of our experience.

We've talked about the Satipatthana Sutta, that text which describes this practice in great detail and offers a number of different ways of being with experience, even just in the realm of the body. I spoke last week about the different aspects of body-based

practices. One of the areas of practice that the Buddha emphasizes, a really simple way of describing practice, is that we should be mindful in all four postures: sitting, walking, standing, and lying down.

We give a lot of emphasis to the sitting posture. We talk a great deal about being present, how to do it, the different things we can be mindful of. We talk a little bit about walking—not enough, I don't think. We could say more about practicing in walking meditation. But on many retreats we say virtually nothing about standing or lying down meditation. So that's what I want to talk about today, and particularly standing meditation.

The Buddha said we should be aware in this important posture. It's a posture we often find ourselves in here on retreat, certainly in our lives—standing waiting for something, standing waiting in line for meals, or outside an interview, outside a shower or a bathroom. Even in our walking, there are often periods where we're just standing. Being able to include that very easily and naturally in our mindfulness is an important part of the practice.

Standing meditation is also a great balancer of energy. If you're sleepy, there is nothing better than standing up to bring energy into the body and the mind. As teachers, we're always very happy when we see people standing in the meditation hall because it means they're really serious about waking up—literally being awake in the practice. But I also think it can help balance other energies as well, such as the restlessness that I spoke about last night. If you stand, there's more energy required, more engagement in the physical posture, so it can be a real balancing for that.

I want to lead this meditation this morning to give some encouragement to incorporating standing into your practice on a regular basis.

Many people, I know, have a resistance to standing meditation. So notice what happens in the mind as I say that. Is there a kind of grumbling going on? "Oh, I like my comfortable seated posture. I curl up under my shawl and shut the world out, and I can just go into my own little realm." Is there a sense of reactivity, resistance to this idea of standing? Does it seem like it takes too much effort? Really just notice what happens when this idea of standing comes up.

Of course, if standing is difficult for you for whatever reason—physically, balance-wise—there's no need to do it. This is just offered as an option.

But I want to encourage you to, right now, bring mindfulness into your body. Really notice your body as it's sitting here seated. Particularly notice if there's any response to the concept of standing, the idea of standing—resistance or interest. Make sure there's a real establishment of mindfulness, because we want to also be present in these in-between times of moving between sitting and standing.

Now, as I ask you to stand, be mindful of all the movements you have to make to get into the standing posture. If you wish to stay seated, of course you can.

Find a comfortable posture, whether you stand on your zabuton or flat on the floor. You can experiment in these first few minutes of the meditation to see which is more grounding for you. Step on and off your cushion just to see what works best. Find a way that you can stand that feels easy. We're not doing any energy work here—it's not qi-gong. But if you're familiar with those practices, you might know easy ways of standing, and you can include those. Basically, we're just simply standing.

For most people, it's helpful to have the feet about hip width apart, seeing that your feet are somewhat aligned straight ahead, letting your hands and arms just rest really naturally by your sides. Take a moment to check the alignment of your posture. There's a sense of uprightness in the spine, not slouching or leaning forward. Check that the shoulders are dropped. And again, just like we do in seated meditation, allow the chest and belly to be soft and open. There's a sense of expansion there in the front of the chest. Let your feet be as firmly planted on the ground as possible, with even pressure on the feet. Just this full awareness of the body as it stands.

The interesting thing about standing meditation is you can just continue whatever practice you were doing if you wish. You can simply stay aware of the breath or sounds.

You can do mettā practice. Standing is simply another posture in which we can be mindful of mind and body—the same process as your sitting practice.

Or you can engage in a more physical, body-based practice, somewhat like we do in walking, where we're really aware of the physical nature of the body. You might notice the pressure on the soles of the feet, observing all the movements of the muscles in the legs that are constantly required to keep us standing upright. It can become a curiosity about the body in this posture—exploring the muscles, the tendons, everything that's required to maintain a stand. You can even become interested in the skeleton, the bones. We grow more aware of the earthy nature of the body that allows us to stand upright.

Find the practice that works for you, noticing at the same time what's happening in the mind. How are you relating to this experience of standing? Is there curiosity, acceptance? Is it neutral? Or is there some resistance, discomfort, irritation?

Notice all the subtle movements required to keep us upright. We're not standing still—the body is expressing itself with this movement of life, responding to the breath, the pulsing of the body, the constant balancing that happens. If you find it hard to feel steady, you're welcome to open your eyes. If you're standing near a chair or a wall, you can use that for balance.

Stay engaged, present for the body in this standing posture. See if there can be a degree of relaxation. Try not to have the knees unnecessarily locked and tight—allow some softness there. Notice if any tension is building up that you can release and relax around. See if this can be a comfortable posture, if there can be a sense of ease in the standing. Notice if tension has built up anywhere—the face, the shoulders, the belly—and allow that to soften, relax, open.

For the remainder of the period, if you wish, you can continue standing and sit whenever you feel that would be most supportive of your mindfulness. Otherwise, sit down with full mindfulness of the body, resuming the seated posture. Stay standing if you wish for as long as feels right, and sit down at any point during the rest of the period.

A couple of years ago, Guy, Carol, and I took a trip through Northern California and stopped at the forests of the giant redwoods. It's quite an amazing experience to walk among those huge trees. I was actually reminded of that this morning as I looked out and you were all standing there. It really felt like a beautiful forest with that same sense of stillness but aliveness. Quite impressive to see.

I hope this was an inspiration to include some standing meditation in your practice. As I mentioned, it can be an antidote for sleepiness or restlessness. It can simply be helpful to give the body another posture when you're tired of sitting, when the back or knees are aching—just stand. You can do it here in the hall. Quietly, mindfully stand at any point. I notice we call it a "sitting," don't we? Maybe we need to change that now—it's also a standing. Stand at any point for as long as feels supportive of your practice, then quietly sit down again.

Be creative with it. Periods scheduled for walking could include more standing, or you can incorporate standing into the walking period. We find ourselves standing at the beginning and end of each section of our walking path—those moments can be extended. There are many ways to include standing in your practice.

I also want to mention lying down meditation. Again, it's a posture we often find ourselves in, and bringing mindfulness into it will really extend our practice. As you lie down at night getting ready to sleep and find you're not falling asleep right away, or when you wake up in the morning perhaps not quite ready to get up, you can simply continue your practice.

When I do this, especially at night when I'm tired but not yet asleep, I do a very spacious breath meditation—not too focused or tight, a whole-body breath meditation, making the breath a little deeper so it's more relaxing. That's what works for me, but you can explore for yourself.

If you're lying down to take a nap in the middle of the day, continue the mindfulness instead of spilling over into fantasies and daydreams. I actually have one teacher who encourages everyone to do a period of lying down meditation each day, both to encourage mindfulness in that posture and so we can get to know what it's like to practice when the body is really relaxed and comfortable.

If you're going to do that, obviously the intention is not to fall asleep. There are a couple of things people find helpful. Sometimes it's simply propping the arm up so that if it starts to fall over, you know you're drifting. Some people find they need to do a more energetic practice when lying down. A body scan can be helpful, where you move your attention systematically but very gently through the body. You can explore different ways of including lying down practice in your day.

A question arose about an observation that sometimes before a thought forms, there's a little energy blip that one can notice. Is that the intention before a thought? Possibly it is. Someone added that it's almost like that energy blip is the thought already complete, just not unpacked yet. Yes, exactly—it's the whole thought right there, that thought energy. You know what it is, but then you think it out.

We can have this experience where we notice this energy prior to a thought. In that moment there's an intuition of what the thought is going to be about, but we always unpack it and then often get lost in it. Mindfulness can show us this quite clearly, this thought energy. Sometimes the awareness of that is enough for it to simply release. You can really see that happening, and it's actually quite a relief when it does. As I was talking about last night, we see we don't really need to unpack it. The knowing is there

in that energy and can just let it subside. It's the mind wanting to, as it does, get in there and investigate and break things apart and know what's happening that engages us in that thinking.

But as our practice deepens and the mind gets quieter, we can just see it. My image of it is like a bubble rising up through a lake or even mud. If you notice it, it just disperses. It doesn't have to come into form. And I don't think anything is lost. I don't think we're missing anything.

So really notice what it's like when you have that experience and bring your awareness to it. If there's a sense of just acceptance or presence, there isn't the need, there isn't the grasping onto the thought, and it can simply dissipate without even forming into words.

Is this just a retreat-only experience, this subtle awareness of thought? Can it happen outside? I'm sure it can happen outside if we're paying enough attention. But most of the time there's so much stimulation and our thoughts are just tumbling over each other that there's not the space to notice this kind of energy. I always think of what Bruce said about the child going to the top of the slide—this arousing of energy. You can feel the impulse, and if the mindfulness is there, it can be let go of. So it is possible, just much more difficult. That's why it's so helpful and interesting to train here on retreat with these supportive conditions, so we can actually see this nature of thought.

As I was talking about last night, we have such an urgency usually around our thinking. Because I'm thinking it, it must be true, and it's worth saying, and it's worth preserving, and it's worth recording, and it's worth everyone else knowing about. I would question that assumption. If we really start to look at our minds, we see how crazy it is—and even a lot of what comes out of our mouths.

A question came about proper posture for standing meditation. I'm not an expert in body practices—people who've done Qigong or other body-based practices would know more. I just gave simple guidelines that work for me: relatively straight and upright, the head not leaning forward, shoulders not hunched but relatively back so the chest is open, feet hip-width apart, arms just resting naturally by your sides. But each of us has developed a different body structure, and there can be ways you need to adjust for that. I would just experiment. The longer you do it, the more you'll find a comfortable posture.

At first, standing meditation can be really challenging. Doing a period of standing makes sitting look pretty good, doesn't it? "Oh, I get to sit again!" You can really develop those muscles. Anything the body isn't used to takes adjustment, just the same as we have to get used to sitting. So it is with standing.

I was really appreciating the number of people who stayed on for whatever length, some through the whole sitting. There was probably some challenge in that if you haven't done it for a while. What I noticed for myself is I would feel a little uncomfortable and there'd be this thought, "Oh, I could just sit." And I'd look at my experience and ask, "What's actually uncomfortable? What's different from how it was a minute ago when I didn't have the thought to sit?" And there wasn't much different. It was really more of a mental relationship to the standing—that sitting would be better, that I would be happier sitting. But when I would question that, there wasn't any real justification. I was actually quite comfortable standing. My feet—I could feel the solidity in them—but apart from that, it was quite okay.

So I would just explore it, and the more you do it, the more the body will adjust and find its own natural balance. It's something we need to explore. And as I said, in the standing we're not standing still. I think it's helpful to allow the body to make those little adjustments and find its natural balance. The body will respond to the life that's in there—the breathing and the pulsing, the muscles. So just make it an exploration.

A question came up about the natural movements that arise, especially in standing but even in sitting or walking: should we notice the intention before those movements? We'll actually do a whole guided meditation on intention in the next day or so. There's intention before virtually every action that we take—maybe every action. Some of the subtlest ones I don't know about, but the grosser movements, yes, there are intentions before those, and it can be really helpful to notice them.

But we don't want to drive ourselves crazy trying to pay attention to all of that. It's just too much because it's there all the time. Intention is one of the universals—it's always present in mind moments. So for me, I look to where intention is obvious, where it's making a change or shift that I can really be aware of.

In sitting, I think it is helpful to notice the intention to adjust, to scratch, to itch, to change the posture in those gross ways. In standing, it's much more a natural response to the body and the balance that's needed. I don't think it's so helpful in those subtle cases to notice the intention. If you were really going to shift strongly from one foot to the other or make a big movement of the shoulders, perhaps you could notice the intention—that would be helpful.

If you're out walking and you notice the body is leaning and then you come back, that I think is really helpful to notice the intention, if you can. When you're working with intention, you don't want to drive yourself crazy with it. But it's like the thought process—if we notice that about-to moment, yes, be right there with it. Because that's what gives us the choice point. That's what's so powerful about intention: do I make this movement or not? And if I choose to do it, can I do it with mindfulness? So it is an important place of practice.

But sometime after this sitting, if you hear a brief sounding of an alarm, that's just them testing. If you hear an extended sounding of the alarm, that's not a test—you should respond. I presume you were given instructions about gathering outside and waiting to be counted. Hopefully it's just going to be a test today, but it will be quite loud. You will notice it. Just notice hearing.

It's another perfect day to practice.

CHAPTER 8

Mundane Right View

Joseph Goldstein · 57 min

> *In this talk from the 2010 three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein begins a two-part exploration of sammā diṭṭhi (right view), the first and critically important factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and the Buddha's teachings on the twofold nature of right view, Joseph distinguishes between mundane right view—which leads to happiness in worldly life—and supramundane right view, which leads to liberation.*
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> *The talk unpacks the traditional formulation of mundane right view: understanding that there is significance in what is given and offered (the power of dāna), that actions bear fruit according to their motivation (the law of kamma), that there is this world and other worlds (rebirth), and that there are wise beings who have realized truth through direct experience. Joseph shares how teachers like Dīpa Mā and the remarkable story of Dhamma Ruwan—a Sri Lankan child who spontaneously chanted Pāli suttas at age two—opened his mind to possibilities beyond immediate experience.*
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> *Particularly relevant for lay practitioners, Joseph emphasizes the karmic significance of our relationship with parents, drawing on the touching story of Sāriputta's difficult mother who finally attained stream-entry through her son's compassion. He challenges Western culture's lack of emphasis on wisdom as a value and invites practitioners to experiment with these teachings—not as dogmatic beliefs requiring blind faith, but as possibilities to explore through the Buddha's invitation to 'come and see.' The talk concludes with the two conditions for right view: hearing from another and applying wise attention in one's own practice.*

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha describes in some detail the different ways of establishing mindfulness. There is the foundation of mindfulness of the body, of feelings—that quality of pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality—mindfulness of the mind and mental states. And the last is called mindfulness of dhammas, which is often translated as categories of experience. That includes different teachings like the hindrances, the factors of enlightenment, and the Four Noble Truths.

In the final section of this discourse, the Buddha summarizes all of the instructions and the essential elements of the path. He does this in the teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path. This is what he says: "And what, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way of

practice leading to the end of suffering?" That's a useful question. "It is just this Eightfold Noble Path, namely right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

When I first heard these teachings, I was still in the Peace Corps in Thailand. This was in the mid-1960s, and I was first reading and studying all of this. The enumeration of these eight steps seemed to me almost a philosophic abstraction, a bit of Buddhist philosophy. It took me a long time to even remember what all the eight steps were. In fact, it's only when I started giving talks on them that I could actually remember them. But probably similar to your own experience, as I continued to practice and explore more fully how to live the path, this teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path took on a tremendous richness and depth that dramatically transformed my life. Slowly, over time, I began to see the internal logic and consistency of these steps on the path, and how each one leads to the next, until they really are a template for how to live a life in the Dharma.

We begin with the first and critically important step on the path, which is Right View. In Pali it's called Samma Ditthi. It might be interesting, though, just to look in your mind right now and see if there's any response even to that term, right view. Often in the West—and this has come up a lot in different teaching situations—in our very relativistic culture, even when we hear the term right view, there might be some resistance arising in the mind. We might associate this right view with some kind of dogmatic belief or orthodox dogma that we have to subscribe to. Do I have right view? What if I don't? All kinds of things come up in the mind.

It's really important to understand as we hear these teachings that none of the Buddha's teachings requires or asks for blind belief. We're always invited to come and see. That's a phrase used in the chanting of the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In the qualities of the Dharma, it has that phrase: come and see. So it's all about our own exploration, our own investigation of the teachings. Does this accord with my experience? Does it seem true in my own experience? Is it conducive to the happiness and welfare of myself and of others? We're always testing it, and we have to hear the teachings in that light.

Right view is such an important first step on the path because it sets our direction. If we are on a journey, no matter how long or difficult the journey may be, if we're heading in the right direction and we keep on going, we will inevitably and certainly reach the goal. But if we don't know the right direction, even with strong aspirations and strong effort, we might wander around for a long time without realizing our aim.

There was a classic example of this in the suttas—a little sad, actually. In the Buddha's time, as you might know, in India many spiritual seekers practiced different ascetic practices. There were two practices called the canine ascetics and the bovine ascetics. These were people who had the view—it wasn't quite right view—that if they imitated the behavior of dogs and cows, that would lead to liberation. The sutta goes into a lot of detail about how they went about imitating them. Then they came to the Buddha and said, "We're doing these wonderful practices. Can you tell us where they'll lead?" The Buddha said, "Don't ask." They asked again and again, and finally he told them: this is not leading where you think it's leading.

They were not developing or cultivating wholesome mind states. They were not cultivating liberation. They were going in the wrong direction.

So this is the importance of understanding what our direction in practice actually is. Do we have right view? The Buddha said that just as the dawn is the forerunner and precursor to the rising sun, so is right view the forerunner and precursor of the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths. That breakthrough or realization of the Four Noble Truths—which is awakening itself—right view is the precursor to that.

In one discourse particularly, the Buddha elaborates on right view, and he makes an interesting distinction between what we might call worldly or mundane right view—that is, the understandings that lead us to happiness and ease in our lives, in our worldly lives—and supramundane right view, which is the right view that leads to liberation.

This is how the Buddha described it: "And what, bhikkhus, is right view? Right view, I say, is twofold. There is right view that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening in acquisitions. And there is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path."

Tonight and next week also, I'd like to discuss aspects of this twofold right view, because they have such important consequences for our lives.

The teachings on worldly or mundane right view very pragmatically acknowledge that for those of us—those few of us—who are not yet fully liberated, our wholesome actions are often in the realm of desire, of accumulating wholesome merit, of aiming for particular happy results in our lives. So even though these are wholesome actions, and they are the accumulation of merit, and they do bring good results, it's still in the realm of acquisition rather than on the side of the abandonment of all desires. That's why it's called mundane right view or worldly right view. It shows us how to live in the world.

I find this aspect of the Buddha's teachings particularly relevant for us as lay people. We're practicing in our lives, engaged with the world, engaged in different kinds of relationships, in work. It shows us how we can live in a way that brings happiness and ease rather than difficulties or stress. It's just another example of the Buddha's great pragmatism. He understood so completely all the different levels that we aspire to. As lay people, we are living in the world. Can we live with ease? Can we live with happiness? And can we also aspire to full awakening? There are right views for each of those.

There's a traditional expression of mundane right view found in the suttas. In a few brief phrases, the Buddha points to a wealth of dharma understanding. It's like four or five phrases that, when unpacked, open up a whole world of understanding how we can live wisely. Some aspects will seem very obvious, while others may be outside the realm of our immediate experience. But it's worth listening to and staying open to what might be different ways of understanding the world. Even if they're not in our immediate experience, it might enlarge our understanding.

So this is the teaching the Buddha gave on mundane or worldly right view: "And what, bhikkhus, is right view that is affected by the taints, partaking of merit, ripening in acquisitions? There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed. There is fruit and result of good and bad actions. There is this world and the other world. There is mother and father. There are beings who are reborn spontaneously. There are in the world good and virtuous recluses and Brahmins who have realized for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world. This is right view, affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions."

These are a few pithy statements, which upon first hearing them, I think—what does this mean? What's the relevance to my life? So I'd like to unpack them a little bit, because I think there's tremendous relevance to how we live.

All of these specific declarations rest on the framework of understanding the law of karma. This is the fundamental and essential understanding that all of our volitional actions—which are many, innumerable through the day—all of our volitional actions bear fruit.

The fruit is conditioned by the motivation behind the action.

Now there's so much emphasis in practice on living in the present, paying attention in the present—which of course is the path of practice—but there's a larger understanding that we need to bring to our awareness of the present, and that is that our actions

and the motivations behind our actions have the power, the energy, to bear fruit in the future. They're all like seeds. We need to understand this so we pay attention to our actions.

As I'm sure all of you are familiar with, actions rooted in greed, in hatred, in ignorance, are the seeds of unpleasant future results. Actions based in non-greed, generosity, non-hatred, loving-kindness, non-delusion, wisdom—these bear the seeds of happiness.

This understanding of the law of karma is so fundamental to the teachings, and so far-reaching in its implications, that the Buddha emphasized it over and over again. It's interwoven through all the many texts of the Buddha's discourses, and it was emphasized by enlightened beings all the way up to the present time.

We've mentioned, I think, the first lines of the Dhammapada, where the Buddha says, "Mind is the forerunner of all things. If we speak or act with an impure mind, suffering follows, like the wheel of the ox cart follows the foot of the ox." And "Mind is the forerunner of all things. If we speak or act with a wholesome mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves." The Buddha is saying it very directly.

The great Indian adept who brought Buddhism to Tibet, Padmasambhava, had an amazing vision of the Dharma and of emptiness. He said that though his vision of the Dharma is as vast as the sky, his attention to the law of karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour. So we need to be watchful not to get lost in either the concept or the glorious aspiration for realizing emptiness without acknowledging that within that is the working of the law of karma. We really need to pay attention on a very fine level.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama made a very interesting statement about this. Given how important the wisdom of emptiness is in the Buddha's teachings, the Dalai Lama said that if he had to choose between teaching about emptiness and teaching about karma, he would teach about karma. That's a really important indication of just how significant this teaching is for happiness and ease in our lives.

And I think the best expression of it—I really love this—is by the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim. He was talking about both emptiness and karma, and he said, "There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." So even as we develop insight into the emptiness of all phenomena—there's no right and no wrong—but right is right and wrong is wrong. We need to integrate these two levels of understanding.

Of course, it's not enough to simply know this conceptually or intellectually, or even to agree with it. "Oh yeah, that sounds right. Karma is a good thing." That's not enough. That's not what transforms our lives. We need to practice applying this understanding

in our lives. As we're about to act, or when thoughts or emotions are predominant, do we remember to investigate and reflect on our motivation? Before our actions, do we stop and think: Where is this action leading? Is it where I want to go? Is this motivation skillful or unskillful? Do I want to cultivate it? Do I want to abandon it?

The beauty of being on retreat in quite an undistracted environment is that we have the chance to explore this, to investigate, because in the busyness of our lives without training, it's very difficult to catch ourselves. We forget to look. We just act out the patterns of our conditioning.

In the Buddha's description of mundane right view, held in this context of understanding the law of karma, he elaborated a few particular areas of investigation and practice.

The first statement in that list of phrases: "There is what is given, offered, and sacrificed." What does that mean? It refers to the moral and karmic significance of generosity. "There is what is given, offered, sacrificed"—he's talking about the power of any act of giving.

The Buddha emphasized this in his very well-known teaching when he said that if we knew, as he did, the fruit, the power of generosity, the karmic result of generosity, we would not let a single meal pass without sharing. That's how strong a force it is in the unfolding of our lives.

So a question for us in our very fast-paced, individualistic culture: Can we actually make generosity a practice? Can we cultivate it? Can we make it strong in our lives?

One way that I found to be very helpful and inspiring for myself, and really transforming of the way I relate to my life situation and the people I come in contact with: I've made it a practice to try and act on all those moments of generous impulse. Many times in the course of our lives, we have a generous impulse, we have a generous thought. So if I have a thought to give—whether it's something just small, a small gesture, or something quite big—if I have the thought, I try to practice actually acting on it at the appropriate time, rather than let the thought simply pass by or start second-guessing myself. "Oh, maybe that's too much. Maybe I shouldn't do that. Maybe I should hold on." If the thought comes to give, I try to act on it and do it, and it's had amazing results.

Acts of generosity are obviously of benefit to the recipient, but they also are of tremendous benefit to ourselves, both in the moment and also as future results. One of the immediate blessings of generosity and of practicing it is that it feels so good in the moment. Because what's going on in those moments of generosity? There are associated

factors of metta, of loving-kindness. When we're giving something, that generosity is motivated by a feeling of friendliness towards the person we're giving it to. There's the associated factor of renunciation because we're actually giving something up, and so there's the lightness that comes from those moments of renunciation. And if we consciously reflect on this whole process and the benefit of it, we're also cultivating wisdom—so the wisdom factor gets strong. All of this is contained in a simple act of giving. That's why it feels so good.

The Buddha would often begin his series of graduated teachings with generosity. Because when we hear about it—even just in talking about it, and I hope I'm conveying this—or if you think about people who are generous, how does that make you feel? It gladdens the heart. It lightens the heart because it's such a beautiful quality. We love being around people who are generous, and people like being around us when we're generous. So it's just good. It's good from the very beginning, and it's not hard to do. We just have to consciously take it on as a practice.

The second phrase in the description of mundane right view is "there is fruit and result of good and bad actions." We've already discussed this in terms of understanding karma. There is no way to overestimate the importance of these teachings—that actions bring results. Because when we practice this understanding in our lives, it allows us to engage creatively in the unfolding of our lives, since we are the heirs of our own actions. When we understand it and practice it, it's like we're artists and the medium is our life. We can shape it and craft it and create something beautiful, because we understand that our actions, moment after moment, are bringing results. There's no way to overestimate the importance of this. We begin to take a much greater sense of responsibility for our actions.

The next aspect of mundane right view says "there is this world and the other world." This is a statement about rebirth and other planes of existence. For most of us, probably this is outside the realm of our direct experience. It's also outside the mainstream of Western thought, so it may be difficult to sign on for these aspects of the teachings. When we hear about rebirth, when we hear about all the different planes of existence, for most of us as Westerners, I think there's usually quite a bit of skepticism.

When I was studying with Munindraji in Bodh Gaya, he loved to talk about this. He would go on about all the deva realms and the seven kinds of devas of sense pleasures and all the Brahma realms—he'd go on and on. I actually loved listening to it, but many of the other Westerners were kind of rolling their eyes. And Munindra would always end his little discourse on this by saying, "You don't have to believe this. It's true, but you don't have to believe it."

For myself, there was a very gradual process of opening to consider these possibilities, because I came to Dharma practice from a study of Western philosophy. I studied philosophy in college and had no

belief at all, and I probably hadn't even heard much about past lives and future lives and realms of existence. This was a completely foreign idea for me.

Over time, though, several things began to open me to consider these possibilities. One of the first things that opened me happened as I began practicing these meditation techniques and saw that so much of what the Buddha taught actually did resonate with my experience. I could test a good part of it for myself. "Oh, all of that seems true. Well, maybe this part that I don't quite experience yet—if he was right about this much, maybe I should consider the other part." And so I began reflecting a little more. I began to practice what the poet Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief," because I saw that just as we can become attached, very attached to our beliefs, we can become very attached to our disbeliefs and hold on to them quite tightly.

The second thing that opened me was being with teachers like Dipa Ma. I think we've talked a little bit about her, and we'll undoubtedly talk more—this wonderful Bengali woman, an extraordinary yogi with a very interesting life story. Not only did she attain very high levels of enlightenment, but also through the concentration practices, all the different psychic powers that are mentioned in the texts. In being with her, such an extraordinary being, and hearing that she herself had experienced all of this, out of my great trust in her, I thought, well, maybe I should consider it. Of course, this is not at all scientific proof of rebirth, so I'm not suggesting that it is. But it just opened my heart a little bit to thinking about it, considering it.

In this same vein, in our first teacher training program here at IMS, we had a young Sri Lankan man named Dhamma Ruwan, whom I had met in Sri Lanka years before when he was still a young child. He was quite an unusual person. At the age of two and three, before he could read, before he could write, he started spontaneously chanting whole Buddhist discourses in Pali—very complex Buddhist suttas in Pali. And he was doing it in a melody, a way of chanting that didn't even exist in Sri Lanka at that time. His parents didn't know these chants. It just started coming spontaneously at two and three.

As he got a little older and started meditating, he began to remember some of his past lives, and one of them was as a monk, a chanting monk, in the time of Buddhaghosa, the great sixth-century commentator of the Buddhist tradition who compiled that great commentary, *The Path of Purification*. Dhamma Ruwan remembered being a monk with Buddhaghosa, chanting these suttas, and he said that's

where all of this chanting had come from when he was still such a young child. His parents taped some of these chants, and I thought it would be interesting to play just a few minutes of him chanting as a very young child.

So again, this isn't scientific proof, but it does raise some interesting questions. Where would that come from? It just makes one stop and think that maybe there are other aspects of what's going on that we don't yet quite understand. It's simply a way of opening to possibilities. It's not a question of necessarily believing, but of expanding the possibilities of what may be going on.

Each of us has our own relationship to these teachings on rebirth and other planes of existence. And it's important to emphasize that awakening and freedom does not depend on this belief. Whether we believe it or don't believe it, we can understand the causes of suffering and free ourselves from those causes. But as the great transmission of Buddha Dharma happens—and we're in the midst of it, this really quite amazing phenomenon, this transmission of these teachings from Asian cultures to our own—I think it's helpful not to immediately dismiss what is beyond our limited personal experience, and to simply keep an open mind about other possibilities.

Regarding mundane right view, we've discussed the aspects of karma, of generosity, of rebirth and other planes of existence. The next phrase in the teachings—"there is mother and father"—highlights not the obvious fact that we're all born of our parents, but that there is a special karmic relationship to our parents with attendant responsibilities. This is an interesting teaching for us in the West. Perhaps in Asia as well, but I think maybe particularly here, there are sometimes, and maybe even often, complications and difficulties in the relationship with our parents.

The Dalai Lama's often repeated teaching that at some point all beings have been our mothers doesn't necessarily evoke the same feeling in us as it does in him. "All beings have been my mother."

Regardless of our present relationship, whatever it may be, the Buddha is pointing out that there is a karmic debt for this great gift of this precious human birth. This is an important karmic connection, and the best possible repayment of that debt is to somehow connect our parents with the teachings, with the Dharma—or at least try to plant a few seeds of understanding within them.

But of course, great skill and sensitivity is needed with this. How each of us might go about it will vary greatly depending on the particular relationships we have. And almost certainly, proselytizing is not going to help—that's not a very good strategy. The best communication almost always is not what we say but how we are. That's what gets

communicated. If there is already an open and loving relationship, there might be real possibilities for Dharma discussion and maybe even an encouragement to practice. But if communication is difficult, as it often is, the first steps might be ones we take within ourselves—to simply cultivate less judgment and be more accepting of our parents just as they are.

Over these many years of teaching, I've met with many people where there was tremendous conflict and even trauma in their family relationships. But it's been amazing to me to hear many stories of how, over time, through years of practice and a tremendous amount of patience, even when there was some pretty intense trauma involved, the relationships were transformed just through the power of the aspiration to work on it. The relationships were transformed into ones of metta, of compassion.

These difficulties are not limited to our modern age. Even Sariputta, who was the chief disciple of the Buddha, second only to the Buddha in his wisdom, had mother problems. He was born into a Brahmin family and had three brothers and three sisters, all of whom eventually ordained and became arahants. But his mother was a staunch Brahmin, very attached to the Brahmanic rituals, and she remained hostile to the Buddha and his teachings.

There is a story describing a little visit Sariputta made to his mother: Once, when the Venerable Sariputta was in his home village of Nalaka with a large retinue of monks, he came to his mother's house in the course of his alms round. His mother gave him a seat and served him with food. But while she did so, she uttered abusive words. "Oh, you eater of others' leavings," she said. "When you fail to get leavings of sour rice gruel, you go from house to house among strangers, licking the leavings off the backs of ladles. And so it was for this that you gave up eighty crores of wealth and became a monk. You have ruined me. Now go and eat." Likewise, when she was serving food to the monks, she said, "So you are the men who have made my son your page boy. Go on, eat now." I can just hear it. So there were some problems.

But many years later, as Sariputta was contemplating his own imminent death—he knew when he was going to die—he thought of his mother, who, although the mother of seven arahants, which is quite extraordinary, still had no faith at all in the teachings and the Buddha. But through his eye of wisdom, Sariputta, this great being, also saw that she had the necessary conditions for attaining stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment, but that only he would be able to bring it about.

Understanding this, he returned to his mother's house, to his birth chamber where he was born. On the last evening of his life—he went home to die—it is said that all of these celestial beings, the devas and the brahmas, came down to pay homage to Sari-

putta, this great enlightened being, second only to the Buddha. This seemed to impress his mother, that all these devas and brahmas were coming to bow down to her son. And she thought, "If all these celestial beings are paying homage to my son, what great virtues must the Buddha have?" In seeing that, her heart softened. Sariputta gave a final discourse, and she became a stream-enterer, bound for full awakening.

We may not have celestial beings come down when we visit our parents—maybe, but maybe not. But this story does point to the importance the Buddha gave to this very fundamental relationship. It may be an easy one, it may be one that is not easy, that is filled with difficulty, that takes great patience, great forbearance. But it's worth reflecting on how we might help, how we might offer or convey or communicate some aspect of these blessings of the Dharma, which have touched all of us. That's why we're here.

And even if our parents have already passed away, it's also possible to share our merit. You might do that at the beginning of a sitting, or the end of a sitting, or the end of a day—sharing the merit of our practice with them, the merit of our wholesome actions, dedicating it

to the welfare, the happiness, the awakening of our parents. And depending on circumstances, this dedication of merit can have a very powerful effect.

The last two statements in worldly right view are that there are beings who are reborn spontaneously in other realms, and that there are in the world wise and virtuous people who have realized the truth through their own direct experience.

Regarding spontaneous rebirth in other realms, we've spoken of simply the possibility of staying open to considering that possibility, even if it's beyond what we know for ourselves right now. It's the last aspect of mundane right view that I find particularly interesting and relevant in our Western culture, where the Buddha says that there are wise and virtuous people who have realized truth through direct experience.

When we look at our society, our Western culture, we don't really find that wisdom is a great cultural value. What do we value as a society? We value wealth. We value talent. We value beauty. To some extent, at least in some circles, we might value intelligence. But when's the last time you saw a magazine cover featuring the wisest person of the year? We don't even think in those terms. In India, if you went into any village and asked who's the wise elder, they would be able to point you to somebody. They may or may not actually be wise, but it would be a recognized value—a question that people would respond to. If you went downtown and asked who's the wise elder, people would look at you like, what are you talking about? Because somehow we haven't incorporated the idea of wisdom as being something important.

In some way, I think our egalitarian values, which of course have brought so much benefit, can sometimes diminish the understanding that there actually are people wiser than ourselves. I remember quite distinctly—I was young, in my early twenties—when that thought first occurred to me. Because we weren't brought up with the idea that there are wise people, it was like a light bulb going off: "Oh yes, there are some people who might be wiser than I am." That was a great discovery. People from whom we can actually learn something about the Dharma, about how to live in a skillful way. There are people with this wisdom.

Acknowledging this also opens us up to wisdom from unexpected sources. It's not always in some conventional way of connecting with wise people. Just the people we meet in the course of our lives—if we're attuned to the possibility that people have varying degrees of wisdom, we listen for it in the people we meet. And very often it's quite surprising and unexpected where we really see: yes, these people have learned something from their lives. They have something to teach us. This becomes a powerful change in how we go through our lives and how we relate to others.

A very important implication of recognizing that there are genuinely wise beings in the world, awakened beings in the world, is that it reaffirms our understanding that this is possible for ourselves as well. Because we're seeing that yes, this is a human potential, and we all share in that.

We can practice these various aspects of worldly right view or mundane right view in different ways. Some are obvious, like the practice of generosity, like paying attention to the motivations behind our actions, realizing that they have consequences. Other aspects of this right view may not be immediately apparent. So we might want to experiment. We try them on for size, seeing how they might affect the quality of our lives.

Just as an example, what would it be like, what would it mean for your life if you were actually open to the possibility of rebirth in other planes of existence? Would it change in any way how you live or the choices you make? Would it affect the stress or ease in your life? It's a thought experiment—living it out a bit, trying it on for size. What would this mean for how I live?

For myself, in doing this and just entertaining the idea that yes, this might be true, there might be rebirth in other planes, I've noticed a significant change in how I live. Within the realm of worldly happiness, because of this understanding, I no longer feel the compelling need to fulfill every desire or accomplish every goal this time around. Life is going by so fast; it increasingly feels like a long weekend. It's just really speeding

up. And if I don't become an expert skier, or learn the languages I want to learn, or learn to sing, or whatever the desire may be—well, if it doesn't happen this life, maybe it'll happen next life. This way of seeing things both takes the pressure off

And it allows me to prioritize what seems most important without thinking that I'm missing out on something. I can just let go of a lot of anxiety about having to do everything. It creates a lot more space, a lot more ease, a lot more relaxation.

So you might just play with it. What would it mean if you happened to have that belief? Not that you should believe it—it's just a kind of playing. Does it have any effect on your life or not? In this way, it becomes interesting as we explore these different possibilities.

Next week, I'd like to continue in this little two-part series, moving from mundane right view to supramundane right view. And we'll see, as we explore that, that the real freedom is not simply in living with ease and learning to live a bit more happily in our lives—which we can do—but that real freedom comes from letting go of the deeply rooted tendency of craving and from the deeply rooted belief in the concept of self. With supramundane right view, we cut through the Gordian knot of self, and we begin to experience our lives and who we are in a radically different way.

In one discourse, the Buddha said there are two conditions for the arising of right view—of both kinds, the worldly and the supramundane. Two conditions for its arising: the voice of another, and wise attention.

You've just spent an hour listening to the voice of another. The wise attention is up to you.

CHAPTER 9

Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · 1h01

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Guy Armstrong examines how we can find freedom in the midst of difficult emotions rather than trying to eliminate them. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and its teaching on the third foundation of mindfulness—contemplating citta (mind/heart)—he explains how emotions, moods, and mental states all fall within this domain of practice.*
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> *Armstrong presents a illuminating framework mapping the four primal emotions onto axes of time (past/future) and pleasure/pain: grief arises from pleasant experiences lost to the past; anger from past unpleasantness; desire from anticipated future pleasure; and fear from anticipated future pain. Each emotion carries a characteristic storyline—desire whispers "if I had that, I'd be happy," while anger insists "I'm right and they're wrong." Understanding these underlying beliefs helps us see the fabricated, empty nature of emotional experience.*
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> *The path to freedom requires two developments: a shift in attitude toward acceptance and non-judgment, and deeper understanding of emotions' impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature. Through vivid personal stories and teachings from the Dalai Lama, Armstrong demonstrates how mindfulness wears away habitual emotional patterns over time. Rather than awakening after confusion clears, we learn to wake up within difficulty itself—bringing investigation, kindness, and presence into the very heart of our struggles, allowing confusion to dawn as wisdom.*

The subject of this evening's talk is working with difficult emotions.

The Buddha's teaching, as you know, is all about suffering and the end of suffering. When I'm in daily life, living that busy life in the world, the question of suffering seems really complicated. You can talk to people in your circle of friends and family and hear all the different situations they are dealing with and working with—there is such a range. Maybe somebody's son is using drugs and they don't know how to help. Or somebody's aging parent has contracted Alzheimer's but they don't have the money to pay for a good care facility. Or a family loses their jobs and their home in the economic downturn, and where do they turn for support? Looking more broadly, I think everybody these days tends to feel that the other political party has gone crazy—whichever

political party you're from, you feel that about the other side. Or looking on a broader scale, it's just hard to believe that human beings are ruining the only planet we have to live upon through the effects of climate change. It's really disheartening.

So there are so many problems on so many levels—personal, societal, global. The question of suffering seems very complicated. But then we come into a situation like this and it gets really simple. When I'm in retreat, it seems clear there are only three things that cause us pain.

There's the body, and that's often present. Physical discomfort probably comes in a number of times during the day, and we've talked some about how to work with that.

There's emotional pain. As we start to pay attention and go through our days, we see the movement of different states—loneliness or anxiety or hopelessness or judgment—move through the mind, some of them more difficult than others.

And then being here, we're privileged to have a different kind of pain: the pain of frustrated meditation. If your mind wanders, sometimes that's really the most difficult thing in a day. "I can't stay connected to the present moment." If you were to go into the outside world and talk to the man or woman on the street, they wouldn't even notice that their mind was wandering, much less care. But here, through our aspiration, we generate a new type of dukkha. So it's a very privileged kind of pain that we enjoy—that's our third kind: wandering mind, restlessness, lack of stability, lack of concentration.

In retreat, these are the only things we really have to deal with on a difficult level: body, emotion, meditation. Really simple.

We've talked some about working with the body. We talk a lot about the craft of meditation, how to work with the third. And tonight I want to talk specifically about this middle portion—how to work with the difficult emotions that come.

Whether we look in retreat or in outer life, this area of pain is one of the greatest we can see. In the world, we probably know a lot of people whose lives have been really affected by depression or anxiety or panic or serious loss and the grief that comes from that, self-doubt, lack of self-confidence. And in retreat too, some of our most difficult experiences are dealing with these kinds of feelings that come up for us.

When I first came into meditation, I didn't feel I knew this terrain very well. When one of these difficult states would come up—like fear or anger—the only thing I wanted to do was get rid of it. I thought, "This is not why I came to meditation. I don't want to have this be happening while I'm here on retreat. How can I make it go away?"

You're all sophisticated meditators and you know that doesn't work. In the short term, we can't just push these states aside. In the long term of practice, it's said that they do all disappear—that the very roots of them are uprooted and they never arise again. But that's a high attainment. For us, it may not happen this week, and we should probably be prepared to have them around for a while.

So the aim is not for them to go away, but rather: How can we find freedom while these states are present?

I think one of the biggest and most immediate benefits of our meditation practice, our mindfulness, is in this area. Through understanding and working with difficult states, we can immediately find a lot of freedom, both in our meditation and in our daily life. This is a very, very fruitful area for our practice.

Pema Chödrön puts it this way: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's creepy, grisly, splendid, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. This is really key. Meditation gives us the method, and the method is mindfulness—paying attention in this area and learning from the experience, learning from what we find out.

In the teaching of the Buddha, this falls into the third foundation of mindfulness as described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This is the foundation of the mindfulness of mind. The word we're translating as "mind" is the Pali word *citta*. Most often translated as mind, sometimes translated as heart-mind, to emphasize the fact that this word *citta* includes both emotional components as well as thinking or intellectual components. So we may translate it as mind, but in Buddhist teachings generally, mind includes both the emotional and the cognitive aspects. Don't think that when we say mind, we're just thinking about thought.

We're also including the whole range of emotions. In fact, the best word, I think, to translate *citta* is the word "psyche," because it encompasses that same whole range of thoughts and feelings.

One kind of pointer to this is that if you ask a person from Thailand where their mind is, they don't point to their head, indicating the brain. They point here, to the center of the chest, or what we call the heart center. Their word for mind is *jit*, which is derived from *citta*, and they believe that the base of the mind is in the heart center. There are many Buddhist teachings that share this same understanding—that the center of the mind is really in the center of the chest.

Just a little funny story. There's a lot of neuroscience research going on these days around meditation, and one of the foremost researchers is Richie Davidson, who heads a lab at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Richie is a longtime Vipassana meditator and really developed his approach to experiments in order to validate what he had experienced firsthand from meditation, which is a lovely thing to know. We have a meditator on this retreat who works at the university in that field and knows Richie well.

At one point, Richie was going to Dharamsala, India, to give the monks around the Dalai Lama a little taste of the kind of work and research he was doing. He couldn't take all his equipment—his basic equipment is an MRI machine, which is a little too big to ship to Dharamsala. So what he took was one of these caps studded with electrodes, which make contact with the scalp and signal the activity in the brain underneath each electrode. You get thirty or forty electrodes all sending signals to a computer, and you can get a map of where the brain activity is happening.

So there was this meeting with the Dalai Lama, Richie, and about five hundred monks. Richie modeled this leather cap studded with electrodes for them. He felt kind of silly with it on, because truthfully, it looks rather stupid. But he explained what he was doing and then took the thing off. All the monks burst out laughing. Richie thought it was because he had looked so silly. But one of the monks spoke up and said, "Oh, that's so funny. You're trying to measure the mind through the brain when everybody knows the mind is located here"—pointing to the center of the chest. Like, what a joke, you guys!

So they talked a little bit about how you might measure mind activity around the heart, but he hasn't figured that one out yet. It's a later experiment.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, in the Third Foundation of Mindfulness, this is how the Buddha begins: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind?"

Just to mention this word *bhikkhu*, which we normally translate as "monk"—many of the commentaries say that *bhikkhu* here should be understood as a sincere practitioner. Anyone who's sincerely practicing the path of meditation is a *bhikkhu*. So all of you are *bhikkhus* tonight. Some of you may be *bhikkhunis* if you prefer.

"How does one abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred,

and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

So again, greed and aversion tend to be more on the affective side, more on the emotional side. Delusion tends to be more on the cognitive side—not understanding things the way they are. In this definition of the foundation of mindfulness of mind, we have both the emotional and the cognitive aspects coming in.

A word on vocabulary. I'll be discussing emotions, which are the strongly felt affective components: fear, anger, loneliness, jealousy, rage, happiness, joy, sympathetic joy, compassion, and so forth. I'll also be discussing moods, which are softer or lighter forms of emotions, kind of the cloud-like backdrop. You might be having a mood that's a little melancholy one day, or feeling a little tender, a little blue, a little nostalgic. It's not quite strong enough or fully formed enough to be called an emotion—just a background flavor in the mind. And then, broader than that, are these things we could call states of mind, which include emotions, moods, and refined meditative states—qualities like calm, peace, concentration, or equanimity. States of mind is the most inclusive term. Moods are a little lighter. Emotions tend to be the stronger expressions.

We'll talk more as the retreat goes on about working with positive states of mind, pleasant states that lead to happiness. But for tonight, I'm going to focus mostly on the difficult ones.

In finding greater freedom in relation to painful emotions—we might call them difficult, we might call them afflictive—we generally need two things to develop through practice. Many of you have already spent considerable time developing these.

These are not new to you, but I want to single them out.

The first is that we need a shift in attitude. We need to go from the attitude I had when I came into practice—I just wanted to get rid of these states. I didn't want to feel them. And every time they came, I thought something had gone wrong. We need to shift that attitude to one of acceptance and allowing and non-judging.

The second thing we need is a greater understanding of the nature of these emotions. Not just their particular nature—the flavor of desire, rage, or terror—but also their universal nature. All emotions can be seen as having what the Buddha called the three characteristics of phenomena: they're impermanent, none of them lasts forever; they're unsatisfactory, especially the difficult ones, not satisfying in themselves; and we can't really claim them as I or mine because we all have them.

It doesn't make sense to try to own an emotion like anger because it's part of the whole human makeup. It's in every human being who hasn't practiced to be free of it. So it's not yours or mine—it's part of human nature, just part of all of us. Nothing personal, really, about it.

We need to understand these three marks of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness as they apply to our emotions. These three together make up what we sometimes talk about as the emptiness of emotions. Emptiness doesn't mean that emotions are boring or vacant. It doesn't mean they're absent. Emotions can be rich and vivid and lively and energized, but they're also impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless. And that expresses their empty nature.

So attitude shift to acceptance, and an understanding of the empty nature—these are the things that can free us in the near term.

As we start to relate with emotions in our practice, the first step is really to know what we're feeling. This sounds easy, but it's not. Growing up, nobody told me how to explore my emotional landscape. Not my parents, not my teachers, not my favorite TV shows, not my siblings. Nobody explained to me that there's a whole world in here that's very rich, partly beautiful, partly difficult, but a world that's really worth exploring. So most of us have to practice knowing what these are.

There's a beautiful program happening now in the public schools in Oakland called Mindful Schools, where a number of trained Vipassana teachers are going into public schools at the elementary level, spending about fifteen minutes at a time, taking a whole classroom and teaching them mindfulness, teaching them to be aware of what they're feeling. To me, this is really revolutionary. And it's beautiful that the public school systems are opening to allow this to happen. Of course, it can't be called Buddhism, because then somebody else would have to come in from every other religion, but it can be called mindfulness. So nobody really has to know about the roots. That doesn't matter. The point is that these kids are getting to know how to explore their inner landscape.

The kids wrote back a number of letters on what was so great, and they said things like, "I love mindfulness. It helps me be nicer to my baby sister." Or, "I love mindfulness. Watching my breath helps me to go to sleep at night." They're really getting a firsthand taste of meditation, kind of under the radar, and it's beautiful.

I have another friend and student who runs a preschool in the Bay Area as a Dharma preschool. She takes kids who are three to five, has them five days a week for the mornings, and the whole time they're with her, she's teaching them Dharma through yoga,

through spiritual stories, through guided meditations. She said that in dealing with kids of that age, you can't talk about things like mindfulness or awareness or phenomena of the six senses—way too abstract.

So what she does is have them lie down and imagine their mind like a big lake. Just imagine that there's this big lake, you open your mind, and all kinds of fish are swimming through it, all different colors. There's a happy fish that can swim through, a sad fish, a loving fish, an angry fish. Just open yourself to this lake and let all the fish swim through. She guides them along those lines for a while.

At the end of the meditation, she asked the class one day, "How was that? Could you let all the fish come? Could you know what fish were there? Did you let them swim through?"

And this one young boy, I think he was four years old, raised his hand and said, "I could let all the fish come through, except I couldn't let the mad fish come."

She said, "Well, why was that?"

And he said, "Well, when you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

Four years old.

So often we need to learn to explore and recognize all these different states that move through us, and it's not easy to pick them up. I remember one time I was on a three-month course here. I had finished a morning sitting, about two weeks into the retreat, and I was fairly settled. I walked out the back door to go to my walking place, which was down on the lawn. I was pretty present—lifting, moving, placing with my feet. I walked out the back door, down the steps, and then I happened to look down at my path, and there was somebody there. That was not supposed to happen.

So I thought, "What are they doing in my path? I've been walking in that path every walking period for two weeks. What is somebody doing there?" And I was noticing—lifting, moving, placing. I walked a little further and got a little more agitated. "Did I cut in front of them at breakfast this morning? Is this a revenge trip that's going on?" I noticed lifting, moving, placing. I went down a little farther and thought, "They must be really insensitive not to have noticed that I've walked there every walking period for two weeks." Lifting, moving, placing.

So I kept walking and got down to a different part of the lawn, which surprisingly worked just as well for walking meditation. I carried on with my walking period, occasionally shooting evil looks in that general direction. And then after about twenty minutes of walking, I realized: I'm angry.

I had thought I was so mindful—lifting, moving, placing—but I was missing the main thing that was happening to me. I was so invested in the story about it: "That guy's wrong, he's insensitive, he shouldn't be there." I was so obsessed with the outer situation that this inner thing had just escaped my notice. It sounds unbelievable, but it happens all the time. We just don't see, for a while, what's really going on with us.

The key to being able to work with it is that we have to notice what the inner state is. When I was preoccupied with "they're wrong, they shouldn't be there, that's my spot," I couldn't get any relief from the anger. It was just getting wound up more and more. Because what the hindrances do is they tend to point us into that outer circumstance that's triggered them. We get fixated on the outer and we forget to look at the inner. In order to find any freedom, we have to take that pointer and turn it the other way, back into our own experience.

Once I recognized it was anger, I could start to work with it. I knew how to feel it in my body, I knew how to notice the thoughts that were going through, I knew what that tone was about—and then I could release it. But only when I saw it. Only when I recognized it.

Usually what happens with a difficult emotion is that we believe some story around it. And as long as we believe the story, we're not going to be able to be free of the emotion. These emotions or hindrances are kind of like low-flying aircraft. We've got our mindfulness radar up—"What's happening now? What's happening now?"—and these zoom underneath and take root because of some story that we create around them.

It's very powerful just to be able to name what's going on in us. There have been a lot of studies of meditation now through academic research. One study dealt with a group of people who had trouble managing their anger. When they got angry, they would always act it out very impulsively and cause problems for the people around them and for themselves. One group in this study was instructed: when you're angry, name it as anger. That's all the instruction they were given—just name it as anger. Compared to the control group that didn't do anything, this group that just named it as anger declined hugely in the outer acting out of it. Just naming the emotion was a really effective means of managing the expression.

There is something about being able to know what's happening that brings in some degree of wisdom. If we can recognize it, there's not just anger present anymore. The state that I was in as I was walking down there was kind of anger plus ignorance—a deadly combination.

Anger plus wisdom or intelligence or recognition or mindfulness or awareness—whatever you want to call it—much better combination. When we can bring that in, we know there's not just anger there. There's an ally helping us work with the situation. That's the mindfulness, the wisdom, the awareness.

I want to focus tonight on a few states of mind that seem particularly powerful for us as human beings, for us as meditators. They're states that come over and over in life and in meditation. It's a little different list than what Skye talked about last week. She talked about the five hindrances, the key list for meditators from the Buddha: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. I'm going to make a slightly different list, which is really the big emotions that I see people working with in actual meditation practice—in retreat, out of retreat, in meditation, out of meditation.

But rather than name them, I'm going to ask you to tell me what they are.

To start drawing this out, I want to make a distinction between beautiful states of mind, as they're called in our tradition, and these difficult states. Beautiful states of mind can arise just in a moment and exist in momentary being. For instance, you might see somebody and have a real feeling of affection or love that just pours out of you. You might see someone else and have a sense of compassion. You might walk out into the evening setting sun, into the beautiful light and warm air, and have this upsurge of joy. These are just momentary floodings of beautiful feeling that come.

The difficult emotions, on the other hand, for them to involve any degree of suffering, we have to be clinging to them with some concept of time. As we go through some examples, I think this will become clearer. Time has to be a factor in a difficult emotion that causes suffering for us.

So one of the ways we're going to look at these emotions is using an axis system where we have the axis of time running from past through present to future. The other thing that difficult emotions are born around is the range of pleasure and pain that we experience as human beings. This is a very mixed realm. There's great beauty here. There's a lot of joy and love. There's also a lot of suffering and pain. Anywhere you look on the globe, on almost any level—personal, social, cultural—you see this whole range of experience. Our range of openness, our range of sensitivity as people to these extremes of pain and delight, is also a basis for the afflictive emotions to build upon.

So the other axis that we'll use, the vertical axis, goes from pain to pleasure. The horizontal axis goes from past to future. The vertical axis goes from pain to pleasure. That gives us four quadrants.

Let's start with the quadrant of past and pleasant. Think about something in your life that was really pleasant in the past and it's not here anymore. That's what it means about being in the past—not here anymore, not in the present. What emotion could get stirred up? What difficult emotion could get stirred up by that? Something very pleasant in the past, not here anymore.

Nostalgia. Missing it. Grief.

This is basically it, isn't it? This is the basis for sadness. Nostalgia, missing, grief, loss—all about clinging to something that was very pleasant in the past that is no longer with us. This is one of the things that human beings everywhere struggle with. You can read accounts of this from the Buddha's time, of those who lost family members and were driven into states of great suffering and distress.

What about something unpleasant in the past? We'll narrow it a little bit by saying something unpleasant having to do with another human being that happened in the past. What emotion might you be feeling today thinking about that?

Anger. If somebody hurt you, insulted you, offended you, stole something from you, took something away, you could be angry or resentful.

And this is the second of these, what I would call primal emotions that we all work with. So there's grief, there's anger.

Let's go now to the future end of the spectrum. If there's something you're anticipating that's in the future and is very pleasant, what emotion might that condition? Desire, isn't it? Wanting. Imagine if we told you that you were going to get ice cream sundaes tomorrow for lunch. It's not true, by the way—I don't want anybody waiting! That would condition the thought, "Wow, that would taste really good. I'd really like some now." So that's the condition for desire: something pleasant in the future. Wanting, longing, yearning, desire, lust—these are very strong primal forces.

And then on the other side, what if there's something unpleasant that you think might happen in the future, something painful? What's the emotion? Aversion or fear. When we know something really painful might happen to us—like we have a scheduled visit to the dentist for a root canal—we could get anxious, fearful, nervous.

So these are the four primal emotions that I particularly want to talk about: sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear. These are things that I meet over and over in myself and in other meditators as well.

We've talked before about how each of these strong emotions has two major components. First, there's the coloring in the mind—fear feels different than anger feels different than happiness feels different than jealousy. Each of these moods has a different taste for us, a different taste in the mind. And if it's strong, it's going to have an expression in the body. With fear, there may be a strong contraction in the belly. With sadness, there's often a sense of pressure or heaviness in the chest. Anger often brings a sense of burning around the shoulders or neck. So we have the mental tone or mood coloring, and we have the physical expression.

There's one other piece that I want to talk about that's also important to take in, which is the area of thoughts. When we're in certain frames of mind, we tend to think thoughts that are like that. In a state of fear, we tend to think fearful thoughts. In a state of rage, we tend to think angry thoughts. It's helpful to notice that the thoughts continue to strengthen the feeling they come out of. Thoughts can trigger emotions; emotions can also launch or trigger thoughts. They reinforce each other.

There's one kind of thought in particular that's like a foundation for these afflictive emotions, and the thought varies from emotion to emotion. I'm going to call this particular thought the *storyline* around the emotion. It's something that we need to feel out for ourselves with an emotion, to get a sense of what the storyline is. I'm going to suggest a few tonight, but I might not have the words that quite fit you. So it will be helpful to investigate: What's the belief or story that's underlying my difficult emotion when it comes?

In the walking meditation experience that I talked about earlier, I believed that that person should not have been in my walking place. I really did. Silly as it sounds, I really did. As long as I believed that, I couldn't let go of the anger. So that storyline was basically, "I'm right and they're wrong." As long as I hung on to it, as long as I really believed that, it sort of kept the anger locked in place. As we go through these other primal emotions, I'll also point out the storyline that supports them.

It's really helpful to see that there's a conceptual underpinning to these emotions, linked to time—either past or future—and linked to some belief about them. This is all just part of our understanding of their nature, starting to see their empty nature, how they're all fabricated from different causes and conditions. Once we see how the whole mindset is put together, like a Lego set, we can see how it can be taken apart. And then it's not such an overwhelming mystery.

Let's take desire as an example. Desire is this movement that wants something pleasant in the future. It can be really common on a retreat, especially in the adjustment period. We often go through a lot of homesickness as we start a retreat, missing people, missing places, missing things and comforts that we associate with home. As the retreat goes on, often this desire force gets connected to events of the retreat. "I'd really like to have that meditation that I had last week. I'd like to have that again." We don't really ask why we'd like to have it again since it disappeared last time, but never mind—I really want to have that again because it felt good.

So we desire things both outside and inside the retreat setting. And then it's interesting to take a look at the nature of desire, how desire feels while it's present, and to recognize that desire has this bittersweet quality in its very nature. It's pleasant, it's sweet to bring in an object that we like, whether it's ice cream or concentration. That brings a sense of pleasantness into what is a fairly stark environment often. So it's a way of comforting ourselves.

Desire has this comfort aspect. But the problem is that the thought of ice cream isn't ice cream. The thought of concentration isn't concentration. And we're still left without that thing we want. So desire always has this built-in frustration. It reminds us of what we want, but it doesn't deliver it. There's always with desire an unsatisfying aftertaste.

And that's really what the Buddha was pointing to—that the source of suffering is craving. Dukkha arises out of this force of wanting. And it's curious: we never want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No. We take that for granted. We never think about that. We just want what we don't have.

When this dynamic hits a meditation practice, some really good learning can happen, actually. I was teaching a retreat a few years ago in Italy, which was a delightful experience. Carol and I were teaching, and Sally was there also. First of all, it was just a delight to work with Italian yogis because they seemed to me very familiar with their emotions and were able to share them very openly in interviews. So that was a lot of fun.

This young man was on the retreat, and he came in for the first interview. We worked through an interpreter. He said he was having trouble settling in. I asked why. He said, "Well, I keep thinking about being somewhere else." I asked what was up. He explained that some of his friends were going for a holiday in the Caribbean, and they had asked him to go with them. So he could either go on the holiday in the Caribbean or come on this meditation retreat. I asked why he came here. He said all the plane tickets to the Caribbean were sold out. So we were the consolation prize.

But while he was on the retreat, he kept thinking about his friends on the beach in the Caribbean and how much fun they were having and the people they were meeting. He said he just couldn't stop wanting to be there, so he couldn't really settle in to being here.

What we talked about was that maybe the unhappiness he was experiencing was because of those thoughts about the Caribbean. Maybe the meditation retreat wasn't actually an unhappy environment, but he was making it unhappy by thinking about wanting to be somewhere else. After he reflected on that for a couple of days and came into his next interview, he'd settled down.

This is a brilliant teaching: the situation we're in may be totally fine, but if we want something else, it will make it misery. Desire has this effect of stirring up discontent, taking a situation that may be absolutely fine and introducing a level of discontent to it.

The storyline, I would say, the storyline that young man was working from was: "If I had that, I would be happy." That's the storyline behind desire. That's why it's so compelling—if I had that, I'd be happy. Of course, desire never looks at the next step. What happens when that's over? Whether it's an ice cream or a vacation or a concentrated sitting, what happens when that's over? Oh, I'm just back to where I am already now. But desire never looks that far. It doesn't look at impermanence.

So when desire is present, feel it in the body. What I sometimes notice is a kind of tension, like I'm leaning forward to make something happen. You sometimes hear the phrase "toppling forward into the next moment." There's some kind of strain in the body that's looking for something else, even in subtle movements of desire. I feel it in that way. Then get familiar with this bittersweet quality—the object brings a sense of pleasantness or comfort, but also the built-in sense of frustration. It's really helpful to investigate the unsatisfying nature of desire as it's present.

The second hindrance I want to talk about is aversion.

Aversion has so many different flavors. I'll just name a few: ill will, anger, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, and resistance. And there are probably more. This is just some. It has a lot of different flavors, but they all share a similar quality.

I'll illustrate this through a story of the Buddha. The Buddha was meeting with some monks in the forest. And while they were standing there in a clearing, a jackal ran out from the forest—a small animal—and stood in the clearing for a minute, then ran off into the underbrush. It sat in the underbrush for a minute, then ran out of there and

went into the hollow at the root of a tree. It lay down in the hollow, but very quickly jumped up and walked across to a cave where it sat for a minute, and then it moved on and went back into the forest.

The Buddha said, "Did you see that jackal? It couldn't find contentment anywhere. It ran from the forest—it didn't find contentment there. It stood in the clearing—it didn't find contentment there. It lay down—didn't find contentment. Went to the cave—didn't find contentment. Everywhere it went, it was discontent. And it blamed its discontent on the forest, on the underbrush, on the root of the tree, on the cave. Blamed it on walking and running and lying down and sitting." He said the problem wasn't with any of those. The problem was the jackal had mange—a very itchy skin disease that dogs get. And because of the mange, it was unhappy everywhere.

That's what aversion is like. When the mind is in a state of aversion, nothing satisfies. Everything we try, everything we pick up, everything we touch—not quite right. And you might say that the storyline behind aversion is: there's some unpleasantness somewhere in the field of experience, and because of that unpleasantness, we form the belief, "I can't be happy. I can't be happy because of this."

So with sadness, the feeling is something like, "I can't be happy because I've lost this thing from the past." As long as we believe that, the belief will block our ability to find contentment or happiness.

Sometimes it's difficult to open to the feeling of sadness and allow it because there's a sense that it may—especially if we've been carrying it for a while—seem huge. It feels like if I open to this, I'm going to go under. I'm going to drown in it. It feels too big. But that's just another belief. And with all these emotions, it's very helpful to go in, touch them with mindfulness, and if it feels too much, back off.

So with sadness, this is the way it often needs to be approached. Touch it. Feel it. Be mindful of it. And when it feels like it's becoming too strong or too much, then find a way to back off. Take the mind somewhere else—through a different object, through taking a walk, through loving-kindness. Place the mind in a different place.

Another form of aversion, of course, is anger—one of the strong forms. The body feels tight, the mind feels kind of on fire or burning. The storyline, as I mentioned with my walking meditation, is generally, "I'm right and you're wrong." This is the foundation for the angry storyline.

This is where it's really important to watch thoughts, because often when we're angry, we'll just put those self-righteous and blaming thoughts one after another. And what they each do is make the fire burn hotter. Anger is already a fire, and as we think

more blaming thoughts, the fire keeps going up in temperature. So we see how with that thinking—"I'm right and you're wrong"—we keep stoking the fuel and adding it. If we stop the thoughts, the emotion will just die out, because that's the nature of every emotion. Unless it gets stoked, it will fade away.

Now sometimes it's difficult, because when we say, "I'm right and you're wrong," sometimes that's true. And those are the ones that catch us the most.

Sometimes it may be true, but that doesn't mean it's skillful to keep telling ourselves that story.

The Dalai Lama, in the early 1980s, met a monk who had just escaped from Tibet. The Dalai Lama had known this monk back in the fifties when he still lived in Tibet and had thought he was a monk of just middling capacity—a good monk. Then the monk had been put in prison for over twenty years and had finally escaped and made his way to India, where the Dalai Lama was able to meet him again.

In their conversation, freshly back in India, the monk said, "You know, when I was in prison, I really felt I was in danger." The Dalai Lama thought, as happened to many people, "Do you mean you were in danger of being tortured?" And the monk said, "No, that's not what I mean. I was tortured. But what I meant was I was in danger of getting angry at them." He said, "But I didn't." The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his estimate of this monk's practice.

So even in a situation like that—he was imprisoned for being a monk, that was his crime, he had done nothing wrong, he was not resistant or angry to his guards, and nonetheless he was tortured—very clearly he was right, and they were not. But he did not let that perception give rise to anger.

So just observe when anger comes, how we tend to feed it and create it through these thoughts that justify ourselves and blame the other. And feel the feeling. Anger is painful—that's one of the things that's really easy to see. It's such a painful state. In the texts, it's likened to someone picking up a hot coal to throw at another person, but by picking up the coal, we burn ourselves first. And the other thing it's likened to is drinking poison and hoping that the other person gets sick—but we get sick first.

So we have to feel this pain of anger. For me, it was the only thing that really encouraged me to let it go. I didn't see any other way out of the pain except to let it go. We need to feel that fire and dukkha and learn from it.

One of the forms of anger that comes up is that we judge ourselves. We feel angry about things we've done in the past, or we blame ourselves, or we put the wrong onto ourselves—and that's doubly painful. This form of self-judgment seems to be really widespread in our culture today.

Again, a story from the Dalai Lama. Some Western teachers were meeting with him a number of years ago in Dharamsala—Western Buddhist teachers—and were explaining this problem in the West of people not feeling good about themselves, of judging themselves, of being critical about themselves, of not really having self-love. The Dalai Lama could not understand what was being described. He said, "What are you talking about?" And when he finally got it, he said, "You know, we just don't have this in Tibet. Children are raised in an atmosphere of love, and they're given positive messages from their family and the culture. And people grow up really caring and trusting in themselves."

So this factor of self-judgment I think we'll talk about more because it's so common in the West. It comes up very often on meditation retreats, particularly because we're not getting the kind of supportive affirmations of friends and family and normal human contact. In the silence, there's often a sense of loneliness and our fears about ourselves come to the surface. So often in retreats these judgments become really apparent, and we want to talk about ways to work with it.

In the classical tradition, the best antidote for all forms of aversion, including self-judgment, is the practice of loving-kindness. So for self-judgment as well as anger, the development of loving-kindness is a really powerful way to offset that.

One little word about the storyline behind self-judgment: it has something to do with "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not lovable the way I am"—some underlying belief. And it's so ironic in a way that meditators feel this so strongly at times, because you all are some of the best people that I know. Anyone who comes here and has the intention to make the world a better place by developing understanding and love is holding one of the highest aspirations. And just from knowing each of you that I've met, and knowing what my colleagues are finding, you are all really good people. So there's not a rational basis for this kind of self-judgment in this group. And yet a lot of us carry it. It's a burden that we don't really deserve. There are ways to work with it.

The last of the primal emotions I wanted to mention is fear. This is the one that was my constant companion in practice for many, many years.

This is the one I would say I cut my emotional teeth on. I became so familiar with this state of mind.

The first thing that made it workable for me—I think it was after a Joseph dharma talk on the topic of fear in this very hall some thirty years ago—was that he simply encouraged us to look into the direct experience in the body and see if we could accept it. So my practice for a long time was: Can I feel the body sensations that arise when I'm in fear, and can I bear them?

Fear is this projection into the future, and there's some kind of belief like, "This present moment is bearable—just barely—but the next moment isn't going to be. Something unbearable is about to happen, something disastrous is about to happen." So if we can set aside the future story, the future thinking, and come into the present moment, the question becomes: Can we bear the fear?

The first avenue in for me was whether I could bear the body sensations of fear—the contraction, the flutteriness, the sweat under the arms, the lightness and ungroundedness that came with it. I worked hard at it. I couldn't right away. But little by little, meeting it time and time again, dozens of times, meeting it, feeling it, trying to open, eventually I could. And I said, "I can bear this."

Then I went to the mental experience. Can I bear that mood in the mind? Again, it wasn't easy, but eventually I could. And finally, I could come enough into the present that I could let go of the future. Because when we're in fear and the world feels like a scary place, there's some kind of projection going on that isn't in this world. I was in a meditation center—it's got to be one of the safest places on earth—and I was feeling like something bad was going to happen to me. It was a total projection, made up just out of that feeling of fear.

So over the years, just bringing mindfulness to this quality again and again and again, I've seen its power ebb, all by the force of mindfulness and loving-kindness. It's kind of like mindfulness has this wearing-away quality with these old habit patterns of mind and heart. It wears them down little by little, just like a wheel would get worn down if you put your hand on it every time it went by. It wouldn't wear away quickly, but it would get worn away. And mindfulness is like putting a hand on this churned-up energy every time it passes. And every pass slows it down, weakens it, until it can pass through.

So this is our approach with the difficult emotions: coming into the present moment, feeling them, noticing them in the body, noticing them on the emotional level, noticing the connection to thoughts. This is how that whole complex has gotten constructed, and this is how it can dissolve and fall apart. As we bring to the difficult emotions this investigative and curious attitude, what we're doing is waking up in the middle of the difficulty.

It's not that we get rid of this stuff first and then we wake up, but in the very moment of difficulty—of fear or anger or wanting or sadness—we bring qualities of interest, kindness to ourselves, presence, wisdom, compassion, investigation. All these qualities are waking up in the very middle of the difficulty. That's what transforms the emotion, and ultimately that's what transforms us. Our confusion gets woken up out of its own very nature—not by making it go away, but by bringing aliveness and awakeness into the middle of it.

I'll close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition, which is a kind of supplication. The supplication could be to the universe, it could be to your own wisdom, it could be to the Buddha or a teacher—whatever you like. It's called the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

CHAPTER 10

Acceptance

Melanie Waschke · 55 min

> *In this heartfelt dharma talk, Melanie Waschke explores acceptance as a transformative quality in meditation practice. She opens with the moving story of Jacob, a psychologist with Alzheimer's who, when his mind went blank during a dharma talk, simply named his experience aloud—afraid, embarrassed, confused—demonstrating profound presence and radical acceptance in the face of vulnerability.*
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> *Waschke draws on the Buddha's teaching that "what one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind," emphasizing how acceptance must be cultivated through practice rather than willed into existence. She outlines Tara Brach's three steps of acceptance: setting the intention to be open, softening the mind around difficult experiences, and surrendering to life as it unfolds. Practical techniques are offered, including noting "it's like this," dropping in questions like "what is not being accepted right now?," and the subtle practice of inward bowing to whatever arises.*
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> *The talk features a remarkable extended metaphor comparing acceptance to surviving quicksand—where our instinctive reactions of panic and struggle cause us to sink deeper, while relaxing, breathing deeply, and trusting the process allows us to float. This visceral image captures how non-resistance and patience, rather than striving, lead to freedom. Waschke closes with Rumi's "The Guest House," inviting practitioners to welcome all inner experiences as guides on the path.*

After listening to Sky's dharma talk last night—I arrived a little late and sat around the corner to listen—I was very tempted when I walked by the hall and saw that beautiful orange flower in front of the statue to simply pick it up, hold it, and enjoy the silence with you. But Carol already told me two weeks ago that I cannot do that. I have to say something. So that's what I'm going to do.

I would like to start tonight's talk with a story I heard many years ago when I was also sitting a long retreat. I think it was told by Tara Brach at that time; she teaches in Washington DC. It's the story of a man called Jacob, and when I first heard it, it deeply touched my heart. It has stayed with me—it keeps coming up, especially in those times when I feel struggle or when I feel unsure why I'm doing all this practice, in those hard times. I wanted to offer this story to all of you. Perhaps some of you know it and will simply hear it again, and perhaps for some of you it's new.

Jacob is a clinical psychologist by profession. He has retired by now and has been meditating for over twenty years. Occasionally he would give dharma talks to small groups in his area, sharing the dharma with everyone around. Jacob was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. As the disease progressed, he experienced times in which his mind would go totally blank—he didn't know where he was, sometimes didn't even have access to words. He would become very disoriented.

One day, as he was scheduled to give a dharma talk, he was feeling fine going up there, feeling fine moving up the aisle to take his seat. But the moment he sat down, his mind went totally blank. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know who all the people were, why he was sitting there. He was just completely blank.

But since he had been practicing mindfulness for such a long time, what he did was pause. Then he slowly brought his palms together in front of his heart, did a bow, and began naming out loud what he was experiencing inside: "Afraid. Embarrassed. Confused. Feeling like I'm failing. Powerless. Shaking. Sense of dying. Sinking. Lost."

He continued for a couple of minutes until slowly his body started to relax and his mind grew calmer—which he also noted. Then slowly he regained a sense of where he was. He bowed to everyone, apologized, and looked around.

When I heard that story, it touched my heart so deeply, and I can still feel it when I tell it. It was just that sense of presence he delivered. One person in that group put it really well. He said, "No one has ever taught us like this. Your presence has been the deepest teaching." And that it has been for me.

What I would like to talk about tonight is acceptance. That quality is so deeply represented for me in this story and in the way Jacob dealt with such a difficult situation—not knowing where you are, not knowing what to do, feeling all those terrible feelings inside. The way he dealt with it, by just putting his hands together in front of his heart and bowing, is such a deep gesture of being present with respect and kindness and openness. At the same time, he had the courage to name out loud what was happening and share it with everyone. He showed all his vulnerability, truly being with what is there and allowing it to be just as it is.

That's one part of the story that has always touched me. The other part is that it has truly inspired me to practice. Because we don't know. We don't know how things will unfold—how much we will have a certain sense of control over our mind, what kind of stressful situations we might encounter. And what usually happens when we get into those situations is that our habits come up. Depending on what we have conditioned, that's what's going to arise.

For me, Jacob represents this deep longing inside, this deep aspiration to really practice in order to be prepared. The moment where this preparation will surely be needed is the moment of death. And I have this sense that as much as I can, I would like to be prepared—to have conditioned those wholesome qualities in this mind so they hopefully arise when appropriate.

That's why I want to explore acceptance, along with different related qualities, as the theme for tonight. I think it has been a big part of my own practice.

And it still is. It's not done.

As the Buddha says, what one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind. For me, this resonates so deeply. What is frequently thought about and pondered upon—that is where the mind will incline. That is where it will go, especially in those moments of stress.

So I would like to start with just a few definitions of what acceptance is. The first thing we always do is look it up in the dictionary. I found two definitions. The first one was: acceptance means the act of taking or receiving something that is offered. Then I looked at another dictionary, and it stated the same beginning—the act of taking or receiving something offered—but then it added: with approbation, satisfaction, or acquiescence.

That was actually interesting to me because it showed there's a degree of acceptance. It's almost like acceptance can go on to deeper and deeper levels. I found it fascinating that even the dictionary made that kind of distinction. And the verb "accepting" was defined as willingly or readily receiving. That sounds pretty much like a lot of our instructions, right? Receiving what is. Being willing to be with what is.

A lot of what presence is for me has this underlying tone of acceptance—to really be willing to be there, to show up, to be open, to receive, to let in. Tara Brach, who wrote the book *Radical Acceptance*, defines it as recognizing the truth of this moment without resistance. She calls that immediate openness. It's really to be there. Another way one could put it is: body and mind are not tensing against anything that is. There's no tensing—not in the body, not in the mind—just an openness to receive, to be with.

Guy actually told me when I mentioned a week or two ago that I was going to talk on acceptance, that one of his first talks was also an acceptance talk. He said that he had put forth at that time that radical acceptance is an approximate form of enlightenment in the here and now, in the present moment. There's no leaning towards anything and there's no pushing away anything or hiding away from anything. It's just being there. No movement towards or away from. Just being there.

So maybe we pause here for a moment and just sense what you're experiencing right now. You don't have to do anything special. Just be aware of what is present. Is it allowed to be there? Is it allowed to be just as it is? Or can you sense that there's a little resistance? Or maybe not little—maybe it's gross resistance. And if there is, is that resistance allowed to be there? Can you feel the resistance? How does it feel? How does resistance feel? Do you feel it in the body? Do you feel it in the mind? Just be aware. What's the attitude in the mind right now?

For me, in a way, accepting very often means just to broaden the space for what is. Just to let it get a little more spacious, a little more spacious each time, with a very soft tone in the mind. As Joseph has said in one of the interviews a week or two ago, if you're struggling, there's always something you're not accepting.

I have found that to be very true. In my own practice over the last few years, whenever I feel there's struggle or tension—I sometimes call it "knotting up"—I just drop in that question: So what is not being accepted right now? And I leave that space open to see what comes up. That sometimes helps to just broaden the space a little bit.

As you probably all have experienced, we all have those places inside we don't so easily accept or admit or be with. About a year ago, one of my colleagues at work gave me this cartoon. I tried to enlarge it so it's not the whole thing, but maybe you can see it at least a little. When she gave it to me, I right away found it very funny, which is unusual for me. I very often don't get cartoons.

Or it takes me a while, and then I'm like, "Yeah, it's kind of funny," but it doesn't really land for me. But somehow with this cartoon, I really liked it and found it genuinely funny.

So it shows—I don't know how well you can see this, but I'll explain it. It shows two bees in a beehive. And what you can see, you know, like a beehive has all those six-angled cells made of wax. These two bees are standing on that hive with all those hexagonal cells, and one of them is holding a map which also shows a beehive with all those six-angled cells. And he's studying it really hard. The caption reads, "Face it, Fred, you're lost."

I found it really funny. I'm glad you find it funny too, because when I showed it to my partner, it was very interesting—usually he's very good at cartoons, but he didn't get it. And I recollected that maybe this has to do with certain situations we sometimes have when we go on vacation, where I feel like we're driving somewhere, and at some point I just sense that we don't really know where we're going anymore. We have the map, but

it doesn't feel like we really know where we are. So I'll point out, "Well, maybe we should ask someone." Which usually means he will take the map and say, "No, no, we're almost there. It must be right around the corner."

Accepting being lost.

I must admit, in my own practice—it's been years ago now—but I think it was actually a talk Carol gave where she mentioned that she sometimes just notes "feeling lost." And it was such an aha moment for me. It was like, "Oh, yes, feeling lost. I can just be with feeling lost." How does feeling lost feel? How does vagueness feel? How does cloudiness feel? And just really be with that instead of trying to get it clear right away again—"What's going on?"—and just rest in not knowing.

For me, these are all little examples of how hard it is most of the time to really let it be as it is, to really feel it as it is right now, and not try to make it just a little bit better or just a little bit different. Or as Joseph has said many times, the tendency to think, "If I watch it enough, if I observe it enough, then it will change." But what if it's just like this? Can I feel that?

In Sharon Salzberg's book *A Heart as Wide as the World*, I found a story about the Dalai Lama. As we all know, the Dalai Lama is a very bright and wonderful being and so often serves as an example of doing things a little differently than we usually do. This is one of those stories where I really feel he demonstrates such a capacity to be with what is, with a certain lightness.

A few years ago in Tucson, Arizona, the Dalai Lama gave a week-long series of teachings on patience. Over 1,200 people attended the event. One of the nights, the Dalai Lama was explicating a chapter of Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, an eighth-century text covering the entire path to enlightenment. Moving line by line through the manuscript, the Dalai Lama presented his commentary in Tibetan. While it was being translated, he examined the upcoming lines he would speak on next.

The Dalai Lama's English is quite good, and at one point during the translation, he looked up from the manuscript and said to the translator, "You are mistaken. That's not what I said." The disagreement that followed was about a matter of syntax—whether Shantideva, in establishing a point about patience, had said "she said that to him" or "he said that to her."

The translator responded by saying, "No, Your Holiness, I did not make a mistake. In fact, the text says 'he said that to her.'" The Dalai Lama replied, "No, it says 'she said that to him.'" Quite a courageous translator, right? The translator again disagreed, and they discussed it back and forth for a while—"He said that to her," "No, she said that to him"—and so on.

The Dalai Lama then turned back the pages of the text until he got to the disputed section. He looked at it, then burst into loud laughter, saying mirthfully, "Ha ha ha! Oh, I made a mistake!"

There he was, having been caught in an error in front of 1,200 people, laughing uproariously about it. Can you imagine? I don't know if I, even with a small group like this, could be so light about making a mistake. "Oh, making a mistake—it's like this, feels like this."

This is a very different conditioning than we usually have.

Being on a long retreat like this, I really feel it's such a great opportunity to practice this allowing of what is. There's a fairly safe container here, as probably most of you feel. There's not much you have to do and take care of. There are not many outward actions you have to take in terms of relationship and responding to what people say or want from you. So it's quite an opportunity just to allow yourself to go inside and to be with those places that are so hard to open up to—the places we so easily either try to skip over, telling ourselves, "Oh, it's not like that, it's already better than that," or where we just don't get close to. Yes, it's kind of in the back there, but let's leave it there.

This kind of space I have found really allows me to be as honest as I can with what's actually present. Sometimes it's painful and sometimes it's joyful. Sometimes it's dull and sometimes it's actually very interesting. Sometimes there's wisdom coming up. Sometimes it's just papañca over and over and over again.

So even if it's papañca, I have more and more incorporated into my practice dropping in that question: What's the attitude right now? Oh, I don't want this. Ah, resisting. Can I be with that resistance? Stop thinking. Oh, judging. Is that judging allowed to be there? Just to really be as honest and open as I can with what's coming up.

One aspect of acceptance for me, which I have probably already pointed out, is this softness, this kindness—this mettā quality. Not in a huge way, just in a very soft kind of tone, a very loving kind of tone, to be with what is. And that can mean it doesn't have to be all open right away. It can mean just a tiny little bit further each time I touch it, or I sense it, or I feel it.

By surfing through the internet, I actually found another story which just kind of popped up. I wasn't really looking for it, but it has really touched me. It's called "A Story of True Love and Acceptance."

This is what true love is all about. It was a busy morning, approximately 8:30 a.m., when an elderly gentleman in his 80s arrived to have stitches removed from his thumb. He stated that he was in a hurry and had an appointment at 9 o'clock. I took his vital signs and had him take a seat, knowing it would be over an hour before someone would be able to see him. I saw him look at his watch and decided, since I was not busy with another patient, I would evaluate his wound. On exam, it was well-healed, so I talked to one of the doctors, got the needed supplies, and removed his stitches and redressed his wound.

While taking care of his wound, we began to engage in conversation. I asked him if he had another doctor's appointment this morning, as he was in such a hurry. The gentleman told me no, that he needed to go to the nursing home to eat breakfast with his wife. I then inquired as to her health. He told me that she had been there for a while and that she was a victim of Alzheimer's disease.

As we talked, I asked if she would be upset if he was a little bit late. He replied that she no longer knew who he was, that she had not recognized him in five years now. I was surprised, and I asked him, "And you still go every morning, even though she doesn't know who you are?" He smiled as he patted my hand and said, "She doesn't know me, but I still know who she is."

I had to hold back tears as he left. I had goosebumps on my arm and thought, that is the kind of love I want in my life. True love is neither physical nor romantic. True love is an acceptance of all that is, has been, will be, and will not be.

So how can we work with acceptance? One thing I find really important to point out: acceptance is nothing we can get at will. It's nothing where we can say, "I want to be accepting right now." It doesn't work that way. It's a process of letting go, of opening up.

Tara Brach in her book has outlined three steps I have found really helpful. She says the first step is just having the intention to be open and accepting with what is present. So the first step we always take is just to incline our mind, to have that intention to be more and more accepting as we go along.

Then the second step is what I also pointed out: the softening of the mind around what is. Can the mind just soften and maybe touch the edges of what is so unpleasant, of what is so uncomfortable, of what is so fearful?

And just very softly, get in contact. Slowly, slowly, just touching it.

To help with that, I have found different ways to be helpful. Sometimes I have found it helpful just to pay attention to the space behind my eyes. Sometimes it's just been this tiny little bit of softening the space behind my eyes and just kind of letting it drop almost. That helps me to soften the mind and be accepting with what is.

Sometimes it has been helpful to just whisper this little phrase: "Okay, this too. Yes, this too. May this too be there. May I care for this too."

At other times, I have actually found that, as Jacob did with his outward bowing after I heard that story, I just kind of inwardly do this little bit of bowing to what the experience is right now. Just a tiny little softening and bowing and respecting of what is.

Sometimes, as I have said, I drop in the question—either "What is not accepted right now?" or "What's the attitude in the mind right now?" Just another way of allowing to be there what is there.

Another way I have found really helpful is often taught by Ajahn Sumedho, a monk in the Thai forest tradition. The phrase he often uses is, "Oh, it's like this." Oh, anger. Anger feels like this. In my experience, it has just helped at times to take away this "it's me being angry" to simply "oh, there is anger." How does anger actually feel? Can I be interested? Can I be open to explore what anger is like, even though it's very unpleasant? How does it feel?

And one last possibility I have at times used is just having the sense of putting a tiny little smile. Not in a big way, or kind of smiling over something. It's more like just letting the sides of the lips move up a tiny little bit to say, "Okay, may this be here. May I open today."

And we actually know from modern scientific studies that smiling—the muscles that are involved in smiling—actually opens up a relaxation in our nervous system. I've read many studies showing that this usual fight, flight, freeze reaction we have is just kind of put aside a little bit, because usually we smile when there's friendliness, when there's openness, when we can relax with our surroundings. So it just kind of helps. And there also have been studies showing that perception changes a little bit in terms of being more open to what is and having more of a positive tone in the mind towards what is. And again, not as a way to kind of get around something or to get over it—just as a way to really open up to it as it is.

And then this third step Tara points out is the step of surrendering. And this surrendering can just go deeper and deeper and deeper. Just this really surrendering to life as it is, to life as it's unfolding in this very moment.

And to me, that has a very mysterious quality. It has this "don't know" quality. There is an unfolding and there is a process. And there's probably a lawfulness in this process which I don't always understand. But that's how life is unfolding right now. That's the Dharma. That's how it is.

Our conditioning is usually very different. We want to say how it is. We want to control how it is. We want to have it our way. It's a tiny shift, but it's a deep shift to this receiving mode: How is it?

What I find important to point out is that strengthening this quality of acceptance doesn't mean that we don't have boundaries. I find that very important. It doesn't mean that we just go over our needs or that we let others do whatever they want to do with us. To me, acceptance and wisdom—or wise discernment—really go together. But it needs a certain acceptance and allowance to really be with the situation as it is for wisdom to arise, and to really find what's the appropriate response.

I have always liked—I don't know which Zen master it is—but a Zen master's explanation or definition of enlightenment. He said, "Well, it's the appropriate response." So that means whatever comes up, can we be with it, open up to it, really feel it, and then see what comes up out of that? Not trying to figure it out, but just letting it evolve as it comes up, and then take whatever action it needs.

So acceptance doesn't mean that we don't take action. Actually, in my own experience, I have found the more I have been accepting with what is coming up, the stronger at times I can really make a statement if I find something inappropriate or if I find that someone has hurt me. The more I have really felt how the hurt has come about in me, the better I can actually say it out loud so that the other person might understand and actually feel the impact of what he or she has done.

The other aspect I find really important to point out—and perhaps this emphasis comes from my background as a psychologist—is that acceptance also requires skillful means at times, especially when it comes to traumatic experiences. When we have those kinds of experiences arising, we need a skillful way to actually be with them. There's no use in simply feeling overwhelmed over and over and over again. That just fries our nervous system.

As we teach very often, it can be skillful to be with something for just a tiny little moment, and then return to a place that's more neutral or even comforting. When the mind is more relaxed, open, and balanced again, perhaps we can touch that difficult experience once more—for as long as we're able. But when we feel increasing tightness or overwhelm arising, we can return to that place of refuge. It might be the breath, or the

touching of our hands together, or feeling our feet touching the floor, or listening to sounds—whatever that is for you. The key is to be skillful in allowing the mind to stay balanced.

In my own experience, I have tried many times to just focus down on something, wanting to push through it. It's painful. It's the painful way. So we learn to be aware of that wanting, that striving, that pushing—and to include that too. Feel it. It's fine for that to be there, but we simply hold it in awareness.

This brings me to another aspect of acceptance I have found so valuable: the element of trust. To really accept and let be what is, it's actually like a little jump—at least in my experience. It's a little jump into the unknown. There is no knowing ahead of time how things will unfold if I completely let experience be as it is. Let it get as wide as it wants. Let it get as tiny as it wants. Let it get as strong as it wants. There is no knowing how it's going to unfold.

For me, it really takes that quality of trust to allow myself to drop fully into the experience, to feel it as it is.

Ajahn Chah, one of the great masters in the Thai forest tradition who has since passed away, put it beautifully: "When I had been practicing for only two or three years, I still could not trust myself. But after I had experienced much, I learned to trust my own heart. When you have this deep understanding, whatever occurs, you can let it occur, and all things will pass on and be quelled. You will reach a point where the heart tells itself what to do. It is constantly prodding, constantly mindful. Your only concern needs to be to continue contemplating."

Isn't that beautiful? Just trusting the heart, trusting the mind, trusting the Dharma, trusting how it will unfold. There's no "I" needed. It's going to unfold the way it unfolds.

Perhaps another way to approach this comes from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which has become quite popular, especially in working with chronic pain—the kind of work I do. Just a couple of weeks ago, I came across someone who has also been working for years and years with patients in chronic pain. What she says is that actually ninety percent of the pain is the holding of the pain. It's not the sensation of pain itself that's so painful; it's the holding, the trying to control, the attempting to manage it without really allowing it to be there.

In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which is very much grounded in mindfulness and acceptance and commitment to one's own values, they use the image of quicksand as a metaphor. They say acceptance is pretty much the same as dealing with quick-

sand. Before preparing for this talk, I thought I'd look up what the actual instructions are for dealing with quicksand. It's fascinating—you could translate almost every step directly into meditation instruction.

The first step they give is: if possible, avoid quicksand. Translated for practice, perhaps: if possible, avoid struggle. But if for some reason you couldn't avoid it and you've found yourself in quicksand, the next step is to drop everything. They explain that your body is less dense than quicksand, so you can't fully sink unless you panic and struggle too much—which causes the sand to further liquefy—or unless you're weighed down by something heavy.

Sometimes we can let go of struggle. Sometimes it just needs this little recognition: "Oh, may I let that go? Oh, I've seen that story 1,575 times already."

May I let it go this time? Sometimes it works.

The next thing they say is: relax. Quicksand usually isn't more than a couple of feet deep. If you panic, you can sink further, but if you relax, your body's buoyancy will cause you to float.

Then they say: breathe deeply. Not only will deep breathing help you remain calm, it will also make you more buoyant. Keep as much air in your lungs as possible. It is impossible to go under if your lungs are full of air.

The next step is the one where it really involves trust: get on your back. Can you imagine? You're in quicksand and what you're supposed to do is completely get on your back. If you sink up to your hips or higher, bend backward. The more you spread out your weight, the harder it will be to sink. Float on your back while you slowly and carefully extricate your legs. Once your legs are free, you can inch yourself to safety by using your arms to slowly and smoothly propel yourself. If you are very near the edge of the quicksand, you can roll to hard ground.

This involves a tremendous amount of trust. And it totally goes against what we intuitively would do. It's just like practice—not doing so much.

The next step they say is: take your time. If you're stuck in quicksand, frantic movements will only hurt your cause. Whatever you do, do it slowly. Slow movements will prevent you from agitating the quicksand. The vibrations caused by rapid movements can turn otherwise relatively firm ground into more quicksand. More importantly, quicksand can react unpredictably to your movements. If you move slowly, you can

more easily stop an adverse reaction and avoid getting yourself stuck deeper. You're going to need to be patient. Depending on how much quicksand is around you, it could take several minutes or even hours to slowly, methodically get yourself out.

Does that sound true for your practice? It can take a very long time with certain habits, and it requires a lot of patience to just be with them over and over again.

Then the next instruction is: get plenty of rest. Other than panic, exhaustion is your worst enemy. This is the striving—the instruction is not to strive, to really relax. Since it can take a long time to get yourself out of quicksand, be sure to take breaks and just float on your back if you feel your muscles getting tired.

So if we're in struggle, sometimes we really need to place the attention somewhere else and be with something that's more neutral, or perhaps even pleasant, so the mind can become more balanced again.

I think this is a quite extraordinary example, especially for those situations of great stress. What it takes is to trust, to pause, to relax, to breathe, and then to very slowly see what kind of actions will serve.

In my own practice, I have so often thought, "Oh, this—but let's quickly get back to the breath. Let's fix this and then get back." But there's something important about just really being with what is, and at times simply exploring and testing what works. There's no right or wrong experience. I know we keep saying that, but it's the way we're relating to experience that's important.

I would like to finish tonight's talk with a poem that probably most of you know, but I still find it such a powerful reminder of what acceptance means. It's Rumi's poem, "The Guest House."

This being human is a guest house. Every morning, a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness—some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all, even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture. Still, treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.

So perhaps we might simply sit together for a moment. And whatever is present right now, let it be there. Just as it is.

CHAPTER 11

Mettā

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson presents mettā (loving-kindness) not as something we must manufacture, but as a natural expression of wisdom that emerges when the mind is free from confusion. She explains that mettā is technically an aspect of adosa (non-hatred), one of the universal beautiful mental factors, and manifests as the sincere wish for the welfare of all beings without discrimination.*
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> *Wilson draws on powerful contemporary examples to illustrate mettā's transformative strength, including the remarkable story of Mahā Ghosānanda, the Cambodian monk who lost his entire family to the Khmer Rouge yet spent years in refugee camps chanting the Mettā Sutta and helping survivors reconnect with the goodness in their hearts. She also shares John Lewis's account of practicing nonviolence during the Civil Rights Movement, demonstrating how seeing the divine spark even in one's attackers represents mettā's deepest expression.*
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> *The talk addresses common misconceptions about loving-kindness practice—that it requires strong emotional feelings, that it's blind or weak, or that anger is necessary for protection. Wilson clarifies that mettā practice trains intention through repetition, gradually shifting the mind's habitual patterns of separation and insufficiency. She examines the near enemy of mettā (desire or wanting) and the far enemy (ill will), showing how craving creates measurement and contraction while true mettā is spacious, inclusive, and immeasurable. Drawing from the Dhammapada and the Buddha's teachings on the "immeasurable deliverance of mind," she encourages practitioners to discover their natural capacity for connection rather than trying to create something foreign.*

So tonight I want to talk about metta, loving kindness. There are some reflections about the state of mind as well as the formal practice—making the choice, making the determination for love.

It's really not so much that we as an individual, which since we know from last night there is no such thing, make the choice for love, but wisdom makes the choice. Metta is described as not its own particular mental factor, but it's an aspect of the larger mental factor of, in Pali, *adosa*, which is non-hatred—quite a large mental factor, one of the beautiful factors. Whenever there is a so-called beautiful mind state, a state of wisdom without delusion, a state that isn't colored by any of the *kilesas*, adosa is always present. It's one of the universals in all beautiful mind states. So there can be non-hatred, which

is clear what that is, but it's not necessarily metta. Metta is an aspect of non-hatred. And as such, it's an expression of the heart and mind that's clear from confusion. It's an expression of the heart and mind, the consciousness of wisdom.

Rather than thinking metta is something that we somehow have to find a way to cultivate in this culture—we don't really trust it so much and it's weak and this and that—it's really more about discovering, learning, having confidence in metta, in this non-individual love as a power of mind and heart, as an expression of wisdom. Even though probably most of us think it's a good idea, it may not be what we really deeply trust.

Let me just read some things you've heard a million times, really basic stuff from the Buddha, where he's talking about the power of metta. It's from the Dhammapada:

When we hold fast to such thoughts as "they abused me, mistreated me, molested me, robbed me," we keep hatred alive. If we thoroughly release ourselves from such thoughts as "they abused me, mistreated me, molested me, robbed me," hatred is vanquished. Never by hatred is hatred conquered, but by readiness to love alone. This is the eternal law. You too shall pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?

And then just one last one that I like:

There is no fear if the heart is uncontaminated by the passions and the mind is free from ill will. Seeing beyond good and evil, one is awake.

I really like those, especially that last one, because that's an expression of metta. We often think it's blind, just seeing the good. But seeing beyond good and evil, one is awake. That's a great expression of the power of metta in the heart, in the mind.

Really, on a deep level, the practice is to keep looking in yourself. I look and ask, do I really, truly believe that? Believe it in the way that that's where my mind goes when I'm feeling someone has abused me, mistreated me? Though I don't want to hold on to these thoughts—that just keeps me suffering. Intellectually, okay, I can go there. But really, in ourselves?

This is why we have a training. It's not that one has to cultivate metta as the intensive practice, as we've been doing in the afternoons, as the only way to experience it. Of course not. It's a really common everyday experience of our mind and heart. But we can learn to recognize it. We can learn how powerful it is, and we can learn to train our mind and heart to really take refuge here in this wisdom. It's a choice. We can begin with ourselves, begin where we are, and learn how to trust, how to incline the heart and mind in this direction.

Let me give you a current example: Maha Ghosananda. You may know who he was, the Cambodian monk. He died in 2007—actually, he died in Northampton. He was staying out at the Peace Pagoda a lot his last few years in Leverett. He was a Cambodian monk who, during the Khmer Rouge years, just before the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia and began really the genocide of the Cambodian people, happened to be in Thailand studying. So he missed the Khmer Rouge. But they killed all of his family, something like eleven or twelve family members.

After he heard what was happening, there were so many thousands and thousands of Cambodian refugees who had managed to get out of the country living in refugee camps on the Thai border. As with Maha Ghosananda, many of the people in the refugee camps had lost everything. Besides losing everything material, for many people their families had been killed. They'd just been through—you know, the killing fields, just a horrible situation you can't even imagine.

Maha Ghosananda was really committed to his path of awakening, but he was committed to it from the basis of loving kindness, of metta. As the story goes, he went into these refugee camps. He spent years really trying to bring Buddhism back to the people, because most of the people were Buddhist, had grown up in a Buddhist faith.

But again, most of the monks and nuns and temples were destroyed also in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge. So he went into these refugee camps to help in what way he could.

And the thing that he did—two things. One is he would go and build a little bamboo temple, just a little bamboo shack for the people to come. And then he would start chanting these metta phrases that I just read. That's what he started chanting. Amazing, isn't it? Amazing.

And the people would know this. Most of the people would be familiar with these. And after some time, it's said, other people would start to chant. He would then spend years going around giving out copies of the Metta Sutta, the Sutta on loving kindness, and just trying to revive the goodness in the depths of people's hearts and minds, knowing that that's really our truest nature when the mind isn't clouded. The best way he felt he could help was to reconnect people with metta.

But thinking about it, to go into a situation where everyone is in such a state of loss and trauma and bitterness and fear and grief, and to start chanting, "If you hold on to thoughts that he beat me, he robbed me, then you're not really practicing"—it's really amazing. And he spent years doing this.

When he died, there was an obituary in the New York Times. I just want to read a couple of lines from that. Scott A. Hunt, who is a professor of Buddhism at the University of California in Berkeley, wrote that "Maha Gosananda's ability to forgive those responsible for the murder of his entire family is incomprehensible until one heard his explanation of Buddhism." This was written for non-Buddhists. Maha Gosananda said—and this is in quotations—he "does not question that loving one's oppressors, Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge, may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But," he then added, "it's the law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle." Reconciliation, he continued, "means that we see ourselves as the opponent. For what is the opponent but a being in ignorance? And we ourselves are also ignorant in many respects."

Just an example—it's a high bar, you could say. I realize it's a high bar. So don't let your mind go into, "Well, it's hopeless." It's a high bar. But this is someone who's been living in this world as it is, in some of the worst ways that it is, and knowing deeply that metta as an aspect of wisdom is really the deepest expression of wisdom and how we can live with ourselves, with each other as human beings.

Again, I'm bringing up a high bar on purpose just to let it get in and just let ourselves—not in a judgmental way at all—but just to let us really explore in ourselves over these days: Do I really have any confidence, faith, in the power of love, of non-hatred, of kindness as an aspect of wisdom?

Again, this really has to be without judgment. Not, "Well, if I really had faith, I'd never feel aversion again. If I really had faith, I'd go around loving." Not that kind of stuff. But just seeing if somewhere in the background, way, way, way back, there are beliefs like, "Well, loving kindness is nice, but when the chips are down"—that's an American expression that means when the going gets tough—"then one needs to get tough." Is that what one believes? When the going gets tough, when the chips are down, I need my anger. I need fear. That's the best protection. Of course, we're not going to say, "Oh, yeah." But just look at what's operating in the background sometimes.

And so as a formal practice of metta, as an intensive practice, but also just inclining your mind to recognize the qualities of metta in your vipassana practice, we do this as a way to really see for ourselves—to move from the concepts of loving kindness and wisdom, the "it's nice and it's good" or whatever, "yes, I'm committed to it," the concepts of it, to the deep experience on the insight level. Both how loving kindness can manifest in my mind in relation to the beautiful, in relation to the difficult, in relation to the boring—and also what gets in the way. A lot of our exploration in practice is learning what the habits are that block my recognition of loving kindness, of connectedness.

So it's not that we actually so much have to create, but rather to just begin to trust, to uncover the possibility of this natural state of mind—connectedness, caring for others, friendliness.

So I just want to talk a little bit about, well, what the heck is it anyway? What is metta? Just some descriptions.

As it's described in the Manual of Abhidhamma, metta is, as I said, an aspect of non-hatred—which is a very powerful wholesome state. So we talk a lot about hatred, we talk a lot about greed, we talk a lot about delusion, but they have their opposite wholesome states: non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. These are also factors of heart and mind that are really more powerful.

So metta also has the quality of spaciousness. Again, the example that's often given in the suttas is that if you had salt and put it in a cup of water, you'd have extremely salty water. But if you take a spoon of salt and put it in a pond, you don't even notice it. So the quality of mind of metta is just spacious, including, not causing trouble about anything, not pushing away and not saying, "Yes, I need this." Just connected, inclusive, spacious, kind, not discriminating. And it's really normal and natural.

The example I always use, because it just really works for me, is this: if you walked out here and saw two little kids, maybe three years old, playing with each other, laughing and bouncing a ball, what would be your normal feeling? Assuming you're not in a really bad, aversive yogi mind—just a normal day. You walk out, the kids are laughing, they're cute or they're not cute, but they're just little kids. Don't you wish them well? It's just appreciated. It's not rocket science. It's not some big esoteric state that you have to crank up intensive meditation for three months to feel. You just walk out and go, "Oh, yeah." You may not say, "May you be happy and peaceful, may you be safe and protected." But you feel that sense of how the mind and heart just expands, connects, includes all of them, all of the kids.

And it's not blind. It doesn't mean you can't act. So the kids are playing. And if, as happens with three- and four-year-olds, they go from being friendly to getting into a fight, and one of them picks up a big stick and starts hitting the other one over the head—you don't go, "Oh, aren't they cute, la la la." You also don't go, "Well, I hate them. Look at those kids, they're so horrible."

You kind of take the stick away, out of metta, right? You still have this sense of appreciation, friendliness for the little kids. That's metta. It sees the whole situation with friendliness, with inclusivity. It acts appropriately, but your mind and heart isn't

troubled. You're not filled with rage and hatred because "oh no, look at that—you can just see the evil of human nature right there." One could go there, but that wouldn't really be the choice.

So metta is not rocket science. And on that simple level, we all know it. This is the simple level we bring to our own experience. Acceptance is a huge aspect of metta, just what Melanie spoke about the other night—this quality of simply bringing all our attention right here, whatever's happening, seeing it clearly without adding anything extra, without adding hatred, without pushing away. So that's an aspect of our vipassana practice as well.

But metta, all the wholesome states—all four brahma viharas: metta, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity—can become really unbelievably powerful forces in the heart, in the mind. And you can sometimes even feel it. You almost feel like you've walked into a metta field around certain persons, or sometimes at the end of a metta retreat when people have been practicing metta for a week together. You can kind of feel it sometimes.

There's a quiet, lovely Burmese Sayadaw, a monk and teacher in Sagaing up in the hills that we usually go to visit, U Jayanta. He doesn't speak English, and he seems very simple. His monastery is small, always impeccably clean. There are only ever a few monks there. We go up to visit him every year. I love it, and I've told him this, because I just feel the sense of metta and peace whenever I walk in there, whenever I come and we just talk to him. He's simple, and he remembers us and loves it if we have a dharma question. There's no big amazing thing going on, but it can just feel like walking into a field of purity, a field of metta, because it touches that in oneself—just living a simple, quiet life.

Although I have to say, my friend Greg, who goes every year too, said last year his illusions were shattered because U Jayanta was on a cell phone when he walked in. Which doesn't mean you can't have metta. Let's not go there.

But anyway, metta can become a powerful force in the mind. This is from the Buddha, describing metta when it's really moving into a force:

"That disciple of the noble ones, thus devoid or empty of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unbewildered, alert, mindful, keeps pervading the first direction with an awareness imbued with goodwill, an awareness filled with goodwill. Likewise the second direction, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. Thus above, below, and all around, everywhere, in its entirety, he keeps pervading the all-encompassing cosmos with an aware-

ness filled with goodwill—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, without hostility, without ill will. This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind, the immeasurable deliverance of heart."

So metta is a simple, really accessible, normal and natural state. And it can also, when it comes together with wisdom and real purity in our heart and mind, open into an immeasurable deliverance of mind. It's really extremely powerful. Immeasurable—without measure.

So what obstructs or hides or keeps us from recognizing the measureless quality of mind, of heart? What keeps us in these perceptions Joseph was speaking about last night—the perceptions that seem to lead to and increase fragmentation, separation, limited mind, limited heart, affection for myself and a few? What feeds the fear?

Really, it's not like there's some monolithic thing. Moment to moment, the sense of fragmentation in our heart, in our mind, the sense of isolation, the sense of separation—that perception is created moment to moment. It's not something we're carrying around with us, and maybe someday, if we're lucky, it'll go away. There are plenty of moments when it's not being created. A moment of acceptance without any judgment, with presence and awakeness—that's a moment of non-fragmentation, when one can almost intuit the measureless quality of heart and mind. Until we think, "I have experienced it," and boom—measurement is back, limitation is back. Fine, notice that.

So these habits: the habits of seeking pleasure, the habits of wanting, the habits of fearing the unpleasant, of pushing away, of aversion, of ill will, the habit of shutting out certain aspects of our experience. "I don't want this to be part of me. I don't want this to be happening."

I don't want to know about this. This is undesirable. This basically cannot be happening. All of these movements of mind.

And these are just the habits we talk about all the time. But this is really the essence of why these habits are the source of suffering for ourselves and others—because they're creating in the moment this sense of insufficiency, of separation, of isolation, of neediness, of fear. And then we believe it. And then we tell ourselves a story that feeds that. And then we act on that. And then we act with somebody else on that. And they respond. And then it just keeps on going, boom, boom, boom.

A friend of mine was just telling me he was doing a retreat somewhere else, and he came out of it having had a big insight into the basically empty nature of thoughts—a lot of what Joseph was talking about last night. And he was telling me, "I came out of the retreat and was visiting friends I hadn't seen. And they would say, 'Tell me your

story.' And it was like they'd talk to me—all these thoughts, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts—and then they'd hand it to me. And then I'd say my story—thoughts, thoughts, thoughts, thoughts—and hand it to them. And then our thoughts are kind of meeting in the middle, la la la la la." He said, "It's just also nothing. It's just also nothing. We could just sit here and be here together, and that's fine."

So a lot of our practice, our cultivation of metta in the direct way and also through the attitude in the mindfulness, is through recognizing the qualities of metta and also recognizing these habits of mind and perception that feed the sense of limitation, that feed the concept of separation.

They say the word metta has two root meanings. I like both of them. One is gentle, and the example that's often given—very appropriate for today—is gentle like a gentle rain that's just falling everywhere. You know how it was gentle this morning? It's just coming, and I love it when it's like that. It falls everywhere. If the gentle rain is falling, it's not like, "I'll fall everywhere, but I'll just miss that lilac bush over there." Just gentle rain on everywhere. It doesn't select and choose.

And the other aspect is friend, friendship, friendliness. A true friend is someone who in happiness and in difficulty doesn't reject you, isn't envious, doesn't rejoice when you're unhappy, is always present without judgment, without picking and choosing. So these are two qualities of the mind of metta, the heart of metta.

And I really feel that with metta practice, and in noticing the metta in the vipassana, it's gentle. There's no way to be with metta other than gentle. You just can't say "May I be happy" any other way. It has to be gentle. And we become a friend—a friend to ourselves, a friend to our minds and hearts, a friend to each other, a friend to the world. We start to see through the perceptions and the habits of mind that feed separation, that are not inclusive.

I'll read you this little story a friend of mine uses and gave to me, from a nurse who said: "During my second month of nursing school, our professor gave us a surprise test. I was a conscientious student and I went easily through the questions until I read the last one, which was: 'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?' Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired, and in her fifties, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count towards our test grade. 'Absolutely,' said the professor. 'In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say hello.' I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name was Dorothy."

That's metta.

Whatever's here, it deserves our attention, even if all we do is smile and say hello.

And the subtle habits of exclusion—sometimes they're very subtle, I see in my mind, though sometimes they're not so subtle—habits of exclusion about what's supposedly internal or external. "Well, these people are more interesting or more important." Or in some subtle way, these people don't count, or I just don't have the time. Just to notice that quality of mind that picks and chooses.

In the formal practice of metta, as we've been doing on the Tuesday afternoons, as some of you are doing more steadily through the days here—Sharon says she'll go to her grave saying this, but I'll say it too. I don't know if I'll go to my grave saying it, but I'll say it: The practice of metta is not about creating and holding on to a great emotional feeling. It's not about holding on to anything. And metta has a wide variety of how it is. It's not necessarily about trying to feel anything.

The formal practice of metta is really the practice of training our hearts and minds through the cultivation, the use of thought, the use of attention, to cultivate our intention—the motivation, the movement of mind. As Melanie said, that very famous line from the Buddha: what we naturally think and ponder upon becomes the inclination of our mind. Well, metta practice—what is the mind saying over and over and over?

And people say, "Well, it's boring." Okay, it's boring. How really fascinating is the other stuff your mind's saying? "May I be happy and peaceful. May you be happy and peaceful." "I don't really feel it." Who cares? Just come back. The intention to say it, the intention to connect with the sense of the person—just that is strengthening the intention, is inclining the heart and mind. And it does have an effect.

Wanting to feel good—now let me see, does wanting to feel good sound like metta? Does wanting to have a better experience sound like the quality of open, connected, well-wishing for all beings? Or does it maybe sound like wanting, which is the near enemy of metta, which I'll get to in a minute.

Through the cultivation of intention, every moment that we can connect—whether it's with ourselves, with benefactor, friend, with all beings, with whoever—ultimately it doesn't matter. Because in the moment, whether it's yourself or benefactor, say, in the moment when there's that phrase of wishing well, "May you be happy and peaceful," and you don't feel a huge emotion, but in that moment there's some connection with it, and there's really no ill will in the mind just for a second. I know sometimes you could say the phrase with ill will—I'm aware of that. But we're talking about a time when there's not ill will. In that moment of metta, it's a little metta, but it's metta.

It doesn't really matter whether it's for you or benefactor or whatever, because the moment of metta in itself has this expansive, inclusive quality. It's just that moment of metta—you just feel, "Oh, may I be happy, may you be happy." That's one reason we say start where it's easy, if yourself isn't easy, and come back, because once the metta's there for a moment in the mind, it's easier to include the self or the difficult.

So we're working through the cultivation of intention to really stop feeding the habits of mind of resistance, of greed, of aversion, of separation—to stop feeding those perceptions and instead to strengthen the intention of well-wishing, the intention of spaciousness, the intention of inclusion. Just very simple, very matter-of-fact, very practical, moment after moment after moment. And a lot of moments, that's not what's happening. Fine.

But every time that you're trying to wish well to someone and your mind goes off —"Well, they would be happy if they'd only do what I said," and "I've been doing this all day"—and you say, "Okay, that doesn't feel like metta," and you just come back, reconnect, say it again—that's powerful. Instead of going on the whole train, you see, maybe you don't use these words, but you're seeing: "Oh, that's the habit, the perception of separation, of not good enough or something lacking. Let me not feed that right now. Let me just come back to, 'May I be safe and protected.'"

It doesn't seem like a lot, because we're always looking for some big, juicy something or other. But this is the level, the subtle moment-to-moment level, that is really changing the deepest habits of our mind. When Joseph was talking about the concepts last night, I'm sure—well, I'm not sure, I'm not sure of anything—but maybe you got a sense of how fast and subtle the concepts are that give us a sense of self. It's not something we can think our way out of.

So the effects of those concepts are gross and with us a lot. But the creation in a moment of perception and concept is so quick and so subtle, isn't it? And the habit of mind is so quick. So it's the subtle habits of mind that really, in some way, are the deepest level of freedom and the deepest level of ignorance.

It doesn't always have to be this big blowout experience, but just this willingness, this determination to cultivate friendliness, loving-kindness, gentleness, inclusivity over and over. This is really what we're cultivating here.

And the part we don't like so much is that a big part of the practice, whether it's the formal metta or the vipassana too, is the recognizing, learning to see and understand these habits that get in the way. We've talked about those a lot, so I don't want to go into them too much, but just a little bit in terms of metta.

The two biggest habits in terms of metta, of course, are desire or lust and ill will. Desire, or lust, is called the near enemy of metta because it's often confused with, mistaken for metta. It masquerades as metta. It can look like metta. When we're really caught in lust or desire and we recognize it, it doesn't actually seem like metta at all, does it? It's kind of surprising that we can confuse lust or wanting for metta, but we can.

One way is because metta, when you're feeling it, when you're just inclining towards well-wishing to someone, it's pleasant. And pleasant, when there's not mindful awareness, when the awareness kind of drops, the habit of mind is to move from pleasant into wanting something, isn't it? Often in metta, it can move into wanting more about the person you're sending metta to. And so then we don't quite recognize it.

"Oh, may you be happy, my good friend." I remember doing metta and just feeling so much well-wishing for her and happiness for her. And then these little thoughts would come in: "We really should spend more time together." Oh, may you be happy. "Really, why doesn't she call me more?" May you be happy. "Maybe when I get out, I'll call her up. We'll go into town. We'll go to that good restaurant." And then it's not so subtle anymore. You're off. But it's very easy to kind of slip over into that. And when it's connected to the person, we sometimes don't quite see it.

Another way that we can really get into wanting with metta—classically they say it's lust, that you actually get into sexual desire for the person. I think that's actually a lot less common than the wanting something back.

With metta also we can start wanting the feeling, right? "May you be happy." How do I feel? "May you be peaceful." How's the heart doing? "May you..." And you're always checking it out. Is it open? Not quite open. It was better yesterday. "May you be happy. May you be peaceful." Maybe if I go slower...

And you have to look and see: what's the motivation right now? Is it metta? Metta is a complete generosity of the heart, just wishing well for the person. Seeing them, the energy goes out, includes them, spreads out. "May you be happy." Do I feel good yet? Oh, okay. Maybe that's not metta. Just seeing.

The near enemy is still bound up. It's still all about me. And you can see that.

The sense of me is still a reference point when we're caught in the near enemy, when we're in wanting, whether subtle or gross. And that's just something you can really notice. As I said, when I really look at wanting in its essence, it doesn't look like or feel like metta at all.

The essence of wanting, of craving, is separation. I'm wanting something else. It's a sense of insufficiency, of inadequacy, of incompleteness. I need whatever it is to feel okay, to feel peaceful, to feel happy. We don't say it that grossly, maybe, but the craving and the wanting itself creates a sense of separation, of insufficiency, and actually increases it, feeds it. The more wanting there is, the more it grows.

When wanting is present in the mind, unseen, that's really the perception that keeps this sense of me and other going. But in a moment of metta, that perception of separateness, of insufficiency, of neediness, of inadequacy is not here. A moment of simply, "just as you are, may you be happy." Just that. There's no sense of "I need something else in this moment." You're not even thinking about "I." Even though we're using the language of "I" and "you," in the moment of metta, it's just, "may you be happy." That's it. Simple, expansive, inclusive. Nothing is lacking. Nothing is in excess.

Wanting is just the opposite of this—whether it's wanting outwardly or inwardly.

This is from Mark Epstein. He's talking about the sense of unworthiness. He says, "When we have a sense of unworthiness, it is easy to feel deficient and to see the love of another person as the only possible solution to this plight. Meditation tends to work against this assumption of deficiency by restoring the capacity for connection from the inside." In doing this, meditation challenges the common assumption of our culture about where connection comes from. We see that connection is already present. We are not as separate and distinct as we think we are. Connection is our natural state. We just learn to permit it, to allow it. I would say to recognize it, actually. You can't stop it. We just learn to recognize that connection is already present. There's nothing to want from outside.

And love, metta, is an expression of this wisdom. It then strengthens our trust in this reality, in this aspect of reality. Just open-hearted, simple connection.

The Buddha said that lust is a maker of measurement, hate is a maker of measurement, delusion is a maker of measurement. In one whose taints, whose poisons are destroyed, these are abandoned—that's an arhat. But in terms of the near and far enemy of metta, lust or craving, ill will—these in themselves, when we don't recognize them, when we believe them and identify with them, when there's a sense of me doing it—these are makers of measurement.

You can feel measurement in the mind, rather than the immeasurable mind that the Buddha speaks of with the brahma-viharas. This maker of measurement—you can almost feel everything shrink, contract. It comes down to me and other, whether it's

wanting or whether it's aversion. Suddenly there's this measurement, and I'm the center that everything's measured from. The mind contracts. The world contracts. Our view contracts. And that in itself is a form of suffering.

So the far enemy of metta is ill will. Well, that's obvious. We're not going to mistake ill will for metta—I hope not. And metta is said to be the antidote to ill will.

The Buddha gave lots of advice to his son, Rahula.

One of his teachings was: "Rahula, develop meditation on loving kindness. For when you develop meditation on loving kindness, any ill will will be abandoned." They don't coexist. They simply don't coexist.

So ill will is the far enemy of metta. And as we practice metta—just as we practice vipassana—sometimes you might feel like it's bringing up more ill will. I think it just highlights it, because the ill will starts to seem so abrasive, so out of sync with the metta, with the vipassana, with the acceptance. It's just so much harsher. But we still believe it often, still get caught in it.

And in terms of what I said earlier: Do we really have confidence? Do we really know that the strongest aspect of wisdom, the strong heart, manifests as metta, manifests as compassion? Or do we, as so often people say, "I need my anger. I need my fear. If I'm just full of metta, I won't be able to function. I'll just sit passively by while people walk all over me. How can I protect myself?" These are reasonable questions given the culture we grow up in. That's why we sit and look and see what's really true.

I've told this story often, but I'll tell it again. At a retreat quite some years ago—I think it was with Joseph, up in the mountains of New Mexico—it was specifically for specially invited environmental activists. People who weren't necessarily Buddhist practitioners, and some of them hadn't done much meditation at all. It was a ten-day silent retreat, very intensive, and we were just doing a regular retreat like this. Once a day, just like we do on Tuesdays here, one sitting every day, we would teach the metta practice. And we had discussion groups.

These environmentalists were lawyers and activists, really on the front lines, living very intense lives. Actually, it was billed as a retreat for burned-out environmental activists. They were pretty stressed, I tell you, and working very hard. Very smart people—it was a little intimidating, extremely smart.

So we started teaching the loving kindness. And in one of the groups, about the second or third day, one of the men there said very sincerely, "I'm in the middle of this huge, acrimonious, anger-filled court case. I have to go into court. These other lawyers will stop at nothing. They're angry." He said, "I need my anger. I can't get into this mushy metta, weak stuff. I need my anger."

But he was sincere. He kept on doing the practice anyway. And at the end of those ten days—I don't know what happened after—but at the end of those ten days, he was really so touched. He expressed, "I really see from this time, from working with the vipassana and the metta, I see that that anger was eating me up inside. It's not like I can just have the anger and take it in and throw it at those other lawyers in the courtroom, and then everything's okay. It's coming out at my family. It's eating me up inside. It's making me sick. It's just taking over my life." It was so touching.

But I know he had to walk back into the court case, and then we're surrounded by it again, and our old habits spring up. We know that. We've seen that here in these three weeks. So I'm not saying it's easy—to find in ourselves, over and over and over, the trust that comes from wisdom, from seeing your own experience.

And then we almost make a resolution, an *adhiṭṭhāna*. It's one of the ten paramis, resolution. I'm resolving to choose love when I can. And when I can't, meeting that with metta too. That's also metta.

I was just on the phone with a man who stays in touch once in a while. He's in his late seventies. He's been doing this meditation for years. He's a welder farmer from Kansas—just a very down-home guy, the kind who says, "You know, I can never really do this practice." But he's completely dedicated.

He said to me yesterday, "I've been doing metta practice for the last two years. You told me to do that." I actually don't remember, but anyway, that's good. "You told me to do that, and it's really making a change."

I said, "Well, what change is it making?"

He goes, "Well, you know, when I walk down the street, anyone I see, I really try to send the metta. And if I can do it at that moment, that's great. And if I can't do it at that moment, then that's okay too."

That, I thought, was just a perfect example. Metta outward, metta inward when we can't be perfect. Okay, that's okay too. This is how it is right now. May I be happy.

Ajahn Sumedho has a wonderful way of speaking about metta in terms of the difficult—in terms of scary, frightening, violent, difficult situations. That's when we think, "No, I need my fear, I need my anger. Metta's blind, metta's weak."

Sumedho says: "With metta, one is not blinding oneself with an ideal." And that's where we can often go. You're not blinding yourself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, a thing, a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it.

I just love that. One is witnessing wholeheartedly the unpleasantness in a situation, in a person, in a thing, or in oneself. Just witnessing without creating anything around it. Just space. It's like this. That's Sumedho, the one who always says, "It's like this." That is an aspect of metta.

So this man is walking down the street. He tries, and he can't send metta now. Okay. You don't have to make up a big story. Acceptance, presence, spaciousness—it's like this. Those are aspects of metta.

And so this is especially true, much as Melanie talked about, towards your own internal experience. Pema Chödrön writes about this. There's an interesting transition that occurs naturally and spontaneously. We begin to find that to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves—the willingness to look, to look directly at our own hearts—and to the degree that there is kindness towards ourselves, there is confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world.

The only reason we don't open our hearts and minds to other people is that they trigger confusion in us, that we don't feel brave enough or sane enough to deal with. To the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we can feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes.

Sharon likes to say that to pay attention is to love. And also listening—there's a slogan on public radio from a series where they go around getting people's stories. Their slogan is: "Listening is an act of love." And I think it's James Baldwin who said that an enemy is someone whose story we have not heard.

So with this ill will, in the face of the difficult, of course we do want to be separate from violent people, from people that are harming us, or that we don't like, or that we don't agree with, or who get us upset. The tendency of our mind in that ill will is to create the sense of me and other, to put the other in a box—these bad things they do, these scary things they do—and to just disconnect. That can seem safe. But first, it's not true about them that they're just all this bad thing.

When Bush was president, I couldn't stand to even think of anything good about him. I didn't want to hear anything good. Now, that's not reality. I just wanted to stay in this hostility. I was feeding hostility. That's not so helpful. It keeps me in the prison of hostility and separation. And it's not seeing accurately. It's delusion. Delusion keeps the perception of separation going.

Non-delusion, clear seeing, the mind that's alert and free—it sees well beneath the separation, beneath the box of "that bad thing" we put people in. And it's incredibly powerful.

I want to read two examples, current-day examples that have nothing to do with Buddhism, about the power of this clear seeing that comes from mettā, from loving-kindness. Mettā, far from being blind, actually allows for a clearer seeing of things as they are.

The first example is from Tracy Kidder's book *Strength in What Remains*, about a man named Deo who had escaped from Burundi at the time of the huge genocide in Rwanda and Burundi. Through a whole series of events, he managed to escape as a very young man in medical school, got to New York, and went through years of hell there. It's a great book, actually—really uplifting.

Kidder writes that Deo had spent a lot of time in Manhattan classrooms—he was going to Columbia—thinking about the catastrophic violence in Burundi and Rwanda. He had come to believe that the misery of the people, while not the sole cause of the mayhem, had been a primary cause, a precondition too often neglected by scholars. There was little or no education for most people. Many people had lessons in brutality, toil and deprivation, hunger, disease, and untimely death, including rampant infant mortality. As an example, Deo said, "Almost everyone has got worms. They're there since they were born, and worms will be their friend—intestinal worms—until they die. Can you imagine that kind of life? It's terrible. So how are you going to think right with pain everywhere?"

He continued, "It's been really hard for me to blame the people who have been slaughtering each other, although I do blame people all the time. They were not themselves. They were something else."

Tracy Kidder says his stance is remarkable. How many people in his place would have divided up the world into good guys and bad guys, Hutus and Tutsis, and left it at that? But somehow he had found a way around the self-poisoning of hatred. He kept his

mind flexible. And in that flexibility, you see more clearly. That's an aspect of mettā. It's not just loving—it's seeing deeply, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, and not creating anything extra around it.

The second example is from John Lewis, who was a congressman from Georgia for over twenty years. He was an African-American man who was in the early days with Martin Luther King in the Civil Rights Movement. He was one of the young college students in Nashville in the late 1950s and early 1960s, one of the early Freedom Riders, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and deeply committed to nonviolence—not just "you don't fight back," but nonviolence as a very deep and profound way of life, internally and externally.

This passage is from his autobiography. He was beaten many times when he was on the Freedom Rides. He's not talking theoretically here. This is a man who put himself on the line over and over and over. They trained the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee with a man named Jim Lawson, another African-American who had studied in India and absorbed Gandhian principles.

I want to read this passage from John Lewis, because to me this is mettā. He's talking about suffering—the suffering of being beaten and the suffering of racism and violence.

He writes: "The suffering is nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering. This is a difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence.

"We are talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy.

"This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, can turn a person toward anger and hate."

It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence.

One method of practicing this approach when faced with a hateful, angry, aggressive, even despicable person is to imagine that person—actually visualize him or her—as an infant, as a baby. If you can see this full-grown attacker who faces you as the pure, innocent child that he or she once was, that we all once were, it is not hard to find love, compassion in your heart. It is not hard to find forgiveness.

And this, Jim Lawson taught us, is at the essence of the nonviolent way of life: the capacity to forgive. When you can truly understand and feel, even as a person is cursing you to your face—if you can understand and feel, even in the midst of critical and often physically painful moments, that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his anger and fury—then you are well on your way to the nonviolent life.

This is to me one of the best expressions of the incredible power of a commitment to continue working towards metta, towards compassion. Only wisdom can give us that strength. But there is wisdom, and we can really trust the depth and the power of this force in our heart and mind.

CHAPTER 12

The Factors of Awakening

Guy Armstrong · 1h03

> *In this dharma talk from the 2010 three-month retreat at IMS, Guy Armstrong offers a comprehensive exploration of the seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅga), which the Buddha described as the qualities that lead directly to liberation. Armstrong explains how these factors naturally unfold through meditation practice: mindfulness initiates the sequence, followed by the energizing factors of investigation (dhamma-vicaya), energy (vīriya), and rapture (pīti), which then give way to the calming factors of tranquility (passaddhi), concentration (samādhi), and equanimity (upekkhā).*
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> *Drawing on the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) and teachings from the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Armstrong illuminates how these factors work together, emphasizing the crucial balance between arousing and calming qualities. He illustrates the potential for mental development through inspiring examples, including the Thai teacher Ajahn Jumnian's freedom from anger and the Indian teacher Dīpā Mā's abiding in peace, concentration, and mettā.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing and nurturing these factors in one's own practice. Armstrong explains investigation as intimate attention rather than conceptual analysis, describes the heroic quality of vīriya as both courageous effort and patient persistence, and clarifies how pīti manifests as joyful interest in the meditation object. He emphasizes that these qualities, when brought to maturity, create the conditions for insight and awakening—the mind tuned so closely to the unconditioned that liberation becomes possible.*

At this point in the retreat, we've talked quite a bit about the difficult energies that come into the heart and mind—the hindrances, the roots of the unwholesome, working with difficult emotions. Now we're turning a corner in our discourse and are going to start talking more about the beautiful states of mind. Carol talked last night about the quality of loving kindness, which you've been practicing for a few weeks. Tonight I want to talk about another set of beautiful qualities called the seven factors of awakening.

The reason I want to talk about them now is that I'm hearing them a lot in the interviews and questions. These beautiful qualities, now that you're settled in for three weeks, are really starting to come alive and percolate in you—in everyone I've talked to—and I think they're there in everyone here. It's very helpful to start paying attention to them, recognize them, and know how to nurture them.

There's a story from the Native American tradition that was popular right after September 11th. Many of you may have heard it. A young boy goes to school and has a conflict with a classmate. He feels he's been treated unfairly and comes back in the evening to his home to talk to his grandfather about it. He describes how angry he feels and how he wants some kind of revenge for what happened at school that day.

The grandfather listens and says, "Yes, I know just what you mean. When I think about all the things that have been done—people taking what didn't belong to them and not caring for the people they injured—I can feel very angry and full of hatred and want to take vengeance on them." He said, "It's like there are two wolves inside of me. One wolf is angry and quarrelsome and hateful. But there's another wolf inside of me that is patient, that wants to be kind to everyone regardless of what they've done, and to live in harmony with others. These two wolves often battle inside me, and each one tries to dominate my spirit, each one tries to come out on top."

The young boy asked, "Well, grandfather, which one will win?"

And the old man said, "The one that I feed."

What struck me about this story—and it's a very touching story about spiritual life in general—was the language the old man used, because it's very similar to the language the Buddha used. The Buddha talked many times about how the path is all about starving the hindrances and feeding these factors of awakening. So really the question is, in all of our practice, how do we starve or weaken the afflictive forces in the heart and mind, and how do we strengthen and grow and build up the beautiful qualities?

This work is the work of what's called bhavana, or mental development. I once quoted the French poet Paul Valéry, who in one of his notebooks wrote, "Other people write books, but I am making my mind." In this work of meditation, we are making our minds also, and we can shape them in the direction of these beautiful qualities once we understand how they come about. There are no limits that I know of to the depth of development of these qualities.

A teacher who comes to Spirit Rock often is Ajahn Jumnian, a Thai monk who's now in his sixties and has been visiting for probably the past ten years. In one conversation, Ajahn Jumnian said that he has not had any anger in twenty-five years. That's a nice mind. That's a mind of some accomplishment. The Buddha talked about how through this development, the mind can really become tamed, brought under some kind of control so that the afflictive forces don't torment us any longer.

Another person who was very impressive in this regard, this degree of development, was an Indian teacher named Dipa Ma. Many of you have heard of her, and there's a wonderful book about her life simply called *Dipa Ma* that many women practitioners resonate strongly with because she was such a strong figure as a woman teacher in our tradition.

I had the chance to spend some time with Dipa Ma in the early 1980s and look after her for a month on her first visit to this country. She was accompanied by her grandson, who was about four years old at that time and was a little bit of a whirlwind. We would take them out shopping in the local mall near Amherst. I remember the young boy—his name was Rishi—running down the aisles of the department store, tugging at clothes, clothes falling off in the aisle, hangers falling down, chaos just following him. And then Dipa Ma running after him—she was probably in her sixties at that point—her white robes flapping behind her as she ran down the aisle, but there was always a little smile on her face. She had such great love and patience for her grandson. I thought, if you can be cool shopping in a mall in America, you're a pretty cooled-out yogi.

At one point, Dipa Ma helped teach a three-month course here. Some yogis were spending time with her. Everybody was struck by her presence, her quality of stillness and openness. They asked her, "What is in your mind? What's there? What do you feel?"

She replied, "I only have three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and metta." That was it. And she seemed to abide in that place most of the time. The kind of development that is possible is really unlimited, and people like Dipa Ma show us some of that potential.

The states I want to talk about tonight, the seven factors of awakening, are probably the group that the Buddha talked most about when describing the unfolding of meditation. As the hindrances are the list of difficulties that meditators frequently encounter, these are the list of wholesome qualities that are directly developed through meditation practice. They're ones it's very helpful for us as meditators to understand. Really, I would say these factors become the meditator's best friend. These are the qualities that accompany us on the journey and produce the beautiful outcomes as well as the insights that arise on the path.

So the seven states included in this group are mindfulness, investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. These are the ones I want to talk about tonight. The Buddha said they lead to awakening—therefore they're called factors of awakening. Makes sense. He described them all as maturing in release. That is, when we develop them and bring them to strength, they lead to our release or liberation. That's their destination.

Another quote from the Buddha: "Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too when a practitioner develops and cultivates the seven factors of awakening, he slants, slopes, and inclines to nibbāna"—to the unconditioned, to awakening. These are the factors that lead in that direction.

They can also be understood as the qualities of a mind that is approaching the moment of awakening or enlightenment. As the mind is filled with these factors, as they come into strength, maturity, fulfillment, the way that mind is formed is right next door to the unconditioned, right next door to nibbāna. You might say it's the closest approximation that can be made to that. It's as though we're tuning to or imitating this unconditioned nature. And as the mind gets closer and closer in approximation to it, it can then fall in. That moment of enlightenment or awakening happens because of that proximity.

The Buddha described these factors in a given order because he said one leads to the next leads to the next. So I'll explain them that way, and I think it's helpful to understand them in that developmental line. But they're also nonlinear in the sense that every one of them supports the others, can support the others. So it's not really that we have to strictly start at the first and only then go to the second and only then to the third. They grow all along the path.

In the fourth foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Buddha describes this as one of the important areas of dhammas or principles that the meditator should understand. What he says is we should know these seven factors. We should also know what leads them to arise and how to bring them to fulfillment or real strength. So that's pointing to the basic terrain of knowing the factors, but also being open to their arising and being, let's say, weak in the beginning. Then as the meditation develops, as we learn how to strengthen them, we can grow them up into quite strong forces in the mind.

It's my impression that everyone here has tasted these factors by this point in the retreat to a greater or lesser degree. And in coming to recognize them, they don't have to be built to a very strong level. We can start to get familiar with them just in their first taste. I want to describe them tonight and encourage you to begin to tune into them in your practice. I think they're already there. It's just a matter of looking for them, getting to know them, and then understanding how to develop them further.

The first of the factors in the sequence the Buddha described was mindfulness. Because we've been developing this from the very beginning, it is really the practice of mindfulness that has set the chain going for these other factors. Whether you consciously knew the other factors were developing or not, mindfulness has been the engine that has made them grow already.

The next three factors are what are called arousing. They're qualities that tend to pick energy up. The final three are called calming. They're factors that tend to settle the energy that's been brought up by the first three. Mindfulness starts the chain going, and then mindfulness is also the factor that balances the energizing and the calming sets of the seven factors.

Overall, what this grouping describes is a balance between arousing energy and tranquilizing energy. When we gave simple instructions in the beginning, pointing to a way of being that was both tranquil and alert, that's an expression of this same balance. So you can see this is a really fundamental place we're aiming in our meditation practice—to find this balance where there's enough energy to be alert, awake, sensitive to each moment as it unfolds and changes, but also relaxed, steady, to some extent still, and able to observe clearly. It's the balance of these qualities that make the mind ripe for meditation, ripe for insight, ripe for awakening.

Let's talk about these one by one.

Mindfulness we've talked a lot about already. I don't need to say much about this factor tonight. You've been doing it hour by hour, day by day. It's grown quite strongly in everyone that I've seen, and I suspect in everyone who's here. Sometimes we don't notice it because the growth of mindfulness doesn't mean that the movement of mind stops, but it means that we're much more aware of it when it's happening.

One thing I'm noticing and hearing in the interviews is it's taking less effort to be present than it did at the beginning. This is something you may notice. It's easier, more effortless to be in contact with the present moment. Sometimes it can start to feel like you're not working hard enough. You may question, am I really doing it? Because in the beginning, it takes a lot of effort to connect with the present, not be swept away by thinking. As the mindfulness has gotten stronger, that becomes a little more natural, a little easier to do.

But you can trust that. When that more effortless quality appears, you can use it as an indicator to relax. Trust that awareness will reveal what you need to see.

When mindfulness is present and we start to look at our experience, we tend to get interested in it. We get curious. We notice a level of detail, a level of activity we haven't seen before, and that leads us to pay closer attention. That leads to the second factor, which is the factor of investigation.

Investigation sounds very conceptual, like we should be raising lots of questions, thinking about it, reflecting. But in meditation, that's not the meaning of investigation. Investigation really means: let me draw the attention closer to my experience. It's not that we have to ask a lot or think a lot or wonder a lot. We just have to look. We just have to connect more directly. You might say, feel things more intimately in our experience.

I'll give you a simple example. In experiencing the breath, many people report feeling bored after some time. "Oh, the breath seems so similar. I've been with a hundred breaths in the last hour. It seems like nothing is changing. My attention's drifting off." What do we do? Boredom is often a factor of simply not looking for all the richness that is already there. By looking more closely, we can often refine that interest.

A few simple suggestions for investigation of the breath: Every breath has three parts—a beginning, middle, and end to the in-breath; a beginning, middle, and end to the out-breath. Can you notice those? Try it sometime and see. Can you feel the breath just as it's making itself known? Can you feel that long stretch of the in-breath coming in? Can you feel it fading away? Then how soon do you feel the first touch of an out-breath? Can you be with it through that whole middle portion of exhaling? And then can you feel it fading away to nothing again? If the mindfulness is close to the breath, you'll feel these three parts. And being interested in that will keep your attention there more easily.

Another good way to investigate the breath was an exercise that Sayadaw U Pandita used to assign meditators. His instructions were to follow the breath at the abdomen with the rising and falling—but if you're experiencing it at the nose or the chest, you could also ask the same question. He would mention this in an interview and then ask for a reply later: "Tell me three distinct sensations that you notice in an in-breath. Tell me three distinct sensations you notice in an out-breath."

Often we might think, "Oh, there's just the in-breath." But if we look more closely, we see that within the in-breath there are lots of little sensations coming and going, coming and going, coming and going over the course of that whole breathing in. Over the course of the out-breath, the same thing—lots of little sensations coming, going, coming, going. So he would say, "Tell me three sensations you notice for an in-breath and an out-breath."

When you have to find it and report to a teacher like Sayadaw U Pandita, it brings your interest into the moment. You don't want to walk into the room the next day and say, "I couldn't find anything." So you get very motivated. And then if you were successful, he'd say, "Well, next day tell me something new that you haven't told me before." So you'd get motivated all over again.

This kind of investigation really draws on a quality of what you might call careful attention. In Pali, there's a phrase that the Buddha used over and over again: *yoniso manasikāra*. *Manasikāra* means attention. *Yoniso* is often translated as "wise." The Buddha talked about how to apply attention in ways that got us in trouble, and how to apply attention in ways that led to growth in meditation.

This word *yoniso*, which is often translated as "wise," actually has a meaning of womb-like—like the womb from which babies come. It's beautiful to think about our mindfulness as embodying a womb-like attention, because that has this lovely image of whatever our object is—breath, sound, sensation, emotion—being embraced with mindfulness. It's being surrounded and held and nurtured.

the way that a womb holds and nurtures the baby that's growing in there.

So you get the sense that mindfulness is not this cold, clinical, detached quality of observation, but has a quality that Carol was talking about last night of non-hatred, a quality leaning toward metta. Adosa was the Pali word that she used—non-hatred. And so it suggests a quality of attention that's warm and caring and embracing, a friendly quality.

You can feel this happening really naturally with certain experiences. When you smell a dessert coming out at lunch, the attention sort of goes to the back table in this really embracing way, holding and nourishing the cake or whatever is coming. I was taking a short walk after tea the other night and I heard one honk up in the sky. I looked up, and this flight of about twenty Canadian geese was going overhead in a really well-formed V. This was before the rain started. They were flying through the sky, fairly low, and I could see them all really clearly. When that happened, my attention was just there effortlessly. I wasn't distracted. I didn't want to be anywhere else. Because of that interest, the attention was just there by itself.

So when we can get interested in this experience of mind and body, mindfulness comes really easily. Investigation can really support this quality of interest. We could take another example—investigating an emotion. If we can find a quality of interest in it, the emotion itself may be difficult, but the quality of interest brings in a really positive element. We feel we can learn from this. There's something to be understood

here. Wisdom can grow. Our ability to hold it can grow. And when we bring that positive element in, that positive feeling, there's actually a kind of joy even in being with a difficult emotion.

So take a look and notice if sometimes even being with some of the primary patterns that you find—anxiety or worry or fear or sadness—if being with them and being interested doesn't bring a kind of joy to the experience that helps really keep the attention with that emotion.

Then as we stay with the experience out of this interest, we not only feel the immediate characteristics—with a breath, we feel all the little sensations that are coming and going, the flutters, the pressure, the relaxation or expansion; with an emotion, we feel its quality of joy as different from a quality of contentment, different from a quality of anxiety—we feel those particulars. But also as we stay, we start to see some of the universals.

All the little sensations that are coming and going with the breath—we start to see there's nothing solid there. It's always changing. Breath really shows impermanence when we look closely. There's not just one sensation. All sensations come and go. We can see impermanence with emotion too. None of them last. And we can start to investigate how this quality that we call fear is probably in all of us. The quality we call happiness is there in all of us. It's not mine or yours. It's part of nature. It's part of human nature.

So we start to get under this idea of self. It's not about me. It's not about you. It's part of human nature. And we take a little bit of the ownership, a little bit of the I, me, mine away from that experience. This comes naturally out of the interest in investigating combined with mindfulness.

The other thing that's powerful about investigation is that it's a direct expression of the wisdom nature of our mind. The practice that we're doing, called Insight Meditation, really relies in the end on developing wisdom and understanding. But sometimes it's hard to know how we foster that. Of all the factors available for us to directly strengthen, investigation is one that really draws out this wisdom element. Investigation expresses: I want to see, I want to understand, I want to know. So we're activating that wisdom quality really directly.

Now, as we become more interested, as we launch this investigation, we move into the third factor, which is the factor of energy. The Pali word here is viriya, sometimes translated as energy, sometimes as effort, sometimes as energetic effort—because translators couldn't decide, so they jammed them together.

And I'll just say a few more words that are sometimes associated with this term, to give you a sense of its meaning: strength, courage, ardor—or my current favorite, enthusiasm. For me, virya is about what quality of enthusiasm we bring to our practice. This enthusiasm relies on interest and investigation; it's triggered by those factors, conditioned by them.

Virya refers to energy in both body and mind, but it's a specific kind of energy—an enthusiasm that's directed toward the path, toward the work we're doing here. The Buddha's description captures this well: "Energy is aroused for the abandoning of unwholesome states and the development of wholesome states. One is strong, firm, not shirking from the responsibility of cultivating wholesome states." There you get a feeling for where the quality of courage comes in. The word "vira," the root of virya, means hero in Pali. So this quality has a heroic dimension about it.

And you all manifest this day by day. I'm touched by this every time in interviews. We know it's not easy doing the discipline you're doing—having left your homes, sitting, walking, being present, sitting still moment after moment after moment. It takes a lot of resolve to keep coming back and greeting the present moment. It's not always pleasant, not always easy. Each of you is carrying out a kind of heroic undertaking in your willingness to be here. That's the expression of the courageous quality inherent in virya.

Of course, it comes out of our motivation, our aspiration, and our understanding of what we need to do to carry out the practice. You can see this in any walk of life. People who want to reach a difficult goal carry out this quality of courageous effort again and again.

When I look for analogies, I often turn to professional athletes, where this quality is very clear. My particular sport addiction is tennis—I like to play, follow it, and watch. The level of physical conditioning in the world of tennis has gone way up in the last ten years. You have people like Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, these amazing athletes who can run around a court for five hours or longer and still look fresh. You hardly ever see Federer even sweat. Nadal is working hard, but he can do it all day long. They're really incredible, incredibly well conditioned.

I remember when I was following Andre Agassi, who retired a number of years ago, I read about his training regimen. He had a very tough workout coach who would lead him on runs in the hills around Las Vegas, where Agassi lives. It's a desert, as you probably know, and it gets really hot most of the year. He would be pushed to sprint up these

hills until he got so tired that he was throwing up. And when he reached that point, the trainer said, "Okay, that's enough for today. You can go back down." That's the extent to which he worked to achieve his goal of conditioning.

In another realm—the one I'm most in awe of—are professional bike riders. Every year I like to follow the Tour de France when it happens, in July and a little into August. I think those are the most amazing athletes on the face of the planet. They go for most of a month, going full out day after day after day. How they get the energy to climb back on the bike the next day and do it again, going up thousands of meters on really steep grades, racing other people who are in the best physical shape imaginable—it's just amazing.

I followed Lance Armstrong for a number of years when he won the Tour seven times. He made a comment: "Yeah, I do well in this sport because I have a high tolerance for pain. Basically, when I go out and race, I know that I'm just going to be setting myself up for eight hours of continuous physical pain. That's what happens when I get on a bike." That's a lot of determination. That's a lot of courage. And in the training for that, there's a lot of hours of pain too.

Now, these people are going for fame and fortune. We're going for the end of suffering. But actually, I think our effort is not inferior to theirs. The effort you all put in on a course like this is similar to that of world-class athletes.

And by the way, every day when I would come in for an interview with Joseph and Sharon, they would ask me how many hours I slept. So I couldn't get off the hook easily.

After a lot of sleepy sittings and sleepy walkings and sleepy standings, I managed to get my sleep down to four hours. And the rest of the day, I was awake and practicing that noting practice for the other twenty. It was probably as hard as I've ever worked in a meditation retreat, and I learned a tremendous amount from doing it. I look back on that period—fortunately it's looking back now; I was younger then—and I learned things there that I don't know if I could have learned any other way. So I'm really grateful that I had demanding teachers at that time and that I practiced in that style. There were a lot of great lessons.

And the continuity of that many hours of wakefulness and that steady noting was as fine as I've ever experienced in my life. That was really the fruit. The moment-to-moment continuity of mindfulness was just superb from that.

So that's kind of the courageous side, the extending side, the going-to-the-limit side of this kind of effort, of virya. But there's another way to understand virya that doesn't rely so much on that courage element, and that is the quality of just persisting.

Bhikkhu Bodhi said in one of his books on the Eightfold Path that there are only two things required for you to reach liberation. One is that you start, and the second is that you continue. He said if you do those two things, the outcome is guaranteed. That's the quality of persistence. Just keep going.

This quality was expressed in a story from the Tibetan tradition. There's a great yogi named Milarepa who was practicing, I think, in the eleventh century. He lived most of his practice career in a cave, lived very simply, always dressed in just a thin white cloth, and sustained himself through the winters by the practice of inner heat, the yoga of inner heat. He trained some great disciples, two in particular: Gampopa and Rechungpa.

The story goes that Milarepa was saying goodbye to Gampopa, who was a great disciple and later founded other schools in that lineage. Gampopa had been studying with Milarepa for quite some time, receiving lots of teachings and transmissions and secret instructions and pith instructions. He was about to go off on his own, find his own cave, and practice for quite an extended period.

The student, very sorry to leave the teacher but knowing it was time to carry on his own practice, came to see Milarepa to say goodbye. He bowed to him, said his farewell, and started off down the path. Then Milarepa called him back. He said, "There's one more teaching I have to give you. This is really the secret to everything I've achieved through meditation."

To give this teaching, Milarepa turned around so his back was toward Gampopa, then flipped up the hem of his white skirt, leaned over, and showed Gampopa his buttocks, which were calloused—it said—as hard as the hoof of a camel. Milarepa said, "This is really the key to my success. Sitting on my backside is what has made my meditation successful, and this is the kind of perseverance you need to do also, Gampopa."

It's said Gampopa took that advice, practiced very hard, and became himself a great teacher with many disciples and schools.

Another teacher, a modern teacher, Sayadaw U Tejaniya from Burma, also expresses this quality of perseverance in a very lovely way. He says, "Right effort means to keep reminding yourself to be aware. Right effort is persistent effort. It is not energy used to focus hard on something. It is effort which is simply directed at remaining aware. It is not difficult to be aware or mindful. It is difficult to maintain it continuously. For this, you need right effort, which is simply perseverance."

So again, just this steadiness of application—it's not hard to be aware. Can you feel your seat sitting on the chair right now? That's not hard. But it's hard to do it moment after moment after moment. And that's what Sayadaw U Tejaniya is pointing to: a relaxed effort, but very persistent.

When there's this kind of energy in practice, an interest in what we're doing, the mind becomes alert and bright and present. That then leads into the next quality of the seven, which is called rapture. Rapture is a bit of an exaggeration as a word. When I think of rapture, I think of somebody almost unconscious in a state of ecstasy. That's too much. A better translation, I think, is something like joyful interest or rapt attention.

The quality of rapture—the word in Pali is pīti—is really this quality of being bright, alert, energetic, and connected to the present moment. And you start to find within that connection, whatever the focus—breath, body, sensation, sounds—you start to find a happiness in that. It's really a wonderful moment in meditation when you find you like your object.

It might be the breath, it might be sounds, but there's a sense in coming into contact with the object that it's pleasant to be there. There's a happiness in being with the object itself.

In the beginning, it just seems like work, and the object doesn't seem that exciting. It's certainly not delightful. But as this quality of present-moment interest and attention grows, it takes on a pleasant quality. Then it becomes easier to stay connected because of the enjoyment of it.

There's a teacher in Australia who lives in Sky's hometown of Perth—a Western monk named Ajahn Brahm who teaches a lot on the qualities of the breath for strong concentration. It's his central interest and his central teaching. The way he encourages people to make a really close connection with the breath is to see it as beautiful. Because if you can see the breath as beautiful, you'll naturally want to be there—just like seeing a flock of geese, just like watching a sunset, just like seeing the face of a child. So finding this quality of delight or joy in relation to the meditation object is the next factor of awakening. It's a mental factor because it comes out of the mind's relationship to the object, but it's said to express itself physically, in varying degrees.

Often when people reach this stage, there's a kind of release or opening to energy in the body. This energy can be experienced, classically, in five different ways. It can be minor—just a kind of trembling on the surface of the skin. It can be what's called momentary—a rush of energy like a bolt of lightning. There's a showering kind of energy where waves pass through the body, one wave arising and passing away, and later per-

haps another wave. There's an uplifting kind of energy where the body starts to feel really light—you could sit for a long time on the cushion because of this lightness, and sometimes you feel you could almost float off the cushion. It's said that this uplifting quality of piti is what allows yogis to develop the ability to levitate. Remember those old stories about the Maharishi teaching levitation somewhere in Indiana? I recently met someone who had been on those retreats, and she said people actually were kind of bouncing across the room, based on the development of this factor of piti expressing itself through the body lifting. This is described in the Buddhist texts as well. And the fifth kind of rapture is said to be all-pervading, where it's felt throughout the body.

Mostly this energy is experienced as pleasant because it arises from a happy relationship with the meditation object. But as the factor develops more strongly, the bodily energy becomes more intense, and it can become unpleasant. The energy can grow strong enough that it's no longer felt as pleasant—it can feel a little too intense, or at times even overwhelming. This doesn't mean the meditation has gone wrong or that anything bad is happening. Generally, one just needs to open and accommodate this slightly too-strong energy. As the meditation deepens, it tends to smooth out, but sometimes it's a little unpleasant at this stage.

Piti is one of the factors connected with the strengthening of concentration. It has a quality of happiness and is often paired with the word sukha, which also means happiness. Together, the enjoyment of the object and the growth of this quality of sukha—pleasure or contentment—begin to lead into the second half of the factors, which are the calming factors.

So the fifth factor that appears is calm, or tranquility. The way it comes about is this: as more happiness arises through this bright energy connecting with the object, finding that delight, a certain satisfaction emerges just based on the meditation—not based on having a particular experience or anything special, but simply in ordinary meditation. The mind starts to become contented. And because there's a quality of contentment, the mind is no longer tending to go out so much through desire, restlessness, aversion, and so on. This leads to a sense of the mind settling within itself, finding its contentment within its own operation. That settling is felt as a calming of mind and body. It's as though the mind starts to settle within the body itself.

This is often a new discovery in the meditation process. This unfolding of calm doesn't happen so often in daily life, and it's a new experience within meditation—after often a lot of active thoughts, restlessness, and other hindrances. As this calm develops,

thoughts are no longer so frequently assaulting us, hindrances are no longer so generally plaguing us. And because there's a sense of calm and the body can relax, there's usually less pain in the body as well.

It's as though you come in on a stormy ocean—the waters of the hindrances and thoughts and bodily discomfort and restlessness, quite turbulent. And then, maybe just for short periods, maybe just for five or ten minutes, another space opens up. You feel like you've floated into a really calm harbor somewhere, out of the storms of the sea into this calm space. It may not last very long, but it's a really different kind of experience.

Emily Dickinson has a poem that expresses this movement, this discovery. It's a section from a poem called "Wild Nights":

Futile the winds to a heart in port.
Done with the compass, done with the chart.

Rowing in Eden. That's kind of what it feels like. It feels like you've come upon this blissful lake for a while. Maybe short, but you've touched it.

At this stage, one can start to open to a different approach to meditation, which is a sense of resting. One has opened to, discovered, unfolded a new quality that has a sense of stillness and rest in it.

Ajahn Amaro is a monk who used to live in Northern California and is now the abbot of Amaravati in England. He likes to give this as a meditation instruction, and it goes something like this: Rest in the natural peace and ease of mind and body that is present, and pay attention to that. But if something comes to disturb that peace, then pay attention to that.

That's a lovely thing to be able to do, and you can take it as an encouragement, as an instruction, anytime you'd like. Joseph gave that instruction early on in working with the breath: As I breathe in, I tranquilize the bodily formation. I tranquilize the mental formation. As I breathe out, I tranquilize the bodily and mental formations. So we can make this quality of calm more accessible by suggesting it to ourselves.

Sometimes when this quality of calm comes, it seems like it's kind of snuck up on us, and we may not recognize it. One meditator said that her first note was calm. Like, is this what they're talking about? She couldn't quite recognize it when it first came. Because it's a subtle state, it can slip under the radar, and often people will come into interviews and say, "You know, I had really interesting things going on a few days ago. I was working with this pain in my chest and it was really opening. And there were a lot

of thoughts. I learned a lot about a relationship that I had in the past. But all that stuff—there's nothing happening now." And often we overlook the fact that what's happening now is this quality of calm.

The Buddha said the state of peace was really a pretty good state. But we often don't see it because it doesn't have the drama of the hindrances or a lot of thoughts. So it's important to notice it and appreciate it. It really opens the doors to a new movement in meditation. It's the foundation for a lot of inner contentment and inner peace.

It then sets the stage for the unfolding of the next factor, which is the quality of concentration. As the mind settles within itself and it's not sending itself out in desire for the future or regret about the past, its natural energy starts to collect. When the natural energy of the mind comes together and is unified, you discover that the mind is naturally strong. Its very nature is strength, and that strength is felt as stability—or you could say stillness.

So whereas calm might be kind of a momentary and easily disturbed state, as it grows further into concentration, there's a sense that concentration has a power. It has a power to be unmoved, unshaken by some of the normal comings and goings.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to come and teach at Spirit Rock before we built our retreat facility. We had a big open hillside that was kind of like an amphitheater, and we built a platform for him at the bottom of it. About a thousand people or more—maybe fifteen hundred people—could sit on the hillside and listen to his teachings. We would have him come for a daylong event.

It was amazing to be in his presence. His voice, of course, was amplified, but we could see him across the hill. He was so still in his body and in his speech that he just transmitted this quality of concentration all across the fifteen hundred people who were watching. It was like a samādhi engine that was generating and filling the whole space. And over the day that he taught, you could just feel everybody settle, settle, settle.

Concentration has this strong quality where you feel really grounded in the present moment. Even if thoughts come, they're seen in the present moment. It doesn't feel like they're going to knock you off your mindfulness. This is a very satisfying feeling also. The mind being stable is a great relief—not being swayed so much by the hindrances, by past and future.

The Dalai Lama put it this way: Inner peace is the key. If you have inner peace, the external problems do not affect your deep sense of peace and tranquility.

Concentration is a significant component of inner peace. This factor of mental stability also prepares the mind for insight. When things become still, we can see clearly what's happening. In this place of peace and stillness, when an insight comes, it goes deep. Concentration is a beautiful ground for understanding.

Someone might say something to us in daily life like, "Body sensations are always changing," and we think, "Oh yes, I've heard that before." But when you're in a concentrated place and you look everywhere in the body and see that every body sensation is changing, it affects your view of the body forever. It goes deep and transforms your relationship to life.

One of the things that happens in concentration is that pleasant and unpleasant experiences don't have as much impact on the mind. Someone mentioned this in an interview recently. They said they were sitting, concentrated, and felt a strong sensation in the leg that normally they would have identified as pain. From the stable attention of concentration, they looked at it more closely. In that closer look, they couldn't actually see pain there. All they saw was a strong sensation that really had the quality of neutrality—intense, but basically neutral.

This happens out of concentration. The pleasant and unpleasant things that come to us don't shake the mind so much, don't move us so much.

And this leads to the last of the factors of awakening, which is called equanimity. Equanimity is a state where we're not so thrown by the changing factors of pleasure and pain, and this gives the mind a lovely balance. You could call it balance, spaciousness, or an openness that can include many different things without being thrown off our centeredness.

In English, sometimes we hear this word equanimity and think it means unfeeling, but it's not like that. When the mind has this quality of balance and space and openness, the beautiful qualities of heart can actually be felt more directly and more strongly. The strength of equanimity makes us much more open to loving-kindness, to compassion, and to joy. It doesn't become a colder place as equanimity develops—it becomes a warmer place. We have the strength to open, to feel those qualities.

So mindfulness starts the unfolding. The first set of factors are energizing. Then as happiness develops out of the energy, the mind moves into a settled state within itself that leads to the calm, concentration, and strength that grows into equanimity.

As you meditate, start to notice when these different factors are arising. They may not last for a long time at first—they're all impermanent. When they come together well, that's a kind of peak experience. It's not something that's going to happen every

sitting. But start to look for the balance. Look for the quality of presence or mindfulness, the factor of energy that makes for alertness, brightness, and interest, and the factor of steadiness or calm.

Particularly keep an eye on the relationship between the energizing factors and the calming factors. It's this balance that is most important for keeping the mind in the sweet spot of meditation.

If the energizing factors are too high, you'll feel a lot of bodily energy and restlessness, and many thoughts may dart around taking you into past and future. The counterpoint then is to bring up the calming factors—perhaps return to a primary object like the breath, work with spacious awareness on sounds, consciously relax the body.

On the other hand, if the calming factors get too strong and the energizing factors are low, this leads to the state we call sinking mind. It can be very comfortable, very pleasant—you get a little bit drowsy, you could sit for hours—but the brightness of insight is not happening. This needs the arising of the energizing factors. You can accomplish that by bringing up energy directly, the antidote to sleepiness, or by doing steady noting on changing objects. This will wake up the alert, interested wisdom faculty of mind.

When these factors come together and into balance, we are in the place where we can open to insight, open eventually to awakening.

I'll close with these two quotes from the Buddha:

"Bhikkhus, these seven factors of awakening, when developed and cultivated, lead to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nibbana. They are noble and emancipating. They lead the one who acts upon them to the complete destruction of suffering."

And from the Anguttara Nikaya: "Whoever has been liberated, is liberated, or will be liberated in the future—all will do so by overcoming the five hindrances that stain the mind, by firmly establishing the minds in the four foundations of mindfulness, and by cultivating the seven factors of awakening in their true nature."

Let's sit together for a moment.

CHAPTER 13

Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this profound talk, Guy Armstrong examines the journey from suffering to freedom through the lens of 'unentangled knowing,' a phrase from the Thai lay teacher Upasikā Kī. He explores the central links of paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination)—contact, feeling (vedanā), craving (taṇhā), and clinging (upādāna)—revealing how bondage arises and where liberation becomes possible.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that freedom is not merely a distant goal but accessible in every moment when mindfulness is strong enough to rest in the gap between feeling and craving. Drawing from the Saṃyutta Nikāya's question about 'the tangle inside and outside,' he shows how sīla, samādhi, and paññā work together to disentangle the conditioned mind. The talk includes Ajahn Chah's teachings on the unconditioned mind and the Buddha's instruction to Rāhula on developing meditation 'like space.'*
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> *Three practical approaches are offered: checking the attitude for greed, aversion, and delusion (following Sayadaw U Tejaniya's method); becoming aware of awareness itself; and recognizing the empty, boundless nature of mind. These practices help shift attention from objects to the knowing quality of consciousness, allowing practitioners to unhook from habitual grasping and touch the deathless—that place of non-becoming where no new self takes birth.*

The spiritual life is about making a journey from a state which is subject to suffering to a state that is free and beyond the reach of suffering.

There are many different words that describe the bare reality of this suffering state. Sometimes it's called bondage. Sometimes it's referred to as states of clinging, grasping, attachment, or the generic overall term of samsara—wandering on through realms of being. This word samsara gives a sense of how deeply conditioned are the habits of mind that keep us in a state of suffering. It indicates how daunting a task this may be.

And then there are many words that describe the awakened state: awakening, enlightenment, freedom, release, liberation, emancipation, nibbana or nirvana in Sanskrit. Our path is to take the journey from a state of suffering to a state of freedom.

In this talk I want to explore what the path is and also offer some reflections on this quality of freedom. The subject is unentangled knowing.

This phrase comes from the Thai woman teacher Upasika Kee, a lay woman who taught from the 1950s through the 1970s. She has a book that I highly recommend called *Pure and Simple*, which is a collection of her Dhamma talks. She was always very good at pointing to the heart of practice, turning her listeners back into the very central focus of the teachings and of liberation. This phrase, unentangled knowing, was one that she used, appearing in a short little verse: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning, cast aside." We'll come back to this and touch it again.

For those of you who are not native speakers of English, this word *unentangled* is rare. To explain it a little: a tangle often refers to a ball of string or thread or yarn that's gotten all jumbled up, and when you try to pull it apart it just falls into knots. *Entangle* is the verb that describes that condition. *Unentangle* means to unthread or take apart the tangled bits that have all gotten jammed up together.

This word *tangle* is one the Buddha often used in describing our state of affairs, our state of mind. He said, for example, "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." The idea is that our desires go in so many different and contradictory directions that they form a tangle in the world and in our mind.

There is a lovely little question from the Samyutta Nikaya. Someone has come to the Buddha and asked: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside—this generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

That's really us, isn't it? We are at work disentangling this tangle—the inner tangle through the work of purifying our hearts and minds. And that gives us the understanding to know how the outer tangle has been created. The Buddha's reply was essentially that it was the one who developed sila-samadhi-paññña—conduct, meditation, and wisdom—who disentangled the tangle.

In Upasika Kee's language, unentangled knowing refers to a quality of mindfulness that doesn't get caught up in reactive formations to the experiences of the world that we contact, both outer experiences and inner experiences. It's a mindfulness that is fully present, fully aware, but is not caught up in or bound by the arisings.

We are all dropping into this state very often throughout the day in meditation practice. This is happening for us frequently at this point in the retreat. We may not yet have taken the time to notice it. I want to emphasize this quality of mind, encourage you to start noticing when it's arising in your practice, and especially to notice and feel the element of freedom that's there.

Sometimes when the mind is in these free states—and we know they're temporary—we don't take the time or effort to notice the quality of freedom. If we start to notice it, it can really enrich our practice, motivate our practice, and bring a lot of interest and appreciation.

This is already happening with all the meditations you've been doing—meditations on breath, sounds, body, thoughts, emotions. Continue as you're doing, and notice the freedom that comes. I also want to talk later about three approaches to practice, slightly different from one another, that you might say focus on this unentangled knowing as their central feature.

But before we go into that, I want to talk a little about how bondage happens, because we can't really understand freedom fully until we know how we get caught, how we get bound. The Buddha's central teachings are all about this question of how bondage happens and how release happens. There will be a talk later on the Four Noble Truths, one of the central pointings. There's another teaching where the Buddha went into more detail, called the Chain of Dependent Arising or Dependent Origination. There are twelve links to that chain; it could be a whole talk in itself. We're going to drop off the boring parts—you start in on those twelve links and people start falling asleep in the back. We're not going to go to the first four or the last four links. We're going to zero in on the central four links of the chain because they're very experiential. This is really where the heart of the question lies.

Before we get into that, let me pose a question: what is our basic situation as human beings? Whether we're meditators or people out in the world, what's the basic reality of life for all of us?

Because there's a reality we all share. We're going to die. That's in the future somewhere. But what about here and now? What's our basic situation?

Things are how they are. And what are those things? Sometimes there's struggle, but not always. There's dukkha. There's food—yes, food is a good one. The sense doors.

Our basic situation is that experiences keep happening to us at the six sense doors, don't they? All the time. Whether you're enlightened or not enlightened, whether you're a meditator or a layperson, wherever you live in the world—as long as your six senses are uninjured, these things keep unfolding for us.

The Buddha gave one discourse that pointed directly at this, called the Sutta on Totality. He said, "Listen, monks, and I will explain to you the totality of life." He was not one given to modest pronouncements. And he said, "It is simply this: the eye and sights, the

ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. This is the totality of life. Anyone who would describe a totality beyond this would not know what they were talking about."

So we've said a few times—I think Joseph has said it—there are only ever six things happening, and these are the six: the objects of the six sense doors. Can you turn those off at will? No. When we fall asleep we lose touch with them, but a loud sound in the middle of the night will wake us up, so there's some thread of consciousness still hanging out there, alert, able to be contacted. But basically these six things, as long as we're awake and our senses are functioning, are coming to us all the time. They're impinging on us. They are contacting us.

These elements are known in the Buddha's teaching, and in this chain of dependent arising, as contact. There are six types of contact: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. This is where we'll pick up this thread of dependent arising.

We're constantly receiving these contacts. They are mixed in terms of their pleasure or pain—some are pleasant, some are painful, some are neither. That's the quality of feeling tone. Every contact has associated with it a feeling tone, or vedanā, and that's the next link in the chain of dependent arising.

This is a very important point. Why is the feeling tone so important? It's based on the feeling tone that desire and aversion arise. The pleasant feeling tone often gives rise to wanting. The unpleasant feeling tone often gives rise to aversion. The neutral feeling tone often conditions delusion—like, "That's not important. That doesn't have enough charge to interest me, so I won't pay attention to that."

The feeling tone is often the ground for the arising of these reactive formations of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion.

Taken all together, greed, aversion, and delusion constitute the form—or you might say the outer expression—of craving. The Pali word is *tanha*, and its literal meaning is thirst. This is the wanting that comes in again and again and again. We want the pleasant. We want not to experience the unpleasant. We don't care about the neutral.

So craving is the next link in the chain, and it refers to the reactive relationship to contacts based on their feeling tone. Then the link that follows on from craving—and this is inevitable—is clinging. Once there is craving, it just takes a little bit longer for it to move into clinging. When we notice a pleasant contact that the mind is reacting toward with wanting, the mind will go out and take hold of it. And in that taking hold, it makes an object of it. It makes a thing of it.

Say you have an experience of a very peaceful sitting and there's a blissful state in the body. At some point, the mind is going to notice that bliss and like it and take hold of it and dwell on it with thought a little bit. We take the pleasant and we turn it into some kind of object.

So this is the heart of the chain: There's contact at a sense door. It has a feeling tone. Based on that, craving is stirred up—we react with liking or disliking. And then some form of taking hold happens, called grasping or clinging. Although we use the term craving here, which is a desire synonym, actually craving as used here includes both the force of greed and the force of aversion. They're really two sides of a coin, because when we're averse to something, we say, "I don't want that," and what we're also saying is, "I want something else instead." Craving includes them both.

Once we've gone into clinging, suffering is inevitable. That's where the chain goes—from craving to clinging, it leads on to some kind of suffering. Why is that? It's really because in the taking hold of something, we form a new self. A new "I" is born in that taking hold. And wherever there's birth, there will be death. It's a momentary birth and it will be a momentary death, but there is birth and death.

Why is that necessarily suffering? Either it's a pleasant birth and then the death is unpleasant, or it's an unpleasant birth and the life is unpleasant. Let me give you some examples.

Many of you were on eight precepts today. I don't know if you wandered through the dining room at tea time, but there was—I hate to tell you, I probably shouldn't even mention it—there was a really good soup at tea tonight. And if you walked close to the table, you'd probably smell it. It was sweet potato and black bean. It was really delicious.

If craving is arising now, you can notice the contact, feeling, craving, clinging. But perhaps it arose at tea time. You walk in, you're a little hungry because you're on eight precepts. There's a quart of juice over in the corner, but it doesn't really compare to black bean and sweet potato. So you walk by and you get a sniff of that, and you think, "Wow, that really smells good." It's pleasant contact. Desire comes up. You start to think, "I've been hungry since about four o'clock this afternoon. That would really be filling. It's been a little chilly outside. That would be so warming." And you dwell on it a little more, and all of a sudden you notice you have clung.

In that clinging, we have taken birth—maybe as a hungry yogi, maybe as a hungry ghost. But we've taken birth in that form, which is being unsatisfied. We want something that we can't have. So in that, the life of the hungry yogi is a little unhappy. It may

not be big unhappy, but it's a little unhappy. Then a while later, you walk on, you go to some other part of the building, you forget the smell, the craving goes away, and your mind is back in balance.

This balanced state is what Upasika Kee calls "normal." It's kind of a funny use of the word because it's not normal in the world. But in Dhamma terms, this is what she calls a normal mind—a balanced mind that's not caught up in desire or aversion.

So that was a slightly suffering life. But let's take the time that you come in and there's a really good sitting. You notice the concentration is really present. You're effortlessly in the present moment. Hindrances are not arising because the mindfulness is strong. There's a sense of being relaxed, comfortable, and at ease in your body. You're noticing very clearly moment after moment. You get up to walk and you think, "That was a really good sitting. I'm going to tell the teacher about that."

At this point, there's been a taking hold of the beautiful qualities of the meditation—the concentration, the stillness, the ease—and owning them in some way. That is a happy birth.

But by the time you walk and come back in to sit again, it could well change. Sometimes after sitting like that, we rush back into the hall. "I can't wait to sit again." And then we come and sit. The body's uncomfortable, there are a lot of thoughts, a lot of emotions. Where did my concentration go? And then there's the pain of the death of that happy birth.

When we hold on to things, we get born as a kind of self. And we either have a painful life and maybe a happy death, or we have a happy life and a painful death. Clinging leads to suffering, as the chain of dependent arising shows.

Normally, in the untrained person in the world, the mind knows nothing but clinging. It is just in this habitual state of reacting to feeling tone again and again, clinging to one thing until that gets uninteresting, and then clinging to the next. It's like a monkey swinging through the forest—it won't let go of one vine until it sees where it's going to take hold of the next. That's the normal state of human mind. This is not a commentary on anyone. It's just our heritage, the way we have been conditioned.

But a meditator has another possibility. And this is really the whole purpose of our practice. We can let go and not take up anything else, not cling to anything else. As you know, that's not easy. When Skye talked about letting go, she really outlined how hard that is to do. Ajahn Chah said something like eighty percent of the spiritual life is knowing that you're holding on and not being able to let go. And that lines up pretty well with my experience in meditation. It's often what happens.

But sometimes we do know how to let go, and there's no new clinging that begins. This is where we can find that element of freedom here and now.

Often we start to think about the journey, the path, as being very long, and frequently it's described as freedom only at the end of a very, very long period of work—one lifetime or many lifetimes. We sometimes forget that we can experience strong aspects of this freedom in the here and now. When we find that possibility, it can really energize our practice because the fruit doesn't have to wait for many years. The fruit can be seen here and now. It strengthens faith, it strengthens motivation, it strengthens the conviction that the path is working for us. So it's very helpful to start noticing when these moments come.

What we're talking about doing is breaking the chain of dependent origination that leads from contact up to suffering. We have contact, feeling—does there have to be craving? If there's a pleasant feeling at a sense door, does there have to be greed? If there's an unpleasant feeling, does there have to be aversion? No.

When the mind is with the object and mindfulness is strong enough, we don't have to move into a reactive formation, even though that feeling tone may be there strongly. This is where we find freedom in the chain, and this is what keeps us from moving on to suffering.

So more and more, our meditation becomes about opening to the pleasant, opening to the unpleasant, but not reacting from greed or aversion. In worldly life, in normal life, the greed and aversion formations are usually accompanied by delusion, because we don't see what we're doing. That reaction is so instinctive that it's not seen and it's not questioned. In meditation, however, we also see clearly. There is no greed, there is no aversion, and so there is no delusion in that moment. In the moment of no greed, no aversion, and no delusion—clear seeing—that's a description of a mind that's free. Temporarily, yes, but free.

So it's very helpful to start looking into the mind at this place in between feeling and before there's any craving, to feel what that feels like and become familiar with it, because more and more that's where you find your sweet spot in meditation. One teacher said that the whole of the Buddhist path is about resting in the gap between feeling and craving. This is available at any moment. It doesn't depend on special conditions. It depends on your mindfulness being strong, but anytime your mindfulness is strong, that is a possibility—to rest between feeling and craving. And that resting is a place of some freedom.

Really what we're talking about is finding a place in that gap that's not determined by conditioned things. The impact of the six sense doors is conditioned, sometimes completely out of our control. We're all receiving pleasant and unpleasant contact alternately, but our response can be unaffected by the conditioned things around us. Ajahn Chah called that an aspect of the unconditioned mind—the mind that is not bound by external conditions.

I'd like to read a little bit from Ajahn Chah on this. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it because there's a lovely expression here:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable—material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, liked and disliked. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things in terms of self is the source of happiness, suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind. Not knowing these things, the mind doesn't see the Dhamma. Not seeing the Dhamma, the mind is full of clinging. As long as the mind is held down by clinging, there can be no escape from the conditioned world. As long as there is no escape, there is confusion, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This kind of mind is called the conditioned mind. The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are—as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

So we have that possibility of realizing the Dhamma in relationship to the changing conditioned things at the six sense doors. What is it like resting in that gap? You could say that resting in that gap means we're not taking birth. Not taking birth, we're not subject to death in this moment-to-moment kind of living and dying. This is described as a place where we're not turning into a new self or a new "I."

In the Sutta-Nipata, there's a chapter where a number of Brahmin youths all came to visit the Buddha, and each youth asked their own questions. One of them was a youth named Todeyya. He asked: for one who is freed, what is that liberation like? Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What does it feel like to be you, to have your mind, to have that freedom?

The Buddha said: "The sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." Becoming is this process of taking birth again as a new self. The sage has nothing and is unentangled in becoming. That means he hasn't taken ownership at the six sense doors.

Ajahn Chah put this non-becoming in terms of a hall where he was giving a talk—probably an open-air sala in Thailand that had basically a roof, a floor, and pillars, but open walls. He said: when you look at this hall, the roof is a becoming. Something has taken birth there. You could take a stand there. The floor is a becoming—something constructed where you could take a stand. But the space in between the floor and the roof? You couldn't take a stand there. There's no becoming there. And that's what's called emptiness. He said, to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness—that is the state of resting.

between feeling and craving, where a new self is not being born, Ajahn Chah says, is this place of peace, this deathless place, uncreated, unbecome. It's deathless because no birth is taking place. No birth means no death will take place.

And it's always available. It's not that special conditions are needed for it. It's always potential for us. The Buddha made an interesting comment about the deathless in another sutta from the Samyutta Nikaya. He said that our path, the path that we're walking, has the deathless as its ground, its destination, and its final goal.

When you think about that, the path that we're walking is going from suffering or bondage toward freedom. So does the path partake of bondage or freedom? Here, the Buddha is saying that the path has the deathless, freedom, as its ground. The path is founded upon the deathless. The path is built upon the goal.

In another sutta in the Anguttara, the Buddha says that merging in the deathless are all things. All things are being supported, held by this deathless state. So this becomes quite an interesting point. The mind that is balanced between feeling and craving, that does not fall into craving even though there's feeling, is residing in this place of deathlessness, of not taking birth, and that is the path.

It becomes very interesting. Not only is it immediately, inherently free, but that furthers the freedom, that grows the freedom. The path keeps unfolding, keeps uncovering more and more of this freedom as we rest there.

Something that's happening when we make that shift is we are no longer staking our happiness on objects. We've given up clinging. We've given up trying to find a lasting happiness through the six sense doors. And something that helps this shift is that we turn from a main concern with objects to a greater concern with the subject.

I want to talk in the second half of this talk about three approaches to our meditation that are based on this shift from focusing on objects to starting to take into account the subject. It doesn't mean we give up connecting with objects. The objects of the five physical senses are very good groundings for mindfulness in daily life. Even this looking at the subject involves some of the sixth sense door, looking at formations of the mind. So we're not putting away the practice we've done so far. These are only suggestions of additional ways you might like to try if you find them helpful. The practice we've described so far is completely sufficient and could serve you forever. But if you'd like to try these, they're also good practices.

The three that I'm going to talk about are a practice of checking the attitude, a practice of becoming aware of awareness, and a practice of noticing the empty nature of awareness. I'll talk about each of these.

In the last few years, a number of us have spent time with a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw Utejaniya. He has a very refreshing approach to practice, which is not so focused on what we're paying attention to, but more on how we're relating to what we're experiencing or contacting. I think you've probably heard Carol talk about his approach a few times in the retreat already.

One of his central practices is what he calls checking the mind. He says, okay, you're relating to the breath, you're relating to sounds, you're relating to your body, whatever your meditation object is, that's fine. But what I'm interested in is how are you relating to it? If you have a strong emotion in the mind, are you wanting it to go away? Are you wanting something else to be in its place? Are you noticing clearly what's there?

So his instruction is, while you're doing your meditation relating with thoughts and emotions and physical senses, also notice: is there greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind? Sometimes that's not so easy to see, so he has a simple checklist.

First, the question to check on greed: am I wanting something else to happen? So often you sit in your meditation thinking, "I wish I could be a little more still." You sit and think, "I had that really beautiful metta opening yesterday, a strong feeling of love for my benefactor. I'd like to have that again." So we notice, I'm wanting something else to happen. This is the force of desire or greed.

Sometimes we look and the question for aversion is: are you wanting something to stop happening? Yes, I'd like this pain in my knee to go away. I'd like this experience of fear not to be here. I'd like the restlessness in my body to calm down. So if we want something to stop happening, that's a sign of aversion.

And the third one, delusion, he treats very simply for this level.

There are many layers to delusion, but just on this level of checking, you ask: Am I not in touch with what's happening? Generally, by the time we've asked this question, we're back in touch with what's happening, so usually the answer to delusion is no. But often the answer to greed or aversion is yes.

So he suggests checking very often. In the beginning it could be four or five times a sitting. As the practice develops, it could be ten times a sitting, twenty times a sitting. As this practice gains momentum, this becomes the main place we look—more or less continuously.

And this is very doable. This is not unrealistic or impossible. Our main item of interest becomes: Is there greed in the mind? Is there aversion in the mind? Is there delusion in the mind in the way I'm relating to what I'm experiencing? This is a very interesting path to follow.

If you notice that there is greed, aversion, or delusion, then just become mindful of that. You don't have to make it go away, because that would be aversive. You just notice it's there, but the noticing shifts things. As you know, noticing these formations of mind makes a change in them.

Upasika Kee puts it this way. Her teaching uses different vocabulary, but it has a really similar emphasis. She says, "So your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise." So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's worth checking on. Just keep checking: How am I relating? Am I trying to grasp at the changing factors of my experience? If so, notice it as greed, aversion, or delusion.

This is the first of the three ways I wanted to talk about. The second one is becoming aware of awareness. And here's where we make a very conscious shift from object to subject. Objects are known. What are they known by? They're known by some aspect of subjectness. Now, what is that?

In the Buddha's description of our experience—well, first let me say, Buddhism as a domain is interested in the experience of human beings. That's not true of every field. Physics is interested in interactions between physical objects. Chemistry is interested in the interactions between atoms and molecules. Earth science is interested in the formation of rocks. All those things are interested in objects. Buddhism is interested in human experience all the way through. That means it's only interested in objects as they're known by a human subject.

So how do we know things? When you hear a sound, you recognize the sound as an object. In the Buddha's language, this is in the field of materiality because it's arising from a material object. But from the point of view of the teachings, the important thing is that it's arising in a human consciousness. This element of consciousness is a critical piece that in ordinary disciplines we often don't talk about. But in Buddhism, it's central.

So when you hear a sound, there are actually two aspects we want to tune into. One is the sound itself, which has a fairly pleasant quality. It arises, it lasts a certain amount of time, and it fades away. But the second thing is you are conscious of it. Is that clear to everybody? We're conscious of that sound.

The way I understand it is not that consciousness is in you and the sound is out there, but rather when the sound arises, there's one experience, which is the sound and your knowing of it, coming up together. We can distinguish two aspects of the experience, but I want to suggest there's only one experience happening, which is your hearing of the sound.

So how can it be that there's this material thing called the sound and there's this knowing, which is of the mind, happening at the same time? That's kind of the mystery of our existence. Nobody knows how that happens. Science doesn't have a clue how it happens. Nobody does. But it does happen, again and again and again.

Or you might ask, how can one thing have these two different parts? Well, if you take a look at this bowl, I could ask you: Is it round or is it black? It's one bowl, right? But it has two aspects. It's both round and black.

So in the same way, when a sound arises, it's one thing, but it has two aspects. There's your knowing of it, and there's the sound. This knowing is what the Buddha called consciousness. The Pali word is *viññāna*.

When we start to take that into account in our practice, it begins to shift things. We come into meditation generally from this worldly perspective where we think the world is made up of objects—earth and cars and dollar bills and women and men and parents and celebrities. But that's not what the world is made of. The world is made of our consciousness of all those things. Because it's only through our consciousness of things that we have the possibility of finding freedom in relation to them.

So consciousness is one of the five aggregates. It's in the fourth foundation of mindfulness that Sally talked about the other night. And we can make it a focus for our meditation, a focus for our mindfulness.

So right now, let me just ask: do you know that you're conscious? Those of you who are asleep don't need to answer. But for everybody else, do you know you're conscious? Can you connect with that quality of awareness or consciousness, and recognize it in this moment?

If it's difficult, just remember what unconscious is like. Unconscious is like being asleep and not knowing any experiences. So in this moment, if you're having experiences, you're aware, aren't you? You're conscious.

Rather than turning our attention to the objects that are filling our momentary experience—if your eyes are open, the sights; if your eyes are closed, the sounds, the physical sensations—what if you turn your attention to this quality of awareness itself?

Let me suggest a way to get into this. Let your mind just roam over the objects in the room or in your experience right now. If your eyes are closed, they can roam over your body and the sounds. If they're open, include the events of the room. Take a look around. Let your eyes gaze and travel and see interesting things and uninteresting things.

And now, instead of looking outward, take that quality of attention or awareness and direct it back toward where the seeing is happening. One way this is sometimes expressed is to become aware of your awareness. It can be described as turning awareness back on itself, or as letting the eyes roll back into the head.

When you make that shift from the senses wandering around outside to coming back to look at the source of awareness, does it feel any different? Do you get a little shift in the way that feels?

What happens when we make that move away from outer objects and toward the inner seeing is that to some degree we unhook from the objects. So for some people—if it doesn't work for you, you don't have to do it—it can be a way to consciously let go. We can consciously take our fixation off of objects. It could be body sensations that we're fixating on because they're pleasurable or painful. It could be a sense of space in the room. It could be a sound. But we can unhook, look inward, and in that way let go.

Now, we can't really see awareness, because that's like trying to see your own eyes. Someone read Ajahn Sumedho talking about this. He said, "I can't see my eyes, but I don't need to because I know they're working." In the same way, we may not see the awareness so clearly—consciousness is a subtle object—but the very act of turning in that direction, being interested in the subject rather than the object, lets us stop clinging or stop being so fixated on objects.

I was taking a walk yesterday in the rain, down by the pond below here, and I just stood and watched for a while the raindrops falling in the pond and making their ripples, one after another after another. It struck me that this was a lot like the experience of contact that the Buddha talked about. Our awareness is just kind of open, and then there are all these sensory inputs coming in and landing, coming in and landing, one after another. The surface of the pond is very still if it's not being disturbed. It can be disturbed by wind. It can be disturbed by rain.

It could be disturbed by an animal swimming in it. But if it's not being disturbed, it's very still.

In the same way, our awareness has this ability to be very still and just let things land and touch it, land and touch it. They make a little ripple, but the ripple will die out really quickly—unless we try to grab hold of it. Some of the things that land we get fascinated by. We grab hold of them and fixate on them. That's the way clinging works.

But when we start to feel this receptive quality of awareness, we can simply let things land and ripple. Land and ripple. And that mind can return to its basically placid and tranquil state. When we're not clinging, we're not creating a disturbance. We're not taking a new birth. We're not leading into more suffering.

So if this appeals to you and you would like to play with it a little bit, here's what I'd suggest. Just try this exercise again. Sometimes a visual cue is helpful, so have the sense that you can let your senses roam outside as much as they want, become interested, and then at some point take the attention and turn awareness back on itself, or direct the attention inward to the source of knowing.

Sometimes the phrase "aware of awareness" helps people connect with that experience. See if in doing that anything shifts in you. If something connects and you want to practice with it, then these are the steps you could go through: Take a look back—in other words, become aware of awareness. Notice if anything shifts, and then just rest there. How long can you rest? Until you get distracted, until the mind gets caught up in thinking, proliferating, grasping onto something. And then when you notice it again, you can do the same sequence again. Turn the attention back on awareness, notice what the effect is, and then rest.

Upasaka Kee put it this way: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." That's another synonym for grasping—making up from grasping. "In other words, an inward-staying, unentangled knowing; all outward-going knowing, cast

aside." That is, the tendency of mind to look for its gratification through objects has been put down. And there's a contentment, an interest, a vitality in this turning to awareness itself.

When we turn to awareness, it doesn't block out any of the sensory arisings. Awareness is still there receiving them. But our attention is not fixated on the objects. And for some people, that gives a sense of greater space, greater equanimity. It's not for everyone. And again, if this description doesn't appeal to you, there's no need to take it up.

The last quote I'll mention in this section is another one from the French poet Paul Valéry, where he says, "I only refer to my pure self, by which I mean absolute consciousness, through which one turns loose from everything else." That's pretty good intuition for a non-Buddhist.

The third of these approaches that I wanted to mention tonight looks at the empty nature of this awareness. I want to approach this with another question, a simple question. It is not a trick. Do you have a body? Do you have a mind? It's not a trick. We all have a body, and because we're alive and breathing and walking, we all have a mind.

If I ask you where is your body, it's really clear, right? It's here. Where is your mind? And to answer that, we have to know: what is your mind? Somebody points to the chest—that's a good place to look.

What is the mind? When the Buddha talked about the Sutta on Totality, and he talked about the six kinds of things, he talked about the mind and mind objects. Mind objects we've talked about many times: thoughts, emotions, meditative states, feeling, perception, intention—those are all objects of mind. What's left that could be called the mind in this schema?

How about consciousness? Maybe consciousness or awareness is the mind. I'd like to refine it a little bit by saying that I want to call the mind that which is the source of consciousness, or more simply, that which knows.

Other parts of what we call mind, like thoughts and emotions—those will be mind objects. But mind is going to be the organ that knows in this consciousness kind of way. In this sense, in this language—and it's only language—consciousness is the activity of this thing we're calling mind.

Can you buy this temporarily as a hypothesis?

Is consciousness limited in space? Your consciousness—is it just around your body? Does it include the meditation hall? Does it include the grounds of IMS? Does it include the trees down the road? Does it include the stars?

It's pretty unlimited, isn't it? It seems to be everywhere we turn. There's some consciousness happening.

So where is the mind? Can you find that which is the source of the knowing? Where does this knowing come from?

It's tough, isn't it? I will encourage you to explore. You could ask questions like: Does the mind have any shape? Does it have any color? Does it have any limit? Does it have any boundary? See what you come up with.

If you can't find it, that's also significant, because it sort of says it's empty. We could say it doesn't exist—that's a fine thing to say. But then what is it that keeps knowing? Knowing continues to happen. So in this language, something like the mind is still doing that. We can't find it, but it seems to function. All we can say is it's ineffable.

What if you let your attention kind of evaporate into that ineffable place? What if you let your attention release into that limitless, boundless, unfindable place of mind?

Connecting with the empty nature of mind can also bring in a sense of unhooking from grasping at phenomena.

This is from the Buddha talking to his seven-year-old son, who became a student after the Buddha's awakening. Rāhula—that was the son's name—develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rāhula, develop meditation that is like space.

As you let your attention fill the vastness of this limitless space of awareness, there's a natural letting go of fixation, preoccupation, and clinging to the individual comings and goings of contact.

I'll close with another quotation from the Buddha. This is also from the Sutta Nipāta, in the dialogue with another Brahmin youth whose name is Kappa. Kappa asks this question: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replies: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbāna, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbāna, the total ending of aging and death.

CHAPTER 14

Simplicity of Non-Reactive Mind

Carol Wilson · 59 min

> *In this profound talk, Carol Wilson investigates the radical simplicity available when the mind rests in awareness without fabricating stories about experience. Drawing on the Pāli concept of atammayatā—"not made of that"—she illuminates how freedom emerges not from stopping thoughts, but from recognizing the non-concocting nature of pure awareness. She presents Luang Por Dun's reformulation of the Four Noble Truths: "The mind that goes out to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering; the mind seeing the mind clearly is the path to cessation."*
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> *Wilson examines the Buddha's teaching on papañca (mental proliferation) from the Madhupiṇḍika Sutta (MN 18), tracing how perception leads to thought, thought to proliferation, and proliferation to being "assailed" by mental constructions. She identifies three primary seeds of papañca: craving (taṇhā), attachment to views (diṭṭhi), and conceit or comparing mind (māna). Through vivid examples from retreat life—from saving food to comparing our practice with others—she reveals how these mental habits construct elaborate worlds from simple perceptions.*
>
> *The talk offers a path through nibbidā (disenchantment)—not aversion, but a wise turning away from what cannot satisfy—toward the stability found in simply being awake and aware. Wilson concludes with the Buddha's instruction to Bāhiya: "In the seen, there is only the seen... This, just this, is the end of suffering." The teaching points to yathābhūta—seeing things as they have come to be—as the gateway to profound peace.*

Tonight, what I mainly want to speak about, I think of as simplicity—simplicity of being, or alternatively, the silence of the non-reactive mind, taking off from Guy's talk last night.

When I talk about simplicity or the silence of the non-reactive mind, I don't mean the simplicity or the silence of no thoughts, of no perceptions, of nothing happening. Not that we have to get rid of anything, but the simplicity of non-complication. As Guy spoke about last night, an example of that simplicity would be that moment of resting between vedanā and taṇhā, craving. But it doesn't have to be just that little moment. There's a sense of non-complicating.

I think freedom of heart, freedom of mind really is a matter of simplicity. As we've been saying over and over, the essence of awareness is just the simplicity of being with things just as they are right now—nothing added, nothing taken away.

At least in the way most of our minds and culture seem to work, the trouble with simplicity is we're just not used to it. Our minds are obviously rather complex. The world is complex. We're used to complexity. Just look at how the body works. Pick any system of the body. Pick the whole structure of science. And the more we know about science, and the more science comes to be the trustworthy reference point in our culture—the way I was trained in school, and I'm no scientist—the complexity of systems is endlessly fascinating.

Of course, if you follow the complexity all the way down, it breaks up until everything is connected. And if you keep following the complexity of physics all the way down—which, believe me, I have no clue about, but just from what I read—you follow it all the way down and you end up with nothing. There's no there there. But mostly, we're seduced. We're fascinated. We're just entranced by the complexity.

I loved what Guy said last night about how the Buddhist teaching is really about our condition as human beings, the quality of consciousness of our own minds. So from that point of view, the complexity we get seduced by is the complexity of our thoughts and our personality. We're continually seduced, fascinated, entranced by this seemingly endless—nothing's endless—this endlessly renewable energy source: thoughts, over and over and over, and personality. We can get lost there.

So the simplicity is not perhaps quite what we know how to recognize or trust.

There's a word in the Pāli, *atammayatā*, which I've liked for a long time. Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was in the last century one of the most well-known Thai forest monks and scholars—and for the Thai Sangha, he was a little bit radical, the most radical who could kind of stay within it in terms of scholasticism—he called *atammayatā* the ultimate Buddhist concept. It's still a concept. What it basically translates to mean is "not made of that," which is like non-fabricating, non-concocting, not making something out of anything. Non-identification is another way of saying it.

But it's the experience, that sense of the simplicity of heart and mind in the moment, just in a moment prior to the subject-object duality concept arising—or maybe that doesn't arise at all. Just the simplicity of just this, without a me, without an other, without a subject perceiving object. Just this. That utter simplicity, that silence. Not made of that.

I like the word concocting, but I know if English isn't your main language, you probably haven't heard that one. It means fabricating, making something up, constructing something out of nothing. You get the drift.

So a lot of what Guy spoke about last night, what he pointed us to, was the silence of the simplicity of heart and mind in a moment that is not fabricating, that's not concocting. But also, as you know, we spend a lot of our time in awareness exploring not only the simplicity, the silence, but also from the simplicity, we can notice how the fabrication occurs. And then it simply becomes another thing that we don't have to fabricate on top of. You don't have to go into infinite regression about it.

This fabrication is the mind going out and creating a reality about any perception, any experience. And it does this endlessly. It's in *The Island*, but before that book came out, I saw a little pamphlet from another Thai forest Ajahn, Luang Por Dun. He's a disciple of Ajahn Mun, who was in the last century this very fierce, very revered Thai forest monk—the teacher of Ajahn Chah and that whole lineage.

So this Luang Por Dun offered his reformulation of the Four Noble Truths, and it fits in with the way I'm thinking tonight. He says: "The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering."

The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering. That's the second noble truth. The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering. That's the first noble truth. The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering.

Don't try to remember all of that. You get the drift. The mind that goes out is basically making all the problems. And the mind seeing the mind is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. He didn't say the mind that hates the mind, the mind that gets rid of the mind, the mind that deadens the mind, the mind that stops functioning. I didn't hear anything like that. The mind that sees the mind clearly is the path to the cessation of suffering.

And so that's our path here. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods—well, this is not a surprise to us. We're very familiar with it. As Guy spoke about last night, he gave great examples in terms of dependent origination, where the sense of craving turns into grasping, turns into becoming. That's an example of the mind going out to satisfy its moods.

The way I want to talk about it tonight is mostly in the realm of thought. Not that thought has to be a problem. When the mind sees the mind and how it works, when thought is simply another arising experience like sound and sight and everything else, and there's just the simplicity of awareness noticing it, no problem. But when thought becomes the agent, so to speak—as if the thought is going out and constructing a reality around any particular perception, and then we try to do something about that reality, and then we suffer from it—well, that's what we call papañca.

Just to read the way the Buddha describes this: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye consciousness arises." That's what Guy said last night. "The meeting of the three is sense contact. With sense contact as condition, there is feeling." We're up to speed on that, right? With sense contact as condition, there's feeling. And what one feels, that one perceives. So perception, which is also one of the five aggregates, arises with contact just as vedanā, just as feeling tone does.

Now, here's the salient point. See if you've noticed this. "What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one mentally proliferates with concepts as the source. The heart is beset. The heart is overcome by mental perceptions and notions that then overwhelm and assail a person."

The solution to this cascade of troubles—that wasn't the Buddha speaking, but doesn't it feel like that? What one perceives, one thinks about. What one thinks about, one complicates with notions, associations, memories, comparisons. And then these notions can overwhelm and assail a person. Assail, like attack. Don't you often just feel like you're the victim of these thoughts? The thoughts have somehow become so strong.

And so as much as we say, "Just notice a thought is a thought. It comes and goes. The sky is blue. I'm hopeless. A thought is a thought"—somehow we can't quite land there. We know it. We've experienced it. But that was yesterday, which is now only a thought.

And that thought is strong. Yesterday I could do it. Today I can't.

So seeing how this papañca gets triggered, and how we can work with it—not to hate thoughts, but the path to freedom is when the mind can see the mind just as it is. Seeing things just as they are. Another great Pali phrase is *yathā bhūta*, which is often translated as "things as they are." But I've heard it's more precisely, in terms of the right tense, "things as they have come to be"—which gives it that moving sense. Because things as they have come to be right now, they won't be like that in the next moment. Things as they have come to be.

And that simplicity of awareness can meet thoughts, can meet this whole cascade of troubles, and stay in the simplicity, rest in the non-fabrication, in the silence, in the non-reactivity.

So the beginning, of course, is just understanding, seeing. I always hesitate with "understanding" because we use that as thinking. Seeing is a way of perceiving the nature of thought itself. Again, as I said, we know it's ephemeral, but then we don't know it. So really, first looking at the fact of how much we trust thought to explain things.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Understanding, wisdom, that kind of understanding, does not arise as the result of thinking." Let me read that again: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking." If only we knew that. "It's the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

Yet we're so seduced, as I said. So used to just trusting, really having our faith in the power of thoughts, that we often don't even realize this whole train of fabrication has gotten going.

So let's go back to the point of perception. This is the Dalai Lama: "All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception." That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. I mean, our whole practice is emphasis on just what's happening now, that simplicity of awareness, that just being totally present with what is. That's the only way for accurate perception.

So we've spoken about perception. I actually can't remember if we've spoken about it here or not—it all blurs. But perception, that quality of recognition in the mind. So perception, that recognition: this is a bird, this is a bell, this mood is sadness, this is a mood—all of that is perception. And how we perceive, we then think about and describe. That doesn't have to be a problem. It can be extraordinarily useful, right? When you hear the bell and you think, "Oh, now it's five o'clock, time for tea." So there was the perception of bell, there was the thought about it, the perception of the time.

And the thoughts about perceptions are how we construct our world. A great deal of the time, we're constructing enough of a similar world that we're all sort of functioning here together. So that just makes us think that our perceptions are completely accurate. But as I know has been pointed out, our perceptions often are not accurate. The perception is colored, is affected by the mood, by the mental state in the mind, particularly when we're not aware of what that mental state is.

So for instance, I was practicing in Burma. Usually sunny, but then there's one really cloudy day. And I noticed at two different points in the day—one time I went out and my thoughts and my mood were kind of a little heavy. There was a little fear, a little unsettledness. And when I went out, the clouds looked threatening and ominous and heavy. Then later in the day, I was in a bright, calm mood. I walked out, and the clouds were cozy, and it was nice to have the sun blocked.

Both of those perceptions—that was what I really perceived at that moment. To think that my perception is an accurate description of reality? Not so trustworthy.

Or when there's delusion in the mind, we don't even know accurately. So say, for example—if this has ever happened to anyone here—after lunch you go to take a nap, or at two in the afternoon, or some odd time.

And you think you're just going to lie down for fifteen minutes, but you totally conk out. One of those really heavy sleeps where, when you wake up for a minute, you don't know who you are or where you are. The bell rings and you're wondering, what is that? Is it breakfast? Is it tea? You know that moment when you just don't know? That's delusion. But at least you know you don't know, so that's wisdom. If you don't know you don't know, and you think you know but you don't—that's delusion. And a lot of the time, it's like that.

For me, a good example is when I don't have my glasses on. I don't like to wear them all the time, but I really don't see well without them. So when I'm in my cottage without my glasses, everything looks really clean, and I'm happy when things are clean. It's really nice. Maybe I don't need to vacuum this week. Then I'll be working, and I go into the bathroom with my glasses on. I'm sitting there going, "Oh, God." And my whole mood shifts. That's the papañca. The perception is just, "Okay, well, it's not so clean as I thought." The papañca is that I think about it. "Look at that. I thought it was clean." Then the mood follows, and more thoughts about it. "I'm so lazy. Why don't I clean? What am I going to do? This is depressing." And then it just starts rolling, in no time at all. Those are the thoughts that overwhelm and assail a person—in no time—because we're jumping on the train and going with it.

But see how it comes from perception. That's the first place it starts. I find it fascinating to explore perception, especially since we don't even notice it much of the time. We just assume it's accurate and then go from there, wondering why things are a little out of sync.

A woman some years ago in another country told me this story. She had gone to work, her regular work in an office. That day, without realizing it, she was in a state of feeling bad about herself—low self-esteem, worthlessness, self-hatred. So she was working, and she saw one of her colleagues across the office, someone she didn't have much to do with, frowning at her. "What did I do to him? We didn't even speak today. Why is he frowning at me?" Going back to her work, and all day that's coming: What did I do? Feeling worse, getting angry, then feeling bad about herself. The whole day, building and building. And of course, you come to find out: first, he wasn't frowning. Second, it had nothing to do with her. He hadn't even noticed her. He was just having some thought about something that had happened at home. No correlation at all.

Have you noticed anything like that ever happening here? Just to see—it's not about bad or good, just notice. The mind can do this. It's complicated when I talk about it, but the moment of awareness, just noticing, is quite simple. I'm not trying to fix it. Just watch how it works. "Oh, look at that—this whole cascade of perceptions and thoughts and story and mood."

Oh, it's like this. Honestly, just that – have awareness again of it. We don't have to take it all apart and unpack it and fix it and put it back, get back to the original perception and see what's right. That's making another big story.

Oh, it's like this. This whole story – "I'm no good and they all hate me and everybody here is getting together secretly at some time when I'm sleeping and making a plan to kick me out." It could be paranoia. Maybe so. But anyway, it's like this. You don't have to figure it out. Just – it's like this.

Dingo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was a great Tibetan teacher, said: "When our sense organs" – so it's not just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, but thinking too. Remember, a lot of our perceptions are mental ones of moods and thoughts. "When the sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to begin the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all of your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure."

And that's just what Guy was saying last night. We tend to look out, look out, but it's all... And this is even a concept, out and in. I mean, that's just some idea too. But looking back at the mind itself.

Ajahn Chah said – he's so pithy with his examples – he held up a vase and said, "Look at this vase. You think it's nice, or you think it's ugly, or you think the flower arrangement should be different or whatever. But it's just itself. It's just a vase. It's neutral. It's you who are driving yourselves insane."

So it's just to see that our emphasis, our interest, can see the process, but it really comes out of all the investment into the perception, the vedanā. Because vedanā, the feeling tone, is not inherent in an object. For example, that vase – I could hold it up, and the sight could be pleasant to you and unpleasant to you and neutral to you. And tomorrow, it could all change around again. It's not an inherent thing at all, but a quality of feeling tone in the mind that's influenced by, as Rinpoche says, our accumulated habits, past experiences, and how things have come to be in this moment.

So the emphasis, the interest, comes back to the simplicity of awareness – of just simply noticing without needing to give so much energy to all this concocting, to all this fabrication. Not trying to stop it, but we can withdraw the fascination, the belief, the sense that this is what's holding our world together. You may not want to withdraw the sense that this is what's holding your world together. And that's another story. That's also something we could look at.

So atammayatā – this simplicity. Not of hating or fearing or fighting with thoughts, or of loving our thoughts, or of making a world of our thoughts, or of needing to change anything. The simplicity of simple awareness.

I'll read you from Ajahn Sumedho. I just love the way he talks about the simplicity of awareness. He says: "The only way to go beyond being caught in thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them – through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion. The island that you cannot go beyond" – which Guy read last night – "is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware."

I love that. Any moment, be awake and aware. You're never going to become awake and aware. That's always a concept somewhere else. But just right now – it's like this. You are awake and aware.

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or our emotions or our actions or our speech or anything. Awareness is simply about knowing these things fully – that they are what they are at this moment. It's very simple, very direct, and you cannot conceive it, awareness. You can't conceive it."

You have to trust it. You have to trust the simple ability that we all have to be fully present and fully awake. Trust the simple ability we all have to be fully present and fully awake, just for a moment. Don't let your mind project "fully awake" into the future—never spacing out again. Just for a moment, this ability to be fully present and fully awake.

And begin to recognize the grasping and the ideas we have taken on about ourselves, about the world around us, about our thoughts and perceptions and feelings. Just recognize with awareness. That's all. You don't have to fix it. You don't have to change it.

And then, as I was saying before, as you begin to realize and recognize this non-grasping, sometimes emotionally one can feel frightened by it. It can seem—doesn't have to, but it can at times—like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, can feel like it starts to fall apart. And that can be frightening. As I said, when we know the ideas that are constructing our world, it can feel frightening.

But if we have the faith to continue bearing with—in other words, faith and awareness to continue being with these emotional reactions—and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find the stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Stability in being awake. Stability in being aware. Just the stability in the simplicity of awareness—of the non-concocting, non-involved, non-reactive mind.

And so in doing that, part of what we do is continue to explore the nature of thoughts so we're not so afraid of them and we get less and less caught in them. It's not a bad thing that you're seeing so many thoughts here, really. We do seem to need to be hit over the head a little bit. We can't just see something a couple of times and get it. We wish, but no.

But the amount of thoughts you've had—how many thoughts would you say you've had since you've been here? Impossible to tell. And how many have we believed? A lot. But how many have we not believed? A lot. And so we really start to see the nature of them underneath that. We start to get it.

This is, again, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "The mind is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning"—have you noticed that?—"triggered off by circumstances. And if not seen clearly, they quickly take root and proliferate," just as we've been saying. "Yet, however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness." No matter what you do, they'll eventually dissolve. Try and hold

on to a thought and don't let it go from now until the end of the evening. It's going to dissolve. "Once you recognize this intrinsic nature of the mind, these thoughts that seem to appear and disappear all the time can no longer fool you. As clouds form, last a while, and then dissolve back in the empty sky, so these deluded thoughts arise, remain a while, and then vanish in the emptiness of the mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

That's what I love. This whole story and world, and it's gone. In reality, nothing at all has happened. And awareness isn't touched or stained, and all that world we went through—gone. Nothing has happened.

There's no logical reason to be so driven by thoughts. In terms, though, of how we get so seduced, there are of course lots of ways of talking about it. But one classical way, found really more in the commentaries, I think, is often called the three *papañcas*—three particular habits of mind, none of which will be a surprise to you.

The three classical Papanchas are not simply greed, hatred, and delusion—though those form a subset. It's a slightly different list that feeds Papancha, that causes thoughts to just take off. I find it interesting to explore because it gives me a little more to notice. It helps cue me: "Oh yes, right, that's what's happening." And you can just see the process.

What tends to really fuel this Papancha—this thinking that takes off and constructs entire worlds—is craving, attachment to views, and *mana*, conceit. Let me say a little about each of these, though we've obviously talked about them a great deal.

About craving, I think I need to say the least. You know what it is. But it's interesting to watch how craving—this wanting, this thirst for whatever—operates in the mind. When there's not awareness of it, when it goes out toward some idea, some object, a sense object, a mind object, whatever is perceived as pleasant, and when that isn't seen, the energy that goes into concocting, into fabricating a whole world, is really amazing, isn't it? I'm sure you've all witnessed this.

It's interesting to observe at times, though not with judgment. The only way to watch any of this is from the motivation of interest, or just the simplicity of awareness. Judgment—that's just the backside of craving. It's just aversion, just *mana*. You can't see clearly with judgment. And when you're judging yourself, I mean, it's just the nature of the mind. This is the whole world. This is how the mind works for everybody, not just you. So just watch all the machinations that go on when there's desire in the mind.

Here on retreat, with the smallest things—if you have a seat you like in the dining room, have you gone through all kinds of mental gymnastics to make sure you get that seat again? And also that nobody should notice you're doing it? Or when to have your shower time? How to sit, how to walk—all that stuff. It gets so complicated here. You start saving food and then discover how much work that is, how complicating it is to save food, put it here, want it later, but you're all the way in your room. Do I want to go back? But I can't do it at four—everybody will see me. When can I do it? I'll get up at three in the morning so I can eat this food I saved. Meanwhile, it rots there in that yogi refrigerator—which, by the way, they would like you to clean out if you have little pieces of moldy food in there. The cooks have asked us to ask you to please, for goodness' sake, clean it out. And as you're doing it, you might notice: What's in my mind when I put this little piece of whatever—I don't even know what it is anymore—in here?

Craving runs us. And how believable it is when this is the perception! Craving colors perception, desire colors perception, so that the object—whatever it is we want, the thought—looks like a beautiful thought. A person looks like the most beautiful person you've ever seen.

I used to have this thought come up, for reasons unknown, of some street corner in Bangkok I'd been at years ago. Now, that street corner was a really busy intersection of little stalls selling plumbing parts. There was nothing attractive about it. But for some reason, depending on my mood, it would come up, and my mind would go: Bangkok! So lovely! And then it would layer in all this beautiful imagery about Bangkok, and I'd go into a whole spinning story. You can spend hours like this. You wake up and nothing at all has ever happened—which is lucky. Because the other option is you go online, book a ticket, fly to Bangkok, get out of the taxi at three in the morning, and think: Why did I come here again? What was it about Bangkok that I liked so much? I forget.

Choki Nyima Rinpoche, brother of Tsoknyi and Mingyur Rinpoche, once talked about this. He said: Watch the fickleness. Fickleness—the unreliability.

We use "fickle" in English to describe someone who falls in love with one person, then falls in love with someone else, and then someone else again—someone unreliable, untrustworthy. Choyki Nyima Rinpoche said to watch how easily the mind is influenced by just a pleasant or unpleasant sight or sound into an immediate mood. And then out of that mood, we construct a whole world. And we believe it.

At least here on retreat, the papañca mostly ends with thoughts. But as I said, in the world, it can go on into actions. You might make a career choice based on papañca. You might—hopefully not—get married based on papañca. "Oh, I'm a little bored. Let's have kids." Then what are you going to do?

It's really important to watch this. And what we have the chance to observe here is this sense of how craving, as the Tibetans say, puts feathers on the object. It makes it much more beautiful. And if we don't see that the perception is unreliable, we're gone. We see that over and over, and then we wake up—oh yes, in actuality, nothing has happened. The more we see that, we start to develop a recognition that these thoughts are not really anything substantial.

There's the seduction of pleasant thoughts, the seduction of craving's promise—this is really going to make me happy now. And we sit here with the knee hurting, lost in some fantasy, and if we stop, we think, "Okay, I really know I'm probably not going to have that dinner party when I leave, but maybe..." I spent a three-month retreat planning all these dinner parties—the menus, the recipes. You wake up and think, oh yes, right, here I am. And I never did any of it. I don't even like dinner parties. But that was the promise, that it was going to be so pleasant. Or the reverse—the fear of the unpleasant.

So we start to see: we wake up and it's nothing. The thoughts are going nowhere. It's just a thought.

What helps us trust the awareness again is what Choyki Nyima calls a weariness with samsara. Not a weariness of aversion, because that's just flipping from craving to aversion, but the weariness of *nibbidā*—a word sometimes translated as "disgust," though that's not a good translation. Disgust for us carries this negativity and revulsion. But *nibbidā* is best described as losing one's taste for something. The example given is of a dog chewing on a bone that has been completely bleached out by the sun. There's just no juice there, nothing there. So you lose your taste for it, not out of disgust or revulsion, but because it simply doesn't offer anything.

It's really a movement of wisdom, a freedom of heart and mind in the moment, a turning away from something that isn't offering us anything anyway. *Nibbidā*, this sense of turning away, of seeing something accurately and releasing that which can't give us what we seek—it's not only from seeing that something doesn't deliver. It's also a releasing of the idea that this is going to bring happiness, just by seeing with awareness the actuality of it. A thought is just a thought and it will never be more than that.

But *nibbidā* can also be developed through attention to the positive, the wholesome aspects of peace in the heart and mind. So it's not just a negative thing. In your practice here, in your daily life, as you're walking around—those moments when you're just touching things as they are, *yathā bhūta*, things as they have come to be—just this simplicity, where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess. The mind is not concocting any story about anything. Just this sense of peace.

I think Guy talked about this last night—that we don't tend to notice it enough. But when we do, it's so much more... I don't know what the word is. Refreshing. Attractive. None of these are exactly the right word. Fulfilling. Nourishing—more so than getting lost in thoughts about dinner parties. They don't really compare.

And so the wholesomeness, the peace, the satisfaction of the heart and mind that is pure, simple, non-reactive, uninvolved in the moment—this becomes so much more vivid and real that the attention turns away from getting lost in daydreams, not out of aversion, but out of simply seeing: there's really another possibility.

This is one of the attractions of samādhi, of the mind that is collected and balanced, whether one-pointed or in a steadiness with changing objects. That sense of the collected mind, the secluded mind—*citta viveka*—is secluded from the hindrances for a time. And the first time you experience it strongly, or after, sometimes we don't even realize until then what it feels like not to have all this stuff in our minds all the time. Like, wow. What's going on? Everything is just so pure and clean. The world is so amazing. Just for a moment.

There's no great hatred and delusion arising in the mind. It's like, wow, that's nice. Maybe that's a possibility. Maybe that's more attractive than thinking about the vacation I'm going to take next month. So it's not a should, but rather seeing the drawbacks of samsara and recognizing the peace, the nourishment of the heart and mind that's at rest.

So that's craving papañca. The second papañca is the papañca of views—views and opinions, and attachment to them. Obviously it's the attachment to them that's the problem, but a view is really any description of the world that we take to be actually true and hold onto, believing that this is true and everything else is false. Although of course we don't usually think of it in those terms. In fact, we don't even know we have a view.

It can be a view of who you are, what your personality is like. It can be political views—we all see where that goes. It can be views about how someone else should behave, views about how we're all supposed to behave here. It can be views about what the appropriate kind of food is. It could be views about what's right practice.

A really sorrowful source of views is Dhamma views. What's the true Dhamma? What's the inaccurate Dhamma? Who has the true Dhamma? Which way of practice? Which teacher? Is it the Thai forest tradition? Is it the Burmese Sayadaws? Is it the Tibetans? Is it Zen? Does anybody even know what anybody else really holds as a view anyway?

Views are an enormous source of suffering. But really, at this level, we're talking about a concoction of thought. Have you noticed that? Huge, huge. I think views are much more gripping and seductive even than craving for sense objects. This is what's happening, we tell ourselves. We take it as reality. And we stop looking. We stop noticing. Our perception kind of snaps shut. It's like this.

That's why mindfulness has this quality of not picking and choosing—just mindfulness, awareness, meeting whatever's arising. Not just the things we like, not just the things we think we should pay attention to.

Have you noticed how much we try in the instructions or in interviews? We say, "Well, what are you noticing?" And so often the mind responds, "Well, this is happening, but that's not what's supposed to be happening. This is what's supposed to be happening." Or, "Yeah, I'm noticing lots of changing objects, but that's because I'm not concentrated enough. I should just be with the breath." Or, "I'm only with the breath, and that's because I'm not able to do choiceless awareness, which I know is really where it's at."

You can have people come in one after the other, with completely opposite experiences, and both suffering because it's not happening the way they think it should. But you don't think you're just thinking that. You know that's how it is.

And how much thought gets engendered when you're holding to a view of what practice should be, or what right practice should be? You might be feeling fine in your practice, but then you see someone else. They look a little better. They're doing something different. Or one of us up here says something that completely doesn't match your experience. And you don't know whether to hate us or hate yourself, but one of us has to be wrong, and you'd better figure it out or you're going to go crazy. The mind just starts spinning.

How do the question periods affect you in the morning? Does your mind just go, "Okay, fine. That's not my experience. Never mind." And you keep going? Great. May it be so. But often we feel we have to figure it all out. How can it all fit in? Views upon views. So much thinking comes from that. So much getting caught.

Sogyal Rinpoche has a great line about this. He says we get into so much pain and confusion by getting lost in what happens. And this, to me, is a good description of how views form. You project a thought, and then the second thought believes the first thought. Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is, by this time, already a reality. By the time the tenth one comes, it believes the fifth has always been an actuality. Views upon views. And we just don't even see it.

Nisargadatta said, "The world appears to you so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. Cease thinking about it and it will dissolve into thin mist." I would say, you know, I feel so real because I'm thinking about me all the time too. We think, "But I don't want to dissolve into thin mist. I'd much rather sit here and stew about the fact that my practice isn't going right and I'll never be able to do it the way those other people are than to dissolve into thin mist and simplicity."

So views are an endless source of papañca—not only the thought, but this concocting a whole world, believing it, suffering, and acting on it. Remember the example I gave a couple of talks ago about a friend of mine who felt that she was so aversive? That was the view she had of herself: "I'm an aversive person." And everyone else agreed she was aversive. That's a perception all agreeing, and we think, okay, that could define the world. But when she sat down with open, balanced mindfulness, deliberately seeing that as a view and not buying into it, she saw that aversive thoughts were maybe ten percent. There were all kinds of other thoughts. And in the long run, she wasn't any of the thoughts anyway.

That's the difference between the simplicity of awareness without a preconceived notion of what we're looking for or what's already here. The preconceived notion can completely blind us to open perception.

It's an example I give a lot, but I'll give it again because it was so vivid. At a retreat I was teaching quite some years ago in California with a friend, James, there were about fifty people—a retreat like this, but maybe a week long. Many of the people had never sat an intensive retreat before. And then as now, I had to sit in a chair. We taught just the way we teach this and described how to sit just like we do here.

This woman, about the fifth day, had an interview with me. It was one of those times when she had just broken through something. She said, "I've been in such agony, physical agony, for the last four days. Just sitting there cross-legged was absolutely impossible for me—so much pain. I've never sat cross-legged before." She was a middle-aged woman, and it was killing her. But clearly that's how you have to sit. There's no way you can meditate if you don't sit cross-legged. She'd just been fighting with pain, no mindfulness. She didn't even know what the point of this was.

Finally, the fourth night, she said she looked up and thought, "Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe it's okay to sit in a chair." She sat in a chair and she could actually meditate—like, notice what was happening. That's how strong views can be, and how the papañca not only of thinking about it can lead to actions.

So that's the second source of papañca. And the third is that of *māna*, translated as conceit of self. It's a subtle sense of self, but the way we mostly notice it feeding endless, endless trains of thought and belief is in this comparing. I think Sally talked about that—where somebody walks by and they're better than me, they're worse than me, or we're equal. Just this subtle sense of "I am-ness."

This comparing arises through the same process. There's the perception of seeing, for example. We don't notice the seeing itself. We don't notice the perception—"That person looks so mindful." They're mindful. I'm not. I'm not doing well. And then the endless thoughts about everything you haven't done well in your whole life follow, on and on and on. You're walking, and then you slow down, and finally you're moving slowly, and someone comes rushing past and you think, "Ah, I'm really doing well. I'm so mindful." Again—seeing, perception, "fast," but not seeing any of this at all. Just going, going, going, going.

So there's this comparing that's extremely subtle. Don't be judging yourself about it—just get fascinated by it. "Wow, look at all this that gets going!" Completely extra. I mean, if you could imagine thought balloons from all of us in the dining room at lunchtime—oh my God, it would feel like a nightmare. "They're good. They're bad. They're eating like a slob. They're eating so gracefully. They're eating too much." It's like, oh please.

So we're comparing to each other. We're comparing with our own past experience: "Well, this is the third week and the fourth day, and in the last retreat on the third week and the fourth day, I was doing a whole lot better than this. Is it my fault? Is it the teacher's fault? Is it the other yogis' fault? Is it the weather? Is it because I'm old? Is it because I'm young? Is it because of my health? Is it because of the food?" It's like—cool

it. *Yathābhūta*—things as they have come to be, right now. It's like this. How simple is that? How free is that from that whole world of comparison? "It's like this." Oh my God, what a difference.

But the mind goes, "Hey, that's almost like being a simpleton." In the big world, if you say about someone, "She's a really simple person," it's not usually a compliment—except in certain spiritual circles. It's not really a compliment to be that simple. "Am I doing better or not? Should I be going slower or not? Are they faster than me? Are they slower than me? Well, maybe there's a reason..." versus simply: "It's like this."

It's almost like the fear of annihilation that Ajahn Sumedho was talking about. The whole constructed world just falls apart. But we don't need that whole thing. We're just dragging it around and suffering.

Ah, the simplicity. *Atammayatā*—not concocting.

So there's comparing to others, comparing to ourselves in the past, and again, comparing with a view, with an ideal. "This is what practice should be like. This is how much I should eat. This is how much I should sleep. This is how I should dress"—whatever it is. And then comparing to that. A source of endless, endless thoughts.

Just notice that.

To me, it's a great dining room practice. Because when I'm on retreat, I tend to stay more by myself. But it could also be practiced in here—just walking in the dining room, being in your body, being aware of seeing. Seeing, seeing. And if it comes up, ah, judging—notice it. The judging, the comparing. No need to do anything about it. You don't have to concoct anything around the comparing. Just notice it. Seeing, comparing. It's like this. Seeing, comparing. It's like this.

We don't need to fear it. We don't need to try and push it away. It's also just another thought. Every thought is just another thought. No matter how puffy it is or how much emotion it comes together with, in that moment there's always the potential for the simplicity of awareness. It's like this—awareness of thought and emotion. And it will remind us that just because a thought comes together with really strong emotion, that doesn't make it more true. In fact, more likely less true. So just noticing that.

These are the three—they say—seeds of papañca. Not the only ones, but the main ones: craving, attachment to views, this māna, this conceit, this comparing. And not to stop it, but just to notice the process. In noticing the process, we've kind of stepped back into the simplicity of awareness, which is always available—the stillness of not self-ref-

erencing, of non-concocting, of yathābhūta, just things as they have come to be right now. Nothing extra, not referencing back to anything else or forward to anything else. Just the willingness to be so simple.

I want to end with a quotation from the Buddha describing himself, his mind. He said: "Thus, bhikkhus, the Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing as apart from sight." In a sense, there's just seeing. "The Tathāgata does not conceive of a visible thing. He does not conceive of something that is unseen. He does not conceive of a thing to be seen. He does not conceive about a seer."

To balance it, in the famous sutta where he's talking to Bāhiya, giving him this little pithy instruction—he only had three minutes, give him an instruction to enlighten him—he said: "When in the seen there is only the seen, in the heard there is only the heard, in the sensed there is only the sensed, in the cognized there is only the cognized—this, Bāhiya, is how you should train yourself."

That's what he's saying. In the seen, the Tathāgata does not conceive, does not think about something visible as apart from the seeing. There's only seeing. He doesn't conceive of a seer apart from something seen. There's only seeing.

"When, Bāhiya, there is for you in the seen only the seen, in the heard only the heard, in the sensed only the sensed, in the cognized only the cognized—then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When, Bāhiya, there is no you there, then, Bāhiya, you are neither here nor there nor in between the two. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 15

The Buddha's Question

Winnie Nazarko · 1h06

> *In this profound dharma talk, Winnie Nazarko traces the Buddha's path from a life of sensory indulgence in his father's palace to his complete awakening under the Bodhi tree, illuminating how his personal quest shaped the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. Drawing from the Pāli Canon, she recounts the pivotal moments of the Buddha's journey: his sheltered youth, the devastating encounters with old age, sickness, and death, his mastery of the jhānas under two teachers, his extreme ascetic practices that brought him to death's edge, and finally his discovery of the Middle Way.*
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> *The talk details the night of the Buddha's enlightenment, when he directed his concentrated mind to recollect his past lives, perceive the workings of kamma across beings, and finally penetrate the causes of suffering itself. Nazarko then presents the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), the Buddha's first teaching at the Deer Park, where he set the Wheel of Dhamma in motion for the five ascetics who had previously abandoned him. She explains the three levels of understanding the Four Noble Truths: intellectual knowledge, reflective understanding, and direct insight through meditation practice.*
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> *Nazarko emphasizes that understanding dukkha is not pessimistic wallowing but rather a courageous opening to reality that paradoxically leads to liberation. She describes how practitioners can use both pleasant and painful experiences as fuel for awakening, intersecting skillfully with each moment through the cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path. The talk offers practical encouragement for retreat practitioners to develop the strength of heart needed to see the truth of their own experience directly.*

You're all so quiet.

The talk tonight is on the Four Noble Truths.

When Gertrude Stein, the poet and salon keeper, was in the process of dying, she was in a bedroom surrounded by people that she knew. And as she was fading, she said aloud, "What is the answer?" No one hazarded a guess, whereupon she rolled over, laughed, said, "Well then, what's the question?" and died.

This points to an important point: if we're going to have insight into this path that we're walking, it's very wise to know what the question is—what the question was that the Buddha was attempting to answer. Because in knowing the question, we know a lot about the framework of explanation.

We come to practice with so many different things that we're seeking. We may want stress reduction, or we might want psychological insight, or emotional healing, or physical healing, or an answer to a life question. These are certainly all understandable and worthy human interests and goals. But each of them, as a standalone or collective thing, is not really what the Buddha was trying to address, although they are certainly all part of what he did address. They're not really the higher level or the macro level question.

So if we were going to look at what the Buddha really was trying to answer, what his deepest question was, I think it can be useful to go back into his own personal biography and spend a little bit of time looking at his whole process of coming to be the Buddha, the teacher, the great teacher, the turner of the wheel of Dharma for the liberation of all beings.

The story goes that the Buddha was born in a place that is currently in part of Nepal, kind of close to the border with India. At the time of his birth into what was considered to be a royal family, there were many signs, apparently, that something unusual was going on, both in terms of the child himself and the circumstances of his birth. These are the kind of stories that you tend to hear about many different religious figures—something unusual about their circumstances of coming into the world that indicated something significant.

After the Buddha was born, a holy man, a seer, a wise man came to the palace. Looking at the totality of circumstances, he basically told the Buddha's family, "This boy can go one of two ways. Either he will be a world leader—the world leader—or he will be the Buddha, a great religious teacher."

The family, this royal family, existed in a world of a great deal of intra- and inter-clan and kingdom violence. They had a clear preference for which one of these two the child should be. And so the story goes that they proceeded with keeping him as secluded from worldly distress as they possibly could.

Some of the later stories talk about this in terms of him having no idea about old age, sickness, and death, or any of the things that are part of the human and animal cycle of suffering. That seems a little bit unlikely because the Buddha himself was born into the warrior class, and so he must have had some idea about why you would need a warrior class. Nevertheless, it's clear that he was kept secluded and was given as many sense pleasures as possible in order to tip his interests away from compassionate activity and more towards worldly accomplishment.

This is his own description, in his own words, of what it was like for him growing up:

"Lily pools were made for me at my father's house solely for my benefit. Blue lilies flowered in one, white lilies in another, red lilies in a third. I used no sandalwood that was not from Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments, and cloak were all made of Benares cloth. A white sunshade was held over me day and night so that no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me. I had three palaces: one for the winter, one for the summer, and one for the rains. In the rains palace, I was entertained by minstrels with no men among them. For the four months of the rains, I never went down to the lower palace. Though meals of broken rice with lentil soup are given to the servants and retainers in other people's houses, in my father's house, white rice and meat was given to them."

This is the world of sense pleasure, sensory indulgence. I think we can safely assume that any kind of sensual pleasure that was available at the time—and seemingly many of them—were completely available to this young man as he was growing up. We can assume that he enjoyed and experienced all of them.

Nevertheless, if you take some of the later stories, there was a day when the Buddha-to-be left the palace accompanied by his driver and went out for a ride outside the secluded protection of the palace walls. When he came out of the palace, he saw in sequence four different sights. He saw an old person. He saw a sick person. He saw a person who had passed away and was left there in the street. And he saw a renunciate.

It had a very deep effect on him. It had the kind of effect that turned his mind in a completely different direction. This is what he says about it:

"Whilst I had such power and good fortune, yet I thought: When an untaught ordinary man who is subject to aging, not safe from aging, sees another who is aged, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to aging, not safe from aging, and so it cannot benefit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another who is aged."

When I considered this, the vanity of youth entirely left me.

And he goes on: "I thought, when an untaught ordinary man who is subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, sees another who is sick, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to sickness, not safe from sickness, and so it cannot benefit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another who is sick. When I considered this, the vanity of health entirely left me.

I thought, when an untaught ordinary man who is subject to death, not safe from death, sees another who is dead, he is shocked, humiliated, and disgusted, for he forgets that he himself is no exception. But I too am subject to death, not safe from death, and so it cannot benefit me to be shocked, humiliated, and disgusted upon seeing another who is dead. When I considered this, the vanity of life entirely left me."

So the party at the palace was no longer adequate. He saw through to the essential matter, the underlying fate of all beings who take birth. I find that particular quote very moving, because you get this sense of someone who has come face to face with the cold facts of existence and has let it in, has opened to it, and has sobered up.

The bodhisattva intention that arose in the Buddha many lifetimes previously is fully activated at this point. He takes his life in a totally different direction. He becomes a renunciate. He leaves the palace. He leaves the comforts. He goes out, determined to find the answer to the question of suffering.

He says: "Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisattva, being myself subject to birth, aging, ailing, death, sorrow, and defilement, I sought after what was also subject to these things. But then I thought, why, being myself subject to birth, aging, ailment, death, sorrow, and defilement, do I seek after what is also subject to these things? Suppose, being myself subject to these things, seeing danger in them, I sought after the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled, supreme surcease of bondage—Nibbana."

So the search unfolded in this way. He sought out teachers. He found two different teachers who were masters of concentration practices, and he studied with each of them for a period of time, becoming a master of the non-material jhanas. With each of these teachers, once the Buddha-to-be attained mastery, the teacher asked him to stay and either share leadership of the school or take over leadership entirely.

But the Buddha, knowing what his goal was—the end of suffering in his mind stream, to understand the causes of suffering and to undo them—said he could not stay. "I thought, this teaching does not lead to dispassion, to fading of lust, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. I was not satisfied with that teaching, and I left to pursue my search."

Here we see a deep intellectual honesty. Knowing, as we do, that these concentration states—especially developed at the level he developed them—are intensely pleasurable in increasingly refined ways, yet he realized that was not enough, that it did not adequately address or resolve the primary problem of suffering.

So then he took another bent. This is where you really see that he did come from the warrior class, because he takes a swing toward renunciation, hardcore renunciation—extreme asceticism and a struggle to subdue, to overcome the body and the mind.

During this period, he initially goes into seclusion by himself. He says he would go into seclusion in a remote jungle thicket that for the average person would be hard to endure, seclusion being hard to achieve, isolation hard to enjoy—a place that would rob a bhikkhu of his mind if he had no concentration. He went to such a place, and because he did have concentration, he wasn't spooked by it in the same way someone with less development would be.

But he said, "I'm not afraid of this place, but there are those especially holy nights of the half moons and the quarter moons. Maybe if I spent those nights in such awe-inspiring abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines, and tree shrines, which make the hair stand up—perhaps I should encounter that fear and dread." It sounds a bit like haunted places.

And so he did go to these places that were especially frightening. Indeed, he had experiences there which made the hair stand up. He says: "While I dwelt there, a deer would approach me, or a peacock would knock off a branch, or the wind would rustle the leaves, and I thought, surely this is the fear and dread coming." He describes waiting for the fear and dread to come, then the fear and dread arriving, then being with it until, as he says, he subdued it—which we would understand as it passing away.

But that wasn't the whole of it. He undertook to meditate in ways where he would do things with his breath and breathing that created a great deal of bodily pain. He would sit with this pain that he himself was creating, and the effect would be that "although he would have tireless energy and unremitting mindfulness, yet his body was overwrought and uncalm because he was exhausted by the painful effort."

He was efforting in a very heroic way, in a very particular way, to bring this suffering mass of body and mind into submission.

And then he gets into the food deprivation.

And he's thinking, should I entirely cut off food? He experiments with cutting off food and eating very little, getting right to the point of death. He talks about what he looked like at that point.

At this stage, he was taking a very little bit of food because one of the deities came to him and said, "Please don't totally stop eating. If you totally stop eating, we're going to find a way to get you a little nutrient through unusual means just to keep you going. You really can't do this." So he was eating a very, very small amount of food—a handful of bean soup or lentil soup or pea soup.

And he talks about his body getting into a state of extreme emaciation. "My limbs became like the jointed segments of vine stems or bamboo stems because of eating so little. My backside like a camel's hoof, projections of my spine like corded beads, my ribs jutted out as gaunt as the crazy rafters of an old roofless barn." His hair was falling out. So he took it as far as it could go.

His conclusion was this: "I've taken this as far as it can go." He says, "I started to think: whenever a monk or brahmin has felt in the past or will in the future or feels now painful, racking, piercing feelings due to striving, it can equal this but not exceed it. But by this grueling penance, I have attained no distinction higher than the human state, worthy of the noble one's knowledge and vision. Might there be another way to enlightenment?"

So he played it out to the very end. And then he had a memory, a key memory, of when he was a boy sitting under a rose apple tree in the shade while his father was doing some ceremonial plowing at the beginning of the planting season—probably some kind of fertility rite, with the king, the head male, out there doing the plowing. He talks about sitting there and being quite secluded from sensual desires, secluded from unwholesome things, and that he had "entered upon then and abode in the first meditation, accompanied by thinking and exploring, with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion."

In other words, that's a description of the first jhāna that spontaneously arose in him at that point. And he says, "Might that be the way to enlightenment?" He realized that might be the way. And he thought, "Why am I so afraid of pleasure? This is pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome things." Then he thought, "I'm not afraid of such pleasure, for it has nothing to do with sensual desires and unwholesome things. It is not possible to obtain that pleasure with a body so excessively emaciated." So he ate food.

With the eating of food, he began the process of being responsive in a non-aversive way to the actual needs of his body and mind. He let go of the polarity. Having let go of the polarity of sense desire and sense indulgence, he let go of the other polarity of ex-

treme asceticism, of the rejection of pleasure in any form. At this point, he's in a position to push for it—to push for the awakening, having come back to the middle, the middle path.

He was also at this point abandoned in disgust by five other renunciates who had come around him, watching this whole process of this extremely strong yogi striving heroically. Then they see him decide to eat, and they're disgusted with him. "Gautama has gone bad. He's given in. He's given in to sense desire." But that's not exactly what was happening.

Having regained his strength, the Buddha then sits under the Bodhi tree. He moves through the four jhānas, coming to the fourth jhāna—his mind collected, bright, present, concentration very deep. As we said earlier, he was a master of concentration. With this very sharp tool, he directs his mind to certain things in sequence.

The first thing he directs his mind to is a recollection of his own past lives. He talks about remembering the particulars, the details of his manifold past lives. "I recollected my past lives: one birth, two, three, four, five, ten, twenty, a hundred births, a thousand births, a hundred thousand births, many ages of world contraction, many ages of world expansion. I was there so named, of such a race, such an appearance, such food, such experience of pleasure and pain, such a life term and passing away. Thence I reappeared elsewhere, and then I was so named, of such a race," and so on.

He says, "This is the first true knowledge attained by me in the first watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one diligent, ardent, and self-controlled."

"Then when my concentrated mind was thus purified, I directed my mind to knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings." So he starts turning it to the lives of others. "With the purified mind, I saw beings passing away and reappearing—inferior and superior, beautiful and ugly, happy and unhappy in their destinations. And I understood how beings pass on according to their actions."

So in other words, he came to understand karma. This was the second true knowledge attained by me in the second watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens to one diligent, ardent, and self-controlled.

He had seen deeply into what actions in what lives lead to what future outcomes, both for himself and for others. He was picking up on the issue of causation.

Then in the third watch of the night, he inclined his mind to the knowledge of the exhaustion of taints. "I had direct knowledge as it actually is that this is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. And this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. I had direct knowledge as it actually is. These are the taints, meaning suffering. This is the origin of taints. This is the cessation of taints. And this is the way leading to the cessation of taints. Knowing thus and seeing thus, my heart was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When liberated, there came the knowledge: it is liberated. I had direct knowledge: birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived out, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come. This was the third true knowledge. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose. Darkness was banished and light arose, as happens in one who is diligent, ardent, and self-controlled."

This is the key point. This is where he personally obtained liberation from direct seeing—direct insight into what led to what. He saw the linchpin, the thing that kept it all together, the machinery of suffering. He saw that linchpin, and the whole thing fell apart.

This is the basic underlying experience that is later expressed in the Four Noble Truths and which is later elaborated all throughout the Buddha Dharma. All the different practices, all the different lists, all the different ways of explaining—they are all subsets, details, different angles upon different facets of the same insights that arose in the Buddha the night of his awakening.

The Buddha came to understand causation at a very deep level. In fact, you could say that the Buddha was a student of suffering until he became a master of causation. He came to completely understand the structure of conditionality—in other words, dependent arising. And once he saw what caused what, what conditions produced what outcomes, he understood what caused suffering. Because he understood it so deeply, understood what went into it and how it was created, he could, in effect, see how to reverse engineer the whole business.

Do people know that phrase, reverse engineering? You look at how something was put together, and then you know how to take it apart.

Interestingly enough, the Buddha did not immediately assume that he would teach. And you can kind of see why. Given all his gifts and the power of his intention and all his karmic backup and what he went through to make the breakthrough, you could see why initially he thought, "They're never going to get it."

He talks about it. He says, "Enough of teaching the Dharma that even I found hard to reach, for it will never be perceived by those who live in lust and hate. Men dyed in lust, in whom a cloud of darkness laps, will never see what goes against the stream. It's subtle, deep, and hard to see. Abstruse."

And then, as part of the mythological telling of this story, a Brahma saw this thought going through the Buddha's mind and said, "Oh, this world will be lost. The world will be utterly lost if he doesn't teach." And so he appeared in front of the Blessed One and said, "Please, Lord, teach the Dharma. Teach the Dharma."

There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are wasting through not hearing the Dharma. Some of them will gain final knowledge of the Dharma.

And then, with his eye of compassion, the Buddha surveyed the world and saw that this was indeed true—that there were people who could understand this, who would understand it, and who would practice it. And he agreed, out of compassion for the many, that he would teach.

So the question was: well, who would he teach? His first thought was the two teachers who had taught him the jhanas. But he found out, by unusual means, that they had both passed away. So that was... hmm. And then he thought: ah, the five renunciates—my former fans. Perhaps they would be the ones.

And he set out walking to where he knew they were. There was a very interesting episode on the road there, which I find rather amusing. He came across a monk who didn't know him. And the monk said to him, "Your faculties are serene, friend. The color of your skin is clear and bright. Under whom have you gone forth? Who is your teacher? Whose Dhamma do you confess?"

And the Buddha said—and this is a bit of a song of himself—"I am an all-transcender and all-knower, unsullied by all things, renouncing all, by craving's ceasing freed. And this I owe to my own wisdom. To whom should I concede it? I have no teacher, and my like exists nowhere in all the world. I am the teacher in the world without a peer, accomplished too, and I alone am quite enlightened—quenched, whose fires are all extinct. I go to Kasi City now to set the wheel of Dharma in motion. In a blindfold world, I go to beat the deathless drums."

So the monk looks at him and says, "By your claims, friend, you are a universal victor."

And the Buddha says, "The victors like me, Upaka, are those whose taints are quite exhausted. I have vanquished all states of evil. It is for that I am a victor." He's claiming this because he has finished with the taints.

It would be a rather unusual position to be a Buddha, wouldn't it? I mean, if you're really going to say what your experience is, you can't really parse it. You have to claim it.

And so, interestingly enough, the monk then says, "May it be so, friend," shaking his head, and takes a side track and departs. Which I read as kind of like, "That's nice, okay, uh-huh." He had his moment.

Nevertheless, the Buddha went on and found the five who used to practice with him. When they saw him coming, they were not jumping up and down with happiness. In fact, they initially agreed among themselves: "Friends, here comes the monk Gautama, who became self-indulgent, gave up the struggle, and reverted to luxury. We ought not to pay homage to him or rise up for him or receive his bowl and outer robe. Still, a seat can be prepared. Let him sit down if he likes."

Nice warm reception.

And yet, as soon as he approached, they found themselves unable to remain seated. There was something about the field around him, we presume. And they showed him respect.

The Buddha then told them that he had attained complete awakening and said he would instruct them and teach them the Dhamma. If they practiced it as he instructed them, they would realize it themselves, here and now, through direct knowledge.

And they said, "Well, you know, even when you did the mortification practice, you didn't go any higher than the human state. And now you're self-indulgent. You've given up the struggle. So how have you achieved this distinction?"

And he says, "I'm not self-indulgent, and I haven't given up the struggle, and I haven't reverted to luxury. I am accomplished and fully enlightened. I'll instruct you. I'll teach you. And by practicing as I teach you, you yourselves will realize the truth."

And so eventually, he talked them into giving it a hear. This is interesting, isn't it? It kind of confirms, in a way, his first position—that this was going to be tough business trying to talk to these people. But he was able to convince them, and then he started.

And this is a very famous scene: setting rolling the wheel of the Dharma. You see the Dharma wheel with the eight spokes represented. This is the sermon where the Buddha set it spinning, set it in motion for the benefit of beings.

He talks first of all about the two extremes that shouldn't be cultivated by anyone who has gone forth. And what are they? Devotion to the pursuit of pleasure and sense desires—that's harmful. And then there's the devotion to self-mortification—that's harmful. But there is a middle way discovered by the perfect one, avoiding these extremes. And what is the middle way? He says it's the Eightfold Path: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This gives vision, knowledge, leads to peace, direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbana.

And then he launches into the heart of the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. To start with this—imagine being the Buddha and now you're in the position of thinking, well, how do I explain it to them? Where do you start with the explanation of what you've learned in a way to try to make it accessible to people? He started with the question he had sought to answer: is there a way out of the cycle of suffering?

One way to look at the Four Noble Truths is that they're the Buddha's problem statement, his analysis of the cause of the problem, his conclusion about how it can be addressed and remedied, and his how-to or his means to implement the solution.

The first question is: what is suffering? The first noble truth is the noble truth of suffering. Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, sickness, death, sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering. Association with the loathed is suffering, dissociation from the loved is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates affected by clinging are suffering.

The second noble truth answers the question: what's the cause of suffering? There is the noble truth of the origin of suffering. It is craving which produces renewal of being—craving for sensual desires, craving for being, craving for non-being. That's what causes suffering.

And then, how can the causes be addressed or undone? The third noble truth: this is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering—the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving.

And then the question about what's the path, how do you do it? The fourth noble truth: the way leading to the cessation of suffering—the Eightfold Path.

In regard to each of these four truths, these four fundamental truths that the Buddha explicates all through his teachings, there are different steps required of us as practitioners. When you hear the Four Noble Truths, you can hear it as a list that you can memorize and recollect. That's the first level—just knowing what they are, being able to remember what they are, having some basic idea about what their structure is.

But there's another part of this, which is the development of a clear understanding of the meaning and significance of these in our own lives on a conceptual level. For this, there's a need to learn, to study, to reflect. What's really being said with each one of these? What's the point? What's he saying and why?

But there's yet another level, which is the level of direct knowing. With direct knowing, you're starting to move into the process of opening, liberating insight. Many of these truths that are presented as part of the Buddha Dharma are just common sense. If you said to the average person, "Is it true that everything is changing? Is it true that everything is impermanent?"—you probably wouldn't get too much argument. Most people would say, "Yeah, that's probably right." They might quibble a little about something they could imagine, but most people could go along with that.

But there's a difference between knowing something theoretically on the intellectual level and knowing it all the way through, deep down in your bones, through the process of direct observation.

And it's this second way of exploring and opening these truths that meditation fits. What we're doing with meditation is through the process of developing a concentrated mind—kind of along the lines of what Gautama did, but maybe not quite as good concentration. We're developing mindfulness and concentration so that we ourselves can directly observe ourselves and our own experience, over and over again. We're moving, we're starting to move out of the head-only understanding, the theoretical assent to "yeah, that sounds like it could be true," into seeing for ourselves whether it really is true. And if it is true, in what ways is it true? And if it is true, what are the inferences or intuitive understandings that are part of that deep level of penetration of the meaning of these four truths?

These truths fully open, are fully known, when the wisdom eye opens within us and we see directly. And in seeing directly at a deep enough level, these truths become the basis for our actual liberation through direct knowledge. To completely understand them happens at the end of the path, but it also happens incrementally in earlier stages of enlightenment.

So let's briefly talk about each one of them in sequence.

The first noble truth of suffering. The Buddha said many times, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." Don't go home and tell your family and friends that—they'll think you're having a masochistic exercise, spending three months studying suffering. Yet we intuitively know the truth of suffering, right? But the usual modality, of course, is to put up as many firewalls of delusion or anything else that would serve to keep us from this knowledge, because it's very painful. But despite our best efforts to run from it and to cover it over, it doesn't really work.

And it's one of the great paradoxes of the Buddha's path that it requires us to head right into contact with, and acknowledgment of, suffering in order to find liberation from it. To let go of it, we have to be conscious of it and come to an understanding of what it is. And in order to become conscious of it, we need to be willing to open to it.

There are three different kinds of suffering. There's the physical and mental suffering, *dukkha dukkha*—sounds a little like a train, dukkha dukkha. That's what is often thought of as suffering. But then there's the suffering of constant change, the unceasing change. And then the suffering due to life's conditional nature.

The Buddha says in relationship to the first noble truth: suffering is to be known. It has to be penetrated to be fully understood. So this is kind of a know-thy-enemy strategy. It's happening anyway—it's not that paying attention to it makes it happen. It's happening all on its own. And in fact, paying attention to it has the paradoxical effect of beginning the process of reducing and ending it. But it takes courage and stability of mind and skill to be able to open to this and know this truth in depth while still holding some kind of balance. Learning how to do this really lays the foundation for practice skills and insight knowledge for the further unfolding of the path.

You might want to reflect at some point: when was it in your life that you really became aware of the fact that reality had issues? Because I would be willing to guess that for many of you, the point of realizing that reality has issues was the beginning of your spiritual search.

The second noble truth is the noble truth of the origin of suffering, which is craving. There's this family story about how when I was about three years old, my aunt and uncle took me to this pony ride at a kind of mini carnival place. And I liked the ponies. I did like the pony ride. So I had one pony ride, two pony rides, and then I wanted three. They gave me a lot of pony rides, but all pony rides must come to an end, right? But not as far as I was concerned. And so apparently it ended badly, with my uncle or my father or somebody picking me up and kind of stuffing me under his arm as I kicked and screamed and wailed, "I want what I want what I want what I want," over and over again.

And aren't we a little bit like that? Isn't that basically the posture? It's really tough being human because we have an ability to affect things sometimes, but we have a very confused idea about what we can affect and how we should affect it. So we have a generalized strategy of trying to affect everything in the direction of the pleasant and desired and away from the unpleasant and not desired. And this is a constant struggle, an ongoing battle. I'm sure you've found, as you sit in meditation and as your mind's gotten a little more collected, you start to see the many different levels at which this fight occurs.

So we have to be students of our craving, of this thirsting—which is desire gone wild, rooted in ignorance.

So ignorance is not just a matter of not understanding things or missing a few bits of information—it's more of an active misunderstanding of what's actually going on. It's not just that we don't quite get it; it's that the ideas we have, so bound up with our emotions and preferences, are really wildly at variance with what's actually happening. This plays out in a very dysfunctional attitude towards experience—an attitude of opposition and straining for control.

Letting go of craving is very difficult because it goes against our conditioning, and in some cases against our own instinctual drives—wanting things to be a certain way, being at war with reality as it presents itself in the moment, this presence of greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind.

When we're practicing with this truth of craving as the cause of suffering, we're really in the laboratory, seeing how and when we get caught in opposition to reality, how we struggle against what's true in the moment, trying to manipulate what we do not control. And you start to see the automaticity of this reaction, how often it's going on. You see the pain and futility of it, the suffering it creates when desire moves into craving. Eventually we come to understand that it doesn't work.

Understanding our deluded reactions and the constant friction they create, we start to realize: this approach does not work. We don't get out of this what we're looking for. Even if we get the things we crave, they don't provide the payoff we thought they would.

Then there's the third noble truth—the cessation of craving, the letting go. In this, we begin to get the idea that it's possible to surrender to the truth of how things really are, to drop the painful and futile resistance to the way the moment is unfolding, to let go of clinging to preferences and rest with what's true without struggle.

When we start having periods where we can do this—moments where we can do this—we start to feel the arising of something else, some sort of peace. Perhaps it's only for a moment. But maybe another moment follows, and another after that. And like pointillism, we start to get a different picture of what's possible. We start to understand how we create suffering through our resistance and insistence, and that in letting go of craving, we can instead open and harmonize with things as they are. This is a very different position.

When we experience the end of suffering in this moment of letting go of clinging and craving, and we see that it brings peace, we do it more and more often. We start to know more of these moments. We start to learn how to restore that connection to non-resistant presence. As we accumulate more of these kinds of moments, our confidence and clarity of mind are strengthened. We start to see that this is really possible, that this might be workable.

We start to see for ourselves what is connected with what—what conditions, what causes result in what outcomes. And to the extent that we are creators of those causes and conditions through how we hold our experience, we move in the direction of skillful intersection with what is present.

This becomes a virtuous cycle where we're penetrating more and more deeply into the meaning of these Four Noble Truths, coming to deeper and deeper equanimity. All of the seven factors of enlightenment are strengthening. It happens because of how reality is constructed, how causation works, how causes and conditions operate together. We're getting on the wave and riding it, rather than standing in opposition and letting it smack us down.

From this state—this open, clear, present, non-resistant, mindful state—awakening to the unconditioned becomes possible. The mind is securely on the path to complete emancipation.

The fourth noble truth is the truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. The Eightfold Path is to be cultivated and developed, and everything you're doing here is part of this cultivation. When you think about it—cultivation of right view, which means understanding the Four Noble Truths intellectually and otherwise; right intention, the intention of renunciation, of harmlessness, of compassion; the work with the precepts; the four wise efforts to let go of what's unskillful and cultivate what is skillful; the development of mindfulness; the development of concentration—that's what you're doing all day long here. All these different dimensions are being practiced simultaneously. You've got a twenty-four-hour-a-day thing going on here, and a great opportunity to understand this for yourself.

When the Buddha said he teaches only suffering and the end of suffering, it's not a pessimistic statement. It's not "rah rah for suffering"—let's really get into it and wallow, see how much of it we can have, rub our noses in it like we're toilet training a naughty puppy. It's nothing like that.

It's saying: Can we open to the truth of what we're actually experiencing, as it is? Can we intersect with what is there—including what is painful and difficult—in a way that uses it for our own development and liberation? Can we touch the places of suffering, the places of difficulty, the places of pain, and through creative understanding and intersection and greatness of heart, use that for our own liberation?

Can we touch the places of pleasure, what is pleasant, with a mind of renunciation and free of craving, and use that intersection creatively as fuel for our own liberation and emancipation?

That's really what we're doing here.

So I wish for you all the strength of heart and confidence to see for yourself the truth of your own direct experience—and the endurance and patience to come to the learning within your own body and mind, which will lead to your own liberation.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 16

Q&A: Faith, Effort, Mettā, Lay Practice, and Fear

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min

> *In this comprehensive Q&A session, Joseph Goldstein addresses fundamental questions that arise for practitioners navigating both intensive retreat practice and everyday life. He begins by clarifying that faith (saddhā) in Buddhism is not belief in supernatural beings but confidence in the lawfulness of phenomena—understanding that our actions have consequences through the law of kamma, much as we have faith in gravity through direct experience.*
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> *Goldstein shares valuable lessons from his training with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita, exploring the delicate balance of right effort (sammā vāyāma)—learning to push past comfort zones without forcing or falling into self-judgment. He then illuminates the profound relationship between mettā and insight, explaining through the framework of the two truths how compassion naturally arises from the wisdom of emptiness (suññatā). As Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche expressed: "When you realize the empty nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."*
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> *For lay practitioners wondering how to integrate Dhamma with family life, relationships, and worldly pleasures, Goldstein offers practical guidance. The path is not about renouncing pleasant experience but renouncing attachment to it—learning non-attachment rather than detachment. He candidly discusses working with sexual energy in meditation as a training ground for bringing wisdom to all sense pleasures. The talk concludes with teachings on fear, emphasizing that accepting fear rather than resisting it provides genuine strength, and that neuroscience research shows meditation actually raises our baseline happiness set point.*

So again, there were very many questions, and I grouped several of them together around some central themes. Sometimes as I read the various questions, you may not exactly see what they have in common—I might not either. In first reading they seemed to go together.

This was the first group: "It is my impression that when you speak of having faith, you are not talking about worshipping the Buddha or seeing him as a god, as some traditions seem to do. Will you clarify what you do mean by having faith?" "Can you further explain the phrase, 'the Dharma protects those that protect the Dharma'?" "Could

you explain some of the rituals like bowing and chanting?" "Why do we pay homage to the enlightened one if there is no self? Isn't that affirming identity and encouraging comparison?" And, "How is taking refuge different from clinging and attachment?"

I thought it would be interesting to talk a little bit about what faith means in the context of the Buddhist tradition and in the context of our meditation practice. As we know, in this country, in the West, and maybe around the world in different places, the word faith can mean so many different things. It can mean belief in a dogma. It can be a belief based on what we hear or what somebody says or some book—we have faith in that.

For myself, when I reflect on what faith means for me in this practice, it's really faith in the lawfulness of phenomena, which is another expression or meaning of the term Dharma. Dharma means law. It means that things are happening in our lives lawfully. When we understand this lawful process, we can live in alignment with it, in harmony with it. When we don't understand it, then we're at odds and often in conflict.

Faith in this sense is not very different than the faith we might have in the law of gravity. Does anybody not have faith in that? We just experience it daily as a basic law of existence. Things work in a certain way, and when we understand how they work, we're not at odds, not in struggle with that lawfulness.

One of the most basic laws to come into harmony with is the law of karma—the understanding that our actions have consequences. When we understand that when we act based on greed, hatred, and delusion, it has the results of suffering, and when we act based on generosity, love, kindness, and wisdom, it brings happiness—this is one of the basic laws the Buddha expressed.

We can, to at least some extent, check that out in our lives. And this is where the great hook of the Dharma operates. Because once we have some sense of this, what are you going to do? Go be more greedy? Really fill yourself with hatred? It doesn't make sense. Once we understand the mind and see for ourselves—this is not a question of blind belief, this is a question of investigating for ourselves—what are the consequences of these different mindsets? What brings happiness? What brings suffering? When we see that, then we have faith in the Dharma.

That's what the faith is about. It's not faith in some supernatural being; it's just faith in how things work. You could say faith in the truth.

So when we pay respects to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, or take refuge, really what we're doing is acknowledging our faith in the lawfulness of phenomena. We're acknowledging that yes, the mind has the potential to awaken. When we come in and bow

to the Buddha—and people bow in various ways, or not, or just sit—we're not bowing to a statue, as some people might think from the outside. It's just a representation of a possibility. It's a representation of understanding.

And we're acknowledging or we're respecting, yes, there is a lawfulness, there is a possibility of awakening. We're paying respect to that. So that's how I understand what faith means in this tradition.

So what were the three most valuable things you learned from practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita? One often hears teachers describe extreme or heroic practices, which are then not recommended. However, these extreme practices seem to give momentum for getting back to balance and have been part of the practice life of some of our most successful meditators. In my own life, the more extreme things often lead to the greatest openings—confusion. What is right effort? How does one deepen one's practice?

The most valuable things I learned from practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita—I think at the top of the list must be an expanded sense of what right effort means. Because he's definitely of the warrior school. And I'm by temperament of the comfort school. My practice had gotten quite comfortable, you know, after the initial struggles which everybody has. But I had been practicing long enough, so I was just kind of cruising along and enjoying it. It seemed to be going well.

And then I met Sayadaw U Pandita. He so encourages—and it's his style, and it's not a style that suits everybody—but for me at that time, it was very helpful. He really pushed. He pushed the yogis to make efforts that went way beyond my comfort zone. The schedule that he laid out for us was basically: you should be spending fourteen hours a day sitting and walking. Well, you think about twenty-four hours in a day, that leaves ten hours. Seven hours for sleep, and that's generous. That still leaves enough hours for eating and other things. But it's not so easy to rack up those fourteen hours when you're really keeping track. It used to annoy me no end at the end of retreat when I found that some of my colleagues were counting the dharma talks as one of their hours. It had never occurred to me. So again, he had this very high bar.

Another aspect of how he worked, which was very demanding—he emphasized to a very high extent the quality of precision, precision of reporting. We would have to go in and really report in quite an accurate way. We felt the breath, the rising, the falling. What did we actually feel? Not just that we were with it, but what was felt in it. The pressure, the expansion, the tightness—what is felt in the falling?

I spent weeks doing walking meditation because we would have to report in that way about the walking as well. I could feel pretty well what I felt in the lifting and then in the coming down. But in the moving forward, that movement through the air—I knew I was moving, but I could not figure out how I knew I was moving, what it was that I was actually feeling in that movement. Maybe you're better at this than I am and so know right away, but it took me weeks to realize, oh, that's what that sensation is. So that's the kind of precision that he was asking for and inspired in the practice.

The caution in this—and this is, I think, one of the great challenges for everybody on the spiritual path—is to find out for oneself, to experiment for oneself, how we can be at the forward edge of effort without forcing. Because it's very easy, especially if people have the tendency—which probably none of you have—but the tendency towards self-judgment. This can be a setup for self-judgment and feeling we're not doing it well enough, we're not good yogis, and just all of that.

So it's a very delicate undertaking, just to explore, each one of us in our own way. It's not going to look the same for each one of us. But what does it mean just to extend past our comfort zone in practice? Just to push those edges, to push those boundaries a little bit, but without forcing, without going to the self-judgment—out of interest. It's just that sense: we're in this amazing environment now where all you have to do is explore awareness. That's your only job. So what a gift. You don't have any other responsibilities. It's an amazing gift you've given to yourself to have this time. Your only job is to see, to explore: what is the nature of awareness? Where do I get lost?

How do I get lost? How can I extend the edges, the boundaries of what I'm comfortable with?

This takes a lot of delicacy. We have to watch and see: Can I push here a little bit? Oh, that's a little too much—I need to sit back, I need to relax. If I'm getting too uptight in trying to be precise, then the move is to open up, to settle back and relax. There's not any one prescription, but it is useful to energize this quality of interest. Now we're really interested in what's happening.

There was one retreat I was on in Burma. I was very fired up to practice, and I remember having the feeling that I did not want to waste a single moment. My practice has not always been like that—there were times when I haven't had that intensity of interest—but it was illuminating to experience it at that time, to see: Oh yes, that's possible. I think probably in part, at least, because it was in Burma and it was hard to get there and required a lot, so I wanted to make the best use of the time. That's the quality I really learned from Sayadaw U Pandita—to arouse this fire of passionate interest in awareness, in understanding our minds, in understanding our lives.

Just as a little anecdote about the dangers of cross-cultural communication: This was when Sayadaw was here, and a lot of us were practicing with him, practicing very hard, trying to do that fourteen hours a day, not sleeping much. We were really pushing ourselves. And then at the end of every interview, he would say, "Try harder." And here we were killing ourselves. Try harder. Some of us just let that go in and out. Some of us went completely neurotic around this and caused a lot of self-judgment. How can I try harder? I'm doing my best! It turns out that what was actually said in Burmese was simply, "Please continue." We didn't find this out till years later, after being driven crazy by "try harder."

So again, this whole question of right effort is a very delicate matter. We need to explore how we can do it in balance. When do we push? When do we settle back? When do we aim for more precision? When do we open up? It's all an exploration.

Several questions have come in: To whom do we send mettā if nobody is there? Doesn't the practice reinforce a sense of me, or something which receives mettā? Do you have a definition of love that is a useful conceptual frame in your practice? The deeper I get into my meditation practice—becoming non-attached, having non-desire—the more isolated this path seems to feel. Why? And: I think you said compassion is the expression of emptiness. Can you explain that?

These questions really have to do with understanding the quality of mettā, how it's cultivated in our practice, both in mettā practice and in vipassanā, and the relationship of mettā to insight—to the insight of selflessness.

A very useful framework for understanding not only the Buddha's teachings but also the application of them in our lives is the framework of what are called the two truths: relative truth and ultimate truth. We operate on both of these levels. Just as an example: you look at this, and what do we see? We see a bell. It's solid, we strike it, and there's a sound that comes out. We're using it; it's functional. So we're relating to it as a bell, and this is just the ordinary, conventional, relative understanding of our lives.

If we looked at this under a high-powered microscope, "bell" would disappear. I've never looked at it under a high-powered microscope, so I don't know what we'd see—but it wouldn't be "bell." If we could look deeply enough, perhaps on a subatomic particle level, it's a whole different level of reality. But that reality is not separate from bell. The relative and what we could call the more ultimate levels exist in union. It's not that the ultimate level is here and bell is over there.

It's the same reality seen from different levels.

This is very important because if we separate the two, then we get into all kinds of spiritual disengagement from our lives. We begin thinking, "Oh yes, I'm cultivating emptiness because that's the ultimate, and the conventional is just something inferior over here." No, it's a union. We're operating on both levels, and we need to operate skillfully on both levels.

So when we cultivate metta in the form of wishing well to ourselves, wishing well to others, this feeling of goodwill—goodwill to ourselves, goodwill to others—that is on the relative level. We are using the concept of self, of I, of other, of being. Those are the terms, those are the concepts that are appropriate and meaningful on the relative level, so there's no problem. May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be free of enmity, may you. This is a level we operate on, and for the most part we operate on this level most of the time.

In the practice of Vipassana, we begin to give ourselves access to another level of experience, the more ultimate level where the concepts disappear, the solidity of things disappears, bell disappears, self disappears, Joseph disappears, and we begin to experience, as Sally was talking about last night—we experience what we call self on the relative level as the play of aggregates, changing, arising, and passing in each moment where there's no solidity.

On that level, to use the conventional phrases of metta doesn't make sense. It's the wrong level. We wouldn't say, "May the perception aggregate be happy." "May vedana be happy." I remember we'd like vedana to be happy. No, it's a misuse of those concepts. It's on the wrong level.

But then the interesting question arises: what's the relationship of the two? How does our understanding of emptiness, emptiness of self, the more ultimate level—how does that inform our life on the relative level, where we're mostly living?

And here's where it gets very interesting. Through the practice of meditation and deepening insight into the selfless nature of this process—that it is just the aggregates arising and passing, this empty phenomena rolling on—as we loosen our attachment to the view of self, and even more important, we loosen our attachment to the felt sense of self, then we're not defending anything. We don't have to live defensively. We begin to see there's not a self here that needs to be gratified or protected or defended or aggrandized.

Through seeing the emptiness of self, the feeling of metta, the feeling of goodwill, arises naturally because there's not a separation which is occurring on this level of self and other.

This was expressed beautifully by one of the great Tibetan meditation masters, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, "When you realize the empty nature of phenomena, the selfless nature of phenomena, the energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless."

I had a powerful moment of what I would call transformative understanding on one retreat I was doing with a Tibetan teacher named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He was giving talks on bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is the term—literally it means awakened mind or awakened heart. It refers on the relative level to compassion and on the more ultimate level to the wisdom of emptiness.

I had read and heard for years about the bodhisattva vows, these vows of compassion to help liberate all beings. They were very inspiring, but it felt completely out of range. How in the world could I ever liberate all beings? It was a nice idea, but I just couldn't connect with the actuality of it and what it could even mean.

But as Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was talking about bodhichitta, something shifted in my mind. As he was teaching, I began to understand that compassion is the activity of emptiness. Compassion is the manifestation of selflessness.

When we are abiding, hopefully increasingly, in that understanding of emptiness of self, we begin to see that that understanding naturally manifests as love and compassion. And so then the bodhisattva vows took on a whole different meaning. It's not that—and they never could—rest on the shoulders of a self. It doesn't make sense. How could a self ever liberate all beings? But when we understand that the expression of emptiness is compassion, then it's the Dharma saving all beings, it's emptiness saving all beings, it's compassion saving all beings without reference to anyone doing it.

That opened the whole possibility of a life dedicated to that.

Does that seem clear to you? Because it was so powerful for me to take it off of the shoulders of self and to see that the wisdom of emptiness manifests as this. The energy to bring about the good of others dawns uncontrived and effortless. The deeper our wisdom of selflessness, of emptiness.

And so this is how metta, which is expressed on the relative level, and emptiness, which is the wisdom of the ultimate level—where there are interfaces, it becomes a union. It's not two different things.

A student asks: "When I really start to see clearly the truth of the Dhamma—the three marks of existence, four noble truths—the things that I thought were most important and meaningful—family, husband, children, career—seem less important, al-

most empty. But I'm not ready to give up my life. So how do we balance practice and truth with a lay life? Basically, how can I hold both the ultimate truth of the Dharma and the mundane realities of day-to-day life?"

Another writes: "I am a relatively young person. I often worry about how to relate to many of the things we are renouncing here, such as art, current affairs, and romance, when the retreat ends. Do you have any advice on how to be a lay Buddhist in a modern Western culture?"

And another asks: "Not much has been said about human sexuality. How does it fit in with the teaching? Can making love be done mindfully? It seems that sex is driven by desire. Therefore, can it ever be wholesome or wisdom-filled? Or perhaps only when the motivation is procreation?"

These are important questions for everyone. There's often a misunderstanding of the teachings that in order to be free, we have to renounce pleasant experience. That is a complete misunderstanding. First of all, it's impossible. We're living in a sense world, and as we all know, our life experience is made up of pleasant things, unpleasant things, some neutral things. And even if we wanted to renounce pleasure, what would that mean? Are you going to go around with your eyes closed and your ears closed and your body in a suit of armor? So it's a completely mistaken view of what it is that we're practicing.

The nature of freedom is not about renouncing the pleasant. The nature of freedom is renouncing or letting go of attachment to the pleasant. These are two very different things.

It's interesting—even in English, there are a couple of words that often get confused, and I think it's important to understand the difference between detachment and non-attachment. In English, the word detachment—and people often associate that with the Buddha's teachings, "you have to become detached"—but the connotation of detachment is a kind of withdrawal, a pulling back from experience. Whereas non-attachment suggests being right there in experience without holding on. That's quite different than detachment.

So this is the framework of understanding. The Buddha taught to a wide range of people. He taught lay men and women. He taught monks. He taught nuns. And the teachings varied according to whom he was teaching. When we think about renunciation—renunciation of attachment—the level or practice of renunciation will be different whether we're leading a lay life or a monastic life. The monastics have some hun-

dreds of rules, which are basically about renunciation. For lay people—and the Buddha acknowledged this, he taught for lay people who realized that in our worldly life, we are not going to be living the life of a monastic renunciate.

And so there are sense pleasure enjoyments that are perfectly allowable. It's just part of a natural lay life. What the Buddha did was to point out that as we're engaged, as we're living the life—whether it's of sexual pleasure or food or any other aesthetic pleasure—as lay people, the guidelines are to be able to enjoy those pleasures within certain limits, the limits being where we're not causing harm to ourselves or others. These are the basic moral precepts that we undertake.

So it's a framework. And it's interesting just to consider the difference when you hear the words—I'll just try this on for size—

When you hear the phrase "making love" alongside the word "lust," in my mind it conjures up two very different things, although sometimes they get conflated. But the renunciation that might be appropriate for a lay person is the renunciation, we could say, of addictive lust—where we're driven by sexual desire, which, as we know, can be so powerful, often driving people's entire lives.

For a monk or nun, they're renouncing it altogether, the acting on it. For lay people, it's not renouncing the expression of that energy, but it is creating certain limits. Is this skillful? Is this leading to harmony? Is it an expression of love? Or are we being driven by an addictive quality of lust? We need to see that this becomes our practice.

It's very interesting on retreat, where we are living temporarily similar to monks and nuns—this is like a temporary monastery—to explore what we can learn about sexual desire in a context where we're not giving expression to it. Because I'm sure that simply by being here, it hasn't meant that you haven't felt any desire. The desire arises in the mind, regardless of our environment. So the question is, what can we learn about that energy which will serve us in the context of our lay life, where we do give expression to it? This has been very interesting for me, and I think for anybody really looking at their minds and this energy.

Just a few examples and arenas of investigation. There's one kind of desire that arises in the mind as fantasies. Sexual fantasies are very seductive. You're sitting here and you look so peaceful—who knows what's going on inside? So how do we relate when there's a sexual fantasy arising in the mind that's so seductive and we get pulled into it? That's a chance to see: can we be mindful of it? Can we be aware of it and learn not to be identified with it? We can play with many different skillful means to do this.

Let me mention a few that I found useful—you'll find your own—in those periods in my practice where this was arising frequently. A fantasy would arise in my mind, maybe one that I had gone through a hundred times already. So I started putting up a sign in my mind: "Dead End." Because I knew this isn't going any place. I'll go down this road, and it's just a dead end, and I'm back to the breath. After being down that dead end so many times, I decided to put the sign up right at the beginning to remind myself this is not going anywhere. And it helped. It helped free the mind from being seduced by something that I could see was not serving any purpose. That was one little tool I used.

Another tool I found very helpful goes to the precision aspect of the practice. When these fantasies were arising, I would be noting "pleasant, pleasant," and sometimes I'd note "seeing" if it was visual images—seeing, pleasant—but it didn't do it. I would note it, but the note didn't get where the real hook was for me. Then, just in being interested in this and seeing how my mind was getting so caught in these fantasies again and again, I reflected on the law of dependent origination. The links, as you probably know, start with contact, then feeling, then desire or craving. The contact is the first contact with the image—that's the contact. Then there's the feeling tone to it, which is pleasant.

What I started doing was making a double note. Every time that image would arise, I would note "contact, pleasant"—contact, pleasant. It was amazing. Just the addition of that little bit of mindfulness acknowledging contact with the image, pleasant—it was like hitting the right acupuncture point. The identification with it released; it just washed through.

I'm using these as a few examples. You'll want to explore when the mind is caught up in this kind of desire. This is really worth looking at, because if we don't have the freedom here to see how these fantasies arise and have some choice about whether we follow them or not, then we're not going to have much freedom of choice out in the world as the fantasies arise. We'll be much more inclined just to act—at least act when we can—whether appropriate or not. So there's a lot to learn here about the nature of desire in the mind.

Another powerful arena for me in this area was not so much the fantasies that arose in the mind, but the feeling that sometimes happens in meditation, especially as our practice has opened a bit and the energy in our bodies is flowing. Sometimes what happens is there are rushes of sexual energy in the body. You can be sitting, and these tremendous rushes come—and they're very enjoyable. Over years of practice, just watching this phenomenon and watching my changing relationship to it, at first I was thrilled.

Oh boy. Now I know why people like to meditate. It's like this blissful sexual energy filling the body. So for a while, I was just really sinking into it and even encouraging it.

But after some time, again realizing: this is just not going any place. It's very enjoyable, but it's not serving the practice. It's not serving freedom. It's not serving peace. But I needed to go through it to actually realize that for myself.

Then I went through another phase. Whenever that energy started to arise, I'd think, "Oh, just don't bother me." I would kind of push it away and didn't want to have to deal with it. So that was a whole phase of resistance or aversion to it, because it felt like it was disturbing the meditation. It took some time to realize that's not it either.

And finally it came to the place of real equanimity. These feelings would come up. It was fine. My mind wasn't drawn to them. It wasn't pushing them away. There was just this openness, impartiality, and then that energy came and went. It was not a disturbance. It was just another part of the passing show.

I say all this because this is a powerful energy. It arises in our meditation practice, and obviously it arises very powerfully in our lives. We need to understand it. We need to come into a wise and skillful relationship to it. And as lay people, we can express it. We can enjoy that domain of relationships. But can we bring wisdom to it?

You can extrapolate from this particular example. I've emphasized the relationship to sexual energy, but it really has to do with all the other pleasures of the senses that we enjoy in the world. There's nothing wrong in the enjoyment of them, but are we enjoying them wisely, or are they becoming a source of suffering? That's our challenge as lay practitioners. We have to be very awake in these domains.

Someone asks about fear: "How do we free ourselves from fear? I am scared of getting old. I do not see how one could not have this fear with all the aches and pains to come. I am not particularly attached to my body or life right now—I could take it or leave it—but I am scared of all the extra stuff I will have to deal with in thirty years. I have recognized this as aversion, and I realize everyone must age, but that doesn't help the fears. Any suggestions?"

Another person writes: "In my own mind, fear leads to many things depending on the situation. Fear may lead to clinging or aversion. Sometimes it leads to thinking, planning, or to delusion. Sometimes it just hangs around as a seeming response to the uncontrollability of the world. How do we free ourselves?"

As I talked about last week, fear is a very deeply conditioned force in the mind. We need to learn how to relate to it in a skillful way so that it doesn't debilitate our lives. And it's interesting—the first question is really about anticipated fear. It's worth noticing how often our fears are about things that are not here in the moment, but things that we imagine will happen.

Let me back up a bit. The primary way of working with fear—and this I mentioned in the talk last week—is to become accepting of the feeling itself. We need to practice this. Mostly fear is such a problem in our lives because we're so resistant to feeling that emotion. It's very painful. It's uncomfortable. We don't like it. And so we'll do all kinds of things not to feel fear.

Our practice is to learn to become okay with feeling fear. It is okay to feel it. It's uncomfortable, just like feeling a pain in the knee or the back is uncomfortable, unpleasant—but it's okay. We can make space for it. We can open to it. We can work the same way with the unpleasantness of this particular emotion. The little mantra becomes: "It's okay. It's okay. Let me feel it. It's okay." We coach ourselves. We remind ourselves to soften, to allow.

What's so interesting in this practice and in life is that the things we resist, we are feeding by the very resistance. We think that if we resist the fear and try to keep it out, that will provide some kind of safety or refuge, that we'll be okay. But actually, the resistance to fear is exactly what strengthens it. We're giving it energy. So it's not an effective strategy for working with it—it's counterproductive. We can hear this teaching, but we need to discover it for ourselves. As fear arises: "This is okay. Let me feel it." Then we begin to see that yes, it's another passing emotion. It arises, it's a mind state, it's there, it's uncomfortable, it's painful—and it passes. This is the foundation.

As was mentioned, when we are not accepting of fear, it drives us to so many other mind states and emotions and actions. I was once teaching at a retreat for lawyers, law students, and law professors—teaching mindfulness. In one of the discussion groups, a second-year law student said something very interesting. They were talking about the adversarial nature of that profession, with a lot of intense emotion. He shared that he had to get angry in these confrontations in order not to feel the fear. I thought that was interesting. The notion in his mind was that if he felt the fear, it would be weakening, that somehow he would be giving up his strength, and so in order not to feel the fear, it got expressed or vented as anger.

It's a mistaken notion. Actually, the acceptance of fear provides tremendous strength because we're not putting all this energy into resistance. We can just allow ourselves to feel it and then act appropriately.

There's a beautiful statement by the great artist Georgia O'Keeffe that expresses what it's like when we can accept fear. She said, "I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life, and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do."

We have the notion that fear necessarily limits us. It does not need to limit us. If we are accepting of the emotion the way we would accept sadness or anger or joy—it's just another mind state—if we can become accepting of it, we can act right in the midst of fear. We can do whatever we think is appropriate to do. We can take appropriate action.

I had an experience of this. I was with friends on Hawaii, on the island of Kauai. There's this beautiful eleven-mile hike on the North Shore into the Kalalau Valley. It's just up and down and up and down cliffs, and then we camped for a week in that remote valley. There were high cliffs, and one of the friends I was with grew up in Hawaii. He was very familiar with climbing them. I looked at those cliffs and thought, "Where's the elevator?" It was daunting. There wasn't a path up—it was just raw cliff face. But I was a lot younger then, and he was very enthusiastic, so I just went along. Like Georgia O'Keeffe, I was really terrified the whole way up.

And it didn't matter. It was just a great lesson for me in seeing that yes, the fear is here, even the terror is here, and I can still do what I want to do. So that was very liberating—that we don't have to be limited by this feeling if we're willing to accept the feeling. That's the basic foundation of working with fear and freeing ourselves from it.

One other piece about this projection of fear about future events. There's been a lot of research—neuroscience research and psychological testing research—about the nature of happiness and people's beliefs about happiness. The conclusion from this research, and I'll just read from this: "Studies have shown that we systematically overestimate the degree to which good and bad experiences will affect us. Changes in wealth, health, age, marital status, et cetera, tend not to matter as much as we think they will. And yet we make our most important decisions in life based on these inaccurate assumptions."

This is very interesting, especially with regard to fear. We're looking ahead, we may be anticipating all these things, thinking that they're going to have a major material effect on our lives, and it turns out that they don't.

There was further research, brain neuroscience research, suggesting that we each have a set point—a happiness set point. Even when very good things happen and we feel elated, we quickly come back to the set point. When very bad things happen, we're upset by them and maybe suffer a bit, but again, we quickly come back to our set point. So our fears about what might happen affecting our happiness are not very accurate.

Now, the very good news. Mostly, researchers had thought that the set point in people is fixed—that through our conditioning and our birth, we each have our set point and that's it for life. What they found through meditation research, the research on meditators, is that the set point changes. Through meditation, we actually set a higher set point of happiness. And the more we meditate, the higher that set point becomes. So meditate away.

Knowing this, I feel that so many of our fears do come up, and a lot are anticipated. But we have to understand the actual process of our lives. What are the causes of happiness? We shouldn't be deluded into thinking that some of these things we may be fearing matter very much, when they end up not mattering very much. It has much more to do with that set point of understanding and metta and compassion. These are the qualities that we can cultivate in our hearts and minds.

There were many more things to say, but this might be a good place to end. Let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 17

Courage and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h03

> *In this heartfelt talk from the three-month retreat, Carol Wilson addresses the intense oscillations practitioners experience—the expansions and contractions, the flowing insights followed by profound identification and doubt. She explores how these challenging cycles are not obstacles but essential opportunities for developing compassion and wisdom.*
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> *Wilson examines sakkāya-diṭṭhi (personality view) as a central hindrance, drawing from the Buddha's teaching that suffering arises when we regard experience as 'mine, I am, myself.' She references Ajahn Sumedho's observation that Western practitioners particularly struggle with self-doubt, taking refuge in personality beliefs that limit our sense of what's possible. When practice becomes difficult, we often fall back into familiar patterns of self-judgment rather than trusting the unknown territory of awakening.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that meeting our individual suffering with mindfulness and compassion connects us to universal suffering rather than isolating us. Wilson shares His Holiness the Dalai Lama's teaching that compassion develops through deep insight into suffering, gained by opening to our own experience. She uses Tolkien's Lord of the Rings as an allegory for the spiritual path—how we repeatedly face situations we never imagined we could handle, and how each challenge strengthens our courage, wisdom, and eventually transforms personal motivation into something approaching bodhicitta, the aspiration for the awakening of all beings.*

In the last week or so, I've been really struck—and this tends to happen to me about four or five weeks into most long retreats—by the diversity of what each of you comes in with during our meetings. Actually, each one of you comes in with a diversity. You never know who's going to walk through the door. It's so changeable. And at this point in the retreat, I'm just really struck by how intense it all is and how much you're all going through in different ways. Up and down, contraction, expansion, contraction, expansion.

Sometimes it's really inspiring to me. Sometimes I just have a sense of amazement—it's remarkable that you keep going. But then other times the intensity is on the side of lots of energy, lots of inspiration, lots of openness. What strikes me most is the commitment, the energy, the courage that it really takes to keep hanging in there like you are and to truly meet what's occurring in all the different realms.

I know sometimes that's difficult. It can change so much. Sometimes the insight is just flowing. It's relaxed, spacious. You just see things coming and going. It's so clear that there's no problem, never has been, never will be. And then the next time it's like, "Oh my God, never going to see through the end of this. It's just hopeless, just never going anywhere." It goes from profound ease and insight to profound identification—sometimes in the same day, sometimes over a series of days.

The whole retreat is like life: it just goes closing and opening, closing and opening, like the breath, or like the tides, or really like the energy of the universe, like a sine wave moving up and down. Part of what's wonderful about a longer retreat is that hopefully you start to get it a little bit—that's just the nature of things. Instead of each up being your personal triumph and each down being your personal failure. Or perhaps the up isn't yours, but the down is certainly your personal failure.

When Joseph mentioned emptiness and compassion the other night—how compassion is the natural expression of wisdom, of the heart-mind of emptiness, of when all the energy isn't coagulating into a sense of me—there's so much space for empathy, for compassion. In the up periods, in the expansion periods, that just seems obvious. Of course compassion and wisdom are the natural state of things.

In the down periods, I know sometimes never mind compassion—but even the mention, the possibility of bodhicitta, of the aspiration that my practice, my life, might be a source of awakening for all beings... Like, are you kidding me? What does that have to do with my sitting here, lost in aversion at this tingle in my back? I'm ready to kill. I know it's a little overreactive, but I don't get what this has to do with compassion or bodhicitta. It doesn't seem too connected.

I want to talk a little about these ups and downs and the sense of how when it's about me, it's much more difficult. You know that, but I'll speak to it some more. Our paths are each different, and we never know how our path needs to unfold—even tomorrow, even in the next minute. But something I've learned to really trust, except when I forget it, is that even when it seems like my particular suffering, my particular pain, my particular story, and I'm really caught in the personal nature of it—each of our so-called particular stories is just our individual experience as a representative of the suffering of all beings.

In the particular, when we continue to simply be with it, open to it, meet it with kindness, with compassion, with courage—just to bear witness to our own incredibly painful or incredibly stupid pain—when we just bear witness to that over and over, that is the cultivation of compassion and wisdom. We really see that this is just the particular expression of what is universal.

Something Ajahn Sumedho used to say when starting a talk in Thailand: "Welcome, brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." We're all in it together.

Our tendency at times can be, when you're in the down cycle of the sine wave, when you're in the contraction—of course it's about me. That's part of the contraction. But that's not when you feel connected to all beings, is it? That's when we either want to go off and hide.

You don't want to come to an interview because you don't want to really admit how completely you're failing at the moment—even to yourself, never mind to us. You don't even want to say it. "Oh, it's not going well. I've completely failed. It's all about me." We don't tend to feel connected then.

But actually, any particular suffering—you think whatever you're going through, you're the only person who goes through it? No. Maybe you'd like to be, but no. And instead of it being an isolating experience, simply by meeting our confusion or suffering with mindfulness—of course, the kindness of mindfulness, that quality of compassion, non-judging, not having an assumption of what should happen, just the courage to keep showing up—the wisdom arises by itself. By itself we start to expand again, opening into the fact that even though it seems like my individual little "poor me," even this can be the avenue into connection with all beings.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about compassion a lot, obviously. Compassion is described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering—feeling with. It's really just empathy, not a pushing away. And His Holiness says, how does it develop? Through deep insight into what suffering is. And guess how we get that deep insight, he says. It arises through focusing, through opening to, through being present with our own experience. Then the compassion strengthens through the continual being open to our own experience. It strengthens with empathy toward ourselves and naturally moves into empathy with all beings, connectedness to all beings.

As Sogyal Rinpoche says, just cultivate the correct motivation in your heart—just the compassion—and it turns into bodhicitta all by itself. But this talk isn't concerned with bodhicitta, because it will happen all by itself. I just want to talk about what he's saying here in terms of the opening, in terms of the acceptance, in terms of the strength it takes—which is enormous—to be present for all this. Enormous strength, over and over. That's why the difficult times in life and the difficult times in retreat are so important. They're key for someone who's on a path of awakening. If we're on a path of avoid, repress, deny, the difficult times aren't so key. But for the path we're on, they're essential.

So I want to talk a little more about that tonight. Hopefully it's a bit of a pep talk, but you never know.

As I mentioned, watching the ebbs and flows in your own practice—even though each thing that's happening is so immediate, everything so intense—your world has really shrunk in a way to this area, these four walls, a lot more than you even realize. Incidents that happen here reverberate hugely. Have you noticed that in your mind, in your heart? Hugely.

Because all our conditioning is still popping up. It just happens to all be focused here. My teacher once had someone say to him, "Oh, you're a monk because you're giving up all desire." And he just cracked up. He said, "Don't kid yourself. A monk can take all that craving you have in the world—that same amount of craving—and bring it down to two things: food and their robes. But the amount of craving can still be the same."

In a way, that's sometimes what's happening here. When you're in the midst of an intense, open, beautiful experience, even though intellectually you go, "I know. I know it's impermanent. I know it comes and goes. I'm seeing the mind that says, 'Oh, finally you've got it.' I'm seeing it. I'm not clinging to this." And when it goes—which it does—we say, "That's okay. It's all right. I know it's going." And it's kind of okay for a while. But somehow the next day, suddenly everything's just wrong. And it's so intense. Each time: this is how it is. This is how it is.

It's so up. It's so down. And even if you sat and looked back over these four and a half weeks, you may not even be able to remember how many changes you've gone through. You may be able to remember some of them, so we get a little bit of the sense. But still, when you're in them, it's everything.

When insight and wisdom is there, it's so strong. And then it goes, and we're so caught—but with the added little extra goody of being able to see that we're caught, to actually know that we're caught and identified, whereas before we didn't know that. And since we know we're caught, and yesterday we weren't, clearly we shouldn't be caught now. So we're caught because I'm useless. I can't do it. I did something wrong. You know the whole thing.

So doubt comes up, impatience, frustration, and whichever particular way your personality is inclined, it can go to doubt or self-doubt or frustration or impatience or out the door. I can't imagine why you're laughing.

We're also coming up against—as many of you have expressed and I think it's been talked about—whatever views and expectations we hold about our abilities, or the practice, or what should be happening. And even when we think we know what our ex-

pectations are, often there's really some subtle one in the background. I can't think how many people have said in the last few days, just as a passing reference and not a big deal, "Well, at this point in the retreat, blah, blah, blah." It should be or it shouldn't be, compared to another retreat—compared to what? But "at this point"—so even that we're thinking anything, there's some subtle expectation, as if we know what should be happening.

So our views, our ideas about ourselves, about practice, about what's going on are constantly being challenged. And really, day after day, even if it seems familiar to you, it's not. It's unknown territory. The conditions are never exactly the same as they were that other retreat when you experienced the breath in this particular way and you know what the next thing should be. And then it isn't that. Oh my God, what does this mean? It's better, it's worse, it's this, it's that. It's like—give it up. We don't know.

We're always being challenged. But we like to have a framework, a path, that we can compare ourselves to, even if that makes us feel bad. At least we can have a path to compare ourselves to. And if it makes us feel good, that's even worse. I mean, it's both the same—it's both a problem.

But it's really difficult. We get into the frustration, into the comparing, into the doubt, the self-doubt, when the reference point is me, is all about me. When the changes are just happening—you know, it's really calm, you're really present with the flow of changing objects, choiceless awareness is peaceful—and then it changes but there's just really no clinging, it's no problem. And that can happen. And then you're tired and things are not so clear, but the mind isn't really reactive—it's no problem.

But the reverse: when suddenly it's been all cloudy and it opens up—and I'm not saying choiceless is better and cloudy is worse, I'm going by what people tend to judge themselves about. People don't usually say, "Cloudy—great! Choiceless flowing—I'm blowing it." Usually not. When it goes from a way you like it, that you feel is effortless, it's flowing, and it changes—there's the sense of: What did I do wrong? How can I keep it? How come my concentration and mindfulness, which were proceeding very steadily for two and a half weeks, how come now it's all over the shop? What am I doing? How can I fix it?

And it's really—we're always looking to some reference point, some pattern we can put it in. But the suffering here, the thing that feeds our doubt and confusion, is the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the personality view.

We've mentioned this before. *Diṭṭhi* is view. *Sakkāya*—well, Sayadaw U Tejaniya defines *sakkāya* as just the flow of the six sense experiences that we've talked about a lot, just the six things coming and going.

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi—well, actually, let's go to the Buddha. "This is the way leading to the origination of personality." One regards—in parentheses it says "all phenomena," but that's just shorthand—one regards any one particular of the six arising experiences as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself."

It's just a fast little moment. You go outside, it's chilly—"I'm so cold." Or you're sitting here and there's a little sound and you go, "I don't like that unpleasantness." Or there's a pain in the back—"my back hurts, this is mine." Or you see someone else walking and that comparison, that *māna*—"I'm so this, I'm so that." It's really a clinging, just the movement of clinging. But it just comes and goes in a moment.

This is the Buddha again: "This is the way leading to the cessation of personality." One regards any particular *sakkāya*, any particular sense experience, any of the five aggregates Sally talked about—which are also sense experiences—one regards thus: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

Now, sometimes that's just theoretical. Sometimes saying that doesn't connect. But sometimes when you're feeling relatively clear but a little caught up, you might just notice in relation to whatever's arising, just go, "Hmm, this is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." It's interesting. Not with judgment, not with force—just, "Hmm, this pain in my knee... oh, my knee... actually, where's the knee? There's sensation. The sensation is not me. It's not mine. It's not myself." You can just drop that in from time to time.

But when it's all about me, my story, my failures, my beautiful experience—it can be overwhelming. And when it tanks, when it goes in the wrong direction, or it's suddenly really intensely overwhelming, or you just feel like, "Ah, I can't do it, it's just too much, I can't do it"—stop a minute. First of all, we don't even know what the "it" is that I can't do. But "I can't do it."

Open to the bigger picture. The *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* is narrowed down to "I've got to somehow do it better, I've got to somehow whatever it is." Just the big picture. This really helps me a lot. When I'm with something—and sometimes it's not that I can't do it, sometimes what's arising is just so difficult, and I'll get to that in a minute—you really kind of know what to do, open to it, be with it, but something in you just says, "I can't." You know, "I can't do it."

That's when I find consciously bringing in the bigger picture. This is the particular representation of this particular aspect of suffering in the world. That doesn't make it go away or better, but sometimes it gives me more courage, more motivation to be with it.

I want to say I don't mean it in the way that some people have said, like a way of denigrating your own suffering. "Well, I feel this pain, but what about all the people who are in the hospital? So I shouldn't be complaining." Now, you might notice what that attitude is in the mind, right? It's aversion. We're not talking about aversion.

We're talking about, "Oh, okay, let me just for a moment be the representative even of something like hunger." "How can I be hungry when people are starving?" No—I'm hungry. That could actually bring us into empathy with people who are really hungry, or people who are really lost in confusion.

So sometimes that just helps me in the "OK, maybe I can be here for another moment." And whatever it is we're going through becomes the vehicle—it is the vehicle for compassion and wisdom. Nowhere else. Dogen Zenji said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" Only this.

So when it's really difficult—I mean, sometimes it's just overwhelmingly unpleasant. But when we're falling into this frustration, this doubt, this "I'm out the door, it's just too much, I can't do it"—especially the doubt and frustration, the me, me, me—it's almost always the real coagulation around personality view that's doing it.

The personality view forms, as I was reading there, about a moment of clinging, a moment of "this is me, this is mine, this is myself." But of course, it immediately—as we talked about last week with all the thoughts and feelings—immediately some whole story of personality forms from that. "I'm this kind of person. I'm that kind of person. I'm such an angry person. I'm such a greedy person. I've always been hopeless at any kind of exercise"—whatever it is. Changing all the time, but we don't notice that when we're caught in one particular version.

And so when we're in the sense of this frustration, this "I just can't do this anymore, I can't bear it," often we're really in a particular story of sakkāya-diṭṭhi that we believe. Sogyal Rinpoche said, "We create a cage for ourselves out of our emotions, out of our sense of personality, our sense of duality, and then here we sit day in and day out." It's a little bleak, but sometimes it feels that way—through the ideas, the personality view. This is who I am. This is what I'm capable of.

And as this practice is a continuing call to the courage to open into the unknown of each moment, to meet stuff we never thought we could meet, when we fall back into our personality beliefs—"Well, this is beyond me, I'm just a simple soul, I thought maybe I'd have a few nice meditation experiences, but I could never be enlightened. I mean, I come and practice and all, but for me to really be free..."—if I really look at it, do I hold that possibility? Of course, as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, it's not the personality that's enlightened, which is actually a huge relief.

He said something interesting at a retreat we were on once. He was talking about Westerners, people with a Western education and cultural upbringing. He said he feels that for people with a Western education and upbringing, one of the biggest hindrances is self-doubt—self-doubt in terms of not having confidence or faith in our own insights. Our own experiences, momentary experiences of the potential of freedom, absolute moments of freedom—really seeing, say, the emptiness of personality view, or just seeing that something we were really suffering from is no problem. I mean, you've all had these experiences—seeing impermanence, seeing the uncontrollability and the freedom that comes with that.

And he says that for our insights into awareness, our liberating insights, in part our self-doubt is so strong because—this is Ajahn Sumedho—our personalities and our belief in our personalities is so strong that we really rely on and take refuge in our personalities in a profound way. And so our personalities often become our reference point. When something doesn't go the way we think it should, we're back in our personality.

Let me give you an example. When in a relaxed, non-grasping mode of practice, there's not much velcro, there's not much clinging, things are just happening, the sine wave's just going—then it might be really obvious, as Buddhadasa says, that the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all. Just a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. Clinging to anything—clinging to a thought, clinging to a view, clinging to a pleasant feeling, clinging to an extra piece of toast, whatever it is. And that can also be noticed. Sense of self arises. Sense of self vanishes. It's really no big deal. Just another thing to notice. There's no personality view really going on at that time.

Even so, emotions can be coming, thoughts are coming, our personality patterns can still be running. But we're just seeing them as causes and conditions. I know if I walk into a particular situation—say I'm by myself on a retreat, I've been just in my room sitting alone, and then I walk into the dining room—unless I'm incredibly still in the mind,

as soon as there's seeing, little judgments start to come up. But that can just be seen as cause and effect, cause and effect. It just goes into empty space. There's no big personality view around that.

It's fine. There's a tenderness. There's a peace. This is how it is. You can just really see it coming and going. No problem.

And then, as you know, the contraction starts. You can't quite say why it changed. You can see it's a little more sticky. There's the judgment coming. Judgment, but it's okay. It's a little more sticky, but you're still seeing it. It gets stickier and stickier, and then no problem. And then all of a sudden, it *is* a problem. A big problem.

"I am so judgmental. Why doesn't this stop? It was so clear. How can I get caught back in this again?" I, I, I. And we're back in.

This is what sakkāya-diṭṭhi means. We really believe this view of "I did this. I shouldn't be doing this. I should be better. But of course, this is the type of person I am. What do I expect? I expect to be enlightened." You know, "Okay, I'll schlep through another day, another week, another month. I'll keep doing it because what else is there to do? But we all know, where is it going to go? Nowhere. Because my personality is so strong."

And this one we really believe. We really believe. We take refuge in our personality so much. It's the default reference point. And from this place comes where it gets really hard sometimes to keep going.

Let me give you an example of how it could be different. A friend of mine, a Burmese guy, was with me on a retreat in Burma, and he was translating. He hasn't done too much practice. He's very intellectual, but still—different conditioning. And he was translating for U Lakkhana. The instructions were for the noting practice where you note whatever's arising. As U Lakkhana described it, he was saying, "If anger arises, you note anger, anger, anger, and it goes away. And this arises, you note sadness, sadness, sadness, and it goes away." And then he left.

Sometimes we teachers would take questions. And one American, Canadian guy said, "Well, I note it three times and it doesn't go away. What am I doing wrong?" And he's really upset. "What can I do? It lasts longer than three times." And we're all saying, "Of course, never mind, all the stuff we tell you."

Later, my friend who was the translator said, "Oh, that was so interesting, because it doesn't go away in three times for us either." I said, "Oh? What do you do when it doesn't go away?" He said, "Well, we go, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

You get a sense of the difference, the suffering that comes.

I was listening to a talk, a CD by Pema Chödrön.

I was just driving in my car, and she was talking about compassion. But what I remember particularly is her point about how in life and in retreat—retreat being just magnified and intensified—as we stay on a path of practice, a path of awakening, anyone who really stays on the path of exploring our experience, our mind and body in a steady way, we're going to come up at points against that which we really, really don't want to have to face, one way or another. In life or in retreat.

That's a lot of what starts to happen at this point on retreat. And it might be some huge trauma from the past. A lot of times it can just be irritation or discomfort or sleepiness. It doesn't have to be something huge—it might be, but it doesn't have to be. It's some pattern of mind that we've almost unconsciously structured our lives around not having to totally be there with. We can move away.

And here, as the spirals deepen—I say sine waves, but it's also like spirals. Have you noticed you keep seeing the same insights over and over, deeper and deeper? "But I saw that one! I got it already. I know this is a habit. I'm ready to be done with it." No, you're not. Down and down, spiral, spiral. It's got to come in a deeper, more subtle way.

That which we really don't want to be with can take many forms and different intensities at different times. But just to know that it's not a mistake—this is what requires so much courage and steadfastness and faith and compassion. To just continue to show up in every sitting and every walking. By this time, you probably know you're more or less aware as you're moving through the day, as you're doing things. You really have got it that your mind and body is going with you wherever you go. You really can't get away from it too well.

When we're in the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, many patterns can come up. It can be unworthiness. It can be loneliness. It can be the groundlessness of impermanence, the chaos of no control. It could be the judgment of no clear progress. It could be aggression. It could be boredom—massive boredom. It could be anything or all of the above, different things at different times.

When it comes up: "I can't do it."

Pema Chödrön was saying she had noticed, in all her years in the monastery working with people, that so often people come for longer retreats or shorter retreats, or she's seen them working through their lives, and they can come for a few years. They're coming and practicing, but mostly getting the goodies—coming to feel a little bit better,

to have some nice meditation, to feel better in their life. And there's nothing wrong with feeling better in our lives. Everybody around us feels better if we feel better. I'm not putting that down.

But she noticed how when, for some people, it hits this place that we don't even know we don't want to go there—but we don't—she says they're out the door. Just out the door. "Oh, this isn't what I signed up for."

I'm not saying anyone here is doing that. You're all still here. Really, maybe right now you're in a space where you're thinking, "Oh, this is great—I'm in the dessert phase!" That's wonderful. We need some dessert phase so we can go back and ask ourselves: Can I find the courage? Can I find the wisdom to meet this new thing with compassion, and to really trust that this isn't something going wrong?

This is really the depth of identification, of personality view, opening up to be met with wisdom and compassion. How we meet this difficult experience right now is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. Compassion isn't something that happens out there.

It's like meeting this experience right now without aggression, without pushing away, without needing to change. This is what we've been talking about the whole time. There's nothing new about that.

But noticing—it's not about making the experience better. It's just that for a moment you take a breath and you go, "Okay, fear. Fear is like this." Quite a few people have mentioned they've been able, just for a moment, to recognize: fear is like this. That's so different from when fear's driving the bus, when fear's telling us all the stories, all the stuff we do not to feel fear. Or aggression, or greed, or loneliness, or grief, or impatience—you name it. We all have our particular ones.

And so, as Ajahn Chah said, it's like many people are out the door. I just want you to appreciate that you're not out the door. We may take a little hike in our heads, but then you wake up and you're still here. That's okay. Because this isn't about pushing. It's about finding that motivation that comes really from love of awakening, from kindness, from courage. The courage actually comes from the wisdom, the faith, that gives us a stronger courage to keep going.

And that's why, as you go along, it both gets easier and more difficult at the same time. Have you noticed that sometimes? It's like what you're going through maybe the last couple weeks—you think, "Oh, this is just what I was going through in the beginning," but it's not. It's so much more intense. You really would have been out the door in the beginning. But now people are coming in and describing this intense stuff, and I'm

just starting to think, "Well, how are you doing?" They go, "Oh, but I'm really fine. I really have the balance. I have the courage. I have the wisdom to be with this." And you do. That's huge. That's amazing.

And that's a movement out of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—to see we have no clue what's really possible, not to limit ourselves with our personality beliefs.

So just some examples of when we get to this place of, "Okay, that's it. That's it. I don't have the motivation to keep going." Just to recognize those and see that we can find it.

Again, one is the strong sense of "I"—it's all about me. "I can't do it. It's not going right. I had it, but I lost it." And that doesn't sound like much in the beginning of practice, but as you're getting deeper in, sometimes the fear that the way the meditation is going is a sign that you're never really going to be able to do it can be terrifying. "I'm really never going to understand the truth" can be totally terrifying.

There's a sutta—I think someone referred to it—where a monk named Assaji was sick and dying. The Buddha came to him, and as he was dying, the Buddha said something he would commonly say to monks: "I hope you are not troubled by remorse and regret in regard to your actions, in regard to your *sīla*."

And Assaji said, "I do. I have quite a lot of remorse and regret."

The Buddha said, "In regard to your virtue?"

"No, no, no, not that."

"Well, then what? If you have nothing to reproach yourself in regard to virtue, why are you so troubled by remorse?"

And Assaji said, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations, but now I cannot obtain concentration. And as I cannot obtain concentration, it occurs to me: let me not fall away. Let me not fall away from the path. Let me not fall away from awakening."

So he's dying, and he's in this deep panic, really, because he can't concentrate—convinced that he's lost the path. Lucky he had the Buddha there.

Because the Buddha said, "Hey, those ascetics and brahmins, Assaji, who regard concentration as the essence and identify concentration with asceticism—who fail to obtain concentration—they might think, 'Let us not fall away.'" But then he gives him the whole teaching: "What do you think? Is form permanent or impermanent?" The entire teaching on the five aggregates.

You know, the consciousness of the whole five aggregates Sally talked about. It goes through the whole thing of everything's impermanent, including mental formations, which concentration is. So therefore, if you understand it, there's nothing to fall away. You're not falling away.

But see how even someone who had been practicing with the Buddha and was quite attained can fall prey to that *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* of "I've lost my concentration, it's all over, and I'm dying without having awakened." Panic, total panic. And the Buddha says, no, that's not true.

So here we're practicing that, practicing it over and over and over. When you say, "Oh no, I've lost it"—right then, that's where you bring in the awareness. "Oh, 'I've lost it' feels like this. *Sakkāya-diṭṭhi* feels like this." And there's awareness there. That's all. You don't have to fix it or talk back to it or rearrange it or get a new personality or anything. "Oh, 'I've lost it' feels like this." And you're back with awareness.

Another place we hit a wall, where we just think, "I've really worked hard, but I can't do it one more time," is often when we're with physical or mental experience that is actually very, very difficult—very painful physical experience, very painful mental experience. And many of you have been going through that.

It gets harder, especially when it's a difficult habit of mind, when we not only keep getting caught in it but we also see that we're getting caught in it. "I'm actually more neurotic since I started meditating than less. I not only get angry and yell at someone, I also deeply feel the shame of being angry. And I add on top of it the shame of being a bad meditator." It's like, "Oh, great." Or the pain and the reactivity, whatever. "I just can't handle it anymore."

Sumedho also had a great line talking about something else in Thailand. He was sweating through his robes in the hot season. If you haven't been in a hot season in Asia with all these robes on, it really is tin roof baking. It's like you're in a 150-degree oven in the sun. And he said he would just feel like, "I can't bear it. I can't bear another moment." And then he'd find that he could.

And that's really how it is. I get to a place of physical pain, or more often it's aversion in the mind—not that you're pushing, but the mind just kind of shuts down. You go, "I can't bear this anymore. This is unbearable." And I ask myself at that point, "Oh, really?" And this isn't a judgment. "What's so unbearable about it?" It's a way of getting into what actually is so unbearable about this right now. I usually can't find what's unbearable about it. Although a hint: there's almost always aversion in the mind. Pretty much always.

That doesn't mean, as we've said, that you push through it. You can be having strong emotional memories, trauma, fear, whatever, and at times the energy of the emotion is much stronger than the energy of mindfulness, and you're just getting swept away over and over. So the skillful thing doesn't mean push through. It might mean you back off. You change your object of awareness. You go to metta. You take a walk.

But that's not saying, "I can't do it." That's saying, "Okay, let me find a way to balance the awareness and strengthen the heart to keep on exploring." That's very different. That's skillful means. That's wisdom. We all do that.

Sometimes, again, it's just that sense of "I've seen this so much, this is such a strong habit, I'm never going to get free of it." And we're back in that cage of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* where we don't trust beyond our personality view, where we don't trust the depth of our own aspiration, of our own motivation, of what's possible—where we think we know, but really we have no clue.

When you first started meditating, however long ago that was, would you ever have imagined you'd come on a six-week or a three-month silent retreat? You know, you think you couldn't bear it. Most people's first retreat is really hard, and if it's not, then your next retreats are even harder. So we really have no clue.

Another place I want to mention, and this is a little different, is not exactly that strong suffering, but as you start to see some intimation that freedom from clinging, or opening to the groundlessness of change, the groundlessness of no stable place to rest—we start to get a sense, some idea, that I'm going to lose some sense of myself. Something, you don't even know what. I use this kind of feeling of some sense of your personality that's comfortable. Or it's often a projection. It's not actuality often, but a projection: I'm not going to care about beauty anymore. I'm not going to care about my family. And even though Joseph was talking about how we still appreciate pleasantness, it is different without the clinging, it is. We're not so driven by it. And it does happen that things that were so incredibly important aren't so important anymore.

And then we go, but I don't know if I want to give up whatever—fill in the blanks. I don't want everything to be old, dull, gray. I can't tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant, between beauty and garbage. If a leper's finger falls in my food bowl, I don't care—which is one of the stories of Mahakashapa. Okay, I'm not aiming for that one, I don't think so.

But it can, in a subtle yet quite profound way, be like a sense of dying to something. And we don't want to die to that. There have been many times in my practice where really a deep sense, a real grief, arose—as if some part of me, some sense of Carol per-

sonality, I couldn't even say what, is dying, is going away, is being lost. And there's this sense of wanting to hold on to it. Why? God knows. It wasn't so lovely. But a sense of wanting to hold on to it. A comfort with the familiar, you know? Like it's an old cloak, an old shabby cloak we put on, but it's me and I'm familiar with it and I don't want to look into these other possibilities. It's just a habit, but it's like a series of small deaths. So we mourn them and find the courage, find the willingness to step up again, to be present, to see we really don't know where the next step's going to go.

One of my teachers used to say, "Pick up your foot and then don't put it down again anywhere." It's kind of like that.

So sometimes in practice, the places that get the most unsettling as you practice more and more—maybe the places that most make us want to roll up the mat and leave—are when we're experiencing the deeply unsatisfactory nature of things. There are times in practice when the so-called dukkha lens becomes so vivid—nothing's really satisfying. That's the first noble truth. There are times when it's just so obvious, and there's nowhere to go to get away from it. It's true, but it's not complete. It's not where we stay. But there are times when we just see that there's no home in the mind, in the body, in the world.

I went through a phase where I knew that was true, but it would come up: there's no home. And it was terrifying, terrifying. There was no home, and it was terrifying. And my mind would go, I can't bear it. And I'd say, what actually can't you bear? I don't know, but I can't bear it. And it would keep going on and on and on. It's a phase. It's a phase. But it's frightening. It's disconcerting.

Or the no control. Everything gets chaotic. At times, choiceless awareness is open, spacious, peaceful. And then all of a sudden, it's not. You still think, I was doing open choiceless awareness, but now it's chaos. Everything is going like crazy.

It's not that I can simply notice what's happening anymore—it's all over the place. It's chaos. And yes, samsara is messy. It's not all nice and tidy. It doesn't mean anything's wrong, but it's very disorienting.

Stephen Batchelor says emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, of seeming protection—*seeming* protection. That's why it's so scary sometimes. And although it's freeing, it can also bring up great disconcertion, confusion, dis-ease, even fear. It's like being in no man's land. We're losing our reference points. And that's when we want to go back to the sakkāya-diṭṭhi, our reference point. You know, that cage—but it's our reference point.

But you don't have to even think about all this. Just that willingness to notice fear. Fear. Fear. That's all we need to do. Meet that with karuṇā, with compassion. And we find we have the courage to recommit over and over and over to... what? We don't know.

When we started out, we might have had some idea what we wanted, where we were going. I mean, we have to—we wouldn't have started without some idea. And I imagine maybe you're finding your ideas of what this path is about, what freedom might be, where it's going, changing. I bet for sure your ideas, even your ideas of who you are and what you're capable of, have really changed. But then we solidify new ideas. Yet as the wisdom grows and the compassion grows, so the faith grows. And even though what we open to is even more unknown, more disconcerting, with less and less landmarks, there's a stronger faith, a stronger wisdom to meet it. So practice gets both more difficult and easier as we go along.

But there's no way to really avoid, as Pema Chödrön said, that thing we really don't want to meet. What we do is find we have more wisdom and more compassion and more faith and courage to actually meet that thing, whatever it is, a little bit at a time.

So I just want to share an allegory that I really like. I've used this before, and it really gives me a sense of how we have to keep making choices over and over. Every time you show up again when it's difficult, you've made that intention. Okay, you haven't made it—the intention has arisen. Let me be here for this moment. That's an intention of wisdom, of courage, of resolve—which is one of the pāramīs—of compassion. Let me just meet this moment. Let me just meet this moment. I don't know where it's going, but let me just lift up my foot again. And over and over and over, we're making that commitment. We're re-motivating ourselves. It's not just a one-time thing.

That's why I have so much respect for all of you being here. It's almost like some days, on the hard days, it's like you have to make that commitment every moment almost, just to stay in the sitting, just to get up. And you get up and your mind says, "I'm out of here." And then you find yourself in the walking room doing walking. And so then you're walking, and at the end of the walking, you think, "That's really it." And then you find yourself in the sitting, doing the sitting. You're showing up. Because the faith gives you the energy to show up, and that energy gives more wisdom, that gives more compassion, that gives more courage, that gives more faith, and it just keeps spiraling and opening deeper and deeper into the unknown.

A couple of years ago, I had a bad flu and was home for a couple weeks. I couldn't read or anything, so I was watching videos. I ended up watching the Lord of the Rings trilogy—the whole trilogy. I'd seen it before, but I just watched it all in a row. And it

struck me how the whole story is really an allegory, and it speaks to how the courage of choosing is strengthened by wisdom. We go into situations we never thought we could face, and this not only strengthens our courage—it strengthens our wisdom and compassion.

And it has a momentum all its own.

So this little being Frodo, this hobbit, gets involved in this whole quest because he has faith in a wise older wizard. The ring of power, which is evil—the wizard tells him about it, but Frodo has no clue. He's just given this task in his little safe hobbit world, kind of like a perfect English countryside where there's not really suffering. He has to take this ring out of his hobbit world to a nearby place he's never been and hand it over there. He's told it's dangerous—don't tell anyone. But some friends go with him. So he's nervous, but it's an adventure. He's never been out. He's trying to do good, and he has no clue what he's getting involved in. He couldn't even imagine if he wanted to.

And so this trip to this little nearby town outside of Hobbiton is a million times more dangerous than he thought. These dark riders, these wraiths—ring wraiths, like ghosts on horses—are trying to kill him and his friends. They barely make it to this place in the pouring rain. They get into this inn that's kind of coarse, not evil, but really rough men. They're completely out of their element. But they think, "Thank God, here we are. Gandalf's going to be here. We can give him the thing."

Well, Gandalf isn't there. Nobody's heard of him. They don't know what to do. And then some of these riders come again and start trying to kill these little guys. The hobbits have no sense of how much trouble they're in, so they're acting in inappropriate ways, calling attention to themselves, acting out. They're almost killed. And they wonder, "What do we do now?" They have to place their faith in this kind of weird-looking guy they've never met or heard of. He says, "You have to come with me. We have to go even further away from your home to this elf land." They don't trust this guy, but they've got nothing else to do. What else can they do?

So they go on this journey of a few more days where they're attacked by these riders, really almost killed. Frodo nearly dies—he's stabbed with a magical knife. They barely manage to get him to the elf land of Rivendell before he dies. He's there for weeks. They manage to pull him back.

So here he is, and it's been ten million times more scary and frightening than he ever could have imagined, more evil than he ever thought existed in the universe. But they've also shown a lot more courage than they expected. And now here they are in this elf land, which is like a deva realm. They've always heard about elves, these beautiful, good people.

Up to this point, good and bad is really very clear. There are clear delineations. You know who's good—the elves. You know who's bad—the ring wraiths. Okay, Strider wasn't clear, but once you get to the elf land, you know he's good.

So they're in this deva realm, thinking, "Wow, this is amazing"—better than they ever thought anything could be, after experiencing worse than they ever imagined. "This is it. Now we can turn it over, and this was a wonderful adventure, and I see there's beauty in the world. Now we'll go back home and everything will be the same."

No way, right? No way.

It turns out that this ring—they have to figure out what to do with it. It has to be taken to the most evil, dangerous place in the whole universe to be destroyed. And who can do it? They're all fighting about it already. So little Frodo realizes he has to do it. Again, he knows this is a lot worse than I ever thought. And I don't think I can do it. But no one else is doing it. At the same time, he still has no clue what he's signing up for. But he signs up for it. And a band of friends come to help him.

So he thought this beautiful deva realm was the end of it. That was only the beginning. That was only the beginning. And then starts this whole three books' worth of a trek with the seven friends through all kinds of dangers. Gandalf, the leader, gets killed. And after a while, this band of seven starts to be torn apart from within. The evil in the ring starts to infect one of the people. And then Frodo realizes he's getting stronger—but he's just this scared little guy. I can't even trust this group of people. I have to go alone.

Over to the evil land of Mordor, which is just belching smoke and evil beings. And he has no clue how to get there. And he has to go by himself. His faithful friend goes with him into the land where the evil head of everything is getting ready for war. There are tens of thousands of evil orcs. And he has to walk into the middle of this without having any battle skills or anything—by himself, because now he can't trust even his friends. And his one little friend goes with him.

As they're getting over and walking, walking, walking, walking, walking for days into worse and worse and worse, trailed by a little kind of evil being who's always trying to ingratiate himself and steal the ring—then the evil stops being just from outside. It

starts to eat up Frodo from the inside. He starts not trusting his most devoted companion, who never really had any kind of badness in him. He starts to trust the evil little guy that's following them. And it starts to be that you can't tell what's good and what's bad, what's evil and what's wholesome. It's all starting to see, like Solzhenitsyn said—Alexander Solzhenitsyn—it's not that some hearts are good and some hearts are bad, but evil and beauty is like a line that goes through all human hearts. And he's finding that.

As he's getting closer and closer, he starts to realize—first he was doing it because it seemed good and adventurous, then he was doing it to save his world and make his world okay, then for his friends. And then as he goes on, he realizes: there's no way I'm going to live through this. It's so clear he's only doing it because it must be done for the benefit of all beings. He's getting more and more eaten up by the evil in the ring, but the strength of this goodness, the only thing that drives him on, is completely impersonal by this point. There's no way I can survive this. But he keeps on going, keeps on going, and it really is turning into bodhicitta there—moving toward the end with no clue of what could happen.

And in the end, he can't do it all by himself. Even at the end, that little seemingly evil twisted being, because that's there, makes it possible. It bites off his finger and throws the ring, and he falls with the ring into the fire, because at the last minute, Frodo just couldn't let go of it. Just couldn't let go of it. But then he didn't need to, because events came together in such a way that it happened.

I love that because it's like—if he knew from the beginning where it was going, no way. No way in the world. But as it goes on and on and on, the horror brings out a courage and a wisdom and a compassion and a love that just gets stronger and stronger and stronger, and gives the strength to be with more and more difficult things. And the motivation moves from being all about me and my happiness and la la la, to just really what's for the good of beings. I didn't say it that way, but it was like that. We see the same stuff but not in the same way.

So I just want to end with a quotation from Pema Chödrön about bodhicitta, noble or awakened heart:

We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 18

The Great Question, Investigation and Doubt

Winnie Nazarko · 41 min

In this dharma talk from the 2010 three-month retreat at IMS, Winnie Nazarko explores three distinct mental qualities that practitioners often confuse: the great question that drives spiritual seeking, investigation (dhamma-vicaya) as a factor of enlightenment, and skeptical doubt (vicikicchā) as a hindrance. Drawing from the Buddha's own awakening story and the teaching of the handful of leaves, she illustrates how existential questions about suffering, death, and the nature of life can powerfully motivate practice when held wisely.

The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing skeptical doubt when it arises—characterized by wavering, repetitive thinking, disconnection from direct experience, and often accompanied by other hindrances like restlessness. Through humorous composite examples of doubt's inner dialogue, Nazarko helps practitioners identify this state in their own minds. She emphasizes that doubt functions like a self-contained balloon of speculation, disconnected from the grounding of direct experience.

Crucially, the remedy for doubt is not engagement with its content but investigation of the state itself—knowing doubt as doubt, observing its qualities, and restoring mindfulness. This approach aligns with the Four Noble Truths framework: since ignorance underlies craving, and we cannot think our way out of what we don't know, we must rely on direct knowing rather than speculative thought. The talk empowers practitioners to distinguish between these mental qualities and use investigation skillfully to resolve life's deepest questions.

I wanted to talk tonight about the great question, about investigation, and about doubt.

In order to sustain the amount of effort and energy required for the spiritual quest, there has to be a very powerful individual motivator. In Zen practice, this is sometimes referred to as the great question or the great matter of life and death. This is a kind of inquiry that's very personal to us, very much at the heart of the matter as far as we're concerned.

I talked last week about the Buddha's own discovery of old age, sickness, and death, and how it affected him. After these things completely became real for him, his mind was totally changed. It could no longer rest in the kind of comfort and day-to-day routine, the set of everyday assumptions that he had grown up in. His mind completely

lost the vanity of youth, of health, and he realized that something was going on—something that was in the background for most people but for him became the question at the foreground, the whole context of his life from that point forward.

This great question is something that many people who come to spiritual practice have known for themselves. You might be able to, in your own mind, think about what it actually was that caused the quest, that triggered the whole search, that moved you in the direction of wanting to know and wanting to understand.

For myself, I can remember being in my early teens. One member of my extended family that I was close to, and that we sometimes lived with, got sick with throat cancer and went through a period of very painful decline and then died. Shortly after that happened, the war in Vietnam was picking up steam, and my father was in the military. That had all kinds of implications about what was happening, where would he go, what would he do, would he be all right. Then another member of my extended family got sick and passed away.

When I was a junior in high school, my father did indeed go to Vietnam. By this point, I had many reservations about the rightness of that. And then another member of my extended family died.

By this point, I was asking: What's going on here? What is this? What is the nature of this world that we live in, that people you love die, and there are wars, and people you love might die or they might kill? And then the question: Am I the only one noticing this? Is it just me?

We don't necessarily see the depth of these questions reflected back to us in the larger culture because the larger culture is so bound up in seeking what is pleasant, trying to paper over the quicksand that seems to be everywhere when these aspects of life become vivid to us.

When I look at the roots of my search, the roots of my inquiry, they were really during that period of my life. From that point on, I had to know, I had to look. If there was an answer, I would find it. And if there was no answer, I would have to find the courage to live with the knowledge of these realities and use my life in a constructive way to assert at least what I could assert in the face of this kind of difficulty and suffering, which seemed to so pervade the world.

This is the great question. And the great question for those who have it is very energizing, very motivating, because the fire is so hot that it's unbearable to think about just sitting in it and staying there. You have a great question of your own, all of you, whether you've ever thought of it that way or not—a kind of inner drive that propels your search.

Buddhism endorses the great question, the holding of the great question, the penetration of the great question. I talked last Saturday about the Four Noble Truths. But Buddhism leaves aside many other questions as not being directly pertinent. It doesn't seek to answer all questions.

The Buddha once was walking in a forest with a group of his monks. As they walked along, he reached down, picked up a handful of leaves, and said to them, "How many leaves are there in the forest, bhikkhus? Are there more leaves in the forest than there are in my hand, or less?" They said, "Oh, more, Lord." And he said, "Exactly so. What I have in my hand represents what you need to know, what you need to learn to find liberation. The rest of the forest reflects what I know but will not speak because it does not pertain."

Buddhism endorses the question, the great question, and the search for an answer to this, but it doesn't seek to answer everything. As we saw in the conversation about the Four Noble Truths last week, this great question in the Buddhist system is answered through individual understanding gained through direct knowledge—your individual direct knowledge.

Another way of putting this is that the answer or answers to this arise within our own mindstream, our individual mindstreams, as a result of our own skillful and persistent search for truth.

Related to the great question and the answering of the great question is what you might call its offspring: investigation. Investigation is the second factor of enlightenment.

It's meant to be keen investigation of the Dharma. If you remember the seven factors of enlightenment, mindfulness is first, then investigation, and then energy.

If we were to define investigation, we might say it's something like that actively curious, noticing, noting capacity of mind which focuses on experiential reality. It wants to know the Dharma directly—to see it working and manifesting in what is observable. That's what we mean when we talk about investigation.

Focused to this end, investigation is a sharp tool for coming to liberating understanding. Its field of exploration is very broad because it is utilized across the four foundations of mindfulness. And contained within the four foundations of mindfulness is every human experience you could ever have. In other words, it pertains to everything that could be part of your life and experience. Investigation has at least the potential to be there and be part of how you know and hold that experience. It's oriented towards this whole question of suffering and the end of suffering, which is the Buddha's question. Investigation is really key, and understanding can't arise without it. Many questions are answered by this factor alone, by your direct knowing and seeing.

Now, having discussed the great question and talked a little bit about investigation, let's turn to something that you might think is directly related when it comes up in your practice, but which really is a kind of faux version of this lineage of inquiry. We could call this the not-so-great question, better known as skeptical doubt.

Skeptical doubt is different from just asking questions or wanting to know about a particular topic. As I just said, wanting to know, wanting to understand—that's the essence of the practice in many ways. But skeptical doubt is a hindrance. What's a hindrance? It's the kind of experience which, if not held mindfully, actually causes a weakening of concentration. If allowed to run along unhindered, it can get in the middle of your meditative process and send it into a spiral. All of the hindrances are essentially hindrances to the mind becoming concentrated—meaning one-pointed and steadily present to what's being observed. If your mind isn't there and connected in a continuous kind of way with what you are directly knowing, you're not going to be able to come to the clear observation that allows realization to emerge.

So what is doubt and how can it be recognized? Here's a simile the Buddha used:

If there's a pot of water which is turbid, stirred up and muddy, and this pot is put into a dark place, then a man with a normal faculty of sight could not properly recognize and see the image of his own face. In the same way, when one's mind is possessed by doubt, overpowered by doubt, then one cannot properly see the escape from doubt which has arisen. Then one does not properly understand one's own welfare, nor that of another, nor that of both, and also texts memorized a long time ago do not come into one's mind, not to speak of those not memorized.

When I read this, I think it sounds like you just kind of lose it. You forget what's going on. The meditation instructions seem like they're not accessible to you. *What was that? I was supposed to do what?* Doubt in action. This is what it looks like, to help you identify it.

Like the rest of the hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry—doubt arises when there's a lapse in mindfulness or when mindfulness is weak. It's kind of like the gates open and the goat escapes from the pen.

Where I've noticed this tends to happen is when we have an experience in meditation and something that is experienced isn't the way we think it should be. Often this isn't even fully conscious. But we're there, we're connecting, we're connecting. And then there's an expectation of what should be known next or how it should feel or how it should be. And it doesn't go like that. Then there's a kind of disconnection. Mindfulness weakens. There's been a confounding of our assumptions, and then doubt comes in. That's how I've often seen it anyway.

Mindfulness weakens and then there's loss of direct contact with the mindstream. The observing ability goes offline. This is very characteristic: when doubt is present, mindfulness is always weak or absent, and there's a lack of direct connection with experience or clarity. This is when doubt is present as a hindrance.

I'll talk later about doubt being present and mindfully known.

Very often there's a kind of inner dialogue which can be repetitive, or which links on and on from one thing to another. Often this involves asking questions in a confused or repetitive manner, circling them again and again with nothing new being added to the situation. This repetitive cycling or questioning usually involves a kind of thinking that goes around and around, but it doesn't have an answer available to it.

While this spinning is going on, the door opens to the other hindrances, and they often come flooding in. At least from my own observation of doubt in my practice, it rarely comes alone. It very often brings friends—sometimes it brings all of them. But restlessness and worry almost always seem to be part of it, for sure. You could have agitation and worry and restlessness and wanting and fear and desire circling through the mind stream as part of this as well.

The thing about doubt is that it exists in its own kind of self-contained nervous reality, disconnected from the stream of experience. It has a large element of speculation in it. And it doesn't know itself. It runs on a self-contained loop.

One image that came up for me when I was preparing this talk was of a balloon. You may have had the experience of getting ready for a party, blowing up a balloon, getting ready to tie it off at the end, and it escapes from you and goes careening around the room until it completely exhausts itself and falls to the ground, devoid of buoyancy and energy. Doubt can be like that. It can do that to your practice—put a lot of energy into it, and then collapse.

Doubt can take up a lot of different topics for its confused attention. Just to make this a little three-dimensional for you, I'm going to talk about some of these. There can be doubts about the self and self-capacity. I'll read you some examples. Just to reassure you, none of these came directly from any one of you. They're composites of things that have been heard or that have gone through my mind at one time or another.

So, doubts about self-capacities: "It's too late in life to be doing this. I should have started earlier. But how could I? No, it's okay. Calm, calm—like hell calm. My back hurts. My knees hurt. And I don't know what those questions mean in the morning. I'll never get it. But maybe they're wrong. Is it stupid? I paid all that money to get here. I wonder what the teachers think about my practice. No, they would say so. Maybe they just want to be nice. No, I'm not sure. Should I pay attention, or is it self-hatred? Okay, doubt."

Here's another one: "I'm too young to be here. Everybody else has been doing this for twenty years at least. They're all so old. I need to be with people my age. The teachers could be my grandparents. They have no idea what my life is like. Out of it, truly. I should have gone to Burning Man. At least you can have sex there. And drugs too. Maybe I should leave. But would I be a quitter? Is that bad? Or would that be wise?"

Or maybe I could do yoga all day and take walks. That could be wise effort. I'm not sure. But would I have to say that in an interview? Is that wise speech? Would it be wrong to take care of myself to end my suffering?

Doubt.

And then we get the comparing mind. Everyone here is so quiet. They're so peaceful and tranquil. So far ahead of me. My mind is a mess. I can't stand the breath. All I do is think, think, think. If I were better, I would be quiet. But maybe they're asleep. Is that a hindrance? Maybe people are too tired because of the schedule. If I slept in, I might have more energy. Is there a rule? But what if I go home and I'm still a mess? No, it will still be okay. Right, right. It's doing me good. Or is it making me worse? I'm not sure. That would be insight, right?

Do any of these sound familiar?

Another frequent area is doubt about teachings. Whether they're right, whether they're complete, various points of Abhidharma. How can they know what the Buddha really taught? It was so long ago. He didn't know anything about science. How about that past life stuff? Do you need to believe it all? Those stories all seem farfetched. I don't want to drink the Kool-Aid. If Buddhism is so good, how come Burma is such a basket case? Didn't this practice come from Burma? Or is it Thai? Does Joseph speak Burmese? How do we know we got the right instructions? It might be better to get a

monk from Sri Lanka. But is that the same thing? All this encouragement to effort—how does that fit with letting go? Isn't that just no effort? And who's getting liberated if there's no self? Or maybe it's the same self as the Hindus mean. Is that non-dualism? Maybe it's like the Tibetans, but they came later. Or were they before the Zen people? Do the Zen people have a self? Maybe that would be better. But is that non-dual?

Then there's doubt about teachers. I don't think any of them have children.

Are they married? Well, Sally and Guy are, I think. But don't you need somebody with your own experiences to understand? But maybe that's the relative level. Is that part of this? Or is that different? The Buddha left his family. Is that what we should do to be enlightened? I don't want to leave my family. Maybe this isn't good for me. Are they just teaching aversion to life? Joy is part of it, I think. But all I hear about is suffering. Shouldn't this be more fun? Where are the happy parts? What's wrong with wanting to be happy?

There's another image of skeptical doubt in the texts, and it's the feeling of a person stumbling through a desert and arriving at an unmarked crossroads. A desert—flat, no features, no Google maps. The person wonders which way to go. There's no way to tell, so they just stand there vacillating. That's the experience of skeptical doubt.

Very often with these other hindrances coming up in association with it, you don't know where to grab hold. It's just swirling. The uncertainty demotivates effort, and then confidence and energy really drop. And that, of course, is the opposite of the great question, which, as I said earlier, is very highly motivational.

So that brings us to the question of how to work with doubt when it comes up. I'll reiterate at this point what I said earlier: not all questions are skeptical doubt. Sometimes they're just questions. You can know skeptical doubt by how it functions. When it arises in your mind stream and you don't see it, it functions as a hindrance.

If you wanted to grow skeptical doubt, the Buddha says, you would give it unwise attention. He says, "There are things causing doubt; frequently giving unwise attention to them—that is the nourishment for the arising of doubt that has not yet arisen and for the increase and strengthening of doubt that has already arisen."

So what's the unwise attention piece of this? It's basically being lost in or identified with the content of the doubt. We could say that doubt is delusion operating under the vague appearance of inquiry or investigation, but it's not investigation. When it becomes the primary experience and it's not known mindfully, it can be destabilizing to the whole process of what you're trying to do. And if it's not seen, you have what I call the fallout of meditation experience.

Probably a lot of people have had this experience in the course of the retreat. Most people, maybe all, have had it. You're going along, doing the meditation. You kind of have your object—or maybe it's slippery, maybe it goes away—but you're in there, you're trying, you get it. Maybe the mindfulness lapses. But you're engaged in the process, you're meditating, or you're attempting to meditate. And then something happens—something like skeptical doubt arises as a strong hindrance and it's not seen.

You have this feeling that your meditation is gone. Like you were meditating and now you're not anymore. It's as if you've fallen out of the whole thing. Like somebody who's been thrown off a horse—you're no longer even in the saddle, holding on to the horn. You're off it, looking around trying to figure out what happened.

where it is and how you can get back on it. That's what I call falling out of meditation.

And it's easy to do with skeptical doubt because it cuts at the underpinnings of trust and confidence and faith—that connection you have to maintain in order to even be willing to try to do what must be done.

So the answer to working with this, and this is probably something that's become a bit of a refrain for you at this point, is to see it clearly in a non-identified way as just another meditation object. To become aware of the mental state of wavering as a mental object. And it very often has physical correlates too.

Here's a key point: the remedy for doubt is investigation of the state of doubt, not enmeshment in its content. With skeptical doubt, you do not want to relate to it on its own terms. You cannot have a dialogue with skeptical doubt. It's just blabbering at you. The conversation doesn't go any place. It just feeds it.

This doubt has a particular tone, a kind of wavering quality. It's a little bit like gunning the motor but spinning the wheels. It keeps us ricocheting off the field of connection with direct experience, which is really what keeps us grounded. And it's the place from which understanding arises.

The difference between doubt and investigation is that investigation rests upon direct experience and takes that as the source of emerging insight—direct experience, not speculative thought.

Let's briefly consider the framework of the Four Noble Truths for perspective on how to work with doubt and why it makes no sense to follow skeptical doubt.

The first truth is that there is the truth of suffering. The second noble truth is that there is a cause of suffering, and it's craving born from ignorance. It's craving, the mind wanting, thirsting. But that has a root. The root is in ignorance, in the unknowing.

The question always comes up when people are really thinking upon this: if the root of craving is ignorance, then why don't we just get rid of ignorance? The answer is we're working on it. But inherent in the nature of ignorance is that you don't know what you don't know. It's kind of like trying to look at the back of your head. It just doesn't work.

Ignorance can't generally be resolved by thinking alone, especially agitated thinking. Ignorance is a lack of knowledge and understanding, and thinking alone, which doesn't supply anything new to clarify the basic confusion from which this kind of thinking proceeds, is not going to do the job. That's why I said you don't want to deal with skeptical doubt on its own terms.

Investigation is key in working with doubt, but it needs to be wise. And that means a direct knowing and experience—staying with what can be directly known and not with speculative thought, the kind of speculative thoughts I gave you examples of. In this case, the direct experience is the actual knowing of doubt, the experience of doubt. Doubt is like this.

We're in the same basic framework that we use to be mindfully aware of every other kind of experience. Tranquility is like this. Sensation is like this. Pain is like this. Happiness is like this. Despair is like this. Ease is like this. Well, doubt is like this.

So how do you do it? Basically the same methodology that you would use with any of the others. You relax, if you can, inviting the body to relaxation, because there's often some agitation going on with this particular state. You summon or invite mindfulness. And then you turn it towards the experience of doubt itself.

What is this experience of the wavering mind? What can be known of it? Well, there are thoughts. You almost always will notice thoughts, and lots of them.

So you want to know that thinking is happening, but don't follow the content. If there's emotion with it, you definitely want to know that. And as I said, doubt is often bound up with some of the other hindrances, so those are there to be known and named as well, along with the feeling of those states in the body. Notice identification with the whole mushroom cloud. Notice the strengthening and weakening of the system. Is it getting stronger? Is it coming in waves? Is it weakening? Is it coming and going? Get in as close as you can to it and just know it.

Whenever a hindrance arises, or we lose awareness, or we lose the right mindful connection with what is to be known, the general rule—the first general rule—is always to do what's necessary to restore mindfulness. That's the strategy in a nutshell. Then how you do it, working with particular combinations of things, is the technique. So that's how you would work with doubt.

To wrap it up: inquiry and direct observation are of great value in the whole Buddhist process of coming to understanding. There's the great question, there's investigation, and there's the bad imitator of skeptical doubt. It's good to be able to discern among these and relate to them appropriately. The great question is the source of your empowerment. Investigation is the source of many of the answers you are seeking. Skeptical doubt is the deluded mind doing its thing. Don't get them mixed up.

Know the doubt, but stick to the investigation, because it's with investigation that you will come to the resolution of the great question driving your search.

May you have the wisdom of discernment and the courage to follow the depth of your question to the shore of understanding and release from all suffering. May all your aspirations be completely fulfilled, and may you know emancipation from all sorrow.

CHAPTER 19

Guided Mettā Meditation For All Beings

Winnie Nazarko · 46 min

> *Winnie Nazarko offers a guided mettā (loving-kindness) meditation preceded by profound reflections on why this practice matters deeply. She shares research showing how even a single caring adult can transform a child's life trajectory, illustrating the immense power of mettā in action. Nazarko addresses the misconception that mettā is somehow lesser than insight practice, explaining that the quality of self-care and kindness is actually foundational to vipassanā—we need mettā to hold difficult mind states with courage and without turning against ourselves.*
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> *The talk situates mettā within the broader Buddhist framework as the second aspect of sammā saṅkappa (wise intention) on the Noble Eightfold Path, alongside renunciation and compassion, and as one of the ten pāramīs. Nazarko notes that the Buddha himself took great joy in reflecting on his complete freedom from ill-will toward any being. She explains the methodology of the practice: beginning where loving-kindness flows most naturally and progressively extending it outward through intention and phrase recitation.*
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> *The guided meditation moves systematically from self to benefactor, neutral person, difficult person, and then expands geographically and dimensionally—to all beings in the room, the surrounding woods and fields, the nearby town, then to the north, east, south, and west, encompassing all continents, oceans, and life forms. The practice concludes by radiating mettā without borders to all beings in all dimensions, seen and unseen, with the aspiration that all may awaken together.*

Tonight we're doing a guided metta meditation. I'm assuming at this point that the basic instructions are familiar to people, so I won't do much prompting in that area. But before we start, I wanted to offer a few reflections on this particular practice and its value.

People who have done studies of children raised in very difficult circumstances—children with absent or alcoholic or abusive parents, or where there's been a loss of parental connection for one reason or another—have noticed something important. The well-being of the child, their basic sense of things being workable in the world as they become adults, seems to have something to do with whether or not they found at least one adult they could make a connection with. Not necessarily even someone close to them, but one adult who could offer them a baseline sense of having a lifeline, of having support and help in the world.

This could even be someone who probably didn't think twice about their relationship with the child—like the lunch lady at school who knew this particular kid liked an extra scoop of potatoes, or a coach, or a teacher. Someone who offered metta, even though they might not have thought of it that way. That's just part of how they were being in the world, and it made a tremendous difference to the child.

We all know, or could probably think of, occasions in our own lives where we were scraping along the bottom or close to an edge or having a really difficult time, and someone offered us kindness when we really needed it.

So this is a very powerful force—not to be confused with wearing pink all the time or putting heart-shaped dots above your i's. This is a very powerful practice. When we reflect on its value in our own lives, in the lives of our families and our communities, and consider how different things would be, could be, if this particular quality of mind were more widespread and valued and consciously cultivated, we can see its importance.

I always think, when beginning a period of intensive metta practice, that at the time we're here doing this, there are many places in the world where people are consciously cultivating the opposite—although they might not think of it that way. The cultivation of the opposite, the things done with guns and bombs and rockets and suicide belts, by all kinds of groups—that always seems to be well organized, doesn't it? And funded. We're organized about that. The opposite, not so much. This kind of place is rare in the world. This kind of opportunity is very rare in the world, and very important.

Some people, when they are doing metta practice or working with a teacher who suggests it, get the idea that this is some sort of practice for people who really can't do insight. That's a wrong understanding. This practice is foundational in many ways to being able to do insight, because the mind that can do insight is the mind that has basic self-care, self-love—a mind that can hold experience with kindness and without losing respect for the person who may be experiencing difficult emotions like hatred or anger or resentment or self-doubt.

To see what's in our mind streams, the full range of it—some of which isn't very pretty and is very painful—takes a lot of courage and a lot of kindness. It takes us being able to stay loyal to ourselves in some deep way, despite what we experience. To not turn on ourselves, to not give up respect for ourselves or care for ourselves or love for ourselves. So the mind of metta is very much present in insight practice. In fact, I would say that for insight practice to be successful, it has to be present.

This quality of metta is also the second step on the Eightfold Path—wise intention, along with renunciation and compassion. It's also one of the paramis. So it's an important quality that occurs again and again in the Buddha's teaching and is one of the qualities he developed to an extremely high level, one that he loved very much. He would talk about how one of the things that gave him the most pleasure in the world was to reflect upon the fact that he had only loving-kindness towards all beings, that he had no resentment, no ill will towards any being whatsoever, in any state. It would bring him tremendous joy.

This quality, of course, is part of our heritage as human beings. We all have this intrinsic in ourselves, developed at some level. This particular practice is designed to take what is naturally present, to strengthen it, to purify it, and through the use of intention, to develop the capacity to extend it further and further out from where we find it naturally occurring—naturally occurring being, for instance, toward those closest to us, our family, our friends, the people for whom loving-kindness tends to flow more easily.

That's the understanding of why it's a progressive instruction, why we start with ourselves generally, where presumably it's accessible. Yet we find often in our culture it's not such an easy place to start. So then we look around—what person, what being, what representation can we use to begin, so that we can prime the pump and get it going? We summon the quality in the body and mind and then keep spinning that wheel through the recitation of the phrases, with the intention to summon loving-kindness and to rest in that state.

That's the basic methodology and the importance of this practice in the Buddhist system of bhavana, meditative development.

With that, we're going to work tonight on extending metta to all beings. We'll start by doing a brief run-through, beginning with self and benefactor, then neutral person, difficult person, and finally all beings.

I'll say the phrases. If you have ones that you are using, you can continue to do that. If for one reason or another it feels indicated to stay with one of the earlier categories, you can do that. And I may vary the phrases as we go along. I find for myself, once it really starts moving, that kind of free-forming it can work well. So that's something you can do for yourself, too—you could stick with your basic phrases, or you could start to free-form as it arises in your mindstream.

So settling back now, we connect with the intention to open to the quality of mettā and to offer it, knowing its importance and value to ourselves, our families, our communities, and all beings.

May I be happy. May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I live with ease of well-being.

May I be happy and at peace. May I be healthy. May I know ease of well-being.

May I be happy and at peace. May I be healthy and strong in body and mind. May I be safe. May I know ease of well-being.

May I be happy and safe. May I be healthy in body and mind. May I know ease of well-being.

And now, leaving if you wish, summon the felt sense or image of a dear friend or benefactor.

Just as I wish to be happy, so may you be happy. Just as I wish to be safe, so may you be safe. As I wish to be healthy, may you too be healthy. As I wish for ease of well-being, so too may you know ease of well-being.

May you be happy and safe. May you be healthy in body and mind. May you know ease of well-being.

May you be happy and safe. May you be healthy and strong. May you know ease of well-being and freedom from worry.

May you be at ease. May you be free from danger and harm.

And now if you wish, leave that being with a blessing and bring to mind a neutral person or a difficult person.

Just as I wish to be happy, so may you be happy. As I wish to be safe, may you be safe. As I wish to be healthy, may you too be healthy and strong. As I wish for ease of well-being, may you know ease of well-being and joy.

May you be happy and safe. May you be healthy. May you live with ease of well-being.

May you be happy in every way. May you be healthy and strong. May you be safe from inner and outer harm and danger, and live at ease.

May you awaken to your true nature.

May you be happy and safe. May you be healthy and live with ease of well-being.

And now bringing this to a close, leave this being with a blessing. Bring your awareness to your heart center and soften there. Become aware of the people sitting next to you, around you.

May all beings here in this space, seen and unseen—may we all be happy and safe. May we all be healthy and strong. May we all know ease of well-being and peace.

May we awaken. May we all be happy.

May we all be safe. May we all be healthy and live with ease of well-being.

And now allow the field of intention to open beyond this room and include in the field the other beings in this building and around it—the beings in the woods, in the fields, in the sky, in the water, underground, seen and unseen. May these too be happy and safe. May they be healthy and live with ease of well-being. The birds and deer, the insects and snakes, the chipmunks, the squirrels and fox, the frogs—all beings, happy and safe. May they be healthy and live with ease and safety.

Now expand your field of intention to include the town nearby, the area around this retreat center, going out however the images come to you. May all beings in this town and state be happy and safe. May they be healthy and live with ease of well-being. All the many lives, all different, all wishing to be happy and safe and healthy and to live with ease, just as we do. May you be free from harm. May you be protected from danger.

And now opening wider. May all beings to the north—New England and Canada, the Arctic, the moose and polar bears, seals, all living things—may you too be happy and safe, healthy. May you live with ease.

And all beings to the east, all the beings in the sea—the fish and the whales and the dolphins, and the invertebrates, seagulls, all the humans—to Europe, the Middle East, Russia and China, Japan. May all beings of every kind be happy and safe. May all beings to the east be healthy and live with ease of well-being.

All beings to the south—the lower states, Mexico, Central America, the Gulf, Cuba and Haiti, South America, the Antarctic. All the many lives of sentient beings, all wish to be happy and safe, all wish to be healthy and to live with ease. May they all be protected from harm and danger. And to Africa and all the beings—humans, the great apes, giraffes, lions, gazelles, tortoises, birds, snakes, insects—all of life so fragile. May you be happy and safe. May you be healthy and live with ease. May no harm come to you. May you know joy and peace of mind.

To the west—the western states and Japan, Hawaii, New Zealand and Australia, the great Pacific, Asia, Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka. May all the beings to the west and southwest also be happy and safe. May we all be healthy and live with ease.

Now allow your mettā to extend in all directions without border, and allow your intention to fall on all beings in all dimensions without exception. Blessing all the beings on this planet, and the planet itself. The Mother.

May we all be happy and safe. May we be healthy. May we live with ease of well-being. May all beings in this and all dimensions, seen and unseen, beings in the higher realms and beings in the lower realms, humans and non-humans—may all sentient beings without exception be blessed.

May we all awaken. May we know our true name. May we awaken together.

May mettā radiate throughout the web of life.

CHAPTER 20

Compassion

Joseph Goldstein · 55 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein examines compassion as one of the two essential aspects of bodhicitta—the awakened heart-mind—alongside emptiness. Drawing from both Theravāda and Tibetan traditions, he explores how compassion functions as the antidote to cruelty and indifference, and why the Buddha placed it centrally within the Noble Eightfold Path as part of sammā saṅkappa (Right Intention).*
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> *Goldstein investigates why compassion, though simple in essence, proves difficult to practice. He identifies our resistance to coming close to suffering—both our own and others'—as the primary obstacle, noting how indifference often operates unacknowledged in our lives. Through personal stories and examples ranging from the remarkable resilience of Dr. Tenzin Chodruk (who maintained compassion through 17 years of torture) to the Dalai Lama's intuitive responsiveness to those in need, he illustrates how empathy serves as the gateway to compassionate action.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for developing compassion through mindfulness practice. Goldstein emphasizes that every moment of opening to suffering—whether physical pain, emotional distress, or awareness of others' difficulties—plants seeds of compassionate responsiveness. He presents compassion not as passive feeling but as active engagement, quoting Thich Nhất Hạnh's teaching that "compassion is a verb." The talk concludes with Mingyur Rinpoche's insight that all Buddhist meditation naturally generates compassion, as looking at our own minds reveals our fundamental similarity to all beings.*

Bodhichitta, as many of you know, is a term in Pali and Sanskrit that means awakened mind or awakened heart—the wisdom mind of enlightenment. In the Tibetan tradition in particular, it refers to that aspiration to awaken, to purify our own minds and hearts in order to benefit all beings.

Bodhichitta can be understood on two levels. On one level, relative bodhichitta is compassion. On the ultimate level, bodhichitta refers to emptiness. And it's said that when these two are both present—compassion and emptiness—enlightenment is unavoidable. So it's good to have that framework.

Over the past weeks, we've discussed in some detail and in different ways the empty, selfless, insubstantial nature of phenomena. We've talked a bit about emptiness. Tonight, I'd like to talk more about compassion, the heart of compassion.

The Buddha emphasized the importance of this quality of mind and heart in different ways. He emphasized it in the teachings of the Brahmaviharas: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. He also taught it in the context of the Noble Eightfold Path. In the second step of that path—it starts with Right View or Right Understanding—the second step is called Right Intention or Right Aspiration, sometimes called Right Thought. This Right Aspiration includes the aspiration or intention of renunciation, of letting go of defilements. It includes the intention or aspiration of loving kindness. And the third aspect of Right Aspiration is the aspiration for compassion—that is, freeing the mind from thoughts of cruelty.

Here, just in this step of the path, we can see so clearly the dichotomy of skillful and unskillful, of wholesome and unwholesome. Cruelty, as a mind state, wishes to cause harm to people. That's its nature. It's the disposition in the heart and mind to cause pain, to cause suffering. Many of us might tend to think of this mind state as something rather rare in the world, arising infrequently. But when we open our eyes and pay attention, we can see the manifestation of cruelty in so many places of violence throughout the world.

Sometimes this quality of cruelty becomes so contagious that whole populations become involved in killing fields of destruction. We've seen it so many times—the killing fields of Cambodia or Rwanda or Darfur and many other places—where it just seems to spread among a whole population. We see this same manifestation of cruelty in the destruction of so many native cultures all over the world, indigenous cultures. We see it in the violence and cruelty of slavery and its legacy of racism. We see it in the very targeted cruelty of homophobia or violence towards women. The range and the force of this mind state is extensive and very far reaching. It shouldn't be underestimated. It's the cause of a huge amount of suffering in the world.

But there is also an antidote to this great destructive power, and that is the feeling of compassion. Compassion is precisely that feeling in the heart, in the mind, that wants to alleviate suffering rather than cause it. It's compassion which wishes to bring suffering to an end. When compassion is present within us, it opens our hearts to the suffering that is actually there, and it overcomes our indifference, overcomes our inaction. Compassion is that strong and deep feeling that is moved to act. Thich Nhat Hanh expressed this so well when he said, "Compassion is a verb." This is the very nature of compassionate energy—the implication of it is that we act.

It was precisely this strong feeling that motivated the Bodhisattva over countless lifetimes in his quest and striving for Buddhahood. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that compassion and love are precious things in life. They are not complicated. They are simple but difficult to practice.

That's a very interesting statement. It's worth investigating why such an uplifting and ennobling quality like compassion should be difficult to practice. What makes it difficult? As we investigate this, it may reveal to us...

even small and unnoticed moments of cruelty within ourselves. Because it's not just out there. We can see it in our own minds, in our own hearts.

Compassion arises out of our willingness to come close to suffering. The problem is, and why it's difficult to practice, is that even though we may want to be compassionate, and often are in our lives, it's not always easy to open to the suffering that's there. We see that in our own practice—all those times when it's difficult to open to the suffering within us, to acknowledge it, to be with it. And just as it's difficult at times to be with our own pain and suffering, we don't always want to be with the pain and suffering of others.

There are very strong tendencies in the mind that keep us defended, keep us withdrawn, indifferent, apathetic in the face of suffering. And this indifference, which is often unacknowledged, is a great barrier, a great obstacle to the arising and manifestation of compassionate response.

There's a wonderful poem by Mary Oliver called "Beyond the Snow Belt." In it she describes a very destructive storm that has taken place, in the poem, two counties north. She describes the destruction. Then the last lines of the poem really capture the problem. She said, "Except as we have loved, all news arrives as from a distant land." We are faced with this situation all the time. We're getting so much news of destruction, of pain and suffering. But except as we have loved, except if we can make some connection to those people or those events or those situations, the news arrives as from a distant land.

As an experiment, so we can begin to explore this within ourselves, watch your mind, watch the response of your mind the next time you come close to some situation of suffering. It might be some pain in the body. What's your first response? "Oh good, let me be with it"? Maybe by now that's beginning to arise, but more likely the first response may be, "I don't want to be with it. I don't want to open to this." It may be some emotional distress, the suffering of afflictive emotions that are arising—of discontent, of

fear, of unworthiness, of jealousy, of loneliness. There are so many painful emotions. What is the response? Are we willing to open? Are we willing to come close to it? Are we willing to feel it, to be with it? Or do we pull back in some way? Are we defended?

It might be a situation of suffering when we are involved with a person who's difficult for us, and we're in some kind of conflict. It could be a situation of suffering in the world. What is our first response? Maybe it's racial injustice. Maybe it's political or religious violence. Maybe it's natural disasters. What do we do with this information as it comes to us? What is our response? We need to take an honest look to see, because it's only if we see that response in ourselves and how we've been conditioned one way or another that we can begin to practice opening to that suffering and allow for the natural arising of compassion.

When we face these situations of suffering, whether interpersonally, in ourselves, or very often now through the very vivid impressions of the media, we're really inundated. What happens? Do we feel uneasy? Do we withdraw? Do we numb out? Or do we let it in?

I could see all of these different tendencies in my mind in one very particular and quite ordinary situation during my time practicing in India. For those of you who have been there, you know that the condition of just the village dogs in India is horrendous. They're not pets. Nobody takes care of them.

Often completely covered with mange, no fur—you can just see that the suffering is so apparent and close.

It was interesting. Often we might be sitting in the bazaar having a cup of tea in one of the tea shops, and these dogs would be around, wanting food. And depending on my own particular state of mind at the time, there could be a wide range of response. Sometimes when the heart was open and I was really present, I could truly let it in and feel this tremendous compassion for these animals. At other times, I just wanted my tea and cookies. I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to deal with it. It was unpleasant. And so I could feel a kind of hardening of the heart. There was just this range of response. At that time, I wasn't particularly noticing all that. It's only now, in looking back, that I can see—oh yes, it was all there.

So the question for us is: how can our hearts stay open given the magnitude of suffering that exists in the world? Is it even possible to open to it all with compassion and diminish the subtle cruelty of indifference?

This challenge is not a theoretical one. It's not enough for us to admire the qualities of compassion and kindness from afar, to admire them in other people as noble ideas but removed from the practice of our daily lives. And it's not enough to simply cultivate these qualities in the silence of a meditation retreat. Our practice is the transformation of consciousness that makes compassionate responsiveness the default setting of our lives. What do we have to do so that this becomes the natural response in the way we live?

As has been mentioned a few times, compassion requires both openness to suffering and also equanimity—letting things in without drowning in the difficulties, without being overcome by sorrow. It's learning through our practice here and in our lives to simply be with the truth of things as they are, to be with things, pleasant and unpleasant, as they're presenting themselves. And this is the great gift of mindfulness to compassion. It's mindfulness in this regard which allows us to be with things as they are, which allows for the arising of compassion. It's what we do every time we open to our own pain and our own difficulties.

I came across an interview with a Zen teacher from California, a Zen priest and teacher named Lou Richmond. Quite an extraordinary story. As an adult, after he was ordained as a Zen priest and teaching, he came down with viral encephalitis, a devastating and often fatal disease. He was in a coma for two weeks, and when he came out of it, there was significant brain damage and other disabilities. He said in this interview that it took him three or four years to recover. He was very fortunate in that he did recover, but this was a massive change in his life.

This is what he said in that interview—a very interesting description of the truth of dukkha, the truth of suffering. He said, "Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddhist teachings, I say this: Everything is connected. Nothing lasts. You are not alone."

This is really just a restatement of the three characteristics of existence. Non-self—everything is interconnected. Impermanence—nothing lasts. And suffering. Now this is where it gets interesting. He said, "I don't think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as 'you are not alone' before my illness. But now I find that talking about it that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer means we are all in the same boat. And that's what allows us to feel compassion."

Perhaps you've had this experience, but it's something that has come up for me in times of particularly great physical pain or suffering in my life. It does create this tremendous feeling of compassion because it's so easy then to relate to the suffering of others in the same situation. We know what it's like because we're feeling it ourselves.

So it would be interesting, at times at least, when we're contemplating the three characteristics, as we're trying to understand dukkha, the truth of dukkha, to frame it in this way: You are not alone. We are not alone.

Everybody shares in this. And to see how that can give rise to the feeling of compassion. As we practice coming close to the suffering in our own lives and open to it with compassion, we then have much greater strength to open to and be with the suffering of others.

Now the beginning of compassion is empathy. And empathy happens when we take a moment to stop and really feel what is going on with another person, in a situation, or with ourselves, before rushing on with our lives. This stopping, even for a few moments, is its own practice. Because how many times have we been cognizant of another person's pain, another person's distress? We're aware of it, but we don't take the time, even for a few moments, to stop and really feel it. We're just so busy, caught up in the forward momentum of our lives. Do we stop, even for a short time, to open to it, to come close to it, to feel it in ourselves?

So we could think of empathy as the heart-mind of inclusion. It takes others in. It takes situations in. It's really a sensitivity to the world around us. And it's beautifully expressed by the Zen master and poet Ryokan. In the 18th century—you probably have heard of him, read some of his poetry—he lived as this wandering monk up in the mountains of Japan, very free, wandering around the villages, playing with the children. And his poetry is wonderful. There's a great book translated called *One Robe, One Bowl*. One of the poems in this collection just really struck me, because it illustrates the feeling of empathy in the most unlikely context:

I've forgotten my begging bowl, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl.

I love that. It's like loving what is unloved. "How sad for my begging bowl. No one would steal it."

So we can practice developing empathy in different kinds of situations. It might be feeling the distress of the restless person sitting next to you. Instead of getting lost in aversion and reactivity—"this person is disturbing my meditation"—would it be possible to stop for a few moments and to open to and feel the discomfort, the suffering, the unease of that person? It might be opening to the difficulties and suffering of people who are very close to us, or to a stressful situation in the world. Empathy has the power to take us out of our self-referential perspective.

Some time ago, I had been in a situation where there was some conflict going on with another person, strong differences of views and opinions, and I was quite involved in my own point of view—irritated and annoyed. I tried everything. I was seeing the suffering, I was really trying, I was noting it, but I was caught by it. And then I happened to overhear a remark by a third person about this other person, mentioning that they were suffering too from this conflict. And it was amazing. That's all I had to hear to let go of the self-righteousness and the indignation, whatever else was going on. "Oh, they're suffering too." And it was amazing—just in hearing that and opening to it, all of that identification fell away and there was just this compassion for the whole situation. It was remarkable to me: something that had been going on for quite a while dissolved in a moment. And it dissolved by opening to the suffering that was there, in myself, in the other person.

The Zen master Bankei captured this so well. He said, "Don't side with yourself." We're always siding with ourselves. So that could be a good little mantra to practice with when we're caught up in some kind of conflict or divisiveness, when we are closed off: don't side with yourself.

There might also be situations where people really are behaving very badly, causing real suffering for other people, causing suffering in the world. When we see this, when we come up against a situation like that, what is our usual reaction? It's usually, again, some judgment about how bad they are, feeling righteous in ourselves, anger towards them. But there's another possibility. It is possible to stop and to open up, even in those more extreme situations where the harm is real—to stop and open up and enlarge the context of our understanding.

This was talked about very powerfully by one of the physicians to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His name was Dr. Tenzin Chodruk. He was imprisoned by the Chinese, imprisoned and tortured for over seventeen years—a horrible, horrendous situation.

And he described what made it possible for him to survive not only physically, but also with a heart that remained open and compassionate, not drowning in hatred and fear.

This is an intense situation. Hopefully we'll never find ourselves in such circumstances, but it points to something very powerful we can learn. He saw that his torturers, his enemies, were human beings just like himself, and that his guards and tormentors were people who were also caught up in an adverse situation. They were doing the actions which were planting the seeds, which were creating their own future suffering—and doing all of this out of ignorance. He never forgot the commonality of the human condition, understanding that all actions bring consequences.

But what's so remarkable is that Dr. Chodrak held this understanding—that all actions bring consequences—not as a vehicle of revenge, not thinking "these people who are torturing me, they'll get theirs," but as an understanding, a vehicle of compassion.

There's a writer named Claude Levinson who wrote about Tenzin Chodrak. He said: "An appearance almost of timidity on first meeting, a voice so quiet it might be a whisper. Dr. Chodrak could easily pass unnoticed until you meet his gaze—a gaze filled with the perception of one who has seen so much that he has seen everything, seeing beyond the suffering he has experienced, beyond all the evil and abuses he has witnessed, yet expressing boundless compassion for his fellow human beings."

That's pretty remarkable. And I think it points to a possibility, it points to a direction. We can enlarge the context even of very difficult situations.

But it's also important to know and understand that in these situations, where it's possible, we do need to take appropriate actions. This is not about inaction. It's not about passivity. Sometimes we have to set appropriate boundaries, to work to stop harmful behavior, to redress injustices. But can we do this with a wise attention to our own motivations? Is it anger? Are we responding with hatred or resentment? Or is it out of compassion for the suffering of everyone involved?

This takes practice. This is not an easy thing to do. It goes against much of our conditioning. The great lesson here is that how we feel and respond to situations—whether on a very individual basis, in the ordinary activities of our lives, or in very big things like Dr. Chodrak experienced—is up to us. Nobody makes us feel a certain way. That's the great potential we have within us.

Empathy brings us close to suffering. We're willing to be with it, to open to it. Compassion takes a step further. It's not only feeling what others are going through, but being motivated to act on that feeling. This is the particular strength and power of compassion—it motivates us to act.

As compassion grows in us, we begin to practice an active engagement with the suffering in the world, responding to the various needs of beings in whatever way is appropriate, in whatever way is possible. Sometimes we act in very small and unregarded ways. It might be a small gesture of friendliness or of generosity or forgiveness—no big dramatic display of compassion, just a small gesture in response to some suffering. We shouldn't overlook or underestimate the effect of these small movements.

There's a writer named Pico Iyer who spent a lot of time with the Dalai Lama, traveling with him as a friend and a student. And this is something he wrote, having observed His Holiness in so many different situations. It's a beautiful description of compassion in action:

"One of his greatest and most mysterious gifts is a kind of radar that alerts him to whom in a crowded space is most in need of help. He'll walk into a jam-packed school auditorium and in the midst of greeting his hosts and shaking hands with everyone eager to say hello to him, making eye contact with each one, he'll notice through a kind of peripheral vision or intuition someone on crutches and walk instantly over to that person and offer a blessing, a reassuring touch. While going through an almost unimaginably busy schedule on a typical day of touring, he'll be hustled toward his next appointment and then suddenly, alone among a crowd of fifty or so, he'll veer off because he's seen a child in a wheelchair by herself, ignored over in one corner. Often he'll respond warmly to even the pushiest person trying to make contact with him on the street. And that is perhaps not only because he tries to live without aversion as well as without attachment, but because he sensed that that person is in need in some form—lonely or unsure of himself—and the pushiness is just an expression of deep pain."

It would be wonderful to practice living like that. As we go through the day, just to sensitize ourselves in small ways—not necessarily in big, grand gestures, just in small ways. How are we responding? Are we open, are we sensitive to all the different kinds of suffering that people go through?

I recently saw a documentary film called *A Small Act*. Maybe some of you have seen it. It was about a Swedish woman named Hilda Bach. In the mid-1970s, she participated in a scholarship program sponsored by a group of Swedish nationals who were committed to helping Kenyan children—bright, very bright Kenyan children who couldn't continue with their education because of poverty.

One of the beneficiaries of the program was a man named Chris Maburu, whose school fees were paid for many years by this woman in a faraway place in Sweden. So here's this young boy from a poor village in the hinterlands of Kenya, with almost no opportunity to continue his education. He was very bright. Through her donations, he was able to go on to high school, to college. He went to the University of Nairobi Law School. He got a Fulbright scholarship to study international relations at Harvard. He graduated in 1993 with a master's in international human rights law. Then eight years later, he went back to Kenya and set up a foundation to sponsor other children—these bright kids with almost no opportunity to continue.

The documentary shows so beautifully how this one very ordinary middle-aged woman in Sweden, making a small monthly donation, affected the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands of people. We shouldn't underestimate these small acts of compassion and responsiveness. They can have a huge effect.

Sometimes compassion does manifest in some pretty amazing ways, dramatic ways. Sometimes it manifests as acts of tremendous determination. You may be aware of Dr. Paul Farmer—there's a book written about him called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. He was a public health doctor who worked for years in Haiti, in just the poorest regions, with AIDS and tuberculosis patients. He was incredibly dedicated, and his work has now spread around the world to many places.

One time he had a clinic in one small city, but he would often go walking for many hours just to serve a couple of families. He was criticized for that. People said, "Why do you spend so much time doing that?" And this is what he said, and it's incredibly inspiring: "If you say that seven hours' walk is too long to walk for two families of patients, you're saying that their lives matter less than some others. And the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong with the world."

He just got it. He encapsulated it in one sentence: The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong with the world. This is the working of compassion. This is the potential of compassion.

Sometimes we see compassion manifesting in acts of great courage. Think of Martin Luther King Jr., at the head of these marches, surrounded by people filled with violence and hatred towards him, and resting in that place of love and compassion. It's amazing. Or think of Nelson Mandela. There are so many people who have been striking examples of this quality.

What's important for us to realize and take in is that there's no particular prescription for what we should do. There's no hierarchy of compassionate action—that some actions are somehow more compassionate than other actions. It's not like that. The field of compassion is limitless because it is the field of suffering beings. Wherever we come close to it and open to it, on whatever level, that's an opportunity to practice this quality.

It can take the form of very active engagement with the world. It could take the form of living in a mountain cave for years, practicing to awaken with the motivation that our awakening be for the benefit of all. It's said that before his enlightenment, the bodhisattva spent lifetimes as a renunciate. Just imagine what his family and neighbors were saying.

What are you doing? I can hear it with a Jewish accent. "You're wasting your time off in a cave." But that was part of his path—lifetimes as a renunciate before the great energy of his enlightened compassion flowered in the world. And his aspiration was not just to alleviate the suffering of particular situations, but really to see and understand and uproot the very causes of suffering, the forces of greed and hatred and delusion in the mind. And 2,600 years later, it's quite remarkable—we're here because of that awakening.

So compassion takes many forms, and we can't judge its outer look. It all depends on the motivation. Is the motivation to alleviate suffering?

We can practice compassion from two sides. First, we work to purify our own minds and hearts as a way of more effectively taking care of others. It's like two people caught in quicksand—if you're both caught in quicksand, it's very hard to get out. But if one person is on firm ground, they can help the other person.

This principle is such an obvious one, and every time we get on an airplane, we hear it in the announcement about loss of cabin pressure. The oxygen mask will come down. Please put it on yourself before you assist the people around you. This is our principle. If we're in a position of safety, of stability, then we can be of help to the people around us. If we're gasping for air, we're not going to be much help to anyone.

Likewise, if we go into situations without clarity of understanding—even with a desire to help, but without some wisdom about the situation—we often just add to the confusion. So that's one way: we purify our own hearts and minds as the foundation for helping others.

The second way we develop compassion is through the practice of putting others before oneself. This practice was beautifully expressed by the seventh or eighth century Indian adept Shantideva, who wrote *The Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. He expressed this in some stanzas known as the seven-branched prayer. The Dalai Lama is a great devotee of Shantideva, finding great inspiration for his own practice in these words:

Like the earth and the pervading elements, enduring like the sky itself endures, for boundless multitudes of living beings, may I be their ground and sustenance. For everything that lives as far as the limits of the sky, may I provide their livelihood and nourishment until they pass beyond the bonds of suffering. For all those ailing in the world until their every sickness has been healed, may I myself become for them the doctor, nurse, the medicine itself. For sentient beings, poor and destitute, may I become a treasure

ever plentiful and lie before them closely in their reach, a varied source of all that they might need. My body thus and all my goods besides and all my merits gained and to be gained, I give them all away withholding nothing to bring about the benefit of beings.

We may hear this and become inspired by this possibility. It's an incredibly uplifting and ennobling aspiration. But we could also hear it and feel a little daunted by it. This is big—that our whole life and everything we do and everything we have be dedicated to the welfare and happiness of all beings. This is a huge aspiration. Could we ever live with this degree of compassion? Is this really possible for us, this great generosity of spirit?

If we're inspired by the possibility, we need great humility. Howard Cutler, the person who co-authored *The Art of Happiness* with the Dalai Lama, collaborated very closely with His Holiness. In one interview, he said, "I'm not a very compassionate guy, but at least I have compassion about not having compassion."

So we start small. We can have this aspiration, and it's beautiful—it can set a direction, inspire us, and provide a huge amount of energy for how we live in the world. But we also have to have great humility about where we are.

Issa, the great Japanese haiku poet, wrote one of my favorite haikus: "New Year's Day, everything's in blossom. I feel about average."

Yes, we feel about average. So we simply plant the seeds of this aspiration.

Know that our practice and our lives be for the benefit of all beings. And maybe we're even planting the seeds of the aspiration to have the aspiration. We start just where we are, but we open to the possibility—know that our practice, that our lives be dedicated to the benefit of all.

The great naturalist Thoreau captured the potential of this aspiration. He said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

Yes, that's so beautiful. Each of us in our own way can plant and water and nourish the seeds of a kind and compassionate heart. And slowly they will grow and become the guiding principles of our lives. So we do it very slowly, very patiently, but with dedication.

And even at those times when we're not acting from a place of wisdom or a place of compassion, this aspiration can still be the reference point that reminds us that there are other choices. So we keep coming back to it in the same way we keep coming back to the breath or the body or the present moment's experience.

I'd like to close with a wonderful reminder by quite a wonderful young Tibetan teacher, Mingyur Rinpoche, who really embodies so much light and so much kindness and so much compassion. He said:

"But the best part of all is that no matter how long you meditate or what technique you use, every technique of Buddhist meditation ultimately generates compassion, whether we're aware of it or not. Whenever you look at your mind, you can't help but recognize your similarity to those around you. When you see your own desire to be happy, you can't avoid seeing the same desire in others. And when you look clearly at your own fear or anger or aversion, you can't help but see that everyone around you feels the same fear and anger and aversion. When you look at your own mind, all the imaginary differences between yourself and others automatically dissolve and the ancient prayer of the four immeasurables becomes as natural and persistent as your own heartbeat."

May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness. May all sentient beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May all sentient beings have joy and the causes of joy. And may all sentient beings remain in great equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.

This is the natural fruit of the very practice we're doing.

CHAPTER 21

Buddha's Advice on Becoming Free from Latent Tendencies

Carol Wilson · 1h04

> *In this illuminating talk, Carol Wilson examines a comprehensive sutta where the Buddha outlines seven distinct approaches for working with the āsavas—the deepest latent tendencies that keep the cycle of saṃsāra in motion. She begins by explaining the three vaṭṭas (rounds of purification) corresponding to sīla, samādhi, and paññā, and how each addresses progressively subtler levels of the kilesas: from transgressive actions, to obsessive mental states, to the most subtle latent potentials that can sprout given the right conditions.*
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> *The Buddha identifies three primary āsavas: kāmāsava (sensual desire), bhavāsava (attachment to being), and avijjāsava (ignorance). Wilson emphasizes that these aren't solid entities within us but rather seeds that sprout when conditions align—particularly when mindfulness is absent. She then guides practitioners through the seven methods of abandonment: through insight and wise attention, through restraint at the sense doors, through using requisites wisely, through patient endurance, through avoiding what feeds unwholesome states, through removing arisen unwholesome thoughts, and through developing the seven factors of awakening.*
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> *Drawing from personal experiences in Asian monasteries and the powerful metaphor of six wild animals tied together, Wilson makes these ancient teachings immediately practical. The key discernment throughout is simple yet profound: notice what feeds greed, hatred, and delusion, and notice what starves them. This isn't about self-judgment but about wise attention that naturally leads to contentment, gratitude, and the freedom that comes when unwholesome seeds no longer find fertile ground.*

So as we have said in various ways this whole time, this whole week, all aspects of our path, all the different techniques and focuses of our practice, are really about freeing our hearts and minds from the influence, from the drive of greed, of hatred, of confusion.

Wisdom and compassion naturally arise when our mind isn't so obsessed with these things, when it's not holding fast to whatever it's holding fast to—holding fast to anything. As Joseph said last night in his talk, when we purify, when our own hearts and minds are purified or are not so enthralled to these kilesa, these torments, then wisdom and compassion are the natural expression, naturally arising.

Larry Rosenberg said once—I really like him, he cracks me up—that the best thing we can do for others is to develop wisdom and compassion, ease within ourselves. Then we stop bothering other people.

So tonight I want to talk about a specific sutta of the Buddha that I really like. It covers a lot of ground, showing how it's not only just the really focused meditation, but all aspects of our life, where we can be working with how our minds are either feeding the kilesa—how the way we're relating to our experience feeds wanting and aversion—or starving them. Feeding and starving is a metaphor that gets used a lot. All aspects of life are part of our path.

There's something called the three vaṭṭas, the three rounds of saṃsāra, or the three rounds of purification, depending on whether you want to look at it half full or half empty. The three vaṭṭas are sīla, samādhi, and paññā.

The first round concerns deeds and speech. When we act from kilesa, we experience the torment, the kilesa of transgression. We've actually transgressed to the point of acting, of speaking in a way that brings harm to ourselves, harm to another. And sīla is what protects us from the torments of transgression. Sīla, which of course requires mindfulness, requires paying attention, requires good intention, requires wisdom. When we are protected by sīla, we naturally experience freedom from remorse, because remorse comes. Many people have been experiencing just memories of even very small, unwholesome things said or done in the past. Not even giving yourself a lot of trouble about it, but just experiencing the remorse, the sadness, the pain of that. "Oh, yes, I didn't understand then. I could have acted better." We're free from that when we're protected by sīla from the torments of transgression, and we offer others the gift of fearlessness. That's one of the lovely things here—more or less we're giving each other the gift of fearlessness.

The second level of the rounds of saṃsāra is the obsessive kilesa, the obsessive defilements—when we're not acting on it, but just completely caught up in spinning. I don't know if you've ever had that experience of just spinning in greed or self-hatred. Take your pick from your choice of favorites. But obsessive really describes it. We're protected from that by samādhi. When the mind, the citta, the heart is collected—and you've all experienced that too, whether you want to acknowledge it to yourselves or not—when the mind and the heart is not so distracted, when the attention is more unified and collected, it's as if the obsessive quality of kilesa doesn't have room to get in. There are many levels of this purification, but that's one of the lovely things about a

more collected, unified mind. It just feels so peaceful not to have all this stuff yammering at us all the time, not to be driven by that. So samādhi suppresses the obsessive defilements.

The third level of the round of saṃsāra is called the latent. Latent means underlying. It's not in evidence at the moment, but it could arise at any time. The latent is described as the underlying potential for kilesa, for these torments of mind to arise given the proper conditions. I'm not saying this to breed fear—not like, "Oh my God, I'm working this hard, but at any time it could attack me from any side." But haven't you sometimes noticed that? You notice this level more at this point in a retreat, when your mind actually is calmer and you're not as caught up in the huge stuff that was there in the beginning. People come and say, "Oh my god, I'm just seeing clinging all the time now." But it's on a much more subtle level. You walk into our favorite place, the dining room, feeling quite mindful, quite present, not off in a train of thought. And it doesn't take much, right? Someone gets in your way, someone slops some food, someone sits in your place, someone who knows what.

And sometimes the mindfulness is strong and no reaction arises. And it's like, wow, notice that. At that point, even the latent underlying tendency wasn't functioning. Wisdom is getting stronger.

But at other times, when you're just minding your own business and something happens—boom, a burst of anger so quick. Or a burst of greed so quick. Someone told me years ago about their experience. They were really mindful and had been working with greed, and it wasn't there. They were walking past, probably at tea time, walking past the food table with no intention to take food whatsoever, very, very mindful. And then they saw, as in a dream, as they walked past the bowl of oranges, their hand reached out and took the orange. Whose hand is that, taking that orange? Just small ways.

So this underlying potential—this is where we can get discouraged. But this is seen through by paññā, by wisdom. The Buddha said greed, hatred, and delusion, not totally. This is like the most subtle level. And this isn't abandoned completely through acts, but through wisely seeing.

So this latent underlying level is like a seed. And when the seed is there and the conditions are ripe, it can sprout. That's why so many times when you're reading the suttas and the Buddha's talking about his full awakening, he says it's cut off like a palm stump. No more can grow from it. He's kind of alluding to this. Nothing else can grow.

One of the definitions of complete, full enlightenment in the Theravada system is that these āsavas are abandoned. Āsava is the word for these latent underlying potentials. It's not like something's really there. It's not sitting in you like a big ball of sludge. It's just that when the conditions are right, something could arise. So imagine that you walk into the dining room and the most annoying thing that always makes you crazy happens, and your mind just goes, "Uh-huh, may you be happy," and keeps going. Lovely. Imagine it was always like that. That's what they're talking about. It's possible. They wouldn't tell us we could do it if it weren't.

But we can notice it now—can notice the times it doesn't arise, notice the times it does arise with interest.

To describe these āsavas, this is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is quite the most well-known of the current interpreters and translators from Pali to English. He has a whole series of talks on each sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya. It's a lot of talks. And he's talking about this sutta, the three āsavas, the three poisons. They're defined as three specific ones, and it's not greed, hatred, and delusion for a change. It's a little more subtle, actually.

The āsavas, he says, are the three deepest, most fundamental tendencies or drives that can keep the process of saṃsāra in motion when we're not aware of them—the most likely biases of mind that arise when we're not paying attention, when we're just in robot mode.

And these are: kāmāsava, or sensual desire, sense desire; bhavāsava, which is attachment to being, usually translated as attachment to continued existence; and of course avijjāsava, ignorance, seeing things wrongly—these three.

One interesting thing Bhikkhu Bodhi said is that you'll notice dosa, hatred, is not listed as one of the āsavas. So for all you aversive types out there, this is finally one little piece of hopeful news—that hatred is not considered one of the qualities that binds beings to saṃsāra. He said it's not a wholesome thing, but it causes so much suffering that we see it more quickly.

So these are subtle: sense desire, bhavāsava, attachment to being, and ignorance. These are considered the three āsavas.

And again, it's not the state itself, but these tendencies, these seeds that could sprout given the right conditions—conditions which usually include not being present, not being mindful, include a mind that's confused.

I want to again mention that there are plenty of other wholesome seeds that are also easily sprouting given the right conditions. And that's what we've been cultivating here all this time. It's not just that we're in this hopeless round of samsara and might as well forget about it. We've actually been spending a lot of time—not just here, but through your whole spiritual path—recognizing the wholesome, feeding the wholesome.

You walk into the dining room, someone does something totally outrageous in your mind, and the response is, "Okay, may you be happy." That's a wholesome response—wisdom, non-aversion, loving-kindness sprouting. Notice that. Or you walk into a situation where normally you'd feel really self-judging, really shy and embarrassed. You walk in and there's just nothing—just calmness. That's a big deal. That's a big deal. Notice that.

The sutta I want to talk about is called "All the Asavas." The Buddha actually lists seven different aspects that we can pay attention to. Very practical. It's nothing new, but I really like it because it points my attention in different directions, all of which are functioning to purify our heart and mind of these habits. It's not just "get into the deepest samadhi you can and stay there." That doesn't work. It's not just "stay there until you finally become an arahant." Actually, we can work with other aspects.

All of these are based in wise attention, which Sally talked about. In the sutta he says, "Bhikkhus, I say that there is an exhaustion, an abandonment of taints"—taints being one of the ways asavas is translated—"in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention."

This is a thread through the whole sutta. When one attends unwisely—and this is also the shorthand for wise effort—when we attend unwisely, it feeds an arisen unwholesome state. And the things he's going to talk about will just give us ways to look at that. Unwise attention even brings unwholesome states that aren't present into existence in the moment. When we attend wisely, if there are unwholesome states present, it starves them. It doesn't increase them. And wise attention can bring more wholesome states into being, and it doesn't arouse unwholesome states. Just stick with feeding and starving—that's easier. Don't make yourselves crazy with it.

The first of the seven I'll go through is asavas that are abandoned by insight. This is obvious—it's what we've been practicing here, seeing clearly the way things are. But what I want to highlight is his description of wise attention. He says that one who is unskilled in the Dhamma, undisciplined, does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are not fit for attention.

This is a really interesting concept to me, because if you don't understand, you don't attend to the things that are fit—you attend to the things that are unfit. What tends to happen in my mind is to think there's a list of things that are fit for attention, and there's a list of things that are not good to pay attention to. But it's not that, of course. It's not in the object at all. It's not inherent in any particular thing that that thing is not fit for attention. The fitness or unfitness is obviously in the wise attention, the quality of attention itself.

This is what we've been saying all along in terms of noticing the attitude, the quality in the mind that's paying attention. And if you can't tell that, you can tell the effect. If what you're paying attention to—not just in the first moment, but over a longer period of time—if sense desire, wanting to be, and ignorance arise and get stronger, there's some way in how you're paying attention that involves unwise attention. If they lessen or don't arise, then there's some way you are paying attention that is wise attention.

I'll just briefly read how he describes unwise attention: "Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I? How was I? Having been what, what did I become? Will I be in the future? What will I be in the future?" You can get the drift. It doesn't seem like rocket science that this isn't really going in a helpful direction. But when we're in it, it's fascinating, isn't it? "Now let me just think about this. How will I be at the end of this retreat? What's going to happen?"

How many of you have already been thinking about—whether you're leaving tomorrow or in six weeks, I don't care—"How amazing am I going to be at the end of this retreat? How can I impress people with my incredible insight?" That's on a good day, in a good moment. In a bad moment: "God, how am I going to hide from people? I'm more of a mess than when I came. How will I ever..." It's the same thing. Not so fit for attention.

But let me give you another way, more basic, that I personally find fascinating—not just on the level of thought, but on the level of sense experience. Say there's a sound here in the hall, maybe a ticking clock. This happened years ago at some retreat. The clock we had up here ticked, and some yogi was telling me for days that this sound was just driving them insane, ruining their concentration, ruining their practice. The more they paid attention to how it was ruining their practice, the worse it got. They thought, "I'm being mindful of how upset I am and how this is ruining my practice." But really, the attention was unwise attention to the repugnant, the unpleasant nature of an object. Unwise because you just keep focusing: "This is so unpleasant. This is so unpleasant." And what's getting stronger? The aversion, the ill will is just getting stronger and stronger. But we think we're being mindful.

Sometimes we'll say turn back and notice the aversion in your mind. But sometimes that doesn't work. In this case, what worked was she just really connected to the purity of the sound itself—just hearing, just really dropped the resistance into hearing. And the whole rest of it dropped away. It was just hearing.

So sometimes you have to explore. Does giving full attention to that painful sensation feed the hindrances? And as you pay attention to the aversion in your mind, does the wise attention come back, do the hindrances get starved? Or does paying attention to the aversion just ramp it up, make it stronger? And if you come right into the sensation, does the mind calm down? Sometimes you have to explore.

This very handy measure of what's being fed and what's being starved—it's not about "I'm good, I'm bad, there's a right, there's a wrong." It's very experiential. You just pay attention to what's happening, not with judgment or "I'm good or I'm bad," just: "Let's do this. I'm paying attention to this. Look what happens. Whoa, whoa—maybe not so helpful."

In terms of these three āsavas, it's said that what feeds or sprouts the āsava of sense desire is attending to the gratification in sense pleasure. You get a sense of that? Not only is it pleasant, but all of these have a "me" in them. "This is really pleasant. And I'm noticing pleasant, pleasant..."

So how come all of a sudden I want more? And I'm noticing wanting. And it feels so nice. There's nothing wrong with enjoying pleasant—there's not. But the gratification, unwise attention to the gratification rather than just being with the pleasant. Just being with the sensation itself, or with the sense of, "Wow, liking feels like this." This is subtle, but explore it.

What feeds the seed of being, the *asava* of being and wanting continued existence, is the same attending to the gratification—in what's called exalted states, the gratification in your meditative states that are really pleasant. And of course we're going to be gratified by it. We just need to really notice that.

It's actually called, in one form, the corruptions of insight. When there are stages, experiences in practice that are very pleasant, and the mind could be very collected, or whatever. Maybe it's choiceless, whatever. It doesn't matter what it is. But it's pleasant. The mind is pretty present. You know it's "good practice," whatever the heck that means. You're noticing pleasant. But there's just that subtle, "Yeah, now finally I've hit into the good place." And it's just that we're all going to get caught in it sometimes. Don't take it personally. But start to notice it.

The corruption of insight is when we don't notice it, and we can just be spinning in that for an extra period of time until it decays—which it will. And then you'll know you were caught because you're really, really bummed out. That's how you know you were caught. No problem, but we can see it sooner.

And what feeds ignorance, of course, is—they say—attending to any mundane thing, which is anything, anything that arises, in the wrong way. But that's actually just when there's delusion in the mind, when we see through the upside-down perceptions. When we're perceiving anything as permanent—the stuff we've talked about. Perceiving anything as me or mine. Perceiving what can't give us any lasting satisfaction as being reliable, trustworthy, somewhere I can rest and find my home. And the fourth one they always say is seeing what is not lovely as being beautiful, something to hold on to.

So any time we're perceiving in this inverted way, it's both a function of ignorance, but it also feeds further ignorance. You can see these are subtle.

Attending wisely on this one is what leads to insight. It's just simply this: noticing the attitude in the mind. Is there wanting? Is there aversion? Is there confusion? If you can't notice the attitude, notice what's being fed. Maybe not the first moment. I mean, if aversion's what you're noticing, and you can be aware of aversion and go, "Oh no," then aversion's getting stronger. That's wrong. But you can be with it. Be with it. And you can see it isn't really going crazy. You might see more of it, but it's not overwhelming you. Do you know the difference?

Just like I said in the beginning, as you're starting to see perhaps more and more clinging, and you think, "I should have less clinging after all this," but you're actually seeing much more subtle levels that we never even noticed before. And in the seeing of it, you're not being driven by it so much. The seeing, that wise attention, does actually keep the seed from sprouting. Mindfulness is absolutely our protection in this.

So that's the first one: abandoned by wise seeing, by insight.

The next four are the ones that are a little more specific. None of these are news to you, but I just want to point them out. The second one is abandoned by restraining. The Buddha says, "Here a bhikkhu reflecting wisely..." And he always says "reflecting wisely." There's just a sense that we can kind of use a little bit of our reflective mode just to notice what we're doing. When we notice we're getting caught up in a lot more sense desire, we can kind of reflect, "Hmm, what's going on here?"

Reflecting wisely, one abides with the eye faculty restrained, and then all the faculties restrained—the nose faculty, the ear faculty, all of them. While taints and the fever of defilement might arise in someone who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no taints or fever of defilement when one abides with the eye faculty restrained.

So what does restraint really mean? It doesn't mean going around blindfolded, with earplugs, not letting anything in. I have a friend who tried that once. But that's not exactly it. Rather, it's mindfulness and wisdom—*sati-pañña*—right at the sense doors. When we're with seeing and we have mindfulness and wisdom at the sense door, we've talked about this a lot, so I don't have to go into great detail. You know the seeing—you see seeing, you see form. When we don't have that presence, it becomes judgment and the whole story, that whole *papañca* within two seconds. Hearing—you meet hearing directly, like that woman with the ticking clock. When she was right there with *sati-pañña*, mindfulness and wisdom—oh, hearing, unpleasant—right at the sense door. It doesn't have to go into feeding the *kilesas*. It doesn't have to go into all that *papañca*.

I want to read from the Buddha, this great sutta that perhaps many of you are familiar with, where he makes an analogy of the six sense doors. We all know what the six sense doors are, including the mind. He makes an analogy of them to six animals that live in different domains: a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a jackal, and a monkey. Six very different animals. He says if you tied each of those animals with a rope, and then took the six ropes and tied them together in the middle so those six animals were all connected to each other in a circle—it would be wild!

Then he says these are like the six sense objects. He says, "Monks, when those six hungry animals are all fighting against each other, when they grow weary, whichever one was the strongest—they would all have to give way to the strongest, and they'd be pulled along by whichever animal was the strongest, going to look for its food."

"In the same way, monks, whenever a bhikkhu, a bhikkhuni, or a layperson fails to practice and develop mindfulness of the body, the eye struggles to draw them towards attractive objects while unattractive objects are repellent. The nose, the ear, taste, the mind—the mind struggles to draw one towards attractive objects of thought while unattractive objects of thought are repellent."

Do you get a sense of that? We're walking around and all our sense faculties are competing—which is the most attractive? Whichever one is strongest pulls us that way. Or which is the most repellent? And whichever repellent thing is strongest pushes us away, whether it's a thought or a physical sensation or a sound.

"This, monks, is lack of restraint at the sense doors." The sense doors are all just open. We go toward the pleasant or away from whatever is unpleasant, and it just pulls and pushes us around like that our whole life.

So what is restraint? "In this, seeing objects with the eye, a bhikkhu is not drawn to attractive objects and is not repelled by unattractive objects. Truly this mindfulness is this protection, this equanimity at the sense door. He remains with firmly established mindfulness as to the body, his mind being boundless, unrestricted. He knows in truth that liberation of the heart, that liberation by wisdom."

Just being present with mindfulness and wisdom at the sense doors, not pulled toward the pleasant and repelled by the unpleasant. Present with pleasant and unpleasant, but not this sense of the eyes being open thinking, "Just let me see what I can see." Not doing walking meditation looking all around. Not straining to hear—"What's that? What's that bird in the distance? What's that sound? Maybe there's something interesting." Or "What's that thought? Let me examine my thoughts. Which one is the most repellent? Let me get all caught up in that."

Then he says if, instead of having them just looped together, you took a really stout post and tied each of the animals to the post, they'd all pull on it. And when they got tired, they'd calm down and lie down.

So that post is mindfulness.

Mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the four foundations of mindfulness. Wise attention, really.

So this is sense restraint. And it's true we might make choices—not to just say, "Let me see if I can meet all pleasant and unpleasant objects with a calm mind, with sati-pañña. I'll just open everything up." Thich Nhat Hanh says you don't have to throw open all the windows and let in everything and try to be balanced in the middle of it. So here we do practice some restraint, but not because things are bad—rather to strengthen the sati-pañña, the mindfulness-wisdom, at the sense door, to learn how to do that.

We've been talking about this a lot, so I don't think I have to go into it too much more. When we don't have that presence, we're off in the papañca, the reaction. But one other hint I did want to give from the Buddha that I also think is interesting.

On restraint, again on a subtle level, he's talking about seeing here, but it could be anything. On seeing attractive forms with the eye—and in this we don't have complete sati-pañña at the sense door, but we're sort of mindful. We can see. Say there's a person

here that you find really attractive, really beautiful, really handsome, and you keep getting drawn into looking at them. So you're sort of mindful—"Oh yes, seeing, pleasant"—and you're falling into it, but you're not completely mindless.

Then the Buddha says: on seeing a form with the eye with real restraint at the sense doors, one does not, in that form, grasp at all the features, grasp at all the signs. You don't go into it so deeply.

An example with a beautiful person: Maybe there's some woman you think is beautiful. You go, "Okay, beautiful, falling into it." The grasping at the signs would be, "Well, look how nice the hair is. Look at the clothes. I love the way she walks. Oh, doesn't she seem dignified?" And so you're sort of present—you see what I mean?—but really kind of getting seduced into looking at all the nice things about it. That's sucking us in, feeding the sense desire, the details that catch our attention. Not that we hate those, but we just come back: okay, seeing, mindfulness-wisdom, right at the eye, seeing pleasant. It's contact. Seeing. Like Joseph says, just not hating or pushing away, but just explore that difference between it all being out there and just wisdom-mindfulness being here. Keeping it simple really helps in terms of restraint.

As they say about Thich Nhat Hanh: don't throw all the windows open. It doesn't mean we don't appreciate the beautiful. But again, Thich Nhat Hanh has a great line where he says we can tell the difference between obsessing and getting lost in sense pleasures and appreciating what is beautiful. And what's the difference? It's back to the wise attention.

He says—I think I have it here—"We have to distinguish between indulging in sense pleasures and the joy and happiness that we experience when we are mindful and at peace." How to tell the difference? "Attachment to sense pleasures brings about suffering and entanglement"—basically what's being fed: more wanting, more desire, more discontent, both in the present and in the future. "The joy and happiness of a peaceful mind brings neither suffering nor attachment in the present or in the future, for ourselves or for others."

That happiness can sometimes arise from being with a beautiful, pleasant experience. But it just doesn't have the Velcro. It doesn't lead to further wanting, further wanting to be. So that's all I'll say about that.

Oh, just this last line from Ajahn Chah: "When the nose smells an odor, let it be. Leave it at the nose." You can take that with any of the sense doors. Just let it be. That's all it is. Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, thought. That's all it is. So that's back to that whole papañca talk we'll have to go into more.

The third category, and I like this very much too—in the sutta it's translated as taints that can be abandoned by using.

It's really about attention to the attitude with which we use things—with which we use food, with which we use clothing, with which we use what supports us for a safe and comfortable life.

Here's how the sutta describes it: "A bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, uses a robe only for protection from cold, for protection from heat, for protection from contact with gad-flies, flies, wind, burning and creeping things." So the Buddha's not saying you've got to go sit in an anthill. You can protect yourself. "And for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience."

The same with alms food. This is actually something that monks say when they are about to eat their food: "Reflecting wisely, he uses alms food not for amusement or for intoxication or feeding vanity or for making yourself beautiful, but for the endurance and the continuance of this body, for ending discomfort, for assisting with the holy life, considering, 'Thus shall I terminate old feelings'—like old feelings of hunger—'without arousing new feelings'—new feelings of greed—'and blameless shall live in comfort and health.'"

Nothing wrong with eating to be comfortable. Nothing wrong with wearing clothes to protect ourselves. "I live in comfort and health." The same with using a resting place—for the purpose of being comfortable, for the purpose of your retreat, for the purpose of protection. The same in terms of using medicine, using it in a way that's for the benefit of good health.

So it's quite sensible to be comfortable, to not have difficult feelings of hunger, of being bothered by insects, or conscience, or to support good health. For us as lay people, it's the same. Of course we use more things—it's not that we need to restrict ourselves to the four requisites—but to really look with wise discernment at the way we use things in our life. What's feeding greed? What's letting greed be abandoned? What's feeding more a sense of me becoming? What makes life just be more simple and a joyful flow?

I find it a really fun thing to play with—attention to the attitude with which we use things. Certainly now, it's been a long time, but in terms of the whole environment... And this is not to say, "Oh, I shouldn't use things," and then the attitude with which you're using things is negativity. That's also not helpful. But to see: do I take more than I need? Not as a should—that's not it—but really looking and seeing.

Here on retreat is a great place to explore this. I think I talked about food the other time, because that's such a big arena on retreat. But just noticing—I noticed in myself the "in case" mind. Let me just take a couple extra pieces of fruit, in case. And not only do they rot back in the room, but noticing what's being fed in the mind. It wasn't long before I could see it's feeding anxiety. "Should I take more? Should I take... am I going to be hungry later? Should I eat more now, even though I'm not hungry now?" And when I realized I'm not hungry now, just don't eat now. So what if I'm hungry later? Big deal. I'm a little hungry—so what?

It's so much more simple. It's so much more peaceful. Life is just a flow. You eat when you're hungry, and then when you're not hungry, you stop.

That's actually one of the things with the ordained sangha—they can only go out for alms once a day and can't keep food overnight. When I was a nun in Thailand, nuns don't have the same rules, and you could keep food overnight. I had several male friends who were monks in one monastery, and I ended up with this giant white tray with a moat around it—because ants would get in, so you have to have water all around it—filled with all these extra fruits and extra sweets that I could then go and offer to my friends the next day. It was anxiety-producing, complicating. It's just so simple when we take what we need and let it go. When we're not afraid of being a little hungry later—I'll have something to eat tomorrow.

Or for me, I'm always worried when I go somewhere: am I going to be cold? Extra blankets. I go running around the place, collecting all the extra blankets. When if I was cold, I could simply go find an extra blanket.

I really don't need to go collect all the extra blankets. Maybe I don't even use them. Notice what's being fed in the mind.

The way we dress—not externally, not that there's some judgment about dressing—but I remember one retreat many years ago in Australia with Sayadaw U Pandita. For some reason, the room I was in, some weird place, had this giant full-length mirror. Not a great idea on a retreat. And I had this one dress. I don't know why, but I really just liked it. I liked the colors in it, the flowers. It was bright. You just need something bright somehow on a retreat—or so I told myself.

And I would notice there's nothing wrong with a dress, but every time I wore it, I couldn't walk past the mirror without looking. And then you don't just look at the dress. You look at yourself, and then the complications, complications. I like it, I don't like it, how do I look, how could I get more, maybe I shouldn't wear it—yada yada yada. Completely unnecessary.

The time that I was a nun for a year, we wore white in Thailand, and I had three outfits: one to wear, one to wash, one to be drying, and one to be dirty. And it was so great, so wonderful, just not to have to get involved in all this complexity, all this complication.

I remember when I came back home and was living upstairs here. Not long after, I had this image in my mind of standing with my closet door open, trying to decide what to put on that day. Like, oh my God. This is really—it's just so complicated. It's so much suffering. Such a waste of mental energy. Obviously I got over it, but just to experience the possibility of that, how burdensome it can be.

So just notice that, how it complicates. And something Ajahn Sumedho said once—he was saying that the mind states of contentment and gratitude are really supportive states for awakening. This sense both of restraint and also of paying attention to the attitude with which we use things, seeing what's feeding greed and putting it down—not because it's bad or good, but because who needs the greed? This leads to contentment, and contentment leads to gratitude. Instead of not having enough stuff or not having the right food or not having enough blankets, it becomes: wow, I not only have a bed to sleep in, I have a blanket, and there's heat. I'm not in a tent in the mountains in Pakistan two years after an earthquake.

And just not feeding in these simple ways—seeing that it's much more powerful than just not feeding greed. It actually strengthens the wholesome, the beautiful states. It gives space for them to come up. So that's just something I found really powerful.

The next one is called Enduring, which I like to think of more as patience. "Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, and again, contact with gadflies, flies, wind, burning, and creeping things"—you get a sense of their life. "He endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words and bodily feelings that are painful, wracking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life."

So patience. But you'll see from the next one, which is actually avoiding, that the Buddha is not being absolute about having to be patient no matter what. It's with wise discernment. But generally, the sense of endurance, the sense of patience—well, we've talked about it a lot. It's an aspect of not bringing anything extra, not bringing ill will, not bringing negativity. Just, okay, this is how it is right now. Reflecting wisely, can I be with this difficult experience without adding anything extra?

Even though I go to Pakistan in the cold winter in tents—but as we've said, even being here, on the physical external realm, you have to put up with things that aren't the way you'd have them at home. Maybe now you've adjusted a lot. Hopefully you're tast-

ing a little bit of the joy that can come from the simplicity I was just speaking of, the gratitude and contentment. But still, we've had to bear with, to be patient with—or unpatient with—things. Physical experiences. People not acting the way we want. Not getting what we want. God knows our meditation doesn't go the way we want a lot of the time.

And seeing how patience is just this willingness to be here. Not because you should. Not because that's the right thing to do to be a good meditator, but because we're not feeding then these underlying tendencies—to wanting to be something better, to wanting sense pleasure, to ignorance.

It's like, okay, this is how it is. Not just because I have to get through it, but because patience is actually a way to strengthen wisdom, to cut through the habit of feeding the kilesas. It's not just, "Okay, I'll be patient until something better comes along." It's a very proactive, powerful way to strengthen wisdom. It's a major axis of practice.

I'll give some examples from Asia, because Asia is wonderful to practice in—great just to have examples like this. But the point is not about war stories, about what tough times we went through. That's not the point. What's energizing about it is being with the difficult experiences. And they're difficult to me because I'm not used to them. For the people that live there, they're less difficult, but they're also difficult. The Buddha's talking about gadflies and creeping things all the time.

What's energizing is that learning—that a situation which had been so unpleasant, so difficult, so overwhelming—when we start to meet it with patience, with patience instead of aversion, instead of trying to fix it. And that's the real American mind: "Let me just fix this. We could get rid of all this stuff." No. You run into that all the time in Burma and Thailand. I was a nun in Thailand. "Let's just do this. We could fix it. We could get rid of this." No, this is just how it is. "No, we could have better food. We could do that." This is just how it is. "Why is everyone being so obstructionist?"

But you realize, no. It's actually very powerful practice to be in the same situation a few months later and be absolutely happy with the same circumstances.

I'll give a couple of simple examples. I was in Bangkok in the hot season. In the nun's clothes, you have like three layers—an undershirt and a long-sleeve blouse, and then another thing that goes over it, of course polyester, because that stays unwrinkled, which is somehow very important. And in a little kuti with a tin roof. So when the sun comes up, you're baking in there. It's like an oven. And there's nowhere else to go.

There's no fans. There's no electricity most of the time. You think, "Well, this could be air-conditioned." This was a very well-to-do temple. "We could have some AC in here. We could have some fans." Forget it.

And I remember seeing the sun coming up in the morning and just going, "Oh... another day." And there's nowhere else to go. Nowhere to go. Where are you going to go? Go out in the sun or into your kuti. That's it. There was nowhere. And it just wore me down. And the food was making me sick.

Then I went up to the forest, and that was cooler. Then it was cold. I could kvetch about that. And on the tin roof of that forest monastery, the jungle—those jungles are incredibly loud. You think it's loud here. And this one didn't even have loudspeakers like someone was talking about.

But just the sounds in the jungle, and the tuque lizards, and there's snakes all over the place, and the bugs—the tuque is incredibly loud. And then it came to be mango season, and I had a mango tree right over my kuti. Tin roof, you know, very loud. And the mangoes would drop off when they were like hard little rocks. So I'd be sitting there, mindful mind, and—*whang!* I'd jump about ten feet. Mango, mango—*whang!* And that would just go on sporadically. You can't time it, you know—for days.

What are you going to do? You have two choices. One of them leads to a lot of suffering. The other one is patience. This is how it is right now.

This is Ajahn Sumedho again. I would call this wise attention; he's calling it metta. I'm calling it wise attention. An attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or faults of any situation, inside or outside of oneself. One is not blinding oneself with an ideal —"Oh, everything's perfect, everything's lovely." Not that. But instead, one is witnessing the unpleasant in a situation, a thing, a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. You simply don't let the mind go into thinking, "I hate it, I don't want it." Just not creating anything around it. This is wise attention. This is patience.

And as I say, the mind truly relaxes around experience. It's not just like, "Okay, I can bear it." That's not patience. It's really this open, connected, relaxed state of heart and mind that truly accepts what's happening. And really, I came to be—in many moments —truly happy and at peace in situations that just drove me crazy. And not just for a couple of days it drove me crazy. I'm talking a few months. To really see that it really is not the external situation.

And I guess what was great about practicing in Asia was that you've made the commitment, so you stay there. And to stay there, you either have to deal with the stuff or just be in an aversive snit the whole time. So it forces us to look at this.

I want to mention three aspects of patience on arousing bodhicitta from Patrul Rinpoche. I don't want to talk about them at length, but I would remember these three a lot when I'm on retreat. It inspires me. All of these three are to help arouse bodhicitta.

The first: patience when one is wronged. Patience when wronged—in other words, not giving rise to anger.

The second: patience to bear hardships for the Dharma—which you're all doing here when you're sitting there and your body is hurting and you say, "Let me just be with it a little longer." Patience to bear hardships for the Dharma.

The third: patience to face the profound truth without fear. That doesn't mean fear doesn't come, but it means we're willing to gently, gently reconnect again.

Patience when wronged, patience to bear hardships for the Dharma, patience to face the profound truth without fear.

The next category—and this shows to me the practicality of the Buddha—is taints that can be abandoned by avoiding. By avoiding difficult, painful, unwholesome things. And this, I think, is so practical, not idealistic.

The things he says to avoid are obvious, but aren't there times we can get in our practice when something is just so intense, or you're hurting your knees sitting, and you think, "No, I need to be with anything." You're having extreme pain, and there's this idea in the mind: "If I was a good practitioner, my mind just wouldn't move. It just wouldn't move, no matter how intense the pain is, no matter how much I enjoy something. Therefore, I'm not going to avoid it. I'm going to go right in."

So the Buddha says: here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, avoids a savage elephant. Okay, he's talking about big things—a savage horse, a savage dog, a snake, a stump.

A stump, I suppose, so you don't fall over it. A bramble patch, a cesspit, a sewer. Reflecting wisely, he avoids going to unsuitable places or frequenting unwholesome companions.

In a way, it's sensible. The kind of idealistic thing is "I should always be the wise companion, and I can be with whoever, and they're not going to bring me back to being more greedy or being more aversive because I'm stronger than that." Well, we're not always stronger than that. It's really about noticing without any kind of self-judgment what's feeding the hindrances, what's starving them.

What we avoid may not be a savage elephant, but it may be a savage elephant in your mind. You know how we've said sometimes a huge emotional storm can come, and sometimes there's enough mindfulness to be with it. It's intense, almost overwhelming. But in not a really long time, you can see that while it doesn't go away, there's some balance. You can tell there's a little bit of mindfulness present—maybe not a lot, but a little.

But then there are other times when it's so strong you're just completely swept away, can't be present. It's just getting stronger and stronger and stronger—the fear, the aversion, the grief, whatever. And we'll say, back off. You need to turn the attention elsewhere. This is really helpful and supportive. That's what the Buddha is saying. Not just to think, "I should be able to be with anything." No. What's helpful?

The energy of the fear is so much stronger than the energy of mindfulness. Then redirect the attention to something that can help balance, that doesn't keep feeding the fear. That's unwise attention at that point. You keep paying attention to the fear, and it's getting worse and worse and worse, and then everything looks dreadful, and you're afraid to step outside, and you're afraid to open your door, and you're afraid—wait a minute, I need to redirect my attention. This isn't wise attention here.

That's what the Buddha is really saying. And sure, we make choices too here. We've avoided in the way we've set this place up. We're not in the middle of Times Square. We don't have TVs playing like they do in the airport, CNN news running 24-7. In fact, we go to great pains to keep you from finding out anything that's going on, to support the practice. We're avoiding. We're not saying you should be able to do this anywhere, anytime, and if you can't, it's just because you're too weak. No, we're saying what supports our wise attention here?

So we don't have super comfortable accommodation, but it's comfortable enough. We don't have incredible rich gourmet food, but we have really good food—almost on the edge of too good, almost on the edge of too much, of feeding greed. So wise avoidance. We're not saying, "Why don't you go out shopping when you're feeling a little bored?" I think it's good we're in Barre. If you've gone shopping there, you know. Once will do it. You have to be in a really bad way to think of something in Barre that you really want. You can do it, but...

I mean, I've whipped up things, even not on retreat. I make it up in my mind. "Oh, I remember that aisle in the supermarket, that row that has this thing." I did that the other day. I completely made it up. The supermarket didn't have that thing. It never had

had that thing. It didn't even have that whole category of things I was looking for, which was cake pans. I envisioned the whole row in my mind. Driving around like an idiot looking for this stuff. So save yourself. You don't need to do it.

Wise avoidance really supports our practice.

The seventh method is developing the seven factors of awakening, which Guy has fortuitously already talked about. When the seven factors of awakening are developed completely, we are awakened—that's why they're called the seven factors of awakening.

The sixth method is called removing. The way it's described is that reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu does not endure an arisen thought affected by sensual desire, by ill will, by cruelty. He abandons it. This points to a very important sutta called "Two Types of Thought," which I find really fascinating. It's one we use a lot, where the Buddha is talking about before he was a Buddha, when he was practicing—he's talking about his own early practice.

He said, "What if I divide my thinking into two types of thinking?" One is thinking that leads to his own affliction—thinking colored by sense desire, by ill will, by cruelty. The other type is the opposite: wise thought, where sense desire changes to renunciation, to non-greed; ill will changes to non-ill will or mettā; cruelty changes to compassion.

But what's interesting is how he describes working with this. He didn't set up these two categories and then say, "This is good, this is bad, it should be like that, I hate myself whenever these bad ones come." He walked, and with this interest, with the wise attention I've been talking about, he said, "Just let me notice what happens." And this is where, if we can just notice, we see for ourselves that the abandonment of the unwholesome ones comes naturally from wisdom, because they cause us suffering.

So he said, "Let me notice. As I remain heedful, thinking filled with sensuality arose. And I noticed that thinking filled with sensuality, sense desire, has arisen in me." Noticing how it behaves, he said, "I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, to the affliction of others. It obstructs discernment, obstructs clear seeing. It promotes vexation. It doesn't lead to freedom. And as I noticed that it leads to my own affliction, it subsided."

He didn't say, "I took out the whip and hated myself." As he was noticing it leads to affliction, it subsided. As he noticed that it leads to the affliction of others, that it obstructs discernment, promotes vexation—it subsided. And then whenever thinking imbued with sensuality had arisen, he would look at it this way with wise attention and abandon it.

Sometimes it just goes by itself. And sometimes, as we've seen more clearly with these types of thoughts—ill will thoughts, cruel thoughts—we know sometimes we can't abandon them. We try to get rid of them with aversion, but that's not looking in the same way. When we just look and see, "Oh, when I follow this thought, this is what happens," and we see that clearly without negativity, without taking it personally—actually, we can bring in a quality of resolution and say, in the common parlance, "I don't need to go there."

I experienced this very clearly quite some years ago when I first came up with a condition that affects my joints—it's actually the reason I sit like this. When it was first happening, people didn't know what it was, and I was getting much more ill, much less able to move than I am now. Of course there was all the fear about the future. I was seeing doctors all the time, and they were always giving their wonderful ideas about what horrible thing it could be.

I could notice—because this went on for some months—I really saw in my mind. I remember one time I was going down to try and clean the bathtub, and it was really hard to get up and down, really hard to stretch like that. My mind goes, "Oh my God," and this fear arises: "I'm never going to be able to take a walk, I'm never going to be able to do this, I'm never going to..."

And I saw my mind start, and I just thought—I saw so clearly, I was so grateful for the Dhamma, for mindfulness to watch thoughts. I saw those thoughts, and I said, "You know what? One, who knows? And two, I don't need to go there. I really don't need to go there. Just come back and feel the arm moving on the tub. It's a little stiff, it's a little sore, and that's all that's happening."

And I really could do that over and over. It was amazing freedom—not feeding the fear, not feeding the aversion, not feeding the wanting for something to be different. And it wasn't the whip. It wasn't "you're so bad." It's wisdom.

You all have that ability—when we look and just see what's feeding these āsavas, what's starving them.

This is just a really helpful tool: feeding and starving, not taking it personally, whether we're on retreat or in our daily life.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

CHAPTER 22

Part 2 Instructions - Day 1

Joseph Goldstein · 1h06

> *In this opening instruction session for the second part of the three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein offers a detailed exploration of the Buddha's breathing meditation instructions from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), the foundational discourse on mindfulness. He presents the four sequential steps the Buddha outlined: simple awareness of breathing in and out, discerning whether each breath is long or short, experiencing the whole body of the breath, and breathing with the intention to calm and tranquilize.*
>
> *Goldstein emphasizes that concentration arises not from tightening or grasping but from relaxation and letting go. He guides practitioners through softening the eyes, jaw, throat, shoulders, and chest as prerequisites for settling into awareness. The instructions highlight how the breath is a natural process that doesn't need to be controlled—we simply need to be present with it as it unfolds.*
>
> *The session also includes Greg Scharf's introduction to walking meditation, presented as an equally valuable practice rather than merely a break between sitting periods. The teachers address common challenges for newly arrived practitioners, including physical discomfort and mental restlessness, offering the wisdom that whatever is predominant in experience becomes the appropriate object of mindfulness. Throughout, the teaching emphasizes flexibility and experimentation—finding which instructions resonate most deeply while maintaining the spirit of relaxed, open awareness.*

I'd also like to welcome those of you who just came for the second six weeks of this three-month retreat. I hope you had a good night's rest and are settling in.

For the next six or seven days, we'll be going over and reviewing the meditation instructions each morning at this sitting. For those of you who have been here, it never hurts to hear them again. You can get a sense for yourself of whether to just continue your practice as you've been doing it over the last week, or whether you'd find it helpful to practice the instructions sequentially as we offer them each morning. Because as you know, we can hear the same thing many times, and depending on where our practice is at a particular time, we begin to hear the instructions in a new way. We begin to hear or understand different nuances of them. So you might find it helpful to go along with the sequence of instructions as they're given. But if you find that somehow that's a struggle or it doesn't quite fit, don't attach too tightly to that idea.

I'd like to begin the series of instructions with those words of the Buddha from the Satipatthana Sutta, the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the basic set of instructions that we follow in Vipassana practice. The Sutta is amazingly thorough and complete in describing how to practice mindfulness meditation—what we should be mindful of, and how we should hold and understand these experiences with wisdom.

After the opening paragraph of the discourse, where the Buddha declares this is the direct way to awakening, this is the direct way to enlightenment—namely the four foundations of mindfulness—the very first set of instructions he gives is mindfulness of breathing.

Over the years of my practice, I heard many instructions and read a lot of the teachings. And finally, over the years, with the wisdom of age, I thought it might be a good idea to actually follow what the Buddha said. So I've become more interested in just seeing the very specific set of instructions the Buddha gave in how to watch the breath, how to feel the breath.

I'll go over those in brief this morning. You can begin to get a feel for it, get a sense of it, and begin to at least get some idea of the tremendous richness and nuance of working with an object as simple as the breath. Just this could take us the entire way to enlightenment. It's a powerful set of instructions.

There are basically four steps the Buddha laid out. Through the sitting, we'll start just with the first one, and then I'll guide you through the other three. If there are questions afterwards, we can discuss it a bit.

One of the very key elements in having the mind settle, becoming mindful, becoming more concentrated, is relaxing. It's not from tightening. It's not from grabbing onto an object. As Annie was indicating last night, concentration itself comes from letting go, from settling back in steadiness. And that itself is an art. We need to learn how to relax back.

As a way of beginning, just feel the body sitting. You might do a quick scan, either starting from the top of the head and going down or starting from the legs and going up. Just get a sense of feeling your body sitting, feeling the posture, settling into your seat, settling back into it, so your back is well supported without being tense.

Quite importantly, and something to remember throughout the sitting, is to relax the eyes. We often unnecessarily tense the eyes in an effort to be mindful. We engage the eyes in a way that's unnecessary. Just for a moment, experience a softening of the eyes, relaxing, and remember to check in with that throughout the sitting.

So we're firm in our seat. The spine and back well supported by the cushion, by the chair. The eyes are soft. Soften the jaw so we're not clenching in any way. Soften the throat and the shoulders. Soften the chest. Doing a quick scan up and down the body in this place of relative relaxation, of ease.

The very first instruction the Buddha gives with regard to the breath: he says, "Ever mindful one breathes in. Ever mindful, one breathes out." It's quite a general instruction. Staying relaxed, staying open. Ever mindful, one breathes in. Ever mindful one breathes out. Keep it that simple. No straining, no struggling. We're breathing anyway. Breathing in, simply know you're breathing in. Breathing out, simply know you're breathing out.

No forcing, no hurrying of the breath. Let it come in its own time, its own rhythm. If there's a space between the out-breath and the next in-breath, simply be aware of the whole body sitting until the next in-breath comes by itself. You're not forcing, you're not rushing it. Breathing is the most natural process in the world. We can relax into it just as it is. Notice any tendency to struggle, to want, to hold on—and then relax. Relax back into the body, relax the eyes. The breathing is happening all by itself. It's simply to be aware, to be mindful. Ever mindful one breathes in, ever mindful one breathes out.

In this relaxed, open easefulness of awareness, we might begin to notice that no two breaths are exactly the same. This is the basis for the Buddha's next set of instructions: "Breathing in long, one understands, I breathe in long. Breathing out long, one understands, I breathe out long. Breathing in short, one understands, I breathe in short. Breathing out short, one understands, I breathe out short."

This is a simple refinement of our understanding of how the breath is happening—a simple recognition with each in-breath, with each out-breath: is it relatively long, relatively short? It's not to make it long or short. It's simply to recognize with each breath how it is. You don't have to measure the breath. There's no absolute long or short in this instruction. It's just the general sense. Is it relatively long? Is it relatively short? You could even add to the Buddha's instruction: medium.

In order to know whether the breath is long or short, we simply need to be present, staying relaxed, open, letting the breath come and go in its own time. And with each in-breath and out-breath, simply understand, simply know: this is a relatively long one, a relatively short one. It keeps changing.

If for whatever reason the mind gets a little tired of noticing whether it's long or short, go back to the first instruction. Ever mindful one breathes in, ever mindful one breathes out. Then relax the mind, open to the natural process of the breathing. Relax the eyes, the throat. Relax the heart and the belly. The breath is coming and going by itself.

We begin with the awareness that we're breathing in or breathing out. In the second step, we refine our understanding a bit more, understanding with each breath whether it's on the long side or the short side. And in the third step of the instructions, the Buddha adds a little intentionality to the practice. He says, "One trains thus: I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body."

There's that sense of just the slight intentionality of training—an intention to breathe in, experiencing the whole body. This has been interpreted in two ways. It's breathing in experiencing the breath through the whole body, and it's been interpreted as the whole body of the breath. So, I breathe in experiencing the whole body of the breath—that is, from the very beginning through the middle to the end of the breath. You can experiment with both of those ways.

We train thus: I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body—feeling the breath throughout the whole body, or feeling the whole body of the breath. One trains thus: I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body.

The art of the practice here is to feel, to experience the whole breath body without forcing, without tightening, keeping the mind and body relaxed. It's not a holding to the breath. It's a letting go—and being steady with it. Letting the breath breathe itself.

He talks about training—one trains thus. He talks about setting the intention in the mind: "I shall breathe in, experiencing the whole body." He sets the intention: "I shall breathe out, experiencing the whole body." And again, it could be the body of the breath, feeling the whole breath, or it could be the breath throughout the body. See which you connect with more easily.

With all of these instructions—simply being mindful you're breathing in and out, understanding whether each in and out breath is long or short, training to experience the whole breath or the breath in the whole body—can you do each of these with a mind and heart that's relaxed, settled back, open? Simply letting the breath appear as it does, without forcing, without trying. The breath is a natural process. The body knows how to breathe. And we're simply feeling it as it does breathe.

In the last set of instructions the Buddha gave on breathing, he said: "One trains thus, I shall breathe in, tranquilizing the body formations. Breathing out, I shall tranquilize the body formations." Body formations could mean the body of the breath—that is, we breathe in, calming the breath; we breathe out, calming the breath. Or it could mean calming the entire body: breathing in, calming the body; breathing out, calming the body.

Again, this is an intention of training. One trains thus, I shall do this. So we set that gentle intention. As you breathe in, you might use a phrase to help guide the mind in this instruction. As you breathe in, you might say in the mind, "Breathing in calming, breathing out calming." Or simply use the word "calm"—calm the body, calm the breath. It's a reminder. Notice what happens as you do this.

Relax the eyes. Relax the body. It's not about wanting or holding on. It's about settling back. The whole breathing process is happening by itself. Just allow its natural process. If the mind feels like it's struggling or wanting or confused, simply come back to the very first step of breathing in and knowing you're breathing in. Breathing out, knowing you're breathing out. You can keep it that simple.

Before taking questions this morning, I'd like to offer a couple more introductions. I'd like to elaborate a little on Andrea's introduction. She is indeed from California, and I've known her quite a long time. She teaches a lot at Gil Fronsdal's center in Redwood City. She's taught the month-long retreat for several years at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. She's taught at the retreat for Westerners held in Burma at the Pa-Auk Monastery in Upper Burma. She's been a nun in Burma and practiced there for a long time. So she's quite a well-experienced yogi and teacher. Andrea, Greg, and Winnie have all completed the IMS Spirit Rock teacher training program, which is some number of years—three, four, five, six, something like that.

I'd also like to introduce Winnie. Those of you who have been here know her. Winnie is assisting us during this retreat very graciously, and she's done many, many years of practice. She has one of the unique distinctions of having sat for a year at the Forest Refuge—a year-long retreat. So she's very familiar with all the ups and downs of one's meditation practice. Winnie is available for sign-up interviews. The rest of us will have scheduled interviews, and you'll see your names on the daily schedule each day. Winnie will have a sign-up sheet with slots that you can write in. These are for people who are not being seen that day. So if you're scheduled to see one of the other teachers, don't also sign up for Winnie, unless the emergency is raging. Mostly it's for people who would like a little extra support on days when you're not scheduled for an interview.

Do you have any questions about these instructions or about your practice?

A question came in from someone who has just come from a very busy, hectic time—trying to arrange everything to come—and is experiencing the not unusual difficulties of settling in: discomfort in the body, difficulty getting into the ease of the sitting posture and practice.

First, know it's completely to be expected. So it shouldn't be a surprise. Mostly I would just make space for it. Don't have an idea that it should be one way or the other. Your practice is really to settle back and see what's happening. You can approach this from two levels.

One approach, even though we're starting with these instructions on the breath in a pretty systematic way, is to recognize that if you find—and you know this from your Vipassana practice—if you find there are other things which are more predominant, whether restlessness in the body, a lot of thinking, or different emotions, the general guideline for Vipassana practice is to be with what's predominant.

So don't fight or struggle to be with the breath. If something else is going on, take some time to open to it and be with it, so you can relax behind that, whether it's discomfort in the body or thoughts in the mind. Make some space. And in that more relaxed space, you're aware of it, and then gently come back to the breath for a while. When this stuff happens again, you open again. You're not in a struggle with it.

You might also, depending on what you're used to, if sitting in this cross-legged posture for so many sittings a day really seems challenging and you're struggling with that, sit sometimes in a chair, just to give the body a little ease. But mostly, don't worry. It's quite natural and will settle out over the next few days.

Just in line with that, this afternoon a good friend and ex-staff person, Eowyn Ahlstrom, will be leading a yoga session particularly geared for ease of sitting posture. That's optional if you'd like, but it might also help in learning to relax into the body in a different way.

The question was whether in these instructions it's better to use the phrases almost as one would do in metta practice, where we're using specific phrases—"ever mindful I breathe in, ever mindful I breathe out"—or just to take it as an instruction and then be with it without the phrase.

I would experiment. My guess is it will be different for each one of you. It could be useful to use them a little bit as a reminder, and then let them go and just be with it. If the mind starts really wandering and spacing out again, you might bring in the phrase a bit. I'll post them on the board, so see what's useful.

I have one general approach to all of these meditation instructions, and over the week there will be different ones given: whatever works. They shouldn't be held rigidly at all. These are the words of the Buddha, and so we should at least give him the benefit of the doubt—that might be a good approach—but not with a sense of holding on tightly to any one particular technique. So I would experiment.

With regard to these four steps, you can also experiment a bit. If you found it helpful, as we did through this guided sit this morning, to spend a little time going through each one sequentially, then you might do that for a while in each sitting. It may be that you found one or another of those four steps particularly helpful. Maybe it was the first one, just that general way of breathing in and breathing out. Maybe it was the calming. Maybe it was feeling the whole body, whether the whole body or the body of the breath. So just see: is there one that you really connected with easily? You might either start with that one or give emphasis to it. There's a lot of flexibility in how we're using and practicing these instructions. You'll learn for yourself what really serves your practice.

The question or comment was that in that step of calming or tranquilizing, she can feel this yearning for peacefulness, but that very yearning can actually become a struggle when that's not what's happening.

I don't think this instruction is the same thing as what you're describing as the yearning for peacefulness, because that's a kind of expectation and wanting and desire which can very much get in the way—we're not simply with what is. My sense is that the Buddha here is talking about a much more immediate experiential sense. We might translate it or use slightly different words. We might say, "Breathing in, I relax the body. Breathing in, I relax the breath." So it's just a reminder of how we can be with it. It's not a yearning for some state. It's just a reminder: let everything relax, let everything calm. Using that word and then seeing what happens. Don't be attached to outcome.

Because as soon as you're attached to outcome, it's a setup for suffering. We can't control the outcome. So I see this last step as just a gentle reminder or guide. Breathing in, calm. Breathing out, calm. And as I said, if any one of these instructions doesn't quite connect for now, or if it's creating more difficulty, let that one go. Use the one that is most helpful.

Just feeling the body standing here, settling into this posture—the standing posture, one of the four postures that the Buddha taught. He taught to practice in the sitting, standing, walking, and lying down postures. So that covers pretty much the whole thing. You could include the transitions between each of these postures as part of it as well.

We're just settling into the sensations of the body, the elements of the body as we experience it—this flow of sensations of pressure and movement and various textures. Whatever you notice, we call body, this experience. Let the eyes close if you want to, or it might be easier to balance if you let the gaze be soft. The eyes can be open—gentle, soft gaze.

Earth standing on Earth, supported by the Earth.

And now just gently, as we're standing here, shift the weight. Let the weight shift slowly to the right foot, shifting over until you feel that weight and pressure really in the right side. Notice all the changes in the body as you do that. And then slowly lifting the left foot off the ground, moving it forward, placing it down, and then shifting the weight forward onto that left foot. Feeling what happens as you shift the weight, the changes in the body.

When the weight is shifted over to the left foot, allowing the right foot to lift, move forward, and place down. Just the simplicity of bodily movement as we shift the weight.

Just as Joseph was saying in the instructions on mindfulness of breathing—this could be a complete practice. Mindfulness of the breathing could take us all the way to enlightenment. Walking meditation is just as good. It gets you all the way. Yet it gets relegated sometimes to second-class status, as though somehow walking is something we do in between sittings, or when we're not sitting because we've got to go somewhere—we have to go to the bathroom or go eat. But it's just as good, even better. Top-notch practice. So don't relegate it to second-class status.

Usually we teach three paces for the walking, and I'd recommend you really explore these. I like to start at a more natural, normal pace.

The question was whether we would consider walking to be mainly a concentration practice and less of a mindfulness or vipassanā practice. I would say no. Some people find it very helpful for concentration—it's so tangible and clear, and it does greatly aid concentration. But I wouldn't tend to separate those too much. We're being mindful of

what's there, and we're noticing all kinds of things. We're still seeing the three characteristics—we're seeing impermanence and change within it. But let that arise very naturally and organically. Let that be the case no matter what.

In the walking, especially for those of you who've just arrived, my suggestion would be to really keep it very, very simple. Stay grounded in the physicality of the body, the sensations in the feet and the legs as we move. But you're going to notice everything.

You know, it's just life unfolding. That's what we're paying attention to here—life unfolding in all these different ways and times and postures. Walking meditation is one of them, and so all things will manifest within it. I don't know if that confused or clarified matters, but keep it simple. Let the concentration come through it, and the insight also.

CHAPTER 23

Mindfulness

Rebecca Bradshaw · 1h02

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Rebecca Bradshaw offers a comprehensive exploration of mindfulness (sati) as the path to complete openness and deep connection with life. Drawing on teachings from both Tibetan master Trungpa Rinpoche and the Theravāda tradition, she presents mindfulness as direct, present-time, non-judgmental awareness that supports our capacity to turn towards everything in our experience.*
>
> *Bradshaw skillfully explains the relationship between concentration (samādhi) and mindfulness, comparing them to two wheels of a bicycle that must work together. She discusses the role of anchors in meditation practice, emphasizing that while concentration gets us to the present moment, mindfulness allows us to investigate what arises there. Drawing on neurologist Antonio Damasio's research, she distinguishes between the "core self" of moment-to-moment sense experience and the "autobiographical self" of our life stories, pointing practitioners toward the deeper level of bare attention where genuine insight emerges.*
>
> *The heart of the teaching introduces the RAIN framework—Recognition, Acceptance, Interest, and Non-identification—as a practical guide for understanding mindfulness. Bradshaw emphasizes that mindfulness is not dry technique but "heartfulness," a kindness-infused awareness that allows transformation through deep acceptance rather than judgment. Through vivid stories including Monet's 35 years of painting water lilies and her own discovery of meditative awareness as a teenager, she invites practitioners to cultivate beginner's mind and genuine curiosity about each moment of experience, ultimately revealing how mindfulness conditions further mindfulness and leads to wisdom, love, and freedom.*

Tonight's talk is about mindfulness.

When Trungpa Rinpoche, the well-known Tibetan Buddhist master, was asked the essence of the teachings, he would say, "It's very simple. It's simply the teaching of openness, complete openness." And complete openness really isn't any different than complete letting go. So Annie was right last night when she said that all of our talks would in some way be talking about letting go. Trungpa Rinpoche would also say, "Turn towards everything."

What supports this openness and this ability to turn towards everything is mindfulness—this direct, present-time, nonjudgmental awareness of life as it unfolds. This openness means a deep connection with life as it is. And this is what we yearn for, whether we know it or not, because it's peace.

There's a poem that reminds me of this yearning, which I'd like to read. It's by Robert Penn Warren, called "Ornithology in a World of Flux":

It was only a bird call at evening, unidentified,
as I came from the spring with water,
across the rocky back pasture;
but so still I stood,
sky above was not stiller than sky and pale water.
Years pass, all places and faces fade,
some people have died,
and I stand in a far land, the evening still,
and I'm at last sure that I miss more that stillness at bird call
than some things that were to fail later.

We yearn for a deep connection with life, a deep connection with peace and with stillness. Meditation is about waking up to presence, to aliveness, and to connection in the present moment so that we can learn from that connection. We can learn what brings the deepest kind of happiness to our lives, what brings suffering. So it's a training in presence and a training in learning.

Mindfulness doesn't mean that we're pushing for something or rejecting something else, but actually that we're allowing—awake, curious, and open to what arises in experience. The goal of our spiritual practice is freedom of heart and mind, a heart and mind that isn't contracted or fettered, restricted in any way, one that lets go. This freedom of heart and mind is as wide as the world—a heart and mind that can include everything, that can accept the full range of life's expression without any contraction. Sometimes it's said: the ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, the laughter and the tears, the sunshine and the rain clouds—all of it.

This freedom of heart and mind is developed by seeing deeply the true nature of reality, of this life, this universe, or even this mind-heart-body process. And there are two qualities that really support us in seeing deeply. These are the qualities of concentration and mindfulness. They work together. I like to think of them perhaps as two wheels on a bicycle. You hope that both wheels are going the same direction, that they're working together. In our practice, we balance concentration and mindfulness so that they pull together, they work together.

I'll talk first a little bit about concentration, though most of the talk will be about mindfulness.

To develop concentration, we often start with connecting with an anchor, like we were talking about today with the breath. That's the most common anchor. The anchor is a tool that helps us connect with the present moment. It gives us a place or an experience to come back to when we're lost. It's a way of gathering the attention, gathering our usual scattered attention, bringing it home.

It's really important to remember that the anchor is just a tool. It's not the goal of our practice. Sometimes we get fixated on whether we can stay with the breath, how long we can stay with the breath, how many breaths we can stay with. That can become like the goal of our practice. But it's just a tool. It's a foundation for establishing contact with our senses. It's a way of reconnecting when we're lost, coming back to the anchor.

We need an anchor that feels comfortable, or we're not going to want to come back to it. We need an anchor that feels either neutral or slightly pleasant—sometimes I even say an anchor that feels safe. Because if we have an anchor that's unpleasant to us, we're going to keep fleeing it.

The breath is traditionally given as the most common anchor. But for some people, that doesn't work. The experience of the breath is unpleasant. There's a tightness or controlling, and it doesn't feel like a place where one can relax. If that's true, then we use an alternative anchor. Sometimes we'll use the anchor of the whole body sitting and then the hands touching: body sitting, hands touching. It's another way to come back. Or sometimes we'll use the anchor of hearing, just opening up the attention wide and allowing sounds to come and go. Hearing as an anchor.

So having an anchor helps unite our scattered energy. It increases the power of our mindfulness, that unity of attention. We go from multitasking, which is very surface-like—when we're doing a lot of different things and going a lot of different ways at one time, we can't go deep with anything. So we're moving from multitasking to unitasking, just doing one thing, and that helps to bring power and depth to our practice.

For those of you who've just arrived here, most likely you didn't feel like you had a whole lot of concentration today. I read somewhere on the internet that somebody described the first few days of a long meditation retreat as like being stuck in a phone booth with a raving lunatic—and that lunatic is our very own self. So don't feel bad if you're feeling a little scattered.

For me, for quite a while in my early long retreats, the first day I would be in complete panic. I would have all kinds of doubt: I shouldn't be here, I can't do this, I'm going to go crazy. I got so used to it that I just started calling it my "24-hour panic," and I quit believing it, and it was fine. So if you're having a 24-hour panic, don't worry about it—it passes.

After giving several alternatives for an anchor, I want to point out that it's quite helpful to really choose one, to have one anchor that is your primary anchor. It helps to train the attention and to train the mind if we know where we're coming back. If every time you're lost in thought you wake up and then think, "Well, maybe I'll go to the breath this time, or maybe I'll go to the body this time, or hearing this time," it's not going to help unite the energy, unite the attention.

Sometimes I say it's like training wild horses—and our mind is sometimes compared to a wild horse. If you're training wild horses to come to a corral, and you change the position of the corral and move it around to different places, the horses are not going to get trained. So having one primary anchor is most helpful.

Concentration builds by coming back, returning over and over again. It doesn't build by an attempt to hang on to our anchor—it can't be forced. It builds every time we wake up and come back. So the effort is really in the moment that we wake up out of a mind story. You're lost somewhere, dreaming about this or that, planning this, remembering that, and suddenly you realize, "Oh yeah, I'm meditating." You wake up. The moment of work, you could say, is the choice not to indulge in that thinking—not to say, "Oh well, that was a really nice fantasy, let's just go back there"—but to actually choose to reestablish present-time awareness in the present moment. And one way you can do that is by coming back to the anchor. Later in the structure instructions, we'll talk about a more open awareness.

We're trying to develop a sense of being fully and wholeheartedly present, because really the present moment is the only time in which we have to be alive and to discover freedom for ourselves. So we're trying to train ourselves to be here.

One mistake we often make is thinking that we can control whether we go off into thought. During my first three-month retreat, I got pretty upset with myself. I thought I was a very bad meditator because I could follow a couple breaths and then I would be off in thought. I thought I was supposed to stop the thought and be able to come back to the breath. Finally I went into one of my interviews, complaining about what a bad meditator I was and how I couldn't stay with the breath. My teacher at that time was

Sharon, and she said, "You know, you can't control whether you go off into thought. The only moment you have some choice is that moment of waking up, and then you can choose whether you want to indulge or not in the thought."

I was so relieved. I thought, "Oh, I can do that. I can make the choice to not indulge in the thought and come back to my anchor." That was doable. It was such a great relief.

It's also important to know that we're not trying to get rid of thought. I'll talk about this a lot more in another talk, but we're trying to understand the nature of thought and understand how we can unhook from being lost in thought—we're not trying to get rid of it. But concentration does grow by being willing to let go of the stories of our mind, to not feed them, to not indulge in them.

When we develop some concentration, when we have an increased ability to be present—less scattered, less lost in the hindrances and the stories of the mind—it's quite pleasant. We tend to like it. We may feel secluded and somewhat free from the hindrances. But sometimes we like it a bit too much. We become attached to it and think that this is the way to freedom. And while concentration is an important quality and necessary for our spiritual path, it's not on its own the way to freedom. It has a weakness in that it's dependent on circumstances. The kind of freedom that we're looking for is free of dependency on circumstances.

You may have noticed that concentration is kind of fickle. Some of you who've been here for six weeks may have noticed a few blips on your concentration radar in the last few days, because it's fickle. When circumstances change and new things come along, concentration tends to diminish. This is one reason why we recommend that people don't read or write—the stimulus of reading and writing disturbs concentration. Monastic conditions, like we have here, foster concentration. They support it: the silence, the relative lack of responsibilities.

the slowed-down pace—all of that supports concentration.

So what we want to do with concentration is harness its energy, its power, to help us see more deeply how things are. And for this, we use momentary concentration. Momentary concentration is the ability to be present for whatever arises, moment after moment. It's not fixed on one thing like the breath, but rather it's aware, moment after moment, of whatever is arising, whatever is present. Momentary concentration is the mind unified on changing experiences that arise moment after moment. It's freer. It's not restricted to one thing.

Sometimes I say concentration gets us to the park and mindfulness smells the roses. This is how they work together. Concentration deepens the power of mindfulness. With concentration, we arrive here, and with mindfulness, we pay attention to what's happening once we're here. Repeated moments of mindfulness develop concentration and bring out the power of presence, out of which insight emerges.

I want to read a story. One of the retreats that I teach here is the teen retreat, and one of the yogis wrote something after his retreat. He called it "The Power of Presence":

"Last summer, during a sit towards the end of the teen retreat, I was going about my normal routine—settling the mind, focusing on the breath, and letting ambient sounds come and go. Suddenly, I experienced a first in my meditation practice. I was uncontrollably happy. Feelings of total relaxation, of fullness, of being in the right place and doing the right thing were produced. Experiencing this happiness was extremely powerful. It wasn't about beating a video game or buying a new pair of shoes, but was pure joy in its simplest form—joy about nothing at all. Added to this was the awesome presence of sixty other teenagers meditating all around me. I was radiating positive energy. I was at the pinnacle of my spiritual, mind-altering high. Breathe in, breathe out. And a couple of minutes later, I was back to the struggle of staying in the present. While this deep happiness only lasted a short time, it was gratifying to know how rewarding it is. It has given me the curiosity to become mindful on a day-to-day basis, whether it's taking a deep breath every so often to remind myself of now, or noticing subtle scenes of beauty while walking down a sidewalk."

Just breathing in, breathing out, not trying to make anything particular happen—and then insight arose that it's possible to experience a happiness that isn't dependent on things, on having things, on doing something particular. Insight arises. It was a paradigm shift for him, important just from sitting and being with the breath and whatever else comes up.

So let's shift into talking a little more about mindfulness, or *sati* in the Pali language. Mindfulness is, as I said, present-time, non-conceptual, non-judgmental attention to our experience. So what do we become aware of with mindfulness? What is our experience?

I'm convinced that when I was about fourteen years old, I was actually doing Vipassana and didn't know what it was. I used to go camping with my family at that age. I come from a large family—there are eight of us—and my dad liked to take us camping. We could all bring a friend, so there would be about fourteen or fifteen young people. We were all within eight years of each other, so it was a very big crowd. We used to go

camping on land that a friend of my dad's owned north of Minneapolis, and we had a lot of fun. We'd play games, and we'd have a girls' campsite and a boys' campsite and a little kids' campsite.

But there was something I really enjoyed doing away from everybody else. There was a meadow there, and I would go to it and sit under a tree. I would do an exercise that I called "finding myself." I was just exploring, trying to understand what it meant to find myself. And what I learned from sitting there and paying attention was that when I attended to seeing or hearing or smelling or sensing, I felt like I'd found myself. And when I was lost in thought, in some other world, I felt like I'd missed it.

So basically what we do in Vipassana meditation is pay attention to these senses that I mentioned. We pay attention to the human experience of life: the five traditional senses we think of in the West—tasting, smelling, seeing, hearing, and tactile—and then the sense door of the mind. In Buddhist cultures, the mind is considered a sense too.

So the experiences of body and mind—that's what we pay attention to. That's it. That's life. Tell me if you find something else.

We come out of living in some kind of dream or substitute reality and arrive at the level of our experience through the six senses. You could say awakening is coming to our senses. Experience the breath, the pressure of the foot on the floor, the sound of the wind, the taste of rice. Toni Packer says presence is the whole world just as it is, moment by moment.

Mindfulness frees us from the past and the future. Presence is this moment just as it is. The Zen master Dogen from many centuries ago said that in twenty-four hours there are six trillion four hundred million mind moments that we can experience. So we have lots of opportunities during the day to reconnect to what our experience is.

I'm reading this interesting book called *The Feeling of What Happens* by a neurologist named Antonio Damasio. He's really interested in how the brain constructs a sense of self. So if you're just arriving, this might be a bit much. You might be thinking, "Well, I'm still trying to make sure I know where my room is, and she's going to start talking about brain psychology and how we create our sense of self." But just hang on. Don't worry if it gets a little complicated.

Damasio talks about core consciousness and extended consciousness. He describes three kinds, but the two we're going to be interested in are core consciousness and extended consciousness, which create either what he calls the core self or the autobiographical self.

The core self that he has studied is the self created moment after moment through contact with the senses, with experience, the sense experience, and the knowing that comes with the arising of sense experience. He talks about it just like Buddhists do—fresh each moment, a process that unfolds. No past, no future, just the moment unfolding, each moment of sense experience and the knowing of it. He calls that the core self, though I'll put "self" in quotes. He even admits that it's not any kind of permanent self; it's this changing process.

Then he talks about another level called extended consciousness, which creates the autobiographical self. The autobiographical self is the story of who we are. It includes the remembered past and the anticipated future, our memories and how they relate to a coherent sense of who we think we are and how we put it all together. This extended self, this autobiographical self, tries to make sense of reality and actually freezes reality so that it's manageable. The concepts, the stories we tell about ourselves—it's a way of trying to freeze reality so that we can pay the bills, basically, so that we can control life enough to make sense of it. But it's a bit removed from that fundamental reality, that core reality of the changing sense experiences. It's conceptual.

He also talks about a phenomenon some of you have probably experienced. I call it the sportscaster—that voice in the mind that gives a running commentary of what's going on: "Now she's doing this, and now she's doing that." He describes this as part of the autobiographical self, part of how it makes sense of the world through that kind of background chatter we can sometimes hear in our minds.

If we keep our investigation at the level of the autobiographical self, we can learn many useful things about our personality and our particular habits. We might work through some of the stories we carry from our past. But if we want the deepest liberation teachings of the Buddha, we have to be willing to relinquish this level of story or self and drop down into that other level—bare attention, the moment-after-moment unfolding of sense experience and the knowing of it.

Because this core self, this unfolding moment by moment, this level of mindfulness and attention, unfreezes reality. It lets us see reality as it is, which is continually changing. This unfreezing of reality reveals the true nature of this wild, changing, ungraspable life. Paying attention on this level is what teaches us to let go, what brings the deepest kind of happiness.

It's said that mindfulness as an enlightenment factor is mindfulness aware of the rising and passing away of phenomena. So if you want the most value for your dollar here, this is the level we're interested in—this nonverbal experience of the changing process of life. Change as a lived experience, lived mindfully each moment.

Because then we start to see that hanging on causes suffering and letting go brings peace. We see that automatically when we recognize that change is continuous. It's like a hot potato. Somebody puts a burning hot potato in your hand, and you let it go. When we see this process of continual change, we see that attachment is burning, it's suffering.

So I said we relinquish or let go of the autobiographical level of self.

So do notice, please, that I didn't say we repress it or squelch it or get averse to it or try to get rid of it, because that also feeds it. Anything that we react to, we actually give more power to. But we have some choice at times. Are we going to spend our time thinking about our lives, or are we going to spend our time experiencing the moment-to-moment arising of experience? Are we going to make the choice to come back to that simplicity?

So it may mean we have to let go of our expectations or our plans or the self-improvement projects that we may have brought with us. But it's worth it. We get a lot more value for our dollar that way. But it's kind of radical. It takes a certain amount of trust. It takes a lot of trust. The great thing is we're in a safe place where we can do that—amazing circumstances that make it possible for us to do that.

Sometimes we talk about mindfulness, and at times it can seem kind of dry or even like a chore, like something we have to do to make ourselves better. So I've played around at times with not calling it mindfulness but calling it heartfulness. In East Asian cultures, mind and heart are the same word. We've just translated it as mindfulness, but we could just as easily translate it as heartfulness. Now, for some of you, heartfulness—you'll be going, "No, I don't think so." Mindfulness is a better word for you. But if mindfulness starts to feel too dry, what's it like to think of relating to our lives with heartfulness? There's that wholehearted feeling with that word. So we're looking for what helps us arrive in the present moment with energy and curiosity, connection, interest.

One way to talk about mindfulness is using a word that my teacher Michelle coined: RAIN. R-A-I-N, using each letter as an aspect of mindfulness. This can help us deepen our understanding of it.

First, we have R for recognition. We need to know what's happening. One aspect of mindfulness is just to know what is happening. Sometimes we can use mental noting to help us with this if we feel like we don't know what's happening. Greg talked about it a little bit with the walking today—stepping, stepping, or lifting, placing, lifting, moving,

placing. With the breath: in, out. Hearing. Thinking. So we note what our experience is, and it can help us sometimes if we're feeling confused. We'll talk more about that in the instructions as we go along.

The A in RAIN is for acceptance. With mindfulness, we practice connecting to experience as it is—not how we think it should be or how it was or how it will be or how we want it to be or how it ought to be, but how it is. So we develop this non-judgmental attention, attention that isn't judging each moment as something we want to keep or get rid of, as great or bad.

I think of this as openness with the flavor of mettā, loving-kindness or love. Jon Kabat-Zinn says mindfulness is a radical act of love, and this acceptance part of RAIN is pointing towards that. It's said that mindfulness arises in conjunction with many wholesome mind states, and one of them is non-anger, which is one way that mettā is often described. So mindfulness arises with mettā.

This acceptance is developing an intimate relationship with our experience, getting to know it intimately. It's not about creating the perfect state, but about connecting to what is with a sense of kindness. Sometimes I talk about a kindness-infused awareness. Our attention, our awareness is often very judgmental. It's like each moment: Is this okay? Do I want it? Do I not want it? Do I want to keep it? Do I want to get rid of it? How do I want it to be different? I remember going through a period in my practice where every breath was judged this way. It was really quick, but every breath was like, "Was that breath okay? Did I follow it okay?"

Just this sense of trying to get everything right, everything perfect. With mindfulness, we relax. We relax into what is. The intention is to understand rather than to judge.

There's a story about Suzuki Roshi one day talking to a group of students, and he said, "You're all perfect just as you are, and you have some work to do." I really like that balance. The "perfect just as we are" means that our experience is good enough, that what is arising is okay, that we can embrace it, allow it. And yes, we do have a little work to do—that part's true too, or we wouldn't be here. But we learn how to work with our difficulties with kindness rather than a sense of harshness or needing to get rid of things. In my experience, all change, all true change, comes from this deep acceptance, this true transformation.

So R-A-I—the I is for interest. Mindfulness is a deep awareness. It's sometimes said that it's not superficial but deep. In the Buddhist scriptures, it's said to have the characteristic of not wobbling, of sinking into the object. What do I mean by deep? Mindfulness is not satisfied with a breath as a concept but is actually about experiencing the breath directly.

The four kinds of breath we were talking about this morning—it's interesting how the Buddha laid them out, because you could say that the first one is the lightest level of mindfulness, just knowing if we're breathing in or out. There's some concept there, right? The conceptual level of "Oh, I'm breathing in and out." But then by the time you get to the third breath, experiencing the full body of the breath, that's the level of bare attention, of deeper mindfulness. You're actually feeling the breath.

At first, when I was thinking about this, the first three seemed like deepening mindfulness, and then I wondered about the fourth one, calming the breath body. But I realized that fits too, because the deepest seeing comes out of relaxation, the deepest relaxation. So calming the breath body—the purpose is so that we can see clearly from that place of relaxation and calm. When we say that mindfulness is a deep kind of awareness, it's dropping from conceptual to lived experience, from conceptual to direct sense experience.

With this interest in mindfulness, we're learning to see with fresh eyes. We assume so much about the things we experience, and it actually leads to a kind of blindness. This story really hit home for me a number of years ago. I used to work quite a bit in a community mental health center in the inner city—I'm a psychotherapist also. Because I speak Spanish and there's a very large Puerto Rican population where I worked, most of my clients were Puerto Rican, and some of them hadn't been in the country very long.

So one day I was talking to one of the people I worked with, and she was looking out the window. All of a sudden she says, "Rebecca, there's this beautiful bird out there!" She was just amazed. So I go over and look out the window and I said, "Oh, that's just a blue jay. They're common." I was really struck by my response afterward. I thought about it—who saw the bird? She saw the bird, because she was looking with fresh eyes. I didn't see the bird. I saw my idea of a blue jay.

This is how we live a lot. We live in our assumptions that we know what an experience is because of our past knowledge about it. With mindfulness, we're trying to bring in enough freshness and a willingness to not know what an experience is, so we can actually experience it. I knew so much that I didn't experience that blue jay.

So we come to a breath, right? We assume that we know a breath. How much do we actually experience the breath when we think we already know it? Check it out for yourself. We're trying to develop what we call beginner's mind.

I like to look at birds, which is also interesting given what I said about the blue jay. My partner and I like to go bird watching and identify birds. When I met him, he'd already been doing it for a while, so he was showing me the tricks of the trade. A number of times in our early time together looking at birds, he would see a bird and assume he knew what it was, that it wasn't any big deal. Me being a beginner, I was still curious. I would want to look a little more.

On a number of occasions, it would actually be a different bird than he thought—and a less common bird than he thought. But I was seeing with beginner's eyes, so I could see it. He was seeing with eyes that already knew, so he didn't see it.

This is what we're trying to cultivate: seeing with beginner's eyes.

A number of years ago, I went to an exhibit of paintings by Monet in Boston. He's an impressionist painter, as most of you probably know. He painted the same pond with lilies in it for thirty-five years, and they had a sequence of these paintings on display. It was just fascinating to watch how the lilies changed over the years. In the first paintings, they look like lilies—it's like he was painting his idea of lilies at first. But as the years go along, they look less and less like lilies and more and more like what he was actually, really seeing. It's fascinating. It's like watching the development of mindfulness in someone over the years. And the wonderful thing is that he was curious—he just kept being curious for thirty-five years, painting the same pond, though not the same lilies, obviously.

Can we be that curious with our breath? Even if we've been meditating twenty or thirty years, can we still be curious? What is a breath? What is a breath, really, rather than our ideas about it?

We tend to live in our thoughts and ideas and concepts about life, somewhat removed from direct experience. With mindfulness, we're learning to connect to the experience that is new in each moment. Wei Wu Wei says we worship the teapot instead of drinking the tea. Rumi said, "Sell your cleverness and purchase bewilderment." We're all a bit too clever. There's a way that to really drop into the mystery of meditation, we have to give up knowing.

So with mindfulness, with this interest, we become deeply interested in experience—very inclusive of whatever experience arises.

I've spent several Januarys at the Chanmyay Monastery in Upper Burma, where both Andrea and Greg have also been many times and taught. I've been there both as a teacher and a yogi. The first year I was there, the Burmese Sayadaw U Lakkhana gave two talks—an hour and fifteen minutes long each—on working with the pain in your buttocks when you sit for a long time. I thought perhaps he made us sit that long because he wanted us to know what he was talking about. But I found it fascinating that he could talk that long about working with the pain in your buttocks. That's interest.

Then he trumped it the next time I was there. I believe it was six talks on half of a step. That's interest. Can we get that interested?

So in RAIN, the N is for non-identification and non-clinging. Bhante Ji says mindfulness is a non-egotistic awareness—we don't add the "I."

This quality is about noticing and learning about attachment and stickiness, about how we appropriate experiences and make them "me" and "mine." Usually when an experience arises, we say things like, "That's my knee, and my knee hurts," or "I'm angry—I'm an angry person." We take experience that's arising and appropriate it as "me." In that way, it becomes sticky. That's what I call the attachment—it's sticky.

For example, anger that arises becomes "I am angry" and "I'm an angry person." But what happens with mindfulness and wisdom is that we start to change that from "I am angry and I'm an angry person" to "Oh, anger has arisen due to circumstances and will pass away when circumstances change."

Non-identification is understanding impermanence, understanding that everything arises due to circumstances and then passes away when circumstances change. It's not me or mine. It's not some solid "me" that it's happening to. It's all flowing and changing.

Obviously we need much more discussion on this subject—this is just a taste here. But when we can start to let go of identification, we find there's so much more space in the mind, so much more ease. We don't freeze the passing show. We don't make it solid.

We unfreeze reality. We let it flow.

So R-A-I-N: recognition, acceptance, interest, and non-identification.

Mindfulness has many benefits. First of all, it makes transformation possible. Without mindfulness, our conditioning just rolls on in its own usual way, and it keeps rolling and rolling. Mindfulness gives us the chance to make different choices, to learn, to develop wisdom. Out of all of this, transformation arises.

It's said in the scriptures that the function of mindfulness is the absence of madness or confusion. So it's the ultimate recipe for sanity, mindfulness. Sometimes it's said that it manifests as protection. The analogy often used is that of a security guard, or in the scriptures, it's a gatekeeper at the city. The gatekeeper decides what should be able to come in, what should go out, and kind of keeps an eye on what's going on in the city as a form of protection. Or another analogy I've heard is that of a nanny. A nanny keeps the children out of trouble, right? So mindfulness keeps us out of trouble, protects us.

But ultimately, mindfulness is so powerful, and its greatest benefit is that it allows us to see life as it is—not as we think it is, but as it actually is. We can read about how life is and we can read about transformation, but true transformation has to come from that ability to connect with our direct experience and to learn for ourselves. And mindfulness lets us do that.

In the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, they talk about the proximate cause of different conditions to arise. The proximate cause is the condition or the circumstances that make another thing happen or arise. So the proximate cause of mindfulness is mindfulness. What that means is that each moment of mindfulness conditions further moments of mindfulness. Each time—and this is very good news—each time you have a moment of mindfulness, you are conditioning and encouraging future moments of mindfulness.

This is great, too, because sometimes when we are lost for a long time, feeling like we haven't been the best meditator in the world, we wake up and come back, and we think, "Oh, I'm such a bad meditator, I've been gone so long," and we can kind of berate ourselves. Actually, that's a moment to be really happy about, that moment when you woke up. Because that's a moment of mindfulness. You know what's happening. And that's going to condition further moments of mindfulness. So try that kind of switch in your mind rather than getting down on yourself when you wake up after being gone a long time. It's like, "Oh yeah, mindfulness, great! I'm creating the circumstances for more mindfulness."

Another proximate cause given for mindfulness, for the arising of mindfulness, is hanging out with mindful people. And so here we are—there's about eighty of us plus the staff, so we have over a hundred mindful people, or people committed to developing mindfulness, and we're all here together. Now that's pretty rare. But what it means is that our presence together is supporting each other's mindfulness. We're supporting each other's mindfulness by practicing this together, by our commitment together. So in some way, each moment of mindfulness we each have is like a gift to our entire community. We have that powerful support and help.

Mindfulness is also supported by slowing down. I read an interesting quote a while ago. It was by a poet named Jim Harrison, and he said that a Native American friend told him, "Life is actually seven times slower than the way we live it," which I find intriguing. So here we get to slow down, right? Perhaps live life at the pace he was talking about—I don't know. But I do know that slowing down does help us to be mindful.

You'll notice that even though you don't have that much you need to do here, at times there's going to be that urgency, right? You're going to be walking along and think, "Oh, why do I have to get there?" There will be that kind of leaning forward—we're so used to that habit. So we can notice when that arises and say, "Ah, this is like a mindfulness bell. I don't need to do this." Settle back. Here. What's happening? Just this moment. Instead of working on the gross national product here—somebody said that in meditation we're working on the subtle national product. So slow down and work on the subtle national product.

Ultimately, mindfulness helps us develop wisdom and love.

It gives us the possibility of learning to live with love instead of learning to live with judgment and aversion. The possibility of developing connection instead of living in disconnection. The possibility of learning freedom instead of living in bondage. And the possibility of spreading peace in this world instead of spreading greed and hatred.

I'd like to end with a short story that I found and enjoy. It's from a book called *Buddhist Acts of Compassion*.

There's a story about Khenpo Rinpoche and his first time in the United States at a beach. It must have been the first time Khenpo had seen the beach and observed exactly what Westerners do there. When he came back to the monastery, he began to give dharma teachings about the eight worldly pitfalls—pleasure and pain, loss and gain, fame and shame, praise and blame. And then suddenly he started talking about the ocean and the beach, and how he and Tuko had gone to the very edge of the ocean.

"It was so big," he said in almost childlike awe, calling it something like "King Trident's house, the house of the king of the ocean."

And then he excitedly described what he had seen. "There were these people there, and instead of sitting and meditating or doing yoga, these people were just lying there, almost naked, and doing nothing. And when they were tired of lying there, instead of doing something, they just turned over. And then they lay there again for another few hours."

Khenpo was truly, genuinely perplexed. "Why were they doing that?" he asked over and over. Though he couldn't understand it, he had so much compassion for them. "How could they waste their precious human existence," he continued, "this life that is so short, so tenuous, so precious, so valuable, so necessary—a life not to be squandered but to be used impeccably and usefully for the benefit and welfare of all—not just to lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard."

Khenpo was sincerely impassioned now. "I just wanted to go wake them up." Then he noticed that there was a big white chair about fifty meters away, obviously the lifeguard's post. "But there were two young people sitting there," he said, "so I couldn't go up there. But I wanted badly to, because I wanted to climb up there and announce to everyone that it was time to wake up."

So you wouldn't really be at the beach right now anyway—not in Massachusetts—but Khenpo would be proud of you.

Let's sit for a minute.

CHAPTER 24

Wise and Balanced Effort

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella examines the interconnected qualities of energy (viriya) and effort on the Buddhist path. She begins by contextualizing effort within the broader teaching that nothing is worth clinging to—yet letting go requires tremendous training and courage. Fella defines viriya not merely as energy but as the inner strength of heart to persevere through difficulty, a quality that appears in more of the Buddha's lists than perhaps any other mental factor.

The talk provides detailed instruction on the four aspects of right effort (sammā vāyāma): avoiding unwholesome states before they arise through sense restraint and mindfulness; abandoning unwholesome states that have arisen through various skillful means including replacement of thoughts and redirecting attention; cultivating wholesome states through practices like mettā and ethical conduct; and maintaining wholesome states by appreciating and being mindful of them when present. Fella emphasizes that these four aspects can operate simultaneously within a single moment of mindfulness.

Practical guidance on balancing effort forms a central theme, drawing on the Buddha's analogy of tuning a stringed instrument and his teaching about crossing the flood "without tarrying and without hurrying." Fella offers concrete techniques for practitioners who tend toward over-striving or laxness, suggesting that mindfulness need only be sustained moment by moment rather than across long stretches of time. She concludes by reminding practitioners that while we cultivate conditions for freedom, the actual ripening of insight occurs naturally—like fruit falling from a tree when ready.

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

Why is that? Why is nothing worth clinging to?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So the energy of our practice, the spiritual faculty of energy, is energy directed towards the purpose of awakening. It is the fuel of our practice. There's one text, I believe it's the Treatise on the Paramis, in which the author says that it is entirely through the spiritual faculty of energy that all the requisites for enlightenment succeed.

We need energy. We need this skillful energy that is imbued with wisdom to lead us away from suffering, away from this dukkha, this dissatisfaction with our experience, our lives.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I'd like to talk about the Buddha's teaching on wise effort. Many of you are probably familiar with this teaching. The teaching on wise effort also takes as its foundation this aspect of wisdom—the understanding of what is skillful and unskillful with respect to suffering.

The simplest definition I know of skillful or wholesome qualities of mind are those qualities that are based in non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion. Those qualities of mind that are not based in greed, aversion, and delusion are wholesome qualities of mind—states like compassion, kindness, joy, tranquility, and peace. Unwholesome qual-

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

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

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

The first is the effort to avoid unwholesome states that have not arisen. This is basically about understanding, learning through the process of observing our experience with mindfulness. We cannot look at this quality of wise effort without also including mindfulness. As we observe our experience with mindfulness, we start to see that certain causes and conditions lead us into suffering, into distress. As we begin to understand this, we can learn to avoid the suffering by avoiding the causes.

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

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

At first glance, you might think this teaching would suggest something like, "Well, if standing in line is causing that judging, maybe I should wait until everybody else has gone through so I don't have to watch what other people are doing." That is one way to avoid that kind of judgment. But that might be motivated out of a sense of aversion, a kind of feeling of aversion toward that judging mind.

Another way to engage with this would be to get interested in understanding not just the simple causes and conditions of that judgment arising—the fact of standing in line—but something deeper about how it comes to be in your own mind. Perhaps you see

somebody taking a very large serving of something and have a moment of fear: "There's not going to be enough for me." And then the judgment follows: "They're taking too much food." So noticing that fear, noticing the underlying causes, observing very carefully what they are, we begin to understand them. And as we begin to understand the causes, the meaning of avoiding changes for us.

Perhaps the meaning of avoiding while standing in that line is not simply about what happens to us, but about what we do with what happens. We see somebody taking some food, and then we notice that we start thinking about it. The initial act of seeing somebody taking food isn't where the judging comes from—the judging comes out of the thinking, out of the belief that there might not be enough, out of the proliferation of thoughts. If you can be mindful of the seeing and simply know that you're seeing, that proliferation of thoughts might not arise, which would avoid the arising of judgment.

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

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

This letting go can have an active quality where you recognize, "Wow, this state of mind—this anger or despair or loneliness—isn't very helpful. Maybe I can let go of it." We see the unskillfulness of that state and begin to release it in an active way. Sometimes, even through the simple recognition—"Oh yeah, this is happening again. I don't need to do this"—it can fall away.

Often, though, it's not quite that simple. There are some techniques we can use to support an active letting go of difficult states of mind. One technique the Buddha taught is replacing the thoughts that surround a difficult state with more wholesome thoughts. If you're angry at someone, for example, or finding a lot of judgment arising, there are thoughts that accompany that state: "They shouldn't be doing that." If you can recognize those thoughts and replace them with thoughts of metta—"May you be happy, may you be at ease"—this active replacement is a way of abandoning, of letting go of that anger. It can lead us out of anger. Again, this can't be done out of aversion to the anger.

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

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

I had a time in my practice where I found that anger was particularly overwhelming for me—an anger at a particular person. And when I tried to bring mindfulness to that anger, I found myself just spiraling down into the pattern of anger over and over again. I began to realize it wasn't the time to try to be mindful of it, that my mindfulness wasn't strong enough to meet that anger.

So I began to realize that, and not out of aversion but really out of compassion for myself, I would recognize: there's the anger, I see you, this is not the time. Not now. I actually kind of made a bargain with it. I said, I'll pay attention to you when my mindfulness gets stronger. Kind of meeting it and saying, I see you, I see you're asking for attention, but this is not the time. Not now. That's a way of letting go. It's a letting be, but not a letting be with the experience right in the field of our attention. It's a letting be in the background, just letting it be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We can also cultivate these wholesome qualities through active practices. The practice of metta is one of these—the practice of actively directing your attention towards cultivating thoughts of goodwill. This is an aspect of this part of right effort: cultivating wholesome states that have not yet arisen. We also cultivate mindfulness. My Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Pandita has said that mindfulness is the most wholesome mind

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

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

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

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

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

It's also really helpful to recognize the beautiful qualities of mind that come from the practice. Sometimes as we are practicing, we're in the midst of attending to some experience—a pain in the knee, or a feeling of loneliness, or frustration—and we're not really recognizing that along with that attentiveness of mindfulness is coming perhaps some

confidence that we can engage, some concentration through the ability to sustain attention, some interest in exploring our experience. All of these are wholesome, beautiful qualities of mind that almost come along for the ride as we pay attention to our experience. Recognize these beautiful qualities. It will support their cultivation.

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

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

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

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

Another teaching along this way that I love, that for me has been a beautiful metaphor and an inspiring thought to help me when I'm either pushing too hard or falling behind—this was a teaching where somebody asked the Buddha, "How did you cross the flood?" The flood being the flood of greed, aversion, and delusion, the flood of suffering. And the Buddha responded, "Without tarrying, friend, and without hurrying, did

I cross the flood." The person responded, "But how did you, without tarrying, without hurrying, cross the flood?" The Buddha said, "When I tarried, I sank. When I hurried, I was swept away. And so without tarrying, without hurrying, I crossed the flood."

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

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

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

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

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

Another of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, compares the practice of mindfulness to lifting weights. We start with the light weights, the ones we can handle. If we start by trying to pick up fifty or a hundred pound weights, we're not going to be able to do it very easily, and we'll strain ourselves. But we start with one pound weights—that's not so hard. We work with one pound weights for a while, then we can pick up two pound weights, then five pound weights.

With mindfulness and effort, we start by just being mindful for a moment. Mindful for half a breath, and then another half a breath, and then another half a breath. Just enough energy to make it through half a breath. How hard is that? And then do it again.

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

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

With this kind of practice, we need to learn how to monitor ourselves, to learn just how frequently we need to make that reminder. Essentially, what I'm talking about here is reminding yourself: pay attention, just be aware. Can I be mindful for a moment, and another moment, and another moment?

At some point, the mindfulness begins to gain momentum. And if you're continuing to remind yourself, it's going to get in the way. There's an analogy I like to use about this momentum that builds. It's like riding on a scooter—you know, those scooters that kids ride on. You start on the scooter and you have to tap your foot on the ground frequently in order to get that momentum going. But after tapping for a while, you can ride for quite a ways without having to tap so frequently. It needs less effort to move because the momentum has built up. As you're riding that scooter, you begin to get a sense of when it's wobbling, when you need to tap again.

It's like that with our mindfulness practice. As the momentum builds, you begin to get a sense of how frequently you need to remind yourself, how frequently you need to engage with that efforting.

Sometimes as the mindfulness begins to gain momentum, my own pattern—a habit of strong effort, of over-efforting—would arise. So I began to ask myself: How little energy, how little effort do I need in order to be present right now? This was a great

counter to that over-striving pattern. The counter to the opposite tendency—the tendency to just lay back and be lax—is reminding yourself: Can I be mindful for this next breath? Mindful again.

So we ask: How little effort do I need in order to be mindful in this moment? Backing off, backing off. And at some point, the mind will wander.

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

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

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

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

One way to look at this is through an analogy of ripening fruit. One teacher said that her teacher told her: when the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree. We can create conditions for supporting a tree's growth—giving it light, water, nourishment—but we cannot make that fruit ripen. That belongs to a different process, a natural process of nature. But we can support the conditions for that fruit to ripen. And that's how our practice works. We make the effort to support the conditions, cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome. And then we let go. The results naturally occur in their own time.

I'll finish with a quote from Piyadasi Thera, the great Sri Lankan scholar-monk and practitioner:

"We must, by our own resolute efforts, rise up and make our way to the portals of liberty. And it is always, in every moment, in our power to do so. Neither are those portals locked, with the key in possession of someone else from whom it must be obtained by prayer or entreaty. That door is free of all bolts and bars, save those that we ourselves have made."

CHAPTER 25

Body and Mind

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this guided meditation and instruction, Andrea Fella offers a systematic approach to settling into practice by first relaxing the body—scanning for tension in muscles, organs, and even treating the brain as a muscle that can soften. She then guides practitioners to open awareness to hearing before settling into their chosen anchor of attention.*
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> *The heart of this teaching explores the intricate relationships between body, mind, and emotion. Fella explains how emotions often manifest through repetitive thought patterns, suggesting that acknowledging the underlying emotion directly can quiet the mental chatter. She notes the strong physical correlates of emotions—anger as heat and pressure, sadness as throat constriction—and recommends grounding attention in these bodily sensations when emotions are strong. Importantly, she cautions that physical sensations can arise independently, and the mind may construct emotions around familiar bodily patterns.*
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> *A practitioner's question about selfhood and choice-making leads to valuable insight: rather than trying to disprove the self, we study what feels like self. Fella shares from her own experience that choices arise from conditions—either from greed, aversion, and delusion, or from wisdom—rather than from a separate 'I' making decisions. The session concludes with brief discussion of the seven factors of awakening (satta bojjhaṅgā), noting how mindfulness supports investigation, and how spiritual urgency can generate energy in practice.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

tion to the emotion at that time is what the emotion wants. It doesn't then need to rattle the cage and produce all these thoughts. The thoughts can often quiet down if you attend to the emotion itself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A question arose about feeling the sense of self around decisions being made, choices, or actions. The questioner could see that there's an intention arising and then action taken on it, but pointed to the teachings about having a choice whether to refrain from wholesome or negative actions. That still feels like me, they said. Somewhere along the line, I'm the one who's making the choice.

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

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

Another question came about the seven factors of awakening: noticing the various enlightenment factors coming and going, and curiosity about what conditions support the arising of investigation, energy, and also the happiness that leads to concentration. What are the other conditions around them that support them?

This is a huge topic. The main thing I would encourage is that the seven factors are in that order and they do each support each other in that order. So mindfulness, when we bring the sense of mindfulness, supports that interest. Interest can also be generated through a little more precision of attention, bringing a little closer attention, but not a tight attention.

Energy arises through the application of our energy. Mindfulness supports energy. Energy also arises from a sense of spiritual urgency—for instance, a reflection on your own impermanence can bring energy into the system. So there are many, many factors that support it. In your own experience, as you're noticing the arising of these factors, can you notice what is supporting that arising in the moment?

Have a lovely day. Be mindful.

CHAPTER 26

Pith Practice Teachings

Winnie Nazarko · 40 min

> *In this dharma talk, Winnie Nazarko presents concentrated, essential teachings on meditation practice—what she calls "pith teachings" or the CliffsNotes version of the path. She establishes the foundational context of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, clarifying that while the Dhamma offers many benefits, its primary aim is liberation from suffering (dukkha) through direct experience.*
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> *The heart of the talk outlines seven key principles for establishing one's practice: recognizing that practice occurs only in the present tense; connecting with what is actually happening rather than preferences; understanding that whatever arises is not a mistake; acknowledging practice as a journey through unknown territory; maintaining persistent effort without insisting on specific outcomes; recognizing that experience is always new and non-repeating; and understanding that identification with experience creates suffering. Nazarko uses the equestrian metaphor of "taking your seat" to illustrate maintaining balance in practice.*
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> *She then addresses what happens when practitioners inevitably "fall off the horse," offering guidance on restoring mindfulness, working with difficult periods, understanding that the ego need not be attacked but simply seen clearly, recognizing hidden agendas, and relating skillfully to the narrative self. Her teaching emphasizes that the "crazy corners" of mind—difficult emotions and thoughts that arise—are universal aspects of practice to be met with mindfulness rather than rejection. The talk concludes with practical advice about honest communication with teachers and an original awakening poem.*

Good evening to you. Saturday night. Here we are again.

I'm going to give you some pith teachings tonight. You know, the Tibetans do this—they'll offer something like the thirty-six mind training slogans, boiling down what practice is about and how to practice into these little bite-sized nuggets. You receive a lot of teachings, many Dharma talks, and a lot of instructions, and you may still be wondering: What's going on? What am I supposed to be doing? What's it about? What's the point of it? There should be a point, but it might not be quite clear. So here are some pith teachings, the CliffsNotes version of meditation practice.

The first thing is to understand the context. The context for the practice here is the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of the Buddha. All the teachings offered here are expressions of this particular framework for understanding reality and working with it.

A second point related to this is that it's true Dharma is universal medicine, meaning that no matter what your difficulty or distress is, it will be helpful to you. However, even though it's helpful in many different ways and on many different levels, the Dharma as taught by the Buddha and as expressed here is really aimed at helping you find, through your own direct experience, liberation from suffering. All the other benefits that might be there for you—stress reduction, improvements to your health, emotional healing, psychological insight—these may be benefits, but they're not really what the practice is directly aimed at here. They're very fortunate associative goods that can come forth, but they're not really directly spoken to in the instructions or in the teachings. So that's the context.

Now the second piece is understanding your main task in insight practice. Here it is, within the framework—listen carefully—of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path: develop a mindful connection with your mind stream and maintain it. That is all. Understanding arises and deepens organically if this happens. Is it that simple? Yes.

Mettā practice, your main task: Within the framework of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, develop an intention to offer loving-kindness to specific individuals and groups. Using specific repetitive phrases, connect with these individuals and groups and offer mettā. Keep doing this with progressively more difficult individuals and groups. That is all. Mettā strengthens and develops organically if this is done. Is it this simple? Yes.

Now at about this point, probably something is not feeling right to you. Because I've just said that it's simple. And it is simple. In fact, it's so simple, it's really hard to do. There are reasons for that. A way to say it is that in attempting to do this, we run across deeply conditioned and habituated patterns of mind, which are cross-currents to our main task. We're very often identified with these kinds of cross-currents or lost in them. What that means is that mindful continuity is lost when these cross-currents arise, unless we somehow bring them into our mindful continuity.

There are a lot of different techniques which can be offered to work with these individual hindrances and cross-currents—that's a whole separate talk. But I want to talk mostly about particular trade secrets, how you can minimize and avoid some of this getting lost in these cross-currents.

I'll start by using an equestrian image for you. Any horse-riding people here in the group? There's a phrase used in the equestrian world about taking your seat and keeping your seat in relationship to riding horses. Basically what it means is: there's you, there's the horse, and then there's the saddle, which is where you should be. In order to take our seat in terms of these main tasks, to get ready to understand the basic thing—the feet in the stirrups, the hands on the reins—there are some basic principles that are good to know, and I'm going to tell you these secrets right now.

The first thing is rule number one: practice occurs only in the present tense. Some of the people who have come to see me have heard this from me quite frequently. A memory or thought of the past is a present experience.

A thought of the future is a present experience. An image of the future is a present-time seeing, or perhaps a present-time fantasizing. What you are experiencing is actually now. It's always now. Recognizing that it's now, now, now, now is very important because it's the only time you need to relate to. Everything you experience arises in the now—it's all here, experienced in sequence. Now, now, now, now.

That's principle number one.

Principle number two is related to this: connect with what is actually happening. Now this is another one that sounds really simple, but as we know, it can be challenging. We need to recognize and acknowledge the real, actual experience. What are you actually experiencing? Keep it very simple. What's right on top of the pile? What's most predominant? It's simple and hard enough to do just that, but that's where you want to be.

So you have to work with what you do have, versus what you want, don't want, should want, should have, shouldn't have, did have, could have, must have. Really note the arising of the if-only mind: "If I only had better material to be mindful of, it would be going well."

Principle number three: know that whatever is arising is not a mistake. It's not a mistake. Attempting to edit the universe is very labor intensive. Whatever it is in that moment, given the totality of factors present, it couldn't be anything different than what it is. It couldn't be anything different. Therefore, it is not a mistake. This is another way of saying: practice with what you've got. Acknowledge it and accept it. Awakening can happen with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral alike.

Four: recognize that practice is a journey through a landscape not yet known. You might have a general idea about where practice goes, but you really have no idea what you specifically will experience getting there. You have no basis for comparison—which is not to say that comparing mind won't arise. It will arise, but you have no basis for comparison because you've never been there.

Here's a red-light thought. When this thought comes up in your mind, know that you have fallen into opposition: "This shouldn't be happening." This is another version of "it's a mistake." It's a flashing red light telling you that an unfounded view is being contradicted by actual experience. When the choice is between an opinion and reality, it's best to stick with reality.

You're not going to think, double-think, or triple-think your way to success with this kind of endeavor. Although practice includes cognition and thought, it's really more based upon the willingness to connect in a trusting, open way with what you actually experience—and to notice it. If you can, abandon all assumptions because, as a wise one said, whatever you think it will be, things are always other than that.

Principle five: have integrity of effort, but do not be insistent upon specific experiences. The key is being persistent, but not insistent. You don't know what should happen next. Really, you don't. It's a surprise.

Every moment is reality's little surprise for us. And since you don't actually control what will arise next, unseen expectations are doomed to being thwarted, and this in turn tends to lead to feelings of defeat and frustration.

Fixed expectations are another way of stating the boundaries you have for what you find acceptable or desirable. They come from delusion, and they are a form of suffering.

Principle 6 says: Experience is always new and does not repeat itself.

Experience is always presenting itself anew. If you were experiencing anger yesterday and you're experiencing anger today, these are two different arisings. They might feel similar or familiar, but they're actually different things. The question is, can you bring a fresh mind to these arisings?

I received a significant correction on this one. The first time I did a three-month retreat here, I was having a lot of anger. I went into an interview with Sharon Salzberg and said something like, "Well, my anger is back. It's here. It's always there, waiting. I can feel it's always just underneath." And she said, "It's not always there."

By the way, you aren't always angry, sad, fearful, anxious, or craving. You might want to notice that. You're not actually always in those states. They're all temporary states. You may have the habit of looking for them, and you may have a deep identification with their occurrence in your mind stream, but they are not actually always present. You would have been screaming out of here by now if they were.

Principle 7: The more the experience is about You—capital Y-O-U—the more difficult practice will be.

Identification is a really common experience, and if it's unseen, it's always suffering. When your ego is attempting to run the practice, it always ends badly. But it's a very common thing to happen.

Consider what's been said previously: what is happening is always conditioned and conditional. Thus it's not directly under your control. If you take ownership of it, if you take up a position for or against what's happening, the experience becomes either inflating or threatening. These are the conditions for aversion and craving to arise—better known as suffering.

There's a Zen teaching along the lines of: "The great way is not difficult for one who has no preferences." See if you can view what arises as a naturally occurring phenomenon, more like a weather system that might be interesting and impactful, but isn't personal. The question is, can you be a weather watcher?

Those are all tips related to taking your seat—getting things set up in your mind, establishing some parameters to keep you on board in your practice. But then the question comes: what happens when you fall off the horse?

And it does happen, of course. You lose it.

The first thing to realize is that there will be periods—you may have observed this—where the crosscurrents to practice are strong and the horse is really bucking. Sometimes you will fall off. Practically speaking, it's unavoidable. There's no way to completely prevent it. Sometimes the horse will step on your head and run away into the woods. If you never fell off the horse, you wouldn't need to be here. You would be out riding pleasantly in the countryside somewhere.

So here are some tips about working with these periods.

The first is that restoring mindfulness and balance of mind is always task number one. All of the techniques, all of the advice the teachers give you, all of the instructions in the morning, all the coaching about how to work with particular hindrances—advice like, "Instead of doing linear walking practice today, go walk in the woods and just be generally aware of what's going on"—

You know, you're trying too hard—drop the eight precepts, go take a big long nap. These are all coachings designed to restore balance and restore mindfulness. They all have one purpose.

With these changes in instructions or coaching, teachers are trying to help you find the right angle of entry into what you're experiencing. Consider the difference between a nice clean dive below the surface into a pool and a belly flop. The angle of entry into things is really important, and sometimes it's not obvious. The adjustments that a teacher makes are to help you find the right angle of entry, particularly with things that are difficult. That's the first principle.

The second principle is this: there will be dark and difficult periods. Do not let this deter you or shake your confidence. Difficulty is intrinsic to the process. When you consider what the main task is, you can understand why—because practice entails opening into direct contact with our habituated tendencies. That's what you see when you sit down and try to do these practices. You see what comes up in the mind stream that runs counter to our stated intention to be with the breath, be with walking, be with metta. We attempt to select the channel, and we start hearing all the static.

Our habituated tendencies run deep, and they can also be very subtle and difficult to see, and they can be painful. There's another aspect about these tendencies that's important to notice: we are very often deeply identified with these cross currents, these conditioned arisings in the mind. We claim them as me and mine, which makes it very difficult to maintain a mindful relationship with them. When we consider what arises in our mind or in our practice as evidence in the court of "Am I good enough?"—we suffer.

Practice is like a long distance run, and it tests courage. It tests resolve and motivation. These are all strengths, attributes of mind that are developed as part of practice. Our courage deepens, our strength of mind deepens, we get in touch with what's important to us—or we're not able to continue. These things are intrinsically developed as part of the process, even though the process is not directly aimed at them. Like all matches with a worthy opponent—in this case, our habituated tendencies—sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. All loss is temporary, however, with persistence and integrity of effort.

Number three: War on the ego, war on the self-sense, is conducted by the ego. We can do some very interesting things with this not-self or no-self teaching. We can take it to mean that there actually is some demolition work that we need to do. But really, we don't need to get rid of our ego or our self-sense in the way suggested by a wrecking ball or a surgical removal. As you proceed, you'll come to see that these are just more arising phenomena, and they are already empty of self. It's not that you have it and you have to get rid of it. It's that there's a misunderstanding of what's going on, which will rectify itself if you pay close attention. You don't need to suppress the ego or the self-sense or attack them. These are just thoughts, beliefs, and body sensations which arise when conditions are present for them to arise. They are not an enemy. They are also not an identity.

Number four: When you are out of balance and disconnected from the main task, notice if there is an agenda present. Often there is an attempt to impose something or prove something, and a failure to actually acknowledge, accept, and open to what's actually there. The question is: What are you trying to make happen, and why? Usually there's some sort of craving present that isn't being seen—craving for a preferred or desired or imagined outcome that has become laden with some investment of self.

Number five: The story of you, of me—the story is usually dense with identification. Going around and around with it in its own terms is not conducive to liberation. We all have a story.

We have many stories. And by story I mean an associative train of thought that happens in the present but which pulls in the past as if it's going on now, and brings in the future as if it's going on now, and kind of takes over—obscuring or obfuscating what can be directly known and directly investigated, what is actually tangibly present.

One thing to know about this is that it's very common. It's the narrative of us as individuals, and we all have a story constructed—a sad story or a happy story, a tragic story or a hopeful story, or some versions of all of them.

Part of the role of teachers is to open to you with respect and compassion, to engage with your enlightened potential and encourage its emergence. Therefore, teachers will generally resist addressing the identified self, except to point it out and assist you in dropping identification with it. So if you sometimes wonder why you might not get quite the response in interviews that you expect, it's probably related to that. It's not because there's not care and concern and metta. It's because they understand that continued enmeshment in the story does not serve your aspirations or well-being.

Number six: crazy corners.

Once we establish our connection with our mind stream, we may wish we didn't! We can be rather shocked by what arises. "Oh my goodness, I'm having these horrible thoughts of hatred," or "I'm experiencing this intense lust. I feel so bad. I was walking in the dining hall and I saw somebody walking really slowly and I felt all this rage and competition—I just wanted to shove them into the table." Maybe not this nice group of people. Maybe nobody ever gets those.

But we might be rather shocked by what arises, especially if we have an identified view of what is acceptable to arise in our mind stream. Then the tendency is to close and just ricochet off that stuff. "It's so bad, it's so bad. I'm so bad. I'm getting nowhere. I thought I came here to get better—I'm getting worse." No, you're seeing the cross currents. You're seeing the cross currents.

What we do with all of these cross currents is we give them a mindfulness wrap. We make the mindfulness big enough to encompass them. This is how we tame them—we bring them into the circle of awareness. We don't push them out. We don't orphan any of these. But it can be kind of shocking.

You could put it this way: there's a lot of weird stuff in there. There just is, and you're not unique in this regard. It's just delusion in the mind stream, and we are all somewhat nuts. I mean, we are. We are all kind of crazy. There's some crazy stuff in there. There just is.

Number seven: The more honestly and specifically you describe your experience to your teachers, the better they will be able to help you.

If you go in and start with a kind of vague ramble about what happened three days ago, don't be surprised if the teacher says, "So what was your sitting like this morning before you came in here?" They're trying to bring you into present tense. They're trying to get you to be specific enough so they can get an idea about what's happening in the practice in order to guide you.

Being a dharma teacher is a little bit like being a driver's ed teacher, except you're not in the same car. So you say, "Okay, here's the wheel. When you go like this, it goes over there. When you go like this, it goes over there. You step on this and it starts to go. But if it goes too fast, you step on this and then it stops. But don't step on it too hard."

Here's the flicker. Put on your—okay. And roll up the window. Bye. Tell me how it goes.

So it's an important thing to be really honest with the teachers about how your practice is going. Because you could have an unnecessary wreck. If there's something significant that could be clarified, you might spare yourself a good deal of pain.

The teachers know all about the crazy corners and the hindrances from their own practice. Believe me. You should hear some of the stories that go on in the dining hall. We've all been there. We've all had some spin-outs. We've all had unusual experiences. We've all had difficult experiences.

So if embarrassment should arise, or the desire to present a particular version of yourself to the teacher should arise, hopefully you'll just let go of that and come as you are. Just the facts.

That about covers the secrets. But in closing, I do have an awakening poem with an equestrian theme—since you're all riding the wild horse of mind:

I've ridden the dark horse, I've ridden the white.
Butt smack in the saddle, holding on tight.
Let go of the reins, the horse carries me.
Deep fear arises, just letting it be.
The horse and the rider are moving as one.
The road we are riding dissolves in the sun.
No longer a rider, no longer a horse,
No longer a saddle to hit with a butt.

Let's sit for a moment.

May the merit of our practice be for the awakening and well-being of all, everywhere, in all dimensions. And may our practice be a cause and condition of our own awakening, and that of many others.

CHAPTER 27

The First Noble Truth

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein offers a comprehensive exploration of the First Noble Truth as presented in the Buddha's first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11). He begins by situating this teaching within the framework of the Middle Way and emphasizes that the Four Noble Truths form the very heart of Buddhist awakening, embracing all wholesome states just as an elephant's footprint contains all other animal footprints.*
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> *Goldstein addresses a crucial point of translation: the Pāli word dukkha is often misleadingly rendered as 'suffering,' when its etymology (du meaning 'difficult' and kha meaning 'empty') reveals a richer meaning encompassing unsatisfactoriness, unreliability, and unease. Drawing on Venerable Anālayo's scholarship, he makes the liberating distinction that while unsatisfactoriness is inherent in all conditioned phenomena, suffering itself arises from our unawakened relationship to these phenomena—and can therefore be overcome. He examines three types of dukkha: dukkha-dukkha (obvious suffering), the dukkha of change (viparināma-dukkha), and saṅkhāra-dukkha (the dukkha of conditioned existence).*
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> *The talk culminates in a practical exploration of the Buddha's summary statement: 'In short, the five aggregates subject to clinging are dukkha.' Goldstein shares his own practice of directly observing the five khandhas—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—moment by moment, revealing how this template illuminates both the selfless nature of experience and the path to freedom. He distinguishes love from attachment, offers reflections on impermanence, and encourages practitioners to verify these truths through their own direct investigation rather than mere belief.*

I'd like to continue the discussion from last week of the Buddha's first discourse—the turning of the wheel of the Dharma in motion.

If you remember, he began this first teaching by laying out the broad framework of the middle way: not overindulgence in sense pleasures, and not being devoted to self-mortification. We spoke of it particularly with regard to psychological self-mortification, which seems to be more what we engage in.

After laying out this opening framework of the middle way, the Buddha goes on in the discourse to provide an amazing conceptual framework, a conceptual structure for understanding everything that is necessary for liberation. These are very powerful

teachings. It is said that just as the footprints of all animals can fit into the footprint of an elephant, so too whatever wholesome states there are, all of them are embraced in the Four Noble Truths. Despite the many differences among the different Buddhist traditions, all of them are in agreement that these Four Noble Truths are the foundation of realization and understanding. We call them the very heart of the Buddhist teachings of awakening.

Tonight we'll explore both the meaning and the relevance of the first of these truths.

The Buddha continues the discourse after his description of the middle way. He says: "This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of dukkha. Birth is dukkha. Aging is dukkha. Sickness is dukkha. Death is dukkha. Association with the unpleasant is dukkha. Dissociation from the pleasant is dukkha. Not to receive what one desires is dukkha. In short, the five aggregates subject to grasping are dukkha."

It's pretty amazing that the Buddha, in just these few lines—three or four lines of teaching—points us very directly to what he means by the experience of dukkha. He points to it in our own lives, both in the very ordinary experiences: birth, sickness, old age, death, being with what we don't like, being separated from what we do like. These are not esoteric examples. This is just the nitty gritty of our lives. And then in his concluding line, on a deeper and more comprehensive level, in summarizing the essence of dukkha, he says, "In short, the five aggregates subject to clinging, subject to grasping."

But even with those aspects that are part of the ordinary flow of life—ones that don't need any particular meditative insight to grasp, just those aspects of dukkha that are part of everybody's life—how often in our lives do we stop and look at them directly and reflect on them deeply?

I think the first challenge for us as we learn to apply these teachings is clarifying our understanding of what the Pali word dukkha means, because it's often mistranslated. In many ways, this term dukkha defines the entire spiritual path, so it's a tremendously rich word that we need to understand. When the Buddha was questioned repeatedly about what exactly he teaches, he would often say he teaches just one thing: dukkha and its end. It's all in that term, and we need to understand it in a very comprehensive way.

The problem is that there is no one English word that fully captures its range of meaning. As you know, dukkha is often translated into English as "suffering." That's where Buddhism has kind of gotten its gloomy reputation. But this translation of the

Pali term is very misleading, because although in some specific instances the translation of dukkha as suffering might be appropriate, in very many cases it's not at all an apt translation of what the Buddha was talking about.

Just a few examples. In one teaching, the Buddha said, "Everything that is felt is dukkha." That's quite a broad statement—everything that is felt is dukkha. But as we know, some feelings that we experience are pleasant. They're enjoyable. We don't experience them as suffering. To say these pleasant feelings are suffering doesn't resonate; it doesn't quite make sense. Or to say that things are suffering because they're continually changing—this also doesn't correspond to our experience. When painful feelings change to pleasant ones, we're usually relieved and delighted. We don't experience that change as suffering. We're glad for that change.

So what did the Buddha mean when he said everything that is felt is dukkha? We need to open up our understanding of the term. A helpful way to do that is to look at the etymology of that Pali word. It's comprised of the prefix *du* and the root *kha*—dukkha.

Du means difficult, it means bad, hard, hard to bear. All of that is contained in the prefix *du*. The word *kha* means empty. Empty here refers to several things—some quite specific, others more general.

There was a very interesting analysis of this term in Venerable Anālayo's book on Satipaṭṭhāna, *The Direct Path to Realization*. He said that *kha*, or empty, in one of its specific meanings refers to the empty axle hole of a wheel. There's a wheel, and then there's a hole in the middle where the axle goes in. So if the axle fits badly into the hole, if it's not a good fit, what happens? That's *dukkha*—empty hole, bad fit. It's a very bumpy ride. And this is a great analogy for a ride through saṃsāra. It's pretty bumpy.

The first time I was in Burma, I was with a group of friends, and we were traveling around. We went upcountry to visit the home monastery of Mahāsi Sayādaw, who was like the grandfather of one of the great lineages of our practice. *Mahāsi* actually means "big drum." The monastery was named that way because it had this huge drum in it, so he was known as Mahāsi Sayādaw, the Sayādaw of the big drum.

To get to this monastery, it was way out in the boondocks of Upper Burma. We flew to Mandalay, then took a bus someplace, and then for some period of time we had to ride in an ox cart. Have you ever ridden in an ox cart? It's a very visceral experience of *dukkha*. The axle didn't fit that well into the axle hole.

In more generalized terms, empty means devoid of permanence, empty of permanence. It also means empty of self—empty of a self that can control or govern experience. Empty here means the understanding that all things follow their own laws. They're not following our wishes. And you've probably had some experience of this over these last weeks.

So getting back to *dukkha*, if we understand this etymology—the emptiness of permanence, the emptiness of self that can control things, the difficulty of those characteristics—then we begin to understand *dukkha* more inclusively. Not in its rather limited application of suffering, but more inclusively, in words like unsatisfying, unreliable, uneaseful, stressful.

There's a very important point here that I want to highlight. Venerable Anālayo highlights it very clearly, so I'll just read what he says. It's understanding the difference between suffering and unsatisfactoriness, and the implications of that difference. This gets to the key of liberation.

He says: "Thus suffering, unlike unsatisfactoriness, is not inherent in the phenomena of the world." Unsatisfactoriness is inherent—it's the nature of things because of the impermanent, empty characteristic. "Suffering, unlike unsatisfactoriness, is not inherent in the phenomena of the world, only in the way in which the unawakened mind experiences them. This is indeed the underlying theme of the Four Noble Truths as a whole. The suffering caused by attachment and craving"—that is, the unenlightened way of relating to phenomena—"can be overcome by awakening. For an arahant, the unsatisfactory nature of all conditioned phenomena is no longer capable of causing suffering."

Let this just sit with you. This distinction is really critical to our understanding of the path. Here we can begin to integrate the understanding that all conditioned phenomena—everything that arises—is *dukkha*. That is, unsatisfying, unreliable, incapable of giving lasting satisfaction, precisely because nothing is lasting. We can integrate this understanding that yes, all conditioned phenomena are *dukkha* in the sense of unreliable and unsatisfying, with the understanding that we can indeed bring the suffering of our minds to an end.

Do you see the difference here? When we open to the first noble truth of *dukkha,* it implies freedom from suffering.

What's important to remember as we hear these teachings is that the Buddha was not interested in simply constructing some elegant philosophical description of the world. We can hear this, and the danger might be that we take it in intellectually and conceptually—either appreciate it or don't—but we're relating to it as a philosophic

construct. And that's to miss the point completely. Rather, all of the teachings are an exhortation to us to look directly, to see immediately, and to investigate for ourselves how we actually experience our lives in the world. It's not about believing any of this.

Everything is an exhortation to look, to look carefully and systematically so we can come to understand how things are.

So how do we see for ourselves the unsatisfying, unreliable nature of things? How can we verify that for ourselves? Is it true? The Buddha pointed out three arenas in which we can look and find out for ourselves.

First, he talked about the dukkha of things that were painful, clearly painful in themselves. And he gave this the very apt name of dukkha dukkha. In this field, it's not just that things are unsatisfying—they're clearly painful. Here's where the translation of dukkha as suffering would be most appropriate. This includes all the suffering that we're familiar with in the world: suffering caused by war, by violence, by famine, by natural disaster, by political and social oppression and injustice. These are very real situations for hundreds of millions of people who are genuinely suffering in painful circumstances due to this wide variety of conditions.

Especially now, with the media being as immediate as it is, in times of natural disaster we get such vivid images of the destruction of earthquakes or hurricanes—very powerful. The images from 9/11, so many examples. They bring home, if we can open to them, if we can take them in, so vividly the essential vulnerability of our bodies and the inherent uncertainty of our lives. Because we are just like all the people in those situations. Our bodies are subject to the same things. And as we know, even if we're fortunate enough not to be in some natural disaster or manmade disaster, there's just the inevitable pain of the body—subject to injury, sickness, getting older, dying. This is common to us all. This is not reserved for some people and not for others.

And in one way, even more painful, more a source of suffering than this inevitable dukkha of the body, there's all the optional but deeply felt suffering of the mind: feelings of fear, of jealousy, of anger, of hatred, of envy, of pride, of guilt, of anxiety, of grief, of frustration, of loneliness. The list of afflictive emotions is long. You probably have your own individual catalog of them by now. And they're painful. These are not pleasant experiences. It's dukkha. And this is dukkha dukkha—things that are suffering in themselves, painful in themselves.

Many times in reporting these kinds of experiences, whether of the body or the mind, to Sayadaw U Pandita, going through the whole litany of this kind of dukkha, he would say, "Oh, very good practice. Now you are experiencing the truth of dukkha." It

was a very good remark, actually. I didn't always appreciate it in the moment. But that perspective just helps us—instead of drowning in the story, or maybe feeling sorry for ourselves because of all the dukkha—we can reframe these painful experiences, experiences painful in themselves, as a deepening understanding of the first noble truth.

The problem is that we'd all like to have the full realization of dukkha without ever having experienced dukkha. But it just doesn't work like that. So this reframe is very helpful. When we're going through those experiences: yes, this is the nature of the body, this is the nature of the mind, this is what the Buddha was talking about in this particular aspect of dukkha, which is obvious suffering.

The discourse, the first discourse, goes on to say about this first noble truth: "This is the noble truth of suffering which should be fully understood." That's a great challenge to us. Are we willing to fully understand this first noble truth?

The second way we experience dukkha is not so much in the arena of things that are painful in themselves or obviously suffering, but more in the arena of how all conditioned things are inherently unsatisfying, unreliable. And we experience this through an increasingly refined perception of change.

There's a line from the text which I'll mention now. But just as a little preface: people have heard this line and gotten enlightened. So get ready. This is your chance. The thing is, it's so obvious that people just gloss over it. Often in the texts, in response to people, the Buddha will say, "Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away." Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

What has the nature to arise?

Everything we experience. Everything we experience has the nature to arise and therefore has the nature to pass away. It's just that this statement is so obvious, so glaringly obvious, that we often overlook or ignore its very deep implications.

Although we don't necessarily feel this flow of incessant change as suffering—so suffering might not be the right word here to describe the dukkha of it—it's not necessarily suffering. But because of the truth of incessant change, that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away inevitably, inexorably, we can begin to more deeply understand the unreliable, unsatisfying nature of phenomena, even pleasant phenomena. It's not that it's suffering; it's just not to be relied on. It can't possibly give us lasting satisfaction because it doesn't last.

So can we take this in? Do we orient our lives around this understanding? Or do we gloss over it? Do we know it intellectually—yes, everything changes, whatever arises passes—and then merrily go about our lives, clinging and grasping and attached, suffering because of it?

When we apply this teaching to our lives, we see that the truth of change, that everything that arises will pass away, will change in some way—this process will inevitably, at times, bring us into association with what we don't want, with what we don't like. It has to happen. And it does happen. And there will inevitably be separation from what we do like. This isn't a mistake. This is simply the law of nature. Because things change all the time, sometimes we're with agreeable experiences, and that changes. Then we're with disagreeable experiences.

But to an untutored mind, as the texts say, to the uninstructed worldling, these situations—coming into contact with what we don't like, with what we don't want, being separated from what we do like and what we do want—usually condition resistance to the unpleasant and attachment and grasping at the pleasant. "Stay away, stay out, I don't want this." Or, "Oh, I like this, please stay, let me hold onto it." Our life bounces back and forth between these two conditioned responses, simply creating more suffering because we're not in alignment with the truth of things. We're in our fantasy world of how we would like things to be, but not with how things actually are.

There are countless examples of this, very ordinary ones, just the ordinary situations of our lives. For those of you who are really attached to warm weather, you're going to suffer as the cold north winds start to blow. It changes. It's just the nature of things. Or maybe we're feeling really good in our bodies and then we injure ourselves, going from feeling good to feeling pain. Or we've been very healthy and all of a sudden we fall ill.

Sometimes even little examples, and one might even say trivial examples, can highlight the depth of our conditioned response. I had one—of course many experiences of this—but one which stands out in my mind. Quite a few years ago, I was teaching in Russia, and it was still under Soviet rule, still under Brezhnev, and conditions were very poor. The retreat site—they had to really work and struggle just to get enough food for the yogis who came on retreat. But it was basically okay, and it was working well. Then one morning I came down to breakfast, and all that they served was this little plate of coleslaw. I sat down and looked at it, and in my mind: "Coleslaw? For breakfast?" It was just unpleasant, unwanted.

Of course, it didn't take too long until I noticed the reaction in my mind, remembered the circumstances, and realized lots of people would be glad for that plate of coleslaw. I reframed the experience. But it was interesting just to watch the initial reaction: this is undesirable, not wanted, don't like. In just so many ways, in simple things and big things, this is the conditioning at work.

On the conceptual level, we all know that things change. Does anybody here think that things don't change? Not only here—you go out to anybody in the street, ask them, "Do things change?" Of course things change. Everybody knows it conceptually. But we haven't translated it very well, integrated it very well into how we live our lives. How often are we looking forward and anticipating the next hit of pleasant experience? We live our lives like that. It's always the next meal or the next vacation or the next pleasant sit or the next relationship or the next whatever.

We all know and have the experience, I think, of when we look back on our lives, look back on all the pleasant experiences that we've already had. And we've all had almost an infinite number of pleasant experiences already in our lives—pleasant sights and sounds and good food and nice sensations in the body. But where are all those pleasant experiences now? When we look back, we see, we understand so deeply their ephemeral nature. They're dreamlike. They were nice in the moment, and they're gone.

So why do we think that the next hit of pleasant experience is somehow going to do it for us? As if, oh, if I only get that, then that will bring some satisfaction or fulfillment. So we need to reflect and deeply consider what we already know. We need to wake up really to our own wisdom.

These are powerful reflections and reminders, because as we all know, it's easy just to fall asleep. The inertia of our lives—we just get caught up in the patterns of our conditioning, and our whole culture and society is working to keep us asleep. So we need to develop some tools for staying awake to this very obvious truth.

A few reflections might help if you bring them to mind frequently. One is that all times of being together with anyone—with friends, with loved ones, with acquaintances, with strangers—all times of being together will inevitably end in separation. That is just the nature of change. Maybe quickly, maybe over a period of time, but in the end, all meetings end in separation.

This simple but very profound truth points to the critical but often unexamined distinction between love and attachment. I think for many people in their lives, love and attachment have gotten so intertwined that we think they're aspects of the same thing.

And for people very close to us, it's very often hard to imagine what love would be like without attachment. They're so inextricably interwoven, and we don't often take time to really investigate that and see what is going on.

When we do, it's very revealing, because we see that the feeling of love is a generosity of the heart. It's a giving. It's an energy of wanting the other to be happy. What is the energy of attachment? It's not giving—it's a holding. It's a wanting. The two are completely, diametrically opposed energies. One is giving, one is holding.

There's a beautiful description of this quality of love, this quality of generosity, of truly wanting the other person's happiness, by the French essayist Montaigne. I read this in an article about his life, and they quoted this particular passage from him. He was talking about a friendship that he had with a very dear friend. He wrote: "In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me. I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

It's pretty amazing. That to me just so expresses the feeling of love and mettā. Love is about the other person's happiness. And attachment is when we're holding on, when we're grasping, when we're trying to keep something for ourselves. It's very different.

It's also very interesting to see that love can be enhanced by the understanding or awareness of change. Attachment in the face of change only leads to suffering. If we're trying to hold on to a relationship, to a person who's going through changes, if we try to fix them in place, there's going to be suffering. Whereas in that change, love can be greatly enhanced.

It's very helpful to remember—and I would really suggest that you look at this in your life, because it could be so much the source of happiness and ease—to really see, in your experience, not because anybody says it, but to explore this: that attachment doesn't add anything to love. It only detracts. So it might be worth looking at this.

You can also reflect that all accumulation—all of these are reflections on the truth of change, so that we don't fall into the patterns of conditioning that cause suffering—you can reflect that all accumulation ends in dispersion.

So everything we accumulate in our lives is going to end up, at one time or another, being scattered. All life ends in death.

Now, in our culture, to speak about this, often people think, "That's morbid. Why do you want to be thinking about death, and all life ends in death, and our lives are just getting shorter and shorter and shorter?" But it's really not morbid at all. It's just a statement of what is true. It's simply seeing clearly how things are happening. And this brings a great clarity to the mind. We're not confused, we're not befuddled. It brings a much greater sense of freedom and clarity of vision.

Alan Watts called this "the wisdom of insecurity." People are so afraid of insecurity and the fact that things are insecure, but actually there's a great wisdom in acknowledging insecurity, because then we dance with it. We see what needs to be done in the moment, we can respond appropriately, but we're not trying desperately to hold on to something which in its nature is in flux.

It's really a great relief to be out of the grip of enchantment. It's as if we live our lives under this magic spell: "Oh, get this, you'll be happy. Do this, you'll be happy. Hold on to this, you'll be happy." We're just leading our lives like that. And the power and the beauty of a retreat like this is that we give ourselves the opportunity to be silent, to be aware, and to connect with the truth of things. Again, not what somebody says—the truth of your own experience. How are things actually happening? The more we align ourselves with what is true, the happier and more peaceful we are.

So there's the dukkha of things painful in themselves—dukkha dukkha. That's suffering. There's the dukkha of the unreliability of phenomena because of the universal law of change, that whatever arises will also pass away. And then there's a third kind of dukkha. This the Buddha called sankhara dukkha, or the dukkha of conditioned states.

We can experience this in a variety of ways. One is in a very mundane way, when we consider just all the effort that's needed to sustain our lives—simply to fulfill the basic needs of life, to have enough food and water and shelter and medicines. And just to do that, the work we have to do. There are very few people in this world who can take care of themselves without putting forth any effort to do so. Even people who have great resources still have to take care of the body, they have to bathe themselves, they have to feed themselves. It's work to keep this whole system going. And for many people, of course, even fulfilling these basic needs is not so easy, where it's really a tremendous struggle to have enough water, to have enough food.

In the silence of the retreat, we do get very sensitive, and I think much more aware, and often gratitude starts to spring up quite spontaneously. The place where I often feel gratitude arising is just in the simplicity of turning on a tap and having hot and cold

water come out. It's kind of a miracle. And this comes with the reflection that this is not true for perhaps billions of people. So we become aware of everything that goes into sustaining our lives, the effort that is required.

And then there's the effort that is hardwired into this instinctual desire to reproduce. Some of you may have seen the BBC documentaries on planet Earth—it's a wonderful series. I was watching it, and there was one section showing the extraordinary effort that some male birds made to attract a mate. They showed these vigorous mating dances where these birds were going crazy. It was amazing. And the feather displays to attract the mate. Some birds had nest building contests of which male could build the best nest. All this effort—huge effort—these little birds going through, just to propagate the genes. It was hardwired in the system. That's what they did. And it was really quite sad to see that many times the nests didn't quite measure up. The elaborate mating dances didn't make the grade.

And then the females just wandered off looking for somebody else. It was really touching. Sankhara dukkha—it's just everything we need to do to sustain life.

The deepest and most comprehensive meaning of dukkha finds expression in the Buddha's own summing up of this first noble truth. So this really gets to the depth of it. He says, "In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging." We can take all these mundane examples, but we can bring it right down to the foundation. In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging. The whole of samsara conditioning is contained in that phrase. It is pregnant with meaning.

We've spoken of this template of the five aggregates—the material elements and feelings and perceptions and the mental formations and consciousness—of being the components of each moment's experience. Now, perhaps like you, but for myself, I've been reading about the five aggregates in the texts for forty years. It's on almost every page of the suttas. But for many years, my eyes would really glaze over. Every time there was this list of the aggregates—material elements, form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness—and then it would be repeated fifteen times. I could understand it philosophically, I kind of understood conceptually what the Buddha was talking about, but it just felt very philosophic and abstract. It didn't connect very much in my practice.

But at a certain point—and this wasn't that long ago, sad to say—I thought, "You know, the Buddha talked about this so often, maybe I should try to see what he's talking about in terms of applying it to my experience, not just having it as a kind of philosoph-

ic notion. Maybe he was speaking directly to me about my practice." So I began to see: how can I apply this teaching? Because everything is contained in it. In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging. It's all in there.

So how do we apply it? As you know, the physical elements are just the physical sensations we feel—hardness, coldness, warmth, pressure. Feelings are the taste of the experience being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. Perception is the recognition. Formations are all the different mental states and attitudes. Consciousness is the knowing. We've gone over this quite a bit.

But even though it seems very simple and straightforward, what's interesting is that there is very often an unnoticed conceptual overlay on how we experience things. I'll give you two examples of this. Both came out of interviews with Sayadaw U Pandita.

At one time, I was sitting—I had been in Burma for a while. My body was very open, a flow of energy. Things felt pleasant, except for this one knot in my neck. So I go into the interview. I'm describing this great open flow of energy, but there's this knot in the neck. I said, "Everything's very open, but there's a block, an energy block." He got on my case for calling it a block. And I realized, after he pointed it out, that just that concept—"block"—already contains desire and aversion. That was an interpretation. I thought I was describing it objectively. You know, everything's open and there's a block. It wasn't objective at all. It was a conceptual overlay. What I was feeling was tightness and hardness. That's what the experience was. To call it a block already contains desire to get rid of it, aversion to the fact that it's there. This is subtle. We do this a lot. Coming back to the five aggregates begins to free us from this conceptual overlay.

Another time, I was sitting and experiencing a lot of lightness in my body and floating. I mean, it felt wonderful.

It felt like I was really floating in the air. And I went in and reported—and I definitely should have known better. This was a big mistake. I said, "Oh, Sayadaw, it feels like I'm flying on a magic carpet!" He just looked at me. Basically shook his head and said, "Have you ever been on a magic carpet?" He rang the bell. That was the end of that interview.

So one way we can begin to apply these teachings—and I did this on my last retreat, and it was so illuminating—is to ask: How can I apply these teachings of the aggregates directly? They are all present in every moment. It's not that they arise sequentially; all five are there in every moment. But in different moments, one or another may be predominant.

I decided to take a period of time—maybe ten or fifteen minutes—where I would try to identify in each moment which of the aggregates stood out. This was in winter, so I was doing some walking meditation outside. It was very cold, really an icy wind, which in some ways is very good for practice. It's a real wake-up.

What's going on here? It became pretty clear—the icy cold material elements. When my mind was tuning into the intense cold, it was easier to recognize: that's the first aggregate. It was unpleasant, very unpleasant. When my mind was highlighting the unpleasantness, I recognized it as the second aggregate of feeling. Then maybe I'd go back to just the cold, then back to unpleasant. Then a car went by. When I heard the sound, I recognized it as "car"—that was perception. So I just noted, "Oh, that's the perception aggregate." Maybe back to the cold, back to the unpleasantness, then I would notice different reactions in my mind. "I don't like this." Or maybe there was equanimity. I was just watching the different reactions—that's the fourth aggregate of mental formations. Sometimes I would be just resting in the awareness, just knowing, and when that knowing was predominant, that was the fifth aggregate.

Moment after moment, I was simply noticing: that was the first, that's perception, that's feeling, that's formations, that's consciousness. It was very revealing.

A few things really stood out from doing this. First, there was a sense of awe that the Buddha could describe the totality of our experience in terms of this very simple template. There was nothing I experienced that fell outside these five aggregates. Just imagine if somebody came up to you, not knowing anything about this, and said, "Describe the world in five sentences." We'd be completely confused. And here the Buddha—his understanding was so brilliant and incisive. The whole world is contained in these five aggregates. To really see that was very inspiring.

And then it became so clear, as I was noticing each one becoming predominant, how evident their changing nature was. It was just: this is feeling, this is sensation, this is perception, this is formation, back to feeling, back to sensation, consciousness—one after the other, moment after moment. It was this dance, this momentary dance of the different aggregates arising and passing. It became so clear both that this was all there was, and that there was no "me" to whom they were happening.

All that there was was this play of aggregates, and seeing their impermanent, unreliable nature, I understood again on a deeper level the burdensomeness of relying on any of these aggregates for lasting satisfaction or peace. And again, this was not, at this point, a conceptual thing. It was being right in the experience. This is what the Buddha was pointing us to.

You might experiment a little with this. If you feel you're resonating with this teaching, explore it in your practice.

The Buddha offered this image: "Suppose, bhikkhus, a dog tied up on a leash was bound to a strong post or pillar. It would just keep on running and revolving around that same post or pillar. So too, uninstructed worldlings regard form as self, feeling as self, perception, volitional formations, consciousness as self. They just keep running and revolving around form, feelings, perception, formations, and consciousness. As they keep on running and revolving around them, they are not freed from them. They are not freed from birth, aging, and death, not freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, not freed from suffering.

"But the instructed noble disciples"—and that's us—"do not regard form as self, feeling, perception, volitional formations, consciousness as self. They no longer keep running and revolving around them. As they no longer keep running around them, they are freed from them, freed from birth, aging, and death, freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, free from suffering."

This teaching is the very heart. It's the description of the first noble truth and the third noble truth. In short, dukkha is the five aggregates subject to clinging. When we free ourselves from that clinging, we free ourselves from suffering.

I'd like to close with one teaching from a wonderful Tibetan master named Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche. He says: "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself. The Buddha said, 'I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you.' This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you."

That's tremendously empowering—to remember that it's up to us, and we can do this.

CHAPTER 28

Gratification, Danger, and Escape

Rebecca Bradshaw · 56 min

In this sutta study talk, Rebecca Bradshaw examines the Buddha's framework for understanding our relationship to sense experience through the lens of gratification, danger, and escape. Drawing from several linked suttas including the discourse on 'The All' (Sabba Sutta, SN 35.23), she explores how the six sense bases (āyatana)—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind—along with their objects constitute the totality of our experience.

The talk unpacks the Buddha's insight that while sense pleasures do provide genuine gratification and happiness, becoming 'enamored' with them leads to suffering because all conditioned phenomena are impermanent (anicca), unsatisfying (dukkha), and subject to change. Bradshaw shares personal examples—from anticipating lunch on retreat to her encounter with irresistible brownies—to illustrate how mindfulness helps us see desire arise and pass without being compelled to act on it.

Rather than rejecting sense pleasures, the Buddha's teaching points toward abandoning the clinging and contraction that accompanies desire. Through poetry by Pablo Neruda and Hán Shān, and teachings from Charlotte Joko Beck and the Dalai Lama, Bradshaw illuminates how this investigation leads to a mature love for this fleeting world—one that holds experience with an open palm rather than a clenched fist. Each moment of non-clinging becomes a taste of the freedom the Buddha described as 'escape' from the prison of craving.

Tonight's talk is titled "The Gratification, The Danger, and The Escape."

Tonight we're going to have a little bit more sutra study. As many of you know, the Buddha gave many discourses during his teaching career, and after he died, they were preserved by an oral tradition for about 500 years until they were written down. Because they were preserved in an oral tradition, they're often very repetitious—it's a way that one can be assured the teachings will be remembered. I'm going to read some sutra to you and abbreviate a little bit, because we're not quite as used to lots of repetition in this age. There are actually several short sutras that I will read, linked sutras, and then explain them in more detail.

To set the stage: The Buddha has sometimes been called a scientist of the mind. He taught in great detail about how the mind works, about the nature of this mind-body-heart process, the nature of reality. He actually only said a couple of really important things, such as "everything changes," but then played out the full implications of these basic laws about the nature of reality.

The Buddha talked a lot about what can be known as conditioned reality—this world as we know it, this world as we can directly perceive it. He broke down conditioned reality in a number of different ways. One way you've already heard: the five aggregates—the body or form, feelings, perceptions, volitional formations, and consciousness. That's one way we can describe this mind-body process in this world.

In the sutra that I'm going to read and talk about, he broke down reality into the six sense bases and the sense objects. This is another way that we can describe and understand reality.

In a short sutra called "The All":

At Savatthi: "Bhikkhus, I will teach you the all. Listen to that. And what, bhikkhus, is the all? The eye and forms, the ear and sounds, the nose and odors, the tongue and tastes, the body and tactile objects, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called the all. If anyone, bhikkhus, should speak thus: 'Having rejected this all, I shall make known another all,' that would be a mere empty boast on his part. If he were questioned, he would not be able to reply, and further he would meet with vexation. For what reason? Because, bhikkhus, that would not be within his domain."

So the all, the whole of reality: the eye and forms, the nose and smells, the body and tactile sensations, the mind and mind objects—mind objects including thoughts, emotions, mind states, consciousness, factors of mind, perception. That's the totality of our experience. And the Buddha said you can't find anything else.

The short sutras that I'm going to read describe how we can relate to this experience of life, the experience of the sense bases and the sense objects. How do we relate to and understand these experiences in a way that leads to peace rather than suffering?

At Savatthi again. Often in the sutras, they start by saying where the discourse took place.

"Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisattva, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: What is the gratification? What is the danger? What is the escape in the case of the eye? What is the gratification? What is the danger? What is the escape in the case of the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind?

Then it occurred to me: The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the eye—this is the gratification in the eye. That the eye is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—this is the danger in the eye. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the eye—this is the escape from the eye.

The pleasure and joy that arise in dependence on the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind—this is the gratification in the six sense bases. That the six sense bases are impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—that is the danger in the sense bases. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the sense bases—this is the escape from the sense bases.

So long, bhikkhus, as I did not know as they really are the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of the six sense bases, I did not claim to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world. But when I directly knew all of this as it really is, then I claimed to have awakened to the unsurpassed perfect enlightenment in this world."

I was thinking today that maybe this is an auspicious talk for the Uposatha Day, because as I explained in the question period this morning, we take the three extra precepts as a practice of renunciation of sense pleasures or sense comforts in order to highlight our relationship to them, in order to develop understanding of our dependence on them for our happiness—and to see that there might be another way, there might be an escape, as the Buddha said.

So the question again in this sutra is: How do we relate to our experience, our lives, through the senses in a way that leads to understanding and freedom?

Let's take the three parts: the gratification, the danger, and the escape.

Gratification. The joy and pleasure that arise in dependence on the eye—this is the gratification in the eye. Here he's talking about the six sense bases and, by extrapolation, the six sense objects.

So the eye and form, the nose and smell, and so on through all the sense doors.

In Buddhist psychology, we understand a moment of experience as having three parts. There's the sense base—eye, nose, ear, tongue, body, mind. There's the sense object—form, smell, sensations, thoughts. And there's the consciousness, the sense consciousness. These three come together, they ignite, and we have a moment of experience. So there's the eye, there's a form, there's seeing consciousness—that's a moment of experience. And the gratification, he said, is when that moment of experience provides pleasure.

So basically, the Buddha is saying that sense contact can sometimes be pleasurable, which is not big news to most of you. And because of this, our senses provide us some sense of gratification. There's a kind of happiness that we get from pleasant sense experience, and we all know this. We might see the beautiful fall leaves and there's a sense of happiness or gratification from that. Or we drink a warm cup of tea on a cool afternoon, or eat a delicious lunch. This kind of gratification or happiness is readily available if we pay attention. Many moments of our day we can experience this kind of happiness if we're available, if we're present to the beauty in this world.

Meditation even helps us access this kind of happiness as we train ourselves to be more present. We actually connect through our senses, and as we connect more and more moments of mindfulness, we're actually present for this kind of pleasure. Many of you may have noticed that as our minds settle, our senses become more subtle. We can appreciate, for example, the taste of a mouthful of rice from beginning to end as a changing experience, rather than just the single taste of rice. Or the many layered smells in the fall air, especially when it's damp.

It can be useful to access this level of pleasure when our practice has a lot of dukkha in it. It's a way of bringing balance to the mind. The commentaries even prescribe very pleasant circumstances for folks suffering from a lot of aversion—it almost seems extreme. The commentaries talk about how folks with a lot of aversion should have satin sheets and flowers in their rooms and handsome servants. It goes on and on. The idea is not to get caught in it—obviously, we'll talk about that later—but to bring balance to the mind when there's a lot of suffering. We need some balance. It energizes us, it soothes us, so that we can keep going. That's why it's prescribed.

So our senses become more refined on retreat, and we can access this happiness more easily. Some of you may even find that your senses have become a bit too refined, that sounds may be louder than one wishes, for example.

The Buddha did recognize that yes, sense experiences can bring us some kind of happiness. There's some joy, some comfort, some gratification. Raised as a prince, he knew about this in the extreme. He said that he had different palaces for different seasons with all the sense pleasures that a person could want. For many folks, this is the conventional understanding of happiness—this level of happiness.

But the Buddha saw that it doesn't solve the problem of human existence and human happiness. We need to look deeper than this. We can't just leave the subject right here.

In another part of the suttas that I didn't read, the Buddha said: "Bhikkhus, I set out seeking the gratification in the eye, the ear, the sixth sense bases. Whatever gratification there is in the sixth sense bases, that I have discovered. I have clearly seen with wisdom how far the gratification in the sixth sense bases extends."

So with this, we start to get some sense that there's a limit to this kind of happiness. There is some gratification in sense pleasures, but it only extends so far. He said, "I have seen how far this gratification extends."

And he goes on to explain where the problem lies. He says: "Bhikkhus, if there were no gratification in the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind, beings would not become enamored with them. But because there is gratification in the eyes and the other sense bases, beings become enamored with them."

So this is the problem. Because there is this pleasantness and gratification, we become enamored and attached. You could say we fall in love with sense pleasures. I find it interesting that he chose the word "enamored," or at least that's how it was translated by a very well-respected scholar. Because there's gratification, we become enamored.

So "enamored" has a little bit of a mindless sense to it, a kind of sense of getting lost in it. When we're enamored or in love or infatuated, there's some blindness there. We see the good, but we ignore the faults. When we're first in love with somebody, everything seems perfect. We don't see any faults. We don't even want to hear about faults. If you've ever tried to talk to somebody who's in love and enamored, they don't want to hear about faults and limitations. They don't want anybody to burst the bubble. This is what being enamored does to us.

This blindness about sense pleasures seems to me particularly encouraged by Western—and maybe even particularly American—society, where we worship sense gratification. Ajahn Sumedho said, "I was brought up in America, the land of freedom. It promises the right to be happy, but what it really offers is the right to be attached to everything." America encourages you to try to be as happy as you can by getting things.

Patrick Ophuls, in a delightful book called *Buddha Takes No Prisoners*, said that our society is like frenetically rearranging the deck chairs on the SS Samsara, trying to make ourselves happy through acquisition. I get a certain amount of entertainment from the media and how they play on this—it's kind of the anti-dharma, you could call it. One of my favorites recently is from Honda Corporation. The tagline is "Something New to Crave." We get this all the time. The most recent one I only discovered a few days ago. I'm not going to tell you which sense pleasure it was because I don't want to get you thinking about it, but the tagline was "The Simple Joy of Obsession."

I hadn't thought about it that way. At first I heard it and thought it was funny. And then I actually felt disturbed. I thought, this is what we're being taught over and over again. But then it occurred to me: if we have to be so convinced over and over again, maybe it means the seeds of wisdom aren't too deeply buried. If we have to be continually trained by the media this way, perhaps the seeds of wisdom are there just waiting to sprout.

We're definitely conditioned by our economic system to seek gratification in sense pleasures. But it's also deeply internally conditioned—habits of the psyche, of the mind—to seek this gratification. So perhaps we find that we want to stay infatuated with sense pleasures, like the person in love who doesn't want to hear about their beloved's faults. Perhaps you don't want to hear the rest of this discourse. But when we tell the infatuated person about the danger, they might avoid some pain and suffering if they would just listen. So let us continue with the Buddha's discourse and see what he would like to warn us about.

Another way we can think about this investigation into the dangers of the six sense bases is that it's about developing a mature love for this world. When we are enamored or infatuated with the sense pleasures of the world, we're not completely in touch with reality. A mature love must see the beauty and also see the limitations in what is loved. A mature love sees and accepts things as they are. This is a stronger and more enduring love than blind infatuation. So as we look at the limitations of the gratifications of things of this world, perhaps our love of life as we experience it can become more mature. Perhaps we can be realistic in what we expect from sense pleasures.

The next part of the sutta addresses this question: What is the danger of the six sense bases? We've talked about the gratification. What is the danger? What is the limitation that the Buddha saw? "That the eye is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—this is the danger in the eye. That the ear, nose, body, and mind sense bases are impermanent, suffering, and subject to change—this is the danger."

One of the basic truths of life and one of the core teachings of the Buddha that we've been exploring is this truth of impermanence, or *anicca*—the changing nature of reality. All that we can experience through the senses is constantly changing. Life is a flowing river, and you can't stop the stream.

This constant flow of change is described beautifully in a book called *Zen Seeds: Reflections of a Female Priest*, written by a lovely Japanese nun named Shundo Oyama. In a chapter called "Hearing the Voice of the Valley Stream," she writes: "The water of the valley stream is always flowing. It races on and on, not pausing for even an instant. Its sound, to me, is the sound of time."

The sound of time glistens on the riverbed of the universe. Though theirs is a much slower flow, stones, trees, houses, and towns are flowing too. Human beings and all things that have life flow. Thought and culture too flow. That all these appear to be unchanging is an illusion. When we listen subconsciously to the sound of flowing water, does it not seem to create a rhythm? Yet not a single drop of water passes over the same rock twice. And the murmur of water rushing over a rock is constantly changing. Sameness is but an illusion of the human ears, eyes, and mind. Water that has once flowed along a riverbed can never retrace its course. Human life is no different. It is only our mundane eyes and minds that see yesterday as being the same as today. Enlightened eyes and minds should recognize that each moment has a form different than any other moment.

So what can we hold on to? We've been seeing this hopefully in our practice over and over again—this truth of change, constant change. We only have to be with our minds for one meditation period to see it. Ajahn Chah said, "All I have learned in the forty years that I have been a monk, I can sum up in one sentence: all that arises passes away. This I know." Forty years of practice: all that arises passes away. The truth of change.

It's our most basic delusion as human beings to hide from this truth. When we look, it's obvious—it's pretty obvious—but we need to see this truth very deeply if we're going to have peace of mind, if we're going to live in harmony with the way things are, if we're going to love this world with wisdom. We must see it happen moment after moment.

The Zen Roshi Uchiyama Roshi described practice as active participation in loss. How do we deal with living in a world of constant change, constant loss? It takes a lot of strength to explore this. The rewards, however, are great. The Buddha said that seeing this is the way to freedom of heart and mind. In the Dhammapada, he says, "Everything changes, nothing stays the same. Having gained this awareness, one is freed from suffering. This is the way of purification. All conditioned things are subject to change. Having fully learned this insight, one is freed from suffering. This is the way to liberation."

As long as we don't deeply understand this truth of impermanence, we're going to continue to believe that we can find the gratification that we're looking for through sense pleasures. We'll expend our life energy pursuing sense pleasures. We'll take our refuge in trying to control life and get caught in attachment to sense pleasures. So our attempts to control the world, to experience sense pleasures continually, bring some

gratification, but this fails as an ultimate strategy for happiness and peace because everything changes. You can't stop the flow of the river of change. You can't make pleasantness stay.

I remember my first retreat here, that first long retreat—the three-month course—and I remember many mornings spending time looking forward to lunch, one of the main sense pleasures on retreat. I would look forward to the gratification that lunch was going to bring. And I'd be eating my lunch, and somewhere about two-thirds through the meal, I'd realize that it was going to end. Every time I'd finish lunch, I'd sit there and go, "It's done. It's gone." I was on the eight precepts, so I'm thinking, "Wow, that's it for the day." And it was a cycle—the energy I would expend in the morning thinking about lunch, looking forward to lunch. I would eat lunch. It would be all over, and there would be this letdown. That's it. It's gone. It wasn't going to be satisfying. But I did it day after day. The habits of conditioning are pretty deep. I don't think I do that on retreat anymore. I've made some progress.

So happiness through sense pleasures—gratification of sense pleasures—can provide us some comfort and solace, but they're not an ultimate refuge for us.

One of my favorite poets is Pablo Neruda from Chile. He expresses the poignancy of this in a short poem: "We, the mortals, touch the metals, the winds, the ocean shores, the stones, knowing that they will go on, inert or burning."

And I was discovering, naming all these things, it was my destiny to love and say goodbye. What I love about this poem is that there's an obvious connection—there's a connection and a love, and then an understanding that we have to say goodbye over and over. That's the kind of world that we live in.

So in his typical scientific manner, the Buddha has set up the problem very clearly. The danger is that we become attached to sense pleasures because of the gratification that they bring, but they are impermanent, not reliable, always changing—and so we suffer if we try to hold on. There's this very restless search.

I remember one time when I was teaching in Upper Burma, the Shan Hills area I've mentioned, and one student raised her hand with a very simple question. She said, "Where can we rest?" Such poignancy in that question. If we're looking for satisfaction in this world through sense pleasures in a changing world, we're not going to be able to rest. We're going to be restless. Where can we rest?

So the Buddha goes on to talk about resolving this problem: "The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the eye—this is the escape from the eye. The removal and abandonment of desire and lust for the ear, for the nose, the body, the mind—this is the escape from the six sense bases."

I think it's interesting that he's chosen the word "escape." Escape implies that we're caught, that we're confined somewhere and that we become free—that we're in a confined place and we leave it. Sometimes craving has been described as shackles in the heart. There's that sense of being imprisoned. Craving binds the heart, clenches it like a fist. We're shackled and imprisoned by our craving.

The Buddha talked a lot about craving, as you know, in many different forms. The kind that he talked about in this sutta is the craving for sense pleasures—there are other kinds that you'll probably hear about later. He says the way out of our predicament is by abandoning desire or craving or attachment for the sense bases, sense objects, sense pleasures.

Now it's interesting—we hear that word "abandon" and we often immediately think "get rid of." Somehow we put that interpretation on it. But he doesn't say that we have to get rid of the sense bases or the sense pleasures. He doesn't even say that we shouldn't enjoy the experience of the senses. The sense pleasures themselves are not the problem. But where we do need to look and work is with the desire and attachment to sense pleasures.

So how do we abandon desire and attachment to sense pleasures? The rest of the sutta gives some hints: "So long as I did not know directly as they really are the gratification, the danger, and the escape of these six sense bases, I did not claim to have awakened. But when I knew directly all this as it really is, then I claimed to have awakened."

To know directly means to experience for ourselves. So we experience for ourselves how we respond to the experiences through the sense doors. We pay attention to sense objects and how we relate to them. It's not to have somebody explain it to us, but to see for ourselves, to see directly, to know directly in our own experience. That's why we meditate.

And so we have the tool of mindfulness to help us in this investigation. What is our direct experience of the senses? How do they change? How do we experience their arising and passing away? Can we experience this constant flow of change? Can we be with our direct experience of desire when it arises? How does desire feel in the body?

How does it feel in the mind? How substantial is it? What happens when we turn mindfulness to it? This is knowing the gratification and danger and escape in our own experience directly.

We should never underestimate the power of sense desire. A number of years ago, I was teaching in the Northwest, and the place where I taught, sometimes the staff liked to make a pan of brownies—and they had the absolute best brownies in the world. To me, they must be somewhat comparable to heroin or something like that, though I've never done it, so I don't know. Really, really good brownies. And so one day I had a brownie, and I had a little cabin, so I took a second one back to my cabin for the next day.

And somewhere along the line, it didn't make it to the next day. I ate the brownie. Sense desire, wanting gratification of the senses. It particularly hit me as I was paying attention. I was stunned. I thought, "Actually, I've been bested by a brownie."

So I decided we needed to do that one over again. The next day, I took a brownie back with the express intent of paying attention to what happened, trying to learn and to be mindful. I had this brownie, and I would watch the desire arise—a big wave of desire, thinking about the brownie and the chocolate. And then I would turn my attention to the desire itself.

This is what we have to do, because if we keep our focus on the sense object, that just keeps feeding the desire. But turning the attention to the desire itself, I would notice the desire arise, and then it would fade. It would dissipate. And then it would arise again, and then dissipate again.

That day I did not eat the brownie, and I felt good about that. There was this experience of freedom—that I could watch the desire rise, watch the desire pass away, without having to believe it. That was a taste of freedom.

What I didn't do, which is also interesting, is that first day when I ate the second brownie, I didn't decide I was a bad person. I didn't get upset. I got curious. And so I repeated the experiment the next day from a place of curiosity and a wholesome desire for freedom.

This is how I'm suggesting we get interested in desire—not from a place of "I have to somehow dominate this" or "I'm a bad person if I can't," but from curiosity and a wholesome desire for freedom. We grow in wisdom as we go through these experiences.

I'm sure you've had some chances here. A retreat is actually an excellent opportunity because we don't have many ways to escape from our wanting mind. So we have to sit down and look at it. Charlotte Joko Beck, one of my favorite Zen teachers, said that retreat is controlled suffering. Or Thomas Merton, the famous mystic, said, "Those who are drawn to solitude don't suffer less, but suffer more effectively." So I hope you're suffering effectively. I'm sure most of you are suffering—I just hope it's effective.

With mindfulness, we see things as they are. We become interested in our conditioning. We become interested in this whole cycle of gratification, danger, and escape. We start to actually see through desire. Don't underestimate the simple power of observing it, of seeing that we don't have to obey it or even believe it, seeing that it comes and goes on its own due to conditions. In this way, we develop wisdom.

Again, in this part of the sutta, the Buddha said "the abandonment of desire and lust." Abandon means to set aside. It doesn't mean to get angry about desire or craving, doesn't mean to make it bad or to reject it, but to simply learn to let it be, learn how not to get caught in it.

Charlotte Joko Beck says, "We never lose an attachment by saying it has to go. Only as we gain awareness of its true nature does it quietly and imperceptibly wither away. Like a sand castle with waves rolling over it, it just smooths out and finally—where is it? What was it?"

One teacher friend of mine described mindfulness of desire as like poking holes into a piece of fabric. If you have a piece of fabric, you can't see through it. But if you poke enough holes in the fabric, you can see through it. Every moment of mindfulness into desire or craving or attachment pokes a hole into the fabric, and we start to eventually be able to see through it. It becomes less opaque, more transparent, loses its power over us. We can become lighter with the wanting mind.

I'll read a little story from Sharon's book, *A Heart as Wide as the World*:

"We all like pleasant experiences and are fortunate to enjoy them. But if we become lost in attachment, then enjoyment inevitably turns to clinging, and then we suffer. At a Buddhist-Christian conference I attended at Gethsemane Monastery in Kentucky, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was speaking about a tour of the monastery he had been given earlier that day."

He began by saying that he was quite impressed that the monastery was able to support itself through the manufacture of cheeses and fruitcakes. Then, in the midst of this formal presentation with television cameras rolling, the Dalai Lama said, "I was presen-

ted with a piece of the homemade cheese, which was very good, but really I wanted some cake." He laughed uproariously and repeated, "It was so unfortunate. Really, I was hoping someone would offer me some cake, but no one did."

His childlike candor was wonderful, with nothing manipulative about it. Clearly, he could be quite happy without a piece of fruitcake. And some part of his state of happiness was the very ability to laugh at his desire for cake, as well as being able to speak about it unabashedly before dignitaries of two religions and a television audience.

So we can learn some lightness around craving, wanting, and the mind. We don't have to take it too seriously. When mindfulness is strong, sometimes the very noticing of the contraction of desire cuts through it, and we return to spaciousness. We become interested if there is this contraction of wanting in the mind and repeatedly point awareness at this contraction—the light of awareness setting up the conditions for freedom.

So much of practice is simply this: Is there clinging in the heart and mind?

Tonight, earlier, I walked outside when the sun was setting. It was very beautiful, and I wanted to enjoy it. I was born with an aversive nature, so I make sure that I enjoy things to balance my own mind. So I was watching the sunset, and then I got curious about what was really happening. There was this sunset, and there was the seeing of it, and there was some slight tension in the mind. I realized that I wasn't actually enjoying the sunset—I was *trying* to enjoy the sunset, which is very different. There was that attachment of wanting something, wanting to enjoy the sunset. Noticing that, it released, and what remained was the experience of just enjoying the sunset.

We can get interested in this way. When there's a pleasurable experience, is there tension in the mind? Is there that contraction of wanting or attachment in any way? What happens when we become aware of it? Sometimes there's a release. Not always, but sometimes. And what's the mind like free of attachment, free of clinging, even while enjoying? This too we can explore.

So we have not rejected this world with its sense pleasures, but we don't expect them to satisfy us. We practice abandoning the contraction of heart and mind in desire that limits our spaciousness. And we have to learn this over and over again.

Charlotte Joko Beck said, "Practice has to be a process of endless disappointment. We have to see that everything we demand, and even get, eventually disappoints us. This discovery is our teacher."

Now, I could see how some of you might find that depressing. But I don't—otherwise I wouldn't share it with you. This endless disappointment is that playing through of the lunch scenario over and over again in order to really understand that everything changes, and to really understand that letting go is the way to freedom.

Trungpa Rinpoche says, "Disappointment is a good sign of basic intelligence. It cannot be compared to anything else. It is so sharp, precise, obvious, and direct. If we can open, then we suddenly begin to see that our expectations are irrelevant compared with the reality of the situations we are facing."

So positive disappointment, perhaps we can call it—playing it through over and over again, stubbornly, but learning as we go. Every moment of non-clinging is a moment of freedom.

In the Shorter Discourse on the Destruction of Craving, the Buddha teaches a deva, a heavenly being, who wants to know how, in brief, a bhikkhu is liberated. It's always endearing in the suttas when somebody says, "Come on, tell me the short version, the fast version—how, in brief, is a bhikkhu liberated?" In this case, I'll take the liberty to call a bhikkhu all of us here, temporary renunciates on retreat.

The bhikkhu becomes learned that anything is not suitable to settle in. He becomes learned, learning all things thoroughly and accurately, recognizing all things. When a bhikkhu abides seeing that nothing is worth adhering to, he directly knows everything. Whatever feeling he feels—whether pleasant or painful, or neither unpleasant nor pleasant—he abides contemplating impermanence in these feelings. Contemplating thus, he does not cling to anything in this world. When he does not cling, he is not agitated.

When he is not agitated, he personally attains nibbana.

So in our investigation, we come back to this world of the senses, the world as we experience it. And we explore how we relate to the world of the senses and the pleasure that it provides. Our love for this world matures as we learn to accept inevitable change, as we understand the limitations of sense pleasures. We learn that we can experience life like this—like an open palm rather than a tight and clenching fist. We develop the open heart and mind that's connected with the poignant truth of this fleeting world. We have tastes of a mind that's free of the shackles of craving. We know directly, as they really are, the gratification, the danger, and the escape in the case of this world of the senses.

I'd like to end with a Cold Mountain poem from Han Shan, the Chinese hermit poet, that describes this free mind. In the poem he talks about "the six doors," and the six doors are the six sense bases.

I love this first stanza. There's so much spaciousness in it:

Cold Mountain is a house without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open.
The hall is blue sky.
The rooms are all vacant and vague.
The east wall beats on the west wall—
At the center, nothing.

Borrowers don't bother me.
In the cold, I build a little fire.
When I'm hungry, I boil up some greens.
I've got no use for the farmer with his big barn and pasture—
He just sets up a prison for himself.
Once he's in, he can't get out.

Think it over.
You know it might happen to you.

CHAPTER 29

The Spiritual Compost

Winnie Nazarko · 48 min

> *In this creative and deeply practical talk, Winnie Nazarko addresses one of meditation's central paradoxes: how do we work with unwholesome mental states when Buddhist teachings emphasize cultivating the wholesome and abandoning the unskillful? Using the memorable metaphor of composting chicken manure, she demonstrates that awakening doesn't come from cutting away difficult experiences but from transforming them through wise relationship.*
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> *Nazarko examines the four great efforts of sammā vāyāma (right effort) from the Noble Eightfold Path, clarifying that these teachings describe where we're heading, not what should be happening right now. She emphasizes that the door to liberation opens inward—through direct engagement with whatever arises in the mind stream—rather than through manufacturing ideal states or bypassing difficulty. Drawing parallels between fully developed mettā practice and high equanimity in vipassanā, she reveals how both culminate in a mind that meets all experience with equal acceptance and interest.*
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> *The talk offers particular guidance for working with the three root tendencies: minds dominated by craving learn to allow pleasant experiences to pass; confused minds learn to trust direct knowing; and aversive minds learn that unpleasant experiences need not be fought. Each transformation happens through the same process—creating the right container, adding the activating ingredient of mindfulness, and allowing the natural purification to unfold. Nazarko's teaching offers profound encouragement that we can begin exactly where we are, even with very little, trusting that wise relationship with present experience creates its own ecology of awakening.*

Good evening.

I was thinking in preparing for this talk about the different ideas we can get about what it means to have an open heart. A number of different images came up in my mind. I thought of stories of various saints that were taught to me or read to me when I was a child, growing up in the Christian tradition. Some of these people were very hard to believe, actually. Some of them seemed more normal, but some of them seemed really far-fetched. There were even people where you would question, why was this person picked to be seen as a saint? Perhaps it was political.

But this idea of there being an archetype of a being with an open heart—a saint or a sage or an enlightened one—runs through all spiritual traditions. There's some version of this. And when we consider the possibilities for ourselves, this might seem like something so completely far out there that it's ridiculous to even take seriously. Or we could think of it as something we do want to aspire to, but it comes with a particular understanding of what that would be like.

We might think that it would be like an idealized version of ourselves—us but without any of our bad habits or personal quirks. All the rough edges would be completely buffed off, and we would be well-adjusted. We would have no neuroses left. Everybody would love us. Our magnificence would shine forth and be acknowledged by the world. But we'd still be modest.

Or we might have some counter-conditioning around these spiritual models and think, "A saint or somebody who's holy sounds like somebody who has no boundaries. You could never really be who you are. You would never be able to say no to people." It seems too sugary, too saccharine, too unreal, too hard to believe, too impossible in all ways. Too pastel. Too sweet. Not going there, not going to try for that—a kind of aversion to any idea of high-level potential as part of the spiritual path, at least for you.

Or maybe when you think about what it would be like to have an open heart, it just doesn't seem like a very safe thing. There's so much pain and suffering in the world, pain and suffering in our own mind streams and in our lives, in our experience of others. Who is the philosopher that said, "Hell is other people"? And I'm sure with this individual, other people were saying, "Hell is this guy."

It can be very difficult to relate some of these models or aspirations to ourselves as we actually are as humans.

In thinking about where our own particular spiritual path goes using this Buddhist context, there are some parameters that can be somewhat confusing. It's talked about in terms of wise effort. Wise effort is compared to unwise effort. This wise effort, which is part of the Eightfold Path, has four great efforts within it: the wise effort to prevent the arising of unskillful and unwholesome states and actions; the letting go of unskillful and unwholesome states and actions; and then the wise effort to summon and develop and extend the wholesome and skillful.

So it's clearly saying some things are not to be cultivated—they're to be let go of. Some things are to be cultivated—they're to be developed. It can sound very binary in a way, very dualistic.

The Dhammapada also talks in these terms in certain sections. For instance, it says: "Make an island for yourself. Get right to work. Become wise. When you are purged from impurity and free from mental taint, you will reach the noble state." That could make it sound like you're excising this stuff from your mind stream, taking a sharp implement and carving away large parts of what you actually do experience in the effort to become one of the noble ones.

These statements, if taken alone, don't seem to have much use for what's not skillful and what's unwholesome. And yet when we do meditation practice, of course, what we see is that the unskillful and unwholesome states are frequently present. Sometimes it can seem like that's the only thing happening, even for long periods of time—just one version or another of these things we're being told we shouldn't be cultivating.

So the question is, how do we deal with this material? Especially since it's very clear that some version or another of greed, hatred, and delusion—or all three—are going to be present in our mind stream all the way up to the point of complete awakening, which for most of us is probably quite a long ride.

How do we deal with the fact of the unwholesome and the unskillful? One way we may be inclined to go about this is through a kind of perfectionism. We've heard what it's supposed to be like—which is the first misunderstanding.

Because what's being said in the conversation around wise effort isn't what it should be like right now. It's a statement about where we are orienting, where we are journeying to. It's not saying it should be like this right now.

So being clear about what we're cultivating is skillful—it's wise view. But if we take a dualistic understanding of this, it can lead us into a kind of resistance to, and a non-acceptance of, what we are actually experiencing in the present. And that's a definition of suffering, right? There's reality, and then there's the position we're taking, which is different. Suffering. That's the definition of suffering.

So we can't get rid of this stuff by cutting it out, since it's actually there in the mindstream. And we can't really ignore it, because unseen, it trips us up—it operates anyway and is kind of running the show. So then the question is: is there some way in which this ignorance, this not knowing, this unawakened, unenlightened stuff that's so much a part of our mindstream, cannot be a complete impediment to practice, since it's there anyway? How do we practice with what isn't wholesome and what isn't skillful in and of itself?

When we start to get a little more continuous with our practice and notice what is arising in the mind more continuously than we have previously, sometimes it can be a bit of a shock. As I was talking about in the last dharma talk I gave, there's a lot of really weird stuff in there. It can be kind of shocking. And the fact that it's shocking really points to the importance of having a wise attitude towards this—an attitude of mettā, an attitude of compassion in the mind for the reality of what is there, to not go to war against our direct experience.

It's very interesting when you look at the two practices of mettā and the practice of insight, vipassanā. The ultimate stage in the practice of mettā is a mind that has equal goodwill and loving friendliness towards all beings, regardless of whether they're pleasant or unpleasant, regardless of whether they're known or unknown—complete equality of kindness and care and love towards all without exception. That's the fully developed mind of mettā.

The fully developed late stage of insight practice, high equanimity, is a mind that can open to, can connect with all experience exactly as it is, without exception, with a friendly, open, interested awareness. And from that stability and openness and clear seeing—a non-distorted mind that's no longer reacting or moving with any experience—opening to the unconditioned can happen.

So you tell me: are those two different minds, or is that one?

This really points to the importance of mettā practice in general, and the attitude of mettā in insight practice, because we're not going to punish ourselves into awakening.

Another point is this: if we're very identified with what we're experiencing—meaning if there's a very strong self-sense present in the practice—it becomes very, very difficult, because there's always something going on related to what it means about us if we have a particular experience. If we have an experience of anger, if we have an experience of greed, if we feel aggressive, if there's a lot of sleepiness, if we feel a lot of resistance—any of these states come up and we turn them into evidence at the trial of our own worthiness. "Oh, good sitting today"—and the inflation comes along. "Oh, bad sitting"—bad meaning whatever is not the imagined preferred version—and then it all falls down. We feel bad about this self we've put in the middle of things, and the spiral into feeling hopeless and lacking confidence starts to really pick up momentum.

But here's another version of how we can think of this binary. What if we thought of this goodness that we're pursuing, this beauty that we seek to develop, this enlightenment that we desire—what if we thought of that not as something out there that we have to get? What if the door, the access point to this, is hinged so that it opens in-

wardly? The door opens inwardly; it's not hinged to open outwardly. If we're trying to get out to get it, it's not out there. It's in here. It's in here and it has everything to do with what you directly experience.

If we have an idealized version of what we should be experiencing, there are some dangers with that, besides the fact that it doesn't work. We might try to manufacture an ideal—you could call this "creating a state." We might try leapfrogging over what we directly experience, just skipping past it to look for something else. "Whoa, I don't want to go there," even though it's what's predominant in our lives. We can do something called the spiritual bypass, which is instead of dealing with things necessary for us to deal with in order to be a grounded human being in touch with the full reality of things, we just decide we're going to float off on a cloud of incense or something.

So if we have an imagined outcome or an ideal version of what should be occurring, there's a kind of craving going on there, and it doesn't even necessarily have to be conscious. Very often it's not conscious. It's just this feeling that it should be something different than what it is.

You might not be able to say exactly what it should be, but it should be different. Or perhaps you can be very specific about it: "I should be able to stay with the breath. I should be able to remain there the whole hour. There should only be a certain number of thoughts in this sitting. I shouldn't be feeling restlessness. I shouldn't be sleepy. I should be like this. I shouldn't be like that."

This is a kind of straining—straining to create a model of experience, then straining to bring it into being, straining to hold onto it, all while ignoring the crosscurrents that are actually present, the forces working against that attempt. The result is the actual creation of suffering, not the end of suffering. As I said last week, when the causes and conditions are present for a certain experience to arise, it's going to be present. Given the totality of factors that are there, this is the experience.

A wiser, much wiser way to think about practice is that instead of being the manufacturing of anything, it is the illumination both of what is skillful and of what is not skillful. Connection with both of these is the path to awakening. Equal connection to both of these is the path to awakening.

Again, this is not to say that we don't make discernments about the direction we're going. We still understand on a big-picture level that we're cultivating the skillful and letting go of the unskillful. We're relying on the liberating power of mindfulness, which has the capacity, when it connects with any object, to strengthen wholesome qualities in

the mind stream and to weaken unwholesome ones. But for mindfulness to be present with both types of states, we have to be open in some way to experiencing the full range of what's present.

The challenge with this strategy is that, let's face it, we do have favorites. In the same way that with metta practice you start with yourself or someone who's easy to love, we have certain states that are easy to love—states of concentration, states of calm, states of mindfulness, states of clarity. These are good. These are genuinely good.

But just as with metta practice, the near enemy of metta is desire—a kind of craving that can get in there and glom onto experience, then start trying to manipulate it out of a greed in the mind to keep things from changing or to make them be the way we want them to be.

Or, using again the metta analogy, states that we experience in insight practice can be a little more like neutral people—the ones you don't really see. It's not that you have anything against them, but they're not particularly interesting. They're not dramatic. They're just not seen, not really of interest. They're not compelling in the way things are that are really pleasant or really unpleasant. The neutral zone—just neutral. This is a very important field of practice, subtle sometimes.

And then, of course, we have states that are analogous to the difficult people, the enemy. The Buddhist personality types tell us something about this. We all have greed, hatred, and delusion in the mind stream—all three. But we tend to be specialists.

To briefly explain: if you're a specialist in craving, if that's your propensity when you fall out of balance, there's going to be a lot of attraction to what's pleasant, a lot of wanting, a lot of tendency to hold on, a lot of getting lost in what's pleasant when it's strong.

If you're a person who is primarily deluded, there's going to be confusion and difficulty about connecting with things in general, an uncertainty about what's really going on and what you should do next, a kind of doubt about everything sometimes.

If you're a person who is predominantly aversive, then you're going to know exactly what you don't want. There's going to be an effort in the mind to do something about what's unpleasant or unwanted, which can take the form of either fleeing from it or, if you're the more aggressive sort of aversive mind, a full frontal assault upon it in order to make it shape up.

These are the three tendencies, and we can see them in our minds when we have various types of experience. I'll come back to these three types later in the talk.

When these states arise and we have an agenda in regard to them other than simply acknowledging their presence and opening to them in a balanced way, the war is on. There are at least two different things going on in the practice: there's what's actually happening.

And then there's all the manipulation, tinkering, rejection, editing, striving, correcting on top of it. Big time split focus, usually with a big "me" in the middle of it—suffering, but expending a lot of effort.

So then the question is: Is there a way to actually use unskillful states in service of our liberation? Since they're there, right? And they're going to be there in some version or another.

When I was thinking about this today, I did a little research—a little dharma research. I found an article called "How to Compost Chicken Manure." It said one of the first principles was: never put uncomposted chicken manure in your garden. It will burn. But it was encouraging. It said chicken manure can be composted with other materials. Compost using chicken manure is able to hold exceptional amounts of water, which can help your gardens.

This spiritual practice, this spiritual process, is a transformational process that uses what you've got. Now, I'm not saying the mind stream is always like chicken manure, but you've got it. Use it.

Here's what they said to do. Number one: prepare a container. Here we are. We've got the container. We've got the form. We've got the teachings. We've got the environment. We have the teachers. You have what you need. You have a container.

So then here's the important part. To the chicken manure—or to these hindrances in the mind stream—we must add other materials. It says you need to add to the container various materials to help the manure decompose more quickly. Mindfulness. Mindfulness. This is the primary ingredient to pair with what's going on in the mind stream because it's the activator. It activates the whole process of turning this from suffering—unconscious or conscious suffering—into something that actually serves your awakening.

It says you should rotate the materials in the compost pile. So you turn it over. You turn it over. Investigation.

It says as part of the process that you should add more manure and more materials at least three times. I'd say no problem meeting the threshold.

And then it says: allow the compost bin to sit undisturbed for about two to six months. Afterwards, it will have a sweet, earthy scent. Now you can add it to your garden.

A little bit of fun with this, but it points to an important principle: the awakening comes through connection with this—the right kind of connection with this. It doesn't come through trying to push it away, trying to chop it away, trying to ignore it. This is the field of awakening—everything that you can experience within the body and the mind. It happens no place else.

So you could say the way out of suffering is a better relationship with our experience in the moment. Friendlier. More mettā-infused. More interested. More accepting. More allowing. More receptive. Less judgmental. Less self-bound. Closer. More mindful. More consistently connected. Non-identified. Without preference or bias for what that experience is.

You could say it's not about getting different experiences—it's more about getting into wiser relationship with what is there to be known. It's about the angle of entry into what's present.

So you can make skillful use of unskillful arisings—which is good, because there are so many of them. And this is really where you start to see the inherent creativity of this process of spiritual awakening. If the angle of entry into experience is skillful, is correct, things purify themselves. There doesn't need to be the self doing what it imagines is necessary to do.

When each experience is met with the same attitude of balanced and connected acceptance, then a virtuous spiral happens. Reactivity in the mind stream decreases. Clarity of mind increases. Mindfulness quickens and strengthens. Energy builds. Interest builds. Clinging lessens. Calm opens. Equanimity grows. And this cycle goes on and on.

But the quicker you can get to being non-preferential about what it is you're experiencing, the stronger support you can give to this cycle strengthening.

Because remember, as I said before, mindfulness is the universal remedy. It strengthens what's wholesome. It decreases what's unwholesome.

I was walking the other day in an area where there are many rocks by the side of the road, as there are around here. On top of one rather large rock was a pine tree, perhaps two to three years old. What really drew my eye to it was this: looking at this tree on

the rock, there was hardly any soil there. It was just very thin. And I thought, "How did that ever get going there? How did that manage to grab hold with so little to nurture it at the beginning of its life?"

As I looked a little further, I saw how it started. The rock's surface created a little pocket, and then some leaves and other things collected there, and they decomposed and made a little bit of soil, and then the roots started growing. One of the roots somehow found a crack into the rock—or maybe the root actually made the crack into the rock—and it followed that tap root, pulling water from someplace down there, perhaps connecting to some soil below.

For some reason, this image really struck me because it seemed to suggest that we can start without feeling there's a lot to work with. We can start with just a little—a little bit of something where we can grab hold and connect and open and allow and receive. We don't have to imagine that we need to leapfrog over the whole process, going straight to no defilements, no kilesas. Can we work in trust with what's there? A small pine creating its own ecology that would support its own growth. That's what you're doing. You're creating your own ecology of mind by how you're relating to what you experience.

This theme about finding a way in difficulty, finding a creative use for difficulty, trusting the fruitful darkness—this is part of every spiritual path. It's not a light-only journey. How could it be, given the full range of what we experience as human beings? This is all about bringing light forward where there has been none, bringing the skillful to the unskillful. Making the mindstream conscious with the right context and the right angle of entry purifies itself. No "just experiences," no ownership towards them. Just experience. But complete responsibility to practice wise husbandry towards all conditions which arise. Taking responsibility for the composting.

I said I would return to the three major types, and I'll do that now.

The path for someone who is primarily a greed or craving type moves along in a way where the mind starts to notice the tendency to look for what's pleasant and to grab it and hold it, to try to keep it. There's a kind of thirsting restlessness, a looking for something, a wanting something—maybe not even knowing what is wanted, but a wanting. When this kind of mind learns to allow for what's pleasant, to see the craving, to see the attachment, to allow pleasant experience to go away just like all experiences must, to notice when there's resistance to letting pleasant go, to see the suffering in that, to begin to be willing to notice what is other than pleasant—when this mind devel-

ops in this way and all experience becomes equally acceptable and interesting, this mind resolves towards a mind of mettā because it sees beauty. This becomes a mind of mettā.

When the mind that's deluded, that has difficulty connecting to the mindstream, that has uncertainty and questions, that has difficulty landing anywhere—when this mind starts to settle, starts to trust the capacity to directly know and moves out of the thinking mind, the speculating mind, the doubting mind, the circular questioning mind of doubt—this mind moves in the direction of being able to trust its own direct knowing, to open and know directly what is there to be known. It learns to rest in its own understanding in faith and becomes a mind infused with equanimity.

When a mind of aversion learns to see that there is suffering in resisting what is present, when it comes to understand that it does not need to do anything with what is unpleasant or difficult, that it goes away on its own, that it is not threatening, that it does not destroy a self, that it is not about a self—this mind learns to accept with patience what is true in its experience, learns to open and notice what is pleasant, what is easeful, allows that into the mindstream. This mind, when it resolves itself, moves to wisdom.

All these transformations take place through this process of learning to open to, see, allow—and the mind will teach you itself.

I'll close now by saying that I wish your deepest aspirations will be completely fulfilled, and that you will learn to know and trust the good heart which is your true nature, and allow that to transform your understanding of the conscious mind.

Let's sit for a moment.

May the merit of the practice we've done be for the liberation of all beings without exception.

CHAPTER 30

Not-Self and Selfing

Andrea Fella · 57 min

In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella guides practitioners through one of Buddhism's most challenging yet liberating teachings: anattā, the characteristic of not-self. Drawing from the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta (SN 22.59), the Buddha's discourse on the characteristic of not-self, she explains how the Buddha used the framework of the five aggregates (khandhas) to demonstrate that nothing in our experience can be found that qualifies as a permanent, controllable self. The teaching points not to nihilism—that nothing exists—but rather to the recognition that what we call 'self' is actually a flux, a process of conditions coming together rather than a fixed thing.

Fella offers illuminating analogies to help practitioners understand this subtle teaching: a river that seems like a thing yet is never the same water twice, and a rainbow that appears solid but exists only when specific conditions align. She explores the Kaccānagotta Sutta's teaching that experience transcends the duality of existence and non-existence, arising instead through dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda). Particularly helpful is her distinction between the insight into impermanence—which can feel destabilizing as we watch things appear and disappear—and the insight into not-self, which brings profound relief when we recognize there is no one here who needs defending.

The talk offers practical guidance for investigating the sense of self in meditation, especially during moments when our views about ourselves are challenged and the feeling of 'I' becomes most vivid. Fella concludes with the Buddha's teaching to Bāhiya: 'In the seen is only the seen, in the heard is only the heard'—pointing to how simple, direct awareness of experience, beneath the level of concept, naturally reveals the not-self characteristic and leads to the end of suffering.

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

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

The other part of the meditation instruction, another aspect of what we offer, is to not only pay attention to that level of experience—what is happening in that sense realm—but also to start noticing what happens to it when you pay attention to it. This part of the instruction begins to point us not to the specific characteristics, that wide variety of characteristics of experience, but to the more common characteristics of experience. By noticing how our experience changes, we begin to recognize that all of our experience is impermanent. And as Joseph talked about last week, not only is it impermanent, all of our experience is also unreliable as a place for lasting happiness.

Some of you may recognize these two—anicca, impermanence, and dukkha, unreliability—as being two of what are called the three general characteristics of all experience. The third being not-self, anatta. So tonight I'd like to talk about these three as characteristics and discuss how they interrelate. But primarily I'd like to talk about this third one, the characteristic of not-self, and also a little bit about how we might begin exploring this directly in our experience.

Directly connecting with these three fundamental characteristics of experience, directly realizing not just the idea of impermanence but the direct recognition of seeing things change in our experience—directly seeing the unreliability, how because it's impermanent it is unreliable, and directly seeing the insubstantiality, that's another way to express this not-self nature, the insubstantiality, the transient flux of experience—these have a deep impact on our minds when we directly experience them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So this is referring to our body. He's saying body is not self because we can't say, "Body, be this." We can't say, "Body, don't age. Body, don't have that pain." He says that's evidence, essentially, for the not-self nature of body.

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

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

He goes on to talk about the other two characteristics and actually points to them, saying everything in our experience is impermanent. Form is impermanent. Feelings are impermanent. Perception is impermanent. Volitional formations are impermanent. Consciousness is impermanent. Because these are impermanent, they are unreliable. And the question he poses to the monks that he's talking to, to the practitioners he's talking to, is: Is something that is impermanent and unreliable worthy to call self? Is it something that makes sense to call self—something that is impermanent and unreliable?

This comes back again to this question of what do we call self. As we think about it, as we reflect on it, there is often a sense that something we call self has a sense of stability, a sense of some kind of permanence. In the time of the Buddha, one of the kinds of self they were looking for was a transcendent self that was permanent and blissful. This teaching was directly pointing to that sense of self as being something that cannot be found.

We can certainly, through meditation, attain states that are blissful, but they are impermanent. They come, they go. They're brought together based on causes and conditions. They fall apart based on causes and conditions.

So in this part of the sutta, the Buddha is really encouraging us to look at what we call self and to explore: Does it make sense? Does what we call self—because there is something that we call self—actually stand up to investigation? Does it stand up to what we think of it as being when we investigate it?

We'll come back to that in a little while. It can sometimes help, in exploring this concept of not-self, to think of it in terms of some analogies that help us understand what is being said. One thing I said earlier is that another way to think of this idea of not-self is to recognize that what we think of as self isn't a thing—it's rather a flux, a flow, an ever-changing stream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

There's a sutta that speaks to this, one of my favorites: "This world, for the most part, depends upon a duality—upon the idea of existence and the idea of nonexistence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom..." And the Buddha elsewhere refers to the world as being this fathom-long body. "In this fathom-long body lies the world." So he's talking about the world of experience here.

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

So when one sees that experiences are constantly arising, there's no idea that things don't exist. And when one sees that things are constantly ending, there's no idea that things do exist. The Buddha goes on to say that rather than existence or non-existence, there's a process of things coming into being and falling apart. And this process is a causally arisen process. Things arise dependent on causes and conditions. Experience arises in dependence on causes and conditions, I should really say. So what we experience as self comes into being through a process of conditions coming together. And we fundamentally misunderstand it to be something, to be a thing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's not uncommon for people to express or feel a sense of discomfort around this teaching, to have almost a feeling of fear around this idea. Listened to from the perspective of self, this teaching doesn't make any sense at all. And listened to from the perspective of self, there can be a sense of, "Well, what's going to happen to me?" This is certainly familiar to me. I've experienced this kind of sense of fear. And that fear usually is not around the experience of not-self, but around the idea of the teaching of not-self.

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

So with impermanence, there's this kind of matter-of-fact, casual response: "Yeah, that teaching, no problem, I understand that." And with not-self, there's this fear that happens. But when we actually move into the experiential world of these insights, it kind of gets reversed. Because when we start seeing things—particularly when we start seeing things disappear, when we start seeing things vanish—things start to feel really unstable. That insight into the ending of things, the impermanent nature of things, everything ending, ending, ending—that experience brings up quite a bit of discomfort. The actual experience of impermanence is not one that you can just say, "Oh yeah, no problem."

The insight into not-self is a relief.

When we really see that there's no one here to defend or to protect, there's no problem. I find this interesting—the way the idea creates so much distress, and yet the insight itself is so relieving.

It seems to us that there's plenty of evidence for self. When we think about what self is, it's just kind of obvious to us that there's a self there. That feeling itself is the confirmation that self exists. The feeling seems to be a good part of the evidence—of course self exists, I feel it. And not only that, the view or the belief, the idea in self, is so powerful that it filters how we view our world.

There is actually a lot of evidence for not-self out there. But because we view our experience through this lens of self, we conveniently ignore all of the evidence to the contrary. This is a fundamental way our mind deludes us. This is a capacity of delusion—that when we look at experience through a certain lens, that's what we see. What we see then confirms our belief.

The Buddha actually pointed to some of this evidence. He mentioned that consciousness is not self: if consciousness were self, it would be possible to say, "Let my consciousness be thus." I'll point to a really concrete example here. When you sit down to meditate and place your attention on your breath or on the flow of changing experience—with an intention of choosing to be present with that experience—and the mind wanders, who did that? Who did that wandering? If you did the wandering, then were you the one that decided to stay put?

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

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

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

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

To study this teaching, we study what feels like self. When we study this, when we get familiar with this feeling, with what we are calling self, we begin to see—and I think Rebecca said this very beautifully the other morning—that as we study this, as we look at what we're calling self, we may see at some point that it falls apart. And then we get a taste of what this not-self teaching means.

Or we may, through studying self, begin to see it arising. We see that out of causes and conditions, a particular pattern or habit of selfing comes to be. The angry self or the frustrated self comes into being out of these habits and patterns. It wasn't there, and there it is. We see this self coming into being.

Or we might start to see, as we explore what we are calling self, that what we call self actually changes quite rapidly into widely different experiences.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So this is a good time to explore this sense of self.

I'll give you an example from my own practice of this kind of exploration. On one retreat, I was suffering from the "I'm a failure" pattern quite frequently. I felt like I couldn't meditate. I felt like everybody else could meditate, and I was a failure. I was a bad yogi. I would notice that, and there was a lot of suffering around that pattern.

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

So exploring it.

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

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

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

This is where the rub comes in. This is where our views don't meet reality. My idea of being a good yogi was like continuous mindfulness. This doesn't happen very often. Mind wanders. Every time the mind wanders, "Oh, I'm a failure." So the rub of our views of self, our view of who I am or want to be—when that meets reality and there is suffering, this is a great place to explore the sense of self. This is a pointer for us. Actually, whenever there's suffering, there's some kind of sense of self, some kind of "you" there.

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

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

On one retreat, I was in a place where things were relatively neutral for quite a good stretch of time. And I was beginning to notice there was subtle reactivity to that neutral experience—just being in the walking meditation, noticing neutral experience. There'd be this little bit of leaning into the neutral experience, a little bit of expectation. "Ooh, maybe something will happen." A little bit of wanting there. And when nothing happened, "I'm a failure." Out of nothing, the mind just creating this pattern. Neutral experience, a little bit of wanting, that expectation doesn't get met, and I'm a failure. This is self arising right in the moment. I saw it in that moment and I actually smiled at it. It's like, look at that! Wow! Out of nothing, the mind created a failure.

We can also see a rapidly changing sense of self sometimes. As we start to feel into what we're calling self, we begin to see that we've got a lot of different selves in there. There's committees in there, all different ages. I was doing some walking meditation out here on one three-month course, and I had some reactivity to some of the questions in the hall. I was arguing in my mind with the questions, with how things were being discussed and described in the question and answer period. And I was noticing that I was arguing in my mind, and I could feel this sense of—I remember feeling a sense of the forty-year-old, analytical, argumentative me. And I was feeling into that, trying to be with it, understand it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let's sit together for a few moments.

CHAPTER 31

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Greg Scharf · 57 min

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Greg Scharf examines the seven factors of enlightenment (satta bojjhaṅgā), which the Buddha declared to be supremely effective for abandoning the fetters that bind us. Beginning with the profound teaching that the mind is inherently luminous and pure—only temporarily obscured by adventitious defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion—Scharf establishes the optimistic foundation of Buddhist practice: we are not trying to create something new, but rather reconnecting with our essential nature.*
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> *The talk systematically explores each factor: sati (mindfulness), which gathers and balances all the others; dhamma-vicaya (investigation of phenomena); vīriya (energy or courageous effort); pīti (rapture or joyful interest); passaddhi (calm or tranquility); samādhi (concentration); and upekkhā (equanimity). Scharf explains how three factors energize the mind while three calm it, with mindfulness serving as the essential balancing agent. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he emphasizes that our task is simply to notice whether these factors are present, understand how they arise, and observe how they develop—not to force or control the experience.*
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> *Particularly valuable is Scharf's teaching that these wholesome factors flourish in the light of mindfulness while afflictive states require a certain darkness of unawareness. The talk offers practical guidance on finding balance in effort, understanding the pervading quality of joy, and recognizing how equanimity ultimately prepares the mind for realization. This teaching provides both inspiration and practical orientation for practitioners at any stage of the path.*

There's one place in the suttas where the Buddha made an interesting and really quite powerful statement that I think can be useful and important to bear in mind as we undertake this practice. He said that the mind, the heart—meaning your mind and my mind—is inherently radiant. Luminous is the word that's used. There's this inherent luminosity, this purity of heart and mind. And it's because of visiting forces, usually described as adventitious defilements, that obscure this clarity that we have problems, that we suffer.

The word adventitious is not one that I use a lot. It means coming from another source, not inherent or innate. So these visiting forces, these adventitious defilements, are various manifestations of what are called the three unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion, along with all the various ways these might manifest. We've

spoken about these quite a lot over the weeks—the way that aversion and ill will and fear, doubt, desire, dullness, these kinds of things manifest in our hearts and minds at times.

But it's important to keep in mind that these are just visitors, that they're not inherent or intrinsically part of who we are. They may visit often, but we need to remind ourselves that they're just visiting, and that this luminous nature of the mind, of the heart, is not ultimately affected by these forces. They may have the effect of temporarily obscuring the clarity, this luminosity of the heart and mind. It's like the sky when clouds come across—they obscure the clarity of the sky, but they don't change its fundamental nature. In the same way, the mind, the heart is not changed. Its nature is not changed by these visiting forces.

It's good to keep this in mind because sometimes they show up a lot, and we'll look and it seems like that's all we're seeing. That's all we see at times. We can feel discouraged or take it quite personally and feel that this is our fault somehow, that it's just the way we are, as if somehow these states represent something ultimately true about us, about who we are. We can fall into judging ourselves, and as Joseph spoke about a couple of weeks ago, falling into these extremes of self-mortification, of doubt and self-judgment—as though if we were any good as meditators, then these states wouldn't show up. We can fall into this kind of way of thinking.

Part of what we do in our practice is to reconnect with this luminosity, this clarity of mind, this inherent purity of heart and mind. You could say it's rediscovering, reconnecting with who we really are beneath our habitual patterns of reactivity and the conditioned habits of mind that may have diminished what we think we're capable of, diminished how we hold ourselves.

Sometimes we really can connect very directly and deeply with this luminous quality of the mind and heart—this essential, primordial nature that is already aware and already free because it never was any other way and never could be any other way. In moments of wakefulness, of pure presence, once in a while things come into this exquisite balance, this deep place of balance where there's nothing to do and no one to be and nothing to get or get rid of. We touch this purity of heart in that place. It may not last, but we do touch it, even if it's fleeting. And just because we might lose sight of it again, just because it might become obscured again, it doesn't change this reality, this truth.

It's not a sign of failure when these visiting forces show up. It's going to happen to us all, many times, as we go through the stages and phases of practice over the years. It's a natural part of the process, part of this path of purification that we walk. If we can

bring more clarity and kindness, compassion and wisdom to bear, the better off we're going to be. We can learn to relate to these difficulties that arise in our practice from a place of some ease and some strength, in a skillful way that can actually allow them to become a vehicle for freedom.

This leads us to really the essential core teaching of the Buddha. He said, "I teach one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." This goes to the very heart of what's possible for us—the full acknowledgment that there is this stressful aspect to life, this ultimately unsatisfactory quality, this dukkha to existence, and that there's the possibility for an end to this.

This serves as a framework for relating to our experience not in terms of good and bad, or right and wrong, or what we like and don't like, what we want and don't want, what we find acceptable and what isn't—all these usual ways we tend to relate to life, to our experience, at least a lot of the time. Instead, we relate to it simply in terms of suffering, of dukkha, and the end of dukkha. We can look at life in this way and see what leads to ease in our lives and what leads away from ease, what leads to freedom and the end of suffering, and what doesn't.

Looking in this way, we see that wisdom, mindfulness, kindness, and compassion lead to the end of suffering, while the forces of ill will, aversion, greed, and delusion lead to suffering in our lives. Rather than seeing these difficult things that arise in our practice, in our life, in our experience as bad or wrong, as something to struggle and fight against, or as a sign of weakness or failure on our part, we see them in terms of suffering in our lives. We see that they're impersonal factors that arise due to causes and conditions and pass away as these conditions change. Relating to them in this way allows for the possibility of transformation and freedom.

Some of the forces of habit in the mind are really old and deep and powerful. Maybe they're lifetimes old—sometimes it feels that way. We see them operating in our lives, and sometimes we find ourselves repeating some habit pattern that we've seen over and over.

We've seen through it. And still it comes up—we can watch ourselves getting caught, getting hooked again, even though we know better on some level. These things run so deep.

But we're lucky, because there are certain powerful, wholesome mental factors which arise naturally and come to our aid in practice. They directly incline the mind towards freedom and towards enlightenment. That's their function.

The Buddha said this: "Bhikkhus, I do not see even one other thing that, when developed and cultivated, leads to the abandoning of the fetters so effectively as this: the seven factors of enlightenment. What seven? The enlightenment factor of mindfulness, the enlightenment factor of investigation, of energy, and of rapture, the enlightenment factor of calm, of concentration, and of equanimity."

That's a strong statement—not one other thing so effective. So tonight I'd like to look at these potent, powerful, helpful powers of mind.

The Pali word for these factors of enlightenment is *bojjhanga*. I like the sound of it—*bojjhanga*. Something about it sounds good. It comes from two roots. The *bo* part comes from *bodhi*, like the Bodhi tree—awakened, awakening, or enlightenment. And *anga* is a limb or a causative factor. Put them together and it's a factor of enlightenment, or a cause for awakening.

These *bojjhangas* are healthy, wholesome, useful mental factors, and they arise when the conditions are right. They have the effect of weakening—I could say even removing—those difficult, afflictive states that have the function of clouding the mind, obscuring its natural clarity.

There's another statement of the Buddha where he pointed to the natural way these factors support our practice. He said, "Just as all the rafters of a peaked house slant, slope, and incline towards the roof peak, so too when one develops and cultivates the seven factors of enlightenment, one slants, slopes, and inclines toward nibbana, towards freedom."

So as these arise and are developed in our practice, we're directly inclining ourselves towards enlightenment. We're sloping, sliding towards awakening. Sounds good—sliding to freedom.

There's a great optimism in this way of looking at things. In many places in the discourses, the Buddha spoke of the path in terms of causes and conditions, and in terms of nutriments—the nutriments which support and lead to the arising of what's wholesome and useful, and the nutriments for these things like the seven factors.

He put it this way in one place: "Liberation by supreme knowledge, O bhikkhus, has its nutriment, I declare. It is not without a nutriment. And what is the nutriment of liberation by supreme knowledge? The seven factors of enlightenment, should be the answer."

So they arise due to causes and conditions, and they're sustained by the nutriment of wise attention, wise and careful attention.

Then he continued: "The seven factors of enlightenment too have their nutriment, I declare. They are not without a nutriment. And what is the nutriment of the seven factors of enlightenment? Attention to the four foundations of mindfulness, should be the answer."

And so if we bring mindfulness in a relaxed and clear, steady, continuous way to any aspect of our experience—any of the four foundations of mindfulness, which includes the entirety of what we can possibly experience, it's all in there, in these focuses, these spheres of attention—this results in the gathering together and maturing of the factors of awakening. You could say it creates the necessary environment for them to flourish, to grow and to come to fruition.

In the same way, these afflictive states, these *kilesas*, these defilements as they're called, these things which tend to bind the heart and obscure the clarity of the mind—they're not without a nutriment either. They arise also because of causes, and they're sustained by their own nutriment of unwise or careless attention.

Another way we could put this is to say that both these wholesome factors of awakening and these afflictive states require a certain kind of internal environment to arise and then to flourish and grow. We could see a parallel to this in nature. Different kinds of plants and animals need specific conditions and environments to live, and different nutriments to support them in order to live happily and grow.

If we walk around here and go into the woods, there are ferns and certain plants that grow under the canopy of the trees. They wouldn't grow well if we moved them out into the open meadows. The same way, if we took some of the flowers and grasses that grow out in the fields and put them under the trees, they wouldn't live there. They wouldn't be happy there. Different factors require specific environments to live.

We could say that the key condition, the key that allows the factors of enlightenment to grow and to flourish, is the light of mindfulness, the light of awareness.

It's like the sunlight that plants need. And these afflictive emotions can't survive in the light of mindfulness, of awareness. They require a certain kind of darkness. They need lack of awareness, you could say.

So I'll list these seven factors again, give you the Pali names, and I'll talk about them this evening. The first one is sati, mindfulness. Dhamma vicaya is investigation of dhammas. Viriya, effort or energy—courage, sometimes it's called courageous effort. Piti is rapture, joyful interest. Passaddhi, calm or tranquility. Samadhi, concentration. And upekkha, equanimity.

Now these are one of the lists—lots of lists in this tradition. I was listening to a talk by a friend of mine, and she likened these various lists to a field guide, like we have a field guide with all these lists in it. The Buddha, as a researcher who's gone out and done fieldwork, has come back with this useful field guide. It's kind of an interesting way to look at it.

I know not everybody likes field guides. Maybe I'm a kind of amateur birdwatcher of sorts—not the kind that will drive you completely crazy, maybe. But I've loved birds, and I like to identify them and learn about them. I have some field guides. I spent the better part of a year on a long pilgrimage in India a few years ago with a monk teacher. Some of you may know his name is Ajahn Amaro. He's recently taken over the abbotship in England of Amaravati Monastery. My friend Eric and I were his attendants, kind of splitting a bit more than a year, traveling in India with him. I had the bigger half of the year, but there was a time when the three of us were together also.

So I bought myself a field guide to the birds of India, and I'd go out and come back all excited. I'd seen a blue-bearded bee-eater, for example—a particularly cool bird. And I'd come back, and they would try to express some dutiful interest for me. But it clearly didn't strike them, although the blue-bearded bee-eater is a very fine bird. There's no getting around it, no matter how you feel about these things.

So regardless of how we feel about these lists, the Buddha did great research, and we have the benefit of that. He put his research into simple, easy teachings, which we can access. In the Satipatthana Sutta, in this sutta with instructions for our practice, he had this simple, straightforward way of talking about the seven factors. He said, "And how does one dwell contemplating phenomena in phenomena in terms of the seven enlightenment factors? Here, when the mindfulness factor of enlightenment is present, one understands, 'There's the mindfulness enlightenment factor in me.' Or when there is no mindfulness enlightenment factor present, one understands, 'There is no mindfulness enlightenment factor in me.' And one also understands how the unarisen mindfulness enlightenment factor arises and how the arisen mindfulness enlightenment factor comes to fulfillment by development." And it goes on in the same way for the other six.

So basically what we're told to do is notice when they're there, if they're there or not, detect them, see what leads to them arising, and see how they're developed. Our job in this, really, the bottom line, is that we're to be mindful—not to control our experience. We see if these things are there, how they arise and what causes them to arise, and how they're brought to development, perfected. So we're not trying to make something happen; we just want to see what's going on, get familiar with that, and begin to really know it directly and intimately.

These seven factors often manifest in a more subtle way than the afflictive states. Sometimes they're really obscured by them, because the afflictive states can storm through us and cause a lot of upheaval. So we need to learn how to recognize these wholesome factors, not through thinking about them and analyzing them, but really touching them directly.

I'll go through each one in brief. You could give a talk on each of them, and that's been done. Joseph has done a series on the Satipatthana Sutta where he devotes an entire talk to each of these, and it's a very good source for more detail.

So sati, mindfulness—this is the first factor, and we've spoken about it endlessly. But it's in its own category, I should say. It has the function of gathering together and balancing the other six.

So it stands a bit alone of the seven. It's said that it's the only one of them that you can't have too much of, and all of the others follow in the wake of mindfulness. So it's really the key. All wholesome things flourish when it's present.

Mindfulness—this quality, this mental factor that connects us directly with our experience, free of concepts—this is what opens the door to the entire path. The Buddha said this is the pathway to the deathless. This is the key.

I'll mention a few characteristics of mindfulness. The word *sati* is related to a verb in Pali, *sarati*, which means to remember. So mindfulness has this function of helping us to remember to be present. And there's another way that it relates to memory in terms of a quality of relaxed receptivity. We could think of times when we're trying desperately to remember something we've forgotten. The more we try, the less we're able to recall it. But then when we set it aside, often the memory springs to mind spontaneously. There's a quality of memory in that.

Mindfulness also has a quality of non-superficiality. There's an image of this: it's said to be like the difference between tossing a cork into a stream of water versus a stone. A cork bobs on the surface and floats along with the current, but a stone sinks down to the streambed. Mindfulness is likened to the stone that sinks below the surface of things. It has non-superficiality, and it's impartial and non-interfering. It doesn't seek to change the experience in any way. It's uninvolved and detached, but not in a cold or indifferent or aloof way—it's totally the opposite, actually. Mindfulness rubs right up against our experience, right up against the objects of our attention. But it's non-reactive. It lets things be just the way they are. There's no judgment or preference there.

So then we have the remaining six factors, grouped into two categories. There are three that have an energizing, uplifting quality, and three that have the function of calming, collecting, settling the mind and heart. We need a balance of them. They need to be balanced in order to function well. And liberation—this sloping, slanting towards freedom that comes when these are developed—this comes out of this balance where we're not too energized, not overly excited or euphoric. And we're not too cooled out, not so chilled out that we fall into foggy stupor. It's a balance between these, because if we get off balance, we tend to disconnect with reality. It's hard to connect with the truth of things in the moment if we're off balance with either too much energy or too much tranquility. But when they're balanced, then our hearts and minds are open and receptive, and there's a strength of heart that comes from this. We're able to open to experience without falling into extremes of being too excited or dull.

So the energizing factors—I'll talk about them first: *dhamma vicaya*, investigation; *viriya*, energy or courageous effort; and *pīti*, rapture or joyful interest.

The factor of investigation, *dhamma vicaya*—I think using the word "investigation" can sometimes be a little problematic with this factor because investigation for us often has the connotation of intellectual analysis or thinking about a thing. We investigate in that way. But this really points to an intuitive kind of discerning that distinguishes the fundamental characteristics of things. It's described as though we were given a flashlight in a dark room and we used it to reveal what's there. We can use this investigation just to see things clearly and to draw our attention near to experience. With this factor, we become more and more intimate with life, with our experience, discovering the details of things—but not intellectually. Rather, through directly connecting with things.

In a way, when this factor is developed, we plunge or dive into our experience below the surface, below the appearances of things. There's a Pali term, *paramattha dhamma*, usually translated as "ultimate reality." It means the characteristics of things that are simply the experience of things free of any concept, below the level of concept.

For example, Andrea spoke the other night about how we can relate to our experience of materiality in terms of these four great elements of earth, fire, water, and air. They all have specific characteristics. She spoke about these at length: earth characterized by hardness, solidity, textures; fire by temperature, heat and cold; water by fluidity and cohesion; air by movement and tension, vibration. These are the fundamental elemental natures of things.

These are the paramatadhammas of all things, and we can experience them directly in sensations in our body. But the factor of investigation also reveals those universal common characteristics that have been spoken about—characteristics shared by all

things, common to all things: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and corelessness. It's through deeply seeing these common characteristics, through seeing them deeply, that insight arises.

This investigation brings interest because it draws close to experience, draws near to it. We touch it directly and intimately, and it doesn't really matter what our experience is. This factor can function and can grow and flourish no matter what we're paying attention to. It's really quite wonderful. We don't have to have some really cool, interesting thing to investigate in our experience. The breath, for example, wouldn't strike most people as particularly interesting. But in meditation, it can become very interesting if we really draw close and near to it, if we really rub right up against it, investigate it in this way.

Then there's the second energizing factor, virya—effort or energy. It's often called courageous effort, and sometimes there is a very courageous, even heroic aspect to it. This isn't easy, what we're doing. A lot of the time it's not at all easy. And so this kind of courageous effort is what we need to stay at it through the ups and downs, to persevere. It's a kind of enduring, patient effort that sees things through to the end, that stands firm in the face of experience—sometimes very difficult experience. I think of it as a kind of doggedness, stick-to-itiveness, where we're in this for the long haul.

There's an incredibly inspiring example of the Buddha on the night of his awakening, his enlightenment. He said this famous thing when he sat down under the Bodhi tree that night: "Let only my skin, sinews, and bones remain. Let the flesh and blood in my body dry up. Yet there shall be no ceasing of energy until I have attained whatever can be won by human strength, human energy, and human effort."

This sense of standing firm is, I think, also very beautifully illustrated by his gesture that night of touching the earth and asking the earth to bear witness—this feeling of not budging in the face of things, in the face of experience. Not fighting it and not retreating, standing firm like a mountain. There's real dignity and courage in that.

Finding balance in terms of effort, in terms of energy, is something that we're constantly refining and adjusting. We don't unfortunately just get this set and then it's all set. It's something we have to adjust and refine. At times we make too much energy, we get tense, and we eventually tire ourselves out, wear ourselves out. At other times we don't make enough energy and we fall into a lazy, dull place. Right effort, the right amount of energy, is just enough that it allows our attention to land on each moment's experience. We don't have excessive zeal, too much energy, and crush the moment. We

don't slip off of it either. We don't lose touch and slip away because we're making too little effort. It's the kind of energy where we just meet each moment arising—just this moment, over and over.

Moments of balanced energy, just a lot of those, just the right little amount made over and over—that's a sustainable way of practicing. We meet each moment, just this moment as it arises. We don't tire ourselves out, don't wear ourselves out. If we try to be mindful for the whole day, it's too much. That's too tall an order—being mindful all day today, not missing a moment. But if we just say, "I'm going to be mindful for this next beginning of an in-breath, and then maybe the end of it if I'm still here"—we can do that. It's doable if we approach our practice that way, moments of effort put together.

The third of the energizing factors is piti, sometimes called rapture, joy, joyful interest. It has this quality of interest with a happy, joyful aspect. It has this characteristic of delight, of satisfaction. And it has these qualities in and of itself, but it also has an ability to pervade, to imbue other states, other experiences with the same quality. It brings this sense of delight and satisfaction to other experiences. We can get very serious in our practice and lose touch sometimes with feelings of joy and joyful interest. Piti brings this. It refreshes us with a kind of spiritual joy.

You could say it uplifts us. It can bring us out of the sometimes overly serious way that we approach our practice.

In one of the technical definitions, it's said that pīti has the characteristic of being endearing. It endears. It has the function of refreshing body and mind, and it manifests as a kind of elation. It can fill our body and mind with lightness and a kind of agility. Sometimes there are physical sensations that come with it, usually quite pleasant and delightful—although sometimes they can be so strong that they aren't so delightful.

But it's a kind of joy that comes from being really intimate with life, intimate with our experience. And it doesn't depend on our experience being any particular way. It's quite amazing in this way. Sometimes we can be experiencing something very difficult or painful, but this quality of pīti has an ability to pervade other states and infuse them with happiness and delight.

I can remember times practicing with very difficult, painful sensations in the body, and this quality of joyful interest arising. Those sensations didn't change, but the relationship to them was completely different. This quality pervades. It imbues these things with a whole different quality.

The other day, Andrea talked about these five different kinds of pīti. I'll go through those again. There's minor or lesser rapture—a kind of chills or goose-bumpy quality in terms of the sensations we might notice. There's momentary rapture, which has a very intense, flashing quality, like flashes of lightning—strong and intense. Showering rapture can feel like it's breaking over us like a series of waves or rain. There's uplifting rapture that can make the body feel very light. And then there's pervading rapture.

I'll tell this story. It brought me a lot of joy once when I was hearing it. Joseph used it in one of his talks. It's a story of a young woman who was in a village near a monastery—the village of Vatakalaka, near the Girkandaka Monastery. She was living with her parents, staying with them. They were going to go to the monastery, but she was pregnant and nearing the time of giving birth, and they said, "You shouldn't go. You should stay home." They told her, "We'll go and hear the Dhamma and gain merit on your behalf." Even though she wanted to go, she heeded their wishes.

So she went out onto the balcony of their house, where she could gaze across at the shrine in the compound. It was a full moon night, an observance night. She could see it shining in the light of the moon and see the people circling the shrine and making offerings. There was chanting she could hear drifting in on the breeze. She thought, "They're so lucky to be able to go to the monastery and wander about the shrine and hear the Dhamma, hear the chanting."

It's said that she had this vision of the shrine as though it were a mound of pearls. Joy and delight arose so strongly that she floated up into the air. She came down on a terrace of the shrine and got there before her parents did. When they showed up they said, "How did you get here? What road did you take?" She said, "I came through the air, not by the road. As I was standing gazing at the shrine in the moonlight, a strong joy arose in me with the Buddha as its object. And then I knew no more if I was standing or sitting, but only that I was rising into the air. And I came to rest on the shrine terrace."

So look and see if there are any floaters out there.

It's a lovely story, but it points to this uplifting quality of this factor. And then there's pervading rapture, which tends to fill the body and mind in a way that is somewhat more subtle in some ways.

So, summing up: these three energizing factors—investigation, energy or effort, and joyful interest. And then there are the three calming, tranquilizing factors. I'd better get going.

The first of these is passaddhi—calm, usually called calm or calm coolness. It has the characteristic of calming the mind and body, tranquilizing when things are agitated or unrestful.

In a way, it's said to suppress heat—the heat of restlessness, of worry, of agitation in the mind and heart. So it has this cooling effect, this non-agitating effect. And sometimes when it's growing and when it's strong, things seem to become, they feel more simple to us. Things seem to sometimes slow down a bit. We relax.

And calm can come in different ways. It can come in brief moments; it's not always this extended period. There can be a feeling of calm in the center of a storm, where there's a feeling of rest even in the middle of energy, in the middle of more agitated states. It's said that this feeling of calm often, almost always, follows upon the arising of strong pervading rapture especially. And when it's strong, we don't want to move at all. We feel we could just sit for a long period.

And then there's the second of these calming, tranquilizing factors: samadhi, concentration. It has the characteristic of non-scatteredness, non-dispersal. So with samadhi, with concentration, the mind tends to really stick right with the object, to not slip off. There's a quality of our attention remaining just right there, a kind of stillness. And so samadhi has the function of gathering, collecting the mind. It keeps things in a group. It keeps these factors from scattering, from dispersing. And so as it grows stronger, the mind becomes quite still, very quiet. This is the manifestation of concentration.

There are two ways that samadhi is developed. It can be developed through a kind of continuous concentration on a single object to the complete exclusion of any other, or through momentary concentration to changing objects. These can arise and pass even very quickly, but the continuity of mindfulness brings a concentration. And both are very, very powerful.

The more continuous type on a single object is a tranquility practice, a pure tranquility practice, we could say. It can lead to deep absorptions when it's developed in a strong way. It develops real strength and unification of the mind and sets all defilements temporarily at bay when it's strong. It can be a very useful foundation for insight practice.

This momentary concentration, arising from continuity of mindfulness to changing objects, can also be very powerful concentration, powerful samadhi, despite the fact that there's this attending to the flux and change. It can be steady if our mindfulness is without many breaks and gaps. And it has the same function of collecting and gathering the mind, keeping these defilements at bay.

So either of these kinds of samadhi brings a composure, a stillness to the mind. There's a great relief from wandering mind, and we're not pushed and pulled around by things. And samadhi is the proximate cause for wisdom and insight to arise, because we can see very deeply into anicca, dukkha, anatta—into impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. It's hard to do this when our minds are scattered. So the samadhi collects and gathers the mind and lets it really see deeply into things.

And then the third factor in this tranquilizing group is upekkha, equanimity. It seems kind of different than the others in a way. It's this sense of balance in the face of experience, in the face of changing experience. So it's a state of mind, a quality that rests in the center. It's not pulled to extremes. It allows us to be with things without being pulled or falling into reactivity. Things that usually bother us, habits of reactivity—when upekkha, when equanimity is strong, they don't arise, they don't upset us.

Sometimes people think that this is some kind of insensitivity or indifference, where we're not feeling things, as though somehow our goal is to become somewhat numb. But it's nothing like this. There's no indifference. There's no insensitivity with equanimity. There's no apathy. There's no disdain or numbness. It's just that we're non-preferential. We're totally present, but we're not pushed and pulled around. There's no preference with regard to experience. And it's a great relief when this is strong.

Another function of equanimity: it's said to fill in where there is a lack and to reduce where there is excess.

I like that. It adds when adding is needed and it removes when removing is needed.

So when this balance of mind is strong, we feel as though we don't have to make any effort to be mindful—as if the practice is doing itself. And this is a manifestation of equanimity. It's likened to someone driving a carriage who settles back and just lets the horses do the work of pulling.

When this balance of equanimity is strong and really developed, this is what prepares our mind to realize nibbāna, to realize the unconditioned. In the models of the progress of insight—these models of successive stages of insight—there's a name for this kind of really powerful balance of equanimity: *saṅkhārupekkhā ñāṇa*. This is equanimity with regard to formations. A deep, deep balance. A perfect equipoise.

One way I think about it is like the description of the Buddha on the night of his awakening, when he was assailed by all the different armies of Māra. It's said that the great being's mind was not moved. This kind of exquisite balance of mind is not moved by things. And it's this exquisite balance of mind that allows for sudden realization to occur.

In this list of the factors of awakening, there is a certain flow from one to another in the order that I listed them. The energizing factors, as they arise and develop and strengthen, tend to organically lead to the arising and development of the calming factors. There's a way in which they all culminate in equanimity, you could say. But at the same time, they're all present at once and they develop in a more parallel way. Sometimes we can see them all manifested—that's what we see in our experience. We see these factors of enlightenment. We see the way they inform and balance one another. So it's not altogether linear, but there is some aspect of this that we do see.

Really the most important thing to remember, to remind ourselves—because we can get a little worked up about getting these babies going and working them up—is that they follow in the wake of mindfulness, that the function of mindfulness is to gather and balance them, that it does this naturally. We don't have to make this happen.

In this way, we can't have an excess of mindfulness. We can make too much energy. We can make too much effort, bring too much energy to our practice. We can get giddy and overly exuberant. We can fall into dullness through excess of calm. Our mind can sink when there's too much concentration and not enough energy. So we can get out of balance with the others, but not with mindfulness. You can't have too much of it.

Sometimes I've thought of our practice as a process of cultivating a taste for these factors of awakening, and starting to lose a bit of our conditioned taste for other states. We begin to see through the mistaken view that desire and aversion—that the strategy of using these as a source for finding happiness—isn't such a good one. We start to acquire a taste for the factors of awakening. We start to see how the way we chase after sense pleasures, and try to avoid and run away from unpleasant things, and zone out in between these two extremes—this is ultimately an exhausting and endless and really hopeless pursuit. It doesn't ever lead us to deep satisfaction and happiness.

This goes against the culture, and it's kind of a major shift in our understanding and our relationship to things. But it's a natural thing that happens. We just see more and more clearly the flaws in pursuing these afflictive states as a strategy for happiness. And this inclines us naturally toward the ultimately more satisfying happiness that comes from the factors of awakening. We start to see how they lead to liberation of mind.

I'll end with some more from the Buddha:

Bhikkhus, these seven factors of enlightenment, when developed and cultivated, lead to going beyond, from the near shore to the far shore.

And having said this, the Fortunate One, the Teacher, further said:

Few are those among humankind who go beyond to the far shore. The rest of us merely run up and down along the bank. When the Dhamma is rightly expounded, those who practice in accord with the Dhamma are the ones who will go beyond the realm of death, so hard to cross.

Having left behind the dark qualities, the wise ones should develop the bright ones. And having come from home into homelessness, where it is hard to take delight, there in seclusion one should seek delight.

Having left behind the pursuit of sensual pleasures, owning nothing, the wise one should cleanse himself of mental afflictions. Those whose minds are well developed in the factors of enlightenment, who through non-clinging find delight in the relinquishment of grasping—these are the luminous ones with taints destroyed, fully quenched in the world.

And I recommend you let the words drift away. Anything that was useful will have gone in there, so don't think about it.

There's time now for some walking meditation.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 32

Guided Meditation: Relaxed, Open Awareness

Andrea Fella · 41 min

> *In this guided meditation from the 2010 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Andrea Fella leads practitioners through a systematic opening of awareness using the metaphor of an expanding bubble. Beginning with attention to physical sensations in the head, the practice gradually incorporates the neck, shoulders, torso, arms, hands, and eventually the entire body, with repeated invitations to relax at each stage.*
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> *The meditation then extends beyond the body's boundaries to include hearing and mental experience, cultivating what might be called choiceless awareness or open presence. Andrea emphasizes allowing rather than doing—receiving experience rather than searching for it. She invites practitioners to notice the texture of knowing itself and to observe how awareness meets experience, whether it feels like suffusing, flowing, jumping, or remaining still while phenomena arise and pass within it.*
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> *This practice develops the capacity for spacious, receptive attention that forms the foundation for vipassanā insight. By relaxing the tendency to narrow focus and instead opening to the full field of present-moment experience—body sensations, sounds, and mental states—practitioners cultivate a quality of awareness that can hold all phenomena with equanimity. The instruction to notice when the mind wanders and simply reconnect with whatever is obvious supports a gentle, non-judgmental approach to meditation that is accessible to both new and experienced practitioners.*

This morning, I'd like to offer a guided meditation that moves into a kind of relaxed, open awareness. You're free to follow along or simply note hearing.

As we go through this process, it's really helpful to keep coming back to relaxation. Allow yourself to relax, settling into the present moment with relaxation.

Begin by bringing attention to the sensations in your head. Notice whatever sensations you find there—pressure, pulsing, vibration, tingling, dryness, coolness. Just noticing the physical sensations in your head.

Relaxing.

Allow your attention to expand a little bit to include not only the sensations in your head, but also the sensations in your neck. You might think of your awareness almost as a bubble that can gently expand to include more experience, now taking in the experience of physical sensation in your head and your neck.

Relax and expand the awareness. Allow this bubble of awareness to expand to include your shoulders, so that your attention takes in the sensations of your head, your neck, and your shoulders.

Relax.

It seems easiest not to do this but more to allow it—allowing the attention to expand. Allow the bubble of awareness to expand further to include your torso, taking in the sensations in your head, your neck, your shoulders, and your torso. Both inside and outside, on the surface and inside the body. Allow the awareness to take in from the top of your head to the bottom of your spine, from the front to the back of your body, from side to side.

Relax.

Taking in the experience, the physicality of the experience—pulsing, vibration, tingling, pressure, lightness, coolness, heat, whatever you're experiencing.

Allow this bubble of awareness now to expand outwards a little bit to include your arms and your hands, so that the bubble of awareness includes the entire upper part of your body: head, neck, shoulders, torso, arms, hands.

Relax.

Just notice what's obvious. See what you can open to, as opposed to what you can try to find. Settle back. Receive the experience of the upper part of your body.

Allow this sensitive, cognizant bubble of awareness to relax and expand still further to include your hips and your buttocks. Allow this awareness to expand to include your upper legs, your thighs and your hamstrings. Allow the awareness to take in the experience of your head, your neck, shoulders, torso, arms, hands, buttocks, hips, thighs, and hamstrings.

Relax and allow the awareness to expand now to include your entire body, including your lower legs and your feet.

Feel into the texture of the awareness, this sensitive bubble of awareness.

Relax. Relax the mind. Relax the body.

Relax, allowing this bubble of awareness to expand still further beyond the edges of your body, as if this bubble of awareness could expand to the size of the room. Let go of the idea of the edges of your body while staying connected to your physical experience.

Allow your attention to open also now to the experience of hearing. That bubble of awareness has already expanded. Allow it to just also pick up on the sounds. You don't have to do too much work to hear. This entire time you've been listening to my voice and paying attention to the bodily sensations. Simply allow the attention to take in the experience of the body, the expanded sense of the awareness, and the experience of hearing.

Sometimes you might notice that with a sound there is a corresponding physical ripple effect through the body.

Staying open to body sensations, the expanded sense of awareness, and hearing, notice too now—allow this expanded sense of awareness to also take in your mental experience. A good place to begin this is noticing the impact that this experience is having on your mind right now. Are there thoughts, feelings, calm or agitation, tranquility, ease? Just noticing resistance, whatever is happening, staying connected to bodily experience, the hearing, and the experience of the mind.

Appreciate your mind's ability to know. Feel into the texture of knowing, almost as if this sensitive bubble of awareness were like an amoeba that met all experience.

Taking in the physical experience of the body—vibration, tingling, pulsing, pressure, lightness, heaviness, hardness, softness, coolness, heat, moisture. Taking in the pitch and tone of hearing. Taking in how the mind is responding to this experience, and in turn how that impacts the body. Taking in how awareness is noticing experience.

There are different ways that awareness takes in experience. Sometimes it might feel like awareness is suffusing the experience.

Sometimes it might feel that awareness is flowing from one thing to the next. Sometimes it might feel like awareness is jumping from one thing to the next. Sometimes it might feel that awareness is very still, and experience is simply appearing and disappearing within that space.

There's no one right way. Just notice how your awareness is meeting experience right now.

Relax. If you notice the mind wandering off into thought, when you notice that, first acknowledge that you have woken up into that thought—and then simply connect with whatever is obvious within this field of expanded awareness.

CHAPTER 33

Wise Effort

Will Kabat-Zinn · 55 min

> *In this talk from the 2010 three-month retreat at IMS, Will Kabat-Zinn offers a fresh perspective on effort in meditation practice. He begins by pointing out a fundamental truth often overlooked: awareness is already functioning effortlessly. We don't have to work hard to hear sounds or see sights—this knowing capacity operates continuously, even in dreams. The challenge in meditation isn't to generate awareness but to recognize what's already present.*
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> *Using vivid analogies—searching for keys that are already in your pocket, learning to fly a stunt kite with subtle movements rather than forceful pulls—Kabat-Zinn illustrates how our habitual efforting often moves us away from what we seek. He describes the dual learning process of retreat: becoming familiar with the vast content of experience (physical sensations, emotions, memories) while also developing intimacy with the nature of conditioned phenomena—impermanence and dukkha. This extended time allows practitioners to become "indigenous to their own experience," no longer feeling like strangers in their own inner landscape.*
>
> *A central teaching concerns how we create unnecessary struggle through identification. When restlessness arises, we quickly construct "I am a restless person"—an entire incarnation manufactured from a passing moment. Kabat-Zinn invites us to see ourselves as nature sees a tree in drought: shaped by causes and conditions, worthy of tending rather than judgment. The practice becomes simpler: just showing up, noticing when we're already here, and letting that recognition become continuous—drops of water forming a stream.*

Good evening.

My name is Will Kabat-Zinn, and I'll be here with you assisting for the rest of the retreat. I just arrived today. It's a little strange coming into the middle of a retreat and not having met any of you and not knowing where you're at exactly. But I thought it would be a good idea to sit up here tonight and speak with you a little and get a feel for what's happening. And you can get a little feel for me too. I look forward to getting to know many of you over these next weeks.

I thought I'd speak a little bit about effort. I was asked to speak about effort—not that there's any sense that you need to make more of it. Usually it's the opposite. But effort is one of those themes that keeps coming back, really, in everything we do. It's always a relevant topic, and especially in meditation, because meditation is an unusual kind of activity and requires a different kind of effort than many of us are used to making.

As a culture, as a society, we tend to be really good effort makers. We're good at doing. We're big doers. We like to get things done. But in that kind of doing, we can miss something that's very close to us. If we're making that kind of big doing effort in meditation, we can miss what's most fundamental.

Even the idea of cultivating awareness can be misleading, because awareness is here all the time. And it operates effortlessly. This is true in terms of your hearing my voice right now. You don't have to do a lot for that to happen. It's kind of amazing, actually. You don't know what I'm going to say, but you end up hearing what I'm actually saying. You don't have to do any anticipating.

This is true with seeing as well. You're seeing very clearly, or relatively clearly, depending on vision—which is different than awareness; that's just the organ. But without making a huge amount of effort, there's some sense of seeing if you have sight. If you don't, you can use any other sense—feeling. It doesn't require a lot of effort to be aware of the room. That's something awareness kind of just does for you. And when something changes in it, you're just aware of it. You didn't know I was going to do that, but you can see it.

So that's a relief, because you don't have to know everything in advance. The awareness takes care of the knowing part of it for you.

This is true with sensation, feeling in the body too. You have this capacity for feeling, and if you tap on your knee, you can feel it without trying too hard. I always think this is important to point out as a reminder. Even though you've all been practicing for quite a while, it's always a helpful reminder for me—just that, oh wow, it's closer and more immediate than I can sometimes think. This amazing mind, this amazing capacity that is happening for all of us all the time. This knowingness which just goes on and on.

And we can't stop it. That part always gets me. You can't turn it off. You can't stop being aware. You can stop being aware of one particular thing and shift the attention. But there's always some awareness happening, even when you're not aware of it. This is true in dreaming, actually. It's a good example of this.

You wake up and remember your dream. You might think, "I wasn't aware because I was dreaming," but somebody remembers the dream. So there was some awareness present. And sometimes, even in the dream, you become aware that you're dreaming. That's just like when you're awake—remembering that the awareness is already there. And then, wow, here's the dream, it's happening.

Part of the reason this is such a good reminder is that often we're chasing awareness. We're trying to get it, and we're moving in the wrong direction because it's not there, wherever we're trying to go with it. It's a lot closer. So much of our effort in meditation is the effort of trying to get to where we think awareness is. And that's a kind of deluded effort. It's not going to lead us to it.

One example I like is looking for your car keys. You're looking all over for them and can't find them anywhere. You're really searching, turning the house upside down. They're not anywhere. Where are they? So you look even harder. And then after a while, you stop and wonder, where could they be? And you feel in your pocket—okay, there are my keys. I feel like a bit of an idiot when I do that. But it's very analogous to what I'm talking about.

That effort to find the keys isn't just not useful—it's actually very useful. Because if you didn't make all that effort, you might not have looked in your pocket. You search everywhere and don't find them, and that not-finding leads you to check again in a different way. So the effort wasn't wasted. In a way, it helped you arrive where you were, or where the keys already were.

In practice, it's often the search for some state of awareness, some particular experience we want to have in a given moment—which is usually not what's already happening. And then there's effort to try to get there, and it can be very frustrating. But after we look for our keys ten thousand times everywhere, we start to get more familiar with the reality that we always have the keys in our pocket, to stretch the analogy a bit.

This knowingness, this wakefulness, is actually always here, functioning. When we start to tune to that, rest in that, hang out with that more—and chase experience less—something shifts. Sometimes when something is so immediate, any effort to be in touch with it almost makes us miss it, because it requires too subtle an effort.

I have an example. I have a ten-year-old stepson, and a friend bought me a stunt kite. I don't know if you've ever seen one, but it has two strings. You fly it like a normal kite, but then you can pull on the strings and make it do tricks. If you pull on the left side, it dives to the left. Pull on the right, it dives to the right. Pull really hard, and it spins around.

I took it with him down to the Berkeley Marina—I live in California, and there's usually a lot of wind there. When I started trying to learn how to fly this kite, I actually couldn't pull on it gently enough. I would pull, and it would just dive right down and hit the ground.

I'd try to move it to the left, and it would hit the ground. It took a while for me to get a feel for this much subtler kind of movement.

I noticed when my stepson was trying to fly it, he went through this very frustrating process of crashing the kite again and again. But he really wanted to stick with it. He was determined—that's one of the paramis, right? Determination. So he was really determined, and he was pulling on the thing, really excited, and the wind was really strong. And it kept crashing.

It was interesting to watch him go through this process. At a certain point, he kind of stopped and lay down with the kite. And when he was lying down, he could make these really subtle movements. It was beautiful. The kite was doing all kinds of things.

So in meditation—even if you don't call it meditation—just in the process of being aware with experience as it arises, moment after moment, we're going through a kind of dual learning process. One is we're learning how to be with the experience that's arising, this vast array of experiences. And that's a process. When you have time to sit as you have over an extended period, there's a deepening into layers of experience. Different kinds of experiences arise, different content. Some of it may be familiar, some of it may be very unfamiliar. And sometimes we can think we're supposed to already know how to be with everything. But the reality is we don't, and so there's a learning process. Just like with the kite.

Some of what we're being with is physical process—pain, discomfort. It's unusual to spend so much time with a body as you have been. And I imagine you've been developing a new kind of relationship to even what this is, experientially, this body. New experiences arise in it, and we crash the kite a few times—or more than a few times—and we're learning how to be with it, whatever it is, in a gentler way.

This can also be true with content, things from your history or your life, memories, your stuff, layers of it. The wonderful thing about retreat—not always easy, often not—is having time to just let some of this long unattended-to content emerge and be attended to. I really do think of it as developing a relationship, as you would with any other being. Relationship doesn't happen right away. It's a process. You need to spend time.

There needs to be some care and exchange and honoring, and you need to go through—if it's going to be a really deep relationship—some struggles. That's how you build a real relationship. And so we're doing this with the vast range of our experience.

That's one of the wonderful things about sitting for so long: you see how vast human experience is. All the different moods and emotions that one experiences in a day, let alone a week—hope, despair, inspiration, joy, sadness, fear, boredom, restlessness, anger. Often we're identified with certain of these human experiences. We're used to a few, we're familiar with them. In our lives, we tend to pay attention to them. But here we get to see that it's all here and to make room for it. It's very impersonal in that way.

Not only do we begin to become familiar with all the content of mind and body, honoring what's arising in the moment and being in relationship to that, but we also begin to develop a familiarity and relationship with the nature of experience itself, or the nature of conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena includes all of this—everything that can be known by awareness, everything you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch, cognize in the mind. It's all conditioned phenomena, conditioned reality.

And you've probably heard these words, but impermanence—you have time here to get deeply familiar with this aspect of reality, that things are changing. You may see this in various ways. It's sort of unignorable. And sometimes it can be really joyful. Sometimes it can be scary.

But it's not an aspect of experience we tend to pay a lot of attention to. I shouldn't say "we"—maybe that's not true for many of you. Maybe you are paying attention to it, and that's wonderful. But I should say societally, we tend not to. We tend not to be sustaining attention long enough to notice impermanence. But as you sustain attention, it sort of starts to become really obvious.

You can't get back the experience that you had earlier today. That really great meditation—that's just impermanence. It's gone. And that moment when you felt like you just couldn't stay here another moment? That's gone too. That's a more obvious level. But we have a chance to really hang out with this reality and integrate it.

It's true too for dukkha, the kind of suffering that comes from wanting what we don't have and not wanting what we have. We get to experience that a lot. It's not so different from that chase I was talking about earlier, the search for your keys. When you're wanting what's not happening right now, there's a suffering in that. It's immediate, a disease.

So we have a lot of time. I'm sure you didn't order everything that arose today—like in the morning you wrote out a menu: "First I'll have this, and then I'll have this, a little of this, a little joy, some insight, and then bliss in the afternoon." It doesn't happen like that. So there was probably something you didn't want, or something you wanted more of. And you get to feel the immediate feedback of dukkha, this dis-ease that comes from wanting and not wanting.

We have time to develop a relationship to this aspect of reality, to get really familiar with it, to become good friends. When we're in relationship like this, then things begin to shift in terms of how we relate to our good friend. You start to develop a feel—it's less of an idea and just more of a feel for whatever that movement is. It just doesn't feel right. So there's a natural settling back.

Even this move—you familiar with this one? Even that one, we kind of feel the dis-ease of it. And then we just start to soften into developing this capacity to be with whatever is arising, and to not have to pick and choose or search and try. All of that effort—all of that moving, not wanting, wanting—that requires energy. A lot of it.

So as we develop this feel, we start to get simpler in a way. And to trust in the being with what's here right now. Not only do we begin to develop a relationship to phenomenal experience—the content, the stuff we're aware of—we also begin to develop a relationship to this beingness, awareness, knowingness itself. The beingness that itself doesn't have any content, but is what allows all of this to be known. Just that simple awareness that I was talking about at the beginning: the seeing, the hearing, the smelling, the tasting, the touching, the cognizing. It's this simple awareness. We also begin to just be familiarized with this and trust it more.

Maybe I'll share a little anecdote about over-efforting. I feel like being around a lot of kids lately, just in my neighborhood, I was seeing all of this dharma. Dharma's everywhere, but especially in these interactions.

So I was playing handball with some kids from the neighborhood—my stepson and this other kid who's about seven, so he's a little guy. They're both kind of little guys. We're playing handball against this wall. I used to be an athlete, but I didn't play much handball. They play with a big ball, and they're pretty good. Even Coltrane, this little guy, is quite good.

So I was playing with them, and I'm pretty competitive, to tell you the truth. And they're killing me at this game.

And I'm trying really hard. The worse they're beating me, the harder I'm trying. And I'm way bigger than them, so I'm throwing my weight around. At one point, Coltrane turns to me and says, "Will, don't be aggressive. It just makes things worse."

That was my little dharma teaching. I stopped. And he was totally right. Then I relaxed and stopped trying so hard, and lo and behold, I started to learn how to play handball.

I'm not going to try to relate that story to anything. You get the point.

Sometimes what we experience in meditation is really unfamiliar. It can be challenging to know how to relate to states of mind we're not used to. Sometimes just calm or stillness can be very unfamiliar, and we don't know what to do with it. The mind gets very excited—"Oh, now let me try to make something else happen." Sometimes we want to be experiencing calm so badly, for so long, and then when it comes, it's like, "What? Peace? This is boring. Maybe if I just really deepen into it, then something else will happen."

So we're getting to know these other dimensions of experience. We always say, "Oh, if I was just relaxed, then everything would be great." But we don't know what to do with relaxed. We don't know what to do with peace, with stillness. So we're getting familiar with it, learning how to hang out with stillness. And then what do you know? We have a relationship with stillness. We can actually live it and not fight it.

Sometimes, even content-wise, things about ourselves that we're not familiar with can arise—or that we've kind of known for a long time exist but that we've never really met. So it can be scary and overwhelming.

One way I sometimes think about practice is that it's like becoming indigenous to your own experience. If you were airlifted into the Amazon rainforest and dropped in the middle of the jungle somewhere, you'd have no idea what was what in that environment. You wouldn't know what was safe to eat. You wouldn't know how to get food or how to find water. You wouldn't know how to orient yourself. But if you were indigenous to that area, it would be exactly the opposite. Everything would have meaning. You'd understand where you were. You'd know how to read the conditions. You could enjoy being there, living there. It wouldn't be such a struggle for survival.

Often when we really drop in, this inner territory can feel alien. And then there's this becoming indigenous to your own experience, more and more, which makes it a lot easier to not have to run somewhere else. All that energy of trying to get somewhere else isn't so necessary, because usually it's just an attempt to get something we don't feel we have—something missing here.

Another thing that tends to lead to skewed effort as we practice, as we be here, is our really tenacious habit of identifying with what's happening as "me."

We're experiencing some restlessness or agitation, and it becomes about me. "I'm a restless person. Everybody else is calm. I've been here for however many weeks and I'm still restless." Or sadness arises. "I'm a sad person. I'm a sad sack. I'm just a bummer." We do this so quickly with experience, almost all the time. Or: "I'm having a great meditation. I'm the best yogi in the world. Everything's so peaceful. The next thing for me is robes and the mountaintop. I'll be preaching to everybody." It happens really fast too—five minutes after being a sad sack, or maybe two minutes. But when it's happening, we're really believing it.

Or, you know, "I've been practicing for fifteen years"—this thought arising in the middle of a sitting where you're struggling with something—"and I'm still dealing with this. My meditation has not led me anywhere. I haven't gotten anywhere. All this effort is wasted." That's a thought. Yes, but it becomes a reality very quickly. It's from identifying with an experience that's happening in the moment by making it me. "This is my identity now." And then, wow, then I have to make up for all the time I wasted, and I have to get somewhere finally. It's a huge project that arose in one second. I just invented a whole history and a whole future. And now I have to live out this incarnation that I've created out of a moment of frustration. It's like magic, but it's happening all the time.

That's a big part of how we create more effort-making for ourselves—from making a me out of just what's happening. We're adding me. Me wasn't there, but we made the me. Often we don't see that part. We inserted the me into nature.

Actually, we have a kind of natural intelligence about nature. We don't tend to do that with nature. Of course, we exclude ourselves from nature—we're kind of something different, in our opinion. But when you look at nature, you don't add the me to nature.

One example of this—and I use this example all the time because I like it—is if there is a tree growing in a drought, and the leaves are falling off. It's obviously parched. It looks like it's on the verge of death. We intuitively don't say, "That tree will never amount to anything because it just doesn't work hard enough at extracting moisture from the soil." We don't do that. That would be silly. You're laughing, because we can intuitively recognize that causes and conditions contribute to the state of the tree.

It's not that we're powerless. We can affect the conditions of the tree. We can shade it and water it and put new soil there. We can tend to the tree. But that tending has a very different quality to it than, you know, "Get your tree self in gear."

Meditation becomes a struggle when it becomes that kind of personal thing—when we abstract ourselves from nature and somehow believe we're an exception to this causes and conditions phenomenon. But it's the same. You're the tree. Sorry. You may be a flourishing tree right now, and that's wonderful. But then the quality of the tending changes, just naturally.

This is one of the wonderful things about practice: we are learning experientially that we are just nature. It starts to become hard to ignore because you're not in control of what's arising. Admit it. You're not ordering what's arising. It's causes and conditions unfolding, body and mind.

So our effort in meditation can be kind of simple—just attending to what's arising in the moment as best we can, and coming back again and again to what's here. Noticing when we create a self and we create an incarnation for ourselves to live out. This is moment-to-moment rebirth. Now I'm a sad sack. Now I'm the yogi of the month. Noticing how we create time, which then may give us a lot that we need to do. "I've been here so long. Before I leave, I need to..." That's again just a thought that arises in the moment. There really is no time in that way. Experientially, it's just always this moment. It's all we have. Like awareness—there's always some knowing present, but it's always now. It's never any other time.

So just noticing when you also create some distance for yourself to traverse in meditation—the goal that you need to arrive at. That happens in time, something that you manufacture through your thinking. You just gave yourself something to arrive at.

I had what I thought was a kind of cool experience of this. I was on a self-retreat in the woods, alone for about a month. At one point I got confused about what day it was—I thought it was a Wednesday or Thursday, I don't know. And I went around for a while in this Wednesday-or-Thursday thing. At a certain point I stopped and wondered, "Where is Thursday?" And I couldn't find it. These are things we just made up—Wednesday and Thursday.

It's not that knowing whether it's Wednesday or Thursday isn't useful. We need that. I know it's Saturday; that's why I'm here. But it's also useful to see how this happens so that we're not trapped by it as if it were a kind of ultimate reality.

I think it's wonderful what you're doing, just being here, sitting and walking. It takes a while to trust this, but in my experience, you don't have to do a lot of fancy things. Just showing up as best you can is enough, and the practice unfolds itself.

Sometimes we hear the term "right effort" and we think that's a thing we're supposed to do—I'm supposed to find right effort and then do it. But my experience is that it's a lot more generous than that. The term I like is just "good enough effort." Not right. Sometimes "right" makes me feel like I've got to get it right. Good enough effort. It's just the effort to be here. Just to be aware that we're already here. And to let that become continuous. We're already here. There is no Sunday happening. It's just a thought.

So this is recognizing that we're already here, and this is what's already happening. This is the work of meditation—just the knowing of this. Let us recognize that this awareness is here and there's experience arising. And when we forget, then we remember again. Just remember to notice.

You've probably experienced how this repeated noticing starts to lead to a kind of continuity. Without our extending these moments, they start to become continuous for periods of time—like little drops of water. First, they're just drops of water, but then they sort of become a stream. We can just be carried by the stream. It's just a metaphor, not a great one, but you get the sense of it. It's just this repeated noticing that this awareness is here. This leads to a growing continuity.

Maybe I'll stop there tonight. Let's just sit for a moment.

May the merits of our practice serve for the welfare and the benefit of all beings everywhere, including ourselves.

CHAPTER 34

What versus Why

Andrea Fella · 1h00

> *In this profound dharma talk, Andrea Fella draws on the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2) to illuminate the distinction between wise and unwise attention. The Buddha taught that the untaught person attends unwisely by asking 'Who am I? What was I in the past? What will I become?' — questions filtered through the framework of self. In contrast, wise attention directly meets present moment experience through the lens of the Four Noble Truths: 'This is dukkha. This is the origin of dukkha.'*
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> *Through vivid personal examples — from stage fright that persisted for years to patterns of self-hatred explored on long retreats — Andrea demonstrates how suffering is continuously recreated in the present moment rather than lurking from the past. She reveals how the mind's tendency to create meaning and assumptions about experience can become self-fulfilling prophecies, while simply noting 'what is happening' allows conditioned patterns to be seen clearly and released.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with layered experience, using noting practice to meet thoughts and emotions as arising phenomena rather than solid truths. Andrea emphasizes that vipassanā insights — recognizing experience as impermanent, unreliable, and not-self — can arise in the midst of even our most difficult patterns. The instruction to use contact followed by feeling tone (vedanā) for sticky patterns proves transformative, demonstrating how direct observation of 'what' rather than analysis of 'why' cuts deeply into the roots of suffering.*

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

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

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

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

And yet we sometimes, I think, perhaps mistakenly feel that we should be able to control these reactions just through this intellectual process. Often this doesn't work very well. We think that because we know this person isn't the same person we have the charge about from our history, we shouldn't have this feeling. And yet we still do. We still have these reactions. So often this reflective process, this thinking back on why we are the way we are, doesn't touch into the deeper roots of our suffering, of our reactivity.

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

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

He says: "An untaught ordinary person does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and does not attend to those things fit for attention. This is how he attends unwisely: Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future? Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?"

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

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

I talked about this in terms of looking at experience through the framework of the Four Noble Truths. Not just the thinking-about process here, but the way this is phrased in the sutta—"this is suffering, this is the cause of suffering"—is pointing us directly to look at the present moment and understand what is happening here and now. Is it suffering? Is it the cause of suffering? Is it the ending of suffering? Is it qualities being cultivated that are leading to the ending of suffering, the path leading to the ending of suffering?

Looking at what is happening in the present moment through this lens of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha says, is wise attention. Rather than reflecting on "why am I the way I am," look at what is this, now? Is it suffering? Is it the cause of suffering? This is pointing us directly into the present moment and is a great teaching for us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At some point in this weeks-long exploration of looking at the loneliness, I began to notice that the loneliness arose while I was setting my alarm clock. I thought that was kind of odd. It was so clear—I was setting the alarm clock, and boom, the loneliness. There seemed to be some connection, but I didn't know what it was. So I just kept observing and began noticing the pattern of the loneliness arising when I set this alarm clock.

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

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

But what amazed me even more was that the next night when I went to bed, setting the alarm clock, the memory obviously came back—it had become conscious to me. But the loneliness didn't come back. It was as if seeing how the loneliness had been created in this process had somehow dismantled it. I didn't know how that worked or why that had happened, but it seemed to be related to having clearly seen the links and the causes in the present moment of how the suffering of the loneliness was created.

I'm not saying I didn't get lonely again, but the regular every-night-going-to-bed-lonely stopped. That was a great relief, this little moment of seeing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Another way to look at what's happening in the present moment addresses something we can sometimes miss. The attitude that Rebecca was speaking about the other morning—the attitude with which we are looking at our experience—sometimes is a

major part of what is happening that goes unnoticed by us. We're looking at our experience through a lens of frustration, or we're looking at our experience through a lens of wanting, and it's not really noticed that we're doing that.

A tool that can support us in helping to reveal other things that might be going on is to simply check in: What's the attitude? What's my relationship to this experience? This serves as a means to help us widen the lens to see more of what is happening in the present moment. This points to seeing an additional lens through which we're looking at experience, or a kind of larger layer of experience that perhaps hadn't been noticed.

This points to the way that we do sometimes recognize that our experience is layered—that habits are layered on top of other habits, emotions on top of beliefs and other emotions. There's a layering process that we often experience and see. We begin to really see this in the present moment, looking to our experience in the present moment. We see this layered nature of our experience.

For instance, you might notice a common pattern arising. You see that there's a kind of fear very deep, and then there's anger on top of that fear, and then resistance on top of that anger, as layers of experience.

Having a sense that there are these layers to our experience, we often think—I've seen in my own mind and in talking to people—we often think that the way to meet that experience, or that the most important part of meeting that experience, is somehow to get to that middle layer. If there's fear in the middle, and then anger kind of outside of that, and then resistance outside of that, what I really need to pay attention to is the fear right in the middle. That's the way we think, because we understand that it's at the core.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There's a beautiful poem about this tendency to create meaning. It's by Fernando Pessoa, a Portuguese poet who wrote under various heteronyms—he created different identities and wrote under each one. This particular poem comes from his Alberto Caeiro identity:

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

Yes, this is what my senses learned on their own.
Things have no meaning. They exist.
Things are the only hidden meaning of things.

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

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

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

Fortunately, I had enough experience not to create the meaning, "This means I'm a failure, this means I'm not trying hard enough." I decided instead to simply look at what was happening. What is actually happening? How are these thoughts coming to be?

What I began to notice was this: I would sit down, pay attention to the breath, and I could connect with it very clearly for about a second. Then the sensations of the breath got really subtle—so subtle that I could hardly notice them anymore. That's when the mind would wander.

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

This is what I discovered in that experience—simply trying to meet that subtlety. What I learned in subsequent retreats was that it doesn't have to be a problem. At first, I was actually trying to grasp at those subtle sensations: "What are they? What is that feeling? How is the breath so subtle?" I was trying to force the mindfulness into them, and that wasn't particularly helpful either.

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

I thought, "Oh." I hadn't thought of that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And in that moment there was a huge kind of release and opening of compassion for this person and their relationship. There was a sense of understanding that happened.

Now I would call this a kind of psychological insight. It was really clear to me how my history connected with the arising pattern in the present moment. And there was an opening around it. It did feel like there was a shift somehow. Actually, I thought, "Oh, maybe that's taking care of the self-hatred." I was actually shocked when it came back the next time. "Oh, I thought I was done with this."

And actually, that psychological insight—the strength of the self-hatred was just as strong. I was shocked.

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

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

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

I had heard this instruction, and as I was leaving the meditation hall that evening and walking up the stairs out of the walking room, the self-hatred descended. I felt powerless to do anything about it. But I had this really strong determination to just meet it. So I went back to my room and I sat. I just paid attention to that experience, and I used this double noting that Joseph had suggested.

Every time there was any kind of a movement towards "you're no good," a thought like that arising in my mind—contact, unpleasant. I just noted it as soon as I could, just trying to meet the arising of that experience with "contact, unpleasant." Just noting it, noting it, noting it.

At some point that evening, the arising of that experience, noted clearly, was just seen as a thought. "This is just a thought. This is just an empty phenomenon arising in the mind." In that moment the self-hatred vanished and bliss flooded the body. The next thought was, "Ah yes, and this too is impermanent."

The bliss kind of diminished and there was just much more of a sense of balance. There was a kind of recognition in that moment that there'd been an insight, but that it didn't necessarily mean the pattern was gone—it had been seen through in that moment. And yet that moment actually had a very deep power of cutting into that pattern.

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

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

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

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

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

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

So let's sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 35

Patience - The Art of Caring Slowly

Greg Scharf · 57 min

In this dharma talk, Greg Scharf offers a comprehensive exploration of khantī (patience) as one of the ten pāramīs—the beautiful, noble qualities that the Buddha perfected over countless lifetimes as a bodhisatta. Drawing from the Jātaka tales and various suttas, he situates patience within the broader framework of Buddhist path models, including the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, and the three trainings of sīla, samādhi, and paññā.

Scharf illuminates how patience differs from mere tolerance or stoic endurance, revealing it instead as an art of "caring slowly"—a quality imbued with compassion, gentleness, and steady strength. Through the charming Frog and Toad story and the Buddha's teaching about the hen incubating her eggs, he illustrates how spiritual development cannot be rushed but requires consistent, patient cultivation. He references the Dhammapada's teaching on the power of mind and intention, and the Buddha's advice to Rāhula about developing meditation "like the earth."

The talk offers practical guidance for working with impatience on retreat, particularly our tendency to judge experiences based on pleasant or unpleasant feeling tones. Scharf shares personal reflections on caring for aging parents and quotes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s powerful sermon on the courage inherent in patient endurance. He emphasizes that true patience manifests as acceptance, non-opposition, and the capacity to meet life fully—both its joys and sorrows—with an open, steady heart.

Our path of practice and meditation is described in a number of different ways. Different traditions offer different models that we can use to understand or look at this process. The Buddha spoke in different ways. He taught in different ways and elaborated the teaching according to who he was teaching, according to his audience and the situation, the circumstances at the time. This was part of his genius—being able to teach in a way that was suitable for his audience, that they would understand and follow.

And so we find the teachings presented in terms of the Four Noble Truths and the deepening understanding of the way this core teaching of the Buddha is practiced and unfolds through our meditation: understanding the truth of dukkha, the cause of dukkha—of stress, of suffering, of difficulty—and the cessation of it, and the path that leads to it.

Following from this, we can look at our process of meditation in terms of the unfolding of the Eightfold Noble Path and the three trainings in Sila, Samadhi, and Panya that comprise it—the trainings in ethical conduct, mind development, and wisdom.

There's a model that involves the path of purification in terms of stages of insight, progress of insight, successive stages of enlightenment. This focuses on ever-deepening understanding of what are called the three characteristics, these universal characteristics, common characteristics of all phenomena, all conditioned experience: the truths of anicca, change; dukkha, unsatisfactoriness; and anatta, the coreless, uncontrollable, selfless aspect of experience, of life.

Some traditions speak about discovering one's Buddha nature, resting in natural great perfection, connecting with this luminous purity of heart that I spoke about last week.

At different times we might find that one or another of these models for understanding our process seems to match our experience most clearly, most directly. This is just a natural part of the path. At different times we see different things.

There's another way that the path is described, which is in terms of the perfecting or ripening of what are called the paramis, or paramita in Sanskrit. I'm sure most of you have heard of these, maybe are quite familiar with these paramis—these ten noble or beautiful qualities, at least in the Theravada tradition. They're said to be ten beautiful, noble qualities that the Buddha developed and perfected over countless lifetimes as the Bodhisatta. These are mostly spoken about in a collection in the suttas called the Jataka Pitaka, the collection of Jataka stories, which are teaching stories, teaching fables you could say, that talk about the previous lives of the Buddha. Often he's born as an animal in many of them—a deer or a goose or different animals. And often his chief disciples, Moggallana and Sariputta, are there in some supporting role in these different teaching stories.

You could say, if we look at the path in this way, that the culmination of the path, the quality of the fully awakened mind or heart, is when these paramis are brought to completion or brought to perfection, completely developed.

In the texts, there's a place where Sariputta is asking the Buddha a question. He asks, "How many qualities are there, Lord, that issue in Buddhahood?" And the Buddha answers, "There are, Sariputta, ten qualities issuing in Buddhahood. What are the ten? Giving, Sariputta, is a quality issuing in Buddhahood. Virtue, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving kindness, and equanimity. These are qualities that issue in Buddhahood."

I'll read this list again—maybe new for some of you and a good review for the rest—and give you the Pali names for the paramis.

The first one is dana, which is usually called generosity or giving, sometimes giving of oneself. Sila is virtue or ethical conduct. Nekamma is renunciation. Panya is wisdom or insight. Virya is energy, effort, courage, diligence. Kanti is patience, and it has qualities of tolerance and forbearance, acceptance, endurance. Satya is truthfulness or honesty. Adhitana is determination or resolve. Metta is loving kindness. And upeka is equanimity.

We really can see our entire practice, the whole path in this way, as the cultivation, the strengthening of these wholesome qualities. This is something that's happening continuously as we go through our days here, no matter what's happening, just through our willingness to be present, to come back, to be present with our experience.

Seeing the path this way seems to be especially common in Asia and among Asian teachers. At least I've noticed this with many of my teachers in Burma and Thailand. They often relate to the path in terms of the ripening of paramis and speak about it in this way. This may have to do with a view they tend to hold where they see practice unfolding over lifetimes. They tend to take a very broad, long-term view of the path, and there's an understanding of rebirth which permeates the culture there.

But whether or not the idea of rebirth is meaningful for us, we can see this in terms of a single lifetime also. We go through so many different births just in a single day or even a single period of meditation, in a way. Our whole life, one lifetime, is a continual flow of births and deaths and rebirths. We can be born into a heavenly realm and drop to some pit of despair and anguish—and everywhere in between—in a single day, or sometimes even in a single hour of meditation. We can go through all these changes, these different births, you could say.

these different realms that we take birth in, even in a single life—through this ebb and flow, there's this continual process of developing these noble, beautiful qualities of heart and of mind.

Sometimes we meet people who seem to have one or more of these qualities very highly developed. We're not all the same. We meet someone who seems to have just an abundance of energy, or they're very, very generous—they just seem to naturally be very generous, or kind and loving.

I was thinking about this when I was putting these notes together for the talk, and my mother came to mind—something I didn't notice about her when I was growing up. In thinking of my mom, she had this amazing abundance of energy, it seemed. She took

complete care of the house. She did everything there, all the cooking. That was what people my mother's age did—they were the cooks. And she was a really good cook. She was a great gardener too. She made a beautiful flower garden in the yard. I grew up in the desert, so you had to water everything. She was always dragging hoses all over the place to water things. And she was a very good ceramic artist—she was a potter. She had a pottery studio at home and made all the dishes in our house. She made all her own glazes, burning things and making ash. She was part of a cooperative crafts gallery, so she had to work there as well. And then she was constantly volunteering. She taught sewing in poor communities, delivered meals to elderly folks who were homebound, and worked as a peace activist—all these things. And then she had friends, and she raised four children. The list goes on and on. She wasn't superwoman, but she was. And it never seemed like she was working too hard. It wasn't hyper at all. She did it all with a kind of grace and ease that was remarkable.

So she just seemed to have an abundance of this. She seemed to have somehow come in with this energy pāramī highly developed. And sometimes we meet people who seem to have all of them, or a lot of them, really highly developed. They seem to come in this way. And when they come to practice, if they come to this practice, they seem to be able to deepen very quickly. In Asia, the teachers would say, "Oh, well, their pāramī is very ripe." They would just see it this way, and there's this understanding that not everyone is the same in this way.

But sometimes we find the idea of cultivating or perfecting these qualities maybe a little challenging to relate to. We hear the list and it seems like a checklist of qualities we don't have. We get disheartened and discouraged and think, "Well, we'll never measure up. We're born the way we are and that's just it. We'll always be deficient in some way." We can actually feel this way. It might seem funny, but sometimes we hold ourselves this way.

But luckily, our minds and hearts are malleable. They aren't static. Nothing is set. Nothing is fixed. And where we place the power of our attention, where we bring our intention—this really matters. The Buddha spoke very directly to this in a very famous verse from the Dhammapada: "Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is their chief."

They are all mind made. If with an impure mind one speaks or acts, suffering follows like the wheel of the cart follows the foot of the ox. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is their chief. They are all mind made. If with a pure mind one speaks or acts, happiness follows like one's never departing shadow.

There is such great emphasis placed on the power of intention, the power of the mind in this way. Through our practice we are strengthening these paramis, these beautiful noble qualities, just by showing up and beginning over and over. As we go through the days and bring our attention and intention to cultivating love and kindness and wisdom and understanding, we are also cultivating non-harming. We have this commitment to living harmlessly as much as possible, maintaining and keeping and refining the precepts.

But we can tend to overlook this part of the path at times. We get very focused on trying to do the practice, on trying to meditate, maybe trying to develop concentration. And we overlook and sometimes fail to even notice at all these other beneficial qualities that are being developed no matter what's going on—things like perseverance and energy and resolve and kindness.

I think it's really good to reflect on the fact that we are developing these paramis, to really bring this to mind from time to time, especially when the going gets rough and we feel like nothing's happening in our practice. We find ourselves wondering: What is it I'm supposed to be doing here? What is this all about? What good is this supposed to be? What does watching my breath have to do with anything? What does it have to do with liberation?

I've always really liked children's books. I liked them when I was little, and I like them now. There's something about how simple and direct they are that I find very appealing, and I like the pictures. So in the spirit of the Jataka stories, I'm going to read you a story. It's not a Jataka tale—it's from Frog and Toad. Some of you may know Frog and Toad. Those of you who've raised kids in the last thirty or forty years may know them. It's a level two reading-with-help book, which I thought might be about our speed. It's kind of my speed anyway.

So this is from *Frog and Toad Together*, and the story I'm going to read is called "The Garden." I wish I could show you the pictures because they're very good. Frog is pretty green, and Toad is kind of beige or tan. They have nice outfits, but their feet are bare, and they have really great feet.

So anyway, here they are. This is "The Garden":

Frog was in his garden. Toad came walking by. "What a fine garden you have, Frog," he said. "Yes," said Frog. "It is very nice, but it was hard work." "I wish I had a garden," said Toad. "Here are some flower seeds. Plant them in the ground," said Frog, "and soon you will have a garden." "How soon?" asked Toad. "Quite soon," said Frog.

Toad ran home. He planted the flower seeds. "Now seeds," said Toad, "start growing." Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow. Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, "Now seeds, start growing." Toad looked at the ground again. The seeds did not start to grow. Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted, "Now seeds, start growing!"

Frog came running up the path.

"What is all this noise?" he asked.

"My seeds will not grow," said Toad.

"You are shouting too much," said Frog. "These poor seeds are afraid to grow."

"My seeds are afraid to grow?" asked Toad.

"Of course," said Frog. "Leave them alone for a few days. Let the sun shine on them. Let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow."

That night, Toad looked out of his window. "Drat," said Toad. "My seeds have not started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark."

Toad went out to his garden with some candles. "I will read the seeds a story," said Toad. "Then they will not be afraid."

Toad read a long story to his seeds. And the next day, Toad sang songs to his seeds—he's standing in the rain holding an umbrella. And all the next day, Toad read poems to his seeds. And all the next day, Toad played music for his seeds.

Toad looked at the ground. The seeds still did not start to grow. "What shall I do?" cried Toad. "These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world."

Then Toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep.

"Toad, Toad, wake up," said Frog. "Look at your garden."

Toad looked at his garden. Little green plants were coming up out of the ground.

"At last!" shouted Toad. "My seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!"

"And now you will have a nice garden too," said Frog.

"Yes," said Toad. "But you were right, Frog. It was very hard work."

You probably get my point. Meditation practice really is a lot like planting seeds in a garden. A lot of the time we're like Toad with his seeds—they don't come up fast enough for us. We start practicing and the first question we ask is, "How soon?" We begin and immediately we're looking to see if these seeds we're planting are starting to grow. And if we don't see results quickly enough for our taste, we start to yell at our seeds, or we yell at ourselves internally in some way. We must not be doing it right. We're doing something wrong. Maybe we try different strategies, like Toad with his poems and stories and songs.

Usually we're not quite as kind as Toad, though, when he thought his seeds were frightened. We don't read stories and poems to our seeds. We blame them, or we blame ourselves. We find fault with the teachers or the teachings or something. We point here and there, placing the blame for our apparent lack of results.

Joseph said I could tell this story. It's from the early days of IMS, when it was first started here. They received a piece of mail addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society." It's funny, but we do want instant meditation. That would be great. That's what we want.

In the Saṃyutta Nikāya, there's a passage where the Buddha is talking about a hen trying to incubate and hatch her eggs. He says, suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs.

If she doesn't cover them rightly, warm them rightly, or incubate them rightly, even though this wish may occur to her—"Oh, that my chicks might break through the eggshells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely"—still, it is not possible that the chicks will break through the eggshells with their spiked claws or beaks and hatch out safely. Why is that? Because the hen has not covered them rightly, warmed them rightly, or incubated them rightly.

So we have to sit on our eggs. It doesn't matter how badly we want things to happen quickly, how much we want things to happen on our timetable. If we don't sit on our eggs, they're not going to hatch. And sometimes it takes a while.

But we're very impatient as a society, here in the West especially, I think. We want everything to happen fast. We want quick results. We tend to lose interest if things don't happen as quickly as we think they should. We're always looking for a better way, and better equals quicker. There's got to be a shortcut somewhere. I think the teachers are holding out on us—actually there's a real quick way, but they want us to suffer.

I think part of the reason we have this impatience in our culture is because we tend to misunderstand what patience is about. Sometimes we might confuse it with an attitude of not caring so much about the results of what we're doing, as though it means we shouldn't be so committed, or as though we're indifferent—a lack of resolve or dedication, this carefree attitude of letting things run their course without any real commitment.

Or we might think patience is some kind of stoic quality where we grit our teeth and bear down, tough it out and make it through. But usually this leads to feeling tight and contracted. And we usually don't want to learn about patience because we usually have to do it when things are not going so well, when things are difficult.

It's pretty easy to be patient when we're having a good time, when things are going well, when our experience is pleasant. Do you ever notice yourself feeling impatient when things are going well in your practice? When you like what's going on or like what you're doing, it's easy. The issue doesn't come up. We don't have to be patient then—usually, maybe sometimes.

But without the quality of patience in life and practice, we're going to have a hard time. We're going to suffer because things aren't going to go the way we want them to very often, if ever. And so patience is really invaluable, really essential for us in our practice and in life.

Things are not always going to go the way we want them to. We're going along, minding our own business, meditating along nicely, everything's going fine—and then all of a sudden it changes. On retreat, how often does this happen? Everything's pretty easeful, our minds are clear, we're relaxed and present, and then it just falls apart. We're confused and resistant and frustrated and angry. Often it just feels like this back and forth between these states.

It might be easier if it didn't change, you know—if it was just kind of a drag all the time, we might get used to it and it wouldn't be so bad. But then we have these moments when things are going well, when it's not too bad, when things come together—and then we lose it again and wonder what went wrong, what happened.

Last year on retreat, I remember starting and feeling that if I'd never meditated at all, ever, I would be just as good at it, if not better, than I was. I really had that feeling. Probably that's not true—I don't know. But we really do have to bring patience to our practice or we can get disheartened when we find things going that way.

The Pali word, as I mentioned in the list of paramis that I read, is khanti—patience. It includes all these different qualities of patience and acceptance, of forbearance, and really of compassion and gentleness and steadiness. All these qualities are mixed together in this word, khanti.

In the texts, there are a couple of places where patience is especially highly praised. One place it says: "No higher rule, the Buddhas say, than patience. No greater thing exists than patience." True patience really is imbued with these qualities of gentle, kind steadfastness—this willingness to stay with it as we go through the sometimes rocky terrain of what it means to be human, as we move through all the different changes that inevitably come in our practice and in our lives.

Sometimes I think we hold on to a secret hope, a notion that somehow we're going to reach a state where we only have pleasant experiences—that this is the goal of practice. We probably wouldn't admit it if someone asked us, but secretly we might be holding out some hope, as though we're tipping the scales, as though enlightenment equals a steady state of nothing but pleasant experiences.

This might be the case in some of the heavenly realms, if you believe in different realms of existence. It's said that in some of the deva realms, the experience is nothing but pleasant. This might sound pretty good to some of you about now—just to be in a realm of nothing but pleasure.

But it's said that the human realm is the best place to practice and realize the Dhamma. Because it's not too pleasant, so we have some incentive to practice, some inspiration. And it's not so difficult that we're crushed under the weight of suffering. There's this balance.

In his teaching, the Buddha was pointing to a freedom that doesn't depend on things being any particular way. Because true freedom can't depend on things being just one way, being a certain way. Conditions are always changing, and any peace we might find because of the conditions in our lives is not going to last. When they change, we'd be back where we started from. There's no real freedom there.

So we have to learn how to open to the whole thing—to our whole life when things are going well and when they aren't. We're going to be in for a really hard time of it if we make our happiness dependent on having things go a certain way, if we make our happiness dependent on things being pleasant.

Sometimes when we come to a retreat like this, we may have an agenda. We come to the retreat with an agenda to find some peace and calm, some ease. We sit down, and this is what we're looking for. But then we find this wild, uncontrollable mind that's full

of resistance and pettiness—that's what we find there. And everything that we've ever repressed or denied or done our best to get rid of somehow, to forget, to push aside—all of it shows up. Maybe even not stuff that's so difficult, but just boring, repetitious, or embarrassing stuff. Every song we've ever heard and every stupid TV show we ever watched. It's all in there and it's all going to come up. We get to play that song one more time. Sometimes when I notice this, I start to really appreciate the value of a renunciate lifestyle—not having as much of that stuff in there.

But sooner or later everything is going to come up, and a lot of it might be difficult to see. It's not easy to be with. There's so much that comes up in our experience that we find unacceptable. There's stuff that we have managed to somehow compartmentalize in our hearts, that we put somewhere where we're not going to look at it. But if this is our strategy, we're going to be in for a hard time. This path is going to test us because we're going to have to look at it all sooner or later.

I was reading a passage when I was thinking about this talk—a chapter in a book remembering the famous Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, written by Jack Kornfield. He was describing an event in Berkeley, California, where Rinpoche was to speak to a large group that had assembled in a big hall to hear him. He tended to arrive late for things, and so he showed up quite late as usual. When he came in, he said, "If you want your money back, it's all right. Just go to the door and ask for it back. It's quite fine. In fact, if you haven't started the spiritual path, it's best not to begin. It's difficult. It's terrible. And you have to face all kinds of things that you won't like. As far as the ego is concerned, it's just one insult after another."

Sometimes it feels like this. We sit down and it just feels like one insult after another as we watch our mind doing its thing, going through these gyrations. We might keep some of it at bay for a while. We can create a temporary place of calm with concentration, or we can zone out in some way. But sooner or later we have to have a relationship with everything, with the whole of our being.

And this is where patience, this quality of patience, is an absolute necessity. We can feel like we have to get rid of some stuff in there, that we have to reach some kind of exalted, rarefied state, and then we can practice and explore the teachings. But it's right here and now, in the thick of it all, where the practice happens—not in some future time, in some state of grace that we manage to pull together, but right now in this body, this mind, in this moment. This is where the Dhamma will reveal itself, right in the thick of the whole catastrophe.

Patience is our best ally in being with this, in practicing, because it allows us to be with this process with some stability and with kindness, gentleness, and strength of heart. We really need patience because we're going to get caught, and we're going to get lost and hooked, over and over. Sometimes it's going to be hard. It's going to be difficult and even painful. And we need to remind ourselves regularly, I think, that this is a path that takes time.

A lot of what we're doing is unlearning habits that we've been practicing for a long time—lifetimes, perhaps. It's going to take a long time to unlearn these habits. And the only way to do this is to stick with the practice, to be really resolute in what we're doing.

This is what ultimately makes the difference. Because until we're fully enlightened, there will be times of confusion. And if we're fighting and struggling against this process, fighting the way things are, we're going to suffer. We can create a situation where we're never good enough, never okay just as we are.

Sometimes we get opportunities to develop patience in life that we might wish we weren't getting. Usually we learn about patience by being impatient a lot of the time.

Over the last few years, my sister and I have spent a lot of time looking after my parents, who both passed away this year. They were both almost ninety-two. They'd been together for seventy years, which is a long time to do anything—a long time to breathe, let alone be with the same person, stay married to someone. It was a great practice in patience to be caring for them.

In the last few years, my mother had pretty severe dementia, especially in the final couple of years of her life. And it was difficult. We'd have the same conversation over and over. She'd ask me a question and I'd answer, and then as soon as I'd finished she'd ask that question again because nothing was staying in there. She was very confused a lot of the time.

My father—it was so hard for him, and his reaction was to try to demand that she not be confused. He would get angry and frustrated. That was all he could do; he couldn't do anything else. It was too painful. And he would have these very difficult reactions to her trouble.

For me, being in that situation, there were times when there was a lot of impatience—wanting them to behave like grownups. These are my parents, after all. But that wasn't possible. So I learned a lot about patience by being impatient.

If we just tell ourselves to be patient, to simply tolerate difficulties, we can sometimes get tight and think we just have to bear this, and tighten down. But we can really explore impatience, really get to know it. And this leads us to developing patience. We see how it feels in our hearts and in our bodies and our minds when we're impatient. What are the moods? What are the thoughts that arise? What happens if we get identified with impatience? How often do we react out of impatience, lashing out in anger or frustration, and then really live to regret it?

I know with my father there were times when I spoke harshly from a place of impatience, and it was so painful—great learning for me there. My father had really refined the ability to push my buttons. Not intentionally, never intentionally, but this is what families are. They're just really good at it. We can feel really equanimous here on retreat, but if you want a reality check, go spend time with your family. More practice will definitely be required.

There's one thing that can really be helpful when we're trying to cultivate patience and work with impatience. One thing to examine here on retreat—I think it's a great opportunity—is to really look at our relationship to unpleasant experience. So often we relate to unpleasant experience as bad, as wrong, as something to get rid of. We can write off a whole day here on retreat because there was a predominance of unpleasant feeling tone in our experience.

We go into an interview and report, "Well, it's not going too well," or "I had a bad day yesterday," and what we describe is that there was an unpleasant feeling tone to a lot of our experience—in our body, or in our mind, in our heart. Conversely, we say, "Oh, it's going really well," and usually this means that a higher percentage of the time our experience had a pleasant feeling tone.

But if we relate to unpleasant feelings as wrong or bad, as something we've got to get rid of, then we're missing out on a real opportunity. We can write off a whole part of our life if this is how we relate to it. We can dismiss these times as though they had no value. But actually there's a lot we can learn right in the moment.

If we can reframe this experience and bring some interest and investigation in, we see there's something we can explore there. In that moment, even with something very difficult and unpleasant, our minds and our hearts can really open. There can be some acceptance of the truth of the way things are. Our whole perspective shifts, and we can start to touch a place of freedom right in the midst of unpleasant feelings.

This quality of investigation and inquiry at such times can lead us to a way of meeting our life more fully, more completely. When we let go of trying to make our experience meet our agenda, when we stop insisting that life live up to our expectations of how we think it should be or how it's supposed to be, we begin to meet our life just as it is. So much of the time, if we find ourselves struggling during the day, somehow in contention with our experience or with life itself, it's because things aren't living up to our expectations, aren't meeting our agenda.

Another useful thing to keep in mind in this process of cultivating patience is to remind ourselves that our practice consists of many small steps taken many times. If we try to be mindful for the whole day, or even for a whole sitting, we can set ourselves up for failure. We can get impatient and frustrated because it's going to be hard to do. But we can be mindful just for one moment, and then for the next moment. We can make this light, manageable effort many times over.

I found a technical definition of patience that's quite interesting. It says: "Patience has the characteristic of acceptance. Its function is to endure the desirable and the undesirable. Its manifestation is tolerance or non-opposition. And seeing things as they really are is its proximate cause."

This quality of acceptance is really key. We accept the truth of things. We take our stand on reality. We acknowledge the truth of the moment—not what we want it to be, but how it is. This is not resignation. There's no sense of resignation here. Resignation is a state of defeat or collapse. But acceptance, real acceptance, is alive and very vital and connected.

And so this proximate cause for the arising of patience—I think this is so interesting—the proximate cause is seeing things as they really are, connecting with the truth of the way it is in the moment. We can focus so much on how we think things should be that we completely miss the way they are. We can always know: right now, it's like this.

There's a place in one of the suttas, the Buddha's discourse of advice to Rahula, where he was giving advice to his son. I'll warn you, this is slightly graphic—sometimes the Buddha spoke very directly about things. But he's speaking to his son and he said: "Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth. For when you develop meditation that is like the earth, agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as people throw clean things and dirty things—excrement, urine, spittle, pus and blood—on the earth, and the earth is not repelled, humiliated and disgusted because of that, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth. For when you develop meditation that is like the earth, agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain."

This doesn't mean that we just let things pile up on us. We don't become a doormat. There's no resignation, as I said. But it's this quality of being like the earth, where we're steady and firm, impartial and resolute. We sit like a mountain. It rains and snows, things walk on the mountain and do all kinds of things, and the mountain is not moved.

It says that the manifestation of patience is tolerance or non-opposition. This points to the aspect of patience that is not in contention with our experiences, not struggling or fighting against things. And at the same time, there's no wilting, no retreating in the face of experience. Patience has this ability to flow with the changes in life. It allows us to move with the changes that come inevitably, without struggling.

There's a great strength of heart that can come from this, because we don't falter in the face of what's difficult. We don't shrink away. We don't shrink in defeat. We don't withdraw either. We stay firm. Sometimes patience has this incredible quality of strength and courage and compassion. Sometimes there's great courage that arises in the form of patience.

I'd like to read this quotation from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This is from a Christmas sermon on peace, given in 1967:

"We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we will still love you."

We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws and abide by the unjust system, because non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. And so throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our homes and threaten our children, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on the wayside road and leave us half dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally or otherwise, for integration, but we'll still love you. But be assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves. We will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be a double victory.

There is incredible courage and strength in those words. And this quality of patience in a statement like that. I think one of the most beautiful aspects of patience is this courageous heart of compassion—a heart that knows suffering and understands the nature of delusion, knows what it is like to act from confusion, because we all have

done this. We all have acted out of confusion, acted from a place of suffering. And so when we cultivate patience, we can bring kindness and compassion to bear in the face of this.

The poet John Ciardi had a beautiful description of patience that speaks, I think, directly to this. He said, "Patience is the art of caring slowly." The art of caring slowly. There's a deep inner strength that comes from this. This patient heart brings kindness and compassion and steadiness and strength to bear. And it can hold all of the joys and sorrows—the ten thousand joys, the ten thousand sorrows that life will bring.

And maybe one of the most important things to remember, and really to remind ourselves, is that worthwhile things in life usually take time to develop and to mature. The seeds that we plant now—they will sprout and grow and bear fruit in their season, in their time.

This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Ajahn Geoff. It was from a series of talks he gave specifically about working with the breath, with ānāpānasati. So there are references to the breath here, but we could put anything in there. It's not just about meditating on the breath.

He said: "Good things always take time. The trees with the most solid heartwood are the ones that take the longest to grow. So we do the practice, focusing on what we're doing, rather than getting into an internal dialogue about when the results are going to come, what they're going to be like, and how we could speed up the practice. Many times our efforts to speed things up actually just get in the way. Our practice is pretty simple. Stay with the breath. Allow the mind to settle in with the breath and be friends with the breath. Allow the breath to open up and get more and more gentle, more and more porous, so your awareness can seep into the breath. That's all you have to do. As for whether the results are coming as quickly as you'd like, or when they do come, whether they're going to stay as long as you'd like—that's going to depend on what you're doing right here with the breath. Our desire to have the results come and our desire to have them stay is not going to keep them here. The actual doing of the practice is what will make the difference."

I'll end tonight with a poem by Linda France, called "Dreaming the Real":

I'm lying down looking at the color of sky
falling through trees, dreaming the real,
tasting what it feels like to love it.

Why did it take me so long to let go,
simply exhale, so the day could breathe itself in
and open without me getting in the way?

How could I forget the grace of my own body,
strong as this blue, tender as the white
of the wild blossom, warm as midday light.

Let me practice a patience bold enough
to hold every weather, trusting the elements,
the beauty of rain, all its shades of gray.

I want whatever's real to be enough.
At least it's a place to begin
and to master the art of loving it
and feel it love me back under my skin.

Let's keep sitting quietly for a few minutes. Thank you for your kind attention this evening.

CHAPTER 36

Gratitude and Generosity

Rebecca Bradshaw · 1h00

In this heartfelt talk, Rebecca Bradshaw illuminates the intimate relationship between gratitude and generosity as essential foundations for Buddhist practice. Drawing from the traditional framework of dāna (generosity), sīla (ethical conduct), and bhāvanā (mind development), she explains how the first two practices prepare the soil for deeper meditation, a teaching often overlooked in Western dharma contexts.

Bradshaw reframes gratitude as a profound spiritual quality that acknowledges our interdependence—a teaching that connects directly to anattā (not-self). She shares how each breath we take is simultaneously receiving oxygen and giving back carbon dioxide, revealing the ceaseless flow of giving and receiving that permeates existence. The Buddha described two kinds of rare people: pure givers and acknowledgers of giving, highlighting how gratitude itself is a precious quality. Through contemplating our benefactors and the web of support sustaining us, we discover contentment that quiets our inner "hungry ghost" and magnifies joy.

Moving to generosity, she explains its characteristic as letting go—a physical manifestation of non-clinging that brings happiness at every stage: forming the intention, the act itself, and remembering having given. Drawing on the Pāli terms kataññū (one who knows what has been done for them) and katavedī (one who pays back the debt), Bradshaw illustrates through personal stories from Burma and Nicaragua how generosity transforms both giver and receiver. She distinguishes three levels of giving: beggarly giving with self-concern, friendly giving with joy, and selfless giving where the sense of separate giver and receiver dissolves. The talk concludes with Pablo Neruda's moving childhood memory, suggesting that our practice itself is a gift we offer to the world.

Tonight's talk is about gratitude and generosity.

I'd like to start with a poem from Mary Oliver. Sometimes I feel like she's the poet laureate of IMS because we read so many poems by her. This one is called "Philip's Birthday":

I gave to a friend that I care for deeply something that I loved. It was only a small, extremely shapely bone that came from the ear of a whale. It hurt a little to give it away. The next morning, I went out as usual at sunrise. And there in the harbor was a swan. I don't know what he or she was doing there. But the beauty of it was a gift. Do you see what I mean? You give and you are given.

I like this poem for a couple of reasons. First, I appreciate that she said, "it hurt a little to give it away." To me, this points to the practice of generosity—the way we stretch ourselves in giving. And then I also appreciate the seeing of giving and receiving, or I would say giving and gratitude, the flow between these two.

We could say that gratitude and generosity are two sides of the same coin: receiving and giving. Both are about an open heart that recognizes the flowing nature of this world we've taken birth into.

Often the practice for lay people in the time of the Buddha was described as having three parts: dana, sila, and bhavana. Dana is generosity, sila is morality or ethical conduct, and bhavana is mind development. You may also recognize that the first two are the first two paramis from the list that Greg spoke about last night. So there are these three parts of the path: generosity, ethical conduct, and mind and heart development.

In the West, we tend to talk a lot about mind and heart development, and sometimes we're slower to realize that the first two are just as important in our practice—that the first two are actually foundational practices that prepare the mind, that make it ripe for our formal bhavana practice. They're all intricately linked. They all work together.

I have to start by saying that gratitude and generosity weren't qualities I came into my adult life with well-developed. They're practices that have grown out of my formal meditation practice, but also conscious practices I've undertaken that feed back into the formal practice. Sometimes I think that because I didn't naturally have these qualities strong when I first came into my adult life, I can actually speak about them—because it's something I've studied so much.

Usually, when I would give a talk about these subjects, I would discuss generosity and then at the end talk about gratitude. But recently I've started to shift the order, speaking about gratitude first. I think that generosity without understanding gratitude can feel, for many of us, like some kind of duty we have to fulfill, some kind of obligation. There's sometimes a bit of cultural conditioning here. In Buddhism, the flavor of generosity is very different. If we understand gratitude first, we can perhaps under-

stand more of the flavor of generosity from a Buddhist point of view. In Buddhism, generosity is about happiness and about freedom of heart and mind—a different flavor than duty or obligation.

So, gratitude. Gratitude is receiving with an open heart. Gratitude acknowledges our interdependence, and for this reason, it's a very deep spiritual quality. If we understand how much we're receiving all the time, it can help lessen the clinging in our hearts. The reality is that we're all very intimately connected and that we're receiving constantly.

If we think about it, even with each breath we take, we're receiving. We're receiving oxygen that we need for life. And with each breath we exhale, we're giving back. We're giving back carbon dioxide that feeds the trees, the plants. So with each breath, we're intimately receiving and giving back to the universe.

Within this giving and receiving, there's the understanding of impermanence, of flow and change in this world. I was thinking about this today as I took a walk in the woods. I was sitting on a log over a creek, a small river, watching the water flow. I noticed that the river gives and gives and gives. It endlessly gives. Even during a dry period, it gives what it can. It just keeps flowing. There's no holding on.

Then I was thinking about the sun—how the trees take up the sun and grow leaves, and then how they give the leaves back. This time of year, they're giving the leaves back. They let the leaves go and they fall to the soil, and by my footsteps and by microbes, they break down and nourish the earth. From those nutrients in the soil, the trees grow strong.

And then one day, a tree falls over a creek and offers a nice sitting spot. There's a sense of flow. When we understand gratitude and generosity, there's a sense of ceaseless flow in this world, and we become part of that rather than resist it.

The Buddha said there are two kinds of rare people: pure givers and acknowledgers of giving. So those who feel gratitude—givers and those who feel gratitude. Gratitude is that acknowledgment of giving. It's an ability to see and to receive the blessings that come our way with an open heart.

Gratitude, I also find, is a relief because it means that we're not alone. We're sustained and nourished by this universe. If we're alive, we're receiving, we're being given to. This can bring for us a sense of warmth and intimacy and openness. We recognize that we are intimately linked and depend on each other, that we're built of each other. We let ourselves be touched by the generosity of life.

Sometimes I think of gratitude also as an anattā teaching. Because with gratitude, we really understand and recognize our interdependence and that all that we are has come to us from others, has come to us from this universe. Sometimes when we talk about anattā or not-self, it's frightening to people. They think that it's about a void or something not there. Another angle from which we can understand anattā is that there's no independent self, that everything is co-created in this universe, intricately linked to everything else. We're part of a web.

This helps us not to overestimate ourselves and believe in some myth of independence—that we alone are responsible for what we are or what we have or our success. But we also don't underestimate ourselves because we see that we're part of a web. With gratitude, we challenge our unworthiness. We allow ourselves to fully receive. Gratitude can magnify the joy that we feel in life, and it brings the happiness of connection.

A number of years ago, I was teaching in Sagaing in Burma, the place we've mentioned a number of times because it's so dear to our hearts for many of us. I was writing a talk on generosity, and after a while I put it aside and went for a walk. The monastery is on the side of a hillside on the Irrawaddy River, and you can walk up all these steps to the top of the ridge. It's a beautiful area. It has six or seven hundred pagodas and monasteries in a few square miles, so it's very imbued with the spirit of Buddhism and practice. I like to walk sometimes up to the ridge. It's a bit steep—I counted once, there's five hundred steps up.

I was walking up the steps, and this young monk, must have been about ten years old, was walking down. In Burma it's not unusual for children to be monks or nuns. Often they're orphans taken in by the monastery and educated and raised. Sometimes families have their children spend a time in the monastery. So he was walking down, and as he got close to me, he made some gesture for me to stop, or I thought maybe walk around him. I stopped for a minute, and then he put his hand on some pocket he had in his robes. He took out a handful of candies and held them out to me.

The monks and nuns in Burma are on the eight precepts, and as you may know what is allowed for the eight precepts, candies are considered medicine. Medicine is allowed. So he may very well have been holding out his dinner for me.

He held out the candies, and being a good Westerner, I thought I should probably just take one, right? That's the way you do it. So I took one little candy, and he shakes his head. Then he puts all the candies in my hand. He went on down the stairs and I continued.

I was so touched by just that connection—the connection between us created by him giving me a gift and me receiving it. I still remember this boy all these years later because of that gift. It was so sweet. Gratitude is feeling that sweetness of connection.

We could also talk about gratitude as a quality that awakens the energy we need for this hard work of transformation. It energizes the mind, gladdens the mind. When we feel grateful, our mind and heart are uplifted. It's lighter. It's easier to concentrate, to pay attention. Gratitude also quiets the mind. It's a gentle happiness that teaches us to be content with little.

We could say that gratitude quiets our inner hungry ghost. In Buddhist cosmology, there's a realm known as the hungry ghost realm—beings with enormous stomachs but tiny mouths and narrow throats. They are perpetually hungry, always wanting. I think all of us have a little inner hungry ghost of some type, always wanting. With gratitude, we can quiet that hungry ghost. There's contentment, a feeling of no lack. It fills that empty belly. When we slow down enough to really receive the beauty and goodness in this life, we see that maybe we don't need so much to be happy.

I'm sure some of you have noticed this here—that there can be moments of contentment with the simplest little things, moments of gratitude. I remember one of the first times on retreat where this struck me. I was washing dishes in the pot room. It was winter, December I think, and it had snowed. The sun was coming in through the window, and there was snow outside. I felt the deepest happiness, contentment, joy—just tears streaming down my face. I was so happy with so little, so much gratitude.

I also think that gratitude is very natural for a heart that is open. Many of you here are experiencing the opening of the heart at times. It comes and goes, I know. But when it's open, many of you are also mentioning gratitude. When the heart is contracted in aversion, obviously we're not going to feel gratitude. And when the heart is contracted in wanting, in clinging, we also don't feel gratitude. But when the heart is open and relaxed, gratitude is natural.

So we can cultivate a heart that sees the world through the eyes of gratitude. It supposedly works better than antidepressants. There's a Japanese therapy where people are asked to make daily gratitude lists, and apparently after a few weeks they feel better about themselves, have more energy, and feel more alert. List keepers sleep better, exercise more, and have more general contentment.

Another way I like to cultivate gratitude is at mealtime. Sometimes I like to really contemplate the plate of food in front of me, to consider how, if you trace all the connections and really look at the web that brings that food to us, the whole universe is

supporting our practice in that plate of food. In that plate of food we have the sun and the rain and the earth. We have those who work the earth and those who supported them and those who transported the food. The web just keeps going out, keeps extending. The whole universe supports us each time we eat a plate of food. For me, noticing that brings up gratitude.

The deepest gratitude understands impermanence. It understands that we can't hold on to what we receive. So the deepest gratitude is openhearted and unconditional. Can we appreciate and be grateful knowing this truth?

Another poem by Mary Oliver, for me, demonstrates a very durable kind of gratitude. It's called "At the Pond":

One summer I went every morning to the edge of a pond where a huddle of just-hatched geese would paddle to me and clamber up the marshy slope and over my body, peeping and staring. Such sweetness every day, which the grown ones watched, for whatever reason, serenely. Not there, however, but here is where the story begins. Nature has many mysteries, some of them severe. Five of the young geese grew heavy of chest and bold of wing, while the sixth waited and waited in its gauze feathers, its body that would not grow. And then it was fall. And this is what I think everything is about: the way I was glad for those five and two that flew away, and the way I hold in my heart the wingless one that had to stay.

So durable gratitude may at times carry the flavor of compassion, of caring in this world of change and unpredictability.

A while ago I was reading one of the little newsletters from Abhayagiri Monastery in California. I think it's called *Fearless Mountain*. There was a whole newsletter devoted to gratitude, and they talked about a few Pali terms that I found quite interesting. The first is *kataññu*—a person who knows what has been done for them, one who feels grateful. Then there's *katavedī*—those who pay back the debt. And then they put the words together: *kataññu katavedī*, feeling gratitude and striving to pay back the debt.

And in this article, he said this is the basis of any sane and fully functioning system. When we feel gratitude—and again, it's not a duty—but when we feel gratitude, there's this natural wish that starts to arise, a wanting to give back into the system, to give back into the flow.

Many years ago, when I was twenty-two, my first job out of college was working in Nicaragua, teaching English as a second language. For a while I lived with the family of a woman I had actually met when she was here on an exchange at the university—Marisol. So for a time I was living with Marisol and her family: Marisol and her baby

daughter, her father, her brother, her cousin, her sister, and a bunch of other people in a small house. It was basically a two-bedroom home, but one of the bedrooms was divided, so perhaps it was almost like a three-bedroom house.

They were very kind to me. By our standards, they would be described as poor. By Nicaraguan standards, maybe middle class. And they always gave me the best. I got one whole bedroom to myself, when I just listed off all the people who were living in this house. I paid them a little bit, but it wasn't very much—they didn't ask for much. And they were so kind to me.

At that time, as I told you, when I came into my adult years, I didn't really understand gratitude or generosity, either one. And years later, I never forgot what she'd done. I always felt that somehow I had not been generous, and it weighed on me. It was as if somehow I had stopped up some flow that should have happened.

In the meantime, Marisol and her family emigrated to the United States and then to Canada, where they now live. A number of years ago, when I was teaching in Canada, I designated a portion of my dana to be sent to that family. And it cleared something inside of me. There was that sense that I had a debt, and to fulfill it freed my heart in some way. Marisol, of course, didn't think I owed her anything. But to me, this demonstrates katanyu katavedi—this feeling of gratitude and then this sense of wanting to pay it back, understanding that to not do so is to somehow block up some energy flow.

One description I saw of it is like a garden hose: for a garden hose to work, both ends have to be open. There's the receiving end and the giving end. If you block either end, the water gets stagnant inside.

A few years ago, I did a retreat where I practiced a lot of metta, and I did it differently than I had in the past. Previously, when I'd done metta for myself, it was simply "may I be happy, may I be peaceful." But for this retreat, when I was doing metta for myself, I was bringing to mind benefactors I'd had in my life and having them send the metta to me. I was thinking about different people who had helped me, and I was astounded by how many there were. I hadn't really realized it somehow.

My primary benefactor on that retreat was my tenth-grade high school counselor. He had believed in me at a time when I really needed support. He encouraged me to be a foreign exchange student, which set my whole life in motion—speaking Spanish and how much that's meant in my life. He set that all in motion. He would always say to me, "You can do anything."

Sometimes, if we're coming from a place of scarcity, we may not realize all the people who have supported us—people we may have forgotten. Contemplating that, I got the sense that I could spend the rest of my life trying to repay all the kindness and support I've received, and I wouldn't be able to do it. And that was a beautiful feeling—a feeling of gratitude.

So we naturally move from gratitude to giving. It's natural to want to give when we see how much we receive, when we see how connected we are.

The characteristic of generosity, according to the Buddhist texts, is letting go. So we're back to Annie's talk on the first night, when she said that what we're going to be talking about over and over again, in so many ways, is letting go. Letting go includes the idea of non-clinging, non-attachment. Generosity is a physical manifestation of the heart of non-clinging. It's an expression of our deep understanding of non-clinging. It's an expression of our understanding that non-clinging leads to happiness.

So the practice of giving aids us in the purification of the mind and the heart. Through giving, we strengthen non-attachment, non-clinging. Giving is an antidote to greed and craving. When we give something or give of ourselves, we reduce attachment. And when we make a habit of giving, we weaken the mental factor of craving in the mind and heart.

We release clinging.

Giving practice is wonderful because it shows us where we're still attached. We learn to stretch ourselves and discover that we don't need to hold on.

In this retreat, as you know, we give a talk every night, and sometimes if we want to give the same talk, we have to negotiate among ourselves. Early in this retreat, it was negotiated and decided that I would give this talk because I wanted to give it. Then a few days ago, the possibility arose that somebody else might give the talk. My instinctual reaction was to hold on—I had planned to give this talk and I had prepared for it.

It is kind of ironic to think of holding onto a talk about giving.

So I let that sink in. I paid attention to my reaction and what I was doing, and I saw that it was suffering. It just wasn't pleasant. I realized I could let it go. Then I realized that it would actually make me happy to help out this other person and let them give this talk. Then things changed again and the talk came back to me.

But this is the practice of giving—watching how we relate to giving or holding on. Seeing that holding on is unhappiness, it's suffering. And that letting go and giving brings joy, brings happiness. I felt so much better when I let go of the talk.

Here's a quote that I really have enjoyed. It truly stretches me, so I like to read it every once in a while. The author is E.J. Gold from Gnosis Magazine. Apparently he teaches some kinds of workshops. He says:

"There's a kind of school where you arrive saying, 'What can I get?' or 'How is this good for me?' You see, I had workshops. I figure I must have had 20,000 people through my workshops in 37 years. Most people asked, 'What is this going to do for me?' My answer is always the same. This is not for you. It is not for your benefit. You're not supposed to get anything out of this at all. If you do, you'll be very fortunate because I never have. All you do is give. That's the whole thing. You just give and give and give. And it costs you to give. You even have to pay to give. And in the end, you have nothing, just nothing. Now, if you can handle that, you belong here."

I think that's actually quite beautiful. In a way, that's what we do when we practice. All the challenges that we meet every day on a day of retreat, all the ways that we suffer during practicing—in some ways that's paying to give, because in the end we give our practice back. We give our practice to all the people that we contact when we leave here, all the ways that we serve more clearly and with a more open heart.

So as I said, the Buddha taught that generosity is about happiness. A quote from the Buddha says: "Generosity brings happiness at every stage of its expression. We experience joy in forming the intention to give. We experience joy in the actual act of giving something. And we experience joy in remembering the fact that we have given."

For me, as I mentioned, this was something I felt I needed to learn. One time I did what I called a dāna retreat—a self-retreat at the end of the year. At the end of the year is when I tend to do charitable giving, so I decided to do it very consciously in this retreat. Every night on this retreat, I would write out a check to a different foundation or teacher or institution. And I would consciously do this reflection before, during, and after I was giving.

Before I was going to write the check and give, I would think about who was going to receive it, and I would notice the happiness that would arise in my heart and mind.

to be giving it to them. And then when I was writing the check, I would reflect on that again, and afterwards I would reflect on it once more. It was a really lovely retreat. For me, it was like reinforcing that joy of generosity so that I could more deeply understand it, and also so that I could counteract some of my conditioning that would cause me to hold back.

And it was kind of fun because sometimes I would take a check that I'd written, look at it, and go, "Nope." I would rip it up and write one that was bigger. It was fun.

So just as gratitude enlightens the mind and makes it energized for practice, generosity does the same. If we remember a time that we were generous, it usually will lighten the mind, bring joy, bring happiness—and a happy mind is easier to work with in meditation. It concentrates more easily. You could say that generosity makes our meditation soil rich so that things will grow. Our dear friend Toad probably had pretty rich soil because his plants finally did grow, right?

Plants don't grow well in weak soil. Generosity and sila practice help strengthen our soil, our meditation field. This is why it's sometimes called a foundational practice that offers protection. And we need this sense of protection if we're going to practice deeply. It gives us a container to hold the process of transformation.

If we've created a world of scarcity, alienation, and holding on, it will be harder to go deeper. We'll be less likely to trust. But if we've created a world out of our kindness and generosity, we find it easier to relax, easier to trust, easier to go deeper in practice.

Visiting Burma has also been really inspiring for me in developing this quality of generosity, because dana is so ingrained in the culture there. It's not to say that we don't have generosity in this country, but there it's so woven into the fabric of life that it's really inspiring—that's the only way I can put it.

When we would give dana to the monks and nuns there, they celebrate it. They have us come forward, they chant, they enjoy the merit. Sometimes here in the West, we give and we kind of hide it. There it's really out in the open. And they also get quite happy enjoying other people being generous.

One time I went out to buy Buddha statues—one of the things I love to do in Burma. I went to buy a number of statues to bring back for volunteers at the meditation center I run in Western Massachusetts. I was also bringing back a fairly good-sized Buddha, maybe eighteen inches to two feet, to donate to the center.

I came back at lunchtime with all my bags. There were a number of women who serve the food at this retreat who I've become friendly with, and they wanted to see what I had bought. They were very excited about it, so I unwrapped all the little statues. Then I showed them the statue that was going for the meditation center. I don't speak much Burmese—I'm working on it—but I put together a sentence that they understood. The sentence was "Dana Yekta America"—giving, meditation center, America.

There were three of them sitting there, and they all spontaneously put their hands together and said, "Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu" to me. Sadhu means "well said" or "well done." I was shocked. They didn't consult with each other—it was just automatic. They were so happy that I was giving this statue as dana to a meditation center in the United States.

As a little aside about this: when I was coming home, I was overweight in my luggage because of the statue. In Burma, when I told them why—that I had a Buddha statue in there—they didn't charge me. And in Thailand, the same thing happened. They love the Buddha so much.

Acts of generosity also have tremendous power to transform. At this monastery in Burma where we sometimes teach, there's a story about how the whole program started. The main teacher is the Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Lakana, and we work as kind of assistants. What happened was about thirteen or fourteen years ago, a Westerner named Stephen Smith was meditating there. At that point, Westerners hadn't really gone there.

He was doing a retreat, and there was a young woman named Chet Su who was working on the road in front of the monastery. She came from a very poor family. She was fifteen years old at the time and had to drop out of school to work for her family. She was carrying heavy bricks back and forth to make the road.

Apparently she saw Steve meditating, and apparently he was the first white person she'd ever seen, so that was surprising to her. But also, she was so appreciative that he would practice. Folks, in Burma, when you go there and practice, they're so appreciative that you're doing that. She was so happy to see him practicing that she decided to give him something. And what she decided to give him was a can of Coca-Cola.

It took about—I've heard anywhere from three to five days' wages to buy one can of Coke, because it's imported. Very expensive. So she did that. She saved enough money to offer this Coke to him. And he was so touched by that generosity that he was inspired to give back and started this whole project called the Metta Dana Project, which is related to the retreat that we teach. Through it, we help support the hospital, built a new

school, support the younger kids in the school, support several nunneries—about one hundred nuns across several nunneries. All of this built out of one act of generosity. A can of Coca-Cola. So beautiful. So powerful.

Chet Su is now married and has a couple of children. When we go around sometimes to give dana to the nuns, she brings along her youngest daughter. The first time I saw her do this, her daughter was quite young—maybe a year and a half old, about eighteen months. She brought her daughter with us as we gave dana to the nuns. She would put the dana in her daughter's hands and have her daughter give it to the nuns, teaching her so young to give. A year and a half old, learning to give. Really beautiful.

When we give, looking at our motivation is important. It helps us to purify our giving. At times when we give, we can have mixed motivations. We pay attention to that, to see the relative levels of happiness and suffering that come from different motivations to give. Sometimes we may give wanting something in return. We can feel that as holding on in some way. Or we're reluctant to give, or we don't give the best—we give the okay. Other times it flows freely, and we see that it comes from compassion and from metta. We can feel that too. So we explore the motivations.

One time, a number of years ago, I lived in a place where I had some bird feeders. Watching birds at a bird feeder is just one of the simple joys I love. Most mornings I like to watch the birds and have some tea. I had these bird feeders, but I also lived in an area—and I still do—where there are bears. In the springtime, they love to take bird feeders. Every once in a while, I would lose a bird feeder to a bear. I remember one time watching this bear. He had my bird feeder under his arm and was galloping off on his three other paws with my bird feeder.

Given that sometimes we lose bird feeders to bears, it's not a cheap hobby. Bird feeders are actually quite expensive. One morning I was sitting there watching the birds, and I had this thought: I've spent a lot of money on bird food and bird feeders. Have I gotten my money's worth? Have I gotten enough enjoyment for the money that I've paid? I noticed there was some tightness and contraction in the mind with these thoughts. I didn't particularly like how it felt.

So then I tried a different tact. I thought, this bird food is my dana to the birds, my gift to them so that they can eat and be healthy and happy, as birds can be happy. That felt better. It felt lighter.

But then my mind, even without trying, went further. There was just me and the birds, and we were each fulfilling our role in the universe in this wonderful dance. There wasn't so much a giver or a receiver.

There was just this dance of things going where they needed to go. And in that sense, my mind felt the freest and the least burdened by self-concern.

I thought afterwards that this reflects the three traditional kinds of giving talked about in Buddhism. There's first what's called beggarly giving, and that's where you give, but there's a lot of self-concern. There's either holding on or bargaining or attachment—like me wanting to get something back for my money. So there's a lot of self involved. And even though it's not the purest giving, it's still encouraged. We're still learning to let go.

The second kind of giving is called friendly giving, and that's where we give more openheartedly. We give more of what we have. It's easier to let go. We start to experience the happiness of giving, the joy of giving. This was the shift when I started to see the bird food as dāna.

The third kind of giving is traditionally called kingly giving. But we have a little problem there with both sexism and classism, so some people call it selfless giving. This is where we graciously give what we have, and we don't even have the sense of ourselves so much as the giver and others as the receiver. There's less attachment to "I." There's a letting go of self-concern and just an understanding that we're temporary caregivers of what we have and that things flow where they're needed. The freest kind of giving. A kind of giving that understands interdependence and is free of the constriction around self.

So how are we developing generosity here on retreat? Well, one of the biggest gifts we can give is the development of our own spiritual growth. As we become happier, as we become more aware, as we become more peaceful, we can offer this back to the world. As we become steadier and more understanding, we can offer this gift. As we learn ways to become free of suffering in our hearts and minds, we can offer this freedom to those around us.

Gandhi said, "I believe if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains that much." So when we develop ourselves spiritually, we are offering a gift to the world. We're doing this for everyone—for our friends and our children and our partners and our coworkers and the guy who cuts us off in traffic. We're doing it for all of them, for all the people that we treat more kindly and for the harm that we avoid. This is the generosity of our practice.

And we see that our practice is embedded also in giving and receiving. There's centuries of giving and dāna that have brought this practice to where we are. I love to reflect on this—that this whole tradition has been held in generosity for over 2,500 years. There's this whole lineage of people behind us that have made it possible for us to be here, people over centuries who have given. It's so beautiful.

And even just this center that's been around for, what, 36 years now? Something like that. All the people who have supported this center, all the staff that have come through and done the work here, and the staff here right now—their gift makes it possible for us to be here. And all those who have donated for our meals. And then we have all the people who at home have covered for us to be here—our family, our coworkers. It's beautiful.

And all the beings that live in this area: the chipmunks and the fox and the red squirrel, the titmice, the frogs sleeping in the bottom of the pond right now, the bears going into hibernation. The unseen beings who protect us. The trees and the sun and the earth and the rain—all supporting us to be here. It's like a circle that keeps going around.

I want to end with a story that I've really loved from Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet—a poet of the people, you could say. At one point, it got him into enough trouble that he was exiled. He wound up on the wrong side of the government. Then in his old age, he was allowed to go back to Chile and died there. A very beloved poet in Latin America. And there's a story about one of the things that fueled his talent and his ability to give to so many people.

This is from Pablo Neruda:

"One time, investigating in the backyard of our house in Temuco the tiny objects and minuscule beings of my world, I came upon a hole in one of the boards of the fence. I looked through the hole and saw a landscape like that behind our house, uncared for and wild. I moved back a few steps because I sensed vaguely that something was about to happen. All of a sudden, a hand appeared—a tiny hand of a boy about my own age. By the time I came close again, the hand was gone, and in its place was a marvelous white sheep. The sheep's wool was faded. Its wheels had escaped."

All of this only made it more authentic.

I had never seen such a wonderful sheep. I looked back through the hole, but the boy had disappeared. I went into the house and brought out a treasure of my own—a pine cone, opened, full of odor and resin, which I adored. I set it down in the same spot and went off with the sheep.

I never saw either the hand or the boy again. And I have never again seen a sheep like that either. The toy I lost finally in a fire. But even now, at almost fifty years old, whenever I pass a toy shop, I look furtively into the window. But it's no use. They don't make sheep like that anymore.

That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea—that all of humanity is somehow together. That experience came to me again much later. This time it stood out strikingly against a background of trouble and persecution.

It won't surprise you then that I attempted to give something resiny, earth-like, and fragrant in exchange for human brotherhood. Just as I once left the pine cone by the fence, I have since left my words on the doors of so many people who were unknown to me—people in prison, or hunted, or alone.

This is the great lesson I learned in my childhood, in the backyard of a lonely house. Maybe it was nothing but a game two boys played who didn't know each other and wanted to pass to the other some good things in life. Yet maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me also, deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light.

May our practice be a gift—deep and indestructible—that brings light to this world.

CHAPTER 37

Three Kinds of Craving

Will Kabat-Zinn · 56 min

> *In this intimate talk from the three-month retreat, Will Kabat-Zinn offers a penetrating exploration of taṇhā (craving), which the Buddha identified as the cause of suffering. He examines the three types of craving: craving for sense experience, craving for becoming (wanting to be something we're not), and craving for unbecoming (wanting to not be what we think we are). Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that ignorance is the root of craving, he illuminates how we mistakenly locate happiness in external experiences—whether mountaintop vistas or delicious meals—when the openness and ease we seek is actually our fundamental nature.*
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> *Kabat-Zinn shares personal stories from practice, including a powerful experience with Sayadaw U Paṇḍita where he discovered that liberation doesn't depend on changing what arises but on the quality of knowing itself. He uses the vivid metaphor of watching a scary movie repeatedly—how identification with the plot gradually dissolves through sustained attention—to illustrate how we can see through the repetitive thought patterns we believe define us. Quoting the Third Zen Patriarch's "Faith in Mind," he points to how even the slightest preference sets heaven and earth infinitely apart.*
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> *The talk offers an important distinction between the desperate, addictive quality of craving and the natural life energy of healthy wanting. Rather than suppressing desire defensively, practice invites us to be with wanting and disappointment fully, opening to vulnerability. This freedom allows genuine engagement with life—enjoying sense experience, relationships, and activities without the grasping that interrupts ease. The path remains simple: just this moment, just being with what's arising, knowing it clearly.*

It's a little different sitting up here this week than it was last week. Having met many of you and heard a little about your practice and gotten a sense of some of you as people, it's different. It's nice. I'm sure it's different for you too. I kind of dropped in on you last week—surprise arrival. Who's that guy sitting up there?

So tonight I'd like to talk a little bit about craving. Good old craving. It's worth talking about. It's said by the Buddha to be the cause of suffering—*taṇhā* in the Pali, craving. The Buddha talked about there being three types of craving: craving for sense experience, craving for becoming, and craving for unbecoming. I'm going to go into what those are about.

But first I'd like to reflect a little on why we crave, what the root of this craving is. This craving for experience, for sense experience, a craving to be something or other, to be this or that, or to not be something that we feel that we are. According to the Buddha, the root of this craving, the cause of this craving, is ignorance—is not seeing things the way they are. When we see things clearly with wisdom, with insight, this craving ceases.

So we're looking for fulfillment, looking for happiness, looking for well-being much of the time in objects and experiences. And you can just reflect a little on the process of meditation. Is there any craving for experience? I think in our culture, more than others perhaps, we tend to be experience junkies. We love compelling experiences. It's not that we can't have wonderful experiences, but we seem to think that there's going to be some lasting satisfaction that comes from this or that experience.

Often that's because we do experience wonderful things. Sometimes you're out in nature and you feel some kind of letting down of something that was held. You sometimes feel expansive. You get to the top of a mountain. There's an incredible view, and you feel really different. Or you've been struggling in meditation, you go into the dining hall, there's some delicious food, and you're eating it. You feel yourself relax. There's a sense of ease.

The mistake we often make is that we believe it's the experience which is the fundamental cause of that sense of openness. For example, at the top of the mountain, we think, "Oh, I need the top of the mountain in order to feel that way." There are a lot of causes and conditions that came together to contribute to this experience of openness, this feeling like yourself, this feeling easeful. But one thing that the Buddha was pointing to is that that openness, that ease, is available to you. It's, in a sense, what you are. And certain conditions contribute to you tasting that in various ways, tasting some aspect of that.

The problem with those mountaintop experiences—and they're wonderful in and of themselves, they're fine—is that when we're not on the mountaintop, we tend to think and feel a lack. And to plan our next trip to the mountaintop, and to spend a lot of time planning it. It's because we think that openness is located in the experience of the mountaintop that this whole dis-ease of not being there is created.

In the old Zen stories, there are a lot of accounts of people getting enlightened while they're eating. I always thought that was interesting. And I think part of the reason that might be the case is because when we're eating, usually there's some kind of letting

down, especially if we've been working hard, practicing. And then, oh, there's some comforting food. And all of a sudden we just kind of relax a bit. We're not trying to get anywhere. There's the spoon. There's the food on it. Just a kind of moment of ease.

But that doesn't mean that if you just plan to eat eight meals a day, you're going to get enlightened faster. You could take it as eating being the cause. But it's actually that letting go of the search.

When you're at the top of the mountain, there's nowhere else to go. You've arrived. You're there. You're here. And there isn't that movement of desire for anything. It feels amazing.

It's hard to say anything after that. I should just ring the bell and leave.

I think somebody mentioned this earlier in the retreat—I can't remember if it was Joseph, in one of the question periods—quoting that beautiful beginning of the Third Zen Patriarch's poem, "Faith in Mind." He says: "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When liking and disliking are both absent, the way becomes clear and undisguised. Make the slightest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart."

It's pointing to this incredible power of wanting and not wanting, liking and not liking. And in those moments when that wanting and not wanting is absent, the way is clear and undisguised.

In meditation, we can get really bent out of shape looking for experiences—experiences that we've had before, or experiences that we would like to have, or experiences that we think we should have. We think that whatever freedom we're looking for (and you're obviously all here for some reason) is going to be found in an experience. It's a very deeply conditioned belief that we seem to carry. Universal, I think—that it's going to be found in an experience.

And what we discover, one of the things we discover as we sit, is that these experiences are coming and going. They don't last. Even the really nice ones. But often we're holding out for that one experience. And even if we're holding out in a little way, in a subtle way, just in that moment, heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. And when heaven and earth are infinitely apart, it's a long way to heaven. You might need a rocket ship. How do you get there? Far away.

We find that the objects we would like—job, relationship, material possessions, money—we think these are going to bring lasting happiness. And we spend a lot of energy pursuing them. It's not that those things are bad. They can be wonderful. It's not

that you shouldn't work for them either. But if you believe that that's where peace lies, the rat race never ends. And who said that thing about the rat race? "The problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat." I can't remember who. Somebody.

So there's craving for sense objects and experience, and there's the craving for becoming—thinking that we need to be something that we're not. Some identity. If we only had some new identity. A better version of me. New and improved. Then... Will 2.0.

A lot of the spiritual path can be motivated by that. There can be this belief that when I have more realization, I won't really be me anymore. I'll be this new thing, new personality. Everybody will like me.

We love these kinds of stories, especially in America. We love these feel-good success stories, and sometimes

Our meditation can become like that. It's like one of those cheesy movies where we're the hero and we're going to arrive at some glorious new identity. Fixed.

The mirror image of this—it's almost like talking about the same thing, I realize both sides are in this—is this desire for unbecoming. They're so close together as to almost be the same: the desire to not be certain things that we are, certain things that we think we are.

The underlying delusion is that we believe we can be defined by objects, traits, mental or physical. We fix our identity. We look for our identity in momentary phenomena of mind and body. Because we're identified with this phenomena that's arising right here, this stuff in here—when I think this is me—of course, then I have to improve it to get the better version, or get rid of it to also get the better version.

But I'm going to posit something, and maybe you've glimpsed this or are glimpsing this: who and what we are cannot be defined by any thing, anything that can be perceived, any object of experience, including body, feelings, mind in terms of thoughts. But because we do feel that we are sort of fixed in this identity, whatever it is in the moment, there's a desire to change it.

A simple example: you may be sitting here sensing the body, body breathing, a sense of being aware of that. Feelings arising in the body, sensations coming and going, changing. Aware of that, maybe not too identified with it. You just see, "Oh, it's just phenomena." Empty phenomena rolling on, as Joseph says. Maybe an emotion arises. There's the knowing of it moving through. No problem. Fear, sadness. Maybe thoughts are arising in the mind. You can see them arise, live out their life, and pass away. Not too identified. You just see, "Oh, it's just arisings."

Then something arises. Maybe it's a thought, a belief. And it's different. "I can't do this. I'm worthless. I'm no good." And that feels different. That feels like, "No, that's me." And then there's the desire, obviously, to not be that person. The craving for non-being.

The only reason that craving is there is because we've believed that thought. We think, "Oh, this is me. I am the worthless person." We've taken birth in that identity. "I'm the no-good meditator," whatever it is. Some of you in the interviews have talked about very repetitive patterns of thought or memories that replay themselves over and over again, and that feel really identified with. "This is me. I am this kind of person. I did this." Sometimes they're just self-judging thoughts, just repetitive.

So what's the way out? It definitely leads to a feeling of craving for unbecoming. "How do I not be this person?" But the way to not be that person is to see clearly how the belief that you are this person is arising. Because it's based in delusion, the work is not to become someone else. It's to see clearly, to see through it. And sometimes it takes a lot of repetitive seeing.

One analogy I like to use—I find it useful, I use it a lot, maybe because I find it useful—is the first time you go to a movie, say it's a thriller, a scary movie, you're on edge. You're really wrapped up in the plot. There's that wind blowing and the creaky door. You don't know what's behind it. Your whole body tenses up, you're totally unaware of what's happening in your body, but it's tensing up.

And you can sense that you know the guy's behind the door. What's going to happen next? And the whole movie is spent completely—I mean, it's like you're there, you're going through all these incredibly strong emotions. The movie's over and you crawl out of the theater. I've crawled out of a few movies—not literally.

But if you went to that same movie and you sat and watched it five times, and you really forced yourself to watch it, it would be a little different the fifth time than the first time. It would probably be a lot different. It might still be scary. But say you went to that movie fifty times, or a hundred times—can you get a feel for it? It would just be boring. Whatever that emotional connection is to the plot, it just wouldn't be there anymore. The guy behind the creaky door—you've been through it too many times.

And it would be hard to keep paying attention. You'd start looking around the theater to see if something else interesting was happening. Maybe you'd start noticing the people in the theater. One person looks interesting. The movie's still playing. You might throw popcorn at someone, try to make something happen. And then at a certain point, you might just get up and leave. "I think I've seen this one a few too many times. There's just nothing left in it."

This is just a metaphor, but eventually you walk by the theater, you see the sign: "I'm a Useless, Terrible Person" is playing. And you think, "You know what? I saw that one. About five hundred times. I think I'll go to the beach."

So partly this is just encouragement to keep watching the movie. Because if you're not really watching it, if you don't really stay there with it, it feels like it's a new movie every time. If you're not really watching it, if you're just kind of *in* it, it doesn't lose that charge. You don't have to be perfectly watching it—don't worry about that—but you have to be more or less present, feeling the feelings that come.

We identify deeply with certain patterns, certain movies that are very compelling for us. Others we can enjoy, or we're just not that interested in.

There was a time in my practice when I was practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita while he was here at the Forest Refuge. During a certain period, I had this incredible energetic knot in my chest—I'd had this before in my practice. This thing was so painful. It was like a rock or something. And I didn't know what it was about, but it really felt like *me*.

Somehow subtly, all of this belief got wrapped up in this knot—that it was a symbol of my blockage, that I wouldn't be able to progress in the practice because of this obstruction, that it was some kind of karmic hindrance I had to overcome. It got really elaborate, without me being super mindful of that. It was just amazing the kind of reality that got created, that I lived in for a period of time. It was simply the way things were to me. I thought I had to clear it somehow. I didn't know how to.

When you're interviewing with Sayadaw U Pandita, at least the way it worked then, you'd often be waiting outside the room where he was interviewing somebody else. You could hear the interview of the person before you, which was sometimes really not that helpful—though sometimes it actually was very helpful.

Towards the latter part of the retreat, right near the end actually, somehow things got switched up, and I was behind somebody I'd never met before. This person was having all kinds of experiences that were very interesting to me, which I thought were very advanced. And Sayadaw's response was unexpected.

He said to this person, "It sounds like the knowing is getting stronger." I'd never heard him use that term. It was through translation, and it could have been my hallucination, but that's what I heard. I don't even remember what happened in my own interview.

But I went back to my room, and I just stayed with the knowing of this knot. The knot was there, moving, changing. And the knowing just got really, really bright and vivid and obvious. That brightness was not diminishing. All of the same stuff was happening, and it didn't matter at all. The knot was still there, but the mind was totally unaffected by any of it. There was just no sense of identification with this.

It was a very revealing moment—a series of moments—for me. I'd seen this in other ways, but it was such a vivid reminder that it really doesn't matter what is happening. It doesn't matter what you're paying attention to. It doesn't matter the state of your body. It doesn't even matter what's happening in your mind. This knowing—it's here. It's not something constructed. It's right here.

Is there anybody for whom knowing is not happening? Who is not having experience of this moment? No. It's fully operating all the time. But we get so attuned to the objects and identified with them that we think that's where the rub is. Something's supposed to happen. The objects are supposed to change, or my body is supposed to be different, or my mind is supposed to be different. There are supposed to be different thoughts happening in here. Someone needs to change the channel or change the program.

I think it takes a long time for us to understand that we don't have to change the program. Liberation can be here and now, just in not identifying with this. And we're practicing this in moments—just with the breathing, with the rising of sensation.

Another example of this kind of unbecoming, which is perhaps simpler but was compelling for me: one of my little unbecoming cravings used to be that I would often feel socially awkward. Just this feeling of awkwardness, which I really didn't like. And it really felt like me—awkward. What do I say? I really thought I had to overcome this, to not be awkward, and then things would just be a lot better.

It was interesting over time to see how, in particular moments, this became very obvious. I was practicing at the time when I was in the middle of a social situation, and one of these moments would happen, and it just didn't matter at all. A really awkward moment. And here we are.

The irony is that the awkwardness kind of disappears because you're not afraid of it. If you can be really okay being how you are, it changes something.

Sometimes we think that the direction of practice is to become less who we are. But what I've found is that actually we kind of become more who we are, who we already are—maybe a little less fearful, a little less neurotic. But who we are doesn't disappear. It actually becomes more comfortable being things as they are.

Sometimes I turn to nature because nature is such a good example of things as they are. We don't tend to impose on nature what we impose on ourselves. We might look at a pine tree that's crooked and gnarled and has a very unusual shape to it and think it's very beautiful. We don't wish that it was a straight, tall pine tree.

It's just sort of—this is nature. We kind of get it. There are these wonderful patterns that are all different.

But with ourselves, we don't do that. We don't see nature. We don't see the exquisiteness of things as they are. We don't let ourselves.

And a lot of that is fueled by craving—craving for new objects and experiences, craving for becoming, craving for unbecoming. There's not much room in that for things as they are.

So how do we come to rest in things as they are? How does our craving get worn down? Partly it's through this clear seeing, which you're all cultivating. Seeing that nothing can be clung to. Nothing is substantial or lasts long enough to provide a lasting ground—no thing.

We slowly stop trying to cling. We stop believing in it as much. Because our ordinary condition is that we kind of believe in clinging. That's why we do it. We believe that it's going to work. We believe in becoming. We think that that's going to work. We believe in unbecoming, and we think that that's going to work. So we invest in it.

But as we see clearly, we recognize the suffering, the pain of that investment. This is dharma pain, dukkha, and it's liberating. It's what Ajahn Chah called the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. It's the pain of grasping, which leads to clinging. It hurts, doesn't it? Even just in the moment. You're meditating, you're fine, and then there's—*what about that?* And this dukkha arises. Things become unsatisfactory.

When I was in college, I was a freshman, just got there. At the school I went to, for some reason—I think this was an old tradition—you had to take a swim test to graduate. You had to pass it. You had to swim the length of a pool. I just have no idea why.

But the way they did it was they'd line up all the freshmen and have them take the swim test at the beginning, so that if they couldn't pass, they could take swimming as a gym class in order to graduate.

And it was a little weird with all these people. You're in a bathing suit, lined up at the pool in this long line. You jump in at the deep end, swim to the other side, swim back. Then you get checked off the list, and you can go to school.

I was standing in line, back a ways, and I noticed there was this guy up ahead who just looked really nervous. You just sort of spot that energetically. This guy was really nervous. He was pacing and fidgeting. And I was like, what's going on with this guy?

I kind of had this feeling something was about to happen. I didn't know what. But I really wanted to find out.

And I watched him. It was his turn. He went up to the edge of the pool. And as he stood at the edge, I just kind of got it—he does not know how to swim.

I could see it plainly. He jumped into the water, the deep end, and just started trying to grab the water, flailing. He was trying to hold on. I didn't even know a human being could sink that fast. He just went down. They had to haul him out.

For me, this is a great analogy for practice. We cannot grasp the ungraspable. And when we try, we go down.

Swimming is not something we know how to do intuitively. We might be able to figure it out pretty quickly, but it takes some getting used to the water. There are different rules in the water than there are on land. Holding on doesn't work—it's not the nature of water. You can't hold on to it. But if you relax and don't try to hold on, you can have a wonderful time in the water. You have to learn how to be in this new way.

Water can be wonderful. You can play around, splash, swim, dive. And this phenomenal world is similar. We can have a wonderful time here. It's not that we shouldn't enjoy our life. It's not that we shouldn't enjoy sense contact or relationship or activities or being alive, engaging. It's wonderful. It's just the grasping and the clinging, the craving that leads to that clinging, which interrupts the freedom and ease of living free in this realm. Free to enjoy, free to play.

And sometimes—this is subtle too—people hear the teachings about craving being the cause of suffering and they think they're not supposed to want things. So there's this subtle kind of pushing down of wanting. And there can be a subtle disengaging with life. "I'm not supposed to have a preference." What would you like for dinner? "I don't care." Did you like the movie? "I don't know." Which movie do you want to see? "I don't have a preference." That could get old fast. What do you want to do? "It doesn't matter."

Sometimes there can be this defensive posture around wanting, because we want to prevent ourselves from suffering. We think, "I'll just stop the wanting, then I won't suffer." But actually practice is the opposite direction, in my opinion. The instruction is always the same: Can you be with what's arising? When wanting is arising, be with wanting.

If I want to take a walk and I do, is that suffering? If I want to have kale instead of Brussels sprouts, is that suffering? What if I like Brussels sprouts? Is that a problem? No, this is life energy. This is a very different energy than the craving I was describing earlier. I don't know if you can feel that, but it's different. That craving has a desperation in it.

It's a search for security. It's different. And sometimes I can only just act it out even—it has this kind of quality... It feels a little bit more like addiction. You know, people who have addiction, when you have an addiction to something, you're not enjoying it that much. You're not enjoying it much at all, generally, because you're a prisoner of some energy of craving.

So it's different.

It's vulnerable to want things. And the practice is opening to that vulnerability—to really want. When you can really be with wanting and really be with disappointment, it opens up a lot. You don't have to be afraid anymore. The reason you're afraid of wanting is because you're afraid of being disappointed, of not getting it. But if you can be with the not getting it, then you're free to engage.

So in that sense, I think this just opens up a lot of possibilities.

The instructions are simple, and you've heard them a million times. And somehow it never hurts to hear them again, because it's hard for us to remember.

Just this. Just this. Just this.

Just being with what's arising right now. Knowing it. It all unfolds from there. All the great dramas that happen in practice are overcome through this—not through anything else. As much as it may seem that there really is something to unbecome, and there really is something to become.

Let's just sit for a few moments.

CHAPTER 38

Dependent Origination (Paṭicca Samuppāda)

Andrea Fella · 1h00

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Andrea Fella guides practitioners through one of the Buddha's most fundamental yet challenging teachings: paṭicca samuppāda, or dependent origination. She begins by contextualizing this teaching as a detailed exposition of the Second Noble Truth, explaining how it serves as the Buddha's "middle teaching" between the extremes of existence and non-existence. Drawing from the Kaccānagotta Sutta (SN 12.15), she presents the complete twelve-link chain while acknowledging its profound complexity—a depth that even Ānanda initially underestimated.

Rather than following the traditional approach of starting with ignorance (avijjā), Fella begins mid-chain with consciousness, name-and-form, and the six sense bases, making the teaching more accessible and practical. She traces how contact leads to feeling (vedanā), which conditions craving (taṇhā), then clinging (upādāna), becoming (bhava), birth (jāti), and finally aging-and-death with its attendant suffering. Through concrete examples—from attachment to a beautiful flower to identification as a "good yogi"—she demonstrates how this process operates in daily experience, emphasizing the moment-to-moment interpretation found extensively in the Abhidhamma rather than solely the multiple-lives model.

The talk's practical heart lies in identifying the chain's weakest links: between suffering and ignorance, and between feeling and craving. Fella explains how mindfulness at these junctures can redirect the cycle toward liberation through faith, gladness, and wisdom. She concludes with an inspiring passage from the Aṅguttara Nikāya affirming that all things, when met with concentration and mindfulness, converge on liberation—offering hope that awakening is possible regardless of where in the chain one becomes aware.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The terms used for birth do seem to indicate—we can interpret this as birth within a body, and aging and death as the aging and death of the body. But the suttas also support an understanding of this process of dependent origination, this full cycle, as being a description of moment-to-moment experience.

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

As an aside, I found this to be very interesting. I had heard the multiple life model as the way of teaching this many, many times, with the understanding that the moment-to-moment interpretation was also possible. But I had understood this as being a more modern interpretation, an interpretation laid on top of the suttas and not one that was actually in the suttas, in the Pali Canon.

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

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

In the commentarial tradition, the tradition that followed on from the suttas and the Pali Canon, this emphasis is reversed. In the commentaries, the multiple life model receives a lot more airtime, and the moment-to-moment model receives much less. Our tradition, the Theravāda tradition, is largely a tradition built around the commentaries of the suttas. So it makes sense to me now that this is the understanding I was mostly taught.

But it's in there. It's in the Pali Canon.

And this second view—that dependent origination describes a moment-to-moment arising of experience—is one that I have personally understood, at least parts of. It has meaning for me. There's a clarity to it. It helps to clarify my moment-to-moment unfolding of experience. I don't have any personal experience of previous lives or any intimations of future lives, so that teaching makes it a little more difficult for me to connect with dependent origination.

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

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

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

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

This is all relatively straightforward. This is just kind of biology at this point. There's contact with the sense bases.

Based on that contact, each of these sense impressions in all of the sense doors has a flavor to it. It's either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. This is the feeling tone of experience. So based on contact—with contact as condition—feeling arises.

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

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

We usually act automatically on this process of wanting. Liking leads to wanting, wanting leads to reaching out to get it, to grab it, to hold onto it. We take some kind of action to grasp that object. This is clinging. Craving leads to clinging.

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

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

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

So that gives you a flavor for dependent origination. Let me offer a couple of examples for these links in the chain.

The first example concerns sense pleasure. There's the contact of a sense object—say, the sight of a beautiful flower. There's contact with the eye, and then a feeling of pleasure arises based on that contact. Based on that feeling of pleasure, wanting can form, this desire to have this pleasant thing. Then there's clinging, which is the actual taking possession of the thing.

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

Becoming consists of the intentions and actions designed to control things according to that clinging—to keep the thing protected or safe. Those intentions around control of that thing.

Birth is the clear sense of identification or possessiveness. "This flower is mine." Feeling that one owns or controls or possesses that thing.

And then aging and death. One who possesses something must ultimately be separated from it, whether through the loss of the thing or through one's own death. All accumulation ends in dispersal—this is one of the teachings around impermanence. Whenever one has something, there will inevitably be separation from it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So this suffering leads to ignorance. A main definition of ignorance is not understanding the Four Noble Truths—that's one of the primary definitions in the texts. One who does not understand the Four Noble Truths, his mind, her mind is clouded with ignorance.

Ignorance means that we don't understand suffering. We don't understand what leads to suffering. In ignorance, we think we know what will lead to our happiness. We think that having what we want will lead to our happiness. But as you have seen, I think, in your own experience, actually having what we want doesn't go very far. It actually just takes us deeper into this cycle of suffering.

deeper into this cycle of dissatisfaction, seeing that having what we want doesn't go very far.

So the basic condition for suffering to lead to ignorance is that suffering is not understood. What causes suffering is not understood. If suffering is met with wisdom and understanding instead of ignorance, this chain leads in a completely different direction. It actually leads out of the chain of suffering and into a chain of liberation.

This is one of the places where we can really bring our attention. Understanding suffering with wisdom begins to break this cycle. But mostly we don't meet suffering with wisdom, and ignorance results.

So the next link: with ignorance as a condition, mental formations come to be.

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

With mental formations as a condition, consciousness comes to be.

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

We've talked about this in past weeks, about how filters have us choosing certain experiences out. We filter things in and out of our experience.

There's one amazing study some of you may have heard about that really highlights this ability of the mind to filter experience. People were asked to view a short video clip of basketball players passing a ball to each other, and they were told to count the number of times the basketball passed between various people on the team. That was their task while watching this video. The vast majority of people could count the number of passes, but they neglected to see that during the course of this video, a person in a large

gorilla suit came out, walked onto the basketball court, danced around for a while, and then walked off. When they were asked about this, they said they hadn't seen it. In fact, they didn't believe it when they were told that it had happened. They didn't believe that gorilla was in the video. This is an example of how a perception can filter in and out experience.

Our mental formations, what we are intending to see and do, impacts what we experience, impacts our consciousness.

With consciousness as a condition, mentality-materiality comes to be—or name and form.

This is sometimes a confusing term. It's sometimes translated as mind and matter, or name and form. Basically, the materiality part refers to the processes of our body. The mentality part refers to most of the processes of our mind—the process of perception, the process of feeling, the process of mental formations. One very clear definition I've seen is that mentality-materiality refers to the four aggregates excluding the aggregate of consciousness. We've talked about the five aggregates: consciousness, feeling, perception, mental formations, and form or body. These two links—consciousness and mentality-materiality—represent the entirety of the five aggregates. Mentality-materiality encompasses feeling, perception, mental formations, and body, with consciousness being separate.

So consciousness conditions mentality-materiality.

Now this is an interesting link because there is an understanding that these two are mutually conditioning each other. I mentioned the chicken and the egg earlier. In one sutta, the Buddha described that he saw consciousness conditions mind and matter. When he tried to go further back, he found that mind and matter conditions consciousness, and consciousness conditions mind and matter. It goes back and forth.

Based on the state of our consciousness—for example, if our consciousness is flavored by anger—then our body may respond, our body may become tense. We tend to perceive things as unpleasant. We experience things as unpleasant.

So at this point we're back where we started: we have a mind and a body. And because we have a mind and a body, there's contact, feeling...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other link I'd like to mention is the link between feeling and craving. The Buddha emphasized this in many places in the suttas, that paying attention to feeling is a very powerful practice. Part of the reason it's so powerful is because it's the link before which we leap into reactivity. Feeling leads to craving, but that link is relatively weak. Some of the links—contact leading to feeling, for example—that's a strong link. I hear that it's possible to see between them; I don't think I've seen that myself. But I have clearly seen the feeling to craving link, and seen that a modicum of mindfulness at feeling just short-circuits that movement to craving entirely. When we can clearly recognize, "Oh, this is a pleasant experience, this is an unpleasant experience," the craving may be completely abandoned. It may not arise at all. This is an extremely powerful practice.

There's a sutta that addresses this. This isn't exactly another chain, but it is a list. I'll read it. This is from the Anguttara Nikaya: "All things are rooted in desire. They come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings." This part maps onto those first links of dependent origination in a rough way. I don't have time to go through exactly how it maps, but basically contact and feeling are clear places where they link together. Things come into existence through being rooted in desire, come to actual existence through attention, originate from contact, and converge on feelings.

And then it goes in a different direction—kind of like the link from suffering to faith goes in a different direction at that point in the chain.

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

This isn't a causal list like dependent origination, but it does point to the link at feeling—being mastered by mindfulness and concentration, the moment-to-moment mindfulness of the flow of our experience, the concentration that results from that.

The foremost of all things is concentration. All things are mastered by mindfulness. Their peak is wisdom, their essence liberation. Clearly seeing and knowing our experience moment to moment, wherever we are in that chain, is the path towards the dismantling of that chain.

The other thing I appreciate about this sutta is that it refers to *all things*. All things have liberation as their essence. All things merge in the deathless. All things culminate in Nibbana with mindfulness and concentration. This is all things he's talking about. The touch of a doorknob, the state of anger—all things culminate in liberation if we attend to them with concentration and mindfulness and wisdom.

It does not matter what we bring our attention to. It doesn't matter where in that chain of suffering we've woken up. It does not matter. Mindfulness and concentration, combined with the wisdom—a little bit of understanding of how this process works—can lead us out of this chain of suffering to the end of suffering.

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

CHAPTER 39

Identity and Identification

Will Kabat-Zinn · 57 min

> *In this talk from the final week of a three-month retreat, Will Kabat-Zinn addresses a common phenomenon: the re-emergence of habitual self-patterns and identity structures as practitioners near the end of intensive practice. Rather than viewing this as failure, he reframes it as precious opportunity—the combination of strong mindfulness with familiar patterns creates ideal conditions for deep insight into the mechanism of selfing.*
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> *Drawing on the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda), Kabat-Zinn illuminates how moment-to-moment identification transforms ordinary experience into identity. Through vivid personal examples—including an encounter on a San Francisco bus—he demonstrates how contact at the sense doors leads to feeling tone (vedanā), then to thought, and finally to 'becoming' (bhava): we literally take birth as 'the irritated one,' 'the afraid one,' or 'the judging one.' He references a discourse featuring Mistress Vedikā to illustrate how latent defilements (anusaya) remain hidden until conditions draw them out.*
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> *The liberating insight is that freedom doesn't require making anything go away. The prison bars of identity are illusory—they have no substance. Through patient, curious investigation rather than striving, we discover that what we truly are cannot be contained by any limited identity. Kabat-Zinn encourages practitioners to cultivate 'Dhamma joy' in seeing these patterns, holding a thousand-year view that transforms both retreat and daily life into continuous practice ground.*

Good evening.

Tonight I'd like to speak about identity formation and reformation. Some of you have been here for nearly six weeks. Others, close to three months. From meeting with you individually and from some of the questions this morning, there seems to be a sense that certain aspects of self, certain dimensions of identity, are re-emerging—and sometimes feeling unwelcome.

When we are doing deep practice for a sustained period of time, we often get a little break from some aspects of our experience, particularly those that have to do with the social realm, the realm of self in relationship. Even though we have a full week left of retreat, it sounds like certain thought patterns and feelings are arising that perhaps

haven't come up for a while. Maybe a sense of wanting to be paid attention to, to be noticed. Maybe a sense of fear around having to deal with other people's energies. Maybe a reemergence of judging.

What I've gotten a sense of is that for many of you there is some aversion to this. A sense of, "Oh, I kind of hoped that wouldn't come back. I thought maybe I was done with that."

Part of the reason the end of a retreat is such an auspicious time is that we've developed a very powerful continuity of mindfulness and concentration. As some of these patterns emerge toward the end, there's an opportunity to meet them in a new way.

It's interesting to notice that we can go along breathing in, breathing out, sensations in the body rising and passing away, feelings arising and passing away, moods and emotions moving through, coming and going, thoughts in the mind—and yet somehow there are certain ones that we stick to. We can be quite equanimous with all this coming and going for weeks or months. Night after night in these teachings you've been hearing of non-interference, that it doesn't matter what's arising, only our relationship to it. And then all of a sudden, it's different. It feels different. Something arises that feels like, "No, this is me."

So let's explore again, perhaps as a refresher or an encouragement: What is this process of identification with momentary experience, and how does it transform into an experience of identity? "This is me. This is who I am."

You're sitting, maybe in the dining hall, and you notice that you're judging everybody around you. For weeks you haven't been paying attention to anybody, but all of a sudden nobody else is doing anything right. Moving too slowly, taking too much food, taking too little food. There's contact with the sense door of seeing. A feeling arises—unpleasant or neutral, in this case probably unpleasant. Then the thought arises, whatever the judgment is: "This person is such a..." And the thought isn't seen clearly with mindfulness. So there's an identification with this thought, and believing it leads to a becoming. We become the judger.

This is an interesting process. Subtle, but you can kind of feel it. Sometimes I have to act it out physically to express it. It can happen in a moment with any kind of experience—there's an identification, and then a movement into becoming. Becoming the sad one, or becoming the hopeless one, or becoming the judging one. It really is a kind of birth in the moment.

I had this experience very clearly on the bus in San Francisco. I live in the Bay Area, and I was sitting on the bus, actually on my way to teach a class—so perhaps a little extra mindful. Not mindful enough, as it turned out. Somebody gets on the bus, on their cell phone, talking extremely loudly. Yelling, if I do say so myself.

And it was so loud. Now, I'm quite tolerant of people talking on their cell phones—it really bothers some people—but of course, they sat down in the seat directly opposite from me, just an aisle between us. And I got into this whole internal monologue about this person. I was really in it: how people should not do this, it's not okay, it's unbelievably inconsiderate, absolutely no awareness of others. I was really in this battle, all taking place inside me, of course.

And at that moment, there was a momentary resurgence of mindfulness, which I think is the fruit of practice. The chances are that it will kick in sooner the more you're practicing. So thankfully, there was a moment of mindfulness. I just asked this question: what's happening? And I traced back—not consciously, almost intuitively—right back to the feeling tone. It was a very unpleasant feeling tone.

As I hung out with that feeling tone for just a moment, my whole experience shifted. It was just an unpleasant feeling. All of a sudden I noticed I was aware of the other people on the bus, of the scenery moving by outside. I could hear sounds again. I hadn't noticed any of these things for the few minutes before that. The difference was striking.

I realized it was a very clear example of how I really took birth in this. I was born into an identity of the irritated one. And as soon as I was born like that, I was in exclusive relationship with this woman, totally locked into it. In the settling back into just what's happening—just the feeling tone of it, out of the story—that relationship dissolved. Just a momentary experience, unpleasant. Then there was this sense of freedom.

Of course, I could have then said something. I didn't need to, and I actually appreciated what had happened. But it would have had a totally different tone than if I had said it a minute before. That wouldn't have been good.

So it's just an interesting process to watch, this moment-to-moment experience. All of you have enough mindfulness, enough continuity to notice this: just one experience after another, arising, arising. And then there's one that has a stickiness, and then there's a birth into an identity.

One way of noticing this, which I find useful—I really think of this as moment-to-moment rebirth. As Andrea was talking a few nights ago about dependent origination, this is that. Moment-to-moment rebirth, born into a momentary incarnation.

It's interesting because that incarnation really has a different body. You can notice that when you're in a moment of embarrassment. If you're not just mindful of the feeling but you become the embarrassed one, there's a very clear difference. The body totally changes. And then when you're born into that identity, you have to live out that incarnation: old age, sickness, and death. Remember that list? Sorrow, lamentation, all those good things—until the death of that incarnation. And then maybe there's just noticing for a while, until the next one. Or there's another one immediately.

I notice this with fear a lot. Fear arises, and there's quite a distinction between just noticing fear—letting it be there fully, okay, fear—and taking birth as the afraid one. It has a center to it. And then that afraid one is in relationship to the threatening or scary others.

So it's just an interesting question: What does it mean to not take birth?

Not take birth in a limited identity in a moment. Sometimes people seem scary. "Oh, would I disappear?" No. It's very interesting to play with—when some identity view does not appear, some limited sense of me, there's a lot more room, a lot more available.

On hearing this, our natural inclination is not just to ask the question but then to try not to take birth. We're really good at trying to do things and trying not to do things. But that's not really useful, because we're taking birth all the time in these limited identities based on what's happening—just causes and conditions coming together, and we identify with it.

But actually, this is a really rich ground for insight. Not just when you see something and don't identify with it, but when you do identify with it. You're really coming to understand this mechanism experientially. And as you consciously take birth again and again, moment after moment—or you can just reflect on how many different incarnations you've had in the past hour, or five minutes, or day—when we allow ourselves to consciously be there for it: "Oh, this is what it's like to be the self-conscious one," or the "notice me please" identity. And then five minutes later it's "I'm the center of the universe, everybody loves me, I love everyone." And then it's "I hate everyone." They happen so differently—it's kind of amazing.

We stop believing so wholeheartedly in the reality of any one of these incarnations. It's quite liberating. You actually don't have to prevent yourself from taking birth. There's a lightness that just naturally starts to happen around all of it. It's not so personal.

Sometimes we take on a certain kind of identity because we're practitioners, or we're identifying with some of the—quote unquote—positive, wholesome mind states which arise, maybe which arise here. And you're certainly hearing a lot about them from the teachers: loving-kindness, mudita, compassion. You may feel these at times quite strongly, and it can be easy for us to start to identify with those. "Oh, now I'm a yogi. I'm a loving person. All beings—let's liberate them. Everybody's so wholesome here."

And then somebody walks by and there's just a ruthless judgment. Cut.

And then there's an identity crisis. "Wait a minute. I'm a loving person. Haven't I been practicing that for months or years? I'm a terrible yogi. This is just a sign that I'm never going to change. I'm always going to be that person that I've always been."

It's interesting to notice this: one part of the mind looking at another. The really wholesome me looking at the really petty me. And there's a conflict.

But this practice is not about being any kind of person. If love is there, wonderful. But we can also build a me out of that. We can build a me out of insight. We can build a me around an experience of selflessness. It's amazing. And you can just watch the mind do it.

Oh, and the Buddha, you know, in the discourses, there are some great suttas where the Buddha talks about people saying, "I am at peace. I'm very selfless. I have realized Nibbana." And the Buddha points out there's still some clinging here. The idea is not to build an identity around any experience. That's where freedom lies.

There's a capacity aspect of what we are that actually holds all of the opposites, all the paired opposites—liking and not liking, loving and hating, joy and sadness. All these things that we, in our ordinary experience, like to pair against each other. Either I'm nice or I'm not nice. And in that kind of thinking, it has to be one. Which one is it? But what about the mind that holds both equally and isn't either?

So this is something to look for in your own experience over these next days. It's really exciting, I think, that all of these habits of mind reemerge. They may not all reemerge, but some do. It's wonderful. It's a ground for real practice. And a big shift happens when you can start to get happy about seeing patterns in the mind, clinging, identification. It's a kind of Dharma joy in just, "Wow, look at that. How did that happen?"

Even just watching, you can watch the movement of mind. I remember having a very powerful experience sitting with a teacher once. They were talking to a group, and I noticed there was something in me pulling for their attention. It was like leaning, trying to get it. And for some reason, the mind was very still that day. I could see that

movement so clearly, it was just very obvious. And just in the seeing of it, this great settling back, and this great spaciousness there. It was clear there's no need to go anywhere, get anything.

So in a way, I'd really just invite you—and this is the same instruction you've been hearing again and again—to really meet what's arising with interest and the quality of investigation. Not to figure out, but just to watch identity being formed. This is the core of the Buddhist teaching. This is where it all happens, freedom and bondage, just in these moments.

We all have our favorites in terms of what we like to identify with as me—our top ten me things or stories. So you can just maybe notice one or a few of them that come up a lot in these next days and just pay attention to that.

I'm going to say something twice now because I think it's important. Freedom does not depend on something not being there. It's so deeply ingrained that we think there's something happening that needs to not be here in order for me to be free. Whether it's judgments, whether it's an emotion, a feeling, whether it's an energy block—it's just so deeply ingrained that that needs to go before freedom can be there. But it's not true. It's only in the identification with it and the grasping that bondage is created.

We have a prison then of certain dimensions. And it could be a big, spacious prison. It could be a nice prison, like "I'm very loving" or "I'm a really generous person." That's sort of like a high-class prison. It's one of those minimum security places where you have a couch and unlimited TV and it's comfortable. Or—and this could change from moment to moment, it's not like you only have one—you can have a really hardcore maximum security prison. "I'm worthless" or "I'll never amount to anything" in a moment. "I'm unworthy. Something's fundamentally wrong with me." That's like really...

You get none of the comforts in that prison. But it has its advantages, that one. The motivation for escape is quite high. In the high-class prison, less motivation.

The thing about these prisons, though, is that the bars are illusory. They actually have no substance. I want to illustrate the fact that it's not a substantial thing keeping us in prison—this is an important point. But when I say "just illusory," it almost seems like, well, why not just walk out then? And as you all know, it doesn't work that way.

But through seeing, these bars can fall away. Or it doesn't matter that they're there, because there's no one behind them. I'm not located inside.

So we have all kinds of identities. We have roles that we play in our lives. We have career—I'm a lawyer, or I'm a carpenter, or I'm a plumber, or I'm a doctor, or I'm a teacher. Mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister. And there's nothing wrong with that. It's good to know what your role is in the moment. There are also momentary identities—it's good for us to remember that. If I go home and I'm the teacher, it's not so good. That's not the role with my wife or with my son. It could be in moments.

Even just thinking of these identities, where do they exist? Just in this moment, where do all these identities exist? They exist as memory, experientially as a thought in the mind. They're not here. Without thinking about the past in this moment, without imagining a future in this moment—what is here? Who are you?

You didn't disappear, did you? But there may not be a sense of "me" in the conventional way, the ordinary way.

It's interesting, even personality-wise or persona—sometimes you have a persona, sometimes you have different personas. There's one way with one group of people, another way with another group. And it's interesting, I read this once and I hope it's true, that the root of the word "persona" has a Greek root, and it has something to do with peering through. It had to do with the masks that actors wore in those old Greek plays. There's a peering through the mask. The mask could change. It's not your identity.

And as I think of these roles, these conventional roles that we identify with, or even persona—they don't need to go away. But it's a question of knowing, remembering: this is not what we are. This is not who we are in any ultimate way. We can't be contained by any of these identities. They're so limited. And what we are is vast, much vaster.

And you might even notice, in moments of not identifying as a this or a that, there's still something here. Maybe calling it a "thing" might not even be right. But there's a lot more available in terms of resources, choices.

In fact, it's hard to describe, but all of a sudden so much more is available. Freedom of movement, freedom of action, freedom of expression.

We can become very identified with some of the states that arise in long-term meditation. We can get very identified with concentration, attached to it. And as the container changes, it can be kind of disconcerting. But the freedom that the Buddha was talking about does not depend on any conditions.

So in a way, I guess the way I hold these retreats—even if it's a long retreat, like a three-month retreat—when we're following this path, we need to have a very, very long view. It's useful, a long-term view. And it's not that freedom resides at the end of this

long-term view. It's that I think over time, the practice, rather than being something discrete that we do just at special times and circumstances like retreat, becomes a way of living, a way of being. And the form changes. Sometimes it's silent and structured retreat. Sometimes you're fully in the world. But the practice fundamentally doesn't change at all. And the question is: are we really using what's arising for our own liberation? Are we choosing to look?

It's very useful that the shape changes, because then new stuff arises that we haven't had a chance to look at.

There's a discourse in the Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha, sort of a funny discourse, I think, where there's this wealthy laywoman, Mistress Vedika. She is known throughout the town for being kind, and she has a very good reputation. Her servant, named Kali, is suspicious of this reputation. She thinks to herself, "My mistress doesn't get angry much. But I wonder if that's because there's no anger in her, or if it's just because I always do my work really well and come on time. I wonder what would happen if I didn't do my work so well and didn't come on time. I wonder how kind and patient she'd be then."

So the next day, she woke up late and came in, and Mistress Vedika kind of laid into her—she was upset and yelled at her. Kali says, "Aha, there's some anger in there." The next day she gets up even later, and Mistress Vedika is even more upset. The following day, she gets up even later still. When Mistress Vedika asks her, "Why did you get up late?" she says, "Oh, is anything wrong? No, nothing's wrong." She's not apologizing.

So this third time, Mistress Vedika flies into a rage and takes a rolling pin and whacks her on the head with it. And Kali is cut, and she runs out into the town announcing to everybody that Mistress Vedika is not as kind as her reputation suggests—I think one of the words she uses is "merciless."

Part of the message in the story is that there are certain habits of mind that don't arise when the conditions are favorable, when they're a particular way. In the teaching, they call these the latent defilements. And we can all kind of empathize with Mistress Vedika, I think. There are these moments: "Where did that come from?"

So get happy about seeing these things. That's the path. The path is not somewhere else. When you're seeing unfreedom, you're working towards freedom. If you're somebody whose servant is always coming on time, you never get to see that you have this anger.

So it's wonderful that conditions are changing like this. We get to see all these places where we identify and get stuck. And we begin to have a chance to get free, to identify less.

In some other traditions, they sort of change things up on you on purpose to bring out these attachments.

What you find is you don't even need to do that. If you're just sitting with reality for long enough, you know, we cling to this, we cling to that. Because things are impermanent, reality works on your preferences plenty. We just start to let go naturally because we simply can't make things the way we want them in the world, even in our own minds.

I remember early on in my practice, I often felt like I was building something up—building concentration. It was almost like building a house of cards. Really precarious, and you're kind of trying, and then it would all fall apart. Interestingly, when it all fell apart, that's when meditation happened. It was just, "Oh, I can't control my mind." Then all of a sudden, it's just what's happening.

This happens over and over again in various ways as we practice. Reality working on us. As long as we're in touch with what is, the path is unfolding. Our intuitive wisdom recognizes we're clinging and we're suffering from the clinging, so we're naturally letting go.

In some of these other traditions—I sat a number of retreats with a Chan master from Taiwan named Sheng Yen. Chan is the Chinese Zen. He passed away not too long ago, but he had this fierceness about changing things up on you and not letting you settle into a comfortable place.

I was reading in his autobiography about how when he was with his first master, his master said, "Okay, you can stay in this room here in the temple." As soon as he got his stuff all organized, his master said, "You know what? Why don't you stay in this bigger room? There's a library there." He was a scholar. "You can study. You'll have a lot of time to read." So he moves all his stuff into that room. Later that day, the master says, "You know what? On second thought, actually, I think it'd be better if you're in the first room." He goes back to the first room. And then the next day: "Actually, you really should study. I want you to be a scholar. I want you to produce good things for the temple." He's there for a couple hours. "We're having a guest coming. You better move to the other room."

And he argued with his master. The way he describes it, he said as soon as he let go, the master stopped moving him.

We can all relate to this. Sometimes this insight is happening on the subtle level. Sometimes it's happening in this very concrete way—just moving rooms—but it's doing the same thing. We're naturally getting less identified with a particular condition, less dependent on it, less needing to land anywhere, not needing to abide in any one place.

Just a little anecdote about Master Sheng Yen: I had this experience on a retreat that I thought was really something. And I told him about it. And he said, "What you experienced was thought farting."

Let go.

This is a very precious time, and I just encourage you to really make use of it. Not in a tight, striving way. Holding this long-term view is, I think, just more correct. But just in the simple way of being curious, interested in

in what's happening here. All of the freedom, all of the understanding—it just comes out of that.

I have a great poster I saw once. It's got one of these beautiful Zen circle paintings, a beautiful *ensō*, and it says: "Never forget the thousand-year view."

Let's just sit for a moment.

CHAPTER 40

Equanimity

Andrea Fella · 1h02

In this comprehensive talk, Andrea Fella examines equanimity (upekkhā) as one of the most profound qualities cultivated through Buddhist practice. Drawing from the Lokavipatti Sutta (AN 8.6), she explores how both ordinary people and awakened beings encounter the eight worldly winds—gain and loss, status and disgrace, praise and blame, pleasure and pain—yet respond to them differently. The key distinction lies not in avoiding these experiences but in discerning them 'as they actually are' (yathā-bhūta) without being consumed by reactivity.

Fella clarifies common misunderstandings about equanimity, distinguishing it from flatness, indifference, or inaction. Rather than emotional emptiness, equanimity represents a fullness of understanding that allows compassion and muditā to deeply engage with life's joys and sorrows without being overwhelmed. She describes it as one of the beautiful emotions of an open heart, working alongside the other brahmavihāras—mettā, karuṇā, and muditā—to form the emotional landscape of a mind free from clinging.

The talk outlines practical approaches to cultivating equanimity: studying what obstructs it (reactivity and its near enemy, indifference), developing concentration and continuous mindfulness, and understanding the wisdom teachings of kamma and anattā. Fella shares personal practice examples demonstrating how mindfulness can meet reactivity like 'jumping on a wild horse,' redirecting that energy toward balance. She emphasizes that equanimity is not cultivated directly but emerges as conditions ripen, ultimately becoming the gateway to liberation as 'equanimity towards all formations'—the final stage before awakening.

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

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

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

So if you thought enlightenment was going to make you endlessly feel pleasure and gain, the Buddha says otherwise. What's the difference between the ordinary person experiencing these things and the well-instructed disciple experiencing these things? He says, "For an ordinary person, when gain arises, he does not reflect, 'Gain has arisen for me. It is inconstant, stressful, and subject to change.' He does not discern it as it actually is." Likewise for all the others. "His mind remains consumed with the gain. He welcomes the arisen gain and rebels against the arisen loss. He is not released, I tell you, from dukkha." Likewise for all the other seven.

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

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

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

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

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

Along with the other brahmaviharas—metta, karuna, and mudita; kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy—these four form the emotional map, in a way, of the heart that is free from clinging. So this emotion of equanimity is not one of flatness or indifference. It is the emotion that allows compassion and mudita to deeply experience the joys and the sorrows of this world without being swept away by them. Equanimity allows us to touch life more deeply. So it's anything but flat and indifferent. It's not an indifference or an apathy.

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

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

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

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

This term "as it actually is" is a translation of the Pali term yatha-bhuta, which means something like "as it actually is" or "as it has come to be" or "things as they are." The present moment is given. It is as it is. It is things as they are. And in meeting the present moment, we rebel against it. We either want it to be different in some way, or we want it to stay. We want to hold on to it. We often struggle with things as they are, wishing they were some other way.

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

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

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

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

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

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

On one retreat, I was exploring wanting, the quality of wanting in the mind, particularly when I was doing walking meditation. I was doing walking meditation out front here a lot in the early part of the three-month course, and I really noticed, as many of you have probably noticed, that I really wanted to look at people while I was doing walking meditation.

Initially, I was being a good yogi and just had blinders on. I'm not going to look. Just forcing myself to not look. And at some point I realized that wanting was arising, and that since that was what was coming up, I should observe that. It took me ages to actually realize that this was what was happening and that this was what I should be doing, as opposed to trying to force myself to stay with the walking while wanting was arising.

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

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

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

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

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

fulness to our experience, when we bring mindfulness to reactivity, the mind begins to understand that the reactivity is created in its own place, that the mind itself is creating that reactivity. It sees that the reactivity is the source of the suffering and that it is creating its own suffering. When it sees that, when the mind sees that, it lets go.

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

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

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

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

And the mindfulness, it feels to me, moves in and connects with that energy, kind of like you might jump on the back of a wild horse. That energy is a very strong movement towards reactivity, and the mindfulness can meet it like jumping on the back of a wild horse—like an Aikido move in a way. The mindfulness meets that energy and then, with a quarter turn, redirects it elsewhere. The mindfulness meeting that reactivity can then be fed by the energy of that reactivity, and the mindfulness can grow and strengthen.

It's quite an interesting exploration. It takes not being reactive to reactivity—just the willingness to meet that reactivity, to jump on it like jumping on a wild horse, to simply connect with the reactivity.

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

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

This is a very powerful place to practice—a direct cultivation of the quality of mind, the meeting of the feeling tone that supports non-reactivity. When we neither reject the unpleasant nor try to hold on to the pleasant, we are beginning to come into alignment with the truth of things as they are. And this alignment with truth allows us to just be at ease. When we actually settle into the truth of the way things are, there's a way in which our whole system just relaxes. It's not a problem.

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

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

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

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

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

Another way to explore this, with an analogy: if you have a relationship with somebody and you feel like you're pretty balanced around that relationship, and they die—they're killed in an accident—and you don't know this.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We seem to think that this is somehow an effective way to help us not repeat those mistakes in the future—to beat ourselves up in the present over something we did in the past. But the understanding of karma is precisely an understanding that we can't change the past.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The degree to which we understand this truth of not-self is the degree to which we experience equanimity. Equanimity unfolds in degrees for us. At times we feel more equanimous than others. Our practice can be looked at as an unfolding or a deepening

of this understanding of equanimity. We get little tastes of it at first, begin to get a flavor, an understanding of the flavor of equanimity. Then we may get some more extended periods of time.

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

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

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

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

I'll close with a quote from Nyanaponika Thera:

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

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