NOTABLE DHAMMA TEACHERS

Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012)

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

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CHAPTER 1

Morning Instruction

Sally Armstrong · 15 min

> *In this opening morning instruction from the three-month retreat, Sally Armstrong establishes the fundamental direction of practice: knowing what's happening in each moment, whether sitting, walking, standing, eating, or speaking. She acknowledges the simplicity of this instruction while recognizing the challenge it presents, as the mind habitually wanders into resistance, fear, loneliness, fantasy, or even pleasant states that distract from direct experience.*
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> *The teaching emphasizes beginning from a place of ease and relaxation, allowing body and mind to become a welcoming place for awareness. Armstrong guides practitioners through establishing an upright yet comfortable posture using deeper breaths to find balance between dignity and softness. A body scan follows, inviting release of unnecessary tension from head to feet, cultivating intimate knowing of the body through mindfulness.*
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> *The instruction then turns to breath awareness, beginning with a wide, open field of attention rather than immediately narrowing focus. This expansive approach—noticing breath throughout the whole body—invites a softness in the attending mind. Armstrong reminds practitioners that the breath is simply a vehicle for training the mind's capacity to notice and stay connected; we're not holding onto breath like a life preserver but rather swimming in an ocean of it. When thoughts arise, we recognize them without aversion and gently prefer returning to simple presence. The practice of beginning again—greeting each moment fresh without judgment about past performance—emerges as a central theme for the retreat ahead.*

Good morning. I hope you all slept well. It's often a little challenging the first night in perhaps a new place, certainly a new room.

We won't begin our regular schedule of sitting and walking in silence until tomorrow. As we said last night, today is a day to help you settle in, get to know each other a little, get to know the place and the staff. We'll have the ceremony this afternoon to celebrate the groundbreaking of the new building.

Every day at this time throughout the retreat, at 8:15, we'll have this sitting where we all come together. There will generally be instructions, especially for the first week or so, and at the end of the period, a time to ask questions of the teachers and get answers. So that will be a stable presence throughout the retreat.

We'll be giving instructions to encourage you to connect directly with your experience. All of the different instructions we give will carry this basic intention: Can you sit and know what's happening? Can you walk and know what's happening? Can you stand or eat or speak and know what's happening? This is the direction of our practice.

As we always say, it sounds so simple, and yet it's so difficult to do, because the mind has its habits—wandering off, resistance, fear, loneliness, sadness, resentment, or being lost in bliss and wonderment about something and not actually even paying attention to the joy that's present right here. So our practice is this coming back again and again to what's happening, what's happening here, what's happening now.

To invite that sense of presence, it's really helpful that we begin from a place of ease and relaxation, that we consciously incline the mind and the body towards that so that the body and the mind become a welcoming place. As Joseph said last night, our mind becomes our friend. When we have that basic intention, that place of connecting with practice, it becomes much easier to come back. In fact, we want to come back. We want to know what's happening. Our fantasy world seems less appealing than just knowing the truth of this moment.

As we begin this morning, I encourage you to find a relaxed and comfortable posture. Most of you have sat before and kind of know how the body feels in sitting. But unconsciously, subconsciously, we've created areas of tightness or pressure—the body isn't as upright as it might be, there are places where we hold or contract around the breath and in other areas of the body.

I really find it helpful at the beginning of every sitting, and perhaps periodically through a sitting, to find this balance between uprightness and ease. One of the easy ways to do this is to take a few deeper breaths at the beginning of the sitting. On the in-breath, let the air as it comes in straighten the body, open the body. Really feel that the chest and the abdomen can fill with air in an easy way. Perhaps your shoulders lift a little bit, your back straightens. There's just that sense of dignity and uprightness that can come on a nice, deep in-breath. And then on the out-breath, you relax a little and soften.

In doing that a few times and then letting the breath become more natural, you can find that balanced state between uprightness and ease. In some sittings, you may need to do that a few times. You find you've gotten slumped or tired, dull, contracted. Invite again that breathing a little deeper, sitting up a little straighter, and just beginning again.

This is one of the things we'll invite you to over and over: just be willing to begin again, to start afresh, to greet this moment as a new moment of experience. Not to be always judging and complaining about what happened in the past, what you didn't do, what you should have done better. But now, here, this moment, this breath—this is meditation.

Perhaps also do a short body scan, just to find the places in the body where there's unnecessary tension or holding that you might be able to soften, relax, release.

Starting at the top of the head and moving down through the forehead and the eyes. Seeing if the eyes can just be gently closed. Touching the cheeks and the jaw. The mouth is gently touching. The tongue is resting easily in the mouth. Relaxing in the throat. Letting the shoulders drop. Many of us spend much of our time with our shoulders hunched up through all of the things we do with typing and phones and all the other instruments we relate with. Just see if you can let them drop. Relax.

Allowing the chest and belly to be as open as you can let them. Seeing if the breath can move easily in and out. The same with the back, the shoulder blades, the middle and lower back, the whole pelvic region.

As you sit, the sitting bones, genitals—just relaxed and soft. Down through the arms, into the hands, however you have them arranged. Can they rest there without extra effort or tension? You can sometimes find tension in the oddest places—in the upper arm or the calf of the left leg—moving down through the legs. However you're sitting, just releasing and relaxing into the sitting posture and into the feet.

There's a sense that the awareness has filled or touched all parts of the body. There's a sense of knowing the body in this intimate way through mindfulness—inviting the body into a degree of comfort, but not getting into a fight with it, wanting it to be completely different. Just as it is, can you find comfort and ease in this posture?

Out of that awareness of the body, begin to notice the movement of the breath. It comes in and goes out. It's often helpful to begin with a wide awareness of the breath, not immediately going to some narrow or simple sensation. This full body breathing, keeping the awareness quite wide and open, can often invite a softness in the mind that's helpful, especially at the beginning of a period of practice. So just notice the breath wherever you notice it. The attention might move around a bit. Perhaps you can take in the whole movement of the breath in this large field of awareness. Breath beginning at the nostrils, down the back of the throat. Maybe your shoulders lift, chest expands, diaphragm expands, belly moves. But do your arms move with the breath? Or your hands? Your thighs move, your calves or feet? Not trying to make something hap-

pen if it's not clear to you, but just expanding the awareness of breath to this experience of the whole body. Letting the mind be soft so it can move easily through this expansive awareness of body.

Within that field of breath, there may be a place where you most easily or clearly notice the sensations. Perhaps it's a place you often work with the breath. Maybe it's a new experience of breath at the nostrils, in the chest, or abdomen. If it feels helpful for you to simplify a little with the breath, to let the attention rest just in this one area, you can choose to do so. But especially in these early days, if you find that you're getting tight, contracted, trying to hold on to the breath, it can be helpful to open up in the way we just did, so there's a softness to the mind that's paying attention to the breath.

What we're really training here is the mind and its capacity to notice, its capacity to stay connected, present, alert. We're not training to be good breathers or to breathe in any particular way. We're just using the tool, the vehicle of the breath, to train the mind to be present. We keep that in mind as we do this practice. We're not holding onto the breath like it's a life preserver and we're drowning, kind of flailing away, trying to keep a hold of it. It's more like we're a fish swimming in an ocean of breath—just needing to breathe and noticing that you're breathing.

Of course the mind will wander into thought, thoughts of past or future, perhaps even commenting on this current experience. This is really natural and normal. We want to recognize that it's happening. We'll be talking much more about working with thought and attitude of mind. But for today especially, just notice your thinking—thinking or remembering—and not in a way of rejecting the thought, being aversive to it. Thought is what the mind does. But just a preferring of coming back to simply being with the breath and the body in this simple way.

If you find you're getting tired or dull—this often happens in the early days of a retreat—you can open your eyes, straighten up, breathe a little more deeply, or even stand up. Standing up is a great way to work skillfully with dullness or sleepiness.

We're just training to be present. We're not looking to have any particular experience. Just connecting moment after moment. What's happening now?

CHAPTER 2

Taking Refuge

Greg Scharf · 59 min

> *In this opening talk for the three-month retreat at IMS, Greg Scharf offers a rich exploration of the traditional chanting of the Refuges and Precepts, inviting practitioners to move beyond rote recitation into genuine contemplation. He examines what it truly means to pay homage and take refuge, unpacking the Triple Gem as wakefulness (Buddha), truth and natural law (Dhamma), and the community of practitioners aligned in shared intention (Saṅgha). The precepts are presented not as commandments but as a foundation of non-harming that creates safety for deep practice.*
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> *Scharf draws on teachings from the Aṅguttara Nikāya to illuminate how ethical conduct naturally leads through gladness, joy, and serenity to concentration and liberating insight. He explores the qualities of the Dhamma as chanted in Theravāda monasteries—sandiṭṭhiko (apparent here and now), akāliko (timeless), and ehipassiko (inviting investigation)—emphasizing that this path requires personal exploration rather than belief. The talk also introduces the pāramīs (perfections) as a way of understanding spiritual development that transcends narrow definitions of meditation practice.*
>
> *Practical guidance includes cultivating generosity of spirit, gratitude, and loving-kindness (mettā) as essential supports for retreat practice. Scharf offers the beautiful image of holding one's mind like a hawk—gently but firmly—encouraging practitioners to befriend rather than battle their inner experience. This approach of kind attention, he suggests, is the very ground from which freedom and love arise together.*

In a little while, we'll be chanting the Refuges and Precepts as part of the talk tonight.

In a certain sense, the entering into the formal retreat will really begin with the chanting of these refuges and precepts together—this ancient tradition of beginning a period of practice this way. Carol spoke a bit about the precepts last night, basically this orientation around non-harming, undertaking that commitment. The words on the sheet are familiar to most of you, maybe all of you. You've all done a number of retreats.

This language that we'll be chanting in, the Pali language, is an ancient language coming from the time of the Buddha. It's the language that the earliest texts are preserved in. The only reason we have this language is because these teachings have been preserved in this way. It doesn't exist for any other reason. It's not spoken anywhere

except in places where people are studying the ancient teachings of the Buddha. There's a certain power in a language that comes from that kind of lineage over the years, just in the sound and the feeling of the words in one's mouth as we speak them.

This evening we'll chant the five precepts. You'll notice there are eight on the sheet. In two or three days, we'll speak more about the sixth, seventh, and eighth precept. That's something some of you may wish to undertake. Some of you may already have decided you wish to practice this retreat undertaking these eight precepts, and you should please feel free to go ahead and do that. But we'll do a more formal taking of those eight precepts for those who wish to undertake this extra level of renunciation, you could say.

By chanting this, part of what happens in the doing of that is the creating of this retreat container. A retreat like this is a marvelous thing. It arises out of the conditions that come together that we bring here, this shared intention that we bring. It doesn't exist except through that coming together and bringing this intention we have to cultivate wisdom, love, kindness, clarity, understanding. We create a place of safety by engaging with these precepts. We create a safe place for us to undertake this practice, which is really a critical aspect of what we do so that we can really open in an environment where we feel safe, where we feel at ease. We voice this intention with the refuges and precepts together and we create this container of the retreat through that. And also, in a way, we will be touching our highest aspiration in voicing this, I feel.

I want to go through the Refuges and Precepts chanting, the format of this chant, because there's actually a lot there. We can tend to sort of say, "Oh, yeah, we'll do that, we'll get that in place, do that at the beginning of a retreat, we always do this chant"—and we either like it or we don't, that relationship we may have there. We can kind of figure, "Okay, it's done. That's done. Now I can get to the retreat." But there's a lot to this, and it's something that is an ongoing exploration. It's not something we just get in place and then that's it.

In this chant that we do, the first part is this homage: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa*. What does that mean, this homage? Yes, we have the translation there: "Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One." What does it mean to pay homage to something? This is something to reflect on—not an answer I'm going to give you now, but a reflection we might look at. What does it mean to do this, to pay homage? What would we hold as worthy of paying homage to? We don't use this word that much in daily life. "I'm going to go pay homage this afternoon"—we don't say that very often to our friends.

I got to go pay homage. It's an unusual word in a certain way.

You might have noticed the teachers, some of your fellow yogis—you yourself may come into the hall and bow, or gesture with a kind of gesture of respect. I usually bow three times to this Buddha image here behind me. It's a tradition to bow, to hold the hands in this posture, this mudra, anjali mudra. Anjali meaning respect—an offer of respect, a gesture of respect. This prayer posture at the heart center is said to represent a lotus bud, something that might flower forth, you could say. There's a certain beauty in that.

Some of you might wonder what's up if you see me or others bowing, wondering what's up with that, and if you're expected to start bowing if that's not something you're used to doing. If you're a good yogi, you'll start bowing. You have to become a Buddhist, whatever that is. So there's some expectation here. But none of us have an agenda about any of you becoming a Buddhist. It's helpful, I think, to remember that the Buddha was not a Buddhist. What is a Buddhist? We might ask ourselves that question.

But then we do, some of us, bow. I bow a lot. I like to bow. It's a good stretch for the back, if nothing else. But it's a beautiful gesture, and I bring a deep aspiration into my mind when I do it. I may say more about that as the retreat unfolds.

But what might we bow to? What would we pay homage to? What's worth venerating? It's not this sculpture here. We may like it, find it appealing or not. It's a casting in metal. I've made things like that—I used to do work that involved not making Buddha statues, but things that were cast, sculptures. There's some value to the metal, but there's no intrinsic, inherent value in that thing. And so, yes, we bow to what it symbolizes. That's an obvious point in a certain way—it's a symbol. But it's worth thinking about what that symbol is then.

Traditionally, one would bow three times to the triple gem—not new to you—the triple gem of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. Or we could say one bows to wakefulness, to wisdom, to one's potential for this realization. We can bow to that. We might find that worthy of paying homage to. Maybe this symbol of the historic Buddha has meaning for us in some way. But it's worth exploring, each of us in our own heart, in our own minds: what might we hold worthy of paying homage to in ourselves, in the world?

And then there is this idea of refuge. We go to these three refuges—we go to the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Three times we do it, not just once. We go to these things for refuge. What is refuge? Again, we don't say, "Oh, excuse me, I need to go take refuge," to our friends. Not very often, probably. But what is a refuge? It's a place of safety, right? It's like a safe harbor. Or you could say a place where we could put our heart that's safe. It's a secure place. And in a world that's constantly changing, that's unpredictable, where can we find that?

Where do we find a place of real safety in a world of change, a world that we can't predict in any way? Where do we find safety there?

And so we have this triple gem. We have refuge in the Buddha. It's said that after his awakening, after his enlightenment, after he'd spent time around the Bodhi tree and had become convinced that he would teach, the Buddha set off on a journey. He was looking for his former companions who would become his first five disciples. And he's walking down the road, and he looks good—just enlightened. He might look kind of good. He's glowing, radiant. And he meets someone on the road, and this person is struck by him and says, "Well, what are you? Are you a human? Are you a god?" And the Buddha said, "I am awake." That was his answer: "I am awake." The name Buddha, the root *budh*, means awake, wakefulness.

And so we have this image of the Buddha, this image of one who is awake, who has awakened. Maybe, as I said, this idea of the Buddha as a human who lived and had this realization might be meaningful to us. We might say there's a refuge in that—this refuge in wakefulness, in our own possibility to wake up. The Buddha said, if this were not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it. He's always pointing to this realization that he had. He said, that's what I want you to see—pointing to that always. That's all he was ever interested in. And it's always possible for us to wake up to the moment, to the truth of things. So it doesn't matter that things are changing or unpredictable. We can know the truth of the moment. We can take refuge there. That's a safe place—this wakefulness, awakening to the moment.

We have the refuge in Dhamma, the second of these. What is Dhamma? This word has more than one meaning. Dhamma means the Buddha's teachings. That's called the Buddhadhamma, all these teachings. And this is great for us. We don't have to figure this out all on our own. The Buddha did that, and he was pretty good at teaching it. So we have that as a resource to draw on.

The word Dhamma also means the law, like the law of nature. Again, it's the truth of how things really are. That's something we can know, potentially know in any moment. It's always there. That's a real place of safety. We can take refuge in the truth of nature, the law of nature, the way it is now.

And then the refuge in Sangha. Traditionally, it's the Ariya Sangha—those who have practiced after the Buddha and realized awakening following the path he was pointing to. That may have meaning for us also. In the chanting, it says, *Supaṭipanno Bhagavato Sāvakasaṅgho*—the Blessed One's disciples who have practiced well. And so we can perhaps take refuge in that lineage over time. Yes, these people walked this path that is

tried and true. There are those who have gone before us, who have walked it, and we can follow in their footsteps. We may take some quality of refuge in that lineage, that tradition, that movement over time.

One teacher defined this quality of sangha as this marvelous organism that we create through our shared intention, the alignment of shared intention—this heart inclination, you could say, towards love and wisdom, kindness. He described it as individuals looking into a common space, as if we were all looking into a room through our own window.

We all have our own window. We look into this room through these eyes, through all that we bring in our own hearts and minds—all our conditioning, our perspective on things. But we're looking into something that's more timeless and more universal than any individual story that might be there for any one of us. We're looking into something bigger than our individuality. And yet our individuality is there, and it's honored, and it's part of things—but no one vision is going to run the show. We look into something greater and create sangha.

So we're creating that here. And that is a place of safety for us, this shared intention.

And then we have the precepts themselves, this thing we'll actually chant. Carol spoke about the first five of these last night, so I won't go over them. You all should be familiar with them, I think. What we're undertaking here with these precepts is this orientation towards harmony, towards non-harming—not harming ourselves, not harming others. We're not intentionally adding to the suffering of the world.

And this is the very foundation. The whole practice rests on our conduct, on this sila, this ethical conduct. The Buddha talked about this on and on throughout the teachings—the importance of this, that no real progress is possible without this foundation of attention to how we live, how we are in the world. If everyone in the world made even a half-hearted attempt to engage with the precepts, we would have a golden age on this planet overnight. If everyone just thought about the possibility, it would change everything—let alone actually lived by these precepts. It would completely transform the world. This isn't a small thing that we do here. This is powerful and beautiful.

And our whole practice rests on this. It's something that is constantly being refined as our practice deepens and our understanding unfolds. If we live a life of non-harming, then the mind is free of remorse and worry. There's more calm, tranquility, and ease in our hearts and minds. This opens the whole practice. Concentration follows upon this. Our meditation deepens. Understanding arises.

The Buddha described this beautifully in a short teaching in the Anguttara Nikaya. Ananda asked him a question: "Lord, what is the benefit of virtuous ways of conduct? What is their reward?" And the Buddha goes through this list:

Virtuous ways of conduct have non-remorse as their benefit and reward. Non-remorse has gladness. Gladness has joy. Joy has serenity. Serenity has happiness. Happiness has concentration. Concentration has knowledge and vision of things as they really are as its benefit and reward. This knowledge and vision has disenchantment and dispassion as its benefit and reward. And disenchantment and dispassion have knowledge and vision of liberation as their benefit and reward. Hence, Ananda, virtuous ways of conduct lead step by step to the highest.

And in that same teaching, he goes on to say that this is a natural law. If this is there, then this follows, then this follows. It's just a natural thing. If one is steeped in virtuous ways of living, then these things follow naturally. One doesn't have to make an act of will. So it's a powerful thing.

These precepts are not laws or commandments. They're something we engage with as an exploration—to see what the effect of this is. And through our commitment to living this way, we're able to offer the gift of safety, of fearlessness. This is one of the most powerful gifts we could possibly offer—the gift of fearlessness.

That *sadhu* means "well-spoken." And it was well spoken.

As I walked over here through the woods from where I'm staying—one of the apartments at the Forest Refuge—I commute through the woods. I came out and it was a beautiful sunset time. People were doing walking meditation out in the driveway. I had mostly mudita and some envy for you, I'll admit it. I tried to get a friend of mine who was going on retreat to switch with me earlier today. "You teach. I'll sit."

It was just so beautiful to see people practicing here. It inspired me to do some walking meditation before coming in here.

Last night, Joseph spoke about three things that would be useful, important, powerful supports for the practice. He spoke about silence as the first of these, or at least one of them. I'm going to say a little bit more about this now.

If we just came here for this period of time—however long we're coming for, six weeks, three months—and we didn't do any formal meditation practice, just really kept silence, just did that, it would be a very powerful time. This entering into silence, and all the ways that we do that, is an incredible support for us.

I really want to encourage you to embrace that as a gift to yourself and as a gift to everyone else here—undertaking silence in all the different ways we might do that. Yes, we let go of speaking for the most part, this noble silence. We may need to speak at times, but for the most part, we're not speaking. But we have all these devices that we love so much.

I think we should be buried with these electronic things, like the ancient Egyptians got all their stuff. They'll pile us over, cover us with iPods and cell phones. But if you've brought any of these with you—I sometimes say throw them in the pond, but I don't want to pollute the pond. So put them in the trunks of your cars, or I think the office probably has a place where you can check them in like your guns at the door. Check in your cell phones. Really let them go.

And letting go of reading and writing as well, as much as possible. It's not like a "thou shalt not read or write," but looking to see what's the motivation behind reading or writing, really looking at that and letting it go.

In many of the monasteries where I have spent time, part of a chant that's done daily, usually part of the morning or evening chanting in these Theravada monasteries, there are reflections chanted on the qualities of the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha—kind of my theme tonight, this triple gem. The chanting of the recollection of the qualities of the Dhamma is really short. You'd think, "Oh, the Dhamma, it's giant. We should have this long chant. We should chant on and on and on about it." It goes like this: *Svākkhāto Bhagavatā Dhammo, Sandiṭṭhiko, Akāliko, Ehipassiko, Opaneyyiko, Paccattaṃ veditabbo viññūhi.* That's it. Done. But what is that? It's short, but there's a lot there.

So that first line, *Svākkhāto Bhagavatā Dhammo*, is usually translated as "the Dhamma is well expounded by the Blessed One"—well taught, well expounded. I already mentioned earlier that we have this wealth of teachings. It is well expounded. There's a tremendous body of teachings we draw upon, and all of us will be drawing on those teachings over the course of this retreat and offering them to you in different ways. So the Dhamma is well expounded. We have that huge body of teachings that we can draw on. And the Buddha had this amazing gift of being able to teach in ways that were appropriate, suitable for his audience. The teachings are presented in different ways. So we have that well-expounded teaching.

The second quality, *Sandiṭṭhiko*, is usually translated as "apparent here and now." Here and now. It points to the immediacy of this practice. It's apparent here and now, in this moment. It's not apparent somewhere way off in some other time or place. It's apparent here and now. It points to this immediacy—that the realization is in this mo-

ment. It's an ongoing thing, this exploration of the truth of things. The truth is always the truth, right? It's not sometimes the truth. It just is the way it is. That's what we're looking at. One of my teachers once said, "We're swimming in Nibbāna, and our faces are pressed up against the Buddha, but we just don't see it." But that possibility is there. So it's apparent here and now—*Sandiṭṭhiko*. We're not creating something or getting something we don't already have.

The third quality, *Akāliko*, means timeless. These teachings are not time-bound. They're just as relevant now as when the Buddha first taught. Not bound by time in that way. And when we undertake this exploration on a retreat, we enter into a very timeless place, don't we? Certainly that's my experience on retreat. Time becomes very fluid. It's a timeless place that we enter. And this understanding is timeless. It's not bound by time.

The truth was, is, and always will be the truth—not some idea, not some belief, but simply the way it is, just the way it is.

Ehipasiko. This is perhaps the most beautiful one: inviting all to come and see. When the Buddha first began ordaining the monks and nuns, he would simply say, "Come." That was it. Until they started misbehaving, and then they had to develop all these rules. But early on, it was simply, "Come. Come and see."

And so there's no belief here. It's not a question of adopting some kind of system of belief or philosophical stance that we take as "good Buddhists" or something like that. It's this exploration. We put this into practice for ourselves.

There's a beautiful teaching where the Buddha was traveling to the area where the Kalamas lived, a clan called the Kalamas. Apparently where they resided was frequented by many teachers. At the time of the Buddha, there were wandering teachers all over the place. When the Buddha arrived, the Kalamas said to him—and I'm paraphrasing—"You say this, and this teacher says that, and another one says something else. How do we know who to believe? They all talk a good line. They look good. You look good."

And the Buddha said, "Well, check it out. Put it into practice. See where it leads. Does it lead to good things or not? That's how you tell. You explore it for yourself."

And so we offer the retreat as teachers in this spirit of *ehipasiko*, come and see. Look for yourself. It's an invitation in that way.

Opanayiko—leading inward, or leading onward. I've seen it translated both ways, and both are good. Leading inward, because these are truths to be seen in this body and mind. We look into this heart, body, and mind right now. That's where understanding unfolds. So it leads us inward. We're exploring nature as it manifests in this mind, body, and heart, right now in this moment. And that's where we'll understand what the Buddha was pointing at.

The Buddha said we have everything we need in this fathom-long body for the whole deal. It's all right there. So it leads us inward to that place where we can really see what's going on, to the understanding that's possible there.

And it leads onward—onward to happiness, peace, freedom. We start to see this, to taste this for ourselves. So it leads both inward and onward.

And then this last phrase: to be seen by the wise for themselves, or to be experienced individually by those who are wise, as it's usually translated. The Buddha, like all great teachers, is pointing the way. The Buddha described himself by saying, "I am the guide who points along the way." All great teachers are pointing the way. Their fingers are pointing at the moon—or perhaps the moon is in your own heart—but they're pointing at that. They want you to look.

They all want you to see the moon, not the finger. Look at the moon. So they point at that, but then we have to walk on the path. They say, "This is the path. This is the path-way that worked for me." And all the great teachers—okay, "I started over here and I went that way"—they point in the way that they understood. And so then we can walk the path with those instructions, with those guidelines, with that pointing out, but we have to walk it for ourselves.

Our teachers can inspire us, and they can carry us with their faith and with their wisdom. Of course, that's true. And they may carry us a long way. But ultimately, it's up to us.

One way that this path is described is in terms of what's called the ripening of the paramis—paramitas in Sanskrit—familiar to you all, I'm sure. This list of the paramis, these ten beautiful, noble qualities of mind, of heart. In the tradition it is said that over countless lifetimes the Buddha perfected these things, and that in the awakened, enlightened heart and mind, these paramis are brought to perfection. This is a way that the path is described. These stories in the Jataka tales, these teaching fables where the Buddha takes birth often as an animal and cultivates generosity or patience or energy—all of these different paramis.

Here's Sariputta asking the Buddha a question: "How many qualities are there, Lord, issuing in Buddhahood?" "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, resolve, loving kindness, and equanimity. These, Sariputta, are qualities issuing in Buddhahood."

These are the paramis. And we can see our practice as these coming to greater and greater fruition or ripening. We can hold our practice in this way. It's a powerful way to hold the practice because it really expands the breadth of what we think of as practice. We can get kind of narrow with that. We think of practice as when I'm sitting in formal meditation on a retreat. But these qualities of the paramis—they're being cultivated, strengthened throughout our lives in so many ways, no matter what we're doing. So our practice can become very wide when we hold it in terms of the ripening of these beautiful qualities of mind, of heart.

This perspective can help us cut through the tendency to be constantly judging and assessing and evaluating our experience, evaluating and judging ourselves and our practice based on that experience—whatever seems to be happening in the moment. We can fall into that so easily, can't we? We judge our experience, we judge ourselves based on our perception of that experience. We focus on trying to meditate, trying to get concentrated, to do it, to make something happen. Maybe we're trying to reclaim something that happened in the past that we think was really it—to get it back. And we can miss qualities that are developing just through our willingness to keep at it, to start over and over, to begin again and again.

This is our whole practice. We're going to begin again a gazillion times over the next weeks. If you kept track, it would be a big number, that starting again. Maybe our whole retreat is about patience or energy or generosity and kindness. We can miss that if we narrow our focus down too much. So I encourage you to hold a very wide field of what we think of as our practice.

It's really important to look and see what kinds of attitudes and expectations we're bringing when we begin a retreat. What's in our mind and heart? What agendas might be there? Usually we have some kinds of agendas, something we're working on. It's good to look and see what's in there. What's going on? What am I bringing to the retreat? Looking at our assumptions about reality, about ourselves, about what we believe is true or possible.

He once said, "The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us—new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. This indeed is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control."

I really love this quotation. I use it a lot. I think it's a great description of mindfulness practice—this idea of waiting actively present to the moment, trusting that things will present themselves. And we have no idea what that is.

A colleague of mine describes this same quality, this active presence, as "soft readiness." I like that description of mindfulness—this soft readiness, and this idea of not knowing. Suzuki Roshi spoke about beginner's mind. Sometimes it's called "don't know mind." We let go of everything we think we know, all of our assumptions about what's true and real, and meet the moment with freshness and aliveness.

We can have such strong beliefs about who we are, about reality, about life. We don't even look at them. We don't even notice them. We don't question their truth. We take it for granted. We don't even look to see if it's true.

One time I was in Burma practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita, a teacher many of you have heard of. He's a powerful and incredible meditation master. He made this really simple statement. He said, "That which did not exist comes into being, takes birth, has its life, and passes away." That's the truth of each moment. It did not exist. It comes into being. We don't know. We think we know what a breath is. But do we really know what this breath is?

There's a quality that I think is really useful to bring to the retreat: a generosity of heart, a generous spirit. The path is also described as the trainings in *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā*—in giving, in ethical conduct, and in the training of the mind. So this quality of generosity is another foundation for the practice. I won't say too much about it tonight. Maybe later in the retreat, one of us will speak about this in more detail. But this generosity of heart is powerful support to our practice.

We might reflect on the generosity of those in our lives who have helped to make it possible for us to come here—people who are perhaps covering for us in various ways, who have helped to support us in order to come and be on retreat. Great generosity that we've received.

We're so conditioned to look to the external world and our circumstances for the reasons why we're happy or unhappy—looking outside for that. But cultivating this generous spirit can help us find a place of inner abundance, which doesn't have to do

with our external circumstances. An inner kind of wealth. We can feel that we're not complete so much of the time. And the whole world of advertising is conditioning this in us—all these things that we need, and then we'll be okay and happy and complete.

Generosity is an expression of non-greed, non-clinging. And this goes to the heart of the teachings. The Buddha taught liberation through non-clinging. So this generosity of heart is a direct antidote to clinging and grasping in the mind and heart. And it really opens the practice. When we find this quality of inner abundance, we can discover we don't need so much to be happy.

So see if you can hold this quality by giving yourself the gift of this retreat, giving yourself this time in silence, giving this gift of silence to everyone else who's here, sharing this time with you. Give yourself to the process as it unfolds.

And this generous quality of heart and mind can lead to two other really useful attitudes—climates of mind that can really help us. I'll mention them briefly. This generosity of heart, this quality of inner abundance, naturally conditions the arising of feelings of gratitude and of loving-kindness, of friendliness.

Those of us who are able to come and do this have a great deal to be grateful for, things we can easily take for granted. We don't tend to count our blessings. It's easy to see all that we seem to lack, all we feel we don't have. But to count one's blessings is a really beautiful thing to do.

Someone once told me they had a practice where every day they tried to think of five things they were grateful for. Just food and shelter. Here we have the opportunity to be on retreat, to hear the Dhamma, to practice. We have friends in our lives. All these things we might reflect on as things to be grateful for. It's really useful to turn our attention to that when it's so easy to see everything we think we don't have.

And this quality of loving kindness that Joseph mentioned last night—let me say a few more words about it. It really is a crucial aspect of the ground that our practice rests upon. This quality of friendliness engenders qualities of acceptance and patience, really critical for our practice to unfold. Metta, loving kindness, softens the heart, increases its pliability, its flexibility, its spaciousness. This quality puts us at ease, and all of these are really important and helpful in our practice.

This quality of loving kindness is not only compatible with the path, but it really pulls us along towards awakening, toward liberation. We could say liberation without love is not possible. And in an essential way, the practice of freedom is the practice of

love, and the practice of love is the practice of freedom. These things are not separate. The practice of meditation is about the transformation of the mind and the heart. You could say it's the practice of bringing the mind and the heart together.

There's a quotation from Krishnamurti I'd like to read that speaks to this beautifully. He said once, "When the heart enters into the mind, the mind has a very different quality. It is really then limitless, not only in its capacity to think and to act efficiently, but also in the sense of living in a vast space where you are part of everything. Meditation is the movement of love, and it isn't the love of the one or of the many. Rather, it's like water that anyone can drink out of any jar, whether golden or earthenware. It's inexhaustible. Without love, there is not freedom. Without love, freedom is merely an idea which has no value at all."

And finally, one last encouragement. I want to reiterate—I think I'm not the only one reiterating—Joseph's suggestion of making our mind our friend, befriending our mind, our heart. Put mind and heart together. We can approach practice like we're setting out into battle, set up a situation where we're in contention with our experience, with our mind, with our heart. We see our minds, our internal world, as a problem to be fixed or an enemy to be subdued. We bring a lot of judgment and criticism there.

But this practice requires the intention to understand rather than to judge. We need acceptance rather than struggle and resistance. We need kindness rather than blame.

A number of years ago, when I was living in San Francisco, I helped with a program studying the migration of hawks through the Golden Gate area. These big birds of prey don't like to fly over open water, so they cross at a narrow point there where the bridge is. They gather in the area north of the Golden Gate Bridge, and we were counting them, gently trapping them, banding them, measuring and weighing them, trying to preserve habitat for these birds and understand how they live.

You had to learn how to hold a red-tailed hawk. These are big birds, and they're fierce. They'll bite you or put a talon through your thumb if you're not careful. But they're also birds. They have hollow bones, and you have to be careful. So you have to hold them gently but firmly.

This is a good way we can relate to our mind and heart. Hold it somewhat firmly but very gently. We don't necessarily let our mind run all over the place, but we don't crush it in some way. We don't relate to our heart and mind as an adversary. We bring this quality of friendliness, of befriending our inner world. We receive life into this field of kind care.

I'll end tonight with a quotation from a Burmese teacher of mine, Sayadaw U Jotika.

How can you make your mind your real friend? By practicing mindfulness, by really watching your mind, by really paying attention throughout the day. Then you will see the truth about your mind. And when you see the truth, gradually it will become purer and it will become your friend.

Let these words drift off into the evening.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 3

Mindfulness of the Body

Sally Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this talk from the 2012 IMS Three-Month Retreat, Sally Armstrong examines the crucial role of kāyagatāsati (mindfulness of the body) as the first foundation of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10). She explores how our relationship to the body develops from infancy through adulthood, often becoming distorted by cultural conditioning, comparison, and unconscious attitudes that we bring into meditation practice.*
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> *Armstrong addresses the common tendency toward disembodied meditation—floating above experience rather than landing in the truth of the present moment. She discusses the body contemplations found in the suttas, including the 32 parts of the body practice (asubha), clarifying that the Buddha's intention was not to cultivate disgust but rather equanimity and clear seeing. Drawing from her own practice experience with these contemplations, she describes how intimate awareness of the body can lead to both amazement at its miraculous processes and freedom from identification.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working skillfully with bodily pain and pleasure during retreat practice. Armstrong emphasizes finding the balance between effort and relaxation, between persistence and kindness—learning to stay present at our edge without creating unnecessary struggle. She reminds practitioners that while the body is our vehicle for awakening, lasting freedom comes through transforming the mind's relationship to experience, seeing the body as 'not me, not mine, not myself' while still caring for it with wisdom and compassion.*

I want to start tonight with some words of the Buddha from the first verse of the Dhammapada, a set of short teachings of the Buddha. This text goes:

Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak or act with an impure mind and unhappiness will follow you as the wheel of the cart follows the ox that draws it. Mind is the forerunner of all things. Mind is chief. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you like your shadow, unshakable.

I've always loved this short teaching because it really points to the importance of understanding, training, and purifying the mind, and the happiness that can come from that.

But the Buddha also said, "Within this fathom-long body, with its thoughts and perceptions, is the world, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to the cessation of the world—within this fathom-long body."

And so that points to the importance of also understanding the body and the nature of the body, and clarifying our relationship to the body. Even though I think the work of meditation is primarily the work of the mind and the cultivation of the mind—it's through the mind we mainly suffer and through the mind we find freedom—understanding the nature of the body and having a wise attitude toward the body, developing mindfulness of the body, is incredibly important. That's what I want to talk about tonight: mindfulness of the body.

If you think back to the beginning of this body—your body, virtually any body as far as I can see—it began in union. Union of egg and sperm in our case: mother's egg, father's sperm. There was that moment of union. But from that moment on, it's a constant process of separation and individuation. This miracle, really, of those cells separating and becoming unique—becoming cells of the skin and the liver and the tongue and the other organs, the muscles and the bones. It's quite amazing. This process starts immediately, separating and individuating. And of course, with birth, there's that separation from the mother and the cutting of the cord, and so we move more and more into separation.

But the newborn baby doesn't quite realize that it's separate. It takes some time. If you watch a baby, you'll see this process: "Oh, that's my finger. That hurts when I do that." Discovering toes and ears, really coming into this relationship to the body out of what was a state of intimacy and a sense of connectedness to everything. This sense of individuation happens, and you see a young baby or child begin to use the body to get what it wants—to reach or throw, to laugh or cry, to move around in the world—so that we use the body as our agent in the world, so we can get what we want.

Because of all these processes, it creates that original sense of self and separation, self and other, that we separate and individuate. Also what happens is the body becomes most clearly or obviously simply me. I am the body. I look out of the body onto the world and I'm separate from the world. This process keeps deepening as we age.

At some point in that process comes self-consciousness. As we develop this awareness of the body and its sense of separateness, comparing starts to happen, and even shame can start to happen around the body that we used to be so easy and natural about. Of course, the archetypal image of this is Adam and Eve. When they lived in

paradise in innocence, they were naked, and when they got some wisdom or understanding, they became ashamed of the body and had to cover it up. There's a whole long story about that, but it still ripples through our culture today.

So we learn all these different attitudes about bodies—about our own body and about other bodies. We can get into really training the body if we get into athletics or sports. You just had the Olympics, where we saw the pinnacle of what people can do if they train the body. Or many of us get into ignoring the body and just living from the neck up, without a sense of being embodied, being in the body—a kind of denial of the body. We can get into obsessing over and valuing the body, believing it's all about looks and appearance, that a certain type of look is better than another. Or we can fall into abusing the body because of some lack of self-care or self-worth.

All of us, to some degree or another, get into judging or comparing the body at some point in our development—and probably still to this day—because we have this sense of responsibility or ownership, even though when you look at the basics of the body, how little we have control over. What our hair is like or our skin is like or how tall we are—we have no control over that. But we have so much of a sense of self and ownership of the body that it creates all of these kinds of relationships, these attitudes toward the body. We can become obsessed with this relationship or these attitudes.

What's interesting, when we start to look a little more clearly at what's happened, is that our ideas about our body particularly, but even any body—

Our image of our body is often not accurate. It's really actually quite distorted. And many of us don't like our bodies. We look in the mirror and we don't like what we see.

Especially—and I think this might relate more to women—there's the terror of the changing room at a department store with the bright lights and the three-way mirror, where it seems like every flaw gets exaggerated. Bathing suit season is kind of the ultimate expression of that: having to go in there and try to squeeze into something where, it seems, the smaller they are, the more expensive they are.

But what we're doing there is comparing ourselves, usually to some idea or even more to an ideal of what a body should look like. And of course, it's always thinner, younger, and stronger than the one we actually have. Even as we age, what we used to be critical of at thirty-five—don't you wish you had that back now, at whatever age you are? Because there's always this sense of not-good-enoughness, this not-okayness that we can carry around about this body.

The thing is that these ideals we're comparing ourselves to are actually fiction. Even more so these days, where virtually every image you see in a magazine, and certainly all the advertisements, is photoshopped—to some amazing extent, actually. There are whole websites that just document photoshopping and the distortions created by people who seem to have no clue about what a body actually looks like. What they do especially to models: they have no elbow, or no hip, or all kinds of bits stuck on or left out in their photoshopping. It even goes to the extent that, especially with celebrities, they'll put the celebrity's face on someone else's body in the photo because the celebrity's body wasn't good enough to be put out as this ideal image of what we should look like.

So it's no wonder that we get kind of screwed up about this, because we're always seeing these images and they don't look like real bodies. They don't look like my body—because they're not real. Even the models get photoshopped and made thinner to the point of looking almost alien, they're so thin. But this is the message we get over and over again about what a body should look like, whether it's thinner or stronger or more muscular or smoother or whatever. We take this in. And so we all have some sense of our body, of this body, and a view of it that doesn't often match reality.

I want to read an excerpt from a book by Larry Rosenberg, who's this great teacher—many of you probably know him. He teaches at Cambridge Insight Meditation Center and has written a couple of my favorite dharma books. This one is from *Living in the Light of Death*, where he looks at the death contemplations and these traditional practices, but he brings a great sense of humor to it.

So this is from Larry's book:

"I am a person who takes very good care of himself. I do yoga most mornings, I take long vigorous walks, I meditate a great deal, and I'm careful about food supplements and the food that I eat."

Sound familiar? Anyone else relate to that as a description of yourself?

"About three years ago when I was sixty-three, I was on the subway in Boston coming back from a trip to the dentist. I comfort myself with the thought that I may have looked a little peaked from my dental work. I was standing there holding on to the metal rail when a young woman seated in front of me smiled and stood up and gave me her seat. I didn't realize at first quite what was happening. I thought she was getting off at the next stop. But that stop went by, and the next, and I started to realize—wait a minute, a young woman just gave me her seat on the subway.

"My mind started racing. I wanted to say to her, 'You've got it all wrong. I get up and give my seat to you. I've been giving up subway seats all my life.' But apparently, from her standpoint, this looked appropriate. She was a young, vigorous, healthy woman. And I, it seemed, looked like a man who needed to sit down. All my years of doing yoga, of eating good food, and taking long walks were wasted. I looked my age anyway.

"Next time it would be, 'Hey grandpa, how'd you like a seat?' Or, 'Slow down old-timer, let me help you with those packages.' My self-image as a youthful, bouncy, older man—an image I didn't even know I had—had been smashed to pieces. This was not a bad experience. It was actually good. A young woman made a courteous gesture, and I got to take a load off my feet. It was what I did with it before my awareness returned and I had a good laugh at myself that mattered. It was a modern-day rite of passage, an initiatory moment that let me know that I was in a new category. It shattered my self-image."

So we've all had those moments, whether it's getting carded when you're going to a bar and wishing you weren't, or stopping getting carded and wishing they would, or getting your AARP card in the mail, or showing up at the movie counter and having them automatically give you a senior discount without asking for it. These things happen. We get reflected back an image that we don't hold as true for ourselves, because most of the time we have a somewhat distorted image of the body and what it's like.

I read an article some time ago on body image—there's a great deal written about it because it's so fascinating. The article, written by a doctor, defined body image as "our mind's eye image of our physical appearance in contrast with the outer image as rated by an unbiased observer." Most would assume these two would correlate substantially, but studies have shown the overlap to be astonishingly low—at just five percent. Only five percent correlation between what we think we look like and what an unbiased observer would say.

It's this body image that is closely related to psychological factors and clinical conditions like eating disorders, depression, and low self-esteem. We don't have an accurate idea, really, of the body. And so there's a great deal of suffering around this in our culture. This distortion can lead to conditions like anorexia—never feeling thin enough, even when one is very thin. Or now there's what's called bigorexia, where especially young men don't feel muscular enough and are always wanting to be bigger, more muscular. So much distortion, so much pain, because of this not understanding the body.

There's a disconnect that happens. The body can come to be seen as almost an enemy—something we have an aversive attitude toward for one reason or another. Definitely this sense of separation, a lot of conflict around the body and our relationship to

it. Because it's seen as this separate thing. Even though we're identified with it, we're in a conflicted relationship to it. You probably know that line from James Joyce: "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." It leads to these distorted ways of relating—where we're in conflict with the body, or obsessed with it, or in denial, not connected.

And we can bring those kinds of ideas, often unconsciously, into our meditation practice. We're frequently not aware, as Larry said, of the image that we have or the relationship that we have to the body. But it's really important to begin to explore what that is—how we actually relate to the body, our attitudes toward it—because it definitely impacts how we do our meditation practice, how we practice mindfulness of the body.

There's a lengthy excerpt I read some time ago by Reginald Ray, a Tibetan teacher. It appeared in the Shambhala Sun, and he talks about how we bring that relationship into meditation, often in a way that's not so helpful. He writes:

"Buddhist meditation as practiced in the West frequently suffers from a profound disembodiment. Often we meditate from the neck up, as floating heads completely cut off from the life of our bodies and our physical existence in the world. We meditate in this way because we believe, often without realizing it, that the ideal meditative state should somehow be devoid of the pain, complexity, ambiguity, and physicality—in other words, the full embodiment of our natural human condition.

"You may object that the Buddha taught a Dharma whose goal was to show the way out of suffering. Quite true. But often in our Western practice of Buddhism, we mistake the goal for the path, seeing the Buddha's attainment of the goal as a description of how we should go about meditating. Many of us, when we sit down to practice, do so with a longing for quiet and peace. No problem. But then our meditation becomes an exercise in trying to attain such a state. It's here our problems begin.

"If we are experienced and skillful enough, perhaps we have figured out how to meditate so as to remove ourselves from the pain, uncertainty, and groundlessness of our lives and enter into a much more satisfying, unambiguous state of mind that we identify as 'the meditative state.' What could possibly be wrong with this?

"The problem is that in this approach, we are expressing and strengthening the profound dualism that has afflicted Western culture since at least the early Christian world of St. Paul. The view of meditation as disembodiment involves not only our idea that we meditate to remove ourselves from the dirt and detritus of our habitual mental states. More subtly, it is our mental image of an ideal disembodied state that we, perhaps unconsciously, hold up before ourselves every time we sit down to practice. This may be

based on a memory of a state experienced in our own practice or with a respected teacher, or something we have read or heard. No matter what specific practice we may be using, this mental image, whether conscious or unconscious, is guiding and directing our meditation. It will limit how we are able to engage and how much we are able to experience, and it will restrict what we are able to see."

I found that so interesting—this tendency, especially when it's unconscious, to want to float above a little bit, to want to be in this more easeful realm that of course feels appealing but doesn't actually land in the truth of the moment, the truth of this body. Our practice is to connect with what's true about the moment, with what's true about here and now, as it actually is.

Joseph gave this beautiful teaching this morning about recognizing, or coming back again and again to, the simple fact: there is a body. This is so important. And so there is this invitation to open to the reality that there is a body, and in that opening, to connect to the body as it is—however it is in this moment. Not a memory of how it was yesterday, not a projection of what we'd like it to be, not some ideal of the body or some escape from the body, but actually as it is.

And so as we're trying to see clearly, a big part of what we see, what forms the ground of our meditation, is this mindfulness of the body. We need to really see that the body is our vehicle for awakening. As much as it's the work of the mind, so much happens through our awareness of the body, because a lot of what we actually know is body-based. We're knowing it through the mind, yes, but emotions, moods, and of course pain and different sensations all register and manifest in the body. Our ability to connect directly with that—with as little filtering, as little projection, as immediate as possible—is enormously powerful to see the actual nature of the body, its felt sense. And this can be the beginning of challenging the assumptions or ideas we have about the body.

To meditate, all we need is a body and a mind, of course, but as the sutta points to, mindfulness enough that there is a body, and awareness and mindfulness of that. Of course it can deepen, but it doesn't matter what kind of body. It just matters that there is a body and that we can be aware of it. And so it starts to challenge the assumptions that we have about a body—that this body isn't good enough, isn't okay, isn't the right body, isn't healthy enough, or tall enough, or strong enough, or whatever it is. And also, as we get deeper, even these assumptions about separation, or the body as me, as mine—we start to look at the very relationship to the body and see it can be a source for

huge suffering and identification. Or a place of awakening, a place where we can actually find freedom through our relationship and understanding of the very nature of the body.

So the body and our relationship to it, our attitude toward it, is incredibly important in our practice. We need to begin to understand what's a skillful relationship, a wise relationship, a wise attitude toward this body right now, right here.

Throughout history there have been great histories of obsessing about the body or idealizing, glorifying the body. So much art is about the beauty of the body. And bodies, of course, have beauty, can be incredibly beautiful—the statue of David or Venus de Milo, all of the beautiful art. There's also a long history of denying the body throughout Christianity—flagellation, asceticism, all those kinds of practices of denying the life of the body. And Buddhism has a thread of that too.

If you know the story of the life of the Buddha, before he was enlightened he did many years of rigorous self-asceticism, really extreme practices of not eating or bathing, sleeping outdoors. He was so thin it's said that if he pressed his belly button he could feel his spine. And then he realized that wasn't the way. The idea he had was that if he tortured the body enough, somehow the spirit, the soul would transcend and go free. But he saw it wasn't getting anywhere. So he took some food and discovered what he came to call the middle way—that the extremes of indulgence are not praiseworthy, not onward leading, but also asceticism is not helpful. He discovered this middle way and realized that practitioners need the four requisites of food and shelter and medicine and clothes, that we need to take care of this body so that it can do this kind of practice.

Now, of course, what he considered the middle way we would these days think of as really extreme asceticism, but the valuing that he put upon the body being healthy is a lesson that we can really take. He said you need to take medicine if the body is ill. We need to take care of ourselves. It's not about soldiering on through difficulty.

So knowing the body intimately is a central part of this kind of meditation practice. There are many other kinds of meditation that go into mantra or visualizations, but our practice is really grounded in mindfulness of the body. It is the first foundation of mindfulness that Joseph was talking about tonight. It's where the Satipatthana Sutta—which really is the description of the practice that we do here—begins, with mindfulness of the body and six different practices that you can do with the body, each one having a number of subsets underneath it. So there's a very evolved and even complex set of practices that the Buddha talked about for working with the body and mindfulness of the body.

This is where we begin. And it's great that this is the place we start. It's where we're most intimate—not going off into some esoteric realm, but here, relating to this body right here. And so it begins with the breath and knowing intimately the nature of the breath, using the breath to calm the body and bring well-being to the body. Then opening up to the body in all these different ways through the four elements and the body in action, body in movement. There's a whole section in the sutta on the thirty-two parts of the body. It's not a practice that we teach in a retreat like this because it's very complex, but if you know that sutta, there's this list of body parts that begins with head hair, body hair, nail, skin, teeth, and goes on to all of the fluids of the body—the pus, phlegm, blood, urine—and the muscle and the bone, the heart and the liver.

The practice is really to develop this intimate relationship, not just with the superficial skin and sensations of the body, but actually with all of these parts of the body. Traditionally this practice is called asubha practice. In some translations—even in Bhikkhu Bodhi's usually wonderful translations—it's often translated with headings like "the loathsomeness of the body," or framing the body as somehow disgusting. In the commentaries especially, this was taken to be the attitude that this practice would develop.

I was really curious about this practice because it's right there in the sutta, but I was never taught it. I didn't know anyone who was even teaching it. So one time when I was on self-retreat at the Forest Refuge, I took it upon myself to teach myself how to do it. I found what little I could that was written about it and began to try to practice it in the way the commentary described—that's the most that was written that I could find at the time—along with what was in the text itself.

Luckily, there's a library over at the Forest Refuge, and I happened to find the catalog from the exhibition called Body Worlds. You know that exhibition? A doctor was able to get these corpses, dead bodies, and put them through a process he called plastination—some kind of preserving of the bodies that enabled them to be maintained in lifelike positions, but dissected. So this catalog was just photos of bodies that were opened up in all kinds of ways: the organs, the musculature, the bones, the nervous system, the circulatory system.

That became my bible for the practice, because I didn't really have any idea what the spleen looked like, or the gallbladder, or all these different parts. Some you have a sense of, but knowing where they were exactly, their color, and so on—that was new. The practice itself has a whole regimented way you do it, where you work through groups of five or six body parts, going forward and backward, then adding the next group. It's very concentrating and quite an amazing practice. I only did it for two or three weeks, so I'm certainly not an expert, but I found it to be really profound.

And instead of loathsomeness of the body—as the text kept pointing to, "this will incite disgust, one should view the body this way"—I actually, I wouldn't say fell in love with the body, but I really became in awe of the body. It was just shown to me what a miracle this body is. How much goes on in the body that we have no clue about, and certainly no control over—all the hormones that get secreted, the regulation of blood sugar, all of the processes happening automatically. It's a miracle, this body.

So that sense of wonder was developed, but also a great deal of equanimity, because it's hard to get identified with the liver. You know, *my* liver or *my* kidney—when I saw all these photos, they all looked pretty much the same, maybe a little different in size, but there was this basic universality to body. So it certainly wasn't a practice of disgust for the body, but actually amazement at the body.

But these kinds of practices, and the way especially some of the commentaries wrote about them, have given Buddhism a flavor sometimes of a negative view of the body. And again, it's somewhat understandable. These practices were carried out and passed on through monastic traditions mainly, and monastics were celibate. These practices were often done to combat and work with passion and lust as it arose for one's own body—but you could also do these practices contemplating other bodies—so it was a real skillful means.

As lay people, though, we need to have a different relationship to the body. But even in that practice itself and in the words of the sutta, to me it's not an invitation to loathsomeness, to thinking "Oh, isn't this icky, all this blood and phlegm and pus." The image that the Buddha used is that the practitioner looks at the body as though it was a sack with holes at both ends, filled with all kinds of grains—red beans and black beans and green beans and lentils. And you'd simply say, "This is red beans, this is black beans." So it's just looking and saying, "This is what the body is made of." You look at a pile of rice—it's not disgusting. There's just that real sense of equanimity. This is simply the nature of the body. So I don't think creating a sense of aversion was the Buddha's intention. Actually, the opposite. There has to be this balanced appreciation of the body.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who is one of our great scholars and writes and translates voluminous amounts, said this about this question: "Although early Buddhism is widely believed to take a negative attitude towards the body, the texts of the Pali Canon do not support this belief. They approach the body both in its positive role as an object of meditation—to develop mindfulness, concentration, and the mental powers based on concentration—and in its negative role as an object for unskillful states of mind. Even in its negative role, the body is not the culprit. The problem is the mind's attachment to the body. Once the body can be used in its positive role to develop mindfulness and concen-

tration, those mental qualities can be used to free the mind of its attachment to the body. Then, as many a modern meditation master has noted, the mind and body can live in peace."

So it's not about needing to be detached from the body, or averse to the body, or having some kind of disembodied meditation—but rather a wise and skillful relationship to the body.

The body in all of its aspects, inner and outer, and in all the postures. Again, in the sutta it talks about awareness of sitting, walking, standing, and lying down—that we meditate in all these four postures. And so our practice is really to start to know the body in this intimate way, this direct way without filters or projections or ideals or distortions.

When we start to be aware of the body in this way, when we close our eyes in meditation, what is it that we actually experience? There's this invitation that Joseph mentioned: just this awareness that there is a body. But when you close your eyes, what actually is there? It's not a body in the sense of a concept. What we actually experience are different degrees and areas of pressure and warmth and coolness, tingling and vibrating and pulsing. This is what our actual experience of the body is.

And in that, we start to see quite literally, quite immediately, the changing nature of the body. It's not one thing, it's not solid, and it's certainly not permanent. It's this fluctuating, flowing set of processes that even as you bring mindfulness to them can often change. The very awareness of them changes our relationship to it.

But from that inner experience, we make a whole world. All of these ideas and attitudes and good and bad and this and that and not enough of this. And we identify: my pain and my back and my body. The Buddha's instruction, again from this Satipatthana Sutta, a little earlier than where Joseph was speaking, says, "Here bhikkhus"—and a bhikkhu is anyone who's a serious practitioner—"here bhikkhus, a bhikkhu lives contemplating the body in the body." And this is another important part of that sutta. In the body—not in the idea of the body, the concept of the body, but in the body itself. Ardent—this is that word I was referring to the first night about courage, ardency—ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful of it, having overcome covetousness and grief for the world. That one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world.

And it goes through seeing all of the five aggregates, which starts with the form aggregate of the body, then feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. We'll talk more about these as the retreat goes on. When we look at the body in that way, we see it as not me, not mine, not who I am. It's just this set of processes, this

changing, flowing, alternating set of experiences. This is actually what we can know as the body, as a meditator. This is the beginning of a wise relationship to the body—to see it in this way.

So part of our challenge is that we see this body in some ways as kind of impersonal. As I said, my liver, your liver—it's just a sensation. You don't have to even say "my sensation," certainly not "my pain" or "my knee." But how do we do that and at the same time care for the body? How do we find this balanced attitude to the body so that there is some ease in the meditation? Because it is hard to meditate when there's a constant struggle, either through ideas or literally in the experience of the body—or certainly if we're not connected to the body, if we can't land here in our experience of the body in this direct and immediate way.

So there's a balance that we're always exploring between seeing the body in this kind of impersonal way and actually caring for the body, bringing kindness to the body, even healing the body, and creating a healthy relationship with the body. Many of you probably know the power of meditation for healing. I'm not talking about miracles, but just bringing balance into the body. The great work that Jon Kabat-Zinn has done—who's a practitioner of this kind of meditation, friend of all of ours and a student here at IMS—from this meditation he developed MBSR, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, that has now gone on to serve countless people, probably hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, who are dealing with chronic pain or stress. And through mindfulness, they find balance, find ease that medication couldn't touch, that other forms of therapy couldn't touch. Just through the power of mindfulness and bringing a kind awareness to the body through this process of scanning, of using the mindfulness to scan through the body.

Now here on a retreat like this, our intention isn't just to get comfortable. It's not just to get rid of pain, to make the body feel better, but to awaken. We want to wake up. We want to find freedom, deeper happiness, more understanding. So finding this right balance in our relationship to the body is really so important.

Here we are on the first day or so of a long retreat. There's bound to be discomfort in the body for virtually everyone—I guarantee it. It's just like starting up at the gym or training for any kind of activity. There's just the getting used to the schedule and the long hours of sitting and the kind of walking meditation that we do, and adjusting to the conditions here. So I guarantee that you've all, to some extent or another, had an uncomfortable body at some stage in these early days, and that will continue to some degree or another as we go on.

So we need to know: how do we take care of the body in a way that's balanced? And this is, I think, a big art of meditation. When we listen to the body and give it rest or ease or a break, we move the posture if it's really uncomfortable. I really don't feel that we can meditate effectively if the mind is like a tight fist, if we're just gritting our teeth and making it to the end of the sitting. If we're doing that over and over again, it's just not that helpful.

And so it's just a place to explore. What's the edge there? And can I just get curious, even for a moment?

And if the mind's too tight, if the body simply isn't able to stay, sure, it's much better to go to something more spacious—to move, to breathe in a way that's easier. But to be willing to work with the edge of that also.

Sometimes we need great determination to actually stay present. My first teacher, my first retreat, was with S. N. Goenka. He's a very fierce teacher, and his retreats are very demanding. I had no clue what I was getting into.

And it's not many days in that he has what he calls vow hours, where the meditation is for an hour and you are not to move. You're not to move your hands or your shoulders or your feet, your legs, or anything. And I would just be hanging on for grim whatever, by the skin of my teeth, waiting for that click. He would click the microphone before he rang the bell. You'd just be waiting till that happened.

But I found I could do it. It wasn't pleasant. I don't know how mindful I was. I was just hanging in there. But I really saw something—to sit through something you didn't think you could sit through. How often do we say to ourselves, "I can't bear this anymore"? But if you have enough mindfulness to see that thought in the mind and look at it, you often find you can. You can bear it a moment more, and perhaps even get curious about it.

So this is the shifting that can happen as we start to inhabit this body, really be very present for it. And of course, in the life of the body there are also pleasant experiences. And we love those, don't we? Of course we do. It's understandable that we do—if the body is feeling light and blissful or joyful or spacious or open, wonderful. We need to also know that, be intimate with that, be mindful of that.

But as we often say, the worst thing that can happen to a meditator is to have a good experience, because then that becomes the metric by which we judge every other sitting, and we can get lost. Many of you probably have stories of how long it took you to

let go, to the final nth degree, of longing for that great experience you had five years ago on your first retreat or your second retreat. It can really be a great challenge to the practice.

So yes, we need to appreciate and open to when the body is in that state—it's beautiful, it's wonderful when that happens—but it's also impermanent. And if we cling to it, it is a source of suffering. In the wise relationship, we start to see that. How often have you had an experience where the body is like that and the thought comes in: "Ah, now I've got it. This is how meditation should be. Somehow I turned the corner. Whatever the instruction was, whatever practice I was doing, this is what it's going to be like now for the rest." Even as we're saying it, we know it's not true, but there's this vain hope that somehow we're going to hold on to this beautiful experience of the body. And what happens? It changes. What happens next? We suffer.

So it is being willing to be with this immediacy of the body. How it is right now. How can we be with that, open to that? And so we see that the body isn't a source of lasting happiness. This is not what the Buddha was pointing to when he talked about freedom. It doesn't happen just in the body. The mind has to be transformed.

So we develop over time, through practice, through our own experience—and again, this is the power of this practice, your own exploration—what is a skillful relationship for you to this body? Not what was skillful yesterday, not what you think should be skillful, but right now, as it is. And to recognize: this body is the vehicle for our awakening. It's the body that we will walk on the path with. But we have to have a wise relationship. We care for it, we feed it, we clean it, we stretch it, we do whatever we need to do to keep it in balance—but we recognize that it is just a vehicle, in some ways impersonal. We don't own the body.

So the Buddha said over and over again: not me, not mine, not myself. It is just the body. We see it in its elemental nature—just heat and cold, earth element, air element, fire element, water element. This is the actual nature of the body. And developing that kind of relationship, of seeing clearly, is the way to the path of freedom that the Buddha talked about again and again.

So I want to close with another verse from the Dhammapada, pointing to this wise relationship to the body.

Whoever, although she's heard next to nothing, sees Dhamma through her body is not heedless of Dhamma. She's one who maintains the Dhamma.

At the end of talks, we like to have some silence to let the words settle. You don't need to change your posture. It's simply about letting the words fade into the background and coming into a direct connection with your experience—your body, your breath, your mind—as it is right now.

CHAPTER 4

Three Jobs Of The Yogi

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson offers a simplified framework for meditation practice drawn from her teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya: the three jobs of a yogi. The first job is cultivating sammā diṭṭhi (right view)—understanding why we practice and recognizing that freedom from suffering is possible. Wilson emphasizes the Buddha's invitation of 'ehipassiko' (come and see for yourself), noting that awakening doesn't transport us to a different world but transforms how our hearts and minds relate to experience. Right view also includes recognizing things 'yathā bhūta'—as they have come to be through causes and conditions.*
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> *The second job is simple awareness (sati)—mindfulness of what's happening now without trying to manipulate or improve experience. Wilson explores how the kilesas (mental torments) of greed, aversion, and delusion color our perception and obstruct accurate recognition of reality. Through personal examples, including her attachment to tennis outcomes, she illustrates how samsaric patterns of wanting create suffering even in seemingly enjoyable activities. She emphasizes that mindfulness doesn't judge but gets interested in exploring experience.*
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> *The third job is perseverance—the steady, moment-to-moment continuity of awareness that allows wisdom to arise naturally. Wilson stresses that we cannot force insight; rather, the conditions for paññā (wisdom) emerge through relaxed yet persistent mindfulness. She offers Joseph Goldstein's practical tip of reversing our usual priorities, making daily activities the primary focus of awareness practice rather than formal sitting.*

So tonight what I want to talk about is, hopefully, a way of simplifying things, which isn't really the way my mind works. But we give so many different instructions. So I'm borrowing from one of the ways that one of my teachers, Sayadaw Utejania, talks. I find he has a very pithy and, to me, amusing way of putting things. And so what I want to talk about, borrowing from him, is the three jobs of a yogi. That's you, and me, and all of us—the three jobs—which is hopefully to simplify.

So of course, all beginning by recognizing, which hopefully we do, that meditation is the work of the mind. The three jobs are the work of the mind.

The first one, the first job, our job, is to begin not only our meditation but our whole spiritual practice with some form of right view. Now, right view in the way that the Buddha speaks about it in the suttas is a vast topic, encompassing so many different

things. And just for this beginning way of our first job, I want to talk about it very simply, not all the ways you have to understand what's wholesome action and what's unwholesome action. You could go on and on, and we probably will over the next few weeks because it's fascinating.

But this beginning aspect, our first job, is simply having some sense of knowing why we're doing this. That there's a possibility for less suffering, if you just want to put it that simply. To have some basic understanding that what we're doing is in a good cause, that there's something behind it. We're not just kind of sitting and walking and following the breath and being aware. You know how sometimes you're just doing it without really any sense of why. So right view is just knowing that it's possible to come to a different way of relating to our life. It's possible—not that we know it yet for ourselves—but this sense of a direction, the sense of a potential to live with more peace and ease. That's my language. You find your own.

That's why, for myself, I think I've always loved and why I spend my life sharing the teachings from the Buddha. I mean, there's so many different ways in this world to practice for awakening, to understand our life better. But I've always loved the way the Buddha describes things. His teachings are complex, but at the core, at the heart, I feel —this is me now—he's just taking us into the core of life, the core of experience.

What he says is that he started his own journey by just seeing how this life is. Why do we suffer? This life with all its beauty and all its marvels and so much sorrow—why is there this suffering? Why do beings, starting with himself, suffer? Why are we unhappy? Why are we discontented?

And then his whole trajectory of practice was not sitting and railing against it or trying to think about it, but setting out in an exploration of his own experience, his own mind and body, to really look into, to really explore and see. Does it have to be this way, that there's so much discontent, dis-ease, suffering? Is there another way? Is there a cause? Is there an end of it? What is it? So you can hear the whole Buddha's teaching in that.

I'm staying simple tonight with that sense of not just going out and following the stream or going by what was taught before, but looking for himself. And so what he offers, all the Buddha's teachings, are a path—what he discovered, what he shared, what he can offer us. But in the end, as I think someone has already said on this retreat, one of the core ways he teaches is the word in Pali, *ehipassiko*, which is lovely: come and see for yourself. You too, come and see. He's saying, I can see this. I know for myself that it's possible to awaken from this dream of confusion and delusion. This is how I did

it. This is what I understand. Come and see for yourself. It's an invitation to explore, an invitation to really make good use of this precious life. And as he said in many different places, if it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so.

So that's what I've always loved, what I continue to love—this invitation—because it's necessary that we look and see for ourselves at this very salient point of life. And the most essential thing, again, that I really love is that when, as far as we can tell from reading, when the Buddha awakened and claimed his full awakening, he did not awaken into a different world. He awoke into the same body, the same physical conditions. People didn't start suddenly behaving better. There were still wars, there were still famines, there was still stupidity, there was still all the stuff that we experience.

And this was like a "duh" moment for me, somewhere way, way into my practice, where I thought, "Oh, the Buddha's life after he awakened still had all this stuff happening." It wasn't like floating on a cloud somewhere of everything lovely. So what was different?

And of course, as we hopefully have some trust and faith in—or you wouldn't still be sitting here, I'm pretty sure—is the sense that the seed, the core of suffering, and the seed, the core of freedom from suffering, of peace, of ease, arises in the mind and the heart in any particular moment. And so this freedom that he is inviting us to come and explore is not in having the world change, but in our understanding of what's happening changing, so that the way our heart and mind relates to experience is completely different. And this is really the freedom he talks about.

So the first aspect of right view I want to mention as our job is this: just having some sense—of course not complete, but some sense—of why we're doing it. And this gives us some energy, some motivation to get us on the path, to keep us on the path.

Let me read you this little story I just read that I enjoyed. It sort of fits in. Lama Surya Das spent a lot of time with Nyoshul Khen, the great Tibetan Dzogchen master. Joseph mentioned him the other night. So Surya Das tells this story of being in France. Khenpo was in France. He was an older man at this time, had lived all his life in Tibet and India. And he was traveling in France. At some point, he ended up at a beach along the French coast. He'd never been to a beach—they don't have beaches in Tibet—or seen how Westerners behave on a beach.

So he came back and was describing his trip and everything. Then all of a sudden he started talking about the beach, how they'd gone to the edge of the ocean. At first he said, "Wow, it's so big!" Can you imagine never having seen the ocean? It's huge. And then he described what he had seen. He said, "There were these people there, and in-

stead of sitting and meditating or doing yoga, these people were just lying there, almost naked, doing nothing. And when they were tired of lying there, instead of doing something, they just turned over. Then they lay there again for another few hours."

Khenpo was truly, genuinely perplexed. It's sort of like *Third Rock from the Sun*, that TV show about aliens coming to Earth. He said, "Why were they doing that?" He asked over and over. He couldn't understand it. He had so much compassion for them. How could they waste their precious human existence? This life that is so short, so tenuous, so precious, so valuable, so necessary. A life to be used impeccably and usefully for our own welfare and the benefit of all. Not just to lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard.

He was impassioned now. "I just wanted to go wake them up." And he had noticed a big white chair, probably the lifeguard's chair. He said, "But there were two young people sitting there, so I couldn't go up. But I wanted to badly, because I wanted to climb up there and announce to everybody that it was time to wake up."

So in our own way, that's a sense of right view—something calling us. It's time to wake up. And having the Buddha, who followed a path, saying, "Yes, it's possible," is really helpful to keep going.

The second aspect of right view I want to talk a little about—and this is again vast—is another reason I love "right view" as a translation of *sammā diṭṭhi*. The literal translation is viewing rightly, or recognizing accurately—accurate perception. What actually serves as the mode, the catalyst of insight, of freeing insight—the insight that even just for a moment releases the habit of the mind and heart of clinging or confusion or aversion—is not some willpower, "Now I will stop this." It's a sudden shift of perception where we recognize things as they are accurately. And when we recognize accurately, the response is appropriate.

This, again, is a vast topic. But recognizing accurately, seeing—one way you can say it is that everything is natural. I think someone said this the other night: that basically everything's a process.

Causes and conditions lead to a lawful effect. We're not going to see all of the causes and conditions and all of the effects, but there's a lawfulness. It isn't random.

For example, if you plant a mango seed, we know we're not going to get an apple tree, right? It's not a random thing. Or the so-called law of gravity—that's what I mean. It's not like if we wish hard enough, if I throw this up, if I wish hard enough, it won't fall back down again. We go, well, that's stupid, right?

Well, the way things work—cause and effect in our mind and body—is just the same. But until we see this, we kind of just keep wishing it would be different. "I just wish I didn't have these unpleasant habits of mind. I wish I wasn't 61 years old." That will change, but not in the direction I wish. And that will also be natural cause and effect. But it's not personal.

So just in a nutshell, the sense of when we recognize accurately that everything is causes and conditions—there's a word for it, *yathābhūta*, recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment. It's a word often used in the suttas, sometimes translated as "things as they are," but more accurate is "things as they have come to be." You get a sense of how that's process.

So in this moment, however it is for you sitting there, is how things have come to be in this moment—this momentary result of infinite past causes and conditions you actually couldn't separate. If you start trying to list all the causes and conditions for your being sitting here right now, well, it goes back to your birth and your parents and the universe and the food and the farmers and the weather—you can't separate anything out. And just in this moment, things are as they have come to be. *Yathābhūta*.

This moment couldn't be different. How could it? It is as it is. Next moment will be different—the causes and conditions change again.

Right view on this aspect—recognizing things as they are, as they have come to be in this moment—it's a huge shift. It's the seed of insight. It's not so much about having some amazing experience and living in some other realm of reality. It's like waking up to what's actually going on now.

I'm simplifying, okay? Just know I'm simplifying. But the reason the seeds of suffering and confusion, of clinging, of grasping, of resistance, of delusion keep arising in our mind is we don't recognize what's happening in the moment just as it is, and then our response isn't really aligned with reality.

I'll give some examples as I go along. But as you know, for example, clinging—clinging to something that's already changed. Why does it not work? When we see it, it's so obvious that we don't have to then groan and grunt and give up clinging to that thing. The clinging doesn't arise anymore because it so obviously doesn't make sense.

It's like, do you cling to the sunset as the sun's going down? "Oh, please, sun, don't go down!" Maybe if something really bad you don't want to happen is going to happen when the sun goes down, we might. But you know what I mean? We don't. It doesn't make sense.

So in this way, the sense of ease, of freedom of heart and mind, is truly natural and normal. It's not like some amazing thing we have to create through willpower. It's the natural effect of the cause of right view, of accurate recognition.

And so this shift that hopefully our formal practice helps us with is this shift from putting so much of our attention on experience and objects for meaning and fulfillment, for the source of suffering and for the ending of suffering—change the object, change the experience. Our shift here, our second job, is that of simple awareness of what's happening now. And I'll talk more about that.

So the second job is *sati*.

awareness, mindfulness, interest in how this mind is working in the moment, rather than how can I manipulate and fix what's going on so everything's a little bit better. But that's our habit.

So another aspect of this, another way of describing this right view, what helps interest in the process arise, is just starting to see—just for a moment—how maybe our strategies haven't quite been working. We know it on one level, or you wouldn't be here. Because this, as someone said, is no one's idea of a vacation—maybe some people's, but not most people's idea of a vacation. So you're here for some reason.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He talks about three attitudes of practice, the first one being renunciation—but he means it in a different way. Renunciation is kind of the root of all the subsequent stages of the path. He says it "implies the strong wish, the strong motivation to free oneself not only from life's immediate sorrows but from the seemingly unending sufferings of samsara." Samsara being that seemingly unending cycle of conditioned existence. There's this cycle of wanting and needing and getting and wanting and needing and becoming. When we start to just see that, with that comes a heartfelt weariness, a heartfelt disillusionment, disenchantment with our endless quest for gratification, for approval, for profit, for status. It's not like we're saying, "Oh, these things are bad, and I'm bad for wanting them," and so that's just coming from one to the other—but seeing through the process itself.

And this doesn't have to be some incredibly esoteric experience. I'll give you an example that was another "duh" experience for me recently. It's a little embarrassing, but I think it's a good example. Samsara, just this endless wanting—get it a little bit better, a little bit better, a little bit better. There's some Tibetan teacher, I think it's Trungpa, I'm not sure who, but defining samsara as the urge to correct. I could really relate to that.

So anyway, it doesn't have to be esoteric. I noticed this—I happen to be, I don't know why, a tennis fan, a real fan of professional tennis. I don't know why, because I'm so non-sports oriented, but I really love following professional tennis. I enjoy watching the people play. I follow the tournaments. And of course, if you do that, you end up having particular players that you root for. So mine's Federer—someone who wins a lot—me and ten million other people.

But when I'm watching a tournament and he's playing, it's so much suffering for me. I'm so stressed. Sometimes when I can see he's making a lot of unforced errors, he's not getting in his first serves, I can see this is not going in a good direction—sometimes I have to stop and go take a walk. Sometimes I can't even watch, and I'll get Joseph to record it on his TV. And then I check who won—I know you shouldn't do this—and then if he won, I'll go watch it.

Now, other players I can watch and just really appreciate. Even if I have a slight preference, I can see that, and it's just enjoyable. But with Federer, it's all wanting. And it's all made up. I mean, I don't know this guy from anybody. And I probably wouldn't like him. And why do I care? What's happening? They're hitting the ball back—if you really look at it, they're just hitting the ball back and forth, making a million dollars whether they win or lose.

But anyway, I think I'm enjoying it. That's the point. No one's making me do this. And so this summer—this was the "duh" moment, I mean, this has been going on for a few years, this is not new—but this summer...

So it was Wimbledon, which if you don't follow tennis, that's one of the biggest tournaments, one of the most prestigious. Roger had been number one for many years, but he hadn't held that position for a while, and he hadn't won a major in a couple of years. He's now 31, so everyone was writing his death sentence.

Anyway, he's playing Wimbledon, and again, the whole thing was so tense. And he won it, which was amazing. He won Wimbledon. He set a new record for the most Grand Slam tournaments ever won. He got back to being number one, which no one ever thought he could do. So long story short, in terms of that world, in terms of my wanting it, that's the best that could possibly happen. It couldn't be any better.

How long does one stay happy from that? A day? Two days? Then you've got to start worrying about the Olympics. Well, they're over. He didn't win that. Then you've got to start worrying about the US Open, which just finished. And I'm even seeing—okay, he got to the quarters. First I'm disappointed, and then it's like, *well, thank God.* I don't have to worry. The next three days I can just relax and watch the tennis and not suffer.

Now, when I say it like that, it's obviously really stupid that you get so caught up. And the samsaric part is that without really looking, this passes for enjoyment, this passes for excitement, this passes for something that's really worth doing with one's time. And I'm only talking about me—I'm not talking about the tennis players or anyone else.

When I start to see how that is, it's such a perfect example of samsara. There's the lure of the next thing, the next thing. *This is good. The next will be better. This isn't good enough. Never mind, there's another chance. This was great. This was fantastic. Oh, now it's over. So we've got to look to the next.* And always looking out, always looking to what's next, never just really present and content with what is—not for more than a few moments. This is samsara.

It's not a matter of saying it's good or bad. What makes the shift is mindfulness. My habit kicked in a little late, but my habit of just paying attention to what's going on in my mind—I mean, it wasn't so subtle—but actually really paying attention. *I'm really not enjoying this very much.*

So it's not saying tennis is bad or good, or watching is bad or good, or I should stop, or anything like that. But just the simple awareness of what's actually going on—wisdom reveals itself. Wisdom comes just from the awareness.

So I'm maybe watching a little less. Okay, not much. A little less. I'm noticing when I'm not enjoying and just turning it off or not following—not because I should or shouldn't, but because when we really see what's happening, the appropriate response that leads to ease and freedom arises, you know?

And that can be applied anywhere. So this is our second job: simple awareness of what's happening now.

Of course, we've been talking about this the whole time—simple and easy, and yet not, right? Simple awareness of what's happening now. Why do we lose it so much?

I've been talking for about twenty minutes. Have you been aware of hearing? I mean, you're hearing. You know you're hearing, but have you been aware of the hearing process? Probably not. But probably as soon as I said it, right? It didn't take a lot of effort, did it? You say, "Oh yeah, right—hearing." Are you aware of seeing? You've been seeing. Most of you have your eyes open. When I said "see"—oh yeah, seeing, right? It's not rocket science, but we just forget over and over and over.

One of the really simple reasons why we forget is the ordinariness, the ongoing repetition—another aspect of samsara, of our experience. You're sitting here seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing every second that your eyes are open. I'm not saying you need to catch it

every second, but it's happening over and over. Hearing is happening over and over and over. Sensations in your body, different thoughts coming and going, moods when you're sitting or doing walking meditation.

Why do you sometimes find walking meditation so boring? Oh, another step, another sensation. Lifting, pressure, tingling, burning. Lifting, pressure, tingling, burning. Lifting, pressure, tingling—please, God, stop. And then we just zone out.

It isn't hard, but through the mundanity, the ordinariness, we somehow stop paying attention, waiting for something worth paying attention to. Have you noticed that at all? Looking for something more interesting, more worth your time here, something that offers the potential of some insight. Not just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, but something juicy.

But this is it, folks. What is life? What is it we experience? The six sense doors, the six sense objects, consciousness coming together—that's all that's happening. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, sensing in the body, and mental experience. We can give all kinds of different meanings and labels and interpretations, which is itself mental experience. But that's all that's happening, over and over. And so much of it seems so ordinary that the habit of interest quality that comes with mindfulness, with awareness, tends to drop out.

Again, it's kind of like back to tennis, back to how samsara works. It has to be *worth* paying attention—the interest, the worth we place in the experience, in the object.

And the shift of refuge, the radical shift that this second job of mindfulness brings, is the shift to just the interest in that moment of awareness itself, the mind itself. The aliveness, the interest, the curiosity, the sense of totality of life—it's not about the experience being better. Just like I said, sometimes in walking you're so bored, other times it's just amazing, right? Is your walking better then? No—we're just present. There's that mindfulness, that interest, that aliveness, the mind not fragmented, not waiting, not trying to correct, not needing something.

This sense of simplicity of awareness—that's our second yogi job. Simple mindfulness, not to make things better or different, but to recognize accurately what's already happening right now. And not even to recognize—that's already a doing. The only way of recognizing accurately is by this moment of pure, simple awareness. It's like this, right now. Nothing's too mundane. Nothing's too ordinary.

Dōgen, the great Japanese Zen master, said one time, "If you cannot discover the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" The mundane, the ordinary—this is where the most profound aspects of reality are revealed, because this is it. There is nowhere else. As I said, the Buddha awoke into this world.

There's another aspect that really helps keep mindfulness—not mindfulness itself complicated, but understanding how we get so sidetracked, how it seems to move from the simplicity I just described. So just be with what is. And we all go, "Yeah, right. How come we can't do it?"

Besides the habit of just checking out when it's not interesting enough, there's another complication. We've talked about this a lot and we will again. Another way of describing experience is that in every moment there's an object arising and a mind, awareness of it. This is a simple—not simplistic, but simple—way of describing it. It's the way the teachings talk a lot about it.

In any moment of mindfulness—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental experience—some object is arising. And with awareness, there's the knowing of it. These happen together, like two sides of the same experience, but with different functions. You could say anything that can be known is an object: smelling, hearing, tasting, thinking, unpleasant experience, whatever. And the mind, the consciousness, that recognition and awareness, the factor of mindfulness, knows, "Oh, that's just what's happening." It comes together.

Our tendency is always to be looking towards what's happening—the object—and assessing: Is it good? Is it bad? Is it this? Is it that? What does it mean about me? Endless stuff. That keeps us going in samsara forever.

What we're doing with mindfulness, with our practice, is expanding—I don't want to say turning around, but expanding—the awareness to also recognize and be interested in the process in the mind. And here's how we get confused. What we don't recognize, what obstructs accurate recognition: when in a moment of what we think is mindfulness, or in a moment of knowing—say there's a sound and the knowing of sound, hearing, very simple—when in that moment of conscious knowing is colored by wanting something, by dislike, fear, aversion, dosa, or confusion, delusion. We'll talk more about that. When they're present and we don't recognize them, when there's not an awareness of those, not a recognition, it's like that distorts our perception, our assessment. It can distort the whole way we experience things. And we don't see that's what's happening.

That's what keeps us bound. It arises and passes, arises and passes. But this is such a deep habit, just habits of mind. All day, the six sense doors, things arising—say a sound arises. Over and over, just with habit without awareness, it might be felt in the mind as pleasant, unpleasant, or neither one. We're not labeling it that. We're not even aware that it just has that kind of subtle resonance in the mind. And it doesn't have to be the same for everyone. Say some of the loud, sudden sounds outside there with the guys working—for one person they might not notice it much at all. It's just kind of neither pleasant nor unpleasant. For someone else it's really jarring, and the mind just registers it as unpleasant.

Just the habit. And as you know how fast our minds work—so fast—it goes into a liking or a disliking, it goes into a thought about it, an assessment about it, and what does it mean about me, about them, or what can we do about it, or whatever. I don't have to tell you how far and fast that stuff goes.

If mindfulness just starts to notice those thoughts, the pleasant, the unpleasant, the aversion—fine. Those are simply the next arising objects. Then it's not a problem. We may not like it, then we're back into not liking. When we're not recognizing it, that's what we call identified.

This habit goes all day long: I like this, I don't like this. What does this mean? How can I fix it? How can I get something different? No wonder we're exhausted. This is how our lives are lived, not just here. When we're not practicing with awareness, we don't even notice that's how our lives are lived. It's almost like that way of reacting and describing and defining things—that almost becomes our refuge. You know what I mean? When something really nice happens, the natural thing is to want more.

When there's some pain, some discomfort in the body, the natural thing is to want to get the hell out of here. And we try to say, no, why don't you stay and look at it? The response comes: why should I stay and look at it if I can move? That doesn't make any sense at all.

And on that level, it doesn't. But we never really learn what's going on. So that becomes our refuge. We cannot recognize accurately because we're overlooking. We're so focused on the object—how to fix it, what does it mean about me—that we're overlooking how the mind is working. The fact that the seed of the suffering, the discontent, isn't about that sound being too rough or at the wrong time, or that I'm too sensitive or whatever. It's the reactivity in the mind, unrecognized, identified with, and persistent.

Now, it's our habit. And these states—greed, confusion, aversion, delusion, called the kilesas or torments of mind—I would say they're louder. They're more obnoxious, you could say, than the wholesome states of mind, such as mindfulness, such as interest, such as faith, such as calm, such as metta. Although any of these can be strong and beautiful, and we really can recognize them as well. It's not only torments arising in the mind. But the kilesas make a big fuss. They get our attention. And our habit is to really believe the story they're telling, which is why our habit of mindfulness gets derailed. But it's also why mindfulness is so powerful.

Like with my tennis story: when I started with awareness, it was no big deal. It wasn't "now I'm going to be aware." It was just kind of sitting there watching. And instead of just being so focused on the game, I was noticing what was going on in my mind and just noticing it with no assumption of what should happen. And again, it was not subtle. It was like, whoa, this is really actually unpleasant. This is suffering. This is stress.

And then just starting to observe the whole process. Not saying it should stop or it's bad, but getting interested. Okay, this is stress. What keeps it going? If the thought comes up in my mind, "I want this to happen," the stress goes up. If it doesn't matter, if whatever happens happens, the stress goes down. I mean, not just saying it and pretending, but really seeing: okay, I can be with things as they are.

Just that exploring—it's a shift of refuge. It's much more radical than we might think. And what helps us to explore is, again, the aspect of right view: realizing none of this is personal. It's just nature. Just like if I throw this up, it's going to come back down, and it'll probably make a sound. It's just nature. And wanting it to be otherwise doesn't change that. And blaming myself for it doesn't change that. Just exploring—steady, steady, steady—seeing.

So let that one go. What we do and continue to do here, and I'll talk more about this later, or one of us will—I can only mention it now—is to explore, to get really interested in the nature of wanting or greed when it's arising. Not hating it. Somehow we think it's better. "There's so much craving in my mind. That just shows what a bad person I am, what a bad meditator, how hopeless." As if somehow substituting hatred for greed is good. Yeah, we believe that. "Oh yeah, now I'm doing good. I'm beating myself up. I'm seeing everything I'm doing wrong, so I'm on the right track." And you see, we believe it.

Or sometimes when it's just interested. You see, sometimes you start to see a lot of wanting coming up, and people will come and say, "Oh, I just see so much wanting." And I'll say, "Great!" Because it's coming up. There's some reason the Buddha picked

craving as the second noble truth, as the cause of suffering. I don't think he just pulled it out of the air. And I don't think it's because it only happens once in a while in really bad people. I think it's pretty much a really subtle and ongoing, easily arising aspect of experience. So great. Mindfulness doesn't judge. Mindfulness gets interested in exploring it.

So when we see wanting come up, don't believe that it's what obstructs clear seeing. Don't believe me. Explore and see what happens.

I'm just going to give a couple of simple examples. You're walking in walking meditation, and the bell rings for lunch. And you're still walking to lunch—what's the quality in the mind, especially if you're hungry? Is the quality in the mind any different? It's not going to always be, but sometimes it is. Explore and see, especially if it smelled good before. Just that kind of narrowing of our field. Before, just being present, walking, whatever's arising, arising—if there's some mindfulness, right? Just being with what is. And suddenly, "Ah, got to get there." Or you want to get to the sitting. Or you want to get to your room. Or you want to get to bed. For me on retreat, that's a big one. Please, let me get to bed.

But noticing. It's not a good or bad about the thing wanted, but what's the quality in the mind? How it goes from just being at ease and relaxed to narrow, restricted, me and other. The Buddha said that wanting and aversion and delusion are makers of measurement in the mind. They limit. They constrict and make the sense of me and other—something needed with wanting, or something that must go away with unpleasant, a sense of problem. Without that, it's just what is. Explore and see. That's all.

And when there is wanting, again, look and see if this is true for you. When we're not recognizing it, in the beginning it may be a little bit in retrospect, but then you can kind of see it happening as it's happening. Notice how, especially if it's a strong wanting—maybe you're having a strong, pleasant fantasy about what's going to happen in the future, or your next vacation, or how great your next sitting is, or whatever. It doesn't matter. And you're really in it. There's a little modicum of mindfulness, awareness that at least you sort of know there's a fantasy happening, right? You kind of vaguely know it's pleasant. Every once in a while you can pull out, but then boom, back in.

Exploring that pleasant, explore how the story of it is, "This is going to be so wonderful, so amazing." I used to plan dinner parties. Or you're planning a vacation, and very conveniently, all the difficult grunt stuff that has to go on—that isn't part of the fantasy, is it? It's going to be amazing. I'm going to have this dinner party and have this food. You forget about the shopping and the cooking, and the food burns, and the people can't

come, and you get nervous, and it's so much work, and you have a headache. None of that stuff. It's just going to be fantastic—because wanting just shows us how wonderful something is.

So we don't see the wanted object accurately. And anything else that's kind of in the way—that's what everything else is. It's in the way. So we're also not recognizing that accurately. It skews our perception. Things as they have come to be—accurate recognition is impossible. Same with aversion. Same when an unpleasant, uncomfortable experience arises.

And right away, it seems unnatural. Let's get rid of it. And as we know, it can lead to annoyance, blame—the whole story can unfold. It can go on for weeks. It can run our lives sometimes.

But here, just explore. First, it's more obvious, usually, that aversion, dislike, fear, unpleasant experience—it's more obvious, clearly, that it's unpleasant. I have friends who are self-identified so-called "greed types"—that's kind of the first movement of mind for them, seeing the pleasant and moving toward it—who try to pretend that that's not really suffering. But on the aversive side, you can't really pretend. Occasionally, you can have some good righteous anger, and that feels good. But basically, you can feel the burning. And anyone else around is quite happy to tell you, "Yes, this is bad, and you're suffering."

But explore it for yourself and see. Does it obstruct clear seeing? How is it suffering? How does aversion, dislike, work? Not just say it's bad. Explore it. See the nature of it. It's fascinating.

And it is personal. We're making it personal. Then right away, it's really hard. As soon as it's there: "Oh, I'm so bad. I shouldn't be like this." And we're sucked into the story. That's just story, too. Pull out and recognize, "Oh, yeah, that's just aversion." Aversion is coloring the consciousness. It's coloring the perception. And at that moment, any thought that comes up is going to be seen through the filter of aversion.

This is the reason why, in terms of practice, if you're in a real doubting, self-aversive phase—have you ever experienced that?—and then you're trying to remember all the different techniques and skillful means. You're trying: "Well, I'm too sleepy, or I'm too dull, or I'm too tight, or I'm too loose, or there's not enough breath, or there's too much breath"—or whatever you're choosing. And you're trying to think, "What can I do to fix it?" But you're not quite saying that. You're saying, "Hmm, I'm a little bit off. How do I fix it?" Meanwhile, the coloring in the mind is: "I'm worthless, no good. This stinks. I stink. This is wrong. How can I fix it?"

And any fixing thought that arises at that moment—when you're not recognizing that aversion is coloring perception—any fixing thought is going to be colored by aversion. Completely unreliable. Completely. "Oh, I should take a walk. That'll be it." Then you realize, "Oh, I should just practice harder." That's usually the way it goes. "I'll just stay with the breath until..." And we somehow miss the aversion. Why doesn't that work? We don't see it. Explore, explore.

And the third aspect is delusion. Of course, both greed and aversion are themselves forms of delusion. One way delusion shows up is just: I don't know what's happening. That's the obvious one. We don't have to take that so personally.

The other way—and this is one of the ways Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it—is that delusion shows up in making assumptions and believing those assumptions as descriptions, as accurate descriptions of what's going on. We don't even recognize we're doing this.

So he gives an example, again, a simple example of someone you've just met. And here, you can kind of notice that in people you've seen and you don't really know. Our mind makes up all kinds of stuff about them, assumptions, which sometimes we know we're making up, and sometimes we don't. You think, "Oh, that poor person. They're just such a sad person. I really feel so much compassion." You have no clue. Or you pass someone on the street and go, "Wow, he's an angry person. I'm glad I don't have to have anything to do with him." Or you see someone, "Oh, she looks a little crazy." And we're doing this all the time.

We talk about judgments. Sometimes it's obvious, great, but sometimes it's not. And we just kind of quite believe it.

Well, in our practice here, we can explore that. It's the same thing. And it can get quite subtle. And it's probably happening for most of you. It happens for me a lot. I'm mindful. I think I'm mindful of what's happening. And there's kind of a subtle, sometimes it's just a subtle commentary. Or it's a kind of description. "Oh, this is what's happening. And this is why it's happening. And this is what this means," right? We kind of think it's true. It's not when it's a big thing, but just a little. We think it's true. We think it's mindfulness. And it's actually thinking, describing, assuming. And the thoughts can be subtle, and we can easily mistake them for simple mindfulness. That's all. Just noticing that. That's a form of delusion. A subtle one.

And usually, this isn't so subtle: it's all about me, me, me. Just notice how long does it take any of the sixth sense experiences that arise and are known to somehow have something to do with me? What does it mean about me? Or what do they think about me? Or what is this going to look like? How do I look? It's endless. Explore it. It's not personal either.

Oh, just an example of a little thing that happened to me, a difference between assumptions, not quite seeing, and thinking it's mindfulness. Not so long ago, after some conversation I'd had with somebody, not any big deal conversation, but somehow I felt in myself later an uncomfortable residue. And you can relate to that, right? Not some big fight or anything, but just kind of an uncomfortable residue left. And when a memory of the conversation would just pop up, I would feel this kind of... I remember it wasn't quite shame, embarrassment, discomfort, sadness. I mean, quite what? But I feel stuff here, so I was feeling that. The memory would come, and I thought I was being quite mindful, not investigating what does it mean in my past, but just feeling it. That's what I thought. And just going about my day whenever it would come up. I'd be aware of the visual memory. That's how stuff comes up, visual memory. And I wasn't noting.

I'm going through the day, aware of the unpleasant residue. And then there would be this wondering: what's the hook here? Because it keeps coming, so there must be a hook. I wasn't analyzing a lot, but I'd notice that thought—*what's the hook?* And so you have to figure it out. It keeps coming, I must be wanting something from that person.

I was really thinking that was mindfulness. I mean, I was aware, but it wasn't like the clear awareness of mindfulness.

And then at some point—because I thought, well, why does this keep coming up? And this was a little thing. It wasn't like some big suffering. But through the day, why does this keep coming up, this little thing?

Finally, I was just sitting there or lying there or something. Oh, unpleasant, uncomfortable feeling. Try feeling it. Just feeling it. Not all of *what does it mean?* or *I'm connected with this*. Oh yeah, uncomfortable feels like this. With no "so that"—not to get rid of it, not to understand it, just because that's what's happening.

That's the simplicity of mindfulness.

So I was just feeling it. And then—this is the steadiness of awareness, this is our third job—the steadiness of mindfulness, the willingness to remember, to try and remember moment after moment, the perseverance. The steadiness is what allows wisdom to come.

Just feeling unpleasant, like, *oh*. The whole sense of struggle around it was gone in that moment. And then the understanding came just from being with, *oh*. It wasn't all about what's the hook and I want something and on and on. It was just simple aversion—subtle aversion to just feeling the unpleasant, uncomfortable feeling. As simple as that.

I can't tell you how often it's as simple as that. But our "it's all about me" doesn't really quite trust that it could be so simple. And even now, if you're thinking, "But maybe it was important that she knew what it was about, right? Well, it was really important. If she wants something from that person..." You know what? If I'm working with steady awareness, if wanting something from that person arises, guess what? I'll notice it—instead of trying to go and figure it out.

This is subtle. I don't know if I'm quite making it clear, but this is really where it's a radical shift—to just trusting the simplicity of awareness of what's happening now. Not for anything else, but simply trusting the simplicity of mindfulness itself.

And our third job—this is essential—is the willingness, the understanding of the power of the moment-to-moment steadiness of the simplicity of mindfulness. Of course we can't stay continuous, but the willingness to keep returning. Without that, it's not meaningless, but the conditions for wisdom to arise, where the profound and the mundane meet, where wisdom can grow—that happens through the momentum of steady awareness.

Because that's where we really see what's what, where we can really see how the causes and conditions come to be. Without the steadiness, we see something happen, then we kind of pull away. Then we go, "Oh, every time I'm walking, this happens. I don't know why. I better do something else." But if we just pay attention, we start to see.

Let me read a little example Sayadaw U Tejaniya gave. It's very basic, but it's probably clearer than if I tried to make one up.

This is only with steady awareness: You might, for example, feel quite relaxed and calm while walking to the meditation hall, and then you notice a subtle restlessness during the sitting. So the mind is now aware of the restlessness, accepts the experience, and starts getting interested.

And this is the key to all of it: we're interested. How does nature work? It isn't personal.

The question may come up: why is there restlessness? But then the awareness simply stays with this question, with the interest in the experience. At the same time, the awareness also notices and feels the physical tension, which you know is somehow connected to the feeling of restlessness—for example, a tightness in the stomach. Then suddenly, there might be the understanding that there's an accumulation of small incidences of stress, frustration, or feelings of elation that lies behind this restlessness and the physical tension. In other words, wisdom starts sorting things out.

Do you see how that wasn't thinking about what could this be? It was just: this restlessness is like this. Okay, feeling the restlessness, getting interested. How does it feel? I wonder why it's here. How does it feel? Feeling the body. Steady, steady, steady. Simple mindfulness is the condition that allows for clear seeing of the whole cause and effect process. Wisdom starts sorting things out.

And that's so hard for us to trust, because we feel like we have to cultivate the wisdom, don't we? One of the reasons we talk about all the right views—and then we think, well, I have to somehow start seeing all this in my practice. And right there, there's the wanting. We miss the wanting in trying to see the right thing. But steadiness of mindfulness isn't choosing what's better to pay attention to. It's just choosing what's here now. Steady, steady, steady. But relax. Aware—Guy said "aware" like a verb. And perseverance. Steadiness. Or as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, never give up. Which means when we space out: Oh yeah, am I aware? You're here again. What's going on? Seeing. Seeing. We're here again.

That simple, that relaxed, that mundane—over and over and over. Really starting to trust that we can't make wisdom arise. That's just some thought. We don't even know. We can't make accurate recognition or clear seeing happen, because that wanting is exactly the thing that distorts perception.

This is so obvious, but I found it really helpful. In practice, when you're really trying to be calm, or really with sincere intention trying to keep coming back and stay with the breath, or you're really trying to have your awareness stay steady through the whole walking period—somehow back there, we think that if we want it hard enough, it's going to happen. We wouldn't put it this way, but that's what we believe. And when it doesn't happen, it's like somehow we didn't want it hard enough.

Instead of that, with a steady awareness, we see: what are the causes and conditions that allow this to happen? What are the conditions that bring calm to the mind? Wanting harder? I don't think so. But we have to look and see. The more I want, the more restless the mind gets. Just keep watching. That's fascinating. It doesn't matter what's happening. It's going to reveal the profound truth if we cultivate steadiness.

So two last things. One, a tip from Joseph that he came up with at the last retreat we were teaching together—he told me to say this. People really liked it. It might help with this sense of continuity. Notice in practice how we may tend to have this subtle sense of priority, even though we all say there's not.

The priority being that sitting is really the most important, where it's at. And if you can only do one thing, you do the sitting. The walking, okay, some people are learning to like it. We do it, maybe a little bit grudgingly, but we know that's not quite the whole thing. And the daily activities—the work meditation, taking a shower, eating, going to the toilet—yeah, okay, that's third. When the rest of our practice is going okay, then maybe we can really give some attention to that.

So Joseph's tip is: reverse all of that. Turn it on its head. Make the most important priority the daily activities. Not to do them right, but to just remember this simple awareness. So you're scrubbing the floor, right? Do I know I'm scrubbing? That's all. It doesn't have to be feeling every molecule in your pinky as you're scrubbing and being aware of pleasant and unpleasant. It could just be really broad. Scrubbing feels like this. That's mindfulness. Hello! And mindfulness is what we love.

Just this simple awareness, learning to love it. Not knowing what's going to happen, what's going to happen next, but having that openness to discover, that openness to explore. Not having to have an explanation and a description that defines our world, but just being willing to see. Oh, uncomfortable feeling feels like this—without needing to know what's going to happen next. And then we're present for what happens next.

So the three jobs: right view, simple awareness, never give up. But only moment by moment. You can't never give up tomorrow—only this morning.

CHAPTER 5

Faith (Saddhā)

Brian Lesage · 53 min

> *Drawing from his years in a Rinzai Zen monastery and his encounters with profound doubt, Brian Lesage offers an intimate exploration of saddhā—the Pāli term for faith that literally means 'to put one's heart into it.' He examines how faith functions as a foundational spiritual faculty (indriya) and references the Upanisā Sutta (SN 12.23), where the Buddha describes faith as the seed that, when watered by practice, grows toward the deathless.*
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> *Lesage illuminates the delicate relationship between faith and doubt, showing how expectations—even subtle ones about how practice 'should' unfold—can undermine our confidence and fuel the hindrance of doubt (vicikicchā). Through the Zen story of Fa Yan's pilgrimage and the moving account of Vedran Smilović playing cello during the siege of Sarajevo, he invites practitioners to cultivate a faith without expectation, embracing the intimacy of 'not knowing' how the path will unfold.*
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> *The talk also addresses where to place our faith: in the Dhamma itself rather than in teachers alone, as the Buddha told the Venerable Vakkali, and in our own capacity to awaken. Lesage emphasizes returning again and again to the simplicity of awareness infused with intelligence and caring—trusting that even difficulties and feelings of separation can become the very link that connects us to our practice.*

Tonight I wanted to share with you some reflections on this mental factor of faith in terms of our practice.

Before I really got involved or fully immersed myself in the Theravada Vipassana practice, I lived in a Rinzai Zen community for about six years. After about a year of spending my time there—and it was actually a very demanding lifestyle—we would get up at three o'clock in the morning and wouldn't go to bed until about nine-thirty at night. This was all during the summer and the winter. In the fall and spring, we'd get a break so we wouldn't have to get up until four-thirty. For me, someone who is actually not a morning person, you can imagine how demanding it was.

But after a year, I noticed that my faith really deepened. I was really taken by the Dharma. I really fell in love with it. And so after a year, I decided to get ordained. I committed my life to the Dharma, and that's the direction I saw it going in. It was a beautiful expression of faith to undergo that.

But then about a year after I got ordained—and especially after I got ordained—I got really gung-ho about the practice. I really tried to be diligent about it. If you know anything about Rinzai Zen, there's a kind of edge to it. As one friend told me, the way the Japanese interpreted Buddhism is they had this sense that in India, they would sit for eight hours a day, and in China, they would work for eight hours a day. The Japanese thought, we want the best of both—so let's sit for eight hours a day and work for eight hours a day. I think that was a wonderful description of Rinzai Zen.

So I really applied myself to the practice. But then after about a year of being ordained, I hit this huge metaphorical wall. Actually, I remember the specific evening that this happened—a huge wall in terms of my life and my practice. I was coming back from what's called sanzen, an interview with the Zen master. I can't exactly remember what happened in the interview room, but obviously it was something that allowed me to emotionally just shatter. That evening was such an incredibly dark night.

What had happened was this huge doubt emerged. And not only did a huge doubt emerge in my mind, but I got hooked by it. I'm sure many of you know this. Have you noticed how doubt can weave the most convincing stories that feel so real? When you're really caught in the grips of doubt, it's so convincing.

Part of the stories going through my head while I was sitting there in the evening coming back from the interview room—imagining these rows of everybody in their black robes sitting very silently—the thoughts careening through my head were something like, "What the hell am I doing here?" And then I'd look around, and of course that didn't help. Here I am wearing these black robes, shaved head, all these other people with black robes and shaved heads and this bib that they call a rakusu around my neck. Obviously this increased the doubt—doubt in terms of the situation I found myself in. And then it started to fall back on myself. Not only what the hell am I doing here, but I can't do this. I must be the worst practitioner in this meditation hall. That kind of feeling. Have you ever gone through that? The worst yogi story?

So there were these two qualities of doubt: I can't do this, and intermixed with this, this doesn't work. Again, as I said, it was a dark evening.

Within that, when there started to become more clarity about the nature of this mind state, there was wanting. There was this wanting mind, an expectation. A lot of times, the wanting mind is expecting something. What I was looking for in practice—the story that was enmeshed in there—was the story that I'm a broken person, something's wrong with me. And if I practice diligently enough, if only I practice hard

enough and I'm sincere about this practice, then maybe one day I'll become a whole person. Maybe I'll even become a perfect person. I won't have any of those imperfections anymore.

And then there'll be this quality of perfection. Have you ever been seduced by that dream? That maybe you could practice and all your imperfections would go away? Or that you'd become a person who doesn't have imperfections?

I noticed that this was fueling my practice. And so it was a dark night to recognize that for a year, this had been fueling my practice. But luckily, a small gem arose out of the experience. I remember the next morning feeling so shattered, and then recommitting myself to something much more simple—simply being aware of whatever activity I was involved in, this quality of awareness that's been spoken about so often on this retreat. The way that Guy and Carol have referred to it: awareness infused with intelligence and caring, with kindness.

The Zen life was perfect for this, really bringing attention to all the details of one's life. And it was there that a new kind of faith began to arise—a faith of truly falling in love with the practice.

Faith, at least clear faith, is an important aspect of this path. It actually creates a foundation, a basis for this practice to unfold. And I'm sure many of you know that the Buddha speaks about this in a few of those lists so common in early Buddhism. For example, in that list of the five spiritual faculties, those five qualities of mind that support the mind and allow it to move towards awakening—the first of those faculties is faith.

Another place we find the Buddha speaking about faith is in a discourse in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Connected Discourses, called the Upanisā Sutta, usually translated as "The Discourse on Supporting Conditions." It's a fascinating discourse, found in the section on causation, alongside all those discourses about dependent origination. In this discourse, the Buddha is again laying out the conditions that support the mind to move towards awakening. And the first condition he encourages us to cultivate is this quality of faith.

It's not only at the beginning of our practice that we want to cultivate faith, but we must nurture it along the way. There's a wonderful story from the discourses that speaks to this quality of faith—that it's something we begin with, but then nurture throughout.

The Buddha was residing outside of Magadha, near a village called Ekanāḷā, and he decided to go out for alms food in the morning. He happened upon a farmer who was feeding his workers. The farmer said to him, "Recluse, I plow and I sow, and then I eat. So if you want to eat, you must plow and sow, and then you should eat." He wasn't exactly excited about giving alms food to the Buddha.

And the Buddha says to the farmer, "I actually do. I plow and I sow."

The farmer said something to the extent of, "Where is your plow? Where are your oxen?"

This is how the Buddha replies—I want to share just parts of it because I think it's a striking image. He says, "Faith is the seed, practice the rain, and wisdom is my yoke and plow. This is how I plow my plowing. The crop it yields is deathlessness, is awakening. And when one has plowed with this plowing, one is released from all suffering."

Striking image, don't you think? Faith as a seed. And through the practice—through the practice we're doing here—that's the rain. It naturally arises from that. We're nurturing the seed to grow towards the deathless, towards awakening.

Please keep this in mind as I speak, because I think doubt arises when we get caught up in the growth of the seed. So many times in this practice we're nurturing the seed and then we get somehow neurotic about it, feeling like we have to control the growth process. What I appreciate about this image is that controlling growth isn't our job. Our job is simply to water the seed. How do we water the seed? It's really simple: resting in this quality of awareness, of intelligence that has this quality of caring.

The other night, Joseph was speaking about another mental quality, ātāpī, usually translated as ardency, and he was likening it to falling in love. Tonight, I want to speak about faith as the process of falling in love—for a specific reason.

Faith is usually the translation of the Pāli word saddhā, Pāli being the early scriptural language of Buddhism. Saddhā literally means to put one's heart into it, or to put one's heart upon. Or, if we want a broader sense, it means to fall in love. I think this is a wonderful way to translate saddhā, because there is an emotional relationship we're trying to cultivate through faith.

Faith has to be heartfelt. Right now, you might want to take a moment to reflect: What has allowed you to fall in love with this practice? You wouldn't be here on this retreat if somehow you hadn't fallen in love with this practice. What was it? Was it possibly a teacher that inspired you, or a community that inspired you, or the teachings themselves? What allowed you to fall in love with the practice? Or maybe it was your

own direct experience of how the Dharma has unfolded in your life, your own direct experience of the fruits of this practice—like that quality of the Dharma that Carol mentioned last night: *Ehi Passiko*, come see for yourself. This is one of the qualities of the Dharma, that we come and see for ourselves how this practice unfolds. And that's the true way that faith unfolds.

This is really the unique flavor of faith on this path. This is not a blind faith. It's a faith that is sometimes also translated as confidence—a confidence that arises from our meditation practice.

Faith is like falling in love. But like falling in love, faith, if it's unskillfully placed—the way I unskillfully placed it in my practice—can carry all kinds of deluded projections, just like the projections we carry when we fall in love. Has anyone here ever fallen in love and gotten wrapped up in those crazy projections that fill your mind about the other person? Or am I the only one? A few. It's wild what happens, isn't it? There is something magical about it, but the thoughts that start to swirl around in our minds when we fall in love—have you noticed that? *Oh, this is going to be the best relationship. It's going to bring me all kinds of happiness.* And even deeper down, what often motivates this is the belief that this person is going to make me feel whole. They're going to take away these feelings that I don't like anymore. This is *the* relationship. This is my soulmate. Have you ever noticed what happens to those relationships? Sometimes they're filled with lots of dukkha.

Actually, the same thing can happen within our practice, where we can approach the practice with these qualities of delusion—like the ones I was talking about in my story. This idea that somehow I'm going to move from being a person where I feel like there's something wrong with me into a person where I feel perfect and whole. That's delusion. That's trying to replace one sense of self for another sense of self. And what we're trying to cut through is creating any kind of sense of self at all—seeing that whatever sense of self we create, there's a quality of unsatisfactoriness there.

Let me go a little more deeply with this. I'd like to share with you an image, an image that was proposed to describe love between two people. It comes from a Platonic dialogue called the *Symposium*. I don't know if anyone, back in their perhaps long-ago days, has read the *Symposium*. This Platonic dialogue is basically a story that Plato tells. It's the story of a group of men—of course Socrates is included—who get together for a symposium. In ancient Greece, a symposium was a drinking party. So they're getting together to drink and to talk about love. What they did is they all went around, and each person gave their description of what they thought love was.

The second person to speak, early in the night, was Aristophanes. Aristophanes was a playwright who wrote a number of comedies in ancient Greece. And please remember, when I share this story with you, that in ancient Greece, comedies were really the darkest view one could have of human nature. Aristophanes was very skilled at expressing this view.

This is the story he tells of love. He said that long ago, we were these creatures—these cartwheels. Two people would be stuck together. Some cartwheels had two men stuck together, other cartwheels had two women stuck together, and yet other cartwheels had a man and a woman stuck together.

And they would roll around very happily. But of course, in all Greek stories, they got a little bit arrogant and tried to fly up towards the gods. And as the gods saw this, they got incredibly angry. Zeus, of course, getting angry. And in order to punish them, he divided all these cartwheels up so that they were scattered across the world. And they were left looking all over the world for their other half so that they could once again feel whole.

What a depressing view of love.

Again, reflect on when you've gotten involved in a relationship, when you think that relationship is somehow going to complete you. We can do this with meditation practice too. We come here with a feeling of incompleteness. Something's wrong with me. And there's some hope that if I practice hard enough, the practice will take that experience away from me.

But please remember, that experience of incompleteness or something wrong with me—what is it? It's just a conglomeration of sensations, of thoughts and feelings that have congealed together, that will arise and pass away. And the amazing thing about the teaching of the Buddha is that he was not proposing that we try to create another kind of self to help cure this self that we don't like. He was asking us to see through this concoction that we create called a self.

And again, how do you do that? It's doing what you're doing on this retreat. Coming back to the simplicity of this practice. That's it. It's so simple what we're doing here. This awareness—this awareness with intelligence and caring—coming back to that again and again and again.

The essence of this practice of resting in awareness is far simpler than becoming somebody. Can you hear just the power in that? When you're aware, you get to sidestep that whole mess of trying to get out of being a certain self and trying to move into another kind of self. It just doesn't work. That's the cycle of suffering—when we get lost in this trying to become.

That's why I appreciate this simple quote from Ajahn Sumedho. He says, "The personality never gets enlightened." I think that's an important thing to remember. So we're placing our attention in the correct place, which is this simple awareness of what's going on right now, what's arising and passing away, rather than getting lost in this project, like I was doing during that first year of being a monastic.

So within this delusion, what we can find is what arises is doubt. And I want to speak about this because this is the thing that can undermine faith. You might notice that what is often within doubt is expectation. It's some kind of wanting or not wanting.

What are some forms this can take? There can be these small forms of doubt, such as the belief, "If only I was doing the practice correctly, maybe this pain would go away." Or, "I must not be doing the practice correctly because I'm still in pain." Or we blame it on the practice: "This practice must not be working because I still have that pain in my back. And not only that, it's increasing."

And you can, of course, place in there all different kinds of states of mind—boredom, agitation, the scattered mind, frustration. There's a subtle expectation. There can be this subtle expectation that if I do this practice, then I will have all these pleasant results. You ever notice your mind do this? That's the setup for doubt, because there's an expectation in there.

And yes, there's a caveat to this. There is a place for discernment, for skillful discernment to help us really cultivate and open up the space for this quality of awareness that we're trying to develop. There are small things that we can tinker with. But this is different than getting lost in the cloud of doubt. Discernment has a quality of clarity to it. Doubt doesn't. Have you noticed the difference in the feeling quality between both of those? It's something to become curious about.

So I want to go back to faith, because I think this helps us clarify what faith really is. Faith is like falling in love, as I was talking about, or confidence. A confidence and a falling in love without expectation. Yes, we can have this aspiration to awaken, to heal. But can you engage in that without some kind of grasping expectation intermeshed with it?

I want to say a little bit more about expectation and how to deal with expectations in our practice, because as I was mentioning, this is what I feel can underlie doubt. Please remember—I think this is very important to remember—that we don't know how this practice is supposed to unfold on a day-to-day basis. And notice there can be this quality of mind, this state of mind that actually really thinks it does know. Have you noticed this dynamic? A part of the mind that feels like it does know how this practice is supposed to unfold. And then when it doesn't unfold that way, it's disappointed.

One story about this, which I have found helpful to keep in mind on retreats, is a Zen story. There was a young monk by the name of Fa Yan. Fa Yan was traveling, and this was very common in China, to travel from temple to temple as part of one's spiritual path, as part of one's practice. One would travel to a temple, practice there for a while, and then journey on to another temple. On his way, he met a Zen master, Dizong. The Zen master asked Fa Yan, "Where are you going?" Fa Yan was a good monk. I really appreciate his replies. He says, "On pilgrimage, wherever my feet take me."

Right there, we can hear—I don't know if you can hear the wisdom in Fa Yan's practice. Very clear. He's on pilgrimage. Where is he going? Wherever his feet take him. There's already not this grasping for some expectation. But luckily, Dizong is a good Zen master. He's always trying to catch the young monk. So he asks, "What do you expect from pilgrimage?" And Fa Yan says, "I don't know." Dizong actually compliments him and says, "Ah, not knowing is most intimate."

Can you allow for that quality of intimacy within your practice—to not know how it's going to unfold? To simply allow your feet to take you however they do and to not know how it's going to unfold? Because when we're traveling on pilgrimage, when you're on this path during these six weeks or three months, there are going to be sunny days and there are going to be cloudy days. It's just the way the weather is. What would it be like to stop trying to forecast the weather or even try to change the weather? What would it be like to simply allow your feet to take you wherever they go and to not know how the path unfolds? Those feet of awareness—awareness that's infused with intelligence and caring.

When I was in Burma, I was told this kind of gossip that would go around. I think it's quite well-known gossip. It said that Burmese women, usually from the village more so than women from the city, are really the practitioners with the deepest faith. Their practice, compared to other practitioners—especially practitioners from the West—unfolds much more dramatically and deeply than definitely Westerners or Burmese men or Burmese women from the city. What's said is the reason for that is because they have such deep faith. It's really quite fascinating.

What they do is they go and see a Sayadaw, and the Sayadaw tells them how to practice. And what do they do? They practice. They don't think about it. They don't entertain any kinds of doubts. They simply surrender themselves to the practice. They don't worry about what the weather is every day. They don't have a mind that tries to forecast it. Can we allow space for that quality of mind within our practice? Practice without expectation, not even the expectation of any kind of results. Of course, still the aspiration for healing, for awakening, but without the expectation or the hope for results.

Another story that I carry with me, that I find inspiring in terms of this, that gives me a sense of what deep faith is, is about a man by the name of Vedran Smailović. Some of you might have heard his name before. He was a cellist, and in the early nineties he was living in Sarajevo. If you remember, in the early 1990s there was the siege of Sarajevo, where Serbian forces surrounded the city.

And it was really a horrible situation. It went on for years. What the Serbian forces were doing was twofold, and this was on a daily basis. First, they cut off electricity and water and tried to seal off the city. Then they would shell the city most every day. This was just the constant reality for the residents of Sarajevo. And not only that, they had snipers situated on the outskirts of the city, so wherever you were walking, you never knew if you were in the sights of a sniper or not. They would just pick people off during the siege.

And Vedran Smailović had the idea that he would play his cello. He played it in all kinds of places—in the streets, at funerals, in bomb shelters, in bombed-out buildings. He was playing it in a city that was under siege. The thing that strikes me about this story is I don't think he was asking, "Is this helping or not?" What was important was his dedication to play and the faith that somehow, somehow, that was going to allow for a change, that somehow that was going to help the people of Sarajevo.

What would it be like to have that kind of faith, that kind of trust in simply being aware? Not being concerned about how it's going to play out, but knowing somewhere deep inside that it's going to have a profound effect in your life and in the lives of others. How? I don't know. To hold the not knowing as well as the faith. Can you have that quality of faith within your practice—the kind of faith that Vedran Smailović must have had to play the cello for four years in all these places while his city was under siege?

So what should we do in our practice when our expectations do get the better of us? In other words, how can you work with doubt? What can help with doubt, this doubt that can undermine our faith?

A few things. One is it can be so powerful just to come to the point of being able to say, "Oh, this is doubt." Just to have that clarity and to name it or label it or at least know it—that it's simply that, nothing more. Or as Joseph was mentioning this morning, dividing up the thought, seeing the component aspects of it, seeing the words that arise in the mind and the images that conglomerate together to give this feeling, and also the emotions that conglomerate together to give the feeling of the doubt. To divide it into these component parts. To see the details of it and how it arises and passes away. Simply being with those aspects, those component parts of doubt—that's one thing that can really help.

I also want to point out that doubt can be incredibly tricky, just like the other hindrances. Doubt is the fifth of the five hindrances and can be very slippery. But all the hindrances can have this quality that when we're practicing, we don't see them clearly. And it can happen to all of us.

One story about this: the Venerable Anuruddha, one of the Buddha's disciples, went to one of the Buddha's chief disciples, Sāriputta, for advice. He said, "You know, I don't know what's going on with my practice. Here I am, I've got this divine eye—remember, I have this divine eye where I can see throughout the world. And not only that, when I check in, I have this unremitting energy, this energy that's just fueling my practice. And of course what comes with that is this very alert mindfulness. And the mind feels concentrated. But the thing is, I don't get it. I don't know why I'm not completely awake yet. Why haven't I let go of all the fetters of the mind?"

Sāriputta says to him, "Well, what's really going on is this: this sense that you have of your divine eye—that's conceit. And that unremitting energy that you have—that's actually restlessness. And all this talk about how you're not enlightened—I'd call that worry."

And of course the Venerable Anuruddha was very happy to hear this and was able to see these states of mind more clearly, and as a result was able to move towards awakening.

It's true, we can get lost in these hindrances. So we do our best to be aware and to report clearly to the teachers. I think that's the wonderful thing, especially about the teachers that all of you have on this retreat. They're incredibly insightful.

And to make best use of the interviews when you have them.

Now we have to come to the question: faith in what? What do you have faith in? Where should we place our faith?

Again, another story illustrates this, because I think it clarifies a quality of faith that you find in early Buddhism—a quality that actually changes as Buddhism moves through different countries. This is the story of a monastic by the name of the Venerable Vakkali.

Vakkali one day was sick, and the Buddha decided to go and see him. When Vakkali sees the Buddha, he says, "For a long time, Lord, I've wanted to come and set eyes on the Blessed One, but I had not the strength in this body to come and see the Blessed One."

And it's interesting how the Buddha replies to him. He says, "Enough, Vakkali. What is there to see in this body of mine? He who sees Dhamma, Vakkali, sees me. He who sees me sees Dhamma. Truly seeing Dhamma, one sees me. Seeing me, one sees the Dhamma."

So in early Buddhism, it's very clear that this is not about having this kind of guru relationship with a teacher. There's this clarity that the teacher is there to help one start to have faith and devotion in the Dhamma. I think this is really wonderful and striking to see in early Buddhism. The Buddha is really clear about where one should place one's attention.

So how do we have faith in the Dhamma? What does that look like? I think there are many ways, but I'm just going to mention two that might speak to you personally—two things that I think are quite important in terms of having faith in the Dhamma.

The first one is having faith in our own ability to wake up. I feel like this is very important. And I want to share with you a passage by Annie Dillard. She's going to be using more Christian language here, but I think it speaks to our situation as well.

She asks this question: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place?" To me, she's asking: who will awaken? Who is it that will awaken? And she answers: "There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us—a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead, as if innocence had ever been. But there is no one but us. There never has been."

Do you hear what she's trying to convey here? In this statement that there's no one but us? We can get this idea that awakening and liberation, that freedom—it's for those monastics, those monks and nuns in Asia that have the quote-unquote "pure heart," or

that are somehow innocent, that they're not like me, they're not like us. And what is she saying here? There's never been such a thing as a pure heart or innocence. There's only been people like us who have awakened.

I feel like this is so important to remember. Sometimes I remember seeing my own mind do this. Sometimes I hear these inspiring, even amazing stories of practitioners that seem inhuman, superhuman. And of course my mind takes that and thinks, "Well, that means that awakening is only for these people that have some kind of pure heart or innocence or a diligence that I don't have."

So I think it's very important to dispel that notion if it arises in your mind and to remember: there's no one but us that can awaken. Can you begin to have faith and confidence in that? Liberation is possible for all of us here.

Where else can we place our faith? I think the other place is the one I keep mentioning: placing your faith in the simple practice of being aware, of really knowing one's experience moment after moment after moment. I feel this is important—to cultivate the trust and confidence in that, to really begin to find your home in awareness.

Have you noticed where your mind likes to find its home? Where is your mind trying to find home during the day? It might be in figuring out, or planning, or analyzing, or simply thinking. Have you noticed where your mind is trying to create a home?

Or a lot of times the mind is just trying to create some kind of sense of solid self to make it feel secure, to find a home there.

There's actually nothing wrong with planning and figuring out and analyzing. But can you notice it from the home of awareness? Can you trust in that, in the simplicity of this practice? Have you noticed, when there really starts to be a rhythm with the practice, how simple it is? It really is. And what the problem is, really, is the complications—the complications and the concoctions that the mind creates around it, and getting lost in those.

A lot of times, once that faith begins to develop, you might notice that there's more and more of this quality of surrendering. Not so much doing the practice, but surrendering to the practice. Allowing the practice to move through you rather than the sense of "I'm doing the practice." I feel like that's one of the gifts of faith—it can really begin to wash away the sense of "I am doing the practice."

I remember the first time I went to Burma. Before I went there, I was nervous. I was going to practice at Panditarama and then Samanganana, and I was going to be practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. I'd heard a lot of stories about Sayadaw U Pandita. Some were really great, and some were just horrific. So I was nervous.

I remember calling a friend who had spent years living in Burma, solely practicing with Sayadaw U Pandita. I said, "What do I need to remember about practice?" I so appreciated his advice. He said, "You know what? It's so simple there. They feed you. All you need to do is sit when it's time to sit, walk when it's time to walk, go to the bathroom when it's time to go to the bathroom. There's just a simple awareness of all of it, and then you report it to your teacher. That's it. Don't worry. It's that simple."

When I was in Burma, I always came back to that whenever I would be freaking out about something. I'd come back to, "Oh yeah, what did my friend tell me? This is it. Just the simple awareness of whatever's arising right now."

The last arena I want to share some reflections on is how to approach difficulties within our practice—just because difficulties as a whole, especially the difficulties that overwhelm us, can undermine faith. Difficulty is the thing that can allow doubt to begin to arise. Of course, there's the simple practice of being with those difficulties, but you might notice that it's not so easy at times. It's much easier to talk about. That's the nice thing about being up here—to talk about it, make it sound really simple. It really isn't. It's difficult at times.

These are some things that have helped me. One is an image I got from a writer by the name of Simone Weil. I don't know if any of you read the writings of Simone Weil. She was a Christian mystic who also wrote a lot of different philosophical writings. So of course she's using language in terms of Christianity, but I think it fits well for our practice.

For Simone Weil, one of the problematic things she was faced with in her spiritual path was always feeling separate from God. It was this feeling of severe separation, of isolation—which I think is interesting because that's also a modern dilemma. But that's for another dharma talk.

She came up with this wonderful image of how the spiritual path works. She says the separation—the separation from God, or for the intents and purposes of this retreat, the separation from our practice—is actually the link. The separation is the link.

She gives this image of two prisoners in prison cells with a wall that separates them. Yet once they start to knock on the wall, the wall itself becomes the link between them. At first, when they come into the prison cells, the wall is that which separates. But then, when they come into a skillful relationship with the wall, it links them. It brings relationship. The separation is the link.

Can you have faith and trust that the things that feel like they're separating you from your practice are actually linking you to it?

A lot of times this is very true—even with all the hindrances and things that arise, when you bring awareness to them, it allows us to link back into our practice. Can you move towards anything that feels like it's separating you from your practice and discover that it's actually linking you through awareness?

The poet Pesha Gertler puts this well in her poem "The Healing Time." She begins:

Finally, finally on my way to yes,
I bump into all the places where I said no to my life.

I have to stop there just because I think that's a great opening line. "Finally, I'm finally on my way to yes, and then I bump into all the places where I said no to my life." Have you ever experienced that? It's called meditation. It can really have that feeling at times—at least in the dark times.

So again:

Finally on my way to yes,
I bump into all the places where I said no to my life,
all the untended wounds,
the red and purple scars,
those hieroglyphs of pain
carved into my skin, my bones,
those coded messages
that send me down the wrong street again and again
where I find them,
the old wounds,
the old misdirections.
And I lift them
one by one close to my heart
and I say, holy, holy.

Can your difficulties, can your wounds turn out to be that which is holy?

So just to review: faith, this quality of *saddhā*. Remember it's like falling in love, and be aware of those delusions that can follow when we fall in love. And doubt—within doubt, be sensitive to expectation. Can you cultivate this quality of not knowing? A not knowing that's most intimate. Not knowing specifically in terms of how the path unfolds. And even not having expectation around result, like the cellist of Sarajevo, Vedran Smailović. And may the separations in your practice—may you see that they're the link, just like those two prisoners and the wall.

May the arising of faith in all of our practices go towards the liberation of all beings.

Thank you.

CHAPTER 6

Finding A Path With Heart

Greg Scharf · 49 min

> *In this contemplative talk delivered during the autumn retreat at IMS, Greg Scharf weaves together teachings from Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan, the poetry of Mary Oliver, and the wisdom of Thai forest masters like Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Phuong Jyotiko to explore what it means to find a path with heart. He begins by inviting practitioners to examine their motivations for undertaking spiritual practice—whether seeking ease, responding to trauma, following inspiration, or longing for deeper meaning beyond conventional offerings of happiness based on acquiring and having.*
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> *The talk centers on the Pāli concept of saṃvega (spiritual urgency), which arises from honestly confronting our mortality. Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya's beautiful similes—life as a dewdrop, a water bubble, a line drawn on water—Scharf encourages practitioners to develop a meaningful relationship with impermanence rather than avoiding or repressing the truth of death. He suggests that such contemplation, rather than being morbid, can free us from 'cursed pettiness' and bring clarity about how to live fully.*
>
> *Scharf guides listeners toward recognizing that suffering arises when we seek refuge in unreliable, constantly changing phenomena. The alternative is taking refuge in awareness itself—that quality of knowing which remains unaffected by what it knows, able to hold anything that arises. Through persistent observation of the mind's basic nature as awareness, practitioners can discover the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha as an ultimate refuge within, becoming like a clear forest pool where truth is seen wherever one looks.*

Starting today, it really felt like autumn—that hint of fall weather that comes this time of year. I was struck by the feeling of the seasons changing as I walked over through the woods tonight, the quality of light at this time of day. Maybe it has to do with being this far north. There's a certain quality of light as autumn starts to come on, and there's a poignance to this season that I feel—though it may not be there for everyone.

It's a great time to be on retreat, I think. There's something about the change of the seasons that, for me, seems to incline the mind and the heart to quiet and to turning inward. I've been here at this time of year a lot at IMS in different capacities over a long time, many years. Not as many as my colleagues, but still quite a lot of time spent here in this hall and at this time of year. Walking over this evening in the light of the setting

sun, through the woods, I was struck by the beauty—the fleeting quality of beauty. We need to be careful what we take for granted. We take a lot for granted. We need to be careful how we live.

I suppose I should begin my talk. The chances of me getting through it are not that good to begin with. But before I do, I was just doing some walking meditation before coming in, and I was reflecting on this quality of faith that Brian spoke about so beautifully last night—faith or confidence. We might find that at different times in different ways. We start to find our own sense of trust or faith, confidence, whatever word you want to use, trust in this quality of awareness.

I was looking in my own heart. I see a lot of this quality there. It's very big and huge. Maybe it has been since the get-go in a way. I'm lucky that way, maybe. But anyway, there's tons of it. So if you feel any lack, you can have all of mine. Any time you feel a little low in that department, I'm giving it all to you right now for your happiness and benefit. So if you ever need any, you can have all of mine. I've got lots of it and to spare.

Now I'll start.

If I conducted a survey here in the hall and asked, "Why did you come here? What's your motivation to come to this retreat, to undertake this spiritual life, a practice like this?"—there might be quite a wide range of replies. Maybe we're just looking for a little more ease or some kind of feeling of balance in our lives. Maybe something difficult or really traumatic happened and it propelled us into this kind of search. Maybe we were inspired by something we read or someone we met or heard about, and through that inspiration we felt, "Oh, yes"—this pointing to some possibility. Maybe it's just mostly curiosity, curiosity about what a long retreat would be like, for example, to come here for the autumn. Maybe one or two of you wound up here by accident thinking it was a health spa and are still hopefully looking around for that hot tub. It's got to be here somewhere.

But I think all of us would say that our motivation is at least in part related to a sense of longing for meaning, for a deeper connection to life, some deeper understanding of what it is to be alive, to be a human. We may have touched, certainly at some point, some sense of questioning or dissatisfaction with the conventional offerings, the conventional strategies offered to us to find happiness and contentment in our lives—wondering if what's offered in that world will ever really bring us any kind of lasting happiness.

And if we look at the values in this society, at least in great part, those are based on getting and having, acquiring things or experiences—a lot of that kind of energy. We can find that we get swirled into it and find ourselves measuring our worth, measuring our happiness in terms of things we've gotten, things we have, things we can somehow lay claim to. We can define success in terms of what we've gotten.

And maybe it's not so conscious or obvious, but then we can look at how language is used so much: all the things we "have." We have a car and a house and all the stuff in it. We have partners or spouses. We have a body, we have a mind, we have knowledge we've had, and we have experiences. We can start defining ourselves in terms of all we have, all we've gotten. It's a rather dangerous way to value oneself—in terms of things we have, things we've gotten. There can be some unease, some anxiety, because things don't last. We'll be parted from any of the things we've gotten that we use to define who we are or measure our happiness. They'll get old. Eventually, we'll be parted from them.

And if we're measuring our sense of well-being or our worth in these terms, then it's a setup for this endless kind of pursuit for the next thing that does the trick somehow—searching for meaning and fulfillment outside of ourselves, in things we might be able to get and acquire.

When I was in high school—and that's a long time ago now; sometimes it seems so strange to be sitting up here teaching, like how did that happen? It wasn't something I planned—anyway, when I was in high school, there was a book that I know many of you are familiar with. It was published when I was in high school, called *The Teachings of Don Juan* by Carlos Castaneda. It was very important to me. It was my Bible, you could say, at that time in my life.

I'm going to read a passage from that book that has stayed with me over the years. It will be familiar to some of you. In this case, Don Juan is speaking to Carlos, who has come to him to seek learning:

"Before you embark on any path, ask the question: does this path have a heart? If the answer is no, you will know it. And then you must choose another path. The trouble is nobody asks the question. And when you finally realize that you have taken a path without a heart, the path is ready to kill you. At that point, very few of us can stop to deliberate and leave the path. A path without a heart is never really enjoyable. You have to work hard even to take it. On the other hand, a path with heart is easy. It doesn't make you work at liking it. For me, there is only the traveling on paths that have a heart, on any path that may have a heart. There I travel. And the only worthwhile challenge for me is to traverse its full length. And there I travel, looking, looking breathlessly."

I remember reading that and wanting so badly to feel some quality of that—looking breathlessly, feeling that I was somehow walking on a path with a heart. I didn't know what that might be like, but I had this strong sense, this intuition: it must exist. It must be possible. But none of the paths that were being offered to me at that time seemed to have any real heart. I couldn't find it there. I thought, there's got to be more to life than the version of reality that was being handed to me by society—something beyond these conventional ways of seeing, the conventional offerings for finding happiness and success. I felt it must be there, but I didn't know where I could look or possibly try to find it.

And so maybe that's one of the reasons we would come to a retreat: because we're looking for a path that might have a heart. Or maybe we're here because we feel like we might have found one.

There's a word in the Pali language that I like a lot: *saṃvega*. It's usually translated as spiritual urgency. It's an aspect, a way of cultivating this quality of ardency that Joseph spoke about the other night. You could say this quality is what might motivate us to look for a path with a heart. It's a quality that makes us examine our life and ask the question: What am I doing with my time? How can I use my time well? What's worth doing with a life?

I think this is a quality that we all have to some extent. We wouldn't come to a retreat like this if we didn't have some connection to this quality of saṃvega. It's a huge commitment and takes a lot to get here, to spend this time.

Every year, it seems, as I get older, the passage of time speeds up. I don't know if anyone else notices this. Years go by so quickly—just another one gone, so fast it seems. Where does the time go? And of course, the perception of time is not a fixed thing, is it? A single meditation period can feel like an eternity. Ring the bell. Ring the bell! And then another year of our life, the last week—where did that go?

There's a place in one of the collections of short suttas in the Aṅguttara Nikāya—an unusual place where the Buddha is quoting another teacher who was around at that time, a teacher named Araka. I'll read just a few things from what this teacher said. It's a long list of images that he gave about the fleeting nature of a life.

He said: "Short is the life of human beings, limited and brief. This one should wisely understand. One should do good and live a pure life, for none who is born can escape death."

And then he gave these beautiful similes from nature, these images: "Just as a dew-drop on the tip of a blade of grass will quickly vanish at sunrise and will not last long, even so a human life is like a dewdrop. It will not last long. And just as when rain falls from the sky in thick drops, a bubble appearing on the surface of water will vanish and not last long. And just as a line drawn on water with a stick vanishes and will not last long—even so, human life is like this. It does not last long."

These beautiful images, but they point to something really, really true, something we can really touch.

Here's a little more from the teachings of Don Juan: "Death is our eternal companion. It is always to our left at an arm's length. An immense amount of pettiness is dropped if your death makes a gesture to you, or if you catch a glimpse of it, or if you just have the feeling that your companion is there watching you. The issue of our death is never pressed far enough. Death is the only wise advisor that we have. Your death will tell you that nothing really matters outside its touch. One of us here has to change, and fast. One of us here has to learn again that death is the hunter, and that it is always to one's left. One of us here has to ask death's advice and drop the cursed pettiness that belongs to those that live their lives as if death will never tap them. Think of your death now. It is at an arm's length. It may tap you at any moment. So you really have no time for crappy thoughts and moods. None of us have time for that."

That's pretty strong language. But it points to something really important. None of us actually has any idea how much more time we have, how much longer we're going to live. There aren't any guarantees—not even the next breath. We don't like to think about this. We don't really like to let the truth of this in. Most of the time, we try to avoid it.

Someone once told me that they were doing a practice called "One Year to Live." Maybe some of you have heard of this. I think it's from a book by that same name—it's not something I've actually read. But I mention this because it's an interesting question to ask oneself: What might I do differently? How might I live my life if I knew I had this finite time, this one year?

It's a question I have really asked myself at times over the years. Sometimes I've thought if I really knew it was true, it would be kind of cool. It would really help me put things in perspective. And sometimes when I look at my life, I find I wouldn't really change very much. But at other times, it's pretty sobering and humbling to look at how I'm spending my time.

And then we turn around and another year has gone by. So often we live as though we have all the time in the world. But the truth is that death is our constant companion. It's walking along with us, just there to our left. And if we come into a real relationship with this truth—the truth of our own mortality—not in some morbid way that takes us down into a dark place, but if we come into a real relationship there, we can actually find that it serves as a source of real strength and clarity for us.

But as I was saying, there's a lot of conditioning to avoid this subject. There's a lot of fear around facing this truth in our culture, I think.

And if you look at how we tend to hide dying and death away—we hide it out of our sight, in special places, so we don't have to see it. Then we sanitize the dead in funeral parlors, trying to make the corpse look like it's just taking a nap. We treat death like it's a mistake, or like growing old and dying are somehow evidence of our personal failure, a reflection of bad taste on our part. That's kind of how it's treated.

This fear is so pervasive. Maybe it's obvious, maybe it's subtle, but it pervades our lives a lot of the time. We focus on outward things—on getting and acquiring and having, all the different things we do to define ourselves, to tell ourselves who we are and enhance our sense of comfort somehow. We can spend a lot of time avoiding, repressing, not looking at our relationship to our own mortality. And it can really lead us to lose out on a lot of what life has to offer.

Here's a poem I love by Mary Oliver. It's called "When Death Comes":

When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn,
When death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy me and then snaps the purse shut.
When death comes like the measle pox.
When death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades.

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering, what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore, I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood.
And I look upon time as no more than an idea.
And I consider eternity as another possibility.

And I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular.
And each name a comfortable music in the mouth, tending as all music does towards silence.
And each body a lion of courage and something precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

I love that line: "I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness." If nothing else, our death is going to be a really interesting event. It's the next guaranteed-to-be-interesting thing—especially if we're actually present for it, if we can really show up for it, meet it with mindfulness and without struggling, step through that door with curiosity.

I once heard this story—I don't know who told it, it was a long time ago. It was someone who was living as a monk in Thailand and had become friends with an older monk, a very well-practiced elderly monk. This elder was getting quite old and was towards the end of his life. At one point, he called in the person who was telling this story, to where he was lying. He knew he was coming to the end of his life—he was dying right then. "Come, come," he said. And his mindfulness and his equanimity were so strong that he was just describing the process. "Oh yes, now this is starting to shut down." He was able to describe his dying moments with incredible clarity, that whole process.

Can you imagine that degree of mindfulness and balance of mind? This is actually a possibility. It's not just a story I'm telling.

In a fundamental way, we can see this whole practice, we can hold it, as preparation for meeting our death when it inevitably comes. We can really look at it that way. And as Joseph said the other day, this could be an incredible opportunity for us at that moment, if we meet it in the right way.

So if we're living with an unacknowledged fear—or maybe an acknowledged fear—of our own death, of our own mortality, and we actually, in a gentle way, start to face that fear, start to look at it, start to undo our conditioning around it, bringing our fears to the surface, digging them out—not in a brutal way, but bringing those things more to the forefront of our consciousness—we can start to see that they're impermanent, those fears. That they're empty of anything solid. That they're not telling us some truth about what's real. We can start to let them go.

This can really broaden the scope of what we hold as possible for us as human beings. A meaningful relationship with our own mortality brings us into a direct relationship with the truth of impermanence, which goes to the very heart of what the Buddha was teaching. Connecting with this truth, with the understanding that all things are impermanent, is stressed throughout the teachings. The whole path seems to flow from a real relationship to this truth. And the classic description of a moment of awakening—the moment of stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment—

It's usually described very simply: the stainless eye of the Dhamma arose thus—that which is subject to arising is subject to passing away. It's a deep insight into that truth that opens the mind to the unconditioned.

But we can fall into a superficial relationship with this understanding. It's so pervasive in these circles. We hear, "Yeah, everything's impermanent." It can become a kind of philosophical stance or a concept that we ascribe to, an idea.

Out here in the woods around IMS, this is a great place to practice. This is a real forest center. A lot of places that get called forest centers in Burma, for example—if we were in a forest center in Burma, we'd be in the heart of a very noisy village with a lot going on. It's pretty quiet here, and we have these beautiful woods. These woods can teach us everything we need to know about the truth of impermanence. It's all right there, just shouting it at you constantly. You don't need me or any of the rest of us. With these woods, we can get it—direct transmission, right in. Just go out there.

If we let it in, we see that trees are born due to causes and conditions. If there's a seed and it goes into the earth, if it falls in the right place, and then there's the right amount of rain and sun and all the things that need to happen—then it'll sprout and we'll have a seedling and then a baby tree. I just saw some walking over here. They're out there, these little baby trees. I hope they make it through the winter. That's tough, getting through the winter. And then they grow and become bigger, and eventually you have a nice, huge, mature tree.

If we walk in the woods, we'll see all stages of the life of a tree there—little baby ones and saplings and mature trees and old trees that are losing their vitality. And we'll see dead trees, ones that have fallen down that are turning back into earth, and new trees sprouting right out of that. We see all of this there. It's just the way of nature, nature presenting itself. We don't make a fuss over it, a problem out of it. It seems really beautiful if we notice it. They're just trees. But if we notice this, there's a sense of rightness there. This is the teaching of the Buddha.

And if we look at this in the right way, if we bring our understanding and awareness to seeing this, we'll recognize that our bodies, our own birth, is not any different from the birth of a tree. We are born due to causes and conditions, things that come together. We need nourishment the same way that the tree needs to be nourished by sun and rain and nutriment from the soil. We take food and our bodies grow based on that nourishment.

And our bodies are changing just like trees. They lose their leaves and get new ones. We lose our hair—we don't necessarily get new hair. At least in my case, I'm losing it, but it's not coming back. But still, our hair, skin, nails—they're growing and they die and fall off. Somewhere I once heard that we get a whole brand new body. It takes about seven years to get every cell replaced. That's kind of amazing. Who are we if we're in a state of constantly being replaced like that?

And so if we look, we'll see that we're not any different from a tree or anything in nature. We're just an aspect, a manifestation of that natural process. We'll see, if we look, that all things internally and externally are the same. All things—if they have been subject to arising—are subject to passing away. They'll change and pass away. That's just the way of nature.

And as I was saying, out in the woods we don't struggle with that truth. We let it be. We find beauty there, the rightness of that. There's a harmony and balance, it seems. Oh, it's just right—these stages of life, these changes. And it's so healing for us often to spend time in nature, opening to that. It has a healing quality for us. We aren't in contention with things there.

But then when it comes to ourselves, it's not different. Somehow we feel it's not right anymore. These changes shouldn't be happening. Like a mistake, or something we should have been able to avoid if we just had our act together. And we fight against it and struggle and try to hold on. We don't want to see that we're the same as nature, same as all things that arise.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "Trees, mountains, and vines all live according to their own truth. They appear and die following their nature. They remain impassive. But not we people. We make a fuss over everything. Yet the body just follows its own nature. It's born, grows old, and eventually dies. It follows nature in this way. Whoever wishes it to be otherwise will just suffer."

And if we sit and pay attention to these bodies and minds, we'll see that they're in a state of constant change. Always changing, and actually changing very, very quickly. How many births and lives and deaths do we go through in a single day here at the re-

treat? We take birth in these different realms, dwell there for a time, and then that changes, and we take a new birth into a new realm. Is there anything in that flow that we can actually hold on to?

Of course, most of the time we get caught up in the process of that flow of change. We get lost in the details of it. We don't see the change because we get carried along with the current, caught up in the details. We get caught up in the world of the senses—all the sights and sounds and touches and smells and tastes. And especially we get caught up in the world of our thoughts and emotions, all that we think and feel about this flow of experience, about the world, and all that we tell ourselves it means about me. Swept up in that, we don't see the change. And then we wind up attributing a kind of solidity or reality to it that it actually doesn't have—that we'll see, if we look closely, it doesn't have any solidity, doesn't have any ongoing, fixed kind of truth or reality in that change.

And then we try to hold on, and it just slips away. It keeps slipping away. It's like trying to hold on to moving water, to a river or a stream. No matter how hard we might try, it's just going to slip through our fingers. It just will slip away. And if we look closely, we'll see there isn't actually a river there. There's just this flow. There's nothing to hold on to. It's just flowing.

Sometimes when we try to hold on, it's like holding on to a slipping rope. And if we try to hold on to a slipping rope, what happens? We get rope burn. The only solution, if we're getting rope burn and it hurts, the only solution is to let go.

This is from a Thai teacher named Upasika Kee Nanayon, in a book called *Pure and Simple*. She said this: "If you look into the rippling current of your experience, you'll find that there's actually nothing you can latch onto as having any essence. Everything disbands and disappears."

New fabrications arise and pass away, arise and pass away. They keep on flowing, and they seem to involve many issues. But actually, there aren't many issues. There's only arising, remaining, and passing away. It's because we're so focused on not seeing this that there seem to be so many issues. But no matter how many there are, there's only just this arising, remaining, and passing away—like a rippling current of water where the rippling isn't a thing at all.

If you learn to see skillfully in this way, you'll see that all things arise, remain, and pass away. The past has passed away. The future hasn't yet come. Look simply at the present arising and passing away right before your eyes, and don't hold on. When you see arising, remaining, and passing away, pure and simple, right in the present moment, and then let go—that's when you gain release.

To me, this is related to this idea of refuge. We've been speaking about this in different ways throughout the week; it's been something of a theme—this idea of refuge, where we find a place of safety in that flow of change. If we're trying to hold on to a moving stream, trying to hold on to the river, then what we're doing is seeking refuge, seeking safety, in something that is inherently unstable and unreliable. We're placing our hearts upon that which by its very nature isn't reliable, isn't really a safe place.

I read an article once where someone asked a Zen teacher what was the secret of her happiness. I guess she was a happy Zen teacher. And she replied, "It's the wholehearted and unrestricted cooperation with the unavoidable." Those Zen teachers are great with one-liners. But it's a good one, a great one. Because when we find ourselves living in a state of non-cooperation with the unavoidable truth of impermanence, it's a setup to suffer. We set ourselves up to suffer, and then if we find ourselves suffering, we tend to blame the world. We find ourselves pointing here and there to fix the blame for our unhappiness. It's out there—it's due to something in the world.

But the world isn't to blame when we're suffering. It's just doing its thing, unfolding lawfully, naturally, due to causes. The poor world is innocent, unfolding according to nature. We've just taken refuge in the wrong thing. That's why we're suffering.

Instead of taking refuge in that which is unreliable, if we take refuge in wisdom and wakefulness and love—if we take refuge in the truth of the way it is in this moment right now, just like this—that's a place of safety no matter what's going on. We can find real refuge in that truth of things. We can take refuge in awareness itself.

That's what we learn to trust through our practice. We trust this quality of awareness. We find the faith and confidence that Brian was speaking about last night. We find a safe place to rest our heart in this quality of awareness itself. And we start to see that awareness is not affected by what's known. The awareness of fear is not afraid. The awareness of anger is not angry. We see that this quality of awareness can hold anything that arises. And so we can find refuge, safety, in awareness itself. Through that, we find a truth that was there all along. We take refuge in the truth that's there now and always has been. We start to find a voice of wisdom that arises in our own heart, a place inside that already knows the truth.

So, ending number one—a lovely quotation by the great Thai forest monk Ajahn Phuong Jyotiko, from a book called *Awareness Itself*:

You have to keep being observant of the mind, awareness itself. It's not the case that the mind isn't aware, you know. Its basic nature is awareness. Just look at it. It's aware of everything. Aware, but it can't yet let go of its perceptions, of the conventions it holds to be true. So you have to focus your investigation on in. Simply keep at it. If you're persistent like this without letting up, your doubts will gradually fade away, fade away, and eventually you'll reach your true refuge within you, this basic awareness that sees clearly through everything. This is the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha appearing within you as your ultimate refuge. It's sovereign in and of itself. It knows clearly and truly all around. That's the true refuge within.

And ending number two, from Ajahn Chah:

You will reach a point where the heart tells itself what to do. Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

The Buddha taught us to lay down those things that lack a real abiding essence. If you lay everything down, you will see the truth. If you don't, you won't. That's the way it is. And when wisdom awakens within you, you will see truth wherever you look. Truth is all you'll see.

So let's just keep sitting quietly for a couple of minutes and let these words drift out into this cool autumn evening.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 7

Am I OK?

Sally Armstrong · 58 min

> *In this talk from the 2012 three-month retreat at IMS, Sally Armstrong examines the pervasive restlessness that characterizes much of our meditation experience. She identifies a core pattern underlying most of our thinking: the questions "Am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay?" Drawing from the Sabbāsava Sutta (MN 2), she shows how the Buddha recognized this same tendency 2,500 years ago, calling it "unwise attention" that causes unwholesome states to arise and persist.*
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> *Armstrong describes restlessness as perhaps the major hindrance for Western practitioners—an unwillingness to accept what is, manifesting as the mind constantly slipping into past rumination or future planning. She notes that even at advanced stages of awakening, a subtle form of restlessness remains: the feeling that something "out there" might have more value than what's here now, what she calls "the addiction to time and its promises."*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with the three main movements of restless mind: dwelling in the past (requiring acknowledgment, acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion), anxious planning for the future, and constant self-evaluation in the present. Armstrong encourages practitioners to investigate restlessness directly through the body, to question the mind's insistent message that "here is not okay," and to discover the fundamental okayness that underlies our experience. She suggests that real freedom comes from preferring stillness to movement, and presence to the endless chase of past and future.*

So here we are, about ten days into the retreat—but of course, who's counting? I'm sure you're not.

At this stage, we've given you a lot of instructions. A lot of ideas and techniques and ways to practice: working with the body, working with the breath, moving on to more subtle experiences like moods and mind states, thoughts, vedana, feeling tone. A lot of different ways to be with practice, different ways to encourage this kind of bare attention, bare awareness—simply just being with things as they are.

But let's get real. What's actually happening most of the time? You're thinking. You're thinking about your experience, about yesterday, about tomorrow. You're judging, you're comparing, you're commenting, and you're narrating. This is a lot of what we do, even as we're trying to come into the present moment. It happens during the sitting meditation, and it happens even more in the in-between periods. That's just what the

mind does. It roams in this field of especially past and future—familiar territory—but also thinking about the present. There's commenting or narrating or judging or comparing. That's actually a little bit of advanced practice. If you're thinking about the present, you're getting a little bit ahead of the game. It's still thinking, but at least you're thinking about this, thoughts about practice. But it's still thinking.

In meditation, because we're trying just to be simply present, to see what's here, see what's happening, we get to see this. And it's kind of humbling to see the nature of our minds and where it goes and what it does and what it obsesses around.

There was a cartoon I saw that really pointed to this. It's from the strip *Rhymes with Orange* by Hillary Price. The setting is a doctor's office. There's someone sitting on that little examination table, and the doctor's there with a clipboard, obviously reading the results from some tests to the patient. And the doctor says, "The MRI confirms it. Your mind is full of dumb and repetitive thoughts."

So we don't need an MRI to have that revelation. Look at what the mind does. It just has no shame. It goes anywhere and everywhere with great rapidity and energy.

Talking about it in this way, it's certainly not that thoughts are the enemy or that thoughts are bad or wrong or we shouldn't be thinking. That is not what I want to talk about tonight. Thoughts and the whole process of the aliveness of the mind—that's what the mind does. It's its nature, its conditioning, to think. But we do want to begin to understand our thoughts and where they're going, what they're doing, because it's through our thoughts, as the Buddha said, that we create the world. We create our reality through our thinking and our concepts and our reactions to experience.

And the thing is, this world that we create is often chaotic. We call it the field of the kilesas, or samsara. This is samsara: just this alternating push and pull of wanting and not wanting, liking and not liking, pushing away and holding on, and a good dose of delusion thrown in there for good measure, woven through. This is really a lot of what we experience a lot of the time. And this is actually pretty normal for a human being, for a human mind. We've had years of practicing to think in this way.

As one teacher said, distraction is the habit of the mind. We've actually trained our minds to some extent to be the way they are. They didn't just wake up and the mind was like that. We've had a lot of time—not deliberately trying, this is just how we have been trained or conditioned or learned to use the mind. It's what the mind does.

And when we bring that mind to meditation, well, there's a lot of struggle. I call the kind of meditation we're often experiencing "sheepdog mindfulness." The image is that our thoughts are the sheep. And sheep, they're a little fearful, and they just want what

they want, and if they can't get it, they're struggling. If you see a sheepdog actually working with sheep, it often gets them into this little ball, but it's a quivering mass of these sheep. And any moment one's going to dart out, and that sheepdog has to rush around and try and pull it back in.

That's the kind of mindfulness we're often doing here. It's like, "Hey, come back here. Hey, come back here." And it's exhausting, right? Sheepdog mindfulness. The only way we're going to find some relief is if the sheep actually calm down a little—if they're actually okay with just hanging out with the sheepdog. Because otherwise, are you exhausted at the end of the day? We spend so much energy trying to corral this crazy mind.

So really looking at thoughts and seeing how they work, coming to a wiser relationship with them, is very important. Now again, as I say all this about thoughts, it's not that thoughts are bad or wrong. It's the nature of the mind to think. But here we can get curious about what's actually happening. What is it we're choosing to think about? It might seem like a choice, but that's part of what I want to talk about tonight.

Especially here on retreat, where, let's face it, we don't need to think about too much to get through a day. It's not rocket science—get up, get dressed, maybe shower, bathroom, whatever, come sit, go walk. Not a huge amount of calculation needs to go into this process. Yet, I'm sure you know, the mind obsesses about things great and small eternally.

As Joseph says—he has these great lines—one of his lines about thought is, "Nothing is worth thinking about." And that has two meanings, because nothing is worth thinking about, but also *nothing* is worth thinking about. Depends which way you look.

So we have this kind of mind. We've trained it for how many—twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, whatever number of years—to think this way. And we come to a retreat. We bring this agitated, obsessive thinking mind to practice, sit down, and expect what to happen? Something different.

Well, if you look at our conditioning in this culture—and it's not that different from a lot of cultures, but this is the culture we're in here in the U.S.—the societally approved drug of choice is caffeine. This culture runs on caffeine. How many Starbucks are there, and all the other coffee shops? And it's not just caffeine in coffee; it's in soda. And now there are energy drinks. You go into any 7-Eleven or convenience store or petrol station, and right by the counter, so you can grab one, is a big dose of caffeine.

This wired energy is rampant throughout the culture—this sense that people need it to get through the day. These energy drinks, especially Red Bull—I've never had one, but it's so popular. It's made the two guys who came up with it billionaires. They sell so much of this stuff around the world.

And the culture itself has this emphasis on everything fast, immediate, now. It used to be that email was bad enough, but now it's instant messaging. Email took thirty seconds or a few minutes; now it's instant everything. And there's the emphasis on multitasking, which science is proving isn't actually possible. All we're doing is more things at once badly, rather than many things well.

I was talking to a staff person the other day about how kids are growing up in this kind of world where you're doing all these things at once. He said, "Yeah, I was going to watch a movie with my son, and we sat down, and then I noticed he's updating his Facebook status and texting his friends. I'm like, 'Are you watching the movie?' 'Yeah, yeah, I'm watching, I'm typing, and I'm texting.'" The mind is just being stewed in that kind of hyperactivity all the time.

And then, as I said, we bring this mind—that's had all of these influences and impacts from society and how we live our lives—to this hill in the middle of central Massachusetts, you could say in the middle of nowhere, where the most exciting thing to watch is the sunset. Now, someone said we have construction TV, courtesy of the workmen out there—"Oh, what's happening with the construction? Oh my gosh!"—but relatively speaking, not much going on.

But now we want calm. We want simplicity. We want the mind to be quiet. And understandably, we get frustrated. We get impatient or surprised or even resentful, judgmental that the mind is not quiet. But it's understandable, because we have trained the mind in this other way, and this is its nature.

So if we want to train our mind in a different way, if we really want the possibility of some peace and ease in our practice, we need to start looking at this tendency of mind and the nature of thought itself. In meditation, you do get to see what a thought actually is. It's this blip of energy in the mind—some words or an image. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And if you see it clearly, if you bring mindfulness to it, a number of you have said this already—I'm sure most of you, if not all of you, have had this experience—what happens? It's like a wisp, like a fog that fades, or a balloon that bursts, or a bubble that pops.

Thoughts have the energy we choose to give them. When we don't notice them, when we're identified with them, when we believe in them, they create our world. They create our reality. They create our view of ourselves and our perceptions of others. If we see them clearly, we can start to have a very different relationship to thoughts, and this is so important.

Thoughts certainly seem random, or that they're not under our control. You just all of a sudden realize what you're thinking, and you're like, "Where on earth did that come from? How did I get there?" Sometimes you can see the sequence of thoughts that leapfrogged from this to that and all over the place and landed you there. Most of the time we don't need to figure that out—it's not that helpful. But thoughts are conditioned like anything else; they have a lawful nature. We mightn't be aware enough to see the triggering sequence that develops into a thought, but it's there, and it is possible to bring some mindfulness to it.

In the context of meditation, one of the things we need to realize is that whatever is unresolved in our life, sooner or later it's going to come up here. You create this space, and nature abhors a vacuum. So what comes up? The stuff of our lives. And again, this is natural. Especially if something is unresolved, this is where the mind goes—whether it's past or future—stewing over it, trying to figure it out.

Our willingness to be with that and see that process clearly allows the meditation to deepen, allows insight to unfold. Our unwillingness is what leads to restlessness—restlessness of mind, restlessness of body. It's what leads the mind to slip off or out of the present moment and into this story, the story of me, the story of my life. Really, this unwillingness to just be with things just as they are is what leads to restlessness.

The core of this movement of mind, this strong patterning of restlessness that many of us experience, I see as answering one basic question, which gets divided into three: Am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay? Most of what we're thinking about is, in some way, trying to resolve one of those three questions. And you can just see how much time and energy we put into that. Sometimes just really highlighting what the mind is doing helps us to understand how strong this tendency is. It's regret about the past and anxiety or planning for the future—this is what the mind is doing.

I read somewhere recently—and I don't know how they calculate these things, but this is what I read, and it was on the Internet, so it must be true—that we have 66,000 thoughts a day, and two-thirds of them are fear-based. You can count, actually. You've got the perfect experiment here; do some tracking for us. The Dalai Lama says that all unwholesome mind states originate in fear.

And really, when I'm talking about this—"Am I okay? Was I okay?"—you can see that it's really fear-based. It's some kind of anxiety that's very deep in most of us. Certainly, I know that very well.

So this is not a new phenomenon, as much as I've been talking about how this society and culture has led us to have this particular kind of mind. But it's certainly not unique to this time and age. The Buddha knew about this tendency of mind. He said that when we get into this kind of agitated worrying, it leads to an increase in desire and wanting, to solidifying the sense of self, and to ignorance or delusion.

There's actually a great sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya—it's the second one, so I don't know if they're in any order of importance, but it's right there at the front—the Sabbasava Sutta. And there's a paragraph in this sutta talking about what we do with the mind:

"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?"

Can you relate? This is from 2,500 years ago. All of this trying to figure out, basically: Am I okay? Was I okay? Where will I go? What will happen to me?

The Buddha called this kind of thinking unwise attention. He says that when we obsess in this way, it causes unwholesome states to arise in the moment, and ones that have arisen to increase or persist. It's this kind of obsessive thinking that really, when you look at it, you see that even though we get so fixated in it, it's a source of suffering—the source of so much neurotic, obsessive thinking.

So I wanted to get a modern-day equivalent of that kind of thinking. Who did I turn to? Woody Allen. Here's a Woody Allen statement about the same kind of thinking:

"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.

Again, he's always a little funny, but it's kind of what we do, isn't it? We're trying to figure things out. We're trying to protect ourselves.

We're trying to plan. We're trying to control. We're trying to make things okay. We spend so much energy trying to make things okay, dwelling on the past, worrying about the future. And you can see it in meditation—how much time are you spending going between those two places? Thoughts of past worry, planning for the future. We could calculate how much. And that leads to this restlessness that I want to talk about tonight.

When we let the mind roam in these fields, it's both out of and the source of restlessness. And I really, as I've reflected on this, see restlessness as perhaps the major hindrance for Westerners—this unwillingness to be with what is or accept what is. The mind then just slips off, not being okay, looking to, struggling with.

In my limited experience, especially in Buddhist Asian countries, they don't have this tendency of mind so much. I've heard teachers say they just say to their students, "Stop thinking." And they're like, "Okay, right." And they meditate, and they do it. I don't know if that's so, but I've heard that said.

But I had a personal experience of this myself. Not last fall but the fall before, I went on pilgrimage to India to visit the holy sites of the Buddha. It was actually the second time I'd made that trip; the first time, the year before, Guy and I had done it on our own. This time I went with a group of students from a dedicated practitioner's program that I lead.

The first time we went there, Guy and I met this lovely young couple in Bodh Gaya who are part of the convert Buddhist community. That's people from what used to be called the untouchable caste, now the Dalits, who are converting to Buddhism to basically step out of the caste system in India that's so limiting to people's lives and interactions. Some of them do it just to get out of the caste system, but Rajesh and Usha, whom we met, were really very sincere practitioners, just beginning to learn about Buddhism. We had this lovely connection with them.

When they learned I was coming back, they invited me to lead a daylong for their community. They met once a month, and I was going to be there at a time they would meet. So I led a daylong for convert Buddhists in Bodh Gaya, India.

It was kind of a trippy thing to do—to be in Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, speaking to Indians, the ethnicity of the Buddha, the land of the Buddha's birth. The Buddha was an Indian. And teaching them the Dharma was like this amazing circle that I felt part of, and so much privilege and blessing to be able to offer even a little bit back to the land of the Buddha's birth and help in that little way that I could.

But it had its strangeness too. I had to work through a translator. I'd never met anyone there apart from Rajesh and Usha. It was a very unusual mix of people, from a young fourteen-year-old girl to these elderly monks who came to kind of check me out. And it had its challenges, including this Swami who wandered in at lunchtime and started a big philosophical debate about the nature of the mind. I'm like, "No, no."

But at some point I said to them—and I was actually being helped by one of the students from my program, Scott, who had offered to come and support the retreat—"Would you like interviews? Practice discussions?"

"Oh, yes, yes, we would like that very much."

So we arranged that during one walking period I would go to one place and Scott would go to another. It wasn't a great facility. We were just in this little room and there was nowhere for us to do interviews. They just parked me in a corridor and said, "Stand here."

I'm like, "Okay, this is where I'll do my interviews."

There was kind of a chest there, so I just perched on it. And one by one, Usha, the woman who had helped arrange the day, brought these beautiful young Indian women to me. Without asking us, all the men went to Scott, all the women came to me. So I would just start, and Usha was translating, and I'd say, "Well, how was your meditation?"

And they would just say, oh, very good, very nice. I would ask, okay, so what happens when you sit down? Oh, very peaceful, very calm. Well, do you have any problems in your meditation? No, no, no, I enjoy it very much. Is there anything I can help you with? And I didn't really know how to get in there.

So one by one, by the third one, the responses were all pretty much the same. I felt like saying, maybe you should teach me about meditation. Because everyone I spoke to, when they sat down, could invite the mind into this place of calm and ease. And their meditations, so they told me, were lovely.

This is not our general experience, is it? We sit down and it's often—not always, of course, and it deepens—but often a real struggle. We get caught in this push and pull of the hindrances that we've spoken about.

I see restlessness as truly at the core of our struggle with the hindrances. It's both the result of the other hindrances and the cause for the other hindrances to arise. Our actual experience, even as we're going through wanting or not wanting or doubt and even

sleepiness, there's this restlessness present—this agitation, this unwillingness or inability to be present. When we're not getting what we want, when we're getting what we don't want, when there's doubt, there's fear, there's agitation.

We can find ourselves in what I call a restlessness cycle. There's a little bit of frustration or restlessness, so we get into the hindrances, into difficult mind states. Or maybe it starts with a difficult mind state—some memory comes up, some issues, some reactivity. But that's painful, so the mind slips off and gets agitated, and the restlessness increases, and more difficult mind states arise. We can often be caught in this cycle of restlessness.

We need to start noticing this tendency of mind because it can obviously be a real impediment for our practice, for our deepening, and for our ability to actually be with what is, to be present.

Ajahn Sumedho, who's one of the senior teachers in the Amaravati Ajahn Chah lineage—he's the head abbot of Chithurst in England, a very deep practitioner with a great sense of humor, very sincere—he talks about an amazing pilgrimage he made in India. My pilgrimage had its challenges, and we were driving in a bus with hotels arranged and food taken care of. He went on pilgrimage in India on foot, on dana, keeping the monastic schedule. That's another whole level. And he wrote a great book about it called *Rude Awakenings*.

In the beginning of that book, he talked about his experience as a newer monk in Thailand. He said at one point it was so difficult, but he stayed a Buddhist monk because to leave would have required the conviction that things would be better somewhere else. At that time in his life, conviction narrowed to one insight: any suffering is mind-wrought, and the way to the end of it has to come through getting to its root. Instead of figuring out different places to go, he realized he had to come to terms with restlessness. Instead of muttering about the lack of interesting things to do and the stifling heat and the poor food and the hideous mind states, he realized that the root of the matter, although hard to come to terms with, was his own aversion. Sometimes he would recognize that he was holding out against things, and then he would relax, let go. That left the way it is, the pilgrim's way.

This is our struggle at times. It is difficult. Our minds are difficult. Our bodies can be painful. The conditions here, as good as they are relative to many people's lives, can be hard. But if we hold out against things, if we keep that sense of unwillingness—unwillingness to be here—then it leads to restlessness, it leads to suffering. This restlessness of mind keeps us agitated.

Have you noticed how we can often be waiting for the next thing to happen? We're sitting, and—I think someone was mentioning this last night—waiting for the bell to ring. The bell rings. We start walking.

When is that over? When can I go back and sit? Sitting is much better, isn't it, than walking? And then we come and sit, waiting for the bell to ring. Or we're waiting for lunch. And finally it's lunchtime, and we're eating, and we're not present for the food, not enjoying sitting down or getting served some nice food.

This tendency to be always looking for the next thing, always in suspended mode because there's this feeling that it's not here somehow—that whatever we're looking for isn't here, but maybe it's in the next thing, maybe it's in the next mind state or the next experience. And so we're searching out of this sense of dissatisfaction, and sometimes we don't even recognize it. We don't even know what we're searching for. There's just this sense that it's not here now, this vague sense of not-okayness that leads to this kind of restlessness.

It's really important to notice if you have this tendency, or if it comes and goes—this leaning forward because here isn't okay, here isn't good enough. And so there's this suspended kind of waiting until it gets better, until I'm a different person, until I get my next interview, until the dharma talk, until I can finally get to bed, whatever it is.

Turn to that. This is a knowable experience, this sense of dissatisfaction, this leaning into the future. However you notice it, it's knowable. How does it feel in the body? What's the mind like? What's the attitude? What are the thoughts around it? See that it's not the truth of things. There isn't something out there that's going to fix it, fix us, make it better. So it's always this invitation to come back and actually be present.

As we begin to notice this tendency of mind, it can often seem that our meditation is actually increasing our restlessness. We were fine trucking along, busy as we are in our lives, but come and sit and try to be still, and it's like we're consumed with this restless energy. But I think it's only the quietness showing us what's actually there much of the time. This is what we need to be aware of. And we can get curious about this tendency and actually begin to feel it as a suffering state. Usually we're so driven by the restlessness to find what we want out there that we don't turn to the restlessness itself, to the felt sense.

So again, we feel it in the body. What is that feeling like? What's the energy like? We see what the mind is like. And we see how restlessness keeps us superficial—this tendency for the mind to keep moving off whatever's happening and into past and future.

How we relate to restlessness is obviously important, because we can believe its message: that we need to keep moving, that we need to fidget. Just this antsy energy of wanting to do something, anything, other than just sit here or just walk up and down. It's like, I've got this energy and I've got to go. Sometimes you can feel like you're going to burst with it. I can't bear this anymore. It can be electric, vibratory, shock waves going through, or it can be a tightness or contraction. But it's just energy.

Sometimes people say about energy, "Oh, give it a big feel, give it a big space." And I think that's a helpful metaphor or practice. But I actually think getting really minute with it is helpful too. What is this energy like? And can I use it—like riding a wave—can I use that energy to get a little closer to my experience?

We often label this kind of energy as unpleasant. And as I said, it can be a suffering state if we see it. But can we find any pleasantness in it? Can we see it simply as energy that we can actually use for practice? We look at what the mind does with it, because it's the mind that's telling us: this is not okay, I can't bear this another moment, I need to get out of here, I need to do something, I need to get rid of this.

And so we need to look at that story, that message that "it's not okay," because it moves so quickly from "it's not okay" to "I'm not okay." And this is what gets really interesting.

This message, whatever level we tune into it—"I'm not okay"—to me, I really see it as like the grit in the oyster that makes the pearl. If we tune into that, bring that into our mindfulness, it is a doorway to really deepening our practice. Because we start to see how much, if we don't attend to it, we're just going to be caught in the push and pull of this again and again.

One of the interesting things about restlessness is that it's actually one of the last fetters to go before full enlightenment. In the Theravada system, there are four stages of enlightenment. In each stage there are these ten fetters that either get released, let go of, abandoned, or weakened, and they progress through the four stages. At the last stage of enlightenment, just before full enlightenment, one of the fetters to go is called restlessness.

I was always really curious about that—restlessness, you know, this kind of thing that's so common that we all experience. Why is that one of the last fetters to go? I've looked into that a little. There are some suttas that talk about this kind of restlessness and how subtle it is.

I was reading *The Island*, which is a compilation of teachings and talks about Nibbana, about waking up, by Ajahns Pasanno and Amaro. They collected all of the sutta references and ancient and modern teachings about Nibbana—such great material in there. They had a piece on this fetter of restlessness, and this is what they said about it:

"The restlessness to which this refers"—that is, as a last fetter—"is not the fidgeting of the uncomfortable meditator. It is the subtlest of feelings that there might be something better over there or just in the future, a feeling that that which is out of reach might have more value in some way than this. It is the ever so insidious addiction to time and its promises."

The feeling that "that out there" has more value than "this." And so the mind, whether it's moving in these really gross ways or the subtlest—the subtlest dissatisfaction, disease—that's the kind of restlessness that is a fetter at this stage of awakening. But we all have tastes of that too, the mind just moving in these subtle ways. And they talk about the addiction to time and its promises.

So again, I really see the mind moves in these three major ways. It goes to the past, goes into the future, and if it's in the present—and this is advanced practice—it's still doing this kind of comparing. So there's still movement even in that.

What is it that the mind actually does when it's not willing to be present, when this stuff has come up and this agitation is present? It goes into the past. And this rumination about the past, this reliving of past experience, this eruption into the present of things from the past—this is a very natural, even normal, and perhaps even necessary part of our meditative process. This life review, in AA they call it a moral inventory, this recollection, this experiencing of actions from our past. It could be past from a few minutes ago, from yesterday, or from so long distant you'd forgotten all about these experiences. But in the quietness of the meditation, these things come up. They're just there.

And we can have all of these emotions around them. We can have guilt and shame and remorse and hurt and anger and grief and resentment about these feelings, these memories from the past. The stories will come up—the time you weren't there for a friend, the cruel thing you said to your sister, the phone call you didn't make, the abusive situations you might have been in and how you weren't able to protect yourself. All of these very complex things can come up.

Through the meditation we can really work through them, but there always seems to be more, doesn't there? We get through some layer and there's another layer underneath. This is very much part of our practice of no part left out, of just really coming to know ourselves.

In this there's a process that one way or another we have to go through to actually find the healing or the transformation that's possible—and certainly how we can begin to relate to these memories, these experiences more skillfully. There are four steps: we need to acknowledge that it happened, to accept that it happened, to forgive to whatever extent we're able to, and to bring compassion to the experience.

Acknowledging is just recognizing that there were harmful actions, whether we did them or they were done to us. It's not denying or minimizing what happened. It's simply this recognition, this acknowledgement: this did happen. And the fact that it's up for you means there's still some stickiness there, some suffering around that experience. So we acknowledge that.

And the acceptance is to say, yes, it did happen. I did that, or it was done to me, or I was part of that. It's just this willingness to say it happened.

Here in this process, we really need to distinguish between a whole package of guilt and shame on one hand, and remorse or regret on the other. Guilt and shame says about bad or unskillful, unwholesome actions, "I'm bad. I shouldn't have done that. It means I'm a terrible person. If other people knew, they wouldn't like me. It means this about me." And that's never helpful. Sometimes it happens and we find ourselves in those kinds of mind states, but we get stuck there, and that's the problem with identifying in that way. There's not a chance for movement.

Remorse or regret recognizes the same actions but sees the actions as being unskillful—not the person, not the individual. There's not the same stickiness. And it's willing, in the regret or remorse, to see the unskillfulness and to have some kind of determination to change. It doesn't mean we always can, but there's some recognition of the suffering in that experience and a commitment to ourselves, to others, to change that patterning of behavior.

So this is really helpful. We could say a lot more about this, but I don't have time to go into it. The key point is it's not about feeling guilty or ashamed, shaming ourselves about past actions. We've all done things that we regret, things that were unskillful, things that were harmful. Things were perhaps done to us that were really painful, really difficult. We need to recognize if we're getting stuck or identified and work with that as skillfully as we can, so that the next stage can happen.

That next stage is forgiveness, where we really see the whole story—that it couldn't in that moment have been otherwise. Whatever we brought to that experience, whatever happened, it happened. They say about forgiveness that forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past. Giving up all hope for a better past. How many mind moments or hours have you spent in the if-onlys? Or "I wish," or "I could have" or "should have," or "they shouldn't have, I shouldn't have." Trying to change the past is a recipe for suffering. Talk about stickiness. It's gone. It's no longer here for us now to work with. It's in the past.

But what we start to see is that while we can't change the past—as Carol likes to say, it's dead as the dinosaurs, back there with the pyramids and the pharaohs, gone—what we can change is our relationship to the past. And that actually does change the past in the way that really matters: in our relationship to it, our understanding of it, leading potentially to the last step, which is compassion.

This is suffering. Whatever happened—our own actions, the actions of others that harmed us—a lot of suffering. And to just let that be an opening to compassion, to really feel the tenderness of just how difficult it is to be a human being, the fragility, the vulnerability, the craziness, the challenge of life. And to really see that this whole process is possible. That whatever happened, healing is possible. Sometimes it takes time. We have to do this gently, when we're ready, when it feels right. But this is a process that meditation can really bring a lot of healing into—this process of acknowledging, accepting, forgiveness, and then compassion. And of course they all weave together. It's not just a linear list.

So that's one of the main movements of mind, a big movement we have in meditation: going into the past and ruminating, stewing, trying to fix the past. The other big movement, of course, is into the future—all of the planning and worrying and strategizing and manipulating.

We plan the next sitting we'll do, or where we'll go walking, or the next hour, or the next day, or the next meal, or the next retreat. How many of you have sat on this retreat planning your next retreat? "What will I do? Well, maybe then I'll have figured this out." It's so obsessive.

And part of it is that we have the luxury, most of the time, of a lot of choices in our lives and what we can do with our lives. Even here on retreat, in the limited world that we live in, there are abundant choices. "What about this? What about that? This aspect, that perspective. What would this person say? What would that person say? Well, what I thought yesterday, what I might think tomorrow. What practice should I do? What focus should I have? Should I look at vedanā, or what about continuity? Or maybe it's just

about concentration." I'm sure Brian talked about the doubt that we can spin in because we have so many choices, and there's no one right answer. "Why doesn't someone just tell me what to do, for God's sake? Just tell me, do it like this. I could just get in line and do it." Sometimes we just want someone to do that.

And most of us in our lives, certainly in this culture in the West, live in a low, chronic state of low-level stress through this kind of agitation—the choices, the busyness of life, the multitude of things we have to take care of. I heard a doctor say once that no matter what people come in to see him for, all of the different conditions of mind and body—stomach and heart and liver or whatever it is—ninety percent of them are stress-related. If the stress in the person's life could calm down a bit, the symptoms and even the condition could be alleviated.

When we're having future thinking, I see there are two main threads that can run through it. There can be the anxiety thread, which is a bit of aversion, the worry. But there can also be the excited thread, which is more the grasping, the wanting—"What about this? And this will be great, and I'll do this and do that." So that's what's important to notice in that movement.

We can use the RAIN acronym that Guy spoke about the other morning, which is usually recognition, acceptance, investigation, and non-identification. In all of these things I'm talking about, that's a really helpful way to get closer to what's happening. I heard another teacher talking about this RAIN acronym, and she had two different ways of talking about the I and the N that I really liked.

So the R is recognition. The A is acceptance. For the I, instead of investigation, which can seem a little heavy-handed—or even interest—she said *intimacy*. And I really liked that as a kind of just getting closer. We're not talking about fixing or changing, but "Can I be with this?" And then for the N, non-identification or "not personal" can seem a little abstract sometimes. She said *nature*. This is just the nature of a mind and a body—to have moods, emotions, anger, fear. So I like that. Anything that helps us get a little closer is helpful.

So we explore this tendency of mind. We see its impact in the mind and the body and often can see it as a suffering state, as a source of restlessness. Sometimes we need to cut through it with the sword of wisdom. Joseph talked about working with thoughts the other day and all these skillful things. Sometimes it's just "not now."

I mean, how much time have I spent planning what I'm going to do when I get out of this retreat? I think Carol talked about this the other night. And it's weeks away, even months away, and we're still "I'll go there and go here and see this friend and that

friend." So I did a test once where I remembered my top ten of what I was going to do—or maybe it was less than that, five or so. And when I got home, I actually tracked whether I did the things I'd been planning, whether any of them came true in any shape or form, like I'd spent hours planning and imagining.

Guess what my hit rate was for that match? Zero. Literally zero. Nothing. I either didn't want to do the things, or I kind of did them but they turned out differently. Or the person never said to me what I wanted them to—what I had planned. The conversation that I... it didn't happen. I wasn't in control of what they were going to say, like I am in my fantasies.

So when you start to see that, it kind of takes a bit of wind out of the sails of this obsession with the future and planning and fixing and trying to manipulate. And you can come to this view, this understanding, that not only can we not manipulate and fix the future—

We don't really even need to manipulate and fix the future—certainly not here on retreat. It's simply not possible. So we might as well give it up already.

I just start to laugh at this mind that keeps reaching out there, trying to live in some future life. What we're actually doing is reinforcing this subtle—or not so subtle—message that here is not okay, that now is not okay. It's this restlessness, as Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno describe it, of leaning forward toward something out there that's supposedly better. And that leaning makes this moment, right here, feel not okay.

So we come to the last category. Again, I don't know what your percentage breakdown is, but we certainly spend some time in the present. Yet what the mind does with that present moment is constantly ask: "Am I okay?" You can notice this kind of commenting or narrating—"Oh, now she's doing this," or "What about that?" A little too fast, a little too slow, too much of this, not enough of that. What about this? It might get worse. Don't know. What about... It's endless, this kind of thing.

And it's just like that sutta. How did I do yesterday? Not as good. I thought I'd be better today. Yesterday, this time of day, I had this experience. Today, not so much. What about tomorrow? If I do this today, maybe tomorrow will be better. It's endless.

And a big one is: What are others thinking of me? As I'm going through the meditation hall or the dining room, we have this sense that all eyes are upon me as I'm getting my food or my cup of tea. What do they think? Oh, I spilled. Who looked? It's amazing, this mind.

But if you really think about it—let's get real again—everyone's doing it. So they're not actually looking at you. They're having the same obsessive thoughts about themselves. What do people think about me? Do they like me? Do they not like me? Am I too fast? Am I too slow? What about this? When do I take my shower? How am I doing my yogi job? What do the staff think of me?

I kept waiting on retreats here to get a note from the housekeeper saying, "No one has ever cleaned the front hallway as well as you have." It never came. They never noticed how magnificently I was cleaning the front hallway. But we can obsess around this, right? And it's all about me.

So just to break the delusion again: if we're all thinking about ourselves, then we're not thinking about you. We're thinking about me.

But even when we are present, it's still a bit of a dance. We're thinking about the now, but still with this sense of restlessness, of not being okay.

So what would it take to actually be okay? To have some trust in some fundamental okayness that really is the truth of things? On some deeper, more profound level, we are okay. We have a mind and a body. We're here practicing the Dhamma. We're blessed in many ways. What would it take to simply accept the okayness of this mind and this body?

It's a radical shift, but it's one that needs to happen for us to truly deepen in our practice. We have to begin to prefer stillness to movement, to prefer now to tomorrow or yesterday, to prefer this moment in all its messiness. I talked in my first talk about how we sometimes want to meditate from the neck up and not be in the messiness of the moods and emotions and fears and wants. But if we can just land in the here and now, there is a fundamental okayness that becomes a huge doorway to deepening and to seeing clearly.

I want to finish with a short poem by Hafez, called "It Felt Love":

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.

Mindfulness is this light that shines into our inner being and shows us its beauty, its okayness. Starting to trust that, being willing to stay, to be present, to be okay with this, with here, with now—that's where real freedom, real happiness and ease can actually be found.

CHAPTER 8

Guided Mettā on Self and Benefactor

Sally Armstrong · 45 min

> *In this guided meditation session from the IMS Three-Month Retreat, Sally Armstrong leads practitioners through mettā (loving-kindness) practice focused on oneself and the benefactor category. She begins by clarifying that mettā, often translated as loving-kindness, is fundamentally about simple kindness, goodwill, and acceptance rather than some exalted emotional experience. This understanding proves especially liberating for practitioners who struggle with self-judgment or expect immediate heart-opening experiences.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that mettā is a purification practice—whatever obstructs the heart from opening will eventually arise. She encourages practitioners to ground the practice in bodily awareness, particularly the heart center, and offers the option of placing a hand on the chest to deepen connection. The traditional sequence moves from self to benefactor to dear friend, though she invites practitioners to trust their intuition about where to focus, noting that developing genuine mettā for oneself naturally extends outward to others.*
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> *The teaching addresses common challenges, including the Western tendency toward self-criticism and feelings of unworthiness. Armstrong shares that this practice was transformative for her own sense of self-worth, offering the powerful phrase "May I love and accept myself just as I am." She recommends incorporating at least one additional formal mettā period daily and using the practice as an antidote when aversion arises, always remembering that mettā for oneself forms the essential foundation for extending loving-kindness to all beings.*

Tonight is our weekly session of practicing and developing the brahmavihara of mettā, or loving-kindness. The fact that we do this only once a week does in no way reflect the value that I feel this practice has. It's an incredibly important and beautiful complement to mindfulness practice. To find a way for yourself to weave these two together, to incorporate the quality and practice of mettā into your time here, would be very valuable. So please don't confine your mettā practice to just these forty-five minutes.

As most of you probably know, this is a systematic practice where you move through different categories of beings, beginning where it's hopefully easiest—with oneself—and then to the benefactor, someone you can easily open your heart to, moving on to the dear friend category, then neutral, difficult, and finally all beings. Especially if

you're doing this practice formally in an intensive mettā retreat or developing concentration, it's very helpful to stay with that systematic progression. There's a real power to it, a wisdom and steadiness that supports the deepening of mettā.

But as we're doing it here in this retreat, really as a complement and support to mindfulness practice, you can be much more intuitive about how the mettā practice unfolds for you. Tonight we'll continue the sequence and work with the dear friend category, but if you want to spend more time with yourself, that's a wonderful way to deepen the mettā. You can never do too much mettā for yourself. If you ever have a thought that maybe that's selfish or you should be spreading it out, please know that if you can really and deeply develop mettā for yourself, it will spread out. It will have an impact on your relationships and your capacity to open your heart to others. Creating that foundation of mettā for self is really very helpful. So even as I move on this evening, please trust yourself if you want to stay with mettā for yourself.

Mettā is this beautiful quality usually translated as loving-kindness. I love that whoever came up with that translation put the word kindness in there, because if we simply think of it as love, that's a very charged word for most of us, certainly here in the West. We think it has to be some exalted experience, some pure experience, some ecstatic kind of experience. Mettā at its heart isn't pointing toward that. Another literal translation I've heard is goodwill—just basic friendliness, simple kindness. At its root, mettā is acceptance. It's accepting our inner experience, accepting ourselves, and certainly accepting others.

When we develop this practice, it's really helpful to have that range of understanding of what we're cultivating. If we're waiting until the heart is just open and glowing and all beings are held unconditionally in love—great if that happens—but sometimes we can be waiting a long time for that and judging ourselves for not moving immediately into that space, as though there's some kind of mettā switch we should be able to turn on. We say a few phrases and the heart should open. I'm sure you know it's not that way.

It's actually a difficult practice. It's a purification practice. Whatever for us is an obstacle to these wishes and aspirations of mettā, sooner or later it will come up. This is definitely the field in which mettā works: What's obstructing the heart from opening? What's the sense of limitation or barrier to being open and caring, particularly toward ourselves, but certainly toward others as well?

So we do this practice with a kind of—somehow the word ferocity came, that's not quite right—but some willingness to go through what this practice might bring up for us, especially if we do it with intensity. Perhaps forty-five minutes once a week may not

get you to that edge of intensity, but those of you who have practiced in a more deliberate way will know the challenges of coming back again and again to wishing for happiness, wishing for safety and ease. There's a whole development that happens when you practice intensively.

But it's really important to begin with understanding what mettā is in its simplicity. It's just kindness. It's just wishing well. It's basically looking around and saying, "How are you doing? Hope you're okay. Hope things are good for you." In the gentlest kind of way. And to be able to do that for ourselves, to check in and have this sense of caring, of well-wishing toward ourselves—sometimes it's life-changing to actually feel that possibility. To go from a sense of always a slightly critical stance, not quite good enough, always something needing improvement, to just saying, "Right here, it's okay." Just some fundamental okayness.

This is what this practice is pointing to: that we can actually cultivate and incline the mind and heart toward that. It's not something you either have or don't have, or maybe you'll have in five or ten years if you get rid of that habit and improve this aspect of your life. But actually, here and now, some sense of kindness or acceptance. And it's possible to train in that, to incline the mind and heart. This for me was one of the revelations of this practice—that I didn't just have to wallow in my sense of lack of self-worth. I could actually cultivate a caring and a kindness.

And it wasn't easy. I had a lot of struggles in this practice, but it really changed my practice, and I could even say changed my life to do this practice intensively.

So when we begin, as we do, we just say the phrases, and sometimes there's a heartfulness to them and sometimes there just isn't. As I said, there's no metta switch. So we're just right where we are. The classic image is that we're planting seeds—not to judge the practice, we don't know when they'll flower, but filling the mind with these kinds of thoughts has got to be better than sitting here with aversion and mistrust and ill will. Even if there's not a great deal of heartfulness in it, it's a skillful way to use the mind, to direct the mind.

So keeping the practice really simple, keeping it really in the moment—not some idea of how it should be, but some recognition of the direct experience in the way we're doing the practice. I always say you've got to do metta with metta. Ajahn Sumedho would talk about using metta as though it were a big club, but it's got "metta" written on it. It's like, "That part of my life—metta!" And you know, the office always says the notes that are most critical are always signed "metta." It's not a weapon that we use to get rid of what we don't like. It really is a coming into some kind of alignment with the way things are, but bringing kindness and acceptance to that.

So this is where we begin. As you do this practice, I think it's always helpful to have it really based in the body. Metta can feel like a kind of mental exercise in the repetition of the phrases. And we are training the mind—that's an important part of it. But it's really helpful to have the practice grounded in the body so we stay in our experience and in the present moment.

Just as we do in mindfulness meditation, drop your attention into the body. Feel your body sitting here. How is the body right now? Can you bring a sense of relaxation and ease into your experience of the body? Consciously invite relaxation, shifting the posture if you need to in order to get more comfortable. Do a body scan so that you can actually relax any places that feel tight or tense, so that the practice begins from a sense of connectedness to your experience right now.

Some people find it helpful as a focus for the metta practice to rest the attention in the center of the chest, the area of the heart, noticing whatever sensations are present there. Perhaps there's emotional response, perhaps not. Not looking to make anything happen or push anything away, but just as a place to rest the attention. You can notice the breathing moving in and out of that area of the heart. Perhaps even feel the heart and its pulsing, its life. When you get lost in the practice, that can be a place to come back to.

Sometimes you can even bring all the aspects of the practice together, so that the phrases seem to be coming out of the heart, the heart center. Some people find it really helpful to actually rest their hand on the heart and just feel that tenderness or warmth, that softness that comes as we make this gesture of touching our chest, our heart, with softness and kindness. It can help us connect more easily to the body, to this moment, to ourselves. If it works for you, you can try that for a few moments or the whole time.

It's traditional to begin the practice of metta by reflecting on the good qualities of the person you're sending metta to. So we begin with ourselves. The idea or the intention is that this should be an easy place to bring metta to. But for many of us, we have a sense of deficiency or unworthiness, and it can actually be quite difficult to wholeheartedly wish ourselves well.

Just reflect for a moment on the sincerity of your intention in coming to practice here for six weeks or three months. This is a huge amount of goodness and integrity and trust and faith—a wish, an interest, a love of waking up, of kindness, of wisdom. These are some of the best qualities that any human being can manifest. Just acknowledging that, just the fact that you're sitting here expresses that.

And out of that sense of appreciation for your willingness to do this work, begin to say the phrases of metta for yourself. Perhaps with the hand on your heart if that's helpful, or just feeling into the heart center.

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy and contented.
May I be healthy in body and mind.
May I live with the ease of well-being.

Say the phrases at a pace that allows you to connect with the meaning of the words. I find it helpful to actually integrate them with the breath, so you can see if that's helpful for you.

Something like being silent on the in-breath, saying a phrase on the out-breath. Or saying a phrase over the whole in-breath and out-breath, but the next in-breath and out-breath just silent—sitting in the echo, the resonance with the wish you've just made. There's a sense of care in the way you actually say the phrases.

Sometimes with metta for oneself, a phrase I find really helpful is simply: May I love and accept myself just as I am. Just to say that one phrase, even if you don't mean it, has a power to change the attitude, change the mind, change the heart.

Sitting with metta for yourself. A sense of yourself as you sit here, a visual image of yourself now or in some place where you're happy or at ease. Perhaps an image of yourself as a young child when you felt this openness of metta, felt loved. Or perhaps at a time when you didn't feel cared for, loved, and accepted. Can you somehow bring that young child into your heart and share the wish for happiness and ease right now with this being, your younger self?

And now, if you feel ready, bring in the person you chose in the category of benefactor. This is someone who inspires you, who has supported you, who has helped you in your life in some way. It could be someone you know; it might be someone whose books you've read, or a teacher whose voice you've only heard. But when you think of this person, your heart naturally opens in appreciation and affection.

Take a moment to connect with them, your sense of them, an image if you have it. If it's someone you know, perhaps imagine them in a place where they're happy and at ease. Feel into their good qualities. Often we find in the benefactor that they manifest qualities we ourselves would like to strengthen, so we feel that resonance with them, that sense of appreciation, affection, respect, caring.

Sometimes, though, the benefactor is a young child, and it's just their sense of love and wonder and gentleness that inspires us. For some people it's their dog or their cat—some representation of unconditional love. Whoever this being is, connect with them, say their name, get a sense of them, and begin to say the same phrases of metta to this person: May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.

And lastly, if you feel ready to open up the field of metta, bring in someone in the category of dear friend. Maybe someone you usually use in your metta practice. Perhaps you want to include someone new, someone different. Perhaps there are many people who might be in this category for you. But just as in the other categories, we choose just one person—not to be making preferences, not declaring "this is my best friend"—but rather this is simply someone who represents this quality of caring in you, and you want to spend this time with them.

Choose this person, and again the same process: reflect on why they're your friend, what you appreciate about them. Their sense of humor, their compassion, their kindness, their willingness to help, their generosity, their quick wit, their artistic ability or energy. We start the metta from that place of connecting with appreciation and affection.

Every time we bring a new person in, it's really natural that a flood of memories and associations come in. The practice is not needing to push those away but actually using them to get the sense of connection—without getting lost in the story. We just need one image, one memory, one thought to help us connect with this person. So it's a little dance we do at the beginning: acknowledging the interrelationship, the connections with this person, but mostly putting that aside and just seeing if we can settle into the feeling of connection, of friendliness, of kindness.

And of course, with the dear friend it can get a little more complicated. Perhaps they're mainly a good friend, you do love them dearly, but they've hurt you at times or been neglectful. Again, we don't ignore that, but it's not what we dwell on. This is the training that's so important in metta: we don't deny where there's difficulty, but for this time we choose, we deliberately incline the mind toward what's good and lovable about this person. We keep coming back to that. It's a powerful mind training to be able to do that again and again.

So we come back to caring. Out of the connection, a visual image or felt sense, the sound of their voice. If you have a visual image, imagine them smiling at you. Perhaps their eyes are twinkling a little—you've shared a joke, as you often do. Imagine them in a place where they're happy, at ease. Perhaps they're sitting right next to you, walking

together, holding hands. Whatever helps you feel that immediacy of connection. Say their name. And then, out of that sense of connection and caring, begin to express the same wishes for happiness and ease to this person.

I think it's really helpful to do some more periods of metta—at least one other formal period every day. If this practice connects for you, do a sitting or a walking period where you can have the practice unfold in your own rhythm, paying attention, directing it to wherever it feels most beneficial. It's just really helpful; it invites this warm attitude toward oneself and one's experience, but it's also a concentration practice. Staying with the phrases in a steady way is actually a good training of the mind. So please include that. And it's wonderful that every evening you're finishing the day with the chanting of the Karaniya Metta Sutta.

So just to have that woven through the day—to use metta as a formal practice, to do it for sitting or walking, whatever feels right.

It can also be a great and helpful response when we find we're stuck in some way, caught in some kind of difficulty, when the mind is struggling. Perhaps there's some aversion going on. Metta is the antidote to aversion. It's said that metta and aversion cannot coexist at the same time. You might find yourself flipping back and forth really quickly, but in the same moment they cannot coexist.

So again, if you find yourself with some irritation or anger—perhaps it's toward someone here—to invite the metta in can really help to balance and soothe that tendency of mind.

Our first impulse is nearly always to do metta for the other person if we're in conflict in some way. And that's a good impulse, but actually where it's really needed is here, with ourselves. So don't forget—that's actually the most important place to keep connecting with metta for self, and have that be the foundation out of which the rest of the practice develops.

CHAPTER 9

Viriya: Courageous Energy

Joseph Goldstein · 55 min

> *In this illuminating talk, Joseph Goldstein examines vīriya (energy/effort), a mental quality that appears more frequently than any other in the Buddha's lists of factors leading to awakening. Drawing from the Pāli tradition, he unpacks the rich meanings of vīriya—strength, courage, vigor, vitality, perseverance, and effort—demonstrating why the Buddha described it as the one factor that brings fulfillment of all aspirations.*
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> *Goldstein explores vīriya's multiple dimensions: as a supporting force that upholds wholesome qualities (like a beam supporting a falling building), as courage that is inspired rather than defeated by challenges, and as perseverance that keeps practice alive over time. He shares the Bodhisatta's powerful declaration of determination and draws parallels to contemporary examples including Georgia O'Keeffe, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Aung San Suu Kyi, illustrating how courage means acting in the face of fear rather than its absence.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance on the art of balancing effort in meditation, drawing on teachings from Sayadaw U Tejaniya and Sayadaw U Paṇḍita. Goldstein addresses common challenges: when effort becomes unskillful 'efforting,' how to recognize the difference between genuine rest and the hindrance of sloth and torpor masquerading as self-compassion, and the counterintuitive principle that effort creates energy. He emphasizes that meditation is both science and art—requiring wisdom to know when to apply heroic determination and when to soften into gentle perseverance.*

Meditation practice is a science of the mind. We can see this in the Buddha's teaching of the Four Noble Truths, in this very clear understanding of what liberates us, and in the understanding that mindfulness is the basic methodology for this investigation. He taught with such amazing clarity and precision what the causes of suffering are and the possibilities of freedom.

But meditation is an art as well as a science. Tonight I'd like to speak about one particular quality of mind that more than any other requires this artistic sensibility. It's a quality of mind that appears more often than any other in the various lists of the factors of awakening. The Buddha spoke of it as the one factor that brings the fulfillment of all our aspirations. It's a powerful force that needs a very delicate touch.

The word in Pali for this quality of mind is *viriya*. We can get a sense of its many nuances and meanings from the various ways this Pali word has been translated into English. *Viriya* has been translated as strength, as courage, as vigor, as vitality, as perseverance, as effort. Put all of these together—courage and strength and vigor and vitality and perseverance and effort—and they give some sense of what this quality of mind that's in all of us is like.

In its most basic meaning, *viriya* is energy. And energy is the capacity for activity. It's the power to act, to do, to accomplish something. The art of practice is learning to cultivate and modulate the use of this energy in an appropriate way.

We experience *viriya*, this energetic capacity of mind, in different ways. We can feel it as a strength of mind that holds up or supports something. The example they use in the texts for this supporting quality of *viriya* is a beam or a post that would support a building that's falling down—we prop it up, we support it with a beam. In meditation, when we combine this quality of *viriya*, of energy, this supporting quality, with mindfulness and wisdom, it's the supporting function that strengthens and holds up, doesn't let fall down, all the beautiful qualities within our hearts, so that these qualities are not weakened or lost. *Viriya* supports them.

The Buddha emphasized the ongoing importance of *viriya*, particularly in this function of supporting the wholesome qualities, when he said that when we practice, wisdom grows, and when we don't practice, wisdom weakens. I think we really need to take note of this. Wisdom is not something we get and then put away for safekeeping. Until there is an assurance of awakening, if wisdom is not nurtured, it simply becomes a memory. We may have had some deep insights, but unless we're continually feeding and nurturing them, the insight itself becomes a memory and not something alive within us. I think we've all seen how easy it is for old habit patterns of mind to begin to reassert themselves.

There was a great eleventh or twelfth century Korean Zen master named Chinul. He was one of the founders of Korean Zen, and he had a wonderful framework for his teaching. He called it sudden awakening, gradual cultivation. He really pointed to the nature of mind, the nature of freedom that's possible right now as we understand the mind, and also the need for the gradual cultivation of that state. It's not enough to have these moments of insight—we have to cultivate that wisdom.

This is what he said: "Beginningless habit energies are extremely difficult to remove suddenly. Hindrances are formidable and habits are deeply ingrained." You may have noticed this. Hindrances are formidable and habits are deeply ingrained. So we need this quality of *viriya* to nurture, to support the wisdom in our minds. It's precisely *viriya*

which keeps this wisdom growing, that keeps strong what is already wholesome within us, and develops those wholesome qualities that are not yet well developed. Support and strengthening—that's one aspect.

Another aspect of *viriya* that powerfully engages us on this journey of awakening is its manifestation as courage. The word courage in English comes from the Latin root for heart. So we might understand courage as strength of heart. We need this strength of heart in our practice.

We see it very obviously when we're dealing with the hindrance, the formidable hindrance, of sloth and torpor. We're all familiar with times of sleepiness and dullness arising in our meditation. But actually, sloth and torpor has a deeper meaning than sleepiness or dullness. On a deeper level, sloth and torpor is the deep-seated tendency in the mind to retreat from difficulties. That's what sloth and torpor does. When those factors are present, we pull back. We retreat from what is difficult.

And what makes it so tricky for us in working with this very deeply rooted habit pattern is that sloth and torpor often comes masquerading as compassion. We might be feeling tired or bored or restless, and instead of engaging with and investigating these states, we hear this very kindly voice in our minds: "Let me take care of myself. Let me be good to myself. A little nap will be just the thing." How often have we heard that voice? And of course, there are times when we do need rest, so it's important to acknowledge that this is sometimes the case. But very often, it's not.

I'll give you one example from my own practice which was so instructive for me. This goes back to my early years in India. I was practicing at the time with the Vipassana teacher S. N. Goenka. In his retreats, we would get up at four in the morning and sit for two hours before breakfast, then follow the daily schedule. So I would get up at four and make a beeline for the meditation hall so I could get a seat in the back against a wall. Wall slots were very desirable. I got up every morning at four, went to the meditation hall, started sitting, and then after a little while I just leaned back against the wall and would soon be asleep. This happened the first day, the second day, the third day, the fourth—it went on for a long time.

I remember thinking to myself, "This is stupid. I'm just getting up and coming in and sleeping. Why not just sleep? Get up at breakfast, and then at least I'll be awake for the day." But I didn't listen to that voice—it was peer pressure, really. I kept going to the hall. And then it was amazing. One morning, I went in and I didn't fall asleep. From that morning on, I was completely wakeful. There was nothing magic about that morning. It

was just the effort to keep doing it, even when the sleepiness was continuing. I kept making the effort, applying that virya. And it was building, even when I couldn't see that it was building, until the point where the mind was really awake.

So we have to appreciate just how the process happens. Virya means not retreating from the difficulty, but staying there and meeting it.

Another way we retreat from difficulties is during those times when we're annoyed or irritated by something. Instead of exploring and investigating the nature of these mind states within ourselves, we immediately try to fix the situation rather than looking at our own minds.

The nature of virya, of courage, is just the opposite of retreating from difficulties. The quality of courage is actually inspired by challenges. It's energized by the challenge. It's the feeling—instead of "let me take a nap" in the face of difficulty—it's the feeling, "Yes, I can do this. I can be with this." The quality of courage is actually inspired by difficult tasks, and it even at times seeks them out.

I had one example of this in my regular life. Quite a few years ago, I started doing some mountain biking. It was my first time, so I was quite a beginner at it. I would often be riding with friends who were much better than I was. It might not seem so until you're on a bike, but it's actually quite hilly around here. The people I was riding with were more experienced, and they would go up pretty steep hills in the woods. For a long time, I was just halfway up when I would have to get off my bike and walk it up, and they'd be waiting for me at the top. I used to tell them that they should bring *War and Peace* along to read as they were waiting for me. But I kept doing it. I just kept doing it. The more I did it, the stronger I got.

One day I could actually make it to the top of the hill. It was a great feeling of accomplishment. After some time, something really interesting happened, because until then I had been dreading the hills. But at a certain point, just by doing it and gradually getting stronger, I found myself actually looking for hills to ride up. The challenge of it inspired the virya, inspired the energy.

I see this as an aspect of this quality of courage—not retreating from difficulties, but actually engaging with them and meeting them and being inspired by them. With this courageous aspect of virya, we meet the different challenges for the sake of accomplishing what we most value, whether it's in meditation or something in our daily lives in the world.

When virya is developed—and here it's important to remember that this quality, like all the other factors of mind, grows stronger through practice—so wherever we are, whether we're at the beginning of our mountain bike career, our meditative career, our virya career, whether at the beginning or somewhere along the way, the more we practice, the stronger it gets. When this quality of virya is developed, it really becomes undaunted by the thought of hardships or by the length of the task or the endeavor.

In all of the texts, perhaps the most striking statement of virya, of courageous determination, was the Bodhisattva's declaration as he was working for Buddhahood. He said, "Let only my skin and bones remain. Let my blood dry up. I will not give up until I have accomplished what can be done by human effort and endeavor." That's quite a statement. Let my blood dry up. I won't give up until I have accomplished what can be done by human effort and endeavor.

It's worth noting here that this powerful resolve refers back to what can be done by human effort and endeavor. It's not relying on some supernormal divine being or power. The Bodhisattva is saying, and the Buddha after his awakening said frequently, this is something we can do as humans. And just as I've done it, we can also do it.

But even so, when we hear this kind of resolve, we might think, yes, that kind of courageous determination may be fine for the Bodhisattva, the Buddha-to-be, but it seems very far away, really, from anything we may be able to do. And it's true—we may not yet have the level of the Bodhisattva's resolve and determination, so it's worth acknowledging that. Still, there are many people and many examples of people expressing tremendous valor and courage in pursuit of their goals.

Sometimes it's in very individual ways. There's one story which really inspired me, told to me by someone who's on staff here at IMS. He told me this story some years ago. Before he came on staff, quite a number of years before, he had been in the Army. While he was in the Army and in training, at one point he volunteered to run a marathon—twenty-six miles. But in the Army, the marathons are a little different. They were run with full gear and a thirty-five-pound pack on his back.

I couldn't even imagine it. I asked him, why did you volunteer? This was voluntary. Why did you volunteer to do this? And he said there was a mixture of motives, but primarily he wanted to face his mind in extreme circumstances. He just wanted to see what his mind would do. And it was for him more about exploring how to live his life rather than finishing the race.

He said that at mile thirteen out of twenty-six, he had many seductive thoughts about wanting to give up and wanting to stop. At mile thirteen, there were vans there that would take people back to a rest stop. Some of the runners gave up at that point. But he said that from mile thirteen on—and this was interesting—the runners who continued, sort of like sangha on a retreat, were really supporting each other. Just by that community of runners, they were helping each other continue. And then, in the last few miles of the race, the course was run over sand. Somehow he finished.

Just as he was telling me this story, I thought, this is an amazing example of virya. It was virya, that quality of mind, that energized the original intention. It was virya that strengthened the determination to keep going. And it was virya that faced the challenges, the difficulties, with courage.

And so it was just a really beautiful example for me of how this quality of mind manifests. And perhaps most remarkable of all, he volunteered to run the race the next year as well.

Now this person wasn't a world-class athlete. He wasn't an Olympic gold medalist. He was just a guy—but with this very powerful development of virya within him. He had this particular quality of mind very well developed.

I'm not suggesting that we should all go out and run a marathon with thirty-five pounds on our backs. But we can bring our own wisdom to bear in considering for ourselves what is important in our lives, what is of value in our lives that is worth, that inspires, the cultivation of this kind of energy, this kind of courageous energy—and realizing that it's virya that will help us accomplish whatever that might be.

In these situations, courage doesn't mean that we're free of doubts or fear. We don't have to wait until we're free of all doubt and fear to apply this courageous aspect of virya. Rather, it is strength of heart to act in the face of fear.

The great artist Georgia O'Keeffe, who lived in the Southwest and created those beautiful paintings, particularly of the desert, once wrote: "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."

I love that because it acknowledges, yes, we all will have fears and doubts when we come to our edges. But with this quality of virya, we don't have to let those fears and doubts stop us. We can act in the face of them.

We can also see the power of courageous energy in the lives of many people on the front lines of social action—just the amazing stories of people like Martin Luther King Jr. or Nelson Mandela, maintaining an open heart in the face of tremendous hatred and violence. Or Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest in Burma for over seventeen years. And in all that time, she was holding the aspirations for freedom for millions of Burmese people—and she could have left at any time. The government actually wanted her to leave the country because then they wouldn't let her back. And she chose to stay under house arrest.

Upon her release, as most of you know, she was released this year and things in Burma seemed to be opening a bit. There was an interview with an Australian newspaper, and the interviewer was asking her, now that you're out and you can actually engage in the political system, don't you want to bring these generals down—the generals who really created such a vast amount of suffering in Burma? And she replied, "No, I want to bring them up."

That's an amazing quality and an amazing response. It just speaks to that courageous heart.

All of these stories inspire me and inspire my practice to some extent, because we don't often challenge ourselves to extend our limits, to play at the very edge of our comfort zone, to really see what is possible for us even if it may be uncomfortable or even when it's difficult.

As we arouse virya within ourselves to accomplish our own particular aims, it's important to remember that this factor of mind can be associated with either wholesome or unwholesome motivations. Energy itself is a neutral factor, and we know that people sometimes use energy for good, and sometimes people use their energy for harm. And even when there's a wholesome motivation, a wholesome purpose, we need to investigate whether we're applying the energy in a skillful or unskillful way. This is the art of the practice: How are we using our energy? Even when it's a wholesome motivation, are we using it skillfully?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya speaks a lot in his teachings about the proper use of energy. He says: "Avoiding difficult situations or running away from them does not usually take much skill or effort, but doing so prevents you from testing your own limits and from growing. The ability to face difficulties can be crucial for your growth. However, if you are faced with a situation in which the difficulties are simply overwhelming, you should step back for the time being and wait until you have built up enough strength to deal with them skillfully."

This is important. We want to experiment and explore playing at the edge, but also knowing when it's too much, when it's overwhelming, and then we have to pull back a bit. This is the art of the practice.

In addition to energy and strength and courage, virya also manifests as persistence, as perseverance. It's the quality that keeps us going. There are many examples of this. I read one story of the great cellist Pablo Casals, who at ninety-three was still practicing three hours a day. Here's this great master cellist at ninety-three still practicing three hours a day. And when he was asked why he still practiced at that age, he said, "I'm beginning to see some improvement."

I think that can be a lesson for us. Meditation is not so different from mastering a musical instrument. It's not overnight. One year we got a letter here addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society," and I think it was kind of wishful thinking.

It's not an instant process, as you know. It takes perseverance and that courageous energy just to keep going. And slowly, the qualities of mind, the wholesome qualities, are strengthened and developed.

There's a great story from the Tibetan tradition. It's well known, so you may have heard it before. The great Tibetan yogi Milarepa was a great ascetic who lived in a cave and survived on nettles for many, many years. He finally became this great enlightened being, and he had many disciples. Before he died, he wanted to give a special transmission to his chief disciple. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are many rituals and ceremonies and different kinds of transmissions. So Milarepa says to his disciple, "We need to go into the mountains for this and create a special place." They hike up into the mountains and do all the ceremonies. The disciple is very anxious to receive the transmission of these higher teachings. They do some chanting and some prayers. And at the end, Milarepa bends over, lifts his robe, and shows all the calluses on his backside. That was the transmission. That's what it takes—sitting on the cushion and persevering with it.

The Dalai Lama expressed it in another way. He said, "Never give up, no matter what is going on. Never give up. Develop the heart. Be compassionate, not just to your friends, but to everyone. Be compassionate. Work for peace in your own heart and in the world. Work for peace. And I say again, never give up. No matter what is happening, no matter what is going on around you, never give up."

That's what it takes. That's the quality of viriya—that perseverance. You'll experience this so vividly on this retreat because, as I'm sure you've already experienced, there are so many ups and downs. There are times when it's really easy and going smoothly, and times when there are big struggles—struggles with the body, struggles with difficult

mind states. But if we can keep referring back to the importance of this quality, viriya, perseverance, never give up, then the practice really unfolds and all of these wholesome qualities become stronger.

So viriya as energy, as strength, as courage, as perseverance. This brings us to one of the most difficult aspects of viriya to understand and to negotiate skillfully, and that's the relationship of viriya, of energy, to right effort. Effort is the use of energy to accomplish some goal, some objective. The art of practice is learning how to use the energy skillfully. When is it balanced? When is effort too much and counterproductive?

In English, the word effort has so many connotations and shades of meaning that we need to understand the subtleties of how effort is applied in practice. Effort becomes unskillful when there's a forcing of the mind—it's what I call "efforting," rather than a relaxation of mind. Effort is unskillful when the mind is full of expectation, that wanting mind, rather than openness and receptivity. So we need to be very mindful of how we're making effort, how we're using the energy of viriya.

If we have a strong agenda, if we come into a sitting or a walking or even moving throughout the day with a strong agenda, or we're focusing too intently, or we find we're holding onto the object too tightly, afraid that we'll lose it, or we're trying to push through something—push through some block or push through some emotional complexity—then we need to open, we need to soften the mind. We need to soften the quality of effort.

But if the mind is continually getting lost, just drifting off again and again in daydreams or reactivity, or we don't have a caring, wise attention to what's happening, we don't have an interest in what's going on, when we're being casual rather than relaxed, then we need to arouse more effort. We need to call up this quality of viriya, of energy, of courage. We need to come closer to the object.

It's so interesting because sometimes it's just a matter of a slight shift which makes all the difference. One example of this happened to me quite a few years ago. I was practicing in Nepal with Sayadaw U Pandita, and we were in this monastery where the conditions were terrible. There were four or five of us in a room on a bare cement floor, right next to the latrine, with bad smells, and the food wasn't good. My mind was really grumpy.

And just a lot of judgment about the whole scene. So I went into Sayadaw and I was reporting on my state of mind. And all he said to me was, "Be more mindful." And my thought was, "Thanks a lot." You know, all these problems—and they were real problems—"Be more mindful."

So I bowed and left the room, started walking. But I thought, okay, here's this great teacher. He said, "Be more mindful." Maybe I should try it.

So I actually became more mindful. In the walking, I just started feeling the movement, the sensations of the movement more carefully. And I realized that up until that point, I had been in that condition which I've described as more or less mindful. I was walking, kind of there, but really continually ruminating about all the bad conditions. As soon as I became more mindful and I just felt closely what was going on, all of that agitation in the mind fell away because I was fully engaged. It wasn't difficult. It was just that slight little shift and remembering—and in this case having it suggested to me—to do it, just to drop into the moment with more care.

There's an interesting principle regarding energy that we often overlook, and that is the principle that effort creates energy. Because mostly we think that we need energy in order to make effort. "Oh, I'm feeling tired. I have low energy. I can't really make an effort now." And it's actually just the opposite. It's by making the effort that energy is aroused.

And we know this just from our ordinary lives. If you're feeling tired and sluggish and dull and then you go out and do some vigorous exercise—you make the effort to do it—how do you feel afterwards? Almost always we feel energized. The effort has created the energy.

So just as one little example of this in meditation, which is very counterintuitive. This was also during a course with Sayadaw U Pandita. It was pretty rigorous. He's a demanding teacher and we were just sleeping four hours a night. Maybe we could cheat a little and sleep five. But it was demanding. We were just sitting and walking, sitting and walking all day. I was often pretty tired. I was doing walking meditation in the dining room, feeling tired, feeling sluggish.

Walking next to me was my fellow yogi and colleague, Sharon Salzberg. And on this retreat, she was the queen of slow movement. I mean, it was amazing to me. It could take her forty-five minutes to walk one length of the dining room. So she was walking next to me, and I was feeling really tired. But I kind of glanced over and I saw Sharon. I didn't know there was a little bit of competitive meditating that arose in me, but I thought, "Okay, I can walk just as slowly."

So I just brought it to the extreme. I said to myself, "How slowly can you walk and still move?" So it just came down to microscopic movements. What was amazing to me was that within two steps, I was totally awake.

Now, if somebody had told me, "Yeah, if you're feeling tired, walk slower," that seems counterintuitive. You'd think, "Oh, walk quicker and arouse the energy," which also might be helpful. But why did it work? Because it took some effort to walk that slowly. And in making the effort, the energy was aroused.

So we want to play. This retreat and this place—it's really like this great laboratory of the mind and the body. You have nothing else to do except to explore how it's all working.

What an amazing gift.

So the cultivation of virya in all its different aspects—strength and courage and perseverance and effort—and its use in a wise and balanced way is a very refined art. It's not something that we find and then have for the retreat. It's a continual adjustment where we're watching, we're noticing what the quality of our effort is in this moment. We need to see the present circumstance, the present experience, with wisdom. Is the mind too tight? Then we need to loosen it. Is it too casual, too loose? Then we need to tighten it a little bit. It's like tuning the strings of a musical instrument.

I think I read this in the opening days of the retreat—I can't quite remember—but it's very appropriate here in terms of understanding how to modulate and understand the balance of right effort. It says: "The teachings describe two shortcomings of practice called lack of attention and being over-attentive. In the former, one does not pay attention to the training and we become lost in daydreaming. Being over-attentive means to be preoccupied with keeping hold of the meditation to such an extent that it actually disturbs the quality of concentration. The hectic attempt to be so present, so mindful, turns into a distraction all by itself. Of course, one should have presence of mind, but it should be allowed to progress in a spacious way, not in a constrictive or rigid manner. The more open the sense of being mindful is, the more at ease it is, the more relaxed we are. And this relaxed quality is very important."

So you're getting some sense of how we need to modulate the virya, modulate the effort, but be paying attention so that we're actually doing it. We're not simply being carried along on our habit patterns of practice. We're really looking to see: where do we need to be more mindful? Where do we need to relax?

One of the things which I'm sure you've noticed here on retreat is that in the course of a day—both on retreat and in our lives—we experience many different energy cycles. There may be times of day when we're really alert and awake and present, and times of day when there seems to be low energy and the mind is dull. In paying attention to these cycles of energy, we can then employ the appropriate aspect of virya.

At times, we might want to emphasize the heroic, courageous quality, seeing where we limit ourselves and becoming inspired to play at the edges of our comfort zone, not to pull back. This might mean—just as a few examples—sitting longer than we usually do, or walking longer. Maybe it's eating less. Maybe it's sleeping less. Maybe it would mean using more mental noting if that's a tool that's been helpful for you. This takes effort. Or it might even be simply doing something a little different than what you usually do.

It's like breaking a habit. Every morning after the 8:15 sitting, you sit for however long you do, then you go have a cup of tea, then you do the walking. Not because there's anything wrong with that, but just to break that—what would it be like to go to the walking without having the cup of tea? Is it even possible? I'm just using that as an example. We all get established in habit patterns of practice and we get comfortable with them. Just to look at: what would it be like to break the habit, to do something a little differently, to play the edge a bit?

Here's something that helped me a lot in the walking practice, and we haven't really taught it formally: there's a way of doing the slow walking not only in three parts of lift, move, and place, but to divide the step into six parts. Lifting, then moving—which is the first part of moving forward—then swinging, then lowering, placing when we first touch, and stepping when the weight comes down. We're just noticing these six parts of the step: lifting, moving, swinging, lowering, placing, stepping.

When Sayadaw first suggested that I do that, I was amazed at the difference it made. Because even when I had been doing the very slow walking of lift, move, and place, I hadn't really noticed it, but there was a slight energetic leaning into the next part. I was lifting in order to move forward. I was moving forward waiting to take a step. It was very subtle, but there was a slight forward lean.

When I did the six-part walking, that disappeared and the mind settled into the moment in a different way, in a more connected way. I'm just saying this not as something each of you should do all the time, but simply as a possibility to experiment with—one way of exploring.

When we're discovering ways to play the edge, to play at our boundaries—whether it's sleeping less or sitting longer or six-part walking or not having the cup of tea, whatever it may be—it's important that it be done with the quality of interest and willingness. It's the sense of exploring, not that it's something we should be doing or that it's the right way to do it. That's not a helpful attitude. It's just that sense of, "Okay, here we're in this situation. Can I explore? Can I explore what's possible?" This is the development, the cultivation of virya.

On the other side, if the mind feels too tight, too much efforting, and we find the mind is just filled with self-judgment—or on the other side, ambitious striving—then the softer side of virya might be more appropriate. Not this kind of courageous, heroic effort, but maybe it's the aspect of perseverance, of continuity.

Again, Sayadaw U Tejaniya expresses this so well: "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." This next line is really important: "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. You do not need strong effort to be mindful. When we are present, we naturally become aware of what is happening. Simply reminding yourself to be in the present moment is all the effort we need."

This is the softer side. It's realizing it doesn't take a heavy focusing. It doesn't take much to be mindful. It's just remembering to come back to the present, to connect with it.

Do you get some sense of the subtlety and the nuances of this quality of virya? It has so many different sides and aspects, and we can use and employ the different aspects of it as we begin to understand from our own experience the complexity of it. We see that sometimes we're really playing at the edge and sometimes we're softening and surrendering, and we each have to be paying attention to see what's appropriate.

This is helpful not only for deepening our practice here on retreat, but this quality of virya and learning how to apply it wisely is so important for integrating our practice in our lives in the world. Whatever we're doing—whether it's here on retreat, whether it's in our daily lives—our minds are always with us. So the power of virya is the training, the energy to stay aware, to stay mindful. What is actually happening? Paying attention, being aware of the quality of our minds as we go through the day.

In this way, as the 16th Karmapa, one of the great Tibetan masters, said, if we're paying attention to our minds throughout the day, we can be living the practice instead of just doing it. I love that slight distinction. So often we're doing the practice at particular times, but we want to be living the practice. When virya is developed, really our whole life becomes our practice.

I want to close with a teaching from another wonderful Tibetan teacher, Dzigar Kongtrul. He said: "The potential for realization is universal and present in us all. 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 experi-

ence. 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."

This is the rallying cry.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 10

Insight Into Impermanence

Brian Lesage · 46 min

> *In this dharma talk, Brian Lesage illuminates the Buddha's teaching that among all his marvelous qualities, the most essential is the capacity to know feelings, perceptions, and thoughts as they arise, persist, and disappear. Drawing from the Acchariya-abbhuta Sutta, Lesage shows how this simple yet profound awareness of impermanence (anicca) is the very quality that leads to awakening.*
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> *Lesage distinguishes between intellectual understanding of impermanence and the embodied insight that transforms our lives. Using the analogy of learning to ride a bicycle, he explains that true insight is a bodily knowing—something felt in our bones rather than grasped conceptually. He explores how much of our suffering stems from fighting with impermanence, whether clinging to pleasant experiences, resisting unpleasant ones, or wanting change on our own terms.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for cultivating sensitivity to how experience unfolds moment by moment. Rather than looking for impermanence, Lesage encourages a relaxed receptivity—remaining "unfamiliar with what we're doing" as composer John Cage suggested. Through stories of ordinary practitioners navigating loss and change, he demonstrates how this insight naturally gives rise to greater flexibility, generosity, and the capacity to meet ourselves and others beyond fixed concepts. He also honors the human experience of grief, acknowledging that even with deep insight, we still navigate the pain of loss in this impermanent world.*

Good evening, everyone.

One day, Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, was hanging out with the other monastics in the assembly hall in Jeta Grove. Jeta Grove was a place that had been donated by one of the Buddha's biggest benefactors, Anathapindika. They had just gone for alms round and had finished their meal, and Ananda began to speak to them about all these wonderful and marvelous qualities that the Buddha had.

Just after he began, the Buddha got wind of this somehow. You know how Buddhas are. He decided to come into the assembly hall and sit down. Then he asked Ananda to please continue what he was saying about all the wonderful and marvelous qualities of the Buddha.

And Ananda did. He was telling of all these amazing supernatural qualities of the Buddha, such as when the Buddha entered the womb of his mother, this great immeasurable light shone throughout the world. Not only that, the world shook and quaked. Then while he was in the womb of his mother, four young deities were always guarding him. Ananda continued, saying that when the Buddha was born, jets of water came from the sky and bathed him and his mother.

After Ananda kept on talking about these wonderful and marvelous qualities, the Buddha at the end says to him, "That being so, Ananda, but remember this too. This too is a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathagata, of the Buddha. Here, Ananda, for the Tathagata, feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Perceptions are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, and as they disappear. Ananda, remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Buddha."

In this situation, I feel like the Buddha's being kind of gentle with Ananda, really pointing out to him: yes, there might be supernatural qualities of the Buddha, but the important quality of a Buddha is this ability to see the arising and passing away of experience. The arising and passing away of a thought or an emotion or a sound, like the sound of my voice, the way it comes and it goes.

Why is it so wonderful and marvelous? Because it's the thing that brings us to awakening, that leads us to our liberation. I think this has been repeated again and again, and I'm going to repeat it one more time. Have you noticed that when it comes down to it, this practice is so simple and so profound? It's simply being aware of what's happening, and also being aware of what happens to it, how it unfolds. Through this, the mind begins to awaken.

Tonight, I'd like to share with you some reflections about that second quality—that there's awareness of experience, but also the importance of the sensitivity that's needed for how experience unfolds, how it's impermanent, how it's constantly changing. On a deeper level, this is insight into impermanence. It's the arising of wisdom.

Most of you know impermanence is one of the three fundamental characteristics that the Buddha talks about in terms of reality. The Pali word is *anicca*, which is really just the negative form of the Pali word *nicca*. *Nicca* is usually translated as constant or permanent, so *anicca* is impermanence or inconstancy. Then there's *dukkha*, which Carol spoke at length about last night—that unsatisfactoriness, that not-quite-rightness. And the third characteristic is *anatta*, that non-self quality.

Impermanence is important. It's really important that the mind becomes sensitive to seeing this. For example, you might recall the last words of the Buddha to the monastics, to the practitioners. He says, "Bhikkhus, this is my last admonition to you." And in Pali, what he said literally means: all formations are impermanent. They're subject to change. Please strive on with diligence.

I feel like this makes sense, that the Buddha was emphasizing this in his last admonition. Because if you really think about it, if you really look at the stress and discontent and suffering in your life, have you realized that it's so much centered around how we relate to impermanence? The mind's relationship to the world being impermanent. It's our inability to truly understand this—to understand this in our bones—that's the reason why there's so much stress and suffering. It's like we're fighting with impermanence.

As Guy mentioned in his talk, samsara is this trying to correct the world of impermanence. And he mentioned those three strategies that I'm sure you've noticed arise on this retreat: the strategy of grasping, of craving, or of pushing away through aversion, or of checking out through delusion.

Let me give some examples of this just so we're clear about this fight with impermanence and how we can intellectually get it, but not actually embody this realization. I think the best example I can give of this is around a car I bought right after I was in the Zen monastery.

When I was at the Zen monastery, it was a great life. It really deepened my spiritual life. It was not so good for my financial life. So I came out of there without much money. And when I got out of there, of course, after living a while in Southern New Mexico, I needed a car. Luckily for me, a friend of mine was selling their car to me for $350. It was such a great deal. I don't know if you know these Daihatsu cars—I don't think they're made anymore—but they had three cylinders, a three-cylinder engine. And I just want you to really imagine, if I bought it for $350, what kind of condition it was in. It was actually pretty rusty. I got this can of primer paint just to paint over the rusty parts. I mean, it functioned, but I bought it for 350 bucks.

And it was amazing what happened. The first thing that broke was the electric windows, unfortunately. The electric window on the passenger side broke. And when it broke, I was so upset. It was such a crazy thing. If you were to take a look at this car, you would think, why are you upset that the window broke? How could it not have broken? Of course, I spent a lot of time rewiring it, and I want to let you know I don't know anything about electricity, so I kind of wired it to the battery itself because I couldn't figure

out how to do it elsewhere, but it actually worked quite well. And then the window on the driver's side broke, and then it was the radio, and then the air conditioning. And each time I noticed I was getting upset.

Why was the mind getting upset? Because I knew about impermanence, but I hadn't fully embodied it. I still had this idea that this was a car that was not supposed to break down. I'd spent 350 bucks on it—of course it wasn't supposed to break down. There was this fight. The mind was fighting with impermanence. And it was not only that, it was because it was *my* car. I was upset because there was this other fixation on it: *mine*. If your car were to break, I would feel for you, but I actually wouldn't be that upset. I might feel for you, maybe I'd talk to you about impermanence and how you need to let go. But it's not my car. It's a little more difficult when it enters the realm of mine.

And have you seen this? I'm sure you've seen this on the retreat here, how your mind fights with impermanence. Something changes. You notice one day the mind is a little more tranquil and concentrated. And then the next day it's a whole different world and you're bummed out. There's this fight with impermanence, as if there's this belief that that should continue. Or wanting impermanence on your terms: I'm okay with being with this pain or this emotion as long as it really starts to manifest this quality of impermanence right now. You ever notice that?

Or sometimes it's around time. I think the best example of this is when I was working at a drug rehabilitation center—the place I started to teach meditation. And please remember, the people I was teaching meditation to were in early recovery. Any of you who've gone through recovery know that early recovery is hell. It's really difficult. The mind is extremely agitated. And I would go in every morning and we would sit together. We'd do a little mindful movement and some meditation. Often we'd only sit for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. And so I began the sitting meditation, and it was silent, and we were meditating, and then in the middle of the sit, I hear this voice say, "Ring the damn bell."

Have you ever had that thought go through your mind? This person was fully embodying that fight with impermanence. We want things on our own terms.

The Zen master I practiced with put it very poetically. He would sit up during his dharma talk and say, "Here I am, up here trying to sell round trip tickets to heaven and hell, and none of you want to buy them. What's up with that?"

What is he trying to say? We don't want to take the ride of allowing pleasant and unpleasant experience to simply unfold and to skillfully respond to them. We want to get lost in fighting. We want the one-way ticket to heaven. Or we want to feel bad about

ourselves and have the one-way ticket to hell. It's quite different to really be open to taking that round trip—the round trip ticket to heaven and hell—on the terms of the way reality unfolds.

So this is what it really comes down to: Can we buy that round trip ticket?

I want to point out that on a deeper level, in terms of the big challenges in your lives, have you noticed how they center around some fight with impermanence? If you can just take a moment right now to reflect on some of the most difficult times in your life—what was going on during those times?

You might notice that within those difficult times, when we reflect on them now, there was usually some loss involved. A loss of a loved one, or the loss of your health, or some ability that you used to have and no longer have. Or the loss of a job, a partner, or a lover. It could have been the loss of safety, or the loss of a kind, caring quality that you were receiving from someone, or the loss of connection.

I just want to point out that living in this impermanent world can be really difficult at times. It's challenging. And hopefully what we begin to realize through this practice is that it's because of the way the mind relates to this impermanent world. Can you see that? Through the fight with impermanence—that's where so many of our biggest difficulties arise. And hopefully, through this practice, we also get to see it's because of how the mind relates to it.

One of the things the Buddha recommended around impermanence—it's not emphasized on this retreat, but I do want to mention it—was actually having a daily reflection around impermanence. I remember right after I got married, my wife and I—I know this is going to sound a little strange, it's not the hottest and sexiest thing to do—but we decided that we were going to do this reflection every day together. We'd sit together and reflect on how eventually our marriage would completely disintegrate as a result of either estrangement or death.

I know it's not the most exciting thing to do on a honeymoon. But it was a wonderful reflection to engage in, especially together—to really begin to see the attachment and to feel our ways through that attachment so that a different kind of intimacy could arise. But we needed to really reflect upon and realize this quality of impermanence that was inherent in our bond.

There's a beautiful poem about this by Jane Kenyon. The title is "Otherwise." She wrote this, I believe at a young age—she died at forty-seven from leukemia. Just keep in mind that she wrote this during the last year of her life, and if you know anything about leukemia, it's often a very slow dying process.

She begins:

I got out of bed on two strong legs.
It might have been otherwise.
I ate cereal, sweet milk, ripe, flawless peach.
It might have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill to the birch wood.
All morning I did the work I love.
At noon I lay down with my mate.
It might have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks.
It might have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls
and planned another day just like this day.
But one day, I know, it will be otherwise.

Something different comes. Something different comes in the way we relate to even the small things in life when we realize, as she says, that one day it will be otherwise.

What I really want to share with you this evening is more about what I'd call the direct experience of impermanence, not just the reflection of it, because I really feel that this is where our practice truly unfolds.

This is what definitively leads to awakening, to our liberation. That's actually what I'm excited about sharing with you—because it's that direct experience that can truly free the heart.

So not just reflecting on impermanence, but seeing it moment after moment after moment, so that a new relationship can arise to our experience. I want to talk about the details of that.

When the mind begins to see impermanence in this practice that you're doing every day here, when it really begins to get a feeling sense of it, this is when insight—the insight into impermanence—arises.

First, I want to talk a little bit about this word "insight" and how I'll be using it tonight. This word can be used in many different ways. Of course, it can be used in a psychological way. Even on this retreat, you might be sitting and, as a result, a psychological insight about your personal life arises. But the insight I'm talking about has a different flavor. It's the spiritual insight that arises from the mind clearly seeing these three characteristics: anicca, dukkha, and anatta.

To get a sense of this, I want to offer an analogy. Insight—or insight into impermanence, this wisdom or knowledge—is like the knowledge of riding a bike. If you know how to ride a bike, or even if you know how to swim, it's not an intellectual understanding. If someone were to ask you to explain how you ride a bike, how you stay on a bike, it would be pretty difficult to explain. You'd have to sit down and think about how you would put it into words. But you know, right? It's very clear. You get on a bike and there's that knowing. There might not be words for it, but there's the knowing of how to ride a bike. It's not an intellectual knowing; it's a bodily knowing.

This is more what insight is like. It's not so much that I know what impermanence is. With my car, for example, I'd read tons about impermanence, but impermanence hadn't been embodied. I wasn't riding the bike of impermanence. Insight is like this kind of wisdom—something you know in your bones and in your body, the way you know how to ride a bike.

Another thing to remember: if you can think back to when you learned how to ride a bike, sometimes that experience, when you're really riding it at first, can be a real "wow" experience—a dramatic kind of experience of "Wow, I know how to ride a bike now!" You notice the difference and it's amazing. Yet at other times, even as we refine our ability to ride, in the midst of riding, the body is learning how to be more skillful. It's gaining knowledge, but it's not really intellectually aware that it's happening. The body is getting it, but it's not a "wow" experience.

This is very important for understanding insight. Sometimes when people are on retreat, they have kind of "wow" experiences. At other times, the body is learning, gaining wisdom about insight, and there's no intellectual knowing of that. It's important to remember: sometimes it's ordinary, sometimes it's wow. And just so you know, you don't get to choose. Bummer, huh?

So again, insight is like riding a bike. It's this bodily knowing. It can be dramatic, and often it's not dramatic.

Most important: when I'm talking about insight, please remember not to follow the path of asking, "Is this insight or is it not?" The arising of insight is actually not your job. That's the job of wisdom. Our job is simply to practice, to do the practice, and then insight or wisdom arises when it arises. That's out of the job description of yogis, just so you know. Please keep it out of the job description—and know that the practice naturally unfolds. The Buddha speaks about this.

I want to share with you a passage from the Upanisa Sutta, the Discourse on Supporting Conditions, which I quoted in my last talk. The Buddha says: "Just as when the gods pour rain and heavy drops and crash thunder on the upper mountains, the water flowing down along the slopes fills the mountain cliffs and rifts and gullies. When the mountain cliffs and rifts and gullies are full, they fill the little ponds. When the little ponds are full, they fill the big lakes. When the big lakes are full, they fill the little rivers. When the little rivers are full, they fill the big rivers. And when the big rivers are full, they fill the great ocean."

In the same way—and I'm paraphrasing here—this is how the practice unfolds. We practice. There's this quality of awareness and sensitivity to impermanence. And through that, the practice unfolds naturally. It leads to the great ocean of awakening. That's all we need to do. Wisdom unfolds on its own. It does its job when we do our job of practice.

So I want to mention some things about what helps allow the mind to be sensitive to impermanence. I'll divide what we're doing into two different aspects—there are many ways of dividing it up, but I want to do it this way to explain more clearly.

When we engage in this practice, there's a quality of awareness that we're beginning to cultivate. As so many teachers have talked about, it's awareness infused with intelligence and kindness. Along with this, there's a sensitivity not only to the awareness of experience, but to how experience changes—how it unfolds, how it arises and passes away, or how there's some kind of alteration within it.

A simple way of putting this second part, the sensitivity to impermanence, is having this quality of mind of curiosity about what happens next. So it's not only "thinking"—what happens next? And then it disappears. There's a pain in my knee. Okay, there's pain, the experience of pain. Then it increases, then it decreases, then it spreads, then it contracts. There's a quality of alteration. Or a state of mind: aversion. It actually increases. Then it decreases, then increases. Or maybe it comes and goes very, very quickly. It's noticing what happens next—just a sensitivity to it.

There's a wonderful poem by the poet Ted Kooser that I feel really elucidates this quality of mind that we want. Ted Kooser was one of the poet laureates about six or seven years ago. The poem is called "A Happy Birthday." He begins:

This evening I sat by an open window and read till the light was gone, and the book was no more than a part of the darkness. I could easily have switched on a lamp, but I wanted to ride this day down into night. And to sit alone and smooth the unreadable page with the pale gray ghost of my hand.

Do you hear the simple event he's describing? He's sitting in the evening by an open window, reading, and the light is going. He has a choice. He could have easily switched on a lamp, but instead he's with the disappearance—the disappearance of reading. He can really see this unfolding of arising and passing away.

What I appreciate about this poem is that I think it speaks to what we usually do with our experiences. An experience happens, and then we move on to another experience by turning on the light. We see one experience and then go to another, but we don't see how the experience unfolds.

The best example of this is watching television. I think it's one of the worst things for our meditation, because what it does is flash an experience at us, and rather than seeing the arising of that frame and the passing away of it, there's another flash to keep the mind interested. We no longer get to see the unfolding of experience. We get flashes of exciting experience to keep the mind engaged. It's not so good for insight into impermanence.

So the mind can get habituated in that way, where we just see things but we're not seeing how they unfold.

Actually, one small caveat about this, just because I think it's fascinating. I do this work with trauma called somatic experiencing, usually around psychological trauma. And it's really incredible. I know this when I'm working with clients and also when I'm assisting, trying to teach other people how to do this. The one essential skill that's so helpful in navigating issues of trauma is this ability to notice how things change.

A lot of times when I work with people, I'll ask them again and again, "So what are you noticing?" And then they'll report what they're noticing. And then I'll have them pay attention to it and I'll ask them—I say this so often—"Can you notice if it's increasing or decreasing or changing in some way?" Or I'll ask the question, "Now if you could pay attention to that and then notice what happens next." So it's priming, priming to see how experience unfolds.

Because a lot of times the mind gets stuck. It's like there's a feeling of fear and then the mind all of a sudden feels like, "Uh-oh, this is going to be around forever and it's going to ruin my life." You ever have that thought? It's actually just another mind state that's arising and passing away.

So what will help with this sensitivity? What I remember is a quote from the musical composer John Cage. Do you know who John Cage was? The radical avant-garde musician. He said, "I'm trying to become unfamiliar with what I'm doing."

This can be wonderful to remember, especially in the middle of a retreat when the mind starts to become familiar with experience. Can you remain unfamiliar with what you're doing moment after moment after moment? When the mind is unfamiliar with experience, it's sensitive, it's aware, and it can notice how things are unfolding.

The other thing to remember is something I recall from an interview with Sayadaw U Pandita. Before the interview, I was thinking, "Now this is a good report. This is a really good report. I really nailed it this time." So I went in there feeling pretty good about my report and really went over the details. And he said only one thing to me. He said, "Don't look for something."

It was some of the best advice I had gotten in my practice. I noticed that I was looking for something. And as a result of looking for something, I was missing what was arising and passing away in the moment.

So it's important to have this quality of sensitivity to how things arise and pass away or how they change, but not looking for it. In this relaxed manner of just allowing the mind to soak that in, the mind can be noticing an experience just for a fraction of a second and still be sensitive to how it arises and passes away. For example, a quick sound or a quick sensation. Or it could be with something of long duration, like a pain, noticing how it's changing. It's the sensitivity to it rather than the looking for it.

And it really is this simple. When the mind sees impermanence again and again and again, it begins to dismantle our habitual ways of relating to the world. It begins to deconstruct this false world that we create again and again and again, simply by seeing what's going on moment after moment after moment.

Paul Cézanne, the French impressionistic painter, said, "The day is coming when a single carrot freshly observed will set off a revolution." I actually feel that what you're doing here on this retreat sets off a revolution with this fresh quality of observing. And I don't mean that lightly. I mean a true revolution. A revolution where the mind begins to get liberated.

Also, when you're engaging in this practice—this simple practice of being aware of experience and how it unfolds—when you remain receptive to impermanence, I feel like it changes the world that we live in, the world that you live in. Because when that happens, it's as if then, when we're practicing, in those moments of practicing, everything is supporting us to awaken. Everything is giving us this teaching of impermanence.

There's a Chinese poet by the name of Su Tung-p'o who I feel put this really beautifully, this realization that when one is practicing, everything is calling us to awakening. He says:

The sounds of the valley streams are his long, broad tongue.
The forms of the mountains are his pure body.
In this night, I heard the myriad sutras uttered.
How can I relate to others what they say?

So when you remain receptive to impermanence, it's as if the Buddha himself is teaching moment after moment. The Buddha is teaching moment after moment through this revealing of impermanence. Can you remain open to that?

I actually want to spend a little time telling a few stories of what it looks like when we begin to ride the bike of impermanence—when we begin to really get in our bones and in our body this insight into impermanence. Sometimes I like to tell stories of the old great practitioners such as Ajahn Mun or the venerable Ajahn Chah. But at other times, I would rather share with you stories about practitioners that are just like you and me. Practitioners that come on retreat and then come back into their daily life and then might go back on retreat, but they're not monastics. They're just like us. So these are not the big grand stories, just the small ones, but I think they're significant. I think they elucidate something important.

This is the first story. There was a practitioner I've been working with for a few years, and I think it was two years ago, she was living in a city which, as most of you know, the housing market got really hammered. The value of her house dropped, and she had bought this house when the market was at its high, but she needed to move. She had no other choice. So she sold it for a huge loss, basically lost all of her savings.

What she shared with me was striking. She said there was just this sense of loss. And then for some reason—and she really attributed it to her practice, and like you, she had done some long retreats and shorter retreats and was really dedicated to the practice—she said there was just this simple turn in the mind that made such a huge difference, where it went from a loss to, "Oh, wow, this is an opportunity. This is an opportunity for me to have this quality of generosity—to have this quality of generosity to the young woman who is buying my house. She gets to have such a great deal on this house, and she's going to enjoy it."

Really small, right? It was just a change in terms of how she was seeing it. But I feel that when we get this insight into impermanence in our bodies, there can be so much more flexibility, a malleability, so that the mind can move with these changing circum-

stances. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could allow generosity to arise like that, just in small circumstances like that? It makes such a huge difference for ourselves and for the people around us. And this comes from beginning to ride the bike of this insight into impermanence.

I want to point out that she wasn't doing anything to make this happen. Wisdom does its work when we do our work of the practice. Wisdom arises.

One of the things I notice in my own life is that there's a little more flexibility in terms of relating to others and relating to myself—in terms of how we can box others in with concepts and how we can box ourselves in with concepts.

One story about this. Some friends of mine have two children, and one is, I think, five years old now, and the other one is seven years old. When we go over to their house, my mind can very easily slip into thinking, "Oh, that one, the boy, he's really shy and kind of withdrawn. But the little girl, she's very extroverted. She likes to really be out there in what she says and the way she acts." What I realized is that if I hold those concepts about them—in some ways they can be useful—but if I hold them, I'm boxing them in. I'm boxing them in to have this expectation of how they behave. And when I do that, I don't see as much what happens outside the box.

Have you ever had that experience when people do that to you, how confined it is when we're kept in a box? When you ride the bike of impermanence, there can be this intimacy where we really get to meet ourselves and other people in a whole different way—not in the fixed conceptual world.

I do want to point out, though, that while we're treading this path, this path towards awakening, even with deep insight, there's still this human experience that we experience around impermanence, which I think is important to name and to speak about a little bit. I'd like to elucidate it by a haiku poem by the poet Issa. This is a haiku that he wrote at the burial of his two-year-old daughter. It was either the fourth or fifth child that he had lost. And I think you know the pain of losing a child. It's that pain that comes when we lose someone that we expect to go after us, not before us. It really gives it a deeper kind of pain.

On that occasion, he wrote these three lines: "The world of dew is only a world of dew, and yet..."

The world is just impermanent. Things arise and pass away. And yet we cry and we're torn by loss. It's the challenge of grief, the pain that can arise from that. We still need to navigate that in this world and to have that quality of presence of this awareness. And in some ways it offers a promise.

There's one poem which I feel offers a promise that we can navigate through grief. It's by David Whyte, called "The Well of Grief":

Those who will not slip beneath the still surface on the well of grief, turning down to its black water, to the place that we cannot breathe, will never know the source from which we drink, the secret water, cold and clear, nor find in the darkness the small gold coins thrown by those who wished for something else.

Striking, isn't it? Those who are unwilling to slip beneath the still surface of grief. I think it's such a striking image—that we need to slip beneath the surface of it, to go into its black water, to the source from which we drink. And I'm so struck by what's found: those small gold coins thrown by those who wished for something else. It's those gold coins that help us begin to understand the suffering of others, where compassion can truly arise.

I want to end by repeating this simple practice, making sure our awareness or intention stays in the right place. It's really just this simple practice of being aware—being aware of what's going on and noticing, having the sensitivity, the willingness to notice how it unfolds. And that's all that's needed to steer us towards awakening.

One of my teachers, the Venerable Sakyong Rinpoche, has a beautiful image of what we're doing here. He says it's kind of like the rudder of a ship. So often when we're on this ship of practice, we get lost in making sure the ship is nicely painted, making sure everything on deck is just so. But actually, all we're doing is simply turning the rudder just a little bit. It's a very small turn of the mind—a small turning of the mind towards awareness, towards this awareness that has intelligence and kindness to it. It's really slight, this sensitivity to impermanence. Yet if you were to start on the California coast and have that rudder change just a little bit, it radically changes the direction, the entire direction that your life is going in.

So may our insight into impermanence together lead to the liberation of all beings.

CHAPTER 11

Mindfulness of the Body - The Four Elements

Greg Scharf · 53 min

In this evocative dharma talk, Greg Scharf weaves together personal narrative and traditional Buddhist teachings on mindfulness of the body (kāyānupassanā). Beginning with memories of pilgrimage in India—hearing the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) chanted at dawn near Jetavana Grove where the Buddha taught—Scharf invites us into the richness of the first foundation of mindfulness.

The talk explores the four great elements (cattāro mahābhūtā): earth (paṭhavī) manifesting as solidity and hardness; water (āpo) as fluidity and cohesion; fire (tejo) as temperature; and air (vāyo) as movement and pressure. Through a guided meditation, practitioners are led to experience these elements directly—the moisture in the mouth, the hardness of teeth, warmth in the body, and the movement of breath. This elemental investigation reveals how body and world share the same fundamental nature, loosening our tendency to claim ownership of experience.

Drawing from the Kāyagatāsati Sutta (MN 119) and the Aṅguttara Nikāya, Scharf emphasizes how mindfulness of the body serves as protection against the defilements, reveals the relationship between mind (nāma) and matter (rūpa), and points directly to the three characteristics of impermanence (anicca), unreliability (dukkha), and not-self (anattā). The teaching culminates with Venerable Ānanda's poignant verses from the Theragāthā, affirming that 'there is no friend that can compare with mindfulness of the body.'

A number of years ago—it's almost eight years ago now—I spent most of a year on a long extended pilgrimage in India along with a friend of mine who's a monk. He had just completed his 25th year in robes and had arranged for a period of sabbatical from his duties as abbot of the monastery where he was living at that time here in the States. He asked me if I would be able to come along and be his companion and attendant, to take care of the things that monks don't take care of.

I invited a friend of mine to join us because I had some duties looking after my elderly parents, who were still alive at that time, and I was afraid I'd have to abandon the Ajahn. So we were kind of tag team attendants over the course of a bit more than a year in India.

Part of that time we spent in an area that at the time of the Buddha was called Sāvatthī. It's a place where he spent many of the rains retreats, and I believe that more of the discourses in the Pali canon were delivered in that location than anywhere else. He liked it there. It's amazing—some of these places, like the ancient city walls of the town of Sāvatthī, are still there, even though that town doesn't exist anymore. Some of you may have been there.

That's the location of the Jetavana Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's park it was called, where the Buddha had his kuṭi and eventually a monastery grew up. There was a beautiful park there outside the city walls.

During the time we were spending the rains period there—this period of twelve weeks, three lunar months you could say—we stayed at a small temple. Every morning we would get up. Our morning ritual was to rise when it was still dark and make our way over to Jetavana Park, arriving in time for the sunrise. We'd walk through the fields there. It had such a timeless feel to that landscape: people just beginning to stir in those early hours, the fields of rice, bullock carts—all the things the Buddha spoke about in many of his teachings were still going on in rural India there.

We would make our way there and spend a bit of time sitting on the foundation of what they say was where the Buddha's hut was. Who knows? Certainly an ancient place. It had an incredible feeling. We would spend the morning meditating there in Jetavana Park.

On our way walking, we would pass by the various vihāras—abiding places for pilgrims. For those of you who've been there, you notice that all of the different Buddhist countries have these. So there's a Sri Lankan temple and a Burmese temple and a Thai temple, Chinese and Japanese and Tibetan temples where you can stay, and Korean. We were staying at the Korean temple, actually.

We would walk to the park in the early morning, and often there would be some chanting coming from one of these vihāras on our way, walking over in the early morning cool. One chant that we heard many mornings was someone chanting the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. It's a very revered, very beloved teaching, and we've referred to it many times. It's this teaching on the four foundations or abidings of mindfulness. It's the core set of instructions for our practice in the Pali Canon.

So as a special treat, I'm going to play a little bit of the chanting of it to start the talk tonight. It's not the same exact one that I heard in the mornings in India, but it's quite lovely. It's by a Sri Lankan monk named Venerable Omalpe Sobita Mahāthera.

You can listen quietly, close your eyes if you'd like, and maybe pretend that you're hearing the Buddha or one of his disciples give you a discourse in Pali. Even though we don't speak that language now, and most of us might only hear a word or two that's become familiar, I think there's a power in hearing these teachings in the original language, this ancient language that exists now only because these teachings have been carried over through centuries. There's a power just in hearing it.

[Pali chanting of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta]

I don't think I'll be able to improve on that with anything I may say now. But I have to keep going, so I will. One of these times, I'm just going to let it play—it takes about the right amount of time for one of these talks.

So as I think Joseph may have said in one of his talks, the word *satipaṭṭhāna* is usually translated as "foundation of mindfulness" or "establishment of mindfulness." Bhikkhu Bodhi, in one place where I read, equates the quality there with a mode of dwelling or abiding. He would translate it as "abiding in mindfulness."

The last section of the chanting you just heard was the Buddha speaking, naming these four abidings. The translation goes like this: "One abides contemplating the body as a body. One abides contemplating feelings as feelings. One abides contemplating mind as mind. One abides contemplating mind objects as mind objects, ardent, clearly comprehending and mindful, having put away desires and discontent for the world." That's a slight abbreviation of that naming of these four abidings.

I think this is important, this sense of dwelling or abiding in these four ways, because of the way it emphasizes the quality of awareness, of being aware, over any kind of emphasis on the particular object. It is this quality of abiding there, this focus on the awareness, the mindfulness, that's the key. We can learn from any object. So the object is, in some ways, less important than the quality of mindful awareness.

Simply put, these four abidings, these *satipaṭṭhānas*, take the entirety of what we can experience—everything—and look at it in terms of four kinds of categories, four spheres of attention. Joseph calls them "four frames of reference." The beauty of the practice is that nothing is left out. Our whole life is there. And that's really important. Our practice will not come to completion if we exclude any aspect of our life from it.

If we distill this teaching down to its essence, you could say what the Buddha is saying is: pay careful attention to your experience and know what's really happening. See what's really happening there.

These four establishments, just to refresh for us, are mindfulness of the body, *kāyānupassanā*; mindfulness of feeling tone, *vedanā*—this pleasant, unpleasant, or neither one of those—*vedanānupassanā*; mindfulness of mind, *cittānupassanā*; and mindfulness of objects of the mind, *dhammā*, *dhammānupassanā*. You could say these are patterns that occur in the mind, like lenses we can look through, different ways of seeing experience.

For the most part, our practice is not so much that we are deciding to place our attention in one of these areas. The practice really is a shifting flow between them, a natural process—although at times we may highlight one or the other, or some aspect of one or the other may present itself to our attention. For the most part, it's an organic process and not so much a doing on our part.

I'm going to stick mostly with the first foundation, the first establishment of mindfulness: mindfulness directed to the body, *kāya*. This is a rich field, and we spend a lot of time here. The Buddha praised mindfulness of the body very highly in different places. I'll read a few things from a part of the Aṅguttara Nikāya called the Kāyagatāsati Vagga:

"Even as one who encompasses with his mind the mighty ocean includes thereby all the rivulets that run into the ocean, just so, O monks, whoever develops and cultivates mindfulness directed to the body includes thereby all the wholesome states that partake of supreme knowledge."

"One thing, O monks, if developed and cultivated, leads to mindfulness and clear comprehension. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body."

"One thing, if developed and cultivated, leads to the realization of the fruit of knowledge and liberation. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body."

"If one thing, O monks, is developed and cultivated, ignorance is abandoned. Supreme knowledge arises. Delusion of self is given up. The underlying tendencies are eliminated, and the fetters are discarded. What is that one thing? It is mindfulness directed to the body."

So it seems from that passage that this is a useful place to put our attention at times. It sounds like it has quite a lot of potential for us.

In the elaboration on the section on mindfulness of the body, there are a number of ways that we're instructed to practice. It begins with mindfulness of the breathing, this section. There are four ways we might pay attention to the experience of breathing. The first is simply knowing. One knows one is breathing in, and one knows one is breathing

out. One knows an in-breath and out-breath. One knows if that in-breath or out-breath is long or if it is short. And when breathing in and out, one breathes in and out experiencing the whole body.

This can be seen in a couple of ways—in terms of the whole body of a breath, the beginning, the middle, the ending of an in-breath and of an out-breath, the fullness of an entire breath—or being mindful of the breath within the entire body system. Both of those ways, or either of those ways.

And then one breathes in, calming the bodily formation, and breathes out, calming. A little more active in that way, actually using the breath to calm the body.

The second way of mindfulness of the body is in terms of the postures, the four postures. We've been instructing in these to some extent: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. One knows the body in these postures.

And then in terms of activities, bodily activities: going forward and returning, looking ahead, looking away, looking behind, flexing and extending the limbs, moving the arms and legs, wearing clothing, carrying things, eating, drinking, tasting, defecating and urinating, standing, sitting, going to sleep, waking up, talking, and keeping silent—all these activities of the body.

Another contemplation involves the anatomical parts of the body. Traditionally, there are thirty-two parts used for this contemplation, beginning with hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, bones, and so forth—skin, organs, bodily fluids. We see the body in terms of its component parts, all that go to make it up.

Then there is contemplation in terms of what are called the four great elements. This is another way we can see the body: in terms of the earth element, the water element, the air element, and the fire or temperature element.

In one section, one is suggested to contemplate a decaying corpse and all that happens as a corpse decays. This was a practice more common at the time of the Buddha. There were corpses decaying around that were more available to contemplate. Places called charnel grounds would be found on the outskirts of a village where you could go and hang out with rotting corpses, if you were so inclined. And one compares one's own body to that.

Someone once sent me a video—I think you can get it on YouTube—of a short time-lapse film of a small animal, I think it was a badger or a fox, going through the decaying process in just a few minutes, what would take days or weeks. It was amazing to watch this change from a recognizable form to earth, with things beginning to sprout from that.

Finally, the last way of contemplating is simply knowing there is a body. Joseph referred to this teaching in his very early instruction that we've been repeating, to actually bring this phrase, "there is a body," to mind. The simplicity of that knowing—bodily life in that way—and what that can open up for us in our practice.

So tonight I want to look at the four elements in a little more detail. The Pali word for the elements is *dhātu*. They're like lenses that we look at our experience of body through, seeing it in these four different ways.

When we hear the terms earth, air, fire, and water, it sounds maybe kind of archaic, almost alchemical sounding—like some ancient, outdated, almost antiquated way of looking at things. We've all trained in science, perhaps, and we have ideas about things. We might say, "Well, I don't know if I go for this earth, air, fire, and water business." It sounds odd to us, maybe.

For this way of seeing the body to make any sense and to have any value for us, we have to look at our direct experience of body. The words themselves—earth, air, water, and fire—are not important. This isn't an intellectual exercise or something to adopt as an idea: "Okay, yeah, now I'm into earth, air, fire, and water." But in our direct experience of materiality, of this form, we can see how these things manifest, these *dhātus*.

There are clear descriptions of these in the texts. The earth element is *paṭhavī-dhātu*, and its manifestation is solidity—the range from hardness to softness, and different qualities of texture, from roughness to smoothness.

The water element has characteristics of fluidity and cohesion. You can imagine or remember the experience of flowing water, tears in your own body, or the feeling of water in the mouth. In the world: rain or running water that touches the body, this flowing quality of water. The quality of cohesion—we can imagine if you take flour, if you're baking and you take powdered ground-up wheat flour and mix it with some liquid, it coheres, it glues it together. It's that binding agent. Add water to dust to make mud.

We can imagine these bodies—I think some huge amount of it, maybe seventy-five percent, is water. If you removed the water part, you'd just have a dry heap of bits there. If we could take the water out of a Greg and pile it there, you could check it out. It

would be a lot smaller. So it's that quality: it binds the other parts together and holds them in. There's a term, turgid, water-filled. It has a binding and holding together with the water in that way.

And then the fire element is the range of temperature. Fire sounds hot, but it's hot to cold and everything in between—heat and coolness.

And we see this in our own body—places of warmth and times when there's warmth in the body, and then the warmth and coolness in the world as we're touched by it.

The air or wind element, *vāyo dhātu* (fire is *tejo dhātu*), has characteristics of movement, pressure, tension, tightness. One way to think of this is when you blow up a balloon or when the lungs fill with air—there's this increase of pressure, movement, and then a sense of tightness, like the tightness in a balloon that you might blow up.

These elements in our experience don't ever really occur by themselves alone. They show up in pairs or groups. In a certain way, we could say they're always manifesting. They are. Sometimes one or another will show up more obviously, will predominate.

In our meditation practice, when we go to our direct experience below our concepts about things, we can begin to touch these directly. If we look in a mirror, we see all these parts—heads and torsos and arms and legs—and there we are standing there. But when we sit in meditation and turn the attention to the direct experience of body, we have a very different experience, don't we?

I'd like to do a short guided meditation right now. You can just sit as you are. You don't have to alter your posture necessarily. Just sit comfortably. You can leave the eyes open if you like, or let them gently close. It might be a little better with closed eyes, but not required.

Just come to the simplicity of body in terms of the knowing of the sitting posture. Know body sitting. Feel the whole body sitting. Maybe a sense of the posture, maybe a sense of the solidity there or the earthiness of it. Feel the contact with the floor, with your feet or parts of the body that are touching the floor. And in the touching, the hardness may be apparent there. Heaviness, hardness, solidity. Earth sitting on earth, the hardness of the floor beneath you, the solidness there.

Now let the attention come into your mouth for a moment. You may feel some wetness there—a subtle sense of the water element. Bring your attention to your lips. Let your lips slowly come apart. Maybe a feeling of stickiness. The lips were touching, and then there's this sticky, cohesive quality of the moisture in the mouth, cohering in the water element there.

While the attention is in the mouth, let the tongue gently touch the teeth. Rub along the surface of the front teeth. You may notice a roughness there—back to the earth element. Or gently touch the teeth together, that hardness of earth element and the moistness of water there in the mouth.

And then back to the experience of the whole body. You may notice qualities of warmth there, or possibly coolness in parts. Maybe where the hands are touching, there's warmth or coolness. Perhaps in the area of the belly or chest, where the clothing is heavier and there's more warmth. Where the skin is exposed, there may be a quality of coolness.

And then if we bring the attention to the breath, perhaps the breath at the nostrils, we can be aware of movement there and perhaps coolness or warmth as well. Perhaps coolness on the in-breath and warmth on the out-breath at the nostrils. We may notice the movement, pressure, tension, tightness in the belly as the lungs fill with air, as the diaphragm moves to expand. Movement on the out-breath.

So then we see, just in the simplicity of letting the attention rest in the body, in this materiality—what we see there is this shift and flow of changing sensations. You could say it's like a dance of these different elements manifesting in these ways of hardness and softness and warmth and coolness and tension and stickiness.

We don't experience those parts that we see in the mirror—arm and leg and head and torso. In a certain way, these are concepts that we hold about the body. And of course, both things are true. You're sitting there, I'm sitting here, and we need to feed and clean and take care of the body. But is that somehow more real than our experience of this flow of changing sensations? Can we see that both of these experiences are equally real?

If we explore the body in this elemental way, in terms of its elemental nature, this direct experience of the flow of sensations, there's an important and really critical shift in our perspective that comes from that. Because if we stay in the realm of concepts—and this seems obvious, but it's really an important thing to notice as you go through the day.

If we stay in the realm of concepts, we're not really going to get into the realm of true insight, because concepts don't change. They're just ideas that we may hold to at certain times. But this flow of elements changing—that's in a state of constant flux and flow, isn't it? If we really look, that's all we're going to see there: change and flow. And seeing

this, seeing the truth of change, opens up the whole practice. Exploring the body in terms of these elements is really a rich field of exploration, and it brings us tremendous benefit.

One way that mindfulness of the body is spoken about—something we don't think about so much probably, but it's expressed in the texts quite often—is in terms of protection. Mindfulness of the body is a kind of protection for us. The Buddha spoke about this in terms of the kilesas, the defilements of mind, the root causes of suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion, along with their manifestations—the hindrances and these difficult mental qualities. He often spoke about these things through the figure, the personification, of Mara, the tempter. He said that Mara cannot invade the mind of one in whom mindfulness of the body is well established. He spoke about how when mindfulness immersed in the body, established in the body, is not developed and pursued, then Mara can gain a foothold.

And there's this image. Suppose someone were to take a heavy rock, a stone, and toss it into a pile of wet clay—what would happen? Would the stone enter into that wet clay or not? He was asking the monks. Yes, it would. In the same way, in one who does not have mindfulness of the body well-developed and pursued, Mara can gain entry, can gain a foothold. But in whomever mindfulness immersed in the body is developed and pursued, Mara cannot gain entry, cannot gain a foothold.

Suppose someone were to throw a ball of string—or we could imagine a rubber band ball, a rubbery bouncy ball—against a strong door panel, against a wall. Would that ball gain entry, or what would happen? Asking the monks again: no, it wouldn't. It would bounce off. In the same way, when mindfulness in the body is well-developed and pursued, there is no entry for Mara, no foothold there. There's a quality of protection.

Seeing the body in terms of the elements can help us cut through a tendency to identify with the body as I, as me, as belonging to me, as mine—this tendency to claim ownership of it. If we investigate the elements, we see that these elemental qualities are the same in the world as they are in the body. There's no difference in that way. They manifest externally and internally in the same manner. We can see this through our direct experience, in the same way as we did in the short guided meditation. In contact with the world—being touched by the world, touching the world—we see that these things are the same.

When we really see this directly, then it's harder to lay claim to it. It's harder to claim hardness as mine, my hardness, my heat. It sounds ridiculous: "This is my heat here." But if we stand and feel the heat of the sun, heat is heat. Hardness is hardness. The hardness in the body, the hardness in the world is just the same. We're not separate from nature.

So often in our language, the way we talk, the way we think much of the time, we see ourselves as somehow separate from the environment, separate from nature, as if it's somehow other than us. But when we look at the body in terms of the elements, we see that in a very fundamental way, we are just a part of the landscape—elements manifesting. We come from nature. We're supported by it. We're part of it. And we return to it. It's a natural flow of things, the same as all of nature.

There's a real change in our perception when we explore the body in its elemental nature. We see that it's all—internal, external—just this dance of elements unfolding lawfully, doing their thing.

When we look at the elemental nature of the body, it points to the relationship of mind and matter, of mentality and materiality, of nama and rupa in Pali. We see that mind has knowing as its function, but there's no form there. Mind has no form, but it knows, it cognizes. Body has form, but it has no knowing capacity. It's just these hardnesses and softnesses, heat and coolness.

And so what we see in our experience is a meeting of nama and rupa. We see mentality coming together with matter—mind knowing body. Seeing this namarupa-pariccheda-nana, this insight into mentality and materiality, is part of how the path unfolds in terms of our understanding and insight. We start to see the conditioned nature of things and how mind and matter influence and condition one another.

It's really interesting to see this, and it's really quite simple. Think of times when anger or shame or embarrassment arise in the mind. What happens in the body? There's a direct conditioning effect. Heat may arise, tension or tightness. The body flushes, reflecting this state of mind. And when the mind is really chilled out, concentrated, the body responds as well. It adjusts to that. If there's a lot of calm and concentration in the mind, the body may feel very light. The metabolic processes may become very fine and subtle as a response. When there's a lot of joy and rapturous quality in the mind, there can be lightness and pleasant tingling feelings—all kinds of bodily responses. Mind conditioning matter, mind conditioning body.

We can see the quality of intention arising in the mind sometimes, and then the response of the body to move. And we can see matter and materiality conditioning mind as well. For example, if there's a lot of heat in the body, there may be a mental response of aversion. Or excessive hardness—if you sit long enough, hardness really shows up, doesn't it? Hardness, hardness. And then there may be resistance in the mind, aversion to that hardness, all kinds of thoughts arising. If it's too hot: "Oh, they should turn on the AC." Too cold: "Oh, they should turn on the heat." Materiality conditioning mind, and thoughts arising from that.

We see materiality conditioning the arising of consciousness itself. There's contact, and then consciousness arises in response. This is what contact is—contact in the body and body consciousness arising.

Exploring the elements really reveals the characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anatta. We see that it's a flow of constant change. The elements are constantly changing. Nothing is lasting. Even things we think of as solid—some solid unpleasant sensation, for example, that feels like a lump or a block—if we look closely, it's a shifting dance of changing sensations within that, coming and going. We see that nothing there lasts for any length of time at all. We start to see that actually it's changing very, very rapidly.

And seeing change in this way opens up the seeing of unreliability. It's not reliable. We can't ask a pleasant sensation in the body to last and be our source of happiness for any length of time. It doesn't do it. It won't do it. It's unsatisfactory in the long run if we try to hold on to it. And we see that it's all happening due to causes and conditions. It's coreless. It has this quality of not-self. We can't control it and decide to have the body only be light and pleasant feeling. It doesn't respond to our wishes in that way. It responds to the changing causes and conditions that come.

So it's an interesting exploration of the body, this elemental nature of it. You can look at it this way internally and then in the world—these elements manifesting in the body, and then the way they manifest in the world.

Just as we go through the day in our daily activities, lunchtime becomes a really interesting place. We might notice the elements there. We notice the hardness, the teeth coming together to chew, or the transforming of food becoming more liquid in the mouth—like lettuce, which is perhaps ninety-eight percent water. It just turns to water in the mouth. We notice the water element there. We might notice the water element when we're drinking liquid, or the water flowing across the body in the shower, this flowing nature. Stickiness, cohesion from the water element in the body—in our contact with the world this may show up at times.

In our various postures that we practice in—sitting, standing, and so forth—we notice qualities of solidity, of hardness, softness, textures of the clothing. Textures in the world as we walk, touch things, benches that we sit on, rocks that we might touch. They have these earth qualities of hardness, texture, solidity. Warmth and coolness manifest in the body as we're going through the day, internally and externally. Heat in the body, the warmth of the sun, the coolness of the breeze, or the movement of the breeze touching the skin—air element there. Pressure, tightness, movement within the body, the breath moving in and out. We see these elements.

It really can bring a lot of interest and happiness to us to see these things, how they happen, to recognize them in our body and mind. Seeing how our internal experience is reflected in the world, that connection, seeing how we're part of nature in this way—it can start to really loosen things up in our world, in our internal world. It can open up and loosen our tendency to claim ownership of any of it. And this really leads to great joy when we let go of owning it.

I may have used this quotation already—I don't remember. It's one I'm fond of, so forgive me if I did, but it's a good one. The great Thai forest master Ajahn Buddhadasa once said this one very simple sentence. He said, "What we're doing with this practice is giving back to nature what we mistakenly appropriated as our own."

I feel like turning the attention to the elemental nature of the body and seeing its relationship to mind really points to this. In a certain way, the whole practice comes down to that. We're just giving it back to nature, letting go of ownership of it, coming back into alignment with natural processes. The whole deal—everything that you can experience in this mind and body internally, and everything you can experience in the world—is just the flow of natural processes doing its thing. So we can just give it back. It's really relaxing. We don't have to carry that around with us. It's like we set down a burden that we didn't know we were hauling around. Give it back to nature.

I want to end this evening with a short excerpt from a longer poem—I guess you'd call it a poem. It's verses that are attributed to the Venerable Ananda, the Buddha's attendant. Having been an attendant on numerous occasions myself—somehow I have fallen into the attendant role a lot in my dharma life—I like being an attendant. It's been a wonderful thing. If you ever get the chance to be an attendant, you might consider doing it. I've gotten a lot out of it. I get to hang out behind the scenes with some cool beings.

This is from a collection of verses called the Theragatha, Verses of the Elders. And this verse is apparently from after the Buddha had passed away. Venerable Ananda outlived the Buddha, and the Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Mahamogalana,

were gone. A bunch of the old gang had been dying off. So it's kind of a sad poem, but it's poignant and beautiful—a poignant reflection on the power of mindfulness of the body. So you can take the sadness of it.

These are the words of Venerable Ananda after the Buddha and a lot of the old ones have passed away:

All the directions are obscure.
The teachings are not clear to me.
With our benevolent friend gone,
it seems as if all is darkness.

For one whose friend has passed away,
one whose teacher is gone for good,
there is no friend that can compare
with mindfulness of the body.

The old ones have all passed away.
I do not fit in with the new ones.

And so today I muse alone like a bird who has gone to roost.

So we'll have a moment of silence, eloquent silence here, and let these words just drift away.

Thank you for listening this evening.

CHAPTER 12

Deepening Concentration, Developing Happiness

Sally Armstrong · 56 min

> *In this comprehensive talk, Sally Armstrong addresses a common misunderstanding about Buddhism—that it focuses solely on suffering—by illuminating the Buddha's teachings on happiness and the path to its cultivation. She introduces the five jhānic factors (vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā) not merely as states leading to deep absorption, but as a practical map for any meditator seeking to understand how practice naturally deepens.*
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> *Armstrong explains how each jhānic factor serves as an antidote to one of the five hindrances: vitakka (aiming attention) counteracts sloth and torpor, vicāra (sustained attention) addresses doubt, pīti (rapture) balances aversion, sukha (happiness) eases restlessness and worry, and ekaggatā (one-pointedness) neutralizes greed. She emphasizes that vitakka and vicāra—the continuous process of connecting with and sustaining attention on experience—form the foundation of all meditative development, from which the other factors naturally arise.*
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> *The talk offers a beautiful arc showing how Buddhist practice moves from effortful foundation-building toward increasingly subtle states of refinement, ease, and contentment. Armstrong draws on contemporary happiness research alongside traditional teachings to demonstrate that happiness is trainable, and that the profound well-being cultivated through practice differs fundamentally from ordinary pleasure-seeking. She concludes with verses from the Dhammapada celebrating the happiness of those who live without hate, misery, or attachment.*

At retreats like this, we talk a lot about how to practice and the difficulties we encounter in practice. And of course, this is very helpful. It's what most of us need—some orientation to the practice, how to work with the challenges that come up. Carol gave a whole talk on dukkha. I talked about restlessness. Guy talked about working with difficult emotions and states of mind.

But this emphasis on the difficulties is partly why Buddhism gets a rap as being all about suffering. There's a real wisdom in this, of course. Our willingness to face suffering, the difficulties of life, and really bring understanding to them is what allows the possibility of transforming them. But if you hear a glib kind of wash on Buddhism, especially around the Four Noble Truths, you'll often hear the First Noble Truth defined as "life is suffering." I don't know how many times I've heard that or read that in inter-

views and radio shows, where someone who doesn't know what they're talking about is talking about Buddhism. "Buddhism, what the Buddhists say is life is suffering. It's all about suffering."

I actually found the other day that Stephen Colbert had done a little segment on Buddhism as part of a series on religion. He was better than that in his definition, but his definition was "life means suffering." And of course he went on a whole rap about that and made it funny. But people don't understand what it is we're doing here. And his image of the Buddha was not a Buddha—it was one of these fat kitchen god things that people think are Buddhas. He's making jokes about the shape of that image, of course. And poor Lama Surya Das, who's a friend and Tibetan teacher, was game enough to go on the show and try to match wits with Stephen Colbert, which is usually a losing proposition. He did okay, but no one really comes out best in that debate.

This emphasis on suffering can lead us to a kind of gloominess of mind. And being on retreat, I know a few people have commented, "It's kind of gloomy here, isn't it?" As you see people walking around, they look very serious and everything's slowed down. There's no singing, dancing and garlands or whatever. We're not getting involved in that, no entertainment. And so it can really seem that a lot of this practice is about turning us back again and again to what's difficult, to what's wrong with experience.

I think it's really important to balance that and to actually remember that when the Buddha taught the Four Noble Truths, what he actually said is there is suffering. Suffering is a mark of existence, a fact of existence. There is a cause of suffering. But he said very clearly there's an end to suffering and a path leading to the end of suffering. We often don't talk so much about those last two, especially in the early days of a retreat. Why are we practicing and where is this leading? But if we don't have a sense of that, how will we find the motivation to continue to practice, to work with the difficulties that do come up, that are a characteristic of experience? We have to have some sense of where this path is leading.

My sense of where it's leading—and I'm sure yours too, or else you wouldn't be here—is to really deepen our capacity for happiness, for calm and for contentment, and to bring more understanding, more wisdom, more insight into our experience, both personal and impersonal, and possibly to come to an end of suffering. We can view that in the biggest picture, of course, but even in a moment, in any experience, we can see that there's that possibility of coming to an end of suffering.

So as well as all of the teachings and the pointers and the guidance to being with suffering and understanding suffering and finding the cause of suffering, there are many teachings and lists about the path to freedom and the beautiful qualities of heart and

mind that we need to develop if we really are to deepen in this path of practice and actually find an end to suffering. Lists like the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, or the Five Spiritual Faculties, or the Ten Paramis, or the Four Brahmaviharas.

I want to talk tonight about a list that we don't teach that much about, but it's one that actively points to the importance of happiness on the path and how developing these beautiful qualities of mind and heart are essential—that this is the direction the path and the practice moves in.

The Buddha was actually known as the Happy One, the Sugata. There are many stories and comments in the teachings about his happiness and the happiness of his followers. People often remarked on the sense of well-being that they observed in the Buddha and his disciples.

The kind of happiness the Buddha expressed, and that I'm talking about tonight, is not the kind of la-di-da happiness of getting what we want, or an ice cream cone, or even an iPhone 5, which you've missed out on—luckily for you. Couldn't go line up at Best Buy for your iPhone 5. It's not that kind of happiness. It's a deeper, more reliable kind of happiness that we cultivate here. And that's really more valuable, more important for us.

You probably know that happiness is in right now. There's all this research being done on it, books being written on it. Type in "happiness" on Amazon and you get hundreds of thousands of responses of books with that in the title. But there's one book that I've really appreciated of all the many that are out there. James Baraz, who at Spirit Rock is our happiness guru—if you know James, you know he's also a happy one—recommended it. It's called *How We Choose to Be Happy: The Nine Choices of Extremely Happy People* by Rick Foster and Greg Hicks, who live in the Bay Area and often come to Spirit Rock, very aligned with meditation and the practice of meditation. They give a definition for happiness that I think really speaks to us as practitioners and what it is we're looking to cultivate.

Our definition of happiness is a profound, enduring feeling of contentment, capability, and centeredness. It's a rich sense of well-being that comes from knowing that you can deal productively and creatively with all life offers, both the good and the bad. It's knowing your internal self and responding to your real needs rather than the demands of others. And it's a deep sense of engagement, living in the moment and enjoying life's bounty.

This is the kind of happiness, on a relative level, that these practices lead us towards. Of course, there's the deeper and ultimate happiness that the Buddha discovered. But on the way to that, this is the happiness that really nourishes us, that allows us to continue these practices. And this definition has a lot of words that we can relate to our practice: centeredness, well-being, contentment, knowing our internal self, living in the moment. This is what we're looking to cultivate here.

What we can really begin to see is that we can actually train in happiness. And again, all the research is proving that it's possible. That book I mentioned, *The Nine Choices of Extremely Happy People*, suggests it isn't just an accident or even a byproduct of something else, but actually choices that we make over and over again to incline the mind towards happiness. And in the context of our practice, we do that not just for happiness' sake, for its own sake, but really because it's onward leading. As we develop that kind of centeredness, that kind of contentment and well-being, a sense of being engaged in life, we can really develop a confidence in the practice and how it's unfolding.

As we open to these teachings, and especially the ones on developing the beautiful qualities of mind, I really find that they provide maps for us. And maps are great. It's how we all got here when we didn't know how to get here. How we find our way in the world is through these maps. Now there are so many maps available online. But the Buddha gave us lots of maps, and he gave us maps to find the way to this kind of happiness and well-being.

In talking about this tonight, I don't want to make it sound like this is some far distant goal—that when we finally get enlightened, we'll be happy, or when we get rid of all these imperfections, we'll be happy. Rather, there's the possibility of here and now discovering happiness, discovering a sense of well-being through this practice and its capacity to collect and unify our minds, to actually develop a mind that's trained, that is responsive. That's the kind of mind that allows us to make these choices towards more happiness, more freedom, less suffering.

The mind that's not so scattered, not so confused—and perhaps over these weeks now of practice, you've started to feel just a little bit of a sense of that. The mind isn't as confused, isn't as lost as it was in the early days of the retreat. You start to see, even in moments, that the mind can actually become an ally, a mind as friend, rather than this very conflicted relationship we often have where it's one of struggle and blame and judgment. Actually, the mind becomes ally and friend through this kind of training. The Buddha said something like—I'm paraphrasing—that the untrained mind can be your

worst enemy, but the trained mind is your best friend. This is, again, really what we're doing here: training the mind. And we need to look at what we are training it for. What are we training it to do?

The list that I want to speak about tonight is called the Five Jhānic Factors. These are qualities of mind, mental states that lead to the experience of jhāna and actually constitute, especially the first jhāna. Their deepening and progress develop into the other jhānas. Jhāna is a Pali word that basically means absorption. It's a meditative experience we can have that really is a marked difference from our normal state of mind and even from normal mindfulness, even quite deep mindfulness. It's a real shifting that can happen through intensive practice where the mind falls into a state that's absorbed, centered, focused, still.

Now these factors are normally spoken about in that context, and I've often given teachings on them at the concentration retreat that I teach pretty much every year at Spirit Rock, where we focus all of the teachings and practices around concentration. But I've really come to see that they're not only useful for the deepening of concentration. Any meditative practice goes through this kind of unfolding, and we can use this map to give us a sense of how the practice is deepening and what direction it might go in.

So I thought it might be helpful on a long retreat like this, where we really do deepen in our practice and there is the time to hear some teachings that we might not normally be exposed to, to get a sense of this particular list, this particular group of practices that the Buddha spoke about a lot. If you read the suttas, you'll see them mentioned frequently.

The process that we're doing here, as we sweeten the mind, as we develop these wholesome states—what needs to happen at the same time is a willingness to work with whatever the obstacles are. This is the kind of suffering that I spoke about at the beginning. The willingness to do that work of working with, diminishing, releasing, abandoning all of the mind states and choices that we make that lead us to suffering. We need to do that at the same time that we're cultivating these beautiful states.

With this particular list, the challenges, the difficult states that are worked with are our old friends, the hindrances. What's interesting about this list of the jhānic factors is that each one is actually a balancing force or an antidote to one of the five hindrances. There's a matching there. And so we have this two-pronged approach to our practice that's actually happening naturally. We don't have to make an agenda about this.

But what we're doing is reducing the obstacles, the hindering factors, the states of mind and heart that lead us to suffering, while simultaneously cultivating the supportive factors. And we're actually doing this all the time that we're mindful. Mindfulness has this natural tendency—we don't have to make an agenda out of it—but mindfulness's natural functioning is to increase wholesome states that it notices and decrease unwholesome states and hindrances that it notices. Just by bringing mindfulness, that natural wisdom of letting go or cultivating is there.

But we can also engage a little, be a little more proactive in that process by understanding more clearly how it actually works. This process is going on all the time that we're practicing mindfulness—we're increasing wholesome states and decreasing negative ones. But this work happens more quickly, you might say, or more efficiently and effectively, through our willingness to notice hindrances when they're there.

We've talked about this already. Part of that can come from our willingness to recognize that if the mind isn't settled, if there isn't some basic degree of ease in our current experience, some form or other of one or more of the hindrances are present. And our willingness to recognize those and actually work with them skillfully continues this cycling of increasing wholesome states and decreasing difficult ones.

All of the practices that we've already shared with you, the practices you already know about working skillfully with hindrances—the classic practice we gave is that acronym of RAIN: Recognition, Acceptance, Interest or Intimacy, Non-identification or Nature. This is one of the most skillful ways of working with these difficult states of mind: feeling them in the body, recognizing the emotion, naming the hindrance that's present, seeing the thoughts that go with it, and bringing wisdom to it—seeing it as impersonal, seeing that it's conditioned, seeing that it's impermanent, that it will also change.

So all of these practices that we've been working with are going to be implied as I go through these lists tonight, this kind of wisdom that we can bring to practice. But I'll be offering some other ways of looking at working with the hindrances using this lens of the jhānic factors.

In this list of the five jhānic factors, the first two factors are usually talked about together. They're called vitakka and vicāra. Guy mentioned them briefly the other morning—I forget what the context was, but probably saying something like how important they are for our practice. Vitakka is usually translated as aiming or directing attention, or initial application. It's that directing of our mindfulness to the chosen object. Vicāra, which goes together with vitakka, is the sustaining of that attention. It's the continued connection with the object.

Sayadaw U Pandita, when he talks about these two, describes them as aiming and rubbing. It's that sense of staying with, really deepening into our connection, our understanding of our mindfulness of a particular object or experience.

In the traditional translations, the two are actually defined—or the literal meaning has something to do with thinking. They're often defined as applied and sustained thought. This was always a little confusing to me because, you know, we're not wanting to encourage a lot of thinking about our meditation process. But I think what it's referring to is using that cognitive capacity of the mind, that mind that knows, that can name, that can recognize—using that functioning of the mind to bring more clarity to our experience. It's a little bit what we're doing when we're using the noting practice, taking that functioning of the mind and using it to help us connect a little more deeply with the experience.

So vitakka and vicāra is this act of connecting with whatever experience it is and sustaining it in a momentary kind of way. The functioning of these two is the foundation of any kind of meditative practice. And if you look at it in a larger context, it's the functioning that has to happen anytime we learn anything. We have to connect with whatever it is that we're studying and sustain for long enough to have the information, the learning, actually land. And so it's a very useful way to understand the mind and its workings.

When we talk about aiming and sustaining, this is not something that happens once and then you hold on. It's something that happens momentarily, over and over again. It's not that you sit down at the beginning of a meditation, aim your mindfulness at the breath, and try to hang on to that for the next forty-five minutes or an hour. That is not the way this works, and that would just lead to frustration. I don't even think it's possible to do it in that way.

But we're always aiming and sustaining with every arising experience that mindfulness knows. So it's as short as an in-breath and then an out-breath, and perhaps even shorter than that—discrete experiences as they arise. Any experience, a sound that arises at the ear door, there's that initial knowing of it, and then the sustaining is keeping our attention there for as long as the sound continues. The sound ends, there's a new experience, and there's another vitakka and vicāra. So we're doing it over and over again.

This is really the workhorse of meditation, doing this over and over again. If the vitakka is there, if there is that initial connection, vicāra has the potential to arise and to continue. Vicāra can't arise unless the vitakka is there. The vitakka is there, the vicāra has the potential to arise. And sometimes it's just very brief and we're lost.

Other times we can really feel that there's this seamlessness to the practice. And all that needs to happen is for the vichara to last long enough until the next arising—the next in-breath, the next out-breath, the next sound, the next sensation, the next mind state, the next thought that arises.

This happens also with thought. Wherever we notice the thought—beginning, middle, or end—there's the vitaka and the vichara, to notice the nature of the thought. Sometimes we can experience the actual thinking process in the mind. So it can apply to any experience that we have.

But it's the development of these two qualities that supports the deepening of the continuity that we've been emphasizing so much. It's so important for the deepening of our mindfulness. It's these two factors, vitaka and vichara, that allow the continuity, that bring a kind of seamlessness to practice.

And again, I'm not assuming or implying that one is therefore mindful all the time. But we go through these periods where there is just this sense of continuity, this sense of flow in the meditation. When there's a break—when there's vitaka, vichara, and then a gap where we don't connect again with something else—that's when the hindrances come in. The mind abhors a vacuum, and so it makes something happen. The tendencies of mind toward doubt or restlessness or whatever—that's where they come in. But if these two keep coming, if we keep developing them, this is when we can really deepen in continuity.

Vitaka is said to be the antidote to sloth and torpor—or when it really gets bad, "toth and slorper," when you can't even get the words out. All of that experience I'm sure you're familiar with: sleepiness and dullness and fogginess and spaciness. Vitaka brings that zing of energy. It's like that clarity of knowing that recognizes the experience, whatever it is, can break through the fogginess that is sloth and torpor.

In talking about sloth and torpor, sometimes teachers give a whole talk on this hindrance, and it's really interesting to see all the layers and textures of how it manifests. But to say just a few words about it: there are different kinds of sleepiness. There's the garden variety of sleepiness that all of us had the first few days of the retreat, or perhaps even longer, just getting adjusted to the schedule, to being here. And then there's a different kind of sleepiness that happens just through our biorhythms, through the course of a day or days of practice.

But we can get more interested in this third kind of sleepiness that we call sinking mind. Sinking mind is an experience that happens when the concentration, the steadiness, is actually deepening, but there's not quite enough energy, not quite enough zing

in the vitaka to bring wakefulness. So it's just an imbalance between the calming factors and the energizing factors. We can experience sinking mind when we feel kind of mindful—sort of mindful. If someone asked, we'd say, "Yes, we're mindful, we're with the breath." But all of a sudden it's like someone turned the lights out. The energy drops, you often find yourself jerking forward, and you wake up and realize you've really been in a kind of fog.

When you notice that happening, sometimes just the little jerk that occurs is enough energy to break through the trance. But vitaka is what will actually support working with the sleepiness. Just bringing more clarity to noticing arisings, noticing the beginnings of things, can actually bring more energy.

What I see is that vitaka, when it's clearly seen, has a little bit of positive reinforcement. There is this little bit of energy in the connecting with experience. And as we understand this process, it actually feels more pleasant to have that energy than to get lost in the fog of sloth and torpor. We kind of see the newness in experience. Vitaka is all about this moment being new, fresh, never repeated—even though you might be thinking it's just another breath. Vitaka allows us to connect with it with this sense of clarity. So it really is an energizing factor.

Vichara, on the other hand—the sustaining of awareness—is the antidote to doubt. And I think this is also interesting, because doubt is in some ways the most difficult of the hindrances. Actually, the most difficult hindrance is the one you're experiencing right now, right? Usually. But if you step back a bit, doubt is really challenging because it puts everything up for discussion, for debate, for questioning, for judging and comparing. "Why am I here? What am I doing here? What am I supposed to be doing? If I'm doing it, am I doing it right? Everyone else seems to know what they're doing and I don't." Or, "No one knows what they're doing, not even the teachers." And we can just go in this spin of questioning and challenging. Of course, some degree of doubt, some skillful doubt or inquiring kind of doubt, is helpful. But this kind of doubt really keeps us spinning around and not landing in experience.

Vichara is that experience of actually connecting with what's happening and knowing it. Vitaka is that momentary recognition: here is something. Vichara allows us to know what it is, allows us to connect, allows us to deepen. And so we can start to trust our experience as we settle the mind and actually know what's happening, know a breath.

Know a sound and know its nature. Know a thought and know its nature. This is actually what deepens our faith in our capacity to do this practice—this sense of steadiness. Doubt keeps us superficial, on the surface. Vichara allows us to connect and keep opening to experience.

I actually had a very exaggerated experience in this area of vichara and doubt. A number of years ago, Guy and I were going to fly to Australia to visit my family. I go regularly, and he comes every now and then. The airline we were traveling on offered a free layover in Fiji, where we'd never been before, so it seemed like a nice idea to take a few days there. We both had the idea that Fiji might be a good and cheap place to learn how to scuba dive.

Now, in retrospect, perhaps that wasn't wisdom actually working. It's like when you see ads in the paper: "Cut-price LASIK surgery—we do the cheapest in town." And you think, "Yeah, right. What I want is the cheapest person to direct laser beams into my eye, the one doing it cut-price." But we were on a limited budget, so we thought this was a good idea.

We flew to Fiji, and to get to the place where we'd booked, we had to take a little plane. Then from the plane—there were no roads on this island, or certainly not over the island—we had to get a little boat. We landed at this tiny resort, just a group of little thatched-roof houses on a very pretty little beach. And we started to learn to scuba dive there.

A few things we didn't factor in. One, cheapness perhaps isn't the best guiding decision-making point. Two, it was January, which is cyclone season in Fiji. And this little resort did not have a swimming pool to learn in—you had to do it out in the open ocean. Instead of a calm Pacific, it was already getting quite surgy, even though the cyclones weren't approaching yet. They actually did approach—that's another whole story. They literally blew the roof off the whole place while we were there. But in those early days, it was just surges and a little brisk breeze.

To learn how to scuba dive, they show you all the equipment. It's a dangerous thing—you're going underwater and going quite deep—so there's a lot of equipment, a lot of things to learn. Then you go out and actually have to do it. Once you're underwater, as they say, no one can hear you scream, because you've got this big thing in your mouth. There are all these dials and buttons to look at. You're wearing weights to help you sink, a flotation vest to help you float, and it's like meditation—you have to learn how to balance those two.

Off we go, trudging in and out. Our dive instructor was Ezra, this big Fijian guy. Even though the equipment had clearly been through its paces—it wasn't brand new and sparkling—I really trusted Ezra. He was a great guy.

We walk in—it's a shore dive, you just walk in and it gets deeper until finally you're floating. The ocean gets deeper and deeper, and the idea was we would do a very gradual descent for our first scuba dive. So off we go. Ezra is first, Guy is second, and I'm following along. It's getting deeper and deeper, we're going down. But at some point, I'm not going down anymore. That's when you have to start balancing the weights and the buoyancy. In scuba diving, there's a little tube with two buttons on it.

One increases the air and one decreases the air. So I'm pressing the button, thinking I need to decrease the air. And I'm not going down. So what do you do? You press it again. You press it harder. You press it more.

Meanwhile, they're going deeper and deeper, and I'm not getting any deeper. So my next move is to press the other button, right, if the first one isn't working. Well, of course, in hindsight, that's the one that increases the air in the vest—it's coming from your oxygen tanks. So they're getting deeper, and I'm going up and up and up.

That's the interesting thing about scuba diving—it's three-dimensional. I'm trying to keep up, but now I'm on the surface and they're descending. After some time—and I have to say it was some time—they noticed that I wasn't there. I could see Guy looking around. He doesn't have a clue. But Ezra finally realizes, "Oh, look up." There I am, floating on the surface.

So he has to come all the way up. And the technique that I had missed, that he had told us, was that when you press the button, you have to hold it above the tank, above your head, for the air to release. And that's what I wasn't doing.

This is what happens. He had told us that, but my mind was busy with a thousand things and didn't pay attention. *Vicāra* is what allows us to stay attentive, to stay present, and get the information we need to actually navigate—whether it's scuba diving or navigating our own minds. I really saw that without that information, I was stuck there on the surface. It didn't allow me to deepen.

And the doubt, the pressing—that's also my natural tendency. If one button doesn't work, try the other one. Who needs to read the instructions? You just press all the buttons until something does something. I personally know that this is a quality I need to develop. Staying steady. It allows us to validate our experience and know for ourselves, to start trusting ourselves instead of flailing around and staying on the surface.

So these two qualities, *vitakka* and *vicāra*, are enormously helpful in our practice. It's such a simple concept—aiming and sustaining. But for me, I found it very valuable. It's like, "Oh right, that's what I'm doing. And can I stay with this, whatever this experience is, just that little bit longer? Can I know it perhaps a little more deeply, a little more clearly?"

These are the workhorses of our meditation. As we develop this capacity over and over again—and I'm talking not just seconds or moments, but days and weeks—it really allows for that sense of continuity I spoke about, and it develops the third of these jhānic factors: *pīti*.

Pīti is also one of the seven factors of awakening and serves a similar function, arising out of a similar experience. Here it arises out of *vitakka* and *vicāra*, aiming and sustaining. *Pīti* is usually translated as rapture or joy. And it's interesting to see that it arises naturally out of a mind that stays connected. It's not an excitable experience that happens randomly, but rather emerges through this process of sustaining the meditation in a continuous way.

What happens with *pīti* is that the mind gets absorbed and fascinated with its chosen object—or even changing objects; it doesn't have to be one object. It becomes effortless to stay connected.

When we talk about this connection, there are two basic kinds of deepening in meditation. One is where we take a single object—perhaps the breath or *mettā* or many other objects—and that develops into deep *samatha* practice, tranquility practice, deepening into *samādhi* and perhaps into *jhāna*. But in this kind of practice, what we're developing is *khaṇika samādhi*.

This is moment-to-moment mindfulness, or moment-to-moment concentration. Even though the objects are changing, it's the continuity—the vitaka and vicara and the continuous nature that we develop—that allows a deepening of the concentration, bringing about this sense of absorption, of piti. It's like a magnetic attraction. There's not so much a sense of having to corral the mind. I talked about sheepdog mind the other day. That's not necessary once this starts to develop.

Joseph talks about practice in this way. He says at the beginning it's like mindfulness is a ball on top of an upside-down bowl—it just easily rolls off. The slightest thing and it's really hard to get it to stay. After a while, it's like a level field. It'll move around, but you have to kind of push it to get it to move. And ultimately it becomes like you're the

upside-down bowl, and the mindfulness just rests. It can move a little around in there, but it takes some pushing to get it to move. It just rests really easily. So this is what can start to happen as the mindfulness becomes steadier.

Now, rapture is a mental factor—these are all mental factors—but rapture particularly can be experienced in the body. It can be showering kinds of rapture, momentary rapture, a kind of goosebumps. A common experience of rapture is a lifting, a lightening. Rapture can also be felt as a real heaviness or solidity. All kinds of pushing or pulling experiences can be a manifestation of rapture. Lights, pulsing—a lot of things can be this deepening of concentration leading to piti.

As soon as we start talking about this, most often people's eyes light up and it's like, "Oh, that's what I should be having in meditation," or "I want more of that." But this is not something that we can or even should go and try to get. It's a natural result. Sometimes it's very subtle, and sometimes actually rapture is unpleasant. The movements or the pressures or the experience can be very aggravating to the mind. It can actually be tiring at times. So again, it's not that we want more piti in our experience. Sometimes piti arises and it has these characteristics. Sometimes it's blissful, but sometimes it's not. We're not doing this practice just to get the experience of piti. This is part of the progression that I'm talking about.

As I said, piti is also in the seven factors of awakening. Rapture, when it comes, counterbalances aversion, counterbalances that sense of not wanting, because we're delighting in the object. The mind is just really happy to be paying attention to whatever it's paying attention to. So any form of aversion—judging, ill will, irritation, aversion to ourselves, to our body, to sounds, whatever—rapture is the beautiful antidote to that. When the mind is really absorbed in its object, it's impossible for those mind states to come in.

You might remember Joseph's story about being at a really terrible retreat where the conditions were difficult, and complaining to Sayadaw U Pandita. And U Pandita's only advice was, "Just be more mindful," which didn't seem like it would help very much. But Joseph tried that, became more mindful, and found that aversion just didn't have a way in. If he was really with his direct experience, there was no room for it. This is what can happen with rapture—there's just no room for the hindrances to come in.

So we really see this direction of practice: as we develop continuity, as the mind gets more collected and unified, it brings with it this reduction in suffering. Again, these are factors that come and go. It's not like we land in this and everything's great from now on, but there's this potential to really reduce the tendency of the mind to move into aversion and not wanting.

Piti is usually quite a strong experience. It can have its subtlety, but it has a strength to it. It's interesting that the next factor that develops in this particular list, the fourth factor, is that of sukha. Sukha is usually translated as happiness or pleasure. It's the opposite of dukkha. And I love it that, you know, it's a Pali word, but you can see its connection to sweetness, to sucrose. It has that feeling or flavor—this sweetness. Steve Armstrong defines it as happy contentment of mind and body.

It has a softness to it, a more subtle experience than rapture. Piti and sukha have a strong connection—some teachers even talk about "piti-sukha," not really distinguishing the two. But I think it's really helpful to understand this progression, this natural progression from the absorption that comes with rapture, that kind of intensity. The natural progression is to this subtler experience of sukha, of sweetness.

Sukha comes with a kind of pleasantness. Often we smile when we have, especially our first experiences of sukha as a meditative experience—to just feel that potential for this kind of happiness in this mind and body, just as it is. So the mind has become absorbed, the vitakka and vicāra have provided the foundation, the mind has become happily absorbed in its object, and this feeling of absorption has arisen. But then what arises is this really sweet, subtle experience of sukha, of contentment, of ease. There's a softness to it. And again, you might have already had this, just in moments where there's no tug on the mind at all.

What sukha balances is the hindrance of restlessness and worry. As we find this kind of pleasure and start to trust it in our present moment experience, the mind isn't so agitated. It's not so caught in the push or pull of experience, going to the past and worrying about that, regrets and remorse, or to the future with planning and agitation. This questioning that we're in so often—am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay?—the experience of sukha is a direct experience of some kind of fundamental okayness that we can begin to trust. This contentment, this experience where the mind isn't in the push and pull of wanting and not wanting, past and future, but is actually just content with things as they are. This is the beautiful power of sukha.

In the progression of the factors, sukha leads to the last factor: ekaggatā. "Eka" means "one" in Pali, Sanskrit, and Hindi. Ekaggatā is usually translated as one-pointedness or non-distraction. And again, there's this movement that's happening. It's often also used as synonymous with concentration, and it has a flavor of equanimity. There's a balance of mind that gets developed, a calmness, even a coolness. It can be quite noticeable after the sweetness of sukha, this coolness of ekaggatā. But it is a deepening, a refining of the sukha. We're not looking for happiness—we're abiding in this sense of well-being and stability of mind.

Ekaggatā is the antidote to greed, to wanting, because the mind is really at rest, at peace. It's in balance. It's not needing to go out and get something or push something away. There's some feeling of completeness in the present moment, in this experience, just as it is. For many of us, this is a really unusual experience—to not be wanting something, something better, something different, something improved, but just some kind of okayness, some kind of steadiness of mind in the simplicity of experience, whatever you might be doing, whether formally sitting in the hall or just moving around the retreat center. The practice begins to show us that this type of well-being is possible, even in these very simple conditions, even with the amount of renunciation we are experiencing here.

So how does this all work? How do these factors come together? It's not as though we have a moment of restlessness and we just say, "Oh, more sukha—that's what I need. Let me just bring that up." It doesn't work that way. There's a process that really has to develop these factors. But it begins by working skillfully with the hindrances, just as we've been talking about. The more we're willing to do that—to name them, to disidentify with them, to bring wisdom in, to bring skillfulness to our relationship with them, to really not give energy, to not believe the story that the hindrances are telling us—and to actively cultivate and nurture the wholesome states of mind, whatever they are, whenever we experience them.

And we do that in the same way—by naming them, by recognizing them, by actually feeling them in the mind and body. We begin to inhabit or integrate these beautiful qualities of mind and heart. So I'm often encouraging people in interviews: Did you notice that? Did you name that? Peace or calm or ease or acceptance or letting go. These are actual felt experiences. And that's what gives us the feedback that we're on the right track, that the experience is developing as it should.

And again, in talking about it tonight, I don't want to hold anything out as what should be happening, or suggest that if you're not having this, the meditation isn't working. This is a very gradual process. All of us weave in and out of little tastes or deeper experiences of it throughout the retreat. Even though the jhanic factors are somewhat sequential, they don't go in lockstep. We can have moments of sukha or a moment of clarity, of ekagata—that one-pointed coolness of experience—any time in our process.

But they all develop out of the vitakka and vichara, that willingness to just again and again aim and sustain, connect and develop our mindfulness, the meditation. These two are the only ones that we have any real control over. The others develop out of them. We can nurture them by noticing them, inclining the mind, understanding the territory,

recognizing them when they arise. But vitakka and vichara are the cornerstones of our practice, the foundation, and we need to do that over and over, to just be willing. The patience I spoke about this morning—it's this willingness to do them over and over again.

The way this practice develops is that we have whatever moments of absorption, even if it's just a few breaths or a few moments where there's that sense of just settling in, just being with without the hindrances having so much impact. This sense of absorption can develop, whatever degree of joy or bliss, strong experiences in the body and mind can develop. But what naturally happens, as that brings its own steadiness—the absorption of that, the mind getting trained, getting connected—the natural development is this refinement into sukha.

And I think this is what I wanted to really point out: this natural arc that you'll find in so many of the Buddhist lists, where they begin with the foundational factors that often require some effort. We need to bring intention into them. The Seven Factors of Enlightenment certainly act that way. A lot of the lists act that way. So we need to bring that clarity of intention into the practice. And then they often arc into some kind of energizing factors that really give us motivation to keep going. But then they all move in the direction of more subtlety, more refinement, more simplicity, more coolness even.

I just think that's a beautiful map or model to hold. We often think what we're going for are peak experiences. We want the drama and the excitement. But all of these lists have this kind of trajectory toward more refinement, more letting go, more calmness, more ease, more contentment, more well-being. Because it's from that place that the mind can really open to insight. This foundation of well-being, of contentment, of equanimity and ease—that's when the mind really can deepen and discover the truth that the Buddha talked about, the nature of reality, but also the possibility of a real and true, deep and lasting happiness.

So just have a sense of this map, not to go after it with striving, but being willing to do this important work—connecting and sustaining gently, persistently, with patience.

I want to finish with some words from the Dhammapada, the verses, the poems of the Buddha. This one is about happiness and its importance:

Ah, so happily we live without hate among those with hate. Among people who hate, we live without hate.

Ah, so happily we live without misery among those in misery. Among people in misery, we live without misery.

Ah, so happily we live without ambition among those with ambition. Among people who are ambitious, we live without ambition.

Ah, so happily we live, we who have no attachment. We shall feast on joy as do the radiant gods.

Let's just take a moment to let the words settle.

Ah, so happily we live, we who have no attachment. We shall feast on joy as do the radiant gods.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 13

Guided Meditation - The Practice of Forgiveness

Guy Armstrong · 45 min

> *In this guided meditation from the 2012 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Guy Armstrong introduces forgiveness as an essential complement to mettā practice. He explains that forgiveness naturally arises at this point in retreat for two reasons: the loving-kindness practice for friends often surfaces difficult memories from relationships, and long retreats spontaneously bring about a life review where past actions are seen in the light of deepening Dhamma understanding.*
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> *Armstrong emphasizes that forgiveness is undertaken for our own liberation, not to excuse or condone harmful actions. Drawing from the Dhammapada's teaching that "hatred never ceases through hatred," he explains how carrying old resentments keeps part of our being tied to the past, preventing complete freedom in the present moment. He makes a crucial distinction between remorse—a wholesome quality involving genuine regret—and guilt, which adds unnecessary self-judgment. The teaching of anattā is offered as support: we are not the same person who committed past unskillful actions, as body, mind, and understanding are constantly changing.*
>
> *The meditation is structured in three parts: asking forgiveness from those we have harmed, offering forgiveness to those who have harmed us (or planting the intention to do so someday), and forgiving ourselves. Armstrong stresses that forgiveness cannot be forced—if the heart isn't ready, that must be respected. The practice concludes with mettā, honoring the Buddha's teaching that it is indeed possible to free the heart.*

So this evening in the guided meditation, we're going to focus on a subject that we do as a complement to the loving-kindness practice. It's not going to be straight metta tonight. We're going to talk about and practice the quality of forgiveness. If anyone knows that you absolutely do not want to forgive anyone for anything, this would be the time to exit. But if you're willing to try, this is the theme that we're going to explore tonight.

Sally made this nice comment in one of her talks that forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past. Makes sense, right? I was curious about this quote. I've read it in Jack Kornfield's book, but I looked it up on the internet, so this must be true—it was attributed first to Lily Tomlin. Kind of interesting. Quite wise.

Forgiveness comes in at this point in the retreat really for two reasons. There are two separate dynamics going on that make forgiveness appropriate right now.

One is that we've just done metta for a friend. When you do metta for your friend—a friend is usually somebody you've gotten quite close to—you might remember things in your relationship that were easy and some things that were difficult. So often the friend in loving-kindness particularly leads into a bit of a relationship review, where some wonderful feelings come through but also some difficulty. You may remember times when you were hurt by your friend, and you may remember times when you hurt your friend. So we often like to teach forgiveness right after doing loving-kindness for a friend because some old emotions may have gotten stirred up.

The second thing that's happening, on a parallel track, is that when we sit a long retreat, for various reasons different memories from the past come into our minds. Again, we may remember ways we've been hurt, and we may also remember ways that we've hurt others. It could be human beings, it could be creatures.

When I sat my first long retreat, all these memories started coming of things that I'd done wrong, because I was really exploring sīla and the precepts as we are by taking the precepts every week. I was remembering all these times when I hadn't followed the precepts carefully—I didn't even know them. So all these transgressions came to my mind, and I felt a tremendous amount of guilt and remorse over them.

We often say, using the words of twelve-step programs, that long retreats lead one into a kind of life review. Spontaneously, we're not trying to do it, but unbidden these memories come and we review our past actions in the light of our Dharma understanding. We're getting a new view on the mind—greed, aversion, delusion, and how fear and confusion affect us—and we see how that's manifested in our outer life. From this perspective, it feels not so right at times.

So the forgiveness practice is useful for working with ways others have hurt us, and also with ways that we've hurt others. I hope both of these will be helpful.

Now, to say a little more about our being hurt, because this is where often the forgiveness is the hardest: we may look over our life and see things that people have done to us that we're not ready to forgive them for. The pain was too great, the magnitude of the action was too wrong, and we just instinctively feel, "I'm not ready to forgive. I don't want to forgive that person. It doesn't feel right."

If that's the gut feeling, it's really important to respect that. So in the meditation, you're not going to be asked to forgive anybody that you're not ready to forgive. Sometimes the heart just isn't there yet. But we will encourage you to think about: maybe someday I could try. I'll plant the intention that someday I'd like to be able to forgive them. That will be one formulation we'll work with.

When we think about forgiving somebody, we also want to be clear that in this meditation, we're not doing it for them. It's not so that they can go about their lives with a clean conscience and forget about what they've done to us or other people. We're doing this meditation for ourselves.

The reason is that if we are carrying some old resentment, part of our whole makeup—our physical and emotional makeup—is tied to the past. And we can't come completely free as a human being in the present moment while we're still carrying that old baggage of being tied to the past. So in the total journey to freedom, we need eventually to let go of all these old holdings that we've got.

Sometimes we find them in the body. We come to sit and there's old tension. There are emotions going back to childhood perhaps, if there's been trauma or abuse. It's very common that they come out in a long retreat through the body. We have memories that are stored in the mind and emotions about those incidents. So eventually, for our own liberation, we want to be able to let the mind be clear of those old holdings.

We will not be completely free as long as there's that attachment to the past. But we can't do that all at once. Often we've had many, many disappointments and hurts and betrayals in our relationships, and it takes time to open to them, for the body to open up and reveal them, for the memories to come. Sometimes they're long buried. So we have to be really patient with this process—it can't be forced.

But forgiveness is one key element of letting go of all that old stuff, to the extent we're able today. I'm not asking you to let it all go tonight, but I want to offer these tools so that if these things are coming for you—old memories of resentment, hurt, or where you've hurt others—you'll have something to work with. And over time, by applying them, the mind can release and let go of these memories. Then we have the potential to really come into the present moment, clear and free and open, the heart unburdened.

The reason we would forgive is not to excuse somebody else. It's certainly not to condone their activities. One can see really clearly: "That was a very unskillful thing for them to have done. It hurt me deeply. It maybe hurt somebody else deeply. I don't approve of what they did, and I'm not letting them off the hook. But I don't want to carry around this burden of hatred for the rest of my life because it's a heavy weight in my own heart, and I want to be clear."

There's a lovely quotation from the Dhammapada, very near the front, that says: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law." So at some point, if we want to remove the hatred from our heart, we have to let go of those old grudges.

Forgiveness also doesn't mean we forgive and forget—as if by forgiving somebody, I'm wiping it off the books, erasing that person's karmic debt. No, we don't need to forget. And we may know that person isn't trustworthy for me, not safe for me to be around, and I don't want to spend time with them. All of those things are fine, and forgiveness can still take place.

I appreciate what the Dalai Lama has said in this area, because he could have a lot of old grudges, you know? Watching what's been done to Tibet, knowing what's happening to nuns and monks who are in prison now, who are being tortured, talking to them when they come out of the country and knowing how they've been treated—he could have a lot of grounds for resentment. But he says, "I do get angry, but in my heart I can't hold a grudge."

That's the kind of heart we're looking for. That's what we're looking to develop with all the brahmaviharas—a heart that is so spacious and loving that anger can't get fixed within it. Not anger against people who hurt us, not anger and hatred against ourselves for things we've done. This meditation on forgiveness can really be a helpful piece of unsticking those old resentments against others and also against ourselves.

We'll formulate the meditation in three pieces to deal with others, ourselves, and the relation between them. And one more thing I want to say about self: when we see things that we weren't happy with in our own conduct, it helps to learn to make a distinction between feeling guilty and feeling remorse.

Remorse is considered in the Buddhist tradition a wholesome emotion—to look at ways we've acted that weren't skillful, to take responsibility and say, "I really regret that," and to feel the weight of that. The impact of our unwholesome actions is a burden on our heart, and it's healthy to feel some remorse or regret about it.

But guilt isn't necessary. Guilt is where we impose self-judgment on top of regret. We keep saying, "Oh, I'm really a bad person. I'm very low in my morals. I'm ashamed of myself." We become very critical of ourselves, hating ourselves. That's not necessary. Remorse can be held without the overload of judgment. That's the quality we want to bring in.

My experience is that when we hold mindfulness, loving-kindness, and forgiveness up against these memories of hurts we've done to others—which can be very, very painful when we first meet them—slowly, slowly, slowly the charge goes off that self-judgment. And then we can see: I did it, it wasn't a good thing, but I don't have to beat myself up about it. I've come to some degree of acceptance of it.

One thing that helps in that self-acceptance, a key part in forgiveness, is recognizing that you're not the same person today that you were when you did those things. This is part of the truth of anattā. We're constantly changing. The body is changing, the mind is changing, the understanding is changing, the emotions are changing. Where you are today, you probably wouldn't have done those things. So in a way, somebody else did them. That's not quite true, because the karma continues—the karma lands here. But it was a different you who did those things.

And so you can understand that in your present understanding, you wouldn't have done them. And maybe it's true for the other person too. Maybe the other person has changed. Or maybe they haven't. You may not know. But for you, you may see clearly that it was a younger person who had a lot of fear and confusion and acted unskillfully, not knowing. So we try to bring compassion to that. If we can see that in the other person who hurt us, that's really helpful too. Sylvia Boorstein has this nice expression: someone who causes great pain is themselves in great pain. We can maybe remember that and help us understand a little bit that these actions that are very hurtful always come out of some kind of fear or confusion.

So we're going to break the meditation down into three parts. In the first part, we're going to ask for forgiveness from anyone that we've harmed. Unlike metta, we're not going to bring specific individuals in. We're not going to bring in a benefactor, friend, neutral person, and so forth. We're going to offer it generally, with nobody particular in mind. We're going to say the forgiveness phrase, and then we're going to see who comes, if anybody. May not be anybody. Maybe somebody, maybe some actions will come to mind. We're just inviting the reflection. In a way, these phrases are just a reflection.

Then we're going to look at a meditation on offering to forgive others. For those who have hurt us, we can offer forgiveness if we're ready. But you don't have to be ready. And so if you don't feel ready, you can say something like, "Know that my intention is someday to forgive you," if you can feel that. So one or the other. Again, we don't think of specific people, but we let the phrase settle in us, and we see if anybody or any actions or any memories come to mind. You don't have to go looking for them. You can just say the phrase and see what comes.

And the third part is that we forgive ourselves for any ways we've hurt others. And in hurting others and in many other ways in our life, we've also hurt ourselves. So it's important that we bring that forgiveness in to self, that we self-forgive during this meditation.

So these are the three parts. We'll do each one for about ten minutes. And I'll suggest a phrase and give detailed instructions as we go.

Please sit comfortably. As you sit, connect with your body sitting, the sense of being at ease and relaxed. Let yourself come into the heart center, this area in the center of the chest, a place often where we feel loving-kindness, where we feel many emotions. We'll just rest the attention there in a very open way.

And we'll start to reflect, to recite the first phrase for forgiveness, which will sound something like this: If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness. You don't always have to say the "knowingly or unknowingly" piece, but you can think it. If you think it a few times, it will find its way in there. If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness.

We also remember as we're saying this that our actions at that time came out of some degree of confusion, of not understanding, of unhappiness or fear. So simply repeat the phrase of forgiveness as you have repeated metta phrases, and just see if anything comes. If any memories come, if any people come, if any images of yourself come. If a memory comes that feels really appropriate to the phrase, you can let the person in that memory receive your phrase, so that then you might want to extend this asking for forgiveness to that particular person during the meditation. But you don't have to fixate on them. If they stay for a while, that's great. If they're light, they come in, go out, you can open it up again and see if anyone else is waiting to come in.

If I have hurt or harmed anyone, I ask for your forgiveness.

As you repeat the phrase, you may come back into the heart center from time to time, just to keep the forgiveness grounded in the present, connected with the body.

The second part of the meditation will be to extend forgiveness, if that feels right for you. And the phrase we can use, very similar, something like: If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you.

And even though we don't say it, we may sometimes reflect that their actions came from their own fear and confusion. If anyone has hurt or harmed me, I forgive you.

As you say the phrase, if people come to mind where you know you're not ready to forgive, you don't want to forgive, that's fine. You can't rush this. If you feel like it, you could say, "Know that it's my intention someday to forgive you." If anyone has hurt or harmed me, know that it's my intention someday to forgive you. But if you don't even

feel that, that's okay too. You could bring someone else to mind where forgiveness seems doable. You could go back to asking for forgiveness. You could go into loving-kindness for yourself. Don't push on this if it doesn't feel appropriate.

But if you like, try saying the phrase: if anyone has hurt or harmed me, I forgive you. Then just see if any memories or people come to mind. Again, you might start from the heart center, come back and touch it from time to time.

As you're doing this meditation, if someone comes to mind and you feel a lot of resentment and the intention to forgive isn't really there, if the resentment is strong, you might just switch to Vipassana. Drop forgiveness or Brahmavihara. Just open and feel the hindrance. Let yourself feel it in the body, feel it in the mind. Allow it, and that can sometimes let it wash through. Don't keep focusing on that person. You could stay in Vipassana for a few minutes, then go to loving-kindness for yourself, or forgiveness for someone else.

The third meditation with forgiveness will be for ourselves. The phrase is something like: for the ways that I have hurt or harmed myself or others, I forgive myself. Of course you can add "knowingly or unknowingly," acknowledging it came from my own pain and confusion—those are implied. A simple phrase: for the ways I have hurt or harmed myself or others, I forgive myself.

Connecting with the heart center, repeating the phrase, just allowing any memory or individuals to come. Allowing your own image to be present—yourself at an earlier age or yourself today. There's a real sense of compassion and caring and understanding for how those things came to happen and how you're a different person today. You hold it differently. You see it differently. You understand it differently. This new understanding transforms the old memory. For the ways I have hurt or harmed others or myself, I forgive myself.

"I forgive myself" means I don't have to be perfect. I can make mistakes. I will make mistakes. All of us will make mistakes. And we can still love ourselves and feel good about ourselves. We don't have to be perfect.

We can close the meditation with just a minute or two of loving-kindness reflection. The Buddha said that it's possible to free the heart. If it was not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it. But because it is possible, I ask you to free the heart.

Recognizing we're all embarked on this great undertaking, just appreciating yourself for your sincerity, your effort, your courage, your determination. May all the fruits of these beautiful qualities lead to your happiness and welfare and freedom. Sending yourself the wishes of loving-kindness: May I be safe and protected from harm. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.

And for all of us here embarked on this project, this great work: May we all be safe and protected from harm. May we all be happy. May we be healthy. May we live with ease.

CHAPTER 14

Q&A

Joseph Goldstein · 1h00

> *In this wide-ranging Q&A session from the 2012 three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein offers precise clarifications on fundamental meditation concepts and their practical application. He begins with a detailed explanation of the distinctions between consciousness (viññāṇa), mindfulness (sati), and awareness, using the memorable image of 'black lab consciousness' to illustrate how bare knowing differs from the meta-cognitive quality of mindfulness—that moment when we 'wake up' from being lost in thought.*
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> *The discussion moves through several rich territory: the near enemy of compassion (sorrow with its subtle aversion) versus genuine karuṇā as the wish to alleviate suffering; the relationship between vitakka and vicāra (initial and sustained application) in choiceless awareness practice; and a profound exploration of love versus attachment as energetically opposite movements—one an opening generosity of heart, the other a contracted holding. Goldstein emphasizes that discerning these differences experientially, rather than theoretically, is essential practice.*
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> *The session concludes with reflections on the transmission of the Dhamma to the West over the past forty years, including the interface between Buddhist practice and Western psychology, and the importance of maintaining the aspiration for liberation while the teachings become more mainstream. Throughout, Goldstein returns to the essential point: all practice serves the deconditioning of grasping, for freedom lies not in any particular state but in the mind that clings to nothing.*

Some nice, easy questions. At least to start with. I was asked this morning to define some terminology: mindfulness, consciousness, awareness. We actually had a little discussion about this among ourselves today, and I think to a large extent we're in agreement and would use the terms in the same way.

Consciousness is that basic quality, the simplest quality of knowing a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch. It's just the bare cognizing faculty. I think what illustrates the difference between consciousness and mindfulness in a clear way is something I've called "black lab consciousness." Are you familiar with black labs, the dogs? It could be any dog, but black labs are particularly funny to watch. They're running around, literally following their nose, just seeming to be having a good time. They're conscious—they're knowing the smells and the sights and the sounds. They're not unconscious. But

they don't really look mindful. When you're watching them, it's not as if there's a mindfulness or a knowing of what they're knowing. They're just in that bare experience of knowing the different sense objects.

So mindfulness is like a step—I know they would say a step back or above—where we know what we're knowing. An example which you're all very familiar with, and which I think again illustrates the quality of mindfulness, is one we've talked about a lot in the different instructions. When you have been lost in a thought, at that time we're conscious, not unconscious. Even if somebody asked what we were thinking, we would be able to tell them. But when we're lost in the thought, we're not mindful of the fact that we're thinking. We're just in it. The knowing is there, consciousness is there, but we're not mindful.

Then in a certain moment, we wake up from being lost, and we know that we're thinking. Right there, we have a very clear experiential sense of what mindfulness means and the difference between mindfulness and consciousness. I think that's an experience you've all had because it's such a common part of our meditation. That's why we've suggested really highlighting those moments of waking up from being lost, because it reveals the nature of mindfulness to us. It's worth not rushing back to some object, but to really see and understand: this is mindfulness, as opposed to the consciousness that's there when we're lost.

Awareness, as was said this morning, is not the translation of any specific Pali term. This is a word in English, and we use it in many ways. Sometimes, in colloquial English, we could use awareness to mean consciousness. If somebody had been unconscious and then they come out of that, we might say they're aware now, simply meaning they're conscious. We could also mean it in the sense of being mindful—we often use awareness as synonymous. Are you aware of a thought? Are you mindful of a thought? Sometimes it's used that way.

Sometimes awareness is used to include the wisdom aspect, because we can be mindful without wisdom. Mindfulness is one of the universal wholesome factors, which means that in every wholesome mind state, mindfulness is present. Non-greed and non-hatred are also universal wholesome factors, which is why in every moment of mindfulness, in every moment of a wholesome mind state, we're not clinging to the object, we're not condemning the object—because non-greed and non-hatred always arise together with mindfulness.

Wisdom, however, is not a universal. We can be mindful, in a wholesome mind state, and sometimes wisdom is there, sometimes not. Wisdom is that investigatory quality of mind, and in the Buddhist context specifically, it means understanding the three char-

acteristics. We could have a very wholesome mind state of generosity or compassion—mindfulness is there, these other wholesome states are there—but wisdom may or may not be present.

So sometimes we use awareness to mean simply mindfulness, and sometimes we might use it to mean mindfulness plus wisdom. With that term awareness, it really depends on context.

is important when we're using it to define how we're using it, because it can mean different things.

Someone asked me a question about choiceless awareness—she was trying to do this practice, and it seemed that a lot of things were flipping back and forth very quickly. She could be aware of sensations in her body, and then if she tried to label them or define them a little better, that seemed like a thought rather than a moment of mindfulness. Often words would go by, and she would sort of know that words were running through, along with sounds or feelings, all seemingly simultaneous but probably all very brief and dimensional. When she didn't know what the words were, it was like she was with those sensations. But when she came a few seconds later to identify what the words were and have an opinion about them or put a label on them, it seemed that in that moment she was out of mindfulness, though still trying to use wisdom to get the essence of the experience. Her question was: Is this choiceless awareness? Am I doing this right?

These sessions keep my brain young.

I think the observation that when you're putting a note on a sensation, that actually is not the same moment as feeling the sensation, is correct—but one can be mindful of the noting process. The mindfulness is there of the sensation, and then, "Oh, pressure." In that very moment of noting, it's the note that really becomes the object of mindfulness. The mindfulness can be continuous. It's the same way in terms of being aware of thought without understanding or knowing clearly what the thoughts are saying, and then in following moments trying to recap. You can be mindful of that process of trying to recap.

The mindfulness really is choiceless if you're just tracking in each moment what process of mind is happening. Sometimes it's sensation, sometimes it's the noting, sometimes it's just thought, sometimes it's remembering the thought to know what it's saying. If you're right there with each process, then you are settled back in a choiceless awareness. If you are being mindful of each of those processes in turn, that sounds fine.

Another person mentioned they were doing a Brahmavihara retreat, eight days into compassion practice. The question was about happiness or joy that could arise out of compassion, both on retreat but more particularly in daily life. In doing the compassion meditation intensively, one drops into a space of more stillness and concentration, but it can have quite a somber feeling tone to it. Is there a space of joy or happiness in compassion?

For those of you who haven't done that practice particularly, compassion is one of the Brahmaviharas, and it's related to metta, to loving-kindness. Metta expresses good will or good wishes for all beings. When we have that feeling of metta towards people who are suffering, it transmutes naturally into compassion, because compassion takes the suffering of beings as its object, as its main focus. When we have metta towards beings who are suffering, the compassion comes quite naturally. It's that feeling of, "How can I help?"

It's helpful to begin to discern the difference between compassion and its near enemy—which in Buddhist jargon is the state that looks like compassion but actually isn't. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. And very often sorrow arises easily when we're in a situation where we're close to suffering. It's very easy to have that feeling of sorrow come up. This is something you will have to explore in yourself, so it's not just about believing Buddhist philosophy.

It's really about seeing in your own experience and discerning the difference in these feelings. In sorrow, there's an aversion to suffering—that flavor of aversion mixed in. In compassion, it's not aversion; it's the wish or the motivation to help. There's an intimate relationship to the suffering, but it's being prompted by a different mind state.

So when you look at the feeling of somberness, you want to see whether that's on the sorrow side, with some aversion, or not. It could be that just in the compassion, in that feeling of "may you be free of suffering," with the sense of the possibility of our alleviating it, the wish to alleviate it—that's really the essence of compassion. It's the wish to alleviate suffering.

When that's there, free of aversion, I don't know if I would express that feeling as joy, but it's an ennobling feeling. It's not a depressive feeling at all. That's why when you look at people who are just embodiments of compassion—for example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who's probably the best known example, supposed to be the manifestation of Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion—there is an incredible lightness of his being, in his face and in his coming very close to the most intense kinds of suffering. And I think it's because of this difference: it's not being flavored by aversion.

So that's what I would look at. And then, if the mind is really centered as you're doing the practice in that wish or desire to alleviate suffering, if you're really connecting with that as the motivating quality, then see what the feeling tone is around that. I think you'll find that it's not in any way depressive; it's really uplifting. But sometimes discerning the difference between a state and its near enemy—that can take careful looking, because they can be very close.

Question: In your talk about vitakka and vicāra, I thought I was kind of getting a handle on it, and then I have to start over at the vicāra part of it. You were talking about choiceless awareness, and it sounded like a series of arisings, initial applications. When I was thinking about vicāra, it seemed like I sort of understand it when it's a sound—a sustaining sound, following it to the end, or like a car passing, watching that until it's out of sight. There's an ability to sustain, to have an experience of sustaining. But when it comes to thought, that was a whole other thing. Does that require thinking about the thought to sustain the awareness of thought? Sometimes thoughts just disappear when you look at them. But if you don't look at them, they continue. And then there's this other thing where they sort of charge ahead and you're sort of hanging on for dear life. So I'm wondering, what does vicāra look like with thought?

I think your investigation of what these particular factors mean with different experiences is helpful, because we want to put this into practice. To have the list of factors and just being able to say them doesn't mean much. It's about how we experience them in our practice.

So the question is: what does vicāra mean, that sustained application, with respect to thought—or really with respect to any object? Because not only thoughts disappear when we're mindful. Sometimes we're just being mindful of changing objects, and in the moment we see them arise, in the moment we're aware of them, we're seeing their changing nature. The vitakka and vicāra in those moments are happening very close together and quickly. You could call it momentary vitakka and vicāra. It doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be there over a noticeable duration.

With respect to thought, I would give more emphasis to discerning whether the mindfulness factor is present. Are you mindful of the thought? Are you mindful that you're thinking? If the mindfulness is there—that is, you're not lost in the thought—sometimes in the moment of being mindful the thought just disappears because we're not feeding it. Sometimes there's a strong energy behind the thought and it may continue, but from the moment of being mindful, even as it's continuing, we know that it's happening.

A very interesting aspect of mindfulness of thinking, which involves vitakka and vicāra, arises when we consciously or intentionally think about something.

In this context, the only allowance is Dharma reflections. No intentional thinking about anything else. That doesn't mean other thoughts won't come—they'll come plenty. But when we're consciously reflecting on the Dharma, the thoughts will be continuing. There will be a whole train of thought. But because it's our intention to reflect on some Dharma point, we can be mindful of it, of the whole sequence. And there will be vitaka and vicara—the initial connection and then the sustained application.

What is the relationship between mindfulness and vitaka and vicara? Are vitaka and vicara mindful? No, they're different factors with slightly different functions. Mindfulness, as I mentioned, is a universal wholesome factor, so it's always present in every wholesome state. Vitaka and vicara are called occasional mental factors, and they're neither wholesome nor unwholesome, because we can have initial and sustained application with an unwholesome mind state—where we connect with something and stay with it, motivated by greed or by hatred. So vitaka and vicara are ethically neutral, and they're sometimes there, sometimes not.

One suggestion with regard to vitaka and vicara: don't think too much about it. The beauty of this practice is that we can really simplify it. What we're doing is cultivating mindfulness in each moment of what is arising. We're aware, we know what it is—a thought, a sound, a sensation, an emotion, whatever it is—and the continuity of mindfulness will bring everything we need. All of this is interesting, and a few moments' reflection on it can be valuable, but I wouldn't spend too much time on it.

The next question concerns the Buddhist notion of non-attachment and how this relates to relationships in our lives—for example, how we can love our families without being attached. The very question reveals the answer.

Let's do a little one-minute guided meditation. If you can, just for a moment, think of someone for whom it's natural to have loving feeling. It may be a partner, a child, a parent, a close friend—just somebody in your life you're really close to, someone you really have love for. See if you're able to connect with that feeling of loving them.

And then see if you can conjure up the feeling of being attached to them.

They're really different feelings. Not only are they different, in some way they're completely opposite. At least in my experience, when I feel most loving, it feels like a generosity of the heart. It's a giving of the heart. Attachment is like a holding. The energetic movement of these two states is completely different. One is this opening, and one is this grasping.

For most people, these two have become almost inextricably interwoven. Why? Because I think most people don't take the time to discern the difference. The question itself—"How can we love somebody without being attached?"—reflects our normal way of relating. But I think it's because we haven't really taken the time or developed the discernment experientially to feel the difference.

When we do feel that difference, an interesting question to consider is: Does attachment, that holding, in any way whatsoever enhance the feeling of love? I don't think so. In fact, I think attachment is the source of a lot of problems. Where does fear come from in relationships? Where does jealousy come from? Does it come from that generosity of heart, or does it come from the holding? And where does openness, where does the loving feeling come from? Does it come from attachment?

This is a very interesting arena to explore. And again, this is something each of us has to feel out for ourselves so it's real, not some theoretical thing—to really examine these different states within ourselves.

The follow-up question was essentially: Is it okay to feel that if someone were to go away, you would feel sad? Is that love rather than attachment? Is there a possibility there?

Yes.

But if there's weeping and wailing... though I don't want to put this out as something superficial. This is not a superficial thing. This is a deep exploration.

One of the examples of the depth of it happened at the time of the Buddha's death. People loved him, as one could imagine—this totally extraordinary being and the people who were around him. Many of the disciples who were not yet fully enlightened were lost in the weeping and wailing and grief. And it's said that those who were fully enlightened were not. So this is a deep thing. This is not something superficial. But at whatever level we're looking at it, I think we can understand on that level and ease to some extent the suffering of attachment.

It's so interesting to notice—not only in this arena but just the habit of our minds that have developed over all the years of our lives, and within the Buddhist understanding maybe over many lifetimes—the habit of the mind to be seduced by suffering. So many times I've been in situations where something has come up, whether in relationships or anything else, where the mind gets caught up in the story and I'm really suffering. Then after a while I'll notice it, and the mind will just come to a place of ease and openness and spaciousness, awareness, peace. And then the mind will get caught back in the old story again. I just watch my mind: peace, suffering. Oh, let's suffer. That's

basically what the mind is doing. Why? It's out of habit. We've gone that way for so long because we haven't been paying careful attention. A lot of our practice is seeing that and realizing that we may have a choice. We may not have to go to this suffering each time. But as you well know, it's a practice. It's not just like that.

The question is why do we withhold love for ourselves until somehow we feel that we deserve it or the conditions are right. I think you're correct in that it's a habit, and our minds have all been conditioned by so many things in our lives and the circumstances of our lives. We have learned a lot of very unuseful habits, habits that cause suffering.

The beauty of a retreat is that we're in a situation where there aren't many distractions. There's not a lot to do here. You sit and you walk and you eat a couple of times a day and that's it. And so we really get a very clear view of the patterns, of the habits, and it's only through that awareness that gradually—and this is not a quick thing—but through seeing the habit, if we can begin to see the mind going to the old habit of suffering, in that moment of awareness we might say, no, I don't have to do that. I've seen that so often.

It's not only the not doing of what just brings suffering. It's also the doing of what actually is wholesome, which is why the mettā practice is so powerful, especially with respect to what you asked. Irrespective of the conditioning of our lives, we see we can make a choice. We can cultivate just goodwill for ourselves. And the more we do it, the more that becomes the habit.

All of this just reveals the amazing nature of the mind as a phenomenon. As you're going through the day, it's so easy to get caught up in the techniques of what we're doing. Sometimes I think it's helpful just to sit back, almost as if one is holding the question for a little bit: What is this mind? Here's this phenomenon, and it has all of these amazingly powerful energies at work. Some are wholesome, some are unwholesome. Just to have a sense of amazement about it all.

For me, one of the aspects of taking refuge is just that incredible sense of appreciation of the Buddha's mind that could sort it all out. He just gave us a map. Even just in terms of mapping—these are wholesome mind states, these are unwholesome mind states—just that. If we had to figure that out for ourselves... I mean, it's hard enough just connecting with three breaths in a row. And so there's this amazing appreciation that the map is there, which helps us to understand our minds.

And this relationship between concentration and fabrication—it's like the mind becomes concentrated, and its potential to fabricate really fascinating, amazing, interesting, and fabricated insights seems so seductive and so prone to taking you into really far out, totally useless places.

The question, or really the comment, was about how when the mind gets more concentrated, it both has the potential for deepening insight and the potential to fabricate a lot of concepts and ideas about these mind states—even doubting the insights that come through deepening concentration and whether those insights are fabricated.

I think this is a good reminder of what the essence of the practice is about. It's not about any state, no matter what it is, fabricated or unfabricated—it's about not clinging. This is so hard to remember. We talk about all these wholesome states and the different kinds of insights, and sometimes they are fabricated. We've heard about them and we kind of think that we're seeing it, and maybe we are and maybe we're not. But the bottom line, the purpose of it all, is to decondition the grasping in the mind. Why? Because when we're holding on, when we're grasping, that's the source of suffering. And when we're not, that's a place of the end of suffering, a place of peace.

One way of strengthening this attitude of not clinging to states, or even to insights, is using intermittently—or as often as is useful—just the mental note of whatever you're feeling. Concentration, equanimity—that becomes just another state to be mindful of. Equanimity, equanimity, peace, whatever. So that we're not seduced into either fabricating anything about it or getting attached to the state, because the freedom is in the mind that is not holding on. Not holding on to anything.

In one of the famous Mahayana sutras, the Diamond Sutra, the pith instruction is "develop a mind that clings to nought." Well, we don't want to cling even to nought. So perhaps it's better expressed as "develop a mind that doesn't cling to anything." It's that letting go.

So then you can see whether the insights that are there are in the service of not clinging or not. If they're not in the service of not clinging, then it may be a fabrication. What's the purpose of really seeing the changing nature of things, or the unsatisfying nature, or the selfless nature? The whole purpose of it is to decondition grasping. That's the purpose.

It's so easy for all of us—we've all experienced so often the seduction of meditative states, because it can get very pleasant at times, very peaceful, very insightful. I had one experience with Sayadaw U Pandita. I'd been there for a few months, and my practice was really in what I felt to be a deep place of concentration, of insight. The mind was

observing just the most minute aspects of experience, and I was completely fascinated by what I was seeing. I went in and was reporting this to Sayadaw, really happy with my practice. And all he said to me was, "You're too attached to subtlety."

It was a great interview because I thought it was good practice. And he just reframed the whole thing. I was fascinated with that level of perception, but I didn't see the attachment.

Someone asked about faith—in terms of people awakening. Here we are in 2012 in the U.S., and sometimes I've heard that the Dharma will really take root when there are liberated people here. The question was about my sense of where we're going, what the direction is, given my exposure to teachers here and in the West.

I think, in looking back, I see two movements in the transmission of the Dharma to the West, and it's really an extraordinary time. In the history of the Buddhist teachings, a movement of the teachings from one culture to another is a huge thing. When Buddhism first went from India to China, and then to Southeast Asia, to Japan—this was something that happened over centuries. How slowly the transmission of those teachings changed those cultures, had a profound impact on them. And in the process, many great masters emerged in each of those traditions.

So we're at the very beginning of something that I think is tremendously significant. We're just in very early stages of it, but when you take that broader view, it's quite inspiring.

One of the things that's happening, I think, is the broad dissemination of the teachings. When I think back to when we first started IMS, when we first started teaching almost forty years ago—nobody had even heard of mindfulness. It was just so unknown, and meditation was just a weird thing to do. Forty years, which is a very short time, and we could almost say mindfulness is mainstream now. It's amazing how it has disseminated, and it's continuing to do so.

So that's a big movement. Out of that widespread dissemination, people practice with varying levels of interest, commitment, and time. We all come to it with different levels of motivation.

Everyone here—don't undervalue the power of the commitment you made to be here. It's not ordinary. It's out of people doing practice like this, and even longer, that real depth of understanding and awakening happens. And you see it. You see there are examples of people who have really gone very deep in the practice. But when you look at some of the great Asian masters—we were just talking today among ourselves—some

of them practiced retreat in a cave for twenty years. So what's possible, the level of what's possible... I don't know what the right image is. It's like we're growing into it. We're growing into the possibilities.

Someone asked whether there's a danger, with mindfulness becoming so mainstream and more of a tool for wellness, that the liberation aspect might get lost.

I'm not worried about that—not if you keep practicing. The more it's disseminated, people will benefit on whatever level they're practicing, and it helps to alleviate suffering. So all of that is good. As long as there are people who both study and practice, who appreciate the fullness of what's possible—the real possibility of liberation and awakening—as long as that's out there, then people who are inspired by that will go the distance. We each find our own level of interest and motivation. I think it's just important that there are always people who are really committed to the depth of practice so that it is not lost. But the fact that it's spread widely where that may not be the main motivation—it's fine.

Another question arose about the connection between culture and practice. As the story goes, when we brought this tradition back from Asia, we separated out the cultural aspects from the practice aspects. The question was really about whether some cultural aspects from Asia were left behind in the transmission, and also what have been the cultural influences from the West on the teachings.

It's really interesting to me because I've heard and read a lot—and in some way it's been a criticism—that as Buddhism came to the West, we separated out the meditation and left the rich cultural aspects of the teachings found in Asia behind. But it's really interesting because in practicing with Asian teachers in Asia, it was just this. It was just this practice of sitting and watching the mind. Whether studying with Munindraji in India or going to the meditation monasteries in Asia—it's true that in the society there are a lot of other cultural manifestations, but in the practice of the teachings for liberation, for awakening, this is it. This is what we were taught in Asia. So it's not that we left something behind; we're bringing exactly what we learned there. And when we read the suttas, the Buddhist discourses, this is what the Buddha taught.

One of the interesting cultural impacts from the West—and this is an ongoing dialogue and experiment—is understanding the interface of Western psychology with meditation. I see them as two overlapping circles where there's quite a lot of overlap and also some differences. I think we've learned a lot from Western psychology, especially skillful tools for being with the mind and particularly difficult aspects of suffering. The danger or the caution in that is when we lose sight of the potential for liberation, which is really not part of Western psychology. That's not what it does. It is pos-

sible to get seduced, in a way, by the real relief from suffering that many psychological tools can offer and limit ourselves, limit our aspirations. So I see this dialogue continuing—to what degree is Western psychology helpful and useful, and is there a time when it becomes a limitation?

Actually, there's one other big impact, and this goes more to the cultural manifestation.

And we might call it the feminization of the Dharma in the West. In most Asian contexts, Buddhism has been pretty patriarchal. You see it in those cultures, in the difference between how the monks are treated and how the nuns are treated. It's there. And I think in the West, we're really transforming that, as you can see. Which is a great thing. It's really a great thing.

Question from participant about working with generosity and noticing lack of generosity in the mind

This is a great question. The question is about working with generosity—she's seeing in her mind a lack of generosity at times, a kind of holding on, and questioning what really belongs to us and what doesn't, and how to work with it.

Carol is giving a whole talk on generosity on Friday, so she will answer every aspect of this. But it's a totally important practice. In some way, generosity is the manifestation of not clinging, of not holding on. So it's a beautiful practice, and it's worthy of not only one talk but many talks, because it's really an important quality.

Let's just sit for a couple of moments.

May the merit of our practice be shared by all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 15

Generosity: Foundation of the Path

Carol Wilson · 1h02

> *In this heartfelt talk, Carol Wilson illuminates generosity (dāna) as the foundational quality at the heart of the Buddha's awakening path. She explains how all of the Buddha's teachings work toward purifying the habits of heart and mind—weakening greed, hatred, and delusion while strengthening wholesome states. Generosity naturally counters possessiveness, ill will, and self-cherishing, while expressing and deepening our sense of non-separation from others.*
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> *Drawing from her extensive time in Burma and Thailand, Wilson shares moving stories that demonstrate how generosity permeates Buddhist cultures with contagious joy. She describes the mutual support the Buddha established between monastics and laypeople, the radiant happiness of nuns who gave up their meditation plans to educate orphans, and the transformation of former businessmen and military officers who found new purpose through selfless service. These examples reveal how generous actions of mind, speech, and body transform our own mind stream over time, bringing deeper happiness than we knew possible.*
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> *Wilson offers practical guidance for cultivating dāna as a practice: attending to motivation, abandoning clinging to what is given, giving face-to-face when possible, and maintaining mindfulness throughout. She emphasizes that the power of generosity lies not in what or how much we give, but in the heart's intention and openness. The Buddha taught that contemplating past acts of generosity purifies the mind of greed, aversion, and delusion, leading naturally toward concentration and ease—a practice accessible whether walking, standing, sitting, or busy with daily life.*

As Joseph mentioned, I'm going to talk about generosity, the practice of dana tonight, which is one of my favorite things to talk about. It makes me happy, mostly because I get to tell stories that make me happy, and that's fun.

To start, as we've said many times, the liberation, the freedom of heart and mind that the Buddha speaks of—the simplest way we've had of describing that is the mind, the heart of non-clinging. Really all of the teachings, as far as I can tell with my limited understanding, all of the different ways of teaching that the Buddha offered were all about this. Nothing was extraneous just for the heck of it because it's kind of interesting. And none of it was just, "Well, if you can't liberate yourself, do this." All of the teachings tend towards purifying the habits of our heart and mind, tend towards trans-

forming the habits from suffering, so-called unwholesome habits, to wholesome, to pure habits—to weakening the habits of greed, hatred, and confusion in our mind, and feeding, strengthening the wholesome.

This is not only so that at some future moment the pure heart-mind can see Nibbana, which is true. But what's accessible here and now, and what we learn hopefully, and you're already seeing that many people have come to trust more and more, is to recognize how in a moment—just in a moment—when your consciousness has cleared from being identified with aversion or confusion or wanting. Several people have given this example of noticing aversion in the mind, and that shift, that Tai Chi move to awareness of aversion is not averse. It sounds nice, but when you really experience it, there's a sense of relief. There's a happiness in that. Aversion's still the object, and there's a happiness in that. It's not incredible bliss where you're dancing around—just a little kind of piece of happiness. If you're not looking so hard for the big bang, you'll notice. And this happiness, this joy almost, or calmness, is the happiness of the wholesome heart-mind. Just a moment of it, the peace of the purified mind.

So there's a saying—I don't really think it's a Buddhist saying—but there's no way to happiness; happiness is the way. And that's really, I feel, in all of the different ways that the Buddha taught, as different ways of purifying our heart and mind: experiencing this happiness, joy, peace here and now, as well as strengthening the habits so that that will continue in our mind and heart stream in the future.

Being here on a meditation retreat, of course our emphasis is on meditation, on bhavana. But what's really important—I think in my first years of practice I didn't really understand this so much, and I'm still learning about it—is that meditation, bhavana, it's like the most interesting, it's like if we get really deeply pure in our heart and mind, we'll understand, we'll see the truth. But it's not all about bhavana. All the different aspects of the way we live our life are equally purifying, ennobling, important. They all work together.

And so the practice, the way of life—it's often called generosity, sila (conscious conduct, moral conduct), and bhavana (the word for mental cultivation, development)—and all the different kinds of meditation, all the different forms, have different techniques. They come from different angles, but they still, at their core, have this quality of purifying the habits of mind.

I just want to give that framework from which I want to share some of my own reflections about the habit, the way of life, the happiness of generosity. Calling it a "practice" makes it sound too automatic, too dull, something you have to do. But I've really begun to imbibe, kind of like by osmosis, from spending time in cultures that are

primarily Buddhist—in Thailand and Burma. Not everyone's walking around enlightened of course; it's as messed up as anywhere, but in different ways. One aspect that I really feel in myself, the more I spend time there, is that the teachings of the Buddha are just more inculcated in the culture—both sometimes really with understanding and sometimes not, like anywhere. But generosity as a value, as a way of life, is just so through the culture, with this sense of joy, that whenever I spend time in Thailand or lately Burma, I can't help but pick it up, even if at first you don't quite notice what's going on.

You could say that generosity is really the foundational quality, the foundational ennobling quality, at the heart of our awakening path, at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. And so many times in the suttas, when he begins to unfold his teachings to people, he begins with generosity—all for bringing in, brightening the heart and mind, purifying the heart and mind, even in the listening. It turns the mind and heart in a wholesome direction.

Just on an intellectual level, it's not a surprise if you think about generosity. It seems to me quite understandable that as a practice, as something that we continue to strengthen in the way that we relate to our lives, ourselves, our things, and others—it of course counters greed and possessiveness of objects, of time, of views, whatever. It counters ill will, interestingly enough. Try giving something wholeheartedly to someone and feeling ill will for them at the same time. It doesn't work. When there's really a wholesome mind state, wholesome and unwholesome don't exist simultaneously.

And of course, it counteracts self-cherishing, the sense of separation and alienation that comes when there's a sense of me holding on to whatever. The act of generosity of mind, speech, and body is an expression of non-separation. And it also, I find, strengthens that understanding and lets us feel it in different ways—the sense of our non-separation.

And I found that the more the mind just inclines to generosity, it also strengthens a sense of inner contentment. In a way, we can't give anything if there's not some sense of inner abundance, of inner non-clinging—that's clear. But also in the giving itself, and in that circle of giving and receiving, joy and non-separation that flows from it, I find that the sense of inner contentment is strengthened while neediness simply weakens. The happiness of generosity is so much more enticing than the unpleasantness of neediness that the mind starts to incline toward the wholesome.

I don't know who figured it out, because even though we say awareness doesn't care about pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, it turns out that the *kilesas* are unpleasant and wholesome states are generally pleasant. Our job is not to cultivate more aversion and clinging to those experiences, but it's a good situation that as the mind inclines more toward wholesome states, there's much more inner happiness and peace.

So generosity—it's great. I recommend practicing it.

The Buddha, as you probably know, when he had to set up his way of living with the monks and nuns in India at that time, there were many different sects and probably many different ascetic men—more men than women. Still, the Buddha was establishing his own *sangha* of monks and nuns with his own rules.

This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, offering a quotation from the Buddha describing how he set up the relationship between monastics and lay people, all on the basis of generosity—the mutuality that comes from generosity:

"Bhikkhus, householders and Brahmins are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, alms food, lodgings, and medicines in times of sickness." Those are the four requisites that nuns and monks are allowed and need to have. "And you bhikkhus are very helpful to Brahmins and householders, as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, and you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, monks, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering."

As you probably know, he really set it up so that monks and nuns are not allowed to keep food overnight. Not only can they not eat after noon, but they can't store food. The monks and nuns had to go out every day with their alms bowl—as in the story of Bāhiya last night—eat the food that they receive, and that's it. Then the next day, again.

So even though there's great emphasis on meditation and seclusion—"here are these roots of trees, go meditate"—they also couldn't completely isolate themselves from the lay people because of this mutual support. The lay people were generous if they felt inspired by faith, and the monks and nuns were generous in offering the Dhamma, not only through their lives but through sharing in whatever way with any lay people who came. He set it up so that you couldn't just live in isolation, because these four groups of people—ordained women and men, and lay women and men—are all needed. It's said even now that these four groups are necessary for this particular Buddhist *sāsana* to stay alive. We need all four.

In Buddhist countries, as I mentioned, this still exists, especially with the monks. They still go out every day on alms round. They can't keep food. But the peace I mentioned before—that has been a revelation to me—comes from being immersed in a culture where generosity is such a deeply ingrained way of being, such a value that it soaks in by osmosis. The revelation is the incredible joy and happiness involved in most acts of generosity, in both the giving and the receiving. And it's not only monks and nuns; it's lay people too. It's really in the culture, and it's contagious.

Of course, I grew up in this culture where people are very generous. I'm not saying only Buddhist countries are generous—please don't misunderstand me. It's just that this is where much of my learning as a Buddhist practitioner and the joy of it comes from.

But there is a slight difference. The way I grew up—sort of Christian, more or less Christian, I would say—there's certainly a sense of love and compassion and sharing what one has, usually, and it's really well meant, with people who are needy. Of course, you tend not to give to people who have more than you, whether it's time or effort or whatever. There could often be, at least the way I learned it, a slight sense of subtle superiority in giving. That's not always the case, but it could be. And one could feel good about it—nothing wrong with feeling good about it—but not necessarily that sense of real joy and dignity in it. Sometimes, the way I grew up, you might offer something to a homeless person and tend to feel more embarrassed or ashamed rather than a sense of joy and dignity.

And if the person receiving it accepted it in this really open, dignified way, that was like a wonderful gift. But it wasn't often happening that way.

When I first began to get a sense of this, it was a long time ago when I was entirely as a nun at a forest nunnery monastery. There were just maybe a few little huts for the nuns, for the women to stay in. I had a little hut, and there was a head nun who was a young woman around thirty, a very strong practitioner.

In nunneries and monasteries in Thailand, people just show up and come. You could have three nuns one day, and then fifteen nuns could just show up the next day, and you have to find somewhere to put them. It's just like that. It's not like we advertise ahead of time. No, there's no room, you can't come. People just come. That's how it is.

And so whenever there were more people than there were kutis, the first person to move was always the head nun. She was happy to give. She'd go stay in this cave filled with bat guano—I'm not exaggerating—up high. I think she liked it a little bit for the aesthetic idea. But still, there was this great joyful generosity of moving out.

I had just come from my early years on staff here, where there's a sense of—well, that's what we would call the room game, you know, what room would the staff people get to live in? And believe me, it doesn't work that the most senior person happily gives up their place to the most junior person who comes. It doesn't work that way. It's all seniority, and we all accept that. So this sense of the most senior most happily giving—I just kept noticing that over and over and over, and I was quite touched by it.

Then quite some years later, the first time I went to sit at a monastery, a meditation center in Burma, I didn't really know anyone there. I was just doing my practice. I was there for quite some weeks. You're in your own world, getting yourself settled, and finally, after however long, you manage to come out of your own—maybe you guys haven't yet—come out of your own world a little bit to notice what's going on around.

Like, do you notice how lovely the flowers are? That's somebody's generous mettā heart, someone in particular, who made it so lovely. She could have just thrown a couple of daisies in there, but no, she made it really beautiful. And then she changes the water when it's funky, even though it's a drag for her, out of generosity. Noticing that, we can let it in. There's a joy in seeing that, in appreciating the small generous acts around.

So I started to notice this in this meditation center. For example, the way most of them are set up, you come in to eat, and we have a certain set seat at a table, about four or five women at a table, and the monks at other tables, and food would be put on the table. And there are young women who work there, not nuns, who come and work. Really, they're hardly paid. Some of them aren't paid at all. They just volunteer their time and they work, like a full week's work. And they're just kind of waiting, making sure there's food and all.

I started to notice that some of the meditator women, even nuns—like foreign nuns—were incredibly demanding, asking the kids, "Well, I want some hot chilies. I want more salt. I want this. I want that." And with me, I'm like, "My God, you know, you're a nun. Aren't you supposed to be renunciant?" I had, quietly, a little bit of an attitude.

But I was just sitting there watching. And the women who were working really hard—first they would try to meet each of these requests. They'd go to a lot of trouble to try and meet them. They'd go out to the garden and come back so happy they could pick a few little fresh chilies. Happy—that's the key. They were so happy to try and do whatever was asked, to try and offer that generosity. It felt really unfeigned, because I was sitting watching it for weeks.

And after a while I thought, well, which is better—sitting here grumpy and judging, or kind of like opening to the joy of that heartfelt generosity about little things?

I mean, it doesn't really work to think, "I should be appreciating this." But it just starts to come in through osmosis. You simply start to notice it. And wholesome qualities, if we're not completely covered in delusion in a moment, are contagious. We feel them. They light up our heart and mind. It was really a gift just to sit there and watch the generosity of these young women.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of how uplifting this could be, because I was having a difficult time. Some of those periods were difficult in my practice. And without having been told anything about it, I just started to notice that when my mind was in a dark funk, if I simply did something like notice, "Oh, look at those flowers—that's somebody's generosity," it wasn't a false thing, but the generosity and the metta behind it would uphold me. It would bring some brightness, some faith into my mind and heart. And that would give me the strength to keep going.

So overall, the wholesomeness, the happiness of the wholesome mind shows us that our happiness really is not at all dependent on external circumstances. But it doesn't mean we can't recognize our mutuality, our non-separation—and that's one of the great things about sangha here. Of course, you're projecting; you don't really know what each other is feeling. But sometimes you just get a sense. Someone walks by and they seem really mindful, and you just get this hit of happiness or metta from them. Great. Don't go into big thinking about it. Let it touch you. Let it be contagious. We're not so separate.

So that's when I first started to get a sense of it. And now I'll tell a few stories about how the mutuality of generosity is so imbued in the culture, and how much I just kept watching. I keep watching. I just have to think about being in Burma, and—believe me, this is a place with incredible poverty, much of it government-induced, incredible oppression, lots of fear. So it's not a paradise at all. And yet there's so much joy of generosity and kindness, a kind of generosity of heart and metta in the culture, in so many people—not everybody, but so many—that when I just start to think about it, memories start popping up and my heart gets really open and happy. It's interesting.

Just to give a couple of examples: one time I was staying at this meditation center right after the big cyclone a few years ago, which was like a massive hurricane, somewhat like Katrina. It had an even more devastating effect on a whole area southwest of Yangon, and on Yangon itself. We were staying at a meditation center right outside of

Yangon, and all around it was a relatively poor village. Many of the houses, which were just little bamboo shacks, had been destroyed. A lot of the crops had been destroyed, both down in the delta and in this area. So poor people were even poorer.

This was a time when the government, of course, didn't do anything and actively tried to stop other people from helping down in the delta—though not in Yangon. The generosity of average Burmese people was so manifest because so many would actually risk danger or jailing by the government to gather food and somehow sneak down to the delta on boats or whatever to pass it out. Just your normal person—any of us—but a lot of people, because the government wasn't doing anything.

Anyway, this was a few months after that. Some friends and I had gone to Burma, and other friends had known there were difficulties and had sent money with us to share with people who needed it. The Sayadaw, the abbot of this monastery, said, "Why don't we buy a lot of rice and offer a big bag to each household in this village? Because rice is the staple, and now it's so expensive." He organized the whole thing—we gave the money, and he organized it. He's a great organizer. It was something like eight hundred households.

And again, the way the generosity is done there—we would say, "Okay everybody, bag of rice here, come get it, bye." But there it's done really face to face and with great dignity. So they brought in trucks of rice. There was this whole room piled with rice. And then the monks in the monastery, who can't offer money, offered their time and bagged all the rice into big bags.

And then Sayadaw came and got us, me and my Western friends, and said, "You have to come and offer it. You can't just give the money and go away. That's got no heart in it." He didn't say it quite that way. He said, "You have to stand here, and each person that comes, you hand them the bag of rice."

So this became an all-day affair. The bags of rice—we're talking fifty-pound bags of rice. It would take two of us, me and my friend, to manage them. We're struggling, we can hardly lift the thing. And then this little lady would come. We're going, "Ugh!" She takes the rice, throws it on her head, and goes walking out. They all do. The women carry it on their heads. The men throw it on their shoulder. Some of the women—and I have photos, I'm not exaggerating—had a kid in both arms, the rice on the head, and off they go. But there's this face-to-face exchange. It has a sense of dignity, a sense of immediacy to it. But it's also the cycle of the joy of generosity and the joy of receiving going both ways.

This, of course, is the area where the monks go on their *pindapat*, their alms round, every morning. They follow the same little routine. So one of the monks—there were only about twelve in this monastery—one of them, a friend of ours, a guy from Mexico, told us the next day what happened. He came back from the alms round that next morning and said, "Okay, we go the same round every day, and more or less the same people come out and offer us rice. And they're poor, so mostly they only offer rice. It's pretty much always the same families, the same little ladies."

So he said the next day, after this rice offering, so many more families came out and offered rice because they had a little bit extra—and the first thing they did was offer it to the monks. He said there were a few places where the families brought out their little kids, because it goes down through the generations, so it was a real treat for the little children to be able to take a spoon of rice and put it in each monk's bowl. And it was just—I don't know—so touching, the cycle of generosity, and so normal there in that culture.

But the cycle of the happiness of generosity really runs not only within that culture but from any kind of giving and receiving.

Here's another example. Some other friends had, a few years before this time, come and visited one of the nearby nunneries—which I'll describe in a minute. Then they went back home, and the next year they sent a check to offer to these nuns who were trying to build a decent enough building to live in.

Just to describe the nuns: there are many, many nunneries around this area. More since the cyclone, as groups of two or three or four nuns would move up from the delta because they couldn't live there anymore. They would somehow get a little tiny plot of land and build these little structures of plaited bamboo—like a woven wall of bamboo. You can make it in about three hours if you know how, and it lasts four or five months. The floor is just bamboo poles laid like this with big holes in between. Many nunneries are like that.

This particular one was run by two sisters. They had come up from the delta some years ago and were living and studying. Many nuns study Pali and Buddhism, and these two had been studying for several years. They were about early forties and late thirties. At some point, the monk, the Sayadaw who was their teacher down in the delta, said to them, "There are these ten little girls, they're orphans, and I can't take care of them anymore, so I'm sending them to you to take care of."

Now, as it turned out—they told us later—they didn't have any way to take care of these little girls. They were living in a study monastery, and their plans were to go and meditate the next year, to really dedicate the next few years to their practice. But instead, they got the news: here come ten little girls.

Many nuns take on little girls—orphans, or children whose parents are really poor—and they educate them, clothe them, feed them, completely take care of them. And that's what these two sisters did. So when we went to visit, they had found this little piece of land, built themselves this little crummy shack, and were living there with ten little girls. They were describing it all, filled with light.

They didn't tell us until quite some time later that they had really wanted to go off and meditate. We were talking through a friend who speaks Burmese, just so we could understand this fully. And they were just describing how they felt so dedicated to giving these little girls the possibility of knowing what a good life is, what a life of virtue is, what a life of generosity is.

They said, "If they decide not to be nuns when they're older, that's fine. That's up to them. But at least they'll know good values. They'll know how to live as a human being." Plus, these children are rescued from the street, rescued from some kind of servitude.

They would laugh about how everything they have is on *dāna*—their food, everything. And if they're given clothes, the head nun was saying, "Well, if someone gives me robes, that's wonderful. I can cut it up and make fifteen little tiny robes." For these adorable little girls in their little pink robes—they're very cute. She was laughing about it. "And if someone gives us a little money, we can buy fifteen little sets of slippers." These little sets of slippers all lined up. There was so much affection, so much dedication. She was teaching them Pali in the morning, and they all get up and chant together.

And then at the end it came out that they had really wanted to go off and meditate. So they just did a 180-degree turn for the next ten years of their lives—with joy, with so much lightness and happiness. It was really amazing to see.

So anyway, when these friends gave the check, and then when I came back the next year, I had gone to California where the friends were, and I had some photos of these nuns receiving the money. You have to put it in piles—it's like huge piles of money worth not very much. So you arrange it on these trays. It's always face-to-face, a very dignified offering, and there's chanting. When you offer, the nuns will all chant—a whole *mettā* chant, a gratitude chant, a blessing chant. It's really very beautiful and formal. So there are photos of all that.

And then the next day, we ran into the nun. She'd run out, and they'd bought concrete and bricks. She was coming back sitting in a truck filled with all the building supplies they'd just purchased. So we could take a photo and show our friends. When I showed them the photo, it was like the completion of the circle, because they were so happy. I was just watching them. "Here's the photo. This is what we did." And their faces just lit up with the happiness of generosity.

So you're happy when you think about being generous, when you're doing it, and afterwards, reflecting on it. The Buddha really talked about this as a wholesome act—it's really beautiful. Quite catchy, as I said. It's really embedded in the culture.

I'm mostly giving monks and nuns as examples because that's where I've been spending my time. But just a simple example from last year—it's complicated with the money, bringing in foreign currency and changing it. It's just complicated. So last year, the way it worked out, the money came through a bank and a money changer. The money changing is like pseudo-black market, let's just put it that way. Now things are changing, but you didn't go to a bank and change money—that didn't even exist.

So a guy, a money changer, would come with—and I'm not kidding—huge mounds of these *kyat*, and look at every single foreign bill. And if it's a little bit wrinkled or it has one red dot on it, they won't take it. So it takes hours. They're going through everything.

So this is going on. And it's not quite like a drug deal, but there's a slightly sleazy quality to it. It's not like the room is filled with light and *devas*, really. But it's also not terrible—I mean, it's what everyone does. One time we were doing it right in the office in the middle of the monastery.

And the monks, rather than thinking, "Oh, it should go to monks, it shouldn't go to nuns"—and you do run into that sometimes—they're quite different. They've gone out of their way to find people who need help, to identify people whose houses are falling down, to find nuns who are running schools for poor children, and to help us go there and visit and see if we can offer support. It's really touching, these monks.

So this one monk came and said, "Oh, you should go visit these two other monks over there." And they were interesting, these two monks. One was about forty, one was about thirty-five years old, and they had only become monks recently—one seven years ago and one three years ago, in their mid-thirties. This is unusual, because usually men who are going to be monks become monks younger. Sayadaws have usually been monks since they were about seven and stay monks a long time. Or they become monks for a rainy season just to do it and then stop. But these two were different—one had been a captain in the military, and the other had been a businessman.

So we went to see them. Upanyaloka, the monk who told us about them, said they're interesting because when they became monks, they were living on this little plot of barren land near where we stay. It's just dusty, flat land. They didn't have a well, didn't have much of anything. He said when he first went to see them, they were newish monks, just the two of them. They didn't really have a senior monk teaching them. He said they were kind of hanging out. They were monks, but they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They had been there a while.

So Upanyaloka said to them, "Look, why don't you do something? You both have an education. There are all these poor children around." And the way school works in Burma—elementary and even high school—even if you can go to the government schools, which have a lot of fees so many children can't, but even if you can, you don't learn enough to pass the exams, which everything is predicated on. Children basically have to hire the teachers for tutoring in the evening. That's how the teachers make enough money to live, because they're paid almost nothing. And so poor children—even if they can barely scratch together enough to attend school—can't afford to hire anyone for tutoring.

So Upanyaloka said to these two monks, "Look, you have an education. You're just sitting around here. Why don't you start tutoring? There are a lot of poor children around." And so they had started doing that. And now maybe a hundred children came every evening to get tutoring.

So we went over to see them. And it was really a great teaching in assumptions, and also in the happiness and the transformative quality of generosity.

You walk in—well, you don't really walk in, there's no "in"—but it's just this barren, dusty land with a kind of shelter, a lean-to. That's what a lot of places are. We went in the afternoon, and there really were a hundred kids there. These two monks were just tutoring them, and the older kids were helping the younger kids. It all felt very friendly and jovial.

The two monks were... not impressive looking, shall I say. They just looked kind of schlumpy. They had clearly been chewing betel nut all their lives. If you've seen that, it's a somewhat addictive thing. If you chew it for long, it dyes your mouth and your teeth red, it rots your teeth, and you're always spitting this red—it's not really a happy sight. But it's very common. A good monk or nun, and women chew it too just as much, wouldn't chew betel nut. So these guys had betel nut, just kind of standing there—U Bassa and U Bola.

But we started talking to them, and the younger one, the businessman, turned out that what he'd been in business in was beer and liquor and such. That was his business. But he finally had to beg his parents when he was thirty-three to let him be a monk.

Anyway, he starts talking to us. They'd been doing this teaching now for some time, and he was like—born again, in a good way. He said he felt like he'd wasted thirty-three years. He was so bright, so happy as he was saying this. He said he felt like he had wasted the first thirty-three years of his life. "I feel like I have a new life now," he said. He's giving his energy and his life to helping others, to helping the children. "Really, it's like I have a new life. I want to be able to do some form of helping for the rest of my life. This is it. And if it turns out there's nothing else to do here, I'll go somewhere else and help somewhere else."

He was just filled with happiness and joy from helping others. It was so touching.

And for us also—one of us had quite a judgmental attitude toward monks. As soon as this person would see a monk with betel nut, it was like a door slammed shut in her mind. So this was really for all of us like, "Oh yeah, maybe I have to drop that." To see the purity of heart, and to see the transformation through simple acts of generosity.

One last story in this vein, about a nun at a different nunnery nearby. She had been there a few years—maybe thirty nuns living there, not particularly bringing up orphans or running a school, not doing anything special. They study, but nothing in particular. And the head nun, Daw Sumanachari, seemed nice. She made good mohinga soup, but seemed a little bit depressive maybe.

Then she came the year before last, just after I'd left. She talked to Daw Aryanyani, who speaks Burmese, and she knew that sometimes people funneled money through her. She said, "You know, there's a school that a nun started ten minutes' drive away for poor kids who can't afford public school. And now five hundred kids are going to that school." I'm not kidding—all on dāna. They have to raise money every month to pay the teachers, to feed the kids, plus the nuns have to live on dāna too.

Anyway, this nun who came to see Aryanyani said, "But the little children around here have to walk half an hour, and in the rainy season, it's too hard for them. So I want to start on my place a school for the really littlest ones." She had a plot of land with two small buildings on it.

We kind of thought, "I don't know—can she really get this together?" But what the heck. So we offered what we could.

We came back the next year, and she'd really done it. First, they demolished the main building that the thirty nuns were living in, and they all moved into the smaller building. That's all they have to live in now. And they had the money to build a really long lean-to roof, hired several teachers, got blackboards. Then she got another company—a Burmese company, as many Burmese companies support such efforts—to build another lean-to. And she had one hundred ten little kids coming.

And she'd hired really good, regular lay teachers. So when she came to see us, we were really impressed.

But the point is, she came and was talking to us later that fall, describing the school, and her demeanor—even though I couldn't understand Burmese and she was speaking through a translator—her demeanor was completely different. She was radiant. She was just filled with light, so light and joyful.

What she was saying was that the year before, it was just eating at her. She couldn't sleep because she so wanted to start this school. It had just come to her that she had to do this, but she didn't know how. She was so worried about it. But now—and I wrote this down, I'm not making it up—she said, "Now the worry's all gone." Before she couldn't sleep or eat, but now she's so happy because it's happening. Even though she has to work so hard to keep it going, to get the dana, to keep the teachers, to take care of the kids, and they all live in this little building, she said she's just so happy. "All of my energy is for the children and the school," she said, "and so my mind is calm and happy."

And she looked like that. It was really quite transformative.

As the Buddha said, and the great story that illustrates this comes through his disciple Anathapindika. Someone mentioned that Anathapindika was one of the Buddha's most generous disciples. When he first met the Buddha, he just had so much faith in the Dharma, in the Buddha, that he became filled with appreciation and generosity. Right away, he offered the Jeta Grove, where many of the suttas you read take place.

This story about Anathapindika shows that the main aspect of generosity is not about what or how much. We tend to look at the result. But as with everything, it's the motivation. The heart of the generous act of mind, speech, or body is in the motivation, the intention to offer time, material goods, freedom from whatever—and the tuning into that, the non-clinging. That's where the joy comes from, and that's what gives generosity its power.

Anathapindika started inviting all the monks from the Sangha in the area—like 500 monks, which means a lot. That's what Andy Olinsky says: when it says 500, it means a lot. Every day he would feed them with a great meal.

King Pasenadi of that area, who was also a disciple of the Buddha, heard about Anathapindika's generosity and wanted to imitate him—or probably do better than him. He thought, "He can do it, I can do it." So he decided he wanted to give alms and food to 500 monks every day, and he started doing that as well.

But then one day, as he was on his way to visit with the monks, he learned from his servants that his servants would give the monks the food, but then the monks would take the food and go into the city and give it to some of their personal supporters, and then the supporters would offer the food back. King Pasenadi said, "Why are they doing that? I'm giving great food. I'm giving better food. I'm giving really good food, so why are they doing that?"

The Buddha explained that in the palace, his servants distributed the food without any inner feeling, just following orders as if they were cleaning out a barn or taking a thief to court. Some of them even thought the monks were just parasites, or even had negative feelings. They lacked faith and had no love. The Buddha said that when anything is given in that spirit, no one can feel comfortable accepting it, even when the meal is of the most delicious food.

In contrast, he said, in the households of Anathapindika and Visakha, another generous woman, they welcomed the monks and regarded them as spiritual friends. A humble meal provided by a friend is worth much more than the most sumptuous meal offered by someone who did not give in a really generous, open spirit.

So you see, it's really about the joy and the purification of heart and mind, not just about giving a lot and being seen as generous. In fact, in another place the Buddha said that even if a person throws the rinsings of a bowl or a cup into a village pool or pond, thinking, "May whatever animals live here feed on this," that would be a great source of merit, a great source of generosity. It's that movement of heart and mind.

Sometimes you have water you're going to throw out, and if you just pour it on a plant and think, "May this be for the benefit of the plant," that's a mental act of generosity—something we're all quite able to do.

Once when Sayadaw U Pandita was here teaching, there was a monk teaching with him, U Nyanapannika, who was a Nepalese monk. He gave a talk on generosity that I really liked—I know because I took notes from it. I wouldn't remember one word if I

didn't take notes. This was a long time ago. But he talked about the practice of giving as a practice and gave six points. I'll just mention them, because sometimes that might be helpful. Not to make it too rigid, but just to illuminate different aspects.

The first, of course, is when the thought of giving anything arises, give attention to the motivation, to the volition. Really purify it. The first and second go together. The second is that whatever one is giving, see and abandon the clinging to it. So it's not just this casual, "Oh, here, take it."

A friend of mine once used a phrase that stayed with me. I'd given him something I didn't want. I said, "I don't want this." He said, "Oh yeah, I'll take it." "Okay, here."

That didn't really feel like an act of generosity. I never gave it another thought. But some years later, he mentioned it. He said, "That thing—I use it all the time. Your act of casual, thoughtless generosity." He wasn't being mean or critical. That was an accurate description. It was casual, thoughtless generosity.

Looking at it, okay, it's more generous than not giving, but it's not really the generosity of giving attention to the volition—not "I should be generous." That's not it. It's this openness.

I heard a Tibetan teacher once say, you know, there's generosity of mind, of speech, and of body. So maybe the thought comes up, "I'd like to give this." But then, "Oh, I just can't." He said, practice in your mind. Practice giving it in your mind. If you can't even do that—well, okay, so you just practice there. Out of loving-kindness, out of generosity, not out of a should.

Another Tibetan teacher suggested taking a rock and giving it from one hand to the other. Just practice letting go. It's the act of letting go. We can play with it. Just start to see what holding on and letting go feels like—viscerally and in our mind. Sooner or later, we notice the letting go feels better. But it's not a should. We can practice that.

Or another way of thinking about generosity of mind: with whatever one does—I read this from Geshe Rabten, who was a teacher of one of my good friends, Fred Von Allmen, and he's been dead a long time now. A generous action of mind is simply this: with whatever you're doing—turning on the water, making some tea, washing your hands—just thinking, "With this act, may all beings be free from suffering." That's just an act of generosity of heart and mind. So simple. So many different ways to practice—with mind, with speech, with body.

The second point is to see and abandon the clinging. And whether that's time or service, it's not just about things.

The third one is to give when possible—it's not possible here when you're on retreat in silence—but when possible, when it's appropriate, to give face to face. That's the way it's traditionally done.

And the fourth one is to give mindfully, with the mind focused. So we're really collected, attentive to both the motivation and the act of giving. It really gives it a power and a beauty.

That face-to-face giving is something I've learned from the way it's done when you're offering to monks and nuns in Asia. And not just to monastics—to lay people too. It's this very formal thing. The giving is done with a real sense of appreciation, and the receiving is done with great dignity, great respect for the whole process. I find it quite ennobling on both sides, as well as joyful.

I remember one time when Sayadaw U Pandita was here. He had been—I was on retreat—and he had been talking about wanting to study Christianity and wanting to practice his English. So I got a friend to buy this very simple English book about Jesus's life or something like that.

And then I'm shy, giving face to face. There's this sense of self and shyness—what do they think?—and all this stuff that isn't the happiness of generosity, this whole kind of self-cherishing that's rather strange. Why is it like that when it's such a joyful thing?

So anyway, I had this friend give it to him, and I went on my retreat here. Weeks later, when the retreat ended and I went to say my goodbye bows, he said, "Wait." And he had someone go get that book.

And he gave it to me. He said, "Now give it to me face to face." It was really far out. And I was like a little nervous. And he was really present in the receiving, very formal. And then they say, like a blessing. And even with lay people, when he gives us some little thing, they go, "May this be a cause for your complete attainment of nirvana in this lifetime." Imagine you give somebody a little towel and they say, "May this be a cause for your attaining nirvana in this lifetime." I mean, it's beautiful. We just go, "Okay, thanks." Or "Do you have a better one?" No—"May you attain nirvana in this lifetime." Try it. It's really a wonderful thing.

So this sense of giving with the mind focused on the giving—it ennobles both the giver and the receiver.

Another example with lay people: someone had given us, had sent money to rebuild some houses after the cyclone. And these were some neighbors, really poor neighbors with their own tumbledown houses, who came to us and said, "There's this elderly couple with a son who's off and doesn't take care of them, and they don't have enough to eat, and their house is falling down. Could you help them?"

So we came, and they were in their 80s, and the woman was almost deaf, and the man was almost blind. He couldn't really work, but she grew things. Their house was spick and span, so clean, so tidy. She grew little plants outside and in back. And on the days that she was well enough to walk, she would take these plants to the market to sell. That was their only income. It wasn't enough, and neighbors would give them rice and such.

So we gave money to build a house, which was not much—it can be done in a day. Then we found out they didn't have enough money for the rent. In Burma, poor people own the house but rent the land. And if you get kicked off, you have to take the house with you. They didn't have enough money; their rent was a year overdue. This was like sixty dollars for a year. So that was nothing, right? We paid that. Then we went back—the neighbors all said, "You come back." We went and paid the landlord, came back.

And it was just—they were so dignified and elegant, really, but also happy. The man had this greatest smile, and he had a kind of homemade mandolin thing that he took down and was playing and singing for us. The wife isn't so smiley, but very serious. And he was doing some kind of dance. It was just this appreciation of the whole situation, this great sense of happiness and dignity.

There was no space, no sense of the shyness of giving or the shyness of receiving, no saying, "Oh, I'm not worthy to give or receive." That cuts the mutuality. It cuts the circle. But to give or receive with this dignity and this face-to-face presence is really ennobling, and it really strengthens the joy.

The fifth factor is: after giving, to continue to be mindful of our motivation. Have you ever had a time when you give and then later you go, "Ah, damn, why did I give that away?" So keep on being mindful. Remind yourself when that happens. You don't want to go there. Re-immerse yourself into the happiness of the generosity while you did it. That's really quite accessible.

And this is important: having a clear comprehension of the broader context. So in other words, if an alcoholic comes and wants help, you give the help you can, but you don't give them twenty dollars to go down to the liquor store and buy more, for example.

But generosity with intelligence applies to everything. And I've added the seventh aspect, which is receiving with the same openness. Because when someone gives and we respond, "Oh no, I'm not worthy," or "I have so much more than you, don't give me anything"—that's problematic. Every time you offer something to these people in Burma, no matter how poor they are, they're going to come and offer you something back with huge joy and dignity. And not to take it is a lack of generosity. "No, no, I have so much more, don't give me that." That doesn't work. And it's not happiness-producing.

So just the last thing I want to say: there's the happiness of contemplating generosity, there's the happiness of the act itself, and there's the happiness of contemplating our past acts of generosity. This is something we don't do so much in this culture. It's not only generosity—also our wholesome sīla. But at times, when you're in a difficult space and you look around and go, "Well, looking at the flowers isn't doing it for me. Nobody's walking by filled with mettā. The leaves are falling and they're all brown and dead. I need something to bring some light in. I can't find one moment of mettā. What could there possibly be to brighten the mind and the heart?" You could contemplate your past acts of generosity of mind, speech, and body. You have to have done at least one, right? Somewhere? If you haven't, go wash your hands and think, "May this act be for the benefit and well-being of all beings everywhere." And then you can contemplate that later.

But this is from the Buddha. And it's a wise use of thought, a wise use of contemplation. He's talking to a layman, and it's embedded in this sutta. He gives other contemplations, but I'm just going to do the dāna one because we're running out of time.

This is the case where you recollect your own generosity: "It is a gain for me that among people overcome with the stain of possessiveness, I live at home, my awareness cleansed of the stain of possessiveness—freely generous, open-handed, delighting in being generous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms."

At any time when a disciple of the noble ones—that's all of you whether you like it or not—at any time when a disciple of the noble ones is recollecting generosity, her mind is not overcome with greed, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. So just the recollection of generosity, done wholeheartedly, is a moment of purification of heart and mind.

And when the mind is not overcome with aversion, delusion, greed, her mind heads straight, her heart heads straight, based in generosity. And when the mind, the heart, is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones has a sense of the meaning, a sense of the Dhamma, experiences joy connected with the Dhamma. And in one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calm experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

Thus, Mahānāma, you should develop this recollection of generosity while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children.

In other words, no excuse not to. And it makes us happy, so why not?

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 16

Bodhicitta

Brian Lesage · 47 min

> *In this heartfelt talk, Brian Lesage shares a powerful dream that revealed awakening as a collective rather than individual endeavor, introducing the concept of bodhicitta—the aspiration to awaken for the benefit of all beings. He distinguishes between relative bodhicitta (the altruistic intention to practice for others) and absolute bodhicitta (the wisdom realizing emptiness), showing how these two aspects are intimately intertwined.*
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> *Drawing from the Sedaka Sutta's teaching on the bamboo acrobats, Brian illustrates how looking after oneself through mindfulness naturally benefits others, while caring for others through loving-kindness and compassion benefits oneself. He uses the image of Indra's net from the Avataṃsaka Sūtra to convey the profound interdependence of all beings—how our practice reverberates through generations past and future, healing patterns that extend far beyond our individual lives.*
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> *Brian offers practical guidance on integrating bodhicitta into daily practice: setting intention before meditation, then releasing it to simply practice, and sharing merit afterward. He clarifies that emptiness (suññatā) doesn't mean nihilism or meaninglessness, but rather seeing that our constructed realities aren't as solid as we believe. When this self-centric world begins to dismantle through practice, compassion naturally arises from the intimacy we feel with all of existence. The talk concludes with a beautiful dedication verse invoking both the wisdom of emptiness and the compassionate wish for all beings' liberation.*

Good evening, everyone.

I wanted to begin by letting you know that I'll be leaving tomorrow morning. First of all, it's really been wonderful to meet a number of you, for those who signed up for interviews with me. I also want to give a big thank you to many of you whose interviews I sat in on—it was a fantastic opportunity for me. Most importantly, though, I want to thank you for your effort and your practice. I don't think you could see it as I was sitting over there, but the entire time I've been here, I've been riding on your momentum in practice. So thank you very much for your effort. It inspires my practice, and it's what I'll be bringing home with me.

Tonight I wanted to begin by sharing a dream I had a couple of years ago. I was teaching a teacher residency in Santa Fe, New Mexico, spending about a month there working on a particular theme that fits with what I'll be speaking about tonight.

It was a very interesting dream. I found myself in this huge room with all these people milling around. In one corner—and actually this has happened in a few of my dreams—was the Zen master I practiced with when I was a Zen monk. He was simply sitting in the corner of this huge room, gazing upon the whole event.

Toward the front of the room, there was this orange flame, just moving about. It had this feeling sense that it represented the dilemma all of us face: the dilemma of birth and death, the dilemma of suffering. There it was, flickering and moving. People would go up in front of it and do something—sometimes the weirdest things: dance, or perform some kind of mantra or chanting—all in an attempt to become free of this thing, to become free of the dilemma of birth and death, to become free of suffering.

But it never worked. Someone would go up, and then they would disappear, as if the flame engulfed them. This was just casually going on—all these people there, the Zen master in the back overlooking everything.

The other thing in the dream that was a little disturbing was this palpable feeling that the name of the game in that room was that all of us were going to have to come face to face with this flame sooner or later. That was the deal. You'd see people summon their courage and come up to the flame and try their thing—always unsuccessfully.

When I was faced with knowing I'd have to come face to face with this, I thought to myself, "I want to go to the beach." As they say, why do today what you can put off till tomorrow? So that's what I started to do—I tried to figure out how to get out of the room and gather what I needed for going to the beach. I didn't want to face it.

As I was milling around, going in and out of the room, I eventually came back in. I think I needed to get my swimsuit. I'd found it, so I was ready to go to the beach. And as I went back into the room, I saw the most striking thing.

What appeared before me was this archetypal image of people holding hands. Just this image of people holding hands. And when it came face to face with the red flame, the flame disappeared, and there was a feeling that finally all of us were free.

For me it was a powerful dream, in the sense that so often we conceptualize or imagine awakening to be something in the context of "I wake up." It's me who wakes up. Awakening is about me and my life. And yet this dream was telling me something different—that maybe something closer to what's going on is that we actually all wake up, or we wake up together. There's a value in having this broader sense underneath our practice here.

There are a number of discourses—about four or five in the Pali Canon—that have the same construction, where the Buddha talks about four kinds of people found in the world. The first is a person who practices neither for their own benefit nor for the benefit of others. The second practices for their own benefit but not for the benefit of others. The third does not practice for their own benefit but practices for the benefit of others. And the fourth is the practitioner who practices both for the benefit of oneself and others. Of course, what the Buddha is really emphasizing is the importance of this fourth way.

The most refined practitioner is one who practices for the benefit of both others and oneself. This is what I'd like to speak about tonight—this quality of practice.

Later in Buddhism, this flowers into the idea of bodhicitta. Literally, *bodhi* means enlightenment or awakening, and *citta* can be translated as heart or heart-mind. There are two aspects to bodhicitta: relative bodhicitta and absolute bodhicitta.

Relative bodhicitta is what I was just mentioning—this altruistic intention. It means having the aspiration to awaken, but having that aspiration for the benefit of all beings, so that all beings may be free. This relative bodhicitta is intertwined with absolute bodhicitta, which is the realization of emptiness. You could say it's the wisdom that sees through the illusion of a separate, fixed sense of self, or the insight into the fundamental nature of things.

Tonight I'll be sharing some reflections on practicing for the benefit of ourselves as well as for others—on cultivating this bodhicitta. I offer it so that you can decide if this is something that fits into your own practice. In particular, I'll probably spend more time speaking about relative bodhicitta, but if time allows, I'd like to explore how this insight or realization of emptiness fits in, how it's intertwined with relative bodhicitta, and how we can understand it in a way that connects with the practice you're doing on this retreat.

In terms of the practicality of how we bring this quality of bodhicitta into our practice, I want to remind you of the instructions that Carol gave a few mornings ago, where she invited us to check in with our motivation. It could be before a sitting meditation, or before each sitting and walking, or simply in the morning—placing this motivation: "May my practice go to the benefit of all beings." Then, as she was clear to point out, setting that aside so that we simply begin our practice. The third point was sharing the merit of our practice after a sitting or walking meditation.

It's a very small addition to our practice. But for me, it really makes a huge difference within my spiritual path. As a way of beginning, I want to say a few things about how this has been an essential part of my practice and how it's been helpful both for those sunny days we have on retreat, as well as those stormy days.

On those sunny days, where things feel like they're unfolding smoothly, it reminds me not to take ownership for the unfolding of this path. It undermines this idea of "me" or "I"—of "here I am waking up" or "this is mine." It gives me a sense of this being something that's happening on a much broader level than this confined world of me.

And on the dark days, the stormy days, it's been incredibly helpful as well. I remember this when I was a Zen monk. There was a period of time that was actually probably the darkest time of my life. I hesitate telling you this because I feel like all the stories I'm sharing about my life as a Zen monk are quite dark. It actually might be true, but let's move on from there.

I remember there was a period, really the darkest time of my life. Some of you have probably experienced this—where you have this feeling of going through the motions of living, but it lacks the feeling of really being alive. You're moving around, but you feel dead on the inside. That kind of darkness. Maybe some of you have experienced that. It's rough. It's even rougher practicing through that, just having the sense of keeping your head above water.

I remember there was something so important, and it was just around simple things—going to the zendo, the meditation hall. Even in the midst of feeling like my practice was worth nothing, that huge doubt I spoke about a few talks ago, somehow when it was for the benefit of others, there was a space around that darkness that allowed me to navigate it. It gave me a space around how confining this self-centric world can be. And it was just about having this sense that this practice is for the benefit of all beings.

So I feel like it's important. It can be something that really gives life to the practice you're doing here on this retreat. And it's not only that—I feel like it brings our hearts into touch with a beautiful quality of mind. What are we talking about here? We're talking about compassion, and having it interfused, intertwined with our entire day and night of practice.

I'd like to give an example of compassion. There are so many examples out there, and this is one I come back to again and again. Maybe it's because of its simplicity, and in that simplicity, there's something profound about it. It's the story of a man named Lorenzo Perrone. Some of you may have heard of him.

He was an Italian bricklayer during World War II, and he was actually working at Auschwitz. A number of bricklayers had been brought over to build more buildings around the camp. Lorenzo was the man instrumental in helping the writer and chemist Primo Levi survive Auschwitz. Primo Levi lived there for a year. Most people in Auschwitz did not live longer than three months.

I'd like to share with you some words from a book by Primo Levi about Lorenzo Perrone. He says, "An Italian civilian worker brought me a piece of bread and the remainder of his ration every day for six months." This is Lorenzo Perrone he's talking about. "He gave me a vest of his, full of patches. He wrote a postcard on my behalf to Italy and brought me the reply. For all this, he neither asked nor accepted any reward—because he was good and simple and did not think that one did good for a reward."

And then he goes on. He says, "I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I'm alive today." And this is the striking part. He says, "And not so much for his material aid—more so for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own. Lorenzo was a human being. His humanity was pure and uncontaminated. He was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a human being."

To me, that's such a striking and beautiful expression of compassion. Such a simple act—bread and clothing. And more important, what did he say? He said it was Lorenzo's presence that actually allowed him to continue.

Shantideva, an eighth-century Indian practitioner known as the author of a text called the *Bodhicharyavatara*, usually translated as *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, offers some beautiful words around this intention—this intention of awakening for the benefit of all beings, of practicing for the benefit of oneself and for others. It's actually one of the most beloved texts in Tibetan Buddhism. I think the Dalai Lama says this is his favorite text.

I'd like to share with you a little from Shantideva talking about this intention and the words he brings to it. And remember, this is an Indian text, so it's a little over the top—but I like a little over the top.

He says:

May I be a protector for those who are without protectors, a guide for travelers, and a boat, a bridge, and a ship for those who wish to cross over. May I be a lamp for those who seek light, a bed for those who seek rest, and may I be a servant for all beings who desire a servant. To all sentient beings, may I be a wish-fulfilling gem, a vase of good fortune, an

efficacious mantra, a great medication, a wish-fulfilling tree, and a wish-granting cow. Just as Earth and other elements are useful in various ways to innumerable sentient beings dwelling throughout infinite space, so may I be in various ways a source of life for the sentient beings present throughout space until they are all liberated.

And then towards the end of this text, the *Bodhicharyavatara*, he gives a word to this quite profound vow or dedication. He says, "As long as space and time endure, and for as long as beings remain, until then may I too endure to dispel the misery of the world."

It's a beautiful movement of the heart. What a beautiful thing to have underlie our practice while we're here.

You might have noticed this—I feel this is so important—because maybe you've seen how our minds are so confined by this self-centric world that runs counter to this intention. Have you noticed that yet? I appreciated Sally's talk, I think it was a couple of talks ago, where she was talking about the nature of thought and noticing that so many of our thoughts center around these three questions: Am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay? What a perfect description of a self-centric world where that's all the mind can think about.

It's even around our meditation practice. So much this self-centric world. I come here. Who comes to IMS? *I* come to IMS. *I* practice. *I'm* mindful. Maybe *I* will gain insight.

I will be kinder. Maybe I will be more free. Maybe I'll be more intelligent. Maybe my life will be better, or my circumstances will be better.

Have you noticed such thoughts? And I want to point out there's nothing inherently bad about these thoughts. They can actually be wholesome aspirations, and of course quite useful when speaking with others. The problem happens when you deeply believe in that, deeply live by that—when you're only living in a self-centric world. So again, there's nothing wrong necessarily with this conceptualization. The problem is getting lost in it, being confined by that.

John Ruskin once said, "When a person is wrapped up in themselves, they make a pretty small package."

I'm sure many of you are here because you've tasted the suffering and stress that comes from living in a narrow, self-centric world. But you're also probably here because you've tasted how this practice can begin to allow you to break out of that confinement.

So what I want to spend some time with right now is this question: How can we understand practicing for the benefit of oneself and others when on a long retreat? How do we understand this?

In order to elucidate this point, I'd like to share with you a discourse from the Buddha—the Sedaka Sutta, the story of the Buddha telling a tale about acrobats.

The Buddha begins by addressing the monastics and tells this story about two bamboo acrobats. These acrobats have a stunt they perform to make money. They have a bamboo pole, and the lead acrobat climbs up and balances on top of the pole. Then his assistant, Medakathālika, this woman, climbs up the bamboo pole and then climbs over him onto his shoulders. It's quite a feat. Once they balance up there, they get off and collect their fees for the show.

The lead acrobat says to his assistant, "Listen, this is what's going to work. If you look after me and I look after you, then this is going to go just fantastic. We'll get off the bamboo safely and we'll collect our fees."

And the assistant, Medakathālika, says to him, "No, it doesn't work that way. The way it works is: if I look after myself and you look after yourself, then we'll be able to get off the bamboo pole and collect our fees."

Then the Buddha continues and says, "Ah yes, just like the assistant said, just like Medakathālika said to her master." And he goes on: "Just with this sense of 'I will look after myself,' so should you practitioners practice the establishment of mindfulness. You should also practice the establishment of mindfulness by saying, 'I will look after others.' Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself. And how does one look after others by looking after oneself? By practicing mindfulness, by developing it, by doing it a lot. And how does one look after oneself by looking after others? By patience, by non-harming, by loving-kindness, by caring for others. Thus, looking after oneself, one looks after others, and looking after others, one looks after oneself."

It's very clear, right? When we take care of ourselves, when we engage in mindfulness, we're taking care of others. There's this quality of taking care of others by doing this practice. And when we're cultivating a skillful way of taking care of others, cultivating these wholesome states of mind such as loving-kindness and compassion, we're actually taking care of ourselves.

What I want to point out about this is that this quality of practicing for oneself and for others is actually already happening when you're on retreat. It's actually impossible for it not to happen. And I think it's important to reflect that just being here is affecting

so many other people. Sally mentioned this, I think on the first night—how as you're sitting here on this retreat, people who have been on this three-month retreat previously know that you're here and they're inspired. Or friends that you have in your sangha or just in your community, some of them are probably quite inspired. I know for many of the staff here, there's a whole different vibe, a whole different quality when this retreat goes on. Simply your willingness to be here has a huge impact on others. And I feel it's important to remember that, so your practice can start to break out of the confinement of the self-centric world.

I find it a striking image—just the image of balance on this bamboo pole.

And what allows things to remain in balance is paying attention. That's where all of us who are involved don't get harmed. When we pay attention in this particular way with mindfulness, we don't get harmed in this world. There's less harm.

I find the image quite striking too, because if you think of being on top of that bamboo pole, it gives me the sense of this quality that we're all intertwined with one another. This is the situation that we find ourselves in. We find ourselves on top of a bamboo pole with all of the other beings in this universe—which I think really points to this interdependent quality of the world that we live in.

There is a sutra that came out later in Buddhism called the Avatamsaka Sutra, usually translated as the Flower Garland Sutra. The last chapter tells the story of a young boy, Sudhana, who ventures on a spiritual journey. And out of this journey, one of the images presented is Indra's net, which some of you might be familiar with. Indra's net is a net that expands infinitely outward in all directions. And in each node of the net, there is a jewel. If you were to look into one of those jewels, you would see reflected within it all of the other jewels in the net. One jewel, and you see all the other jewels—the infinite number of jewels within one jewel. This interdependent quality is the reality that we live in.

I want to bring this up because I want to spend a little more time on this idea that this practice reaches much farther than your own lives. I want to give an example on the healing level, which I find striking. Because not only is this about awakening, but for many of us, this is about healing as well.

There's a story I heard of a woman who had been in many abusive relationships. She would get into a relationship, and it would become violent. She would exit that relationship, eventually, with difficulty, only to find herself yet again in another relationship that was abusive and violent like the previous one. But then she really started to truly

heal, to deeply heal from this dynamic. And it was interesting how she conceptualized it. What she realized was that she was healing from a dynamic that felt like it stretched back for generations in her family.

When she started to understand this, it was an incredible journey for her. She began to have this feeling that she was stopping a dynamic that went well beyond her life. From her cultural worldview, she started having dreams and a sense that her ancestors, especially the women in her family, were supporting her. And not only supporting her—it was as if they were being healed as well from what she was doing.

It was a beautiful description. There's something really powerful about it: she wasn't the only one healing. Generations that had come before her were healing too, and of course generations coming after her wouldn't have to experience that pattern.

You might have a different worldview, but I want to point out that the same kind of thing is going on here on retreat. Isn't that a cool thing just to consider? That you're putting an end to old habitual patterns that, in this framework, have probably been going on for generations within your family. What a remarkable thing that they finally begin to stop. They might course through our minds again and again, but gradually, they cease to have that stranglehold on this system. Generations of habitual patterns stopping because of this retreat. And of course, in terms of Buddhist cosmology, it's endless lifetimes that have been built up.

Do you see how this fits with the image of Indra's net? What you're doing here on this retreat is all intertwined. When you sit here, it's going to reverberate. There's no way it can't. There's no way this can happen in a vacuum. And maybe at times in your practice, you have this worry about being so self-centered, sitting here, struggling with your stuff. But the fact is, it actually isn't your stuff. It goes well beyond you. For better and for worse, it's what you've inherited.

So that's the amazing thing about this practice. It's actually impossible to be completely self-centered when we begin to really sink into it. It's virtually impossible.

Perhaps you might try it sometime—see if you can make your practice completely self-centered, have it be only about you. Maybe take those cosmic scissors and see if you can cut out some of the jewels from Indra's net. But it doesn't work that way. It's impossible.

The other benefit of having this sense—and this is really important, as I mentioned—is truly understanding that all of the things that arise really have nothing to do with you. It's the activity of this mind that's been conditioned by all these patterns that come before us. So what a noble thing to do, to actually sit down with them, to allow for something new or something freeing to arise in this world.

I want to reiterate—I'm sure you can see now—this is not about doing something different while you're here. Of course, we do the small things that Carol mentioned and I repeated at the beginning of the talk. But it's more about allowing this practice to have a broader sense to it, to allow it not to be confined by this self-centric world. It's about letting go of this fixed sense of self that runs so deep.

I want to spend some time now speaking about how this altruistic intention—this intention for awakening, for liberation, for the benefit of all beings—is intertwined with absolute bodhicitta, this wisdom about emptiness. What is all this emptiness stuff about? How does it fit with vipassana, and more importantly, with compassion?

I want to simplify it, so this is not going to be a talk about the sixteen kinds of emptiness, or the eighteen kinds, or the twenty kinds, for those of you familiar with Tibetan Buddhism. Rather, let's see if we can situate it within the practice all of us are doing here.

Simply put, emptiness refers to the fact that all phenomena lack an inherent, fixed existence or essence. You find this in the early discourses. Ananda was spending time with the Buddha and asked, "Venerable One, what does it mean that the world is empty?" The Buddha basically replied that what is meant by the world being empty is that the world is empty of anything pertaining to a self. It's empty of a self. There's this quality of not-self or non-self within experience. And of course, later in Buddhism, this expands to really seeing that there's no kind of fixed, inherent existence with anything found within this universe.

How do we relate this to our practice here? The way I understand it is that this definition of emptiness, this simpler way of understanding it, basically means that what we're experiencing is not as real as we usually make it out to be.

Guy gave that example of walking in the forest and feeling like there's a snake there—the fear arises, but actually it's just a rope. The process of seeing, "Oh, this is not as real as I thought it was"—that's the quality of emptiness. The mind is placing much more there than is really there. Joseph shared with us the quote from Dilgo Khyentse

Rinpoche about how our thoughts are like a rainbow. These thoughts that course through our minds create this whole reality that feels so solid, but it's more like a rainbow. When you really see it, it's not completely there. It's not as real as we think it is.

Let me give some examples, just to be crystal clear. I want to give a big, gross example, and then get more refined in terms of our meditation.

To me, the best example is this: Have you ever sent off an email, maybe one where you had to think carefully about what you were writing? There's a lot involved in the email. You send it off, click send. A day goes by. Two days go by. Then thoughts start to creep up: Why aren't they writing me? I think they're really upset with me. I know why they're not writing—it's because of those sentences I put in the email. And it's because of when I saw them the other day at the market where I didn't say hello to them.

Then maybe a few days go by, you get an email, and you find out they were just sick. There's the realization: I created this whole world that doesn't exist, that's not real. That's noticing the empty nature of this thought world—it's empty.

And of course, that's what's happening on this retreat. I'm sure you've seen all the stories about ourselves and others, and how huge they can start to feel. The practice is to see that this is just a thought that arises and passes away. Have you noticed, when the mind really sees that clearly, how powerful it is, how freeing it can be? Just that—just to be able to note with clarity: thinking, or wandering, or planning. It's seeing that it's not as real as you once thought it was.

And of course, there are deeper levels to that.

There could be even deeper seeing—noticing the empty nature of this thought that "I am here" and "all of you are out there," or "I am here" and "the world is out there." Sometimes it feels like awareness has some kind of location to it. And with practice, a lot of times that gets undermined. So empty in that sense.

This kind of emptiness is actually embedded in the practice that you're doing. It undermines the belief in this constructed reality that the mind has created. When that happens, what's occurring? That's basically dismantling this self-centric world. Because that self-centric world is a created world that's not real.

And you might notice that once this begins to dismantle, a natural quality of compassion arises. You might want to do an experiment around this. I find it quite fascinating to notice that when the mind is not so lost in conceptualizing about the world, some-

times what I notice is there's much more of this quality of intimacy—this kind of spiritual intimacy with the world around me. Notice if that's true or not. For me, that's where compassion truly arises: through that intimacy.

I want to point out also what emptiness is *not*. This is really important. Because a lot of times there can be this thought that emptiness means "everything is empty, none of this matters." And actually, even the phrase "everything is empty" or "none of it matters"—what is that? That's a thought. So it's not like we're trying to latch onto a thought and say, "This is emptiness." It's more the process of seeing that things are not as real as we believe them to be. Not about nothing existing, or that all of it's meaningless.

I'd like to share with you a description, a view, that I think can be confused with emptiness. You might know this quote. I hope some of you do:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

If you might remember, these are the words of Macbeth in the play that Shakespeare wrote. To remind you, he says these words when his world is falling apart. He's done some pretty heinous crimes, and everyone's leaving him. His wife has just died. His life and his rule are falling apart. And for him, nothing matters. His wife's death signifies nothing. His actions signify nothing. And life, which is this "poor player," means nothing.

Emptiness is not about "my life is meaningless" or that nothing matters. It's important to remember that the Buddha was teaching in a specific context—that of suffering and the end of suffering. And actually, he encourages us to take up really important "stories," such as the story that our actions have consequences, and the importance of ethical behavior that results from that understanding.

How do we allow this practice of emptiness to unfold, or this realization of emptiness to unfold that I'm speaking about? As I was mentioning in my last talk, it's really easy. It's simply engaging in the practice that you're doing. Your job description is super simple: aware. Simply being aware with this quality of intelligence or kindness that's been mentioned again and again. Relying on mindfulness. Insight and realization actually aren't in our job description. We don't have to worry about that, which is such a wonderful thing. Just sticking with the job description so that these realizations can start to move through our practice.

So again, this altruistic intention—having a practice that's for the benefit of all beings. And again, just those simple instructions that Carol gave us. You might at the beginning of each sit, or each walking, or in the morning, just place that intention really clearly. And then at the end of sits, and maybe even a walking meditation, share the merit. It's not something you have to think about throughout the day.

I'd like to end with a dedication connected with Red Tara that I feel really speaks to both the absolute and relative quality of bodhicitta. It goes like this:

Throughout my many lives and until this moment, whatever virtue I have accomplished, including the merit generated by this practice and all that I will ever attain...

This I offer for the welfare of sentient beings. May sickness, war, famine, and suffering be decreased for every living being, while their wisdom and compassion increase in this and every future life. May I clearly perceive all experiences to be as insubstantial as the dream fabric of the night, and instantly awaken to perceive the pure wisdom display in the arising of every phenomenon. May I quickly attain enlightenment in order to work ceaselessly for the liberation of all sentient beings.

Let us sit together for a few moments in silence.

CHAPTER 17

The Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Greg Scharf · 59 min

> *In this comprehensive talk, Greg Scharf illuminates the Buddha's teaching on the luminous nature of mind and how the seven factors of enlightenment (bojjhaṅga) function to free it from adventitious defilements. He begins with the profound teaching that the mind is inherently luminous, with greed, hatred, and delusion being merely 'visiting' forces rather than intrinsic qualities. This understanding forms the foundation for appreciating how the bojjhaṅgas naturally arise to support awakening.*
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> *Scharf systematically examines each factor: sati (mindfulness), which gathers and balances the others; dhammavicaya (investigation of dhammas), a direct intuitive discerning rather than intellectual analysis; vīriya (energy), characterized by courage and perseverance; pīti (rapture), which infuses experience with delight and can even arise during difficult moments; passaddhi (calm), which dispels the heat of agitation; samādhi (concentration), born from continuity of mindfulness; and upekkhā (equanimity), the profound balance that prepares the mind for liberation.*
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> *The talk emphasizes that these factors arise organically through the cultivation of the four satipaṭṭhānas—we create conditions for their natural development rather than forcing them. Three factors energize the mind while three bring tranquility, with mindfulness maintaining their balance. Scharf concludes with the Buddha's words describing those whose minds are 'well developed in the factors of enlightenment' as 'the luminous ones with taints destroyed, fully quenched in the world.'*

There are two short statements that the Buddha made in one teaching that are deceptively simple, but I think they're actually quite profound. I'd like to read them to begin this evening.

"Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements. Luminous, bhikkhus, is this mind, and it is freed from adventitious defilements."

These two short statements, one following the other, are part of a longer teaching. The word *adventitious* is not one we use often, so it's good to define it. It means not an inherent part of something. In essence, more simply, you could say it means visiting. It's transient. In this case, these defilements he spoke about are not an inherent part of the mind.

I love the fact that both of these statements begin with the words "luminous is this mind." In the first, the mind may be defiled by these visiting forces. In the second, the mind is freed from those same visiting forces. In both cases, the mind may be defiled by them—they may be present—or it may be free of them. But this luminous quality is there in either case. That's the starting point. That's the basis for this teaching.

This word *luminous* has to do with light, a quality of being suffused with or glowing with light—clear, enlightening, shining. These are definitions from the dictionary.

These adventitious defilements, these visiting forces, are of course the various manifestations of what we call the three unwholesome roots: greed, hatred, and confusion or delusion. That's what he's referring to with these adventitious defilements, and all the different ways those can manifest—as ill will and fear and doubt and desire and dullness, stubbornness. They show up in all these ways.

I think it's really important for us to reflect as we go through our days here, to remind ourselves that these are just visitors, that they aren't an inherent, intrinsic part of who we are. They're not inherent to the mind. They may show up quite a lot, and at times they do cloud the mind. They do obscure, for periods of time, this natural luminous quality of the heart, of the mind. But they don't change anything fundamental about its nature. The mind is not changed by these things that show up at times.

One aspect of our practice, one part of what we're doing here, you could say, is reconnecting with this inherent luminous quality of the mind, of the heart—rediscovering who we are beneath habits of mind, beneath patterns of reactivity that often diminish what we hold ourselves capable of, what we believe to be possible for us as humans.

All of us, I think, can reflect on moments—they may be brief and fleeting—when we do have a connection with this empty, aware, luminous quality of the mind, of the heart. This essential nature that's already aware and already free, because it's never been any other way. We touch that at times in our practice when we connect with just pure presence, knowing the moment just as it is. And even though this connection may not last, may be fleeting, just because we lose sight of this luminous mind does not in any way negate the reality of it. It does not diminish that truth in any way.

The forces of habit, these deeply conditioned mental patterns that we have, are very powerful. Maybe they're lifetimes old, some of them—many lifetimes old, if we hold that kind of view. We see these patterns operating in our lives, some pattern that we feel like we've seen through from every side. We know it up one side and down the other. And yet we still find it arising. We find ourselves getting hooked again in something

that we can watch ourselves doing. It's like rising to the bait—I'm going to bite it—and we can see it happening. That's the power of these things. These habits die hard, some of them.

The power of these adventitious defilements, these visiting energies, is strong. They're very strong. They're not to be underestimated. We have been engaging with them for a long time, and in many ways we've held them as a strategy for how we have lived in the world. So of course they arise. Of course they're there. Of course they visit and obscure this luminous mind at times.

Luckily, there are powerful, wholesome mental factors that naturally arise, that come to our aid in practice.

And they have the function to directly incline the mind towards freedom, towards awakening, towards enlightenment.

Another statement of the Buddha's: "Because 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 are the seven? The enlightenment factor of mindfulness, the enlightenment factor of investigation, of energy, of rapture, of calm, of concentration, and of equanimity. These seven.

That's a powerful statement. Not one other thing so effective in leading to the abandoning of these fetters that cloud and trouble the mind and heart. It's worth having a look at these factors of awakening, so we'll look at them this evening.

The Pali word for these factors of awakening is *bojjhanga*. *Bojjhanga*—Mr. Bojangles. Now you're going to have that song in your head. Some of these Pali words are really nice; they roll off the tongue. The *bojjhangas*. *Bo* is the same root as *bodhi*—awake. And *jhanga* is like a causative factor, or a limb. It's a factor of becoming awake, an awakening factor.

These healthy, wholesome, beautiful factors arise when the conditions are right. Their effect in our hearts and minds is to weaken and even help to remove the afflictive states of the *kilesas*, the defilements. The Buddha spoke to this natural way that 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 towards *nibbana*."

Like that. We're slanting and sloping towards *nibbana*—this natural inclination in that direction with these factors. As we develop and cultivate them, or as this happens as a natural part of the deepening of our practice, we are inclining towards awakening. It's a very optimistic point of view.

Often throughout the suttas, the Buddha would speak of the path and various factors within his teaching in terms of causes and conditions that would lead to their arising, often in terms of the nutriments that support and sustain them. In another place he said, "I say, bhikkhus, that true knowledge and liberation have a nutriment. They are not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment of true knowledge and liberation? It should be said—the seven factors of enlightenment."

These *bojjhangas* also have their causes and conditions for their arising. They're sustained by nutriment as well—the nutriment of wise and careful attention. Again he said, "The seven factors of enlightenment too, I say, have a nutriment. They are not without nutriment. And what is the nutriment of the seven factors of enlightenment? It should be said—the four establishments of mindfulness."

Well, that's wonderful, because that goes to the heart of what we've been talking about this whole retreat and what we're practicing. Mindfulness of the four foundations, the four *satipatthanas*, the four establishments of mindfulness. Whether you notice it or not, that's what you're doing all day long—engaging with that practice. So that's good news for us.

If we bring mindfulness in a relaxed, clear, steady, continuous way—and it doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be pretty good—if we bring mindfulness to this flow of our experience, to our life, then these factors of awakening arise. They're gathered together and arise as a natural result. It's an organic process. What we do, in essence, is create an environment where they will arise naturally, organically. It's all natural process. The whole deal is just a natural process.

In the same way, these defilements of mind—the fetters, the *kilesas*, these energies which bind the heart—they obscure this natural luminous quality of the mind, of the heart. They also have their nutriment, causes and conditions that cause them to arise. They're sustained by unwise or careless attention, by heedlessness. That is what sustains them.

You could say it another way: the factors of awakening and these defilements of mind both require a certain kind of internal environment to arise and then to stick around, to flourish. We could make parallels for this in nature. If you walk around out-

side here at IMS, if you go into the woods, there are ferns and other kinds of plants that do well in there. If you were to transplant them out into the full sun in the field, they wouldn't do well.

They wouldn't flourish there. And if you took some of the field grasses or the plants that do well in meadows and put them under the trees, they wouldn't do well there. Different animals, too—animals that need it to be cool and damp, like slugs and snails, they don't do well out in the sunny pastures. So we see this is just the kind of environment that they need to be able to live and flourish and live well.

And so the key condition for the factors of awakening, the factors of enlightenment, to flourish, to grow, to come to development is the light of mindfulness. They need light the way plants need sunlight. And the kilesas—they don't do well in the light of awareness. They need the cloudiness or the darkness of unawareness, of heedlessness, to flourish. That's the nutriment, the environment you could say they need.

So I'll list these factors again. The first one is sati, mindfulness. The second is dhamma vicaya, investigation of dhammas. The third is viriya, effort or energy, courageous energy. The fourth is pīti, rapture, sometimes called joyful interest. The fifth is passaddhi, calm. The sixth is samādhi, concentration. And the last is upekkhā, equanimity. So these are the seven bojjhangas.

Sometimes—I know for myself—in the early days when I would hear a talk on this subject, I would hear it as a list of qualities that I didn't have and had never even had a glimpse of. That's how it would strike me. We may hear this kind of talk and think, "Well, there's another list of things that I have no idea where they are or if I've ever seen one of them."

And so it's important to remember that these things have a subtle way of manifesting. They show up in a much more subtle way than the defilements. They're often obscured by these defilements. The troublesome mind states are like raging storms, while the factors of awakening have a more subtle manifestation. We need to start to be able to recognize them. They may be somewhat hidden in our experience. We start to get to know them.

So I'm going to talk about each one, at least briefly. One could easily give an entire talk on each one of them, and that has been done. But that's not what I'm going to do. I'm giving a broad overview of these seven factors.

Sati, mindfulness, is the first one, and in a way, it's in its own category. It's funny—we were talking the other day, the teaching team, about different ways that thoughts manifest. For some people it seems to be words, and for some more images, pictures. We all

have both, of course, but it seems like certain types have more of one or the other. I don't know. I see a lot of pictures. When I think of these seven factors, there's a picture there. And mindfulness is out in front. It's like a boat, and the others are pulled along behind it.

So it's in its own kind of category because its function is to gather together and balance the others. And it's the only one of them that it's said we can't have too much of. We can have too much of the others and things get out of balance, because the way they function well is when they're balanced. But mindfulness—we can't have too much mindfulness. And so it's as though the other factors are pulled along, following in the wake of mindfulness, flowing along behind it. That's the key. And all good things flourish when mindfulness is present.

We've spoken a lot about mindfulness over these weeks, talked about it in various ways. I'll mention a few of the key points.

The very word is related to a word for remembering, and that's a big part of its function—remembering the present moment, remembering to be here. It's what gets us to show up; this is one of its primary functions. It connects us with the moment in its present arising.

Mindfulness has a non-preferential and non-interfering quality. It doesn't choose anything. It's like a mirror—it reflects whatever's there, not picking this and leaving other things away. It can be aware of anything, and it doesn't choose. It doesn't interfere with experience. It just brings us face to face with this process of our mind, body, and heart.

Mindfulness is characterized by a quality of non-superficiality. There's an image—I'm not sure where this comes from—of the difference between throwing a cork or something that floats easily onto a stream of moving water versus throwing a stone into the water. The cork just rides along the top, bobs along and flows on the surface of the stream. But the stone would sink right down to the bottom of the streambed. Mindfulness is likened to the stone in that it sinks below the surface. It's not superficial. It goes more to the heart of things.

So this quality of mindfulness functions to gather together and balance these other six factors. The others are grouped into two categories of three—three that have the function to energize the mind, the heart, to bring energy and uplift, and three that have the function to bring calm and tranquility. This balance of energy and calm, energy and

tranquility—this is a lot of what is being worked with in our practice as we cultivate these factors. They have to be balanced to function well, and that's part of what mindfulness does. It takes care of a lot of things for us.

You could say the mind that opens to liberation arises out of this balance in the mind and heart, where we're not too high or blissed out, not too caught in analysis and thinking about—that comes with energetic states—and we're not too cooled out, where we slide off into dullness or stupor or fogginess. Because if we're out of balance either way, we tend to disconnect from the moment, to disconnect from the truth, from reality.

This balance leads to a mind and heart that are open and receptive—this balance of energy and calm, of tranquility and energy—leads to a mind and heart that are open, balanced, and receptive. There's a real inner strength that comes from this balance that allows us to open to things. We don't go into extremes of agitation or restlessness or worry, or fall off into dullness and stupor.

I'll start with the energizing factors. The first one is investigation of dhammas, of things as they are. It's a factor of investigation. Sometimes using the word investigation can be a little problematic in talking about this factor, because for many of us, we tend to think of it as more of an intellectual analysis, a thinking about, a figuring out on that level. I think it reflects a lot of our training, our schooling—to look at investigation this way. But this kind of investigation is an intuitive, direct discerning. It's a direct touching. It distinguishes the characteristics of phenomena in a direct way, not in an analytical way.

Someone once used a description as though one were in a darkened room without light, and were given a flashlight and could turn it on and begin to shine that light around and see what's there. We use that kind of image for this investigation. It points to things, shows what's there—a direct seeing of it.

So it has this quality of drawing our attention near to whatever's happening in our experience. It increases our connection, our intimacy with it. You could say it functions in that way. There's a sense, as this factor is developed, of really connecting or plunging into—almost a kind of diving into—the flow of experience a little more directly and deeply.

It connects us with what are called the *paramattha dhammas*, which are usually translated as ultimate realities. We could say it connects us with the direct knowing of things free of concepts about them, of ideas—beneath our concepts and ideas, you could say.

I guess last week I talked about the four elements, this way of investigating or relating to the experience of materiality in the body, in the world, internally and externally, in terms of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. These are said to be the paramatthadhammas, a really fundamental way of seeing materiality in terms of these qualities. Investigation helps to reveal those.

And it also reveals what are said to be the universal or common characteristics. It doesn't stop at these unique individual characteristics of things that arise—like hardness and softness, coolness and warmth in terms of the material elements. It then also touches into the common characteristics of all things, of all phenomena: the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and coreless quality or characteristic of all things. It's through seeing these universal characteristics that liberating insight arises. All of insight arises in relation to seeing deeply into these three universal, common characteristics.

This factor of investigation tends to immerse us more in our experience. There's a quality of interest and curiosity that comes along with that direct touching, that direct intimacy with our life. And it doesn't matter so much what the experience or object of our attention might be. It doesn't have to be something that we would think of in everyday life as interesting.

You could see this in terms of mindfulness of breathing. Most people, if you stopped them on the street and said, "Well, isn't the in-breath interesting? The out-breath?" they're going to slowly back away and say, "Have a nice day." They're not generally going to agree that it's a really fascinating subject to think about or have any relationship to. But in our meditation, it can be fascinating, can't it, if we're really there with it?

So the interest is not in the object. It's in our relationship to it. That seems obvious, but actually it's quite an important point. Where does the interest come from? That's a mental factor. It's in the mind. It's not inherent in any particular object.

The second of these energizing factors is viriya. Joseph already spoke at great length in an entire talk on this quality of effort or energy, so I'll just reiterate a few key points. Joseph spoke a lot about it in terms of qualities of courage and perseverance—two key qualities. There's a kind of bravery with this quality of energy and effort that's actually really important, because this isn't easy. Any of us who have been on this path for any length of time know that often it's not easy. A lot of the time it's not easy. We need to have qualities of courage and real perseverance, the steadiness, a steadfastness that keeps us going through the ups and downs.

That's a very key part of this quality of energy or effort—a feeling that we're not faltering in the face of the ups and downs of our life, of our practice, of our experience over the day and over the long haul. We're not fighting against it and struggling on the one hand, and we're not shrinking away and retreating in the face of changing experience. We have a certain kind of strength there, a bravery, a courage, and a perseverance.

There's a key to the use of effort or energy: finding what is right effort. It would be nice if we could just get it and then say, "Okay, this is right effort, and it'll just work now for the rest of this life." But it's a constant process of balancing. What's right effort in one moment may not be in another. This is a constant dance. We don't just get it in place—it's constantly being refined and adjusted as our practice unfolds. Too much effort and we can get tense and tired and restless, and eventually we wear ourselves out, get exhausted. Too little effort and we fall into a dull, sleepy place.

So it's that balance of effort. And then with right or wise balanced effort, our attention lands right on the object and doesn't crush it with too much zeal. It doesn't slide off and lose touch. It just lands lightly there, like a bird. In this way, when effort is balanced, there's a sustainable quality to our practice. It's doable.

Too much effort might be thinking, "I'm going to be mindful for the whole day." That's a tall order. But we can be mindful for this moment, and then the next one. It's this light effort made repeatedly over time—that's more sustainable. That's really key. Just this moment. That's all we're doing anyway. And if we hold it that way, it's much more doable. It's this moment, and then the next one if we happen to still be here. And if we're not, we will show up sooner or later, and we'll do it then. We bring our sincerity to that.

The third of these factors is pīti—rapture, joy, or joyful interest, as various translations render this word. Sally spoke about it the other night as one of the jhānic factors of concentration. These qualities show up on more than one list. So it has that function there, and it's also here on the factors of enlightenment list.

This quality of rapture or joyful interest has characteristics of delight, of happiness, even of satisfaction as part of its experience. It possesses these qualities in and of itself—you could say those are aspects of its own characteristic. But it also has the ability to infuse other objects or other experiences with these qualities of joy and happiness and delight. It pervades them. It can bring a real deep delight to practice.

This is really useful because we can get very serious in our practice. I think it's good to look at the word "serious." We are sincere. We're committed. We're dedicated. Those are all good things. So if that's what we mean by serious, fine. But if it means we're serious in a way that involves a kind of heavy bearing down, then that's not such a useful quality of seriousness. Sometimes we can lose touch with the quality of joyful interest.

Pīti is a spiritual joy. It's not just having-a-good-time kind of joy, even though it may be quite delightful and pleasant in the mind and heart. It can sometimes lift us out of an overly serious way of approaching our practice.

There's one definition, more of a technical definition, of this quality of pīti. It's said that its characteristic is endearing—I like that. It has the characteristic of being endearing, of infusing things with an endearing quality. Its function is to refresh the body and mind. It has a refreshing quality. And its manifestation is a kind of elation or uplifting.

When pīti is strong, it can fill the mind and body with qualities of lightness and agility, flexibility. It can enhance that. There may be physical sensations that come along with this. It's a mental quality, but it affects the body, the way I was talking the other day about how mind and body condition one another. When this is strong, there may be very pleasant physical sensations in the body, although at times the physical sensations may show up as things that are not that pleasant—certain kinds of pressure. It can be too strong sometimes and not always be experienced as pleasant.

Pīti is a kind of joy that comes out of the quality of intimacy that arises through our mindfulness, through investigation, through effort. All of these bring us to more intimacy with life. And pīti arises from that intimacy.

And as I was saying, qualities of interest, joyful interest—they don't depend on what we would conventionally call interesting objects in some traditional way of thinking. This quality of piti can even arise in relation to something we would describe as difficult or painful. But if we're really there and connected, this quality can arise even at those times. That's really interesting. Even when we're being mindful of something we could describe as very strong, unpleasant, painful sensation in the body, this quality of joyful interest can arise even then. And it pervades our experience with this quality of delight. It has a transforming effect in those moments. It's quite amazing, actually, to see this. It infuses things with happiness.

It's said that there are five kinds of this rapture, this joy of piti. There's minor or lesser rapture—sometimes goosebumps and chills and shivering feelings in terms of its physical sensation. You don't have to worry about these, but they're kind of interesting.

There's momentary rapture that's said to come like flashes of lightning, intense jolts of it that come through. There's a showering rapture that comes like waves and showers down. There's uplifting rapture, and sometimes the mind and the body can feel very light, almost like a floating quality with that uplifting rapture. And it's said that when it's really strong, it will actually lift us up off the ground.

I have a sweet story. I might not have time, but I like it. I'm in the mood. I heard it once—it's a story from the Visuddhimagga, and Joseph used it in one of his talks. At the time when I was listening, it brought a lot of joy into my heart right in the hearing of it, because I'm a devotional kind of guy. So maybe it'll do that for some of you.

This is a story of a young woman back in ancient times—the time of the Buddha, let's say. She was in the village of Watakalaka near a monastery, the Jirkandaka Monastery. Her parents were going to go to the monastery because it was a full moon night—even though the moon's not out now, it was a night like tonight—and they were going to listen to the Dhamma and visit the monastery. The young woman was pregnant. She had gone to her parents' house to give birth, as was the tradition. And her parents said, "No, you should stay home. It's not a good time for you to go out because you're near the time of giving birth. We'll go listen and we'll get the merit on your behalf." She wanted to go, but she said okay and stayed home.

She went out onto the balcony of their house, which was somehow on a hill where she could look down and see the monastery grounds and the beautiful shrine there, the Akasachitya Shrine glowing in the moonlight. People were making offerings and circumambulating—quite a lovely scene. She could hear the chanting of the nuns and monks. And she thought to herself, "Oh, they're so lucky that they can go into the monastery and wander around this beautiful shrine and hear the sweet chanting and beautiful preaching of the Dhamma."

Then, watching this, she had a vision. The shrine looked like a mound of pearls—they get quite flowery in these things. And she had such joy and delight in seeing it that she rose up into the air and came down on the terrace outside the shrine. Her parents came up and said, "How did you get here? What road did you take?" And she said, "I came through the air, not by the road. I was standing gazing at the shrine in the moonlight, and a strong joy arose in me with the Buddha as its object. I didn't know if I was standing or sitting, but only that I was rising into the air. And then I came down to rest here on the terrace of the shrine."

of the shrine.

So I hope you all have this strong, uplifting rapture. Come in later, and you'll all be floating around.

The fifth kind is pervading rapture. This is said to pervade the entire body and mind. When it's strong, we can really feel a lot of ease and comfort in the body.

So these are the three energizing factors: investigation, energy or effort, and piti—rapture, joyful interest. And then there are three calming ones.

The first is calm. Passaddhi is the Pali word for calm. It's sometimes called cool calmness, and the coolness has to do with how it dispels the heat of an agitated, restless mind. Its characteristic is calming both mind and body. It will calm unrest, unease, and agitation. Its function is said to be to remove or suppress the heat of agitation. So that's this coolness of calm. You could think of heat as arising from restlessness, worry, and agitation. Calm removes this heat and replaces it with ease and coolness.

There's this non-agitation in the body, in the mind, and in the heart as calm grows strong. It really rests in the present moment. Often, as calm becomes stronger, it feels as if things become more simple—a simpleness to our experience. Or things almost slow down in a certain way. There's a relaxing into the moment when calm becomes strong.

Calm can also arise briefly. It's not always that it arrives and stays for long periods of time. There can be brief moments of calm, like a sense of momentary calm within a more stormy or energized state—like resting in the center of a storm, where there's at least brief resting within a highly energized, agitated state.

It's said that this calm invariably follows after the arising of joy, of rapture, especially this pervading kind of rapture that infuses the body. Calm is said to often, almost always, follow on from that. When it's strong, there can be a lot of sense of being able to sit in meditation for longer periods. There may be no wish to get up at all. That's a factor of calm.

The second of the tranquilizing factors is samādhi, concentration. We've talked about this as well. Concentration is characterized by non-distractedness or non-scatteredness of mind. The mind tends to stay with the object. Even if it's changing objects, the mind tends to stay there, not wandering off, not slipping off. So the attention has a kind of stillness and connectedness—really connected with the moment just as it is.

This quality of samādhi gathers together and stabilizes the mind and mental factors. Things are not scattering off. It keeps them in a group. They don't disperse—non-dispersedness. The mind tends to really remain with the object, and there's a movement towards greater stillness and quiet in the mind as it strengthens.

As we've mentioned, there are two ways one can develop concentration, samādhi. One is on a single object to the exclusion of all others, where we keep the attention on one object, turning away from any other—that kind of continuous concentration on a single object. And then there's momentary concentration, what's called khaṇika samādhi, which is concentration on changing objects, momentary objects.

You can think of samādhi as born of the continuity of mindfulness, whether with a single object or changing objects. That's where samādhi comes from. It's that continuity of connection; it grows from that. And that can be even with objects that may be changing very quickly—samādhi can grow and strengthen.

The jhānic factors that Sally spoke about apply in either one of these ways of developing concentration, whether it's on a single object or this khaṇika samādhi. Those same factors of vitakka, vicāra, pīti, sukha, and ekaggatā all come into play. They develop and strengthen in either way of practicing.

So it's this continuity of mindfulness that has fewer and fewer gaps or breaks in it that develops this quality of samādhi. When it's strong, it brings great tranquility and connection to the mind, brings strength and power and composure. It's a great relief from the wandering mind.

from the restless mind. It's like we're settled into a kind of zone when samadhi is strong. We're not pushed and pulled around by experience.

Concentration is really said to be one of the keys to the arising of insight and wisdom—the proximate cause for that. And we can see how this would be the case, because when the mind is stable and still to some extent, it doesn't have to be perfect, but this stability and calm collectedness of samadhi allows for there to be space for insight to arise. The mind is not running all over the place. Insight into the more subtle nature of things can show up when the mind is more stable.

So then the last of these tranquilizing factors, the final factor of awakening, is upekkhā—equanimity. This is the sense of balance in the face of the changing nature of our experience. Equanimity is a state of mind that rests in the center of things. You could say it's not pulled to extremes. It allows us to be with things just as they are without falling into reactivity in relation to them.

As equanimity becomes strong, as it begins to develop, patterns of reactivity that we may have seen in our hearts and minds tend to not arise so much. As it becomes stronger, they don't arise at all. The mind is not moved by things. Things that can often bother us just lose all power to upset us.

Sometimes people worry that this quality of equanimity points to some way that we become indifferent or not connected, that it has a quality of not feeling, of numbness. This is not at all the case with equanimity. It's not a numb, indifferent state at all. Indifference is actually said to be the near enemy of equanimity because it can sort of resemble it. But indifference is actually disconnected—it's not there. Equanimity, however, is totally connected. It feels everything intimately, just as it is, but from a state of balance in relation to what's arising. So there's no quality of indifference or apathy or disdain. It's just not preferential. This non-preferential quality is strong.

And it's a great relief when this factor begins to strengthen. It's said that equanimity will fill in where there is a lack, and it will remove where there's an excess. It's a quality of balance that comes with this—it fills in where something is lacking and removes when there's too much.

When this balance of mind is strong, it can at times feel as though we don't have to really make much effort to be mindful. The practice starts to feel as though it's just doing itself. There's a kind of momentum, but a balanced kind of momentum. This is part of its manifestation. There's an image that's used: it's likened to someone who's driving a wagon or carriage pulled by a team of horses, and the driver just lets the horses do the work and settles back. It's a quality of settling back and letting the mindfulness carry us along.

When equanimity really begins to become very strong, very powerful in our practice, in our minds, it develops into what is sometimes called high equanimity, or sometimes it's called equanimity regarding formations—sankhārupekkhā ñāna, the insight knowledge of equanimity regarding formations. Sometimes it's also called six-limbed equanimity because it arises at the sixth sense door, as you could say. There's equanimity arising in any aspect of experience at any sense door—this six-limbed equanimity.

At times when equanimity really is characterizing our practice in great part, when it's very strong, things can become very smooth. The mindfulness becomes very agile, you could say. It just stays with the object very easily. It does it itself. The mind is not moved by anything. Pleasant, unpleasant—it does not move the mind. It's a very high quality of balance. There's no chance for attachment or aversion. They can't arise in that. They just don't show up.

It's said that when equanimity is very highly developed, it's similar to the mind of a fully awakened being, of an arahant—this unshakable quality of balance.

description of when the Buddha-to-be, the Bodhisattva, in the night of his awakening was sitting under the Bodhi tree. And he's assailed by the armies of Mara, all these different weapons and things to try to get him to move—everything possible. And it's said the Great One's mind was not moved. It's this very refined, powerful equipoise of high equanimity.

And it's this balance, this great balance of mind, of heart, that is what prepares the mind to let go into the unconditioned, you could say—to open to the realization of nibbana, this great balance of mind, of heart.

To a certain extent, there is a way that the development of these factors of awakening does flow in the sense that I've spoken about tonight. In some ways, that is true. And yet at the same time, they're all present. So it's not like this one and then that one and then that one in a stepping way. But there is a bit of a flow, the energizing ones tending to lead to the calming ones. There are times in our practice where we see them all there and we see them balancing one another. You see that just as a natural process. So it's not that it's only a linear progression—it's not that. But there is a certain aspect to that organically culminating in this quality of high equanimity.

I want to say to end tonight that the key thing to get out of this talk—at least one thing—is the understanding that the continuity of mindfulness is what gathers together and develops and brings these along. They flow in the wake of that. So we don't have to do them all in any kind of a doing. We just have to keep going steadily with gentle perseverance with our practice. And they come along. They flow along. Be sure and remember that it's not a doing of these things so much.

We start to learn to recognize them, to taste them, to develop a taste for them. In a sense, that's part of what happens in the practice. Because we've been using strategies of greed, hatred, and delusion as strategies for finding happiness—going for the pleasant, getting away from the unpleasant, falling into confusion in between those two. That's been our strategy for a long time in some ways. So we have a certain taste for those things, even if we see that they don't really work.

Part of what we do is develop a taste for these more subtle qualities of heart that are actually, in the long run, in the end, more useful. They actually lead us onwards. They slope us and slant us towards awakening. It's their function.

And this is not easy to do. This is a real shift in orientation, a shift in our consciousness. It goes against a lot of conditioning. That's a radical shift, and it takes time for that. But we start to develop more of a taste for these things and for the deeper happiness that's possible through the development of these factors of awakening.

I'll end now with more words 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.

Having said this, the Fortunate One, the teacher, further said this:

Few are those among humankind who go beyond to the far shore. The rest of the people 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 person should develop the bright ones. 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 person would cleanse herself 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, are the luminous ones with taints destroyed, fully quenched in the world.

CHAPTER 18

Guided Mettā - Neutral Person

Joseph Goldstein · 44 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Joseph Goldstein introduces the practice of extending mettā (loving-kindness) to neutral people—those we encounter regularly but feel neither attraction nor aversion toward. He begins by reframing mettā as 'kindness' rather than 'love,' finding this more accessible and less laden with expectation. Drawing from Montaigne's description of true friendship—wanting good for another without expecting anything in return—Goldstein illuminates the pure, uncomplicated nature of genuine goodwill.*
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> *Goldstein shares a transformative personal experience from his early practice with Munindraji in India, where directing mettā to an old gardener at the Burmese Vihāra revealed a profound insight: how we feel about anyone is entirely up to us. The gardener never changed, yet through sustained practice, Goldstein's inner experience of the relationship transformed completely. This understanding—that our capacity for loving-kindness depends not on others' behavior but on our own cultivation—is deeply empowering.*
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> *The guided practice moves through self, benefactor or friend, and then to a neutral person, with instructions to find phrases that feel personally meaningful. Goldstein identifies three components of mettā practice—the feeling of goodwill, the words expressing it, and the person receiving it—encouraging practitioners to explore which aspect provides the strongest connection and to emphasize that in their practice. The session concludes by extending mettā to all beings everywhere.*

This evening we're going to continue with the metta practice, loving-kindness. I'd like to say just a few words about metta in general, and then specifically about the category of people we'll be working with this evening.

The word metta, as you know, is usually translated as loving-kindness. I've found that it's often helpful when I emphasize the kindness part rather than the love part. Because love is such a huge, small word. It has so many meanings and there's so much projection on it. Am I loving enough? Could I ever be that loving? There just seem to be a lot of complications involved in that word. So much of it is just our idealization of it from what we see in the movies. Whereas kindness somehow seems very down to earth, just very pragmatic, very accessible. Are we being kind? Are we being kind to ourselves, kind to others? So that's just a simple reflection which you might consider.

The feeling of metta, however you hold it, the loving-kindness—it's important to understand its simplicity. It's the basic feeling of goodwill. It's just wishing well, wishing well to ourselves, wishing well to others. So it's not complicated, and it doesn't necessarily mean that we're in some ecstatic state of bliss. It's the simplicity of that intention. Be happy. What's so amazing about it is that we can wish this for everyone. There's no limit on who we can wish this well-being for.

I wanted to read just a very short passage. This was from an article in the New Yorker magazine about the French essayist Montaigne, who wrote these fantastic essays on life and different aspects of life. In this article, he was being quoted describing one of the great friendships of his life, and the relationship seemed to me the perfect expression of metta.

He said, "In a truly loving relationship, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good, rather 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 just struck me how uncharacteristic that is of many of our relationships, when we're more possessive. The only wish in that expression is for his friend to be happy, and whatever makes the friend happy makes Montaigne happy. I felt like that was a good way of understanding the feeling of metta, of loving-kindness. It doesn't really expect anything back. It's just the expression of goodwill.

So this evening we're going to move on. I think you've worked with self and benefactor and friend. This evening we're going to work with a category of neutral people. When I was doing intensive metta practice the first time in India with Munindraji, my first teacher, when he came to talk about directing it to a neutral person, I wasn't even quite sure what he meant. It didn't register right away. He said, well, pick somebody that you just don't have much feeling about one way or another.

At that time I was in India living at the Burmese Vihara, and there was an old gardener, an old Indian gardener who worked there. I thought, oh, I'll do it for him. And just that recognition that this gardener whom I saw every single day was neutral, that I just didn't have any feeling about one way or another, was a bit shocking to me. That I could have such a lack of feeling or absence of feeling toward somebody who I was in contact with, even though we didn't really converse. But there he was in the same small surroundings, and I just had no feeling about him. So that was a bit shocking.

I started doing the loving-kindness, the metta. This was intensively, so I was doing it all day, every day. He became my love object. And what was so extraordinary—and this is what I think is so striking about working with a neutral person, and this was a transformative insight—was the realization that how I feel about anybody is up to me.

He didn't change at all. He was just going about doing his thing, and I doubt that he even knew that I was sending all this loving kindness his way. But for me, it totally changed how I felt about him—and the relationship from the inside. I started having these genuine feelings of kindness and care and wishing him well.

So just that insight: that how we feel totally depends on ourselves. It doesn't depend on the other person. It doesn't depend on the behavior of the other person. This is really an empowering understanding. It's only up to us whether we feel loving or not, and it's something we can practice. And we do practice it.

Let me guide us through a few minutes of practice, starting with ourselves, and then for this evening just spending a few minutes with either a benefactor or a friend—you can choose somebody for whom it's simply easy to have these feelings arise. Then when we get to the neutral person, just pick somebody. It might be somebody here that you don't know, or someone from your life situation that you meet every day but you really don't have any particular feelings about. See if you can just choose someone whose image you can call to mind, somebody who's neutral, and then we'll begin sending these loving wishes, these kind wishes to that person.

It's quite transformative, this practice. And it's very noticeable with this category of neutral beings because they go from being neutral to somebody we actually care a lot about.

As you know, it's helpful to choose phrases that are meaningful to you. I'll repeat some phrases as we start the meditation, but there's no need for you to use the ones I'm using. An important part of doing metta practice is really finding phrases that are meaningful to you and feel appropriate to the person you're sending it to, so that there's a real connection—you can get behind the wish. If you're just using phrases that somehow don't fit, then the practice gets a little mechanical.

It's helpful to sit in as comfortable a way as possible. You might take a few deep breaths and even center the feeling of the breath at the heart center, so that the awareness, the attention, rests in the area of the center of the chest, the heart, feeling the breath move from that place.

Start with the phrases directed to yourself, whichever ones are meaningful.

May I be happy and healthy. May I be free of all harm and danger. May I live in peace.

Connecting with the feeling of basic goodwill for yourself. See if you can inhabit the meaning of the words.

May I be happy and healthy. May I be free of all harm and danger. May I live in peace.

Whenever you're ready, you can call to mind either a benefactor or a good friend, somebody for whom it's easy to have these kind and loving feelings. Sometimes it's enough just to call the image to mind. We can feel that warmth, that goodwill. Take a moment to settle into the feeling itself. Let the words be the expression of that.

When you call your friend or benefactor to mind, notice the simplicity of the good feeling—simply wishing them well.

As you're resting in this field of goodwill, let the image or sense of a neutral person just slide into the field. Begin expressing that feeling of basic kindness towards this person.

May you also be happy and healthy, free of all harm and danger. May you live in peace.

Keep bringing the image of this neutral person to mind so that there's a feeling of connection. See if you can inhabit the words, the meaning of the words that are expressing your goodwill. It's as if we embody the words in each phrase.

Now spend a few minutes extending these loving feelings out to everyone in this room.

May everyone here be happy and healthy, free from all harm and danger. May everyone here be at peace.

Let this basic feeling of goodwill and kindness extend to all beings everywhere.

May all beings be happy and healthy, free of all harm and danger. May all beings be at peace.

In doing the metta practice, there are three components to it. There's the feeling of goodwill, there are the words we use to express it, and there's the person or beings that we're expressing it to. It might be interesting for you to explore if any one of these three is easiest for you to connect with. Some people might find it very easy to connect just with the feeling, even without words. For some people, the phrases are what connects us.

For some people, holding the image of the person comes very easily. You can keep that person, the image of them, very clearly and steadily in our heart-mind.

It's fine to give emphasis to any one of these three. There are ways of doing metta where we're just residing in the feeling, calling different people to mind while the feeling remains what's strongest. For other people, the feeling might not be so strong, but the meaning of the words is very clear—so then give emphasis to that. And for those of you who can hold the image very clearly, you can make that the predominant aspect of the practice, holding the image and letting the feeling and the words come in response to that image.

There are lots of ways of playing with the nuances of this practice.

CHAPTER 19

Exploring Grasping at Views

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this profound exploration of one of the Buddha's four fields of grasping (upādāna), Carol Wilson investigates how attachment to views and opinions creates suffering at both gross and subtle levels. She begins by outlining the three levels of wisdom—acquired wisdom (sutamayā paññā), contemplative wisdom (cintāmayā paññā), and insight wisdom (bhāvanāmayā paññā)—explaining how transformative insight differs from intellectual understanding through its quality of perception shift rather than rational conclusion.*
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> *Wilson examines how perception (saññā), when distorted by greed, hatred, and delusion, leads to inaccurate descriptions of reality that harden into views (diṭṭhi). She draws on teachings from Dzongsar Khyentse, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Ajahn Sumedho to illustrate how our entire experience is subjectively constructed and how clinging to views—whether political opinions, ideas about correct practice, or personality views (sakkāya-diṭṭhi)—creates rigidity and disconnection from the fluidity of direct experience.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for recognizing when we're caught in view-attachment during meditation, noting how we constantly judge our practice against implicit standards we don't realize we're holding. Wilson emphasizes that freedom comes not through reconciling all views into one correct understanding, but through the radical willingness to rest in awareness without needing to know—what Suzuki Roshi called 'beginner's mind.' She acknowledges this surrender can be both profoundly freeing and deeply unsettling, as our habitual refuge in personality views gradually dissolves through sustained practice.*

The essence of what I want to speak about tonight is just an exploration of attachment to views and opinions.

Since we were mentioning clinging, *upadana*, today—there are many places where the Buddha spoke about four fields of grasping, he called them. Just four big areas where grasping comes up a lot.

Pretty obvious, the first is sense desires. The next is grasping at views and opinions. This is a huge source of confusion and suffering. Third is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi—diṭṭhi* means view, so it's actually grasping, attachment to view of self, sense of self. So really both of those are views; I'm going to conflate them. And the fourth is rites and rituals, which is really talking about believing. It's almost back in the Buddha's day where there were beliefs—for instance, certain religious beliefs that if you washed yourself in a certain

river, that would wash away all your previous bad karma. So he's saying attachment to that is not helpful. But we could think of it almost as magical thinking, our little personal rites and rituals.

I'm not speaking about all of those tonight. I just want to talk about attachment to view, because I personally find it really fascinating. Just a warning: I can go on and on, really. But I won't. I find it fascinating.

I want to start with the Buddha's teaching about three levels of wisdom, three levels of understanding, which I think can be really useful. If we realize that things are happening on all three levels, it helps illuminate this topic.

The first is called heard, or acquired wisdom. Something we've read, something we've heard, something someone's told us—extremely useful. I mean, that's what we're up here doing, and what you read in the suttas or whatever. Acquired wisdom. Of course, because we don't know for ourselves, we don't really know what's true or not, but it's extremely useful.

The second level is sort of putting that information into practice, you could say. We contemplate it. We explore it in our experience. It's kind of using the thinking mind in a useful way. We start to understand it. Take impermanence, for example. We first hear it and go, "Yeah, it could be. Makes sense." The second level, we're thinking about it, we're consciously noticing it: "Yeah, pretty much, that seems like I could accept that." But that level still isn't transformational.

The third level is *bhāvanāmayapaññā*. *Bhāvanā* means mental cultivation. Or you could say that's the level of insight, when we talk about insight meditation. That is a level where it's transformational. That's what insight meditation is.

So what's happening? What's the nature? This is simplistic—I don't at all claim to be covering all the nature of insight. Just giving a flavor.

What's happening in a moment of insight, of dhamma insight, insight in your experience, or even some personal problem or a mathematical problem or anything? It's not like you're sitting thinking about it and go, "Yes, that makes sense. That's the rational answer," right? It's a kind of "aha" moment. It's like, wow, just all of a sudden you recognize in a different way. It's not an experience of thinking.

The way I talk about it, in terms of what I'm exploring tonight, is it's really a shift of perception. We recognize something in one way—that's just how it is—and suddenly something lets go that we didn't even know was being held, and we suddenly perceive something in a different way.

You know what I mean? You know those images where if you look at it one way, it's two vases, and then if you kind of shift your perception, it's two faces? That kind of thing. And both perceptions are there in that phenomenon, right? It's not like you get rid of one piece of paper and bring up the other one. Both ways of perceiving are there. One isn't true and one isn't false, but they're different modes of perceiving. That's a simple way of talking about it.

But really, to me it feels like that's what's happening with insight, on a gross level or on the most subtle levels. Something lets go.

And so reality doesn't change—maybe even this particular situation isn't ostensibly externally different—but because of this perceiving in a completely different, unexpected way, it opens up a whole different understanding, a whole other possibility of response.

So we're waiting for the huge insight that's going to end it all, and meanwhile we're having all these little ones. "I really understood that craving comes and goes. And when the craving for that banana is gone, it's really gone. I don't need the banana. The freedom from craving is freedom." I really got that.

So how come, two seconds later, I've got to have that banana? Like, I really got it. And I'm choosing something simple, but on deeper levels—deep personality patterns of real suffering—don't you often feel frustrated? Like, "I really understood this. Why?" And maybe not just this retreat. People have said, and this is not unique at all, "Now I'm seeing the last retreat I went through this. I really understood this, and somehow I forgot it." And now it's like, "Oh right, that. I'm having to learn it again."

Well, yes. That's why it's practice. And it's also because of the subtlety—the subtlety of levels of delusion. So we keep having insights again and again and again. I'm saying this not to be discouraging but to be encouraging. We think, "Well, now I saw it. It's over." But the perception shifts back again. Yet once we've recognized something in a different way, even when it shifts back to the other way, you know it, doesn't it? It changes something in the mind stream. There's another possibility.

And so, say with impermanence, the simplicity of really getting that the suffering in something isn't not getting what I want, but the craving itself—on some level, absolutely, I know that. Maybe not absolutely—okay, absolutely for the moment, then relatively I know it—and we forget. But that experience of really knowing, that shift of perception from "gratification comes from getting the thing" to "it's just being okay with the

craving and it's gone"—that changes something radically in my understanding. You can't give that understanding to anybody else. But at the same time, no one else can take it away from you. This is the level of insight wisdom that's really transformative.

So how does it come about? That's what we all want to know.

You may have noticed by now that it doesn't occur through willpower. It doesn't occur from wishing it. "Okay, now today I'm going to sit under this tree and I'm going to see to the depths of impermanence. Boom." The Buddha could do that—that's a different thing. That's *adhiṭṭhāna*, based in wisdom of knowing what's appropriate. That's a whole other talk. But it's not just wishing for it. And it's not by thinking about it. Something lets go that we didn't know was clinging.

There are many different ways, but what I want to talk about tonight is clinging to view, to an idea—which at a level of our insight wisdom can get very subtle. In the world, not so subtle. The suffering of clinging to views—the conflict, the pain, the hatred, the violence—is appalling and shocking. Well, it's not all the other guys; it's the same pattern down into our practice here. So that's what I want to talk about.

So say someone told me this example a few years ago. They were in a sitting and the body just got so restless, so unpleasant, so difficult that they couldn't stand it. And so they stood up—and it was in a different place. They were in the back of the room and you could only get out by threading your way through all the people, and it was really, really crowded. So social shame kept them there.

But they were sitting there, and the experience she was telling us: this vedana is so unpleasant. It's so horrible. This is causing me so much suffering. This is just horrible. I can't stand these sensations. And she was just getting completely worked up. But standing there, rather than running away, there was some modicum of mindfulness. And at some point, it shifted.

Oh. This is just unpleasant. That's all that's happening. And it's not really what's causing the suffering. It's just my mind going wild.

And it changed the whole experience. It was still restless. It was still unpleasant. But the belief that this restless experience is unbearable, causing me so much suffering—that belief, that view—was just suddenly seen and it dropped away. And so the experience itself was perceived and responded to in a radically different way.

As we all know, we can't wish that. It may not happen next time. But remembering when we experience that begins to break us out of views and descriptions of experience that we don't even know we're clinging to. We don't even know we're holding them. That's where, to me, it gets so fascinating.

So to talk about what a view is, I need to start by talking about perception, which luckily we've talked about a lot, so I don't have to go into it too much. But it's fascinating. It's just fascinating.

As you know, perception is that arising with each moment of contact, and it's that precise in the way the Buddha talked—the description, not the labeling like noting, but the recognition quality. What's happening? As the Buddha says, what we perceive, we think about. Now that doesn't have to be a problem; it's really quite useful.

So there's a perception a little while ago: you heard a sound, the perception for all of you was probably "bell," and the thought—which maybe doesn't quite bubble up to thinking—meaning, oh, it's 7:25, that bell's time for the sitting, to go into the hall, to listen to the talk. And all of these perceptions, one after the other, you come in and there's a perception of where you sit, and you're a yogi, and I sit up here. You shut up. I talk. All these perceptions—we string them together and describe our world.

It's useful. If every time the bell rang, you're all running around, "Oh, the bell! What does that mean? Where do I go?"—nothing could happen. And it works because we have, more or less, close enough, the same description of the perception of what it means, even whether it was pleasant or unpleasant in that moment for you is different. So that's just how we describe our world. Who we are, however we self-identify—all of that is normal and useful on a relative level, on a conventional level. It's not a problem.

Of course, the first place the problem begins—before we even get into views, and we've talked about this as well—is that our perception is quite frequently not accurate. And even more frequently, when it's not accurate, we have no clue that it's not accurate. We totally believe it. We think about it. We build up the description of the world based on that perception.

Sort of.

Okay, let me offer some examples. And what distorts our perception? Our friends: greed, hatred, and delusion.

The example I like to give for delusion is very impersonal. When I'm home, if I don't have my glasses on, I really don't see that well, obviously. And I like things to be clean, you know, to a certain level of observable cleanliness. So if I'm walking around my

house and it hasn't been cleaned for a while and I don't have my glasses on, I'm happy. It's clean. I don't notice anything. I'm just quite content. I don't tend to wear my glasses—you're all a blur to me when I'm just walking around if I'm not needing them for something.

But then I'll notice. I'll be working at my desk with my glasses on, and I'll leave them on when I go into the bathroom or something. And I'm sitting there going, "Whoa. What's that ball of dust? Is that a spider? What is that grunge over there?" The perception is really changed. The fogginess of delusion is gone. That's just a very simple example, but we misperceive from delusion—and then we think about what we've misperceived.

The same happens when the mind in that moment is colored by greed or aversion. I remember one day, I don't remember where it was, but it was a really misty, foggy day like yesterday. It went on all day, and I noticed for myself—it must have been a retreat—when I'd walk outside and my mind was in a happy, clinging state, I'd walk out and think, "Oh, this fog is so beautiful and cozy, and the light..." and I'd get all these thoughts about it. Then later in the day, as my body hurt and I was feeling grumpy, I'd walk out and think, "Ah, this is so oppressive. It's so heavy." Similar fog—not the same fog, a few hours later, but similar fog. Very different perception.

What we perceive, we think about. And what we think about turns into emotions, moods that go along with it. If we're aware that's happening, great—that's fascinating to bring mindfulness to. When we're not aware, then what we think hardens into a view. And without even recognizing we're attaching to it, we take that to be the true, accurate description of me, or you, or the fog, or reality at this moment.

Dzongsar Khyentse writes, "When sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object—the fog, the dirt, the banana, whatever—influenced by all the accumulated habits and past experiences of your mind, the whole process is entirely subjective."

Notice he's not saying it's kind of subjective, or a little subjective. He's saying it's *entirely* subjective.

"When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm." Have you noticed that? "When your mind is peaceful, free from clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure."

It's really interesting to see.

Or there's this funny story—probably you've heard me tell this before. I heard it from Charles Genoud, about a Zen master and a samurai.

So this wild, aggressive samurai comes to see a Zen master with his sword, angry and threatening to kill the Zen master, screaming and yelling, calling to the Zen master, "You pig! You pig!"

And the Zen master, as they do, just bowed and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

This even took the samurai back a little. He said, "A Buddha? You see me as a Buddha? How am I a Buddha?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

It's really more that way than we might realize. Again, it's not to take it personally, but just watch how this works. It's so fascinating.

So the perception colored by any one of the kilesas—and we just don't quite recognize it—leads to a description that's inaccurate, which leads to a view, and then can lead to acting on it. Sometimes we can see through it to the accurate perception, and then the whole thing falls away.

For example, someone told me at a retreat—not this retreat, a smaller retreat—that they noticed a particular yogi hadn't come to any sittings for a day or two, and they got really concerned. Which can be good. It can be good. If someone's really missing for two days, it would be good to tell us. But this wasn't here; it was somewhere else, a smaller venue.

So they started noticing after some time, "Well, they really are missing." And all the thoughts and all the worry gets going. "Where could they be? They're lost in the woods"—whatever, all of that. And as the yogi didn't show up, the thoughts start to come together with emotion. And it hardens. So it moves from perception to thinking about it, citta, to view, diṭṭhi—hardened into view. "Yes, something's really wrong, and I have to do something about it."

You can see the difference between when it's just thoughts going through your mind, and you can recognize, "Oh yeah, it's just thoughts," versus when suddenly the view is, "Yes, something's wrong. I've got to let him know right away"—that energy that comes, that sense of an accurate description of reality.

Then this person recognized, after I don't know how long—because they were telling me later—they recognized that, "Oh, actually..." And this is also funny, because they were just looking in the wrong place. They had a wrong idea of which place in the hall that person sat. So for two days they went through this whole thing. Then they saw it and said, "Oh, okay."

Some misperceptions are easy to see through. The view, the reactions are all—we can just kind of laugh, hopefully. Okay, great. We learn how it works. But so many, so subtly, we don't see through because they're happening so frequently.

When the Buddha talked about hallucinations of perception—inverted or distorted perception—he was pointing to how we tend to perceive what is in constant flux as being permanent. We don't have a big sign saying, "Yes, this is permanent." But perception's happening every minute, and we're perceiving and assuming permanence so much of the time. We don't recognize it.

Or with anicca and dukkha—we don't perceive the unsatisfactory nature of things. We perceive this as offering security, satisfaction, happiness. Or, of course, as Guy has been talking about so much, we perceive a separate identity, a separate self where there isn't one.

These distortions, these hallucinations of perception, are what lead to thinking, lead to descriptions of our world, lead to how we act and respond. But they're happening, these perceptions. They're so fleeting, so quick, that we don't tend to even recognize those perceptions are happening, never mind all the thoughts and reactions that describe our world, the views that are coming from them. Just such a subtle process.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties come through mistaken perception. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience and true knowledge.

The emphasis here, the simplicity of moment-to-moment mindful awareness—not looking for something, because that's already too much. We're looking for some idea of what should be there. Gone, you know? But the moment-to-moment direct experience, through that—each moment of pure mindfulness is just a moment. As I think I said last night, just mindfulness in that moment is free from wanting, from greed, from aversion, from delusion, just for that moment. So there's the possibility of a more accurate perception.

It's quick. Not every accurate perception leads to insight. But the steadiness of the mindfulness and the simple perception is what allows for that shift, that wisdom, to arise.

So perception, when it's inaccurate, leads to the way we think about and describe ourselves, describe the world, and leads to views when those descriptions are implicitly believed.

The Buddha described a view as "this alone is true, everything else is false." If only our views telegraphed themselves quite so clearly.

I want to start talking about how we get attached to our descriptions in a broader realm than the subtlety of personality view, because it's the same process. Having an opinion or a view in the world isn't a problem—of course we need it. Opinions, preferences, views. It's election time. It's helpful, up to a point, to have a view. If you're going to vote or if you're not going to vote, either one's a choice, an opinion informed by whatever. Knowing that process—no problem. Just to know whether you want to take an orange or an apple at breakfast. There's nothing wrong with using opinions. It's not that in this way we give it all up and can't tell anything from anything. We're not talking about that. We're talking about grasping.

Because once we get attached—this kind of energy of clinging, holding to a description, a view, an understanding of how we think we are, how we think the world is, what's right and what's wrong—the holding to our description, we take it to be the reality. And it's as if, and don't believe me, look in your own mind, in your own heart, it's as if our awareness snaps shut. It's as if we stop really looking, because now we know. This is how it is. And we often don't notice, or even allow in, perceptions that run counter to the particular view or description we're holding to. I call it selective perception. And we don't even realize we're doing it sometimes. Sometimes we do.

But this freezes our mind. It freezes the intimacy with experience. We're not recognizing accurately. It freezes our idea of people, our idea of ourselves. In a very subtle way, we just notice what supports our view. Because when we're really holding to a view, even though if we really look, it's a suffering, a rigidity—we're disconnected from the fluidity, from the beauty, from the intimacy, the mystery of life and ourselves—it can give us this false sense of security. We know what's right, and we stay with the people who believe the same way we do. It's comfortable.

And it's scary when our views are challenged. A lot of times we feel threatened, or anger. I mean, look around the world—incredible violence and fear from different groups of people who have different views or beliefs about anything. It can be subtle, but it can also be obvious.

I can watch myself doing this. Since you guys are really lucky to be sitting here, you don't have to hear all the pre-election stuff. Every four years is just, for me, so much suffering. But I watch my mind. It's fascinating. Let's go to a different year, a different election—I won't talk about this one. But in any particular one over the last some years, it's like, I have my views, what I believe. I may not think each particular person is so great, but I know one is more aligned—the best I could do anyway—with the views I have. And I totally believe that's true. I believe my view. I know views matter, right? It's not like it doesn't matter. So I believe them, but I can really watch and see how my mind snaps shut.

I remember when Nixon—maybe some of you weren't even born then, I don't know—I didn't want to hear any good thing about Nixon. If he came on TV and did something kind of sympathetic, I didn't want to know it. I didn't want to let it in because it messed with my view of the demon, whatever. And I can see how hard that is, how much suffering that is in my mind. And when they have the debates with the presidential candidates, I can see in my mind, it doesn't matter for me what anyone says.

There's nothing the person I'm not going to vote for could say that could change my mind. Nothing. And if I go in with that view, am I likely to hear anything? Is there even a possibility that I don't have it all scoped out? No, there's no possibility. And I have plenty of friends who all agree with me. Very few people do I know who don't. And then we can't even talk about it. So that's half this country. And that's even without coming to blows, without coming to violence.

This is a delicate line we walk. It's not simple to hold. And I'm not saying I've found how to do it, but this is gross. I mean, this isn't hard to notice—that I really hold a view, an opinion. I need to act on that view and opinion. I'm not renouncing that. But can I do that without the attachment that makes me right and them wrong, that shuts down my perception and makes it impossible to receive any new information?

It's like Krishnamurti talked about—freedom from the known. When we're attached to view, we're the prisoner of what we think we know. And then we can unconsciously, often, make choices to only let in the information that confirms what we know. Or we hear information that discounts it and go, "Well, he's just lying. It doesn't mean that, so you can't even believe it." Whatever. You can see how much suffering comes from this in the world. And that's in really obvious cases. What about all the ones we don't even recognize?

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "All things arise because of their interdependence. That is why nothing has a separate, independent identity. Because of our ignorance and hatred, we accuse, reprimand, or slander one another. Each of us is a product of our

family, our environment, our friends, our education, our culture, our society. These conditions lead to a certain way of seeing things and a certain way of responding to things. When we see this, we can have compassion for everyone, including ourselves."

Just seeing how much incredible suffering there is in this world from people holding different views about—you pick it—our cultural identity, our gender identity, our religious identity, our country identity, our political views, whatever it is. I don't have to go through it. You can pick this country. You can pick almost anywhere in the world. And it's interesting to see how it's often the neighbors who are closest that have the most virulent fear and hatred, who feel their views are being assaulted.

Sometimes it can be a little bit amusing. We're coming away from war and hatred and bombs to something a little less dramatic, but you can see how we act on it, how we are so entrenched in our way of seeing that we just can't even get it—that another way is equally valid.

Years ago, many years ago here, we had a teen retreat with teenagers. Quite a few of the kids who came to this retreat were from the city, from a whole different environment than here. So it's hard enough—they're having to eat tofu and beans and all of that. But the cooks at that particular time were in a really intense "sugar is poison" phase. They wouldn't serve anything with sugar. God forbid there should be any sugar out anywhere. So these kids—I mean, they're in this really austere environment, out of the city. There were so many difficult things. The food and the meditation. And then they're told they can't have any sugar. It was just really too much. A few of them were really suffering.

So finally, with the intercession of one of the teachers who had to do a major intercession with the cooks, some of the kids were allowed to have a secret stash of sugar. They could go hide it. They come in from the city. People are probably dealing drugs on the street corner.

And they have to go hide their sugar from each other. Pretty whacked out.

So just this sense of being willing to let go of our perceptions. "Sugar is bad for you always and for everybody." How do we let go of that? And these are ones we even know that we've picked up. What do we know for sure—that we know so for sure we don't even think about it? We don't even question it. We don't even know that there's another option.

This gets into the territory, of course, of personality view, even more than that—worldview. Just to give a simple example: a couple of years ago, I was teaching here with Steve Armstrong. And somebody said something—I can't remember the whole

context—but I think Steve had somehow been talking about karma. And anyway, somehow the subject of rebirth had come up. So I'm just mentioning rebirth; I'm not saying anything about true or not true. Who knows?

But it had come up, and somebody said something in the question period, which was, "Well, of course we know that's not true." Completely dismissing it with an assumption that that's what we all know. Scientifically, no way that could be true. And then he went on and asked some question.

And I really thought, what's Steve going to say? What he said was great. He pulled out this example. He said, "Oh, you're so sure that couldn't possibly be true?" He didn't try to convince them. He just said, "Here's another story."

Somebody we know—we all know him—a Sri Lankan man. When he was born, at about two years old, he spontaneously started chanting in Pali, these really long Pali chants, and he was two years old. He'd never heard these in his two-year-old life. And of course, Sri Lanka has a lot of Buddhism. Apparently they took him to some scholars, and they said not only is it accurate—he's chanting like the whole Satipatthana Sutta, not just a few lines—not only is it accurate, it's in a kind of ancient Pali that isn't even what the scholars of this day were using.

What do you do with that?

He started remembering spontaneously lifetimes back with Buddhaghosa, who wrote the Visuddhimagga. He was a secretary or something. We know this person. This is a true story.

What do you make of that?

This is—if we can not have to make anything of it, if we can let that openness, that not knowing, inform our mind. You get a sense?

Well, I don't know what your minds did with it. You all got kind of quiet. I didn't see anyone going, "Oh, that's a crock." You just were kind of listening. So if you didn't do that, if you just kind of held that space for a minute—*huh?*—what could that be? You get a sense of the lack of clinging, the openness to discover, the potential to just soften.

Surrender into the mystery of this moment without having to have an explanation before, during, or after. Without having to compare it to anything. Without having to know what it means about you. Without having to know how it compares to that other person, or your last retreat, or what you read, or what this teacher said, or what that teacher said, or anything.

Just this openness to explore, to be present, *yathā bhūta*, with things as they have arisen in this moment. That's just that moment of freedom from the known, freedom from attachment to view that allows—just for this moment—openness and presence and freedom to discover. A kind of real tenderness, a kind of curiosity for life.

And this is what we're trying to talk about in terms of the quality of mindfulness.

When we talk about that level of Dhamma vicaya, investigation is not "now I will understand this, and I'll put it together with this, and I'll have this in it." You know Suzuki Roshi's famous line about beginner's mind: in the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few. Just to be here now, this quality of almost childlike innocence, connectedness and wonder without having to draw conclusions.

So my favorite example of this, which I've often used, is the world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He's currently involved in so many cross-cultural musical adventures, you could say. You can see this kind of openness to discover all different kinds of music and instruments and forms, and he brings them together. He does this Silk Road ensemble now with people from all over the world, from all different kinds of music, different scales, different tonalities. I've listened to some of it, and I have to say, I really don't get some of it. It's out there to my kind of limited view, but I love the sensibility.

Well, one time years ago, before he was doing the Silk Road, I saw in Germany some kind of TV documentary about him. And all I remember is he was flying in a helicopter into the middle of Africa to some very simple tribe. He got out of this helicopter with his million-dollar cello, and they brought him to what I think was a tribe of bush people. They took him to the head musician of this tribe, and this musician's instrument was literally a big empty oil drum—a metal oil drum that he had fashioned with a series of strings on a wooden pole. That was his instrument. So he was playing and singing on that, and then Yo-Yo Ma was playing on his cello. And then Yo-Yo Ma says, "Oh, let's switch." So they switched instruments. He had this childlike openness, and he's trying to play this guy's instrument, and he goes, "Oh, I just can't play this nearly as good as you. You play it so well." And it wasn't put on at all. It was just this complete openness to discovery.

I've always remembered it because I was so touched by that quality of mind that isn't building walls and separations through our views—"Well, I have this million-dollar cello and this background of all this Western classical music, and I know so much, and look at this oil drum." None of that was there, but rather this sense of appreciation within different cultural contexts instead of trying to reconcile all views.

The freedom from views isn't that we reconcile them all and figure it all out. And this applies to views of practice, by the way—views of what's good practice, views of choiceless awareness versus concentration versus you name it. Without trying to reconcile them all into the one right view, it's the sense of not needing to hold to any view. We can use them as skillful means, but can you just imagine that possibility of not holding to any view whatsoever? It's scary a little bit. It's also really freeing.

So views of practice—I mentioned some. I love watching this in myself because the mind takes some little experience, makes up a few thoughts about it: "Oh, that's how it's supposed to be." I don't know if you notice this at all in your practice. Having the honor to sit while different people come and talk to us, we can see it happening one after the other. When you're just in your own experience, you don't quite see it.

So we can see people come in and go, "Well, good sati. I had good mindfulness because when I really paid attention to the pain, it went away." Or someone else comes in and says, "Well, my mindfulness isn't good because when I try to pay attention to this unpleasant thing, it just goes away, and I can't hold on to it. I should be able to see its arising, its persistence, and its passing away, but I can't see that because it goes away too soon."

And someone else says, "You know, I'm not having emotions. And because I'm not having emotions, I'm not really getting to the meat of things. There's something wrong." And the next person comes in and goes, "But there's just so many emotions. I have nothing but emotions. It's just supposed to be about getting concentrated and being with the breath. I can't do choiceless awareness because it's just breath, breath, breath, calm, calm, calm. Nothing's happening."

There's a full range of experience: choiceless awareness with thoughts and sounds and sensations all arising. And how can I possibly get calm when all this stuff is happening? And often it's the same person rotating through all of these concerns, one day after the other.

Now, none of it is suffering if we're not clinging to the view. But when we see conflict arising, when we're suffering, call up the thought in the back of your mind: what am I really believing right now? And the thought will come up: "I'm really believing there should be no thoughts." Don't just bang it away and go, "Oh, I know that's stupid." Yes, we know it's stupid, but that doesn't mean we're not believing it. So call up the thought and see: right now there's a clinging to that view. And that's the suffering. Great. Explore it. Is it possible to even entertain the sense of what if there's no perfect right view

of what your practice should be? Oh my god. You can't keep judging yourself then, can you? You'll never get perfect either, because there is no perfect. Just that surrender into what's happening now.

And this is both incredibly freeing—freeing from the clinging, the stricture, the measurement, the limitation of attachment to view—but also, at times, it can be very unsettling, because we are familiar with wanting this sense of security. Even if it makes us totally miserable, we're upheld by our view. It's like, "I know. I know what's true. I can't ever do it. I'll never be able to do it. I'm completely hopeless. But at least I know that. And I know what's true." Open instead to: what's appropriate? What's happening now? That can be a little bit scary.

So views of right practice, and this—sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the sense of me—really arises in the same way. A moment of clinging to any sense experience or to any of the khandhas. But you can see, again, how there's a perception. For instance, you're walking, and there's just a slight unpleasant sensation, very faint. There's some aversion. And there's a whole train of thought about it: it's unpleasant, but I'm not seeing it clearly. And this pain has been there the whole time. I'm blocked. There's something wrong. Or in the sitting, that pain in your stomach comes back. "Oh, there's that block again." You ever think that? There's that block again. What can I do to get rid of it? How can I move through it? My practice is stuck because I keep having the same block. A whole sense of self arises, and then all the stories and memories about me and the things I haven't done and how I'm blocked—all the thoughts.

Then the next sitting you come and sit down and that starts, and you just meet it with mindfulness, and it dissolves in sparkling light. "Ah, that block has dissolved because my practice is moving." And it's pleasant. And then we start having memories that support our good practice and our onward-leadingness and ideas about the future. And all the memories that come up at that time support our view of ourselves as being the practitioner of the ages, the next Dalai Lama in female form, whatever it is.

Selective perception. When you're feeling really horrible, you don't remember all those great moments. You might remember, but you throw them away: "Well, that was just a fluke. This is really me. This is the core." It's just taking a perception that's skewed by aversion or clinging.

A delusion is definitely there because we think it's me, a whole story of me, and we run with it.

Ajahn Sumedho talks brilliantly about this self-view. He says, "So then the self arises. I start thinking about myself, my feelings, my memories, my past, my fears and desires, and the whole world arises around Ajahn Sumedho. It takes off into orbit—my views, my feelings, and my opinions. I can get caught into that world, that view of me that arises in consciousness." That's what sakkāya-diṭṭhi is—that view of me arising in consciousness. "But if I know that, that view of me, then my refuge is no longer in being the person. I'm not taking refuge in the personality or my views and opinions. So then the world of Ajahn Sumedho ends, because what we're taking refuge in is this awareness rather than in the view of me, of personality—I'm so good, I'm so bad, I'm this, I'm that. Our refuge then is this awareness rather than in trying to sustain refined experiences and consciousness as our refuge, because you can't do it."

Resting in this conscious awareness is what he refers to as coming home, or our real home. It's just that Tai Chi move, you know—from "There's no way I can do this, and I saw this, and I saw that, and here I am" to "Oh, awareness of." I can't do this, and this and that—awareness of. The refuge is the awareness, not the clinging to the view.

He said something I found very interesting. I've often recalled this—he said it to a group of Western teachers a few years ago when we were meeting with him. He was talking in terms of personality view, or attachment to our views of our personality, our sense of self. And he said he thinks the biggest hindrance for Westerners—this is just his opinion—one of the biggest hindrances is self-doubt in regard to trusting our insights into awareness, trusting our insights, that perception of the liberating sense of refuge in awareness.

It's sort of like what Guy was talking about last night—I want to say "minding the gap," that's not exactly what he said—but that sense of just taking refuge in that gap, in that moment of non-concocting, of non-creating, of just the stillness, the silence of non-creating view, sense of self. Just this. The simplicity, so simple. That's what he's talking about: our insight into the liberating potential of a moment of awareness. Just this.

Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about generating a contentment with this. He calls it emptiness—this guy said lots of words—generating a contentment with it. And seeing how quickly, and this is what Sumedho is saying, our self-doubt kicks in. We don't tend to trust that. We don't generate a contentment. We don't even believe it really happened, or if it did, we don't really think it's anything.

He says it's in part because our personalities, our belief in our personalities, is so strong—we really have such faith in our personality views. It's so strong that that's our reference point. That's where we take refuge. That's what we really believe. And we

wouldn't think it's a belief; we just think it's true. And so we get caught back into believing very implicitly the thoughts, the views, the story of our personality, our personal history.

All that's there. It's all cause and effect. But any of us, if we look steadily moment to moment, our moods are always changing. Our personalities have certain conditioned patterns, but they're changing all the time, aren't they? Yes. The same ones may come back very frequently—that's the conditioned patterns—but nothing's always there. Yet what he's talking about is our believing so implicitly in our personalities.

So there's a simple example, like a moment just—

Just the gap. Awareness is like this.

And a moment before, it's, "Oh, there's no way I can possibly do this." And then it's so high. What about stream entry? What about all these things? And then who am I? And what are they talking about anyway? This teacher says it's like this. And then another says it's like that. And the Burmese and the Thais. And what about the Tibetans? What about Zen? It's hopeless. We fall back into that.

And in that moment of "Oh, awareness," all of that drops away.

And then our habit of mind jumps back into, "Okay, it dropped away, but that's no way to live. How can you live like that? You have to have opinions. You have to know. You have to teach, right?" And that's what we believe. That's what we believe. That becomes our reference point. It's a lot of suffering. It's a lot, a lot of suffering.

But it's radical trust in not knowing. Just the willingness to not know, to open into this moment, is both freeing, but again, it is radically unsettling at times. It's not like every moment is just nice, nice, nice, leading to the most nicest, and it just goes like that.

As I said in the beginning, even with our gross views in the world, when our views, our perceptions, when our views are threatened—views that we've been somehow holding to, whether it's in the world or in our view of ourselves—it gives us a sense of stability. When that's threatened, that can be really scary.

Sometimes it happens in meditation. For a simple example, there's just a moment where suddenly the perception of the solidity of body goes away. Just sensations in space, you could say. And at times, that's really pleasant. But sometimes, the first time

that happens, a lot of fear can come up because—where's the body? You open your eyes, okay, here it is. But it feels unsettling, you know, just because it's unfamiliar. And we're comfortable with the familiar.

And in terms of our whole subtle personality view, what Subhuti is talking about, we have such a strong belief in it. And the ongoingness of practice keeps—we keep coming up against the views we don't even know we're holding about ourselves, the beliefs, even when they're suffering ones.

But every belief we have about ourselves, as we keep on with steady awareness, is going to be challenged, is going to be questioned. No, we can't hold with clinging to any view and really recognize the truth.

So while it's freeing, I know for me, I remember one time in retreat I recognized this. It felt like in some way, one way of describing my practice is that it's felt like over the many years a series of small little deaths—deaths of certain beliefs of who I was that I didn't even know I was holding to, like deaths of certain sense of Carol personality.

Now, someone from the outside might say, if they were as observant as me, "Maybe it died to you, but one would wish that it didn't really stop manifesting in the world." So don't be afraid. You don't really change into someone different.

But this belief, this something holding, it dies away. And there can be a kind of grieving. And it doesn't make any sense. Grieving for what? This stupid idea I had about myself that was causing me enormous suffering, and then there's grief when I'm seeing it's not true? Okay. Grieving is like this.

Or we see a certain habit and think, "I don't want freedom if I have to get rid of this." Notice that kind of stuff.

There's one quotation from Stephen Batchelor that I like a lot. He says, "Emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, and seeming protection. And although it is freeing, it can also bring up great disconcertion." Disconcertion—if you're not English-speaking, it means a kind of dis-ease. It's unfamiliar. It's confusing. Like being in no man's land.

So just so simple, we can't stand it.

But when we can just open—just radical surrender into this moment as it is, free from view, free from clinging to view, just that willingness to generate a contentment with emptiness, with non-concocting, with not needing to know and describe—then we're left with something essential.

I'll end with this from Ajahn Sumedho, because it also speaks to what Guy said this morning about the island:

"The only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, sense of self, is through awareness of them—through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion, through awareness of views. The island that you cannot go beyond is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of *becoming* awake and aware."

So let's just practice being awake and aware.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 20

Self-Compassion

Susie Harrington · 57 min

> *Drawing from the Sedaka Sutta (SN 47.19), the Bamboo Acrobat discourse, Susie Harrington illuminates the Buddha's teaching that caring for oneself and caring for others are inseparable aspects of practice. She explores how our cultural pursuit of self-esteem—which requires us to be "above average"—creates a painful internal conflict between inflated self-image and harsh self-judgment, neither of which leads to genuine happiness.*
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> *Harrington presents self-compassion as a radically different approach, one that acknowledges our inherent worthiness without requiring us to be better than others. Drawing on research by Kristin Neff and insights from the scientific study of compassion, she demonstrates how self-criticism actually undermines motivation, while self-compassion provides the emotional safety needed to see ourselves clearly and make genuine changes. The talk addresses the fear that self-compassion leads to self-indulgence, showing instead that it cultivates what Matthieu Ricard calls "a deep sense of flourishing."*
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> *The practical dimensions of self-compassion are explored through three components: first, recognizing and feeling our suffering rather than glossing over it; second, responding with kindness through wise intention and renunciation of rigid views; and third, recognizing our shared humanity—that our struggles are not unique but part of the universal human experience. Harrington offers the liberating perspective that we are "learners in this life" who need not perfect our practice, but simply start and continue with commitment. This teaching invites practitioners to welcome all aspects of themselves, transforming the inner environment from one of criticism to one of care.*

In thinking about what to talk with you about tonight, I kept coming back to this fundamental part of our practice that you've heard many times: our practice is about our relationship to what's happening. That's what's most important. And a lot of what's happening is right here with us. There are a few things happening out there, but a lot of it's right here.

I want to read to you first a sutta, a very short sutta from the Buddha. This is the Bamboo Acrobat, the Sedaka Sutta.

Once upon a time, bhikkhus, a bamboo acrobat, setting himself upon his bamboo pole, addressed his assistant Medakathalika: "Come you, my dear Medakathalika, and climb up the bamboo pole, stand upon my shoulders."

"Okay, master," the assistant replied to the bamboo acrobat, and climbing up the bamboo pole, she stood on the master's shoulders.

So then the bamboo acrobat said to his assistant, "You look after me, my dear, and I'll look after you. Thus, with us looking after one another, guarding one another, we'll show off our craft, receive some payment, and safely climb down the bamboo pole."

This being said, the assistant said this to the bamboo acrobat: "This will not do at all, master. You look after yourself, master, and I will look after myself. Thus, with each of us looking after ourselves, guarding ourselves, we'll show off our craft, receive some payment, and safely climb down from the bamboo pole." That's the right way to do it.

And the Buddha, hearing this, said to his monks, "This is correct. Just like the assistant Medakathalika said to her master, 'I will look after myself,' so should you, bhikkhus, practice the establishment of mindfulness. You should also practice the establishment of mindfulness by saying, 'I will look after others.' Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself."

In the Pali dictionary, karuna or compassion is often defined as the aspiration to find a way to be truly helpful to oneself and others. I want to talk tonight specifically about this taking care of ourselves—this taking care of what's here, this relationship to what is arising in this moment right here.

I want to start with acknowledging and appreciating that we all want happiness. That's our basic desire, and it's a good desire. There's nothing wrong with it. St. Augustine in his book *On the Happy Life* says, "The desire for happiness is essential to man and woman. It is the motivator of all our acts. The most venerable, clearly understood, enlightened and reliable constant in the world is not only that we want to be happy, but that we want only to be so. Our very nature requests it of us."

A more colloquial version of that I appreciate comes from John Lennon. He said, "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment, and I told them they didn't understand life."

In our attempts to be happy, we try many different strategies. It's natural—we're trying to figure out how to do it. One of the strategies our culture really supports, pushes on us, that we try really hard with—the bookstores are full of self-help books—is trying to improve our self-esteem. Self-esteem is very much based on what Sally was talking

about a few nights ago: that mana, that conceit of comparing mind. We're constantly trying to compare, and it's so challenging because self-esteem requires that we be better than average.

I always laugh at Garrison Keillor's description of Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average. How does that compute? But that's exactly what we think we need to be. We all think we have to be above average. We all think we have to be better.

There have been a lot of sociological studies done recently. I went to a scientific conference on compassion and found it really fascinating—all the different ways they were studying how we are compassionate to each other and ourselves, and what effects that has on us. One of the people who's done a lot of this study is Kristin Neff. She's worked particularly on self-compassion and has a wonderful book called *Self-Compassion*, which I highly recommend. From some of the studies she participated in, 85% of students think that they're above average in getting along with other people.

94% of college faculty think they are better teachers than their colleagues. 90% of the people they asked think we're better drivers than the other people on the road, regardless of how many accidents we've had—not a factor.

And it's interesting because it's not just us culturally; we think we need to be better at certain things. But they did this as a cross-cultural study. They went and tested in some Asian countries, and what they discovered was that the figures were similar. 90% of the Asians in the countries where modesty was important thought they were more modest than their compatriots. Figure that out. And more self-sacrificing and more cooperative than anyone else. So it seems to be a very widespread tendency.

But this is challenging. We have these two versions of ourselves. One tells us we're better, we're doing it well, we're above average—primarily we try to choose the things that we're good at, and we aim towards those and we get good at those. And then on the other side, we have that self-judgment: You're not any good at it. You're not good enough. You should do it better. So we have these two conflicting things. I'm supposed to be better than average, and I'm not any good at it. What a confusing world to live inside of.

And this self-esteem that's so supported by the notion that we need it to establish our self-worth—that's where we are looking for it. But what is so fundamental to our happiness, what actually allows us to rest, is to realize that our worthiness is already here, that we don't have to go somewhere else.

The Buddha—you probably have heard this quote, it's misquoted in many ways—but he said, "Though in thought we range throughout the world, we'll nowhere find a thing or person more dear than self. So since others hold the self so dear, one who loves oneself should not injure none." We won't find anyone in the world more dear than ourselves. So to actually act from that place, to acknowledge that dearness, to come into a relationship of care and compassion with ourselves that reflects the worthiness, the beauty, the wholeness that's already here.

This involves making friends with ourselves, really making friends. One of the things I always say at the beginning of a retreat—to myself, or if I'm teaching, to others—is: all of you and all of me is welcome here. All aspects, whoever you are, all the parts and pieces, the places that we're proud of, the things in the closet—it's all welcome. There are so many parts of ourselves, the imperfect places, the places we make mistakes, just the ways we came out of the womb, that we tend to want to shove into hiding. And actually turning and looking at those and welcoming them into the room is such a relief.

I remember I was taking a course in college, a botany class. Part of the way it worked was we would walk around and the instructor would point out the plants and then she would spell these incredibly long, non-intuitive Latin names. Everybody would be there with their clipboards writing down the name. And I couldn't do it. She'd say the letters and I'd try to write them, and I would think, she has to go slower—the problem is she's going too fast. But I'd look around and everybody else seemed to be able to do it. I thought, what's going on?

So finally I would just cozy up to my friends and other people and look over their shoulder. As they wrote it down, I'd write it down. And pretty soon people would realize that when the Latin name was being spelled out, I needed to see someone. And it brings up emotion for me because the kindness just naturally arose. I'd be standing there and somebody would think, oh, she's going to spell, and they would just automatically move over to where I was so that I could see.

And of course at first it was just like, oh my God, I can't figure this out. But now I realize, wow, there's some set of neurons that doesn't fire for me the way other people's do. When somebody spells something over the phone, I have to ask them to be really slow. And it's wonderful, because it gives me so much clarity and understanding about this—oh, this doesn't work in me that well. I have great faculty with numbers. And when somebody else is confused about numbers, I think, oh yeah, I totally understand.

So letting that in—oh, I can't do this. This is hard for me. I don't have a faculty for it. And as you think about it, what part of yourself, what's hard for you that you keep tucked away somewhere, afraid to let in? Can you just welcome that and go, oh yeah, that's hard for me. That's hard for me.

One of the confusions that comes to us as we move towards this capacity for self-compassion, for caring for ourselves, is that we all get very afraid of self-indulgence. We think it's this self-criticism and this movement towards self-esteem that keeps us going. And yet what we're looking for isn't the normal things of indulgence—the sensual pleasures, the wanting of pleasant moments. Those are where we move towards indulgence. This is something else, this level of care.

Matthew Ricard puts it this way: what we're looking for is a deep sense of flourishing, not a mere pleasurable feeling, a fleeting emotion or mood, but an optimal state of being. Happiness is also a way of interpreting the world, since while it may be difficult to change the world—or I would add, ourselves—it is always possible to change the way we look at it, or look at ourselves.

At this compassion conference I went to, one of the papers presented an experiment where they tested people who said they were happy. So they started with a select group—that's a pretty select group in itself. These weren't people who had to be super happy, just people who basically said they were happy with their lives. And those people fell into two categories.

There were those who found their happiness through pleasures—they partied, they did things that gave them that kind of lift. They did the experiment in Florida, and I have a certain idea that pops into my head, but that may not be yours. They said specifically it was people who were partying, going out late, and had a lot of friends. And then they had another group who found support in more connecting activities, in meditation and other contemplative ways.

Even though both groups said they were happy and scored similarly on the happiness tests, what they discovered was striking. The people whose happiness came from this high level of activity—when they tested them biologically, they found lots of indicators of stress. But the other people, their body systems were relaxed and not in a state of stress at all.

So there's a deeper kind of happiness where the whole system is relaxed and open. And I think that's what we so deeply want. In our effort to move towards happiness, this self-critical aspect, this fear of indulgence—we're so afraid of letting go of that and settling into ourselves.

Kristin Neff says it this way: if you always criticize yourself, you may not be willing to take a good look at yourself and see where you need to change, because you'll be too afraid of the consequences—that you'll hit yourself over the head with an emotional hammer if you recognize your shortcomings. In contrast, self-compassion should provide the emotional safety needed to see yourself clearly, so that you are actually better able to identify needed areas of change and growth. In this case, one's motivation would not stem from the need to escape harsh criticism, but from the compassionate desire to create health and well-being for oneself.

We think we have to motivate ourselves through criticism. And in fact, it's through care and compassion that we are most motivated. They actually tested this in various ways and showed that people who were given lots of encouragement, told they were okay, and given compassionate practices were actually more motivated in their lives.

One of the ways of understanding this, I think, is shifting from goals and ideas of who we're supposed to be to the experience we're having right now. We often wander around with this version of ourselves somewhere over here that is the ideal me—if I just get up in the morning and do it all right, I'm going to end up like this. If not today, maybe tomorrow, but it's going to look like this. And we're constantly trying to compare ourselves to this ideal.

Instead, we have the possibility and the option to simply ask: what's here right now? What does this person really look like? Who am I?

When we do things from that point of view, it's quite different. I'm someone who has a lot of push, a lot of ideas about who I should be and how I should be better. At least that's been my pattern—it's wearing a little thin now. But not long ago, I took up trying to play the guitar. It was wonderful. I don't have much faculty here—and that other thing might be related. I can't really tell if notes are on pitch or off pitch. It really makes tuning a guitar easy, as long as nobody else is in the room. And it's really fun.

I pick it up, play for a little while, then wander away. I'm never going to be good at this. I don't really care if I am. And I have so much fun.

I have a friend who's an artist, and she is the most prolific person I know. She draws and paints on scraps of paper, on fabric. She's constantly creating. She dresses herself like she's an ongoing piece of artwork. I mean, it's unbelievable. It's just happening, happening, happening. It's not for any purpose. It's just this expression.

When we shift from the idea that we're supposed to be this other person, this other being, and we come to here, then we have the possibility of turning towards our imperfections, our mistakes, toward where it's hard for us, where things don't go well, and actually acknowledging that and touching it.

I know for myself—and some others might have this experience—food has long been a struggle for me. I have this idea that somehow food will make me feel better. It's like that thing about the second piece of chocolate cake that was told the other day: I should have the second piece of chocolate cake. And then you have the second piece of chocolate cake, and you go, who was that who told me to have the second piece of cake? I'm really familiar with that. And yet, slowly, as time has gone on, I can see instead: what will actually be the kindest thing here? How can I speak to myself in a way, in this moment, that says—whether I do or I don't, or I had or I didn't have the piece of chocolate cake—it's okay?

Kristin Neff did a study about food. As part of the study—I think they did it all with women at the University of Austin where she is, somewhere in Texas—they had all of the women eat a chocolate or a glazed donut. They were told it was part of a taste-testing thing. Then to half of the women, they said, "Well, several people have told me that they feel bad about eating donuts in this study. So I hope you won't be hard on yourself. Everyone eats unhealthily sometimes. And everyone in this study eats this stuff. So I don't think there's any reason to feel really bad about it."

They said that to half the people. The other half they didn't say that to. The half that didn't receive those words were so busy beating themselves up about eating the glazed donut that later in the study, when chocolate and a bunch of candies were put out and they were told they could eat as much as they wanted, the ones on a diet especially ate a lot. The ones who had received this compassionate feedback about eating the glazed donut weren't caught in the loop and didn't eat the candy.

Isn't that interesting? Once we start into this loop of "I'm a failure," we start feeling hopeless and helpless. But if we interrupt—if we make a mistake or we fall in some way, but we respond to ourselves with compassion, with "oh, well, this happens"—then it's not so bad. We can pick ourselves up and carry on.

Here we are on retreat, and you probably often have this experience: "Oh, I took that nap, and it ruined my concentration all afternoon. How was I supposed to know I shouldn't take the nap? Oh, I should have taken a nap. I would have felt better. I should eat dinner. No, I don't think I should eat dinner. I think I should walk now. No, I should stay and sit more."

It's pretty confusing, isn't it, sometimes? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to know what to do?

Maybe you're not. Maybe you're not supposed to have it all figured out. How would that be?

To paraphrase a Zen Roshi: My life is an endless series of mistakes, and there's no problem.

So how do we actually engage these components of self-compassion? How do we actually touch in there? How do we activate this?

Well, the Buddha had a lot to say about that. The first noble truth, for instance. He said the first thing we have to do is feel our suffering. There is suffering, and to know that is the first step in compassion. We can't skip over it.

The Dalai Lama said, if you can't practice when you are suffering because of what it does to your mind, and you can't practice when you're happy because of your attachment to your happiness, then there will never be a time when you can practice.

So recognizing the suffering and being willing to be with it—we've talked about this. That's the R in RAIN.

I remember quite a few years ago I was practicing at the Forest Refuge, and at that time there was one comfortable couch in the entire complex. I don't know if it's changed since then. There was no Room 200—very sad. This couch was in the dining room, and you could hear the kitchen from there. So I would go in really early in the morning before there was any activity and practice there. I really liked being there.

But then a couple of times I'd go in really early and somebody would be in the kitchen banging around pots and making all this noise. And I'd be sitting there doing metta. "May I be safe, may I be happy—what are they doing in the kitchen?—may I be safe, may I be happy." I would just go on like that while my whole system was boiling with aversion to the noise, and I would just keep going with my little phrases. Finally, one morning I was doing this, and I realized—oh, I'm suffering. Oh, that's what's really happening right now. I had completely missed it. I was so convinced about what I was supposed to be doing that I hadn't even noticed my own suffering in that moment.

Have you done that? Just chugging along and then finally it bubbles up from underneath and you go, "Oh yeah, that's what's really going on."

A lot of the imperfections of the world and ourselves we glaze over, trying to pretend that they're not there, because to actually feel them, somehow to admit that something isn't perfect, feels very awkward and unpleasant.

Kristin Neff puts it this way. She says, "Excuse me, there's been some error. I signed up for the 'everything will go swimmingly until the day I die' plan. Can I speak to the management, please?" That's what we're hoping for.

Norman Fischer has this wonderful passage I want to share. He says, "It's hard being a human being. There's a lot to it. There really is. So I want to say, let's all agree to accept the reality that we are not going to be able to do a very good job of this. There's too much to do. Isn't it a relief to know that it's not going to work out? And you can just forget about that to start with. So you're not going to get it right. You're not going to get it perfect."

The worst possible outcome of my saying these things today would be for everybody to walk out of this room and think, "Oh God, now I have to be compassionate to myself. Now I have to not only balance the seven factors, watch my breath, have open awareness, watch the elements. Oh yeah, and then there's impermanence. And then there's vicāra, vitakka. Oh yeah, sukha, pīti—I've got to keep track of that. Oh, and I'm not supposed to think about any of it. And I've got to brush my teeth every day. I've got to remember which day is laundry day. And besides, when I get home, I've got to take care of my children, my aging parents. I'm aging—oh yeah, there's that too. And now I've got to do all of this. I've got to meditate. Oh, and when I'm walking, I even have to take care of it."

Well, don't worry. You're not going to be able to get it all done. There's no hope.

You're not going to be able to do it. It's not going to work out. But the important thing—the important thing—is that despite this, recognizing and embracing this reality, you don't have to worry about finishing the job or doing it perfectly, because it's not going to happen. But start. You see, start and continue. This is the thing. You can really trust that if you will start, and if you will continue with commitment, that will be enough. That will be enough.

We're not going to get it done. We're not going to get it right. If we can really take that in. Can you just for a moment take that in? Do you feel any sense of relief? This whole meditation thing that we've been talking about, that you've been doing for four weeks—not going to get it right. Now you're probably going to be upset with me. I've told you you can't get it right. There is no right.

There's an alternate set of forgiveness phrases which I really like, which point to this. And they are: I offer myself forgiveness for being imperfect. I offer myself forgiveness for making mistakes. I offer myself forgiveness for being a learner in this life. I feel those are so helpful. So helpful to really acknowledge that.

As we contact our suffering, as we touch in and acknowledge it and stop resisting, then we can start to respond to it. We can connect with it. And one of the ways that we can respond is a kind of internal sīla, a kind of internal care for this environment in here, doing it as an act of compassion for ourselves.

One of the ways we can do this is through wise intention. Wise intention is divided into several categories, and one is renunciation. So there are a few things that we can renounce that are really helpful. Carol spoke at length last night about views and opinions and the renouncing of being right. I'm going to read you an excerpt from the New York Times. You can feel the being right in it and how we build up and suffer in this way.

What follows is a transcript of the actual radio conversation between a US naval ship and the Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland.

Canadians: Please divert your course fifteen degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Americans: Recommend you divert your course fifteen degrees to the north to avoid a collision.

Canadians: Negative. You will have to divert your course fifteen degrees to the south to avoid a collision.

Americans: This is the captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert your course.

Canadians: No, I say again, you divert your course.

Americans: This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course fifteen degrees north. I say again, that's one-five degrees north, or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.

Canadians: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

How many times do we get ourselves all wound up? All wound up. If we are willing to let go of that being right and instead be compassionate to ourselves—say, well, I might be right, I might be wrong, I'm not sure, I guess I'll wait and see. Or even: I think I'm right. Ooh, that feels really painful. Do I really want to be right? Would I rather be right, or would I rather be nice to myself? Would I rather care about my state of mind?

One of the ways we can also practice renunciation is letting go of the idea that our life is somehow going wrong. This is one of the ways we avoid touching into our suffering—we get the idea that it should be better, that it should be right. Really, that's what Norman Fischer and Kristin Neff were talking about: letting go of those ideas. Even letting go of the ideas that the world should be different.

There's one Indian teacher, Swami Prajnanpad, who said that idealism is an act of violence. Trying to live up to an ideal instead of being authentically where you are can become a form of inner violence if it splits you into two and pits one side against the other. When we use spiritual practice to be good and to ward off an underlying sense of deficiency or unworthiness, then it turns into a sort of crusade. That's a quote from John Welwood. This ideal world—it's another way we have the virtual me as compared to the actual me, and then we have the ideal world that we're in opposition with.

I love the feeling of the phrase: contentment is giving up all hope of a better future. This is it, staying right here. Even if it's imperfect, can I be with this one?

How do we meet the challenges with this sense of goodwill, this kindness? By practicing it over and over again.

There was a time I had a back injury. I was in my house, on the floor, trying to do a stretch or something, and something happened—I couldn't get up off the floor. I was lying there, and at first I was in a state of panic. This was horrible. And then I thought, well, I'm on the floor in my house. The rug's pretty comfortable. Either something will change and I'll be able to get up, or somebody will be home in a while and I'll be here when they get here. And I was like, oh, okay. I'll be all right. This isn't perfect, but I'm okay. I was there for a while and then something shifted again and I was able to get up. Oh, okay. That's the way it is right now. It's the best I could do.

I had a friend who had MS, and she drove, but it was quite hard for her. I remember she had to back down a long driveway to where we were having a meeting, and she came in. I said, you know, how was that? Because I could see her sort of working at it. And she said, oh, it's pretty hard. But it's okay. Some people climb mountains. I back the car down the driveway. It was like, that's what's happening for me.

A big part of how we express our self-compassion, the way we care for ourselves, is in our internal dialogue, what we say to ourselves. I know for myself, it was a big shift. For a long time, I would say very supportive, encouraging things. I would be like, this is fine, you're going to be okay, you're doing great. And I know that, for instance, your back is... but it's going to be better. And besides, this is all for the best. I had all sorts of these responses. And finally I discovered it was kind of an avoidance strategy for actually being willing to feel my suffering. I was making up a whole story around how everything was okay.

And it was so useful to me when I actually settled back and said, well, actually, this is kind of hard. This is a challenge. I'm okay, but this is a challenge. I even went so far at one point that I realized there was a huge voice in me that went off many, many times a day saying, "I don't want to"—to all sorts of things that I'd never even heard before. And I started just paying attention to it.

"I don't want to." "I don't want to get out of bed in the morning."

I listened to this voice, and I'd respond, "Oh, okay. So getting out of bed is hard for you." And then what I noticed was that I'd get out of bed anyway. It wasn't like I had to pretend that it was great getting out of bed. It was cold. It was dark. I wasn't interested. But it was okay.

So in our movement towards self-compassion, towards caring, first we have to recognize what compassion actually is—versus self-indulgence, versus moving towards self-esteem. We have to realize that this compassion is different. It's actually feeling what's happening, being willing to contact the truth, being present with what's here. And then, after we contact and actually are with what's here, it's responding to it with kindness—actually giving ourselves the same offering we'd give to a friend, to someone we love.

The last part of compassion for ourselves is very important. It's realizing that we're not alone, that what we're experiencing is not just me. One of the most painful parts of suffering is that we get involved in a vicious cycle where, by suffering, we feel isolated, and then our isolation leads to more suffering, and we continue in this loop. So it's really important to break out of that loop, and we can do this. Sometimes it happens automatically, but we can do it intentionally.

I had a friend who was on retreat, and she was quite worried about her son, who was off on an extreme expedition in a remote jungle and was not going to be contacting her for a long time. She felt the stress of a mother in that unknown. We can all feel that

—when somebody we love and care about is two hours late, five hours late. Well, what if you don't get to hear from them for thirty or forty days, even if something goes wrong?

She really stayed with the experience, and the experience spread. She started to feel the connection to all mothers, all mothers everywhere, of all beings—all fathers, all those connected to those that they love. Realizing that she was so not alone, that this was such a human and even beyond-human experience, became one of the profound openings in her practice.

I remember being on retreat at Spirit Rock and having an injury, sort of stumbling around and making my regular trips to the ice packs in the freezer. One day I was standing on a grassy knoll looking out, just over the little town of Woodacre, and I thought: how many people in this little town, at this retreat, just right here, are struggling with some aspect of their body? It's hard to be a person. It's hard to be a person.

Sukhne Rinpoche says that after the self dissolves, the expression of that realization is compassion. When we drop out of our movie, stop being the star of our movie as Sally was talking about, compassion is the natural reaction—here and elsewhere.

What we say to ourselves matters. "I care about myself. I care about my suffering. I can see this is difficult." And I have to say, my favorite is "It's hard to be a person." I say that to myself often. And when we realize that other people too have these difficult experiences—very helpful.

This sense of caring for ourselves allows us to expand and care for others as well. This is what the Buddha was pointing toward. When we care for ourselves, we care for others. When we care for others, we care for ourselves. When we realize we are not so different—just as we are imperfect, they too; just as it is hard for us, just as we have challenges—so too for others.

Pema Chödrön says, "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 feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes."

Look clearly and compassionately at ourselves. Then we can look at others.

In Tibetan, the word *tsewa*, translated as compassion, makes no distinction between compassion for self and compassion for others.

I'm going to end with a short reading from Jo Coudert, from a little booklet of hers titled *Advice from a Failure*:

"It is rewarding to find someone whom you like, but it is essential to like yourself. It is quickening to recognize that someone is a good and decent human being, but it is indispensable to view yourself as acceptable."

It is a delight to discover people who are worthy of respect and admiration and love. But it is vital to believe yourself worthy of these things. For you cannot live in someone else. You cannot find yourself in someone else. You cannot be given a life by someone else. Of all the people you will know in a lifetime, you are the only one you will never leave or lose. To the question of your life, you are the only answer. To the problems of your life, you are the only solution.

So let us sit together for a moment.

CHAPTER 21

Patience

Greg Scharf · 50 min

> *In this heartfelt talk, Greg Scharf examines khantī pāramī—the perfection of patience—as an essential quality for navigating the spiritual path. Drawing from multiple frameworks the Buddha used to describe awakening, including the Four Noble Truths, the progress of insight, and the ten pāramīs, Scharf suggests that viewing practice through the lens of ripening beautiful qualities helps us move beyond constant self-judgment and evaluation.*
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> *Through the charming children's story of Frog and Toad's garden and a sutta about a hen incubating eggs (from the Saṃyutta Nikāya), Scharf illustrates how we often demand quick results from our practice, shouting at our seeds to grow faster. He explores the technical definition of patience—its characteristic of acceptance, its function of enduring both desirable and undesirable experiences, and its manifestation as non-opposition to reality. The Buddha's advice to Rāhula in the Mahārāhulovāda Sutta (MN 62) to develop meditation like the earth offers a powerful image of stability amid changing conditions.*
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> *The talk weaves personal stories of caring for aging parents with profound teachings, including a powerful excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Christmas sermon on peace that demonstrates patience as courageous compassion. Scharf reminds us that patience is not resignation but a vital, connected acceptance of things as they are—'the art of caring slowly.' This quality allows us to meet our entire life with steadiness, kindness, and the willingness to begin again, moment by moment.*

This path and the unfolding of our practice and meditation in the spiritual life has been described in a number of different ways. Different traditions use different models or frameworks for describing the spiritual path, and the Buddha taught in different ways at different times, depending on his audience and the situation. He had a real genius for seeming to be able to offer what was most useful to any particular audience at any time.

Sometimes we hear the path described in terms of the unfolding of the Four Noble Truths and understanding of this core teaching—the truth of suffering, the cause of it, the cessation, and then the Eightfold Noble Path—this training in sīla, samādhi, and paññā that leads to the cessation of suffering. Sometimes it's spoken about in terms of what's called the progress of insight, this deep seeing into the characteristics of anicca, dukkha, and anattā through stages of insight and stages of awakening. Sometimes in

terms of discovering our Buddha nature, resting in natural great perfection, touching into this luminous quality of the mind and heart that's already awake and never has been any other way.

At different times, one or another of these ways of looking at things may resonate with us more or seem to be more clearly paralleling our experience in any particular moment. It may be useful to hold our practice in one way or another at different times. But there's one description which I think is always useful, always appropriate, and can be a very powerful way of looking at the unfolding of our practice. This is in terms of the ripening of pāramīs, pāramitās—these ten beautiful qualities of mind and heart that it's said the Buddha perfected over countless lifetimes.

If we reflect on the spiritual life in terms of the ripening of these beautiful qualities, it really opens up the breadth of what we relate to as practice, which can sometimes get very narrow. We think of it as the time sitting on the cushion, formally engaged in meditation. But the pāramīs offer a very broad way of looking at the spiritual life and are really helpful, I think, at any time.

This perspective helps us cut through the tendency we have so often to be judging and assessing and evaluating our experience and our practice in meditation. So often we fall into looking for evidence of progress. We get caught up in mentally comparing ourselves with our projections of what's happening for other yogis on retreat. We look to see: Is it working? Am I doing it right? Am I getting it? It's so easy to fall into those mind states—judging our experience, then judging ourselves based on our perception of that experience.

And we can overlook a lot of good qualities that are actually getting strengthened, getting developed, just because we're willing to keep at it, to show up again and again, to come back and begin again. Just through that, we're developing a lot of good qualities: perseverance and energy, determination.

This way of viewing the path in terms of the ripening of pāramīs is really common in some of the Buddhist countries in Asia where I've spent time. The path is spoken about this way a lot in those cultures. So often my teachers would speak of the spiritual life in terms of ripening pāramīs, relating to it in that way. I think this has at least something to do with the very broad view they hold of practice unfolding over lifetimes, the understanding that these qualities are nurtured and strengthened over a long period of time, reflecting the understanding of rebirth that permeates those cultures in a very deep way.

Whether or not the idea of rebirth is meaningful for us—there's no requirement that it be meaningful or that you adopt it as some kind of belief—we can see it in terms of one lifetime or just in one day. How many different births do we take over the course of a day? Even in a single meditation period, we can take birth in heaven realms of bliss and pleasure, and we can take birth in dukkha realms of deep, difficult states—despair and anguish—and everywhere in between in just a single sitting period. So we could see our whole life, a whole day, as a series of births and passings away and new births. Moment by moment, we can look at our life in this way. And throughout this ebb and flow of change—of births, lives, passings away, rebirths—we're strengthening and developing these beautiful qualities of the pāramīs, whether we notice that or not.

It's so interesting. We meet people sometimes who seem to just have one or more of these qualities of the pāramīs highly developed. They seem to have come into life that way. It seems like they were just born with these qualities. They may have a lot of natural kindness or generosity or energy.

I think of my mother in this way. She had a lot of these beautiful qualities very highly developed. She was a really cool person, my mom. I think of energy, for example. I didn't really notice it when I was growing up, but she had so much energy. She took care of the house. She planted a garden. She was a really great cook and did all the cooking. She was a potter—pretty much all the dishes in the house she made, really beautiful stuff. She worked in an artist cooperative gallery, helped run it, sold her things there. She had lots of friends. She raised four kids.

She did all kinds of incredible volunteer work. When I think about it, list this all out, I don't know how she did it. There just don't seem to be enough hours in the day. And it was all done—it wasn't this hyper, driven energy. It was just my mom, the way she was. It was done with such real ease and grace, very naturally. She just had a lot of energy. Some people do seem to just be that way, to come into life that way.

And we meet people who just seem to deepen and progress in their meditation very easily. In Asia, the teachers would say, "Well, their paramis are very ripe." They would just say that's the way it is. There's an understanding that we're not all the same in this regard.

So I brought one of my favorite books—this is the show-and-tell part of the talk. Some of you have heard me read from this before. It's called *Frog and Toad Together*, and it's a level-two reading-with-help book. That's kind of my speed some of the time. I'm going to read a story called "The Garden."

There are good pictures. I love kids' books with great pictures, which I can't share with you. But Frog is green, and Toad is kind of brownish and warty, and they're really good friends.

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.

All the next day, Toad sang songs to his seeds. And all the next day Toad read poems to his seeds. And all the next day Toad played music to 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 might have gotten the idea of my point here. Our practice really is a lot like planting seeds. We use this image a lot, but it's a good one. It's actually a really useful image—to hold our practice in this way, understanding that our job is just to plant those seeds.

But a lot of the time we're like Toad with his seeds. They don't come up fast enough for our taste. And the first question we ask when we start practice is, "How soon?" We start to look. Is it working? Are they growing? We don't see results. And then, like Toad, we start to yell at our seeds. We yell at ourselves internally a lot of the time. We're not doing it right. And then maybe we try all kinds of strategies like Toad with his seeds—reading them stories and playing music and all the rest of it.

But often we're not that kind. We don't do those things. He played the violin for them in the picture there. But we don't read stories or poems to them. We blame them, or we blame ourselves. We find fault with the teachings or the teachers. We look outside and point around to place the blame for our apparent lack of results.

Here's another story. This is from the Saṃyutta Nikāya. It's a story the Buddha tells about a hen incubating her eggs.

"Suppose a hen has eight, ten, or twelve eggs. If she doesn't cover them rightly, warm them rightly, or incubate them rightly, then even though this wish may occur to her —'Oh, that my chicks might break through the eggshells with their spiked claws and beaks and hatch out safely!'—still, it is not possible that the chicks will break through the eggshells and hatch out safely. Why is that? Because the hen has not covered them rightly, warmed them rightly, or incubated them rightly."

And so no matter how much we want things to happen on our timetable, if we don't sit on our eggs, they're not going to hatch. We need to let these seeds we're planting sprout in their own time. And sometimes it takes a while. We're so impatient as a society. We have a lot of impatience.

We want everything to be done fast. We want quick results. We lose interest if things don't happen quickly. We always think there must be a better way, and better always means quicker. We want to find a shortcut—there's got to be a shortcut. It's like that story of the letter that came here addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society." Someone mentioned we want instant meditation if we can get it, like a packet we could open and mix up.

And because we're so impatient, we often misunderstand what patience really is, what it's about. Sometimes we can confuse it with an attitude of not caring about what we're doing or about the results of our practice—some kind of indifference. Or we think patience means a stoic attitude where we grit our teeth and bear down and make it through. But we can come out of that with a lot of tightness and contraction in our hearts and bodies and minds.

We don't want to learn about patience because we usually have to practice it when things are difficult. It's easy to be patient when things are going well. If we're having really pleasant, nice, easy experiences, the issue of patience doesn't even come up. We generally don't feel, "I have to be patient with this lovely, blissful mind state." But without the quality of patience in life and in our practice, we're really going to have a hard time. We will suffer without this because things aren't going to go the way we want them to all the time. Patience is essential in our life, in our practice. And we're going to face challenges no matter what—that's just part of the deal. When we take birth, there will be challenges.

We're here on retreat, sitting, minding our own business, everything going well. And then it just changes for no apparent reason. We see this in our meditation. It's easy and clear. We feel relaxed and present. We're connecting. Everything is just flowing along. The practice is doing itself. And then all of a sudden, it just falls apart. We're filled with resistance. We're angry and frustrated. A day can feel like the movement between these kinds of extremes—it's going great, and then it turns into a train wreck, and what did we do wrong? And then it gets better again.

It might be easier if it just didn't change so much. If it was kind of a drag all the time, maybe we'd get used to it. But there are times when it's not too bad, when it feels like it's actually going okay. Things come together, and then we lose it again. It seems like we must have done something wrong—we blew it somehow. I was recently on a retreat, and at one point I thought, "If I had never done this, I'd be just as good, if not better, than I am at it now." That was my perception. I thought if I'd never done it, it would be going better. We have moments like this.

And so we really need to find and cultivate qualities of patience and acceptance, forbearance, the kind of compassion that Susie spoke about last night—which is an aspect of this patience—gentleness, steadiness. All of these qualities are part of this *pāramī* of patience. *Khanti* is the Pali word for patience, *khanti pāramī*. It includes all these qualities I've just mentioned. We need to really cultivate this to help us. It's one of our best allies in practice.

True patience has this kind, gentle attitude—compassionate, caring—this willingness to stay with it, to stay steady as we navigate the ups and downs and the rocky terrain of a life, of our practice, and what it means to be human.

Sometimes I think we have this idea, this notion, that the goal or the result of our practice is going to be reaching a state where we only have pleasant experiences. None of us would admit that if someone asked us outright, but secretly we're holding out some hope that that's the trajectory—that somehow we're tipping the balance in that direction where, a little longer, and it's just going to be really nice all the time. As though enlightenment were some kind of steady state of nothing but pleasant experiences and pleasant feelings in the body and mind.

And it's said that there are some deva realms, some heavenly realms where it's like that, where it's only pleasant. That might be sounding kind of good right about now to some of us. But the human realm with this mix is said to be the best place to practice and to realize the Dhamma. This is the best realm for that. These realms of pure pleasure offer not much motivation for practice. It's not too pleasant here, so we have some motivation. And it's not so difficult that we're just crushed under the weight of suffering. We get some of both, and it's said this is the best place to practice.

The freedom the Buddha was pointing to is a freedom that doesn't depend on things being a particular way. It doesn't depend on it being pleasant all the time. A true freedom cannot depend on things being any particular way because conditions are always changing. Enlightenment doesn't mean we somehow suddenly get control over conditions—conditions are always changing. And any peace we find that's dependent on conditions being in some particular way, it won't last. It's not a real freedom.

In our practice, we have to learn to be able to open to the whole thing, to the entirety of our life—when things are going well and when they're not, when it's easy, when it's difficult. If we only open up when things are going the way we like, when it's pleasant and flowing easily, then what are we learning? There is no real freedom in that. If our happiness depends on life going only the way we want it to, we're going to be in for a hard time of it. We're setting ourselves up for frustration, for suffering.

We come to a retreat like this, and maybe sometimes we come with a bit of an agenda. We want to find some peace, some calm, some ease—nothing wrong with that. Or sometimes we come and there's something we want to fix in ourselves, fix in our lives, or figure out. We have an idea that we're going to get something we don't have already, or find something that will make us happier. We sit down, just hoping for a little ease and calm, and we start paying attention to our experience. What do we find there? This wild, uncontrollable mind. So much of the time, it's full of resistance and pettiness. Everything we've ever repressed or denied or done our best to forget shows up. Even the stuff that's not difficult is just boring or repetitious or embarrassing. Every song and jingle and stupid TV show we ever watched—we start seeing reruns of all that. It's all in there. Sooner or later, everything is going to come up, and some of it's not that easy to be with.

There's so much in our experience that we put into the category of unacceptable, isn't there? How much that we experience, that unfolds over the course of a day, gets tossed into the unacceptable bin? All the stuff that we put in a little hidden compartment—not going to look at that—and put it away. But this is not ultimately a good strategy because it's all going to come up at some point. The path is going to test us in different ways at different times, and we're going to have to look at it all sooner or later.

I once read an article describing a time someone had been to an evening teaching given by the very famous Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. This was an event in Berkeley, California, and a lot of people had come. He was very famous and popular—a big hall, and everyone was there waiting. He tended to arrive late to these events, so he was quite late as usual. Finally he shows up, and this is what he said to start:

"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, 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 that's what practice feels like over the course of a day—just one insult after another.

But we really do have to develop a relationship with our entire being. And patience is absolutely necessary for this—it's a total necessity in this process.

We can have the idea that we have to get rid of certain things in our lives, in our experience, in order to practice properly or achieve some special state for the practice to unfold. But right here, right now, in the middle of it all, right in the midst of it, is where

the practice happens. It's not in some future state of grace. It's right here in this body, in this mind, in this moment. This is where the practice happens. This is the Dhamma unfolding. It reveals itself right in the middle of this mess.

And patience really is, as I said, one of our very best allies as we walk this path. Patience allows us to navigate this process with some stability, with some ease, with kindness and gentleness. We can stay steady with the ups and downs, and it helps us find that willingness to begin again.

So much of the practice is this willingness to begin again. We're not going to get anywhere without a willingness to start over. If there's any single key to it, it's that willingness to begin again. We're going to get caught. We're going to get hooked by things. Even when we've seen through them from all sides, we'll get caught again and again. Sometimes it's going to be difficult.

And we really need to remind ourselves that this is a path that takes time. Much of what we're doing, you could say, is unlearning old, deeply conditioned habits of mind and heart. We've been practicing them for a long, long time—maybe for lifetimes. And it's going to take time to unlearn those, to loosen those patterns. The only way this is going to happen is to stick to it, to stick with the practice, to be resolute in what we're doing. This is what's going to serve us and will really be the thing that makes the difference.

Until we're fully enlightened, there are going to be times when we're lost in confusion, struggling in different ways. And if we're fighting against that, fighting against this process, we'll suffer and create a situation where we're never good enough, where we're never okay just as we are.

Sometimes life presents us with the chance to develop patience that we might wish we weren't getting. Usually that's the case. We mostly learn about patience by being impatient.

My sister and I were very much involved in caring for my parents in the years leading up to their deaths. They died close to one another, about ten weeks apart. Both of them were nearly ninety-two, and they'd been together for seventy years, which is a long time to do anything at all, let alone stay married to the same person. And they still even liked each other. They were very sweet. One of my friends came to visit when my parents were in their late eighties, and they were sitting on the couch holding hands. She was really amazed by that—they still liked each other after being together for that long.

But it wasn't easy. My mother, in her later years, had kinds of dementia where her mind really wasn't functioning very well. I would visit, and we would have the same conversations over and over and over. I know many of you have friends or relatives where you've been around this kind of situation. Great patience was required, and sometimes I didn't have a lot of it. My father had real trouble with my mother's decline. It was very, very difficult. There were many times when I didn't have much patience.

Spending time with our families—that's really where the rubber meets the road, isn't it? It's easy to be wise and equanimous in a meditation center. But go hang with the family and see. That's where you find out more practice is required. Definitely.

And if we just tell ourselves to be patient, to tolerate difficulties in our practice, we can get into this kind of bearing it—we can get tight. What we really need to do at times like that is to take a good look at impatience, to explore the quality of impatience: how it manifests in our heart, in our mind, how it manifests in the body. What are the thoughts, the emotions, the stories that come up? How does it affect us? What happens when we get identified with that quality of impatience?

How many times have we reacted out of impatience, lashed out in some way, or spoken from a place of frustration, only to regret it afterward? I remember times of speaking harshly to my father during those difficult years, and the pain of having done that—doing my best afterward to make some kind of amends.

There's a Chinese proverb that says, "One moment of patience may ward off great disaster. One moment of impatience may ruin a whole life." We can think of situations where a moment of impatience leads to some act that can alter the entire course of a life.

One strategy that can help with cultivating patience is to examine our relationship to unpleasant experience, to unpleasant feelings—which I've been touching on already. This helps us both to develop patience and to work skillfully with impatience, both sides of the coin.

How often do we relate to an unpleasant feeling tone in our experience as problematic, as bad, as wrong, as something to be gotten rid of? We can write off a whole day here on retreat because there was a predominance of unpleasant feeling tone to our experience. We just write it off. We find ourselves reporting, "Oh, it's not been going so well," or "I had kind of a bad day yesterday." And if we look, often what we're really talking about is that it was unpleasant—my experience had an unpleasant feeling tone,

a higher percentage of that. And when we report, "Oh, it's going really well," what do we mean? Often it's simply because it feels pleasant. A higher percentage of moments where there's a pleasant feeling.

If we relate to unpleasant feelings only as wrong, bad, problematic, something to get rid of, we're missing out on a real opportunity. We're dismissing a big part of our life as being without value. But there's actually a lot we can learn there if we're willing to look into it, if we can reframe our experience and bring some interest and investigation, seeing it as something we can explore.

In that moment, if we do that—even in the midst of something really difficult and unpleasant—things can open up. Our mind and heart can open in powerful, beautiful ways. We really start to see that our experience is conditional, that it's subject to change, that it's impersonal, that things arise due to conditions and causes, and change when those conditions change. We can start to touch a place of freedom and ease right in the middle of something that's unpleasant and difficult.

Patience allows us to meet our life more fully, more completely. Rather than trying to make life meet our agenda, live up to some expectation we might have about how it should be or is supposed to be, we meet life just as it is right now—just like this, however it is.

Another useful consideration in developing patience is to remind ourselves that our practice consists of small steps taken many times. If we wake up in the morning with the thought, "I'm going to be mindful for the whole day," or we sit down thinking, "I'm going to be mindful for this whole sitting," or even "I'll be mindful for the next five minutes," we may set ourselves up to fail and find frustration and impatience arising because we're not able to do it.

But if we say, "I'll just be mindful for this moment"—well, that's all we have anyway. We can't be mindful for the next five minutes. We can only be present for this moment. If we're still there, we'll do the next one. If we get lost, then whenever we come back, we'll do that one. So we take one step at a time. We do this moment, and then the next moment, and then the next one. This little step, over and over. And that's really manageable, sustainable, if we hold it in that way.

There's a technical definition of patience from the classical texts that offers some useful considerations. Sometimes I like to bring these definitions in. It says that 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—the condition for it to arise.

This quality of acceptance is really a key aspect of true patience. This acceptance, this acknowledgment of the way it is—we're taking our stand on reality with that. We're acknowledging the truth of the moment, not in terms of how we want it to be or think it should be, but how it really is. We stand on the truth of things.

It's important to remember that this quality of acceptance is nothing like resignation. It's not resignation—"It's like this" with a defeated, collapsed attitude. Resignation is a deflated, collapsed state. But acceptance is alive and vital and connected.

Acknowledging: no, it's like this now.

And this points to what was defined as the proximate cause for the arising of patience—seeing things as they really are. So often we're focused on the way we think things should be that we lose sight of the way they actually are, right here and now. If we take our stand on that reality, this can allow patience to flower in the moment.

That definition said the function of patience is to endure the desirable and the undesirable—you could say the pleasant and the unpleasant, the agreeable and the disagreeable, the acceptable and the unacceptable. There are different ways we might express this.

There's a sutta in the Majjhima Nikāya, the Greater Discourse on the Buddha's advice to his son Rāhula. In that long teaching, one part advises Rāhula to 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 there."

Patience allows us to remain firm and steady like the earth itself—this impartial, firm, resolute quality. We sit like a mountain. The mountain is not moved. All kinds of things can happen.

Usually we don't think of desirable things as something we have to endure. I think this points to a relationship with impermanence, with the quality of impermanence. We endure the desirable, the pleasant, in that we know it won't last—that it's subject to arising and passing like everything else. We endure the desirable in that we don't hold onto it. We let it be there, knowing that it will pass away. And so there's a balanced relationship to the changes, the ups and downs that we inevitably encounter in our practice.

The definition also said the manifestation of patience is tolerance or non-opposition. This is an aspect of patience where we're not in contention with our experience—we're not struggling against it. Patience has the ability to flow with change, to ride these changes without fighting against the times when it's difficult. This tolerance, this non-

opposition. We really build great strength of heart with this. We don't falter in the face of what's difficult. We don't shrink in defeat or withdraw from challenging times. We don't struggle and fight either, which just exhausts us. We find a place in the middle—we don't fight to the point where we simply give up. This quality of non-opposition is an aspect of patience: not in contention with the truth of things.

Sometimes the quality of patience manifests as an incredible strength and compassion and courage. This is an excerpt from "A Christmas Sermon on Peace" by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—a beautiful sermon he delivered at Christmas time:

"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 some 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 and otherwise for integration, but we'll still love you. And 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."

I think this speaks to one of the most powerful aspects of the quality of patience—this courageous heart of compassion that knows suffering, that understands the nature of confusion, knows what it is like to act from that place of pain and suffering and confusion, and is able to bring kindness and compassion to bear in the face of that. There is incredible strength in that quality of patience.

The poet John Ciardi had a beautiful short description of patience that I really love. It speaks to this quality. He said: "Patience is the art of caring slowly."

Patience is the art of caring slowly. A deep quality of connection and care is part of this.

One thing worth remembering as we walk this path, as we engage in the spiritual life, the meditative life—something to remind ourselves of regularly—is that most worthwhile things in life take time to develop and grow.

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 the results—when they're going to come, what they're going to be like, and how we can speed up the practice. Many times our efforts to speed things up actually just get in the way.

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 and now. Our desire to have the results come, 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 short poem by Linda France. It's 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 standing in the way. How could I forget the tender 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, and 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, feel it love me back under my skin.

Thank you for your kind attention this evening.

CHAPTER 22

Guided Meditation: Mettā for the 'Difficult' Person

Carol Wilson · 43 min

> *In this guided meditation from the IMS Three-Month Retreat, Carol Wilson leads practitioners through the traditional progression of mettā (loving-kindness) practice, culminating in the challenging step of extending goodwill toward a difficult person. She begins by dispelling a common misconception: that reaching the difficult person quickly somehow indicates spiritual progress. Instead, she frames the entire practice as gentle exploration—training the mind in wholesome states and changing habitual patterns of reaction.*
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> *Wilson offers practical wisdom for working with difficult people in mettā practice. She emphasizes that 'difficult person' doesn't mean the person themselves is difficult, but rather that thinking of them naturally brings up something other than mettā in our hearts. The proximate cause for mettā to arise, she explains, is seeing the good in someone. She suggests creative approaches: imagining the difficult person as a small child, visualizing them far away in a rowboat where they feel safe but distant, or simply remembering an aspect of their goodness alongside their difficult qualities.*
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> *Crucially, Wilson reminds practitioners that mettā for others never excludes mettā for oneself. If extending goodwill to someone who has been harmful makes us feel unsafe, we should return to self-compassion. She quotes Ajahn Sumedho's understanding of mettā as the potential to see difficulty without creating anything around it—simply bearing witness with kindness. The meditation moves through self, benefactor, and friend before exploring the difficult person, always returning to self-compassion and eventually radiating loving-kindness to all beings.*

So as we continue in the trajectory of the loving-kindness instructions, today we come to the so-called difficult person.

Just to say a few things, as I'm sure has been reiterated hopefully many times: this practice is not about achieving something or proving something to yourself or getting it right. I'm often surprised in speaking with people how often there's a kind of underlying, maybe not quite conscious, idea that if they're doing it right, they'll get to the difficult person soon. The sooner you get there means the better you're doing. That somehow proves we're understanding metta. So I'd just like to suggest, if you happen to have that, put it down.

Remember, all we're doing here is exploring how the mind and heart can be developed in the wholesome. Just training and learning to trust how one moment of a wholesome mind state influences the next. Just changing our habits. Just investigating and exploring, each of us in our own experience, what that quality of mind is that is really not holding ill will.

As many people have said, sometimes there's a real feeling you might call love or outflowing well-wishing. Sometimes it's a simple kind of kindness, friendliness. For me, sometimes I think the essence of metta is simply connection—just connecting the heart-mind with the sense of the person without judgment, without saying, this part okay, that part no good. Just exploring it for yourself.

As you already know, a lot of the practice is also seeing how the habits of mind and heart that are the opposite, or that seem to obstruct the open flow of non-ill will, of friendliness, come up. Not a mistake, you know. We meet those with kindness.

Of course, we'll start with self, go to whatever person has been easy, and then I'll suggest difficult, if you want to explore that. Again, I would suggest not choosing the most difficult, scary person in your whole life, or someone you don't know but who is someone in the world you cannot bear to even think about. This isn't about achievement. It's about exploring. So we say pick like a nudgy difficult person.

It doesn't mean they in themselves are a difficult person, right? It means when you think of this person, something other than metta arises naturally in your heart and mind. And we're learning to change the channel.

Calling them "the difficult person" doesn't mean they are difficult. That's part of what's interesting to begin to explore—seeing how someone that we have resentment towards, or who has hurt us, how the habit of our mind can be that when we look at or think of that person, they become completely defined in our mind by their difficult behavior. That hard thing they did to us, or that really annoying habit they have, becomes almost like who they are when we tune into them.

Part of this is, just as with ourselves, learning in a way to see. Metta isn't blind. Metta doesn't say, "Oh, no, no, it's really okay that you go around kicking puppies. It doesn't matter." It's not that. Metta sees clearly unwholesome actions, but without the judgment. It sees that unwholesome action doesn't define who anybody is. We're all such a mix.

The interesting thing is, with this person, to see if you can tune in, remember some aspect of their goodness. Everyone has some. As I'm sure has been said, the proximate cause for metta to arise in the mind—this friendliness, this non-judging connectedness, acceptance—the proximate cause is said to be seeing the good in someone.

Sometimes you're surprised: the person pops up you think will be difficult, and it's really not a problem to wish them well. But if it is, just explore. See if you can take a moment to imagine them either doing something kind you know they do, or imagine them being happy. See if you can tune into them in another way, including their difficulty, but not just focusing on that.

If the person you're exploring working with here is someone who has really been difficult or hurt you, you might find that part of what comes up is just a kind of fear, a kind of self-protection. I remember thinking when I was doing the long retreat, "I don't want this person in my heart." They could be happy, but I didn't want them in my heart. And that's what would happen when I would start doing metta to someone. You can again be a bit creative.

You might imagine the difficult person as a small child. I remember reading that quotation from John Lewis weeks ago where he was describing people who were beating him—if you can see the small child in that hate-filled person, something shifts.

Another approach, and this isn't just my idea but something I've read and heard other teachers suggest: depending on what your personality is like, what works for you, sometimes with a person you just don't want to be happy, someone you don't want close to you, you can play with it a little. You can envision them with a slight sense of humor—not a put-down kind of humor, but a sense of making it safe. Someone told me ages ago they would imagine the person in a little rowboat in the middle of a huge lake, way far away, just a little speck. The person isn't in any danger, but that's as close as they could imagine wishing them well while still feeling safe themselves.

And that's fine, because remember, metta for someone else never excludes metta for yourself. That's how metta, how all the brahmaviharas, partake of the vastness of the awakened heart-mind. That's how it moves into limitlessness. So if we're choosing someone who has been abusive and we think we have to have metta for them in a way that makes us feel unsafe—drop the metta and come back to yourself. Reconnect with metta for yourself, with the sense of "may I be safe and protected." If metta for somebody means shutting out metta for yourself, come back to where it's easy, because that's not metta. That's some idea of what we should be doing.

With all of this, we're just exploring. If you get lost in thinking too much, or it becomes too difficult, or a lot of aversion comes up—self-aversion, whatever—come to where it's more simple and direct. Whether that's yourself, or benefactor, or friend. And just play with going back and forth if you get into striving.

So we'll start as usual with ourselves. Then I'll come in after a while and offer a suggestion, but you can find your own timing of moving from self to whatever has been easiest for you—whether that's benefactor, friend, or neutral person—whatever has been helping you connect with the sense of well-wishing, the sense of connectedness. Then I'll suggest, if you want to explore a difficult person, taking a moment to connect with them, looking for their good, and beginning your phrases.

Finding whatever way you have been using, whatever you've found supportive, to bring your heart and mind and body together here in this moment. Let your attention, your awareness, relax into the body. And let your mind relax. Whatever's going on in the mind, in the heart, in the emotions—acknowledging, letting it be, just like this.

Just as I am in this moment, may I love and accept myself.

If you have trouble receiving metta for yourself, some people find it helpful to imagine sitting surrounded by your friend, your benefactor, other loved ones, all sending metta to you, and you simply let yourself receive it.

I'll say my phrases; you use yours.

May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be happy. May I have physical happiness. May I live with ease of well-being in this world.

If you'd like now, bring in the person who seems easy for you. If that's yourself, wonderful—stay there. Or benefactor, friend, neutral person. If you're bringing them in, just take the time to get a sense, an image of them. Let your mind connect, tune into their goodness, and then begin offering the phrases as an expression of the intention of goodwill in your mind, in your heart.

And if you would like to explore bringing in someone a bit difficult, you could do that now. Again, just taking your time. A mental image or sense or memory of the person. And while not denying the difficult aspects, see if you can let your attention notice also some good. Or imagine the person happy, or in a way where they're safe but you also feel safe. Offering just one phrase as a connection.

Ajahn Sumedho has said he thinks of metta not particularly or necessarily as liking or loving anyone or anything, but as its potential to see the difficult without creating anything around it. I love that. May we see the difficult and the good about someone simply being present, bearing witness with kindness.

May you be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be well. May you live with ease in this world.

Just one phrase at a time.

For these last moments, if you like, come back to yourself. Reconnecting with your own goodness and friendliness toward yourself. And then imagining this kind of well of loving-kindness, of simple, friendly, connecting energy.

And just allow it to spread out and include all of us in this room, in the field of each of our loving-kindness, of our well-wishing. Wishing for all of us just as we wish for ourselves.

May we be safe.
May we be happy and peaceful.
May we be healthy and well.
May we live with ease in this world.

Just letting this friendly energy spread out and fill and touch all beings in this room.

And may the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms, in all phases of life.

May all beings be happy and peaceful.
May all beings be freed from suffering and confusion.
May our practice be a cause for the liberation of all beings.

CHAPTER 23

Refraining From Ten Unwholesome Actions - Ill Will and Wrong View

Joseph Goldstein · 59 min

In this continuation of teachings on the ten unwholesome actions, Joseph Goldstein examines the two remaining unskillful mental actions: ill will (byāpāda) and wrong view (micchā diṭṭhi). He explores how ill will manifests across a spectrum from mild irritation to hatred, arising whenever we encounter what is unpleasant—whether physical pain, difficult memories, or imagined future scenarios. Drawing on stories from Munindraji and Ajahn Chah, Goldstein illuminates how we often personalize impersonal situations and how sounds or circumstances only bother us when we "go out to annoy them."

The talk offers practical strategies for working with aversion, including mindfulness of unpleasant vedanā (feeling tone), the practice of "contact unpleasant" noting, and checking our attitude toward the aversion itself. Goldstein shares the Buddha's teaching that 100% of our suffering comes from unskillful states in our own minds—a challenging but empowering recognition that how we feel is ultimately up to us.

The discussion of wrong view focuses on two critical aspects: not understanding the law of kamma (that actions have consequences) and the deeply conditioned belief in a permanent self. Goldstein explains how we create a sense of self through identification with thoughts, emotions, and the body, quoting Ledi Sayādaw's teaching that "the delusion of a self renders them all unwholesome." The liberating insight is that there is no underlying 'I' behind experience—thoughts arise like rootless clouds in the sky. The talk concludes with the Buddha's instruction to Rāhula: "This is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself."

Last week I began speaking about the ten unwholesome actions the Buddha said to avoid, both for our own happiness and the happiness of all others. It's almost as if he were putting up a warning sign on a beach that said, "Caution, dangerous undertow, take care." So it's the same thing when we're on the shoreline of the ocean of our activities. The Buddha is reminding us of these areas of danger—the activities of body, speech, and mind that lead to suffering.

I spoke of the three unwholesome actions of body, four of speech, and the first of the three unwholesome actions of mind. Tonight I'd like to continue and speak of the two remaining unwholesome, unskillful actions of mind that the Buddha said to avoid. Both of them play a tremendously powerful role in our lives. They're powerfully conditioned in our minds.

The first of these is the mental activity of ill will. As we know, it expresses itself in so many different ways: as anger, as impatience, as annoyance, as irritation. And in extreme cases, it expresses itself as hatred. All of these forms of ill will are conditioned responses to what we find unpleasant in our experience. They arise in situations when we don't get what we want, or when we do get what we don't want.

It would be interesting to look at all of the times ill will or aversion is arising in the mind and to really see that it comes down to just these two things. We're not getting what we want, or we are getting what we don't want. We can see ill will and aversion arising in these situations in fairly predictable ways. This is not some kind of hidden, subtle truth we have to investigate. It's all pretty obvious if we're paying attention.

It's very easy to see the arising of ill will in one of its forms in relationship to physical pain. When we feel sensations as being unpleasant—getting what we don't want—our habitual response, as I'm sure you've noticed, is usually some kind of contraction. We pull back from it. We don't like it.

This is very different from an interaction I had with Munindraji, my first teacher. The first year I was in India, between different practice periods I was going into Bodh Gaya to the bazaar to have a cup of tea. One day I was having a really bad headache, and Munindraji came by. Chatting a little bit, he asked how I was. I said, "You know, Munindraji, I have this really bad headache." His response was, "Oh, I hope you are enjoying it." Not quite. But it was interesting that that is another possible perspective.

We can take our more usual response—the contraction of our energy system when we feel ourselves pulling back—and that contraction becomes a very useful signal that some form of aversion is present. We can really take it as feedback, and it awakens us to the fact that there's some ill will in the mind. So it's very obvious in relationship to physical pain and unpleasant sensations.

Ill will can also arise when we think about painful or unpleasant past situations. There's a thought or an image in the mind of someone or some event, and if it was an unpleasant encounter, very often just in having the thought or seeing the image, we get annoyed, we get angry, we get irritated. It's almost as if we were back in the situation again.

But it's really interesting to watch carefully what actually is happening in that moment, because what's really happening is that we're getting angry at a thought. As Munindraji said, in one of his very great teaching lines, "The thought of your mother is not your mother." It's a thought. But we have these thoughts, and because we're not aware in the moment that it is just a thought, we get pulled right into the content, the story, and then all the attendant emotions arise.

Even more unbelievable is that we can have thoughts about things that haven't even happened yet. We're imagining something might happen in the future, and we can play out a whole story of what's going to happen and get furious. What is going on? Mark Twain captured this very cleverly, as was his wont, when he said, "Some of the worst things in my life never happened."

Being on retreat is a perfect time to observe this phenomenon—to see when ill will arises around certain people or events, how much of it is about just the memory of something that happened, which is just a thought now, and how much of it is about something we imagine might happen in the future. It hasn't happened; it's just a thought now. If we can see this, it really is a way of unhooking ourselves from this addiction to the habit of ill will.

I find it particularly illuminating to watch this process in walking, whether it's walking meditation or maybe going for a walk. When we're walking and we're more or less present, there's a very simple, easy connection with the reality of our experience. We feel the movement of the body and the touch; we may be aware of the rain or the sun or the environment. There's a real connection with where we are. And I'm sure you've noticed this many times: we can be walking, connected, fully present, and then some thoughts come into the mind, and we just get pulled into them—pulled into this mind-created world with all of the emotions that might come with it, often, or at least sometimes, ill will or aversion.

And then three steps, five steps, a hundred steps later, it's like we come out—oh yeah, I'm just back, I'm back here. All of that was just in our imagination. We were lost in this mind-created world.

To observe this over and over again—our connection with being present, our connection with reality, everything is fine, and then we're lost. And then at a certain point, depending on the strength of our mindfulness, we're back again.

There's an old Zen story which provides a useful note for this phenomenon. It's the story of an old Zen hermit who was living in a cave and was also a fantastic artist. He spent years painting a tiger on the wall of the cave, painting it so meticulously that, as the story goes, when he finished, he looked at it and got frightened.

That's what we're doing. When we're getting lost in these mind-created worlds, it's like looking at a painted tiger. We're creating out of our imagination a little world, having all kinds of feelings about it, and it's just the brushstrokes of our mind. When we see this, a good note to remind ourselves might be "painted tiger." Just "painted tiger"—it reminds us that that's all it is.

Aversion or ill will can arise in relationship to physical pain. It can arise when we remember unpleasant past interactions or imaginary future ones. We can also see aversion arising in relationship to different situations on retreat. Retreat is a hotbed for ill will. When we are feeling a little discouraged or grumpy, the smallest thing can provoke aversion in us, where we project our discouragement onto others.

Then there's the phenomenon which is so common, especially in a group this size: the Vipassana vendetta. There's somebody here, some yogi—you don't like the way they walk, you don't like what they wear, you don't like how they move. They take too much food, whatever. The mind just starts obsessing. It just picks out this person, and very likely you have not even met them. You know nothing about them, but the mind is just making up this whole story. It's sort of the counterpoint to the Vipassana romance, which is the desire side of things. So watch out for that. If you find you're obsessing about another yogi's behavior, you might just note "Vipassana vendetta"—this is ill will arising in my own mind.

Ill will also arises when we personalize difficult situations that are really impersonal. How many times have we been in airports? We get to the airport two hours early, and then we see on the board: flight canceled. And if we don't get irritated because of our profound wisdom, we can certainly see it around us. People get so angry, so irritated. It's not that it's not a frustrating situation—it is. But it's completely impersonal. It has nothing to do with us. It's not directed at us. But we personalize it, and because we personalize it, we give tremendous power to the ill will.

One example of personalizing what's impersonal—and which will be of particular benefit during this retreat—is a story told about Ajahn Chah. At one point he decided to go on retreat by himself. He had this little meditation hut outside a village. This story comes from a book by Ajahn Amaro called *Small Boat, Great Mountain*. The villagers were partying at night, and there was loud music through the loudspeakers. Ajahn

Chah was getting a little irritated, especially because he was the teacher for many of these villagers. I can just imagine what was going on in his mind: "Don't they know that I'm here sitting? Don't they have any respect for their teacher?" On and on.

But then—and he was a very wise man—this is the account in the book. He said, "Well, they're just having a good time down there. I'm making myself miserable up here. No matter how upset I get, my anger is just making more noise internally." And then he had this insight: "Oh, the sound is just the sound."

It's me who is going out to annoy it. If I leave the sound alone, it won't annoy me. It's just doing what it has to do. That's what sound does—it makes sound. This is its job. So if I don't go out and bother the sound, it's not going to bother me.

It's just so true. And you have this enormously gracious gift of sounds to work with during this retreat. And it really is a gift, because it is possible to come to this place of understanding. It's just as Ajahn Chah said: sound is just sound. It's just a phenomena. And if we're not bothering it, if we're not reactive to it, it's totally fine. It's just another experience happening.

Sitting here in the morning and sometimes hearing a little bit—it really hasn't been too bad yet. Yet. Yet. I actually have been enjoying watching the mind settled in its own place, and the sound is in its own place, and there's no problem.

Anyway, it's a very useful example of how very often we personalize what's impersonal. We take it personally and then get annoyed or irritated or whatever it might be.

Another way ill will or aversion can arise is when there may be unnoticed emotions underneath the ill will that are feeding it. Because we're not noticing those, the ill will is nourished. Maybe underneath some feelings of anger or ill will there might be a feeling of hurt that's unacknowledged, or there might be a feeling of fear that's unacknowledged. And as long as we're not seeing that, it just keeps feeding the more surface manifestation of anger or irritation.

I had an interesting example of this quite a few years ago. I was teaching a retreat for lawyers and law students. It was very interesting. In the course of some of the group discussions—this was a very bright group of people and somewhat intense, and the law students especially, it's pretty rigorous—they were right in the middle of the intensity of their studies. One of them, I think a second or third year law student, was talking about the dynamics when you're in that adversarial position, speaking about anger and ill will. And he made this remarkable comment. He said, "I have to feel the anger in order that I don't feel the fear."

That was just so interesting. For him, that was the only alternative. In order not to feel the fear—which he took as being a weakening of his ability to be present and to work—he needed to get angry. We just talked about that a bit and explored the possibility, another possibility, that it's actually okay to feel fear. That in the acceptance of the fear, it's even easier to act and to manifest, because we don't have this internal conflict going on.

So it's just an example of how there can be an underlying emotion which keeps this unskillful state of ill will and aversion strong in our minds.

Given all of these forms and expressions and situations where ill will and aversion arise, and recognizing how unpleasant it usually is, I think a question of interest is: what is the great seductive power of this mind state? You can kind of understand the seductive power of greed. Even though it's unskillful, it's often associated with some pleasure. Ill will, hatred, anger is almost always associated with unpleasantness. So what is it that seduces us over and over again into feeding this mind state?

Often the seductive power of anger in all its different forms is that very sweet feeling of being right. I should be angry. I should be annoyed. I should be irritated. Look at what's happening. Look at what that person is doing. There's that kind of upwelling of self-righteousness that somehow energizes us, and we feel strong and right.

The Buddha captured this so well. He described it this way: anger with its poisoned source and honeyed tip.

It does have a honeyed tip, and that's what seduces us. And we often don't see its poisoned source—what that mind state is actually doing to us.

So the question is, how do we avoid getting caught up in this unwholesome action of mind? And how do we abandon it or let go of it when we do get caught up?

There are many ways of working with it, and you have been working with it for the past four weeks. Sometimes simple recognition and mindfulness is enough. We're being mindful, we recognize anger arising, we see its conditioned, impermanent, even selfless nature—like watching a movie in the mind. We're just watching it. We're not pulled into it. We don't get caught up in the story.

There's a Tibetan teaching which highlights this possibility: "If you don't cling, whatever arises is naturally freed." That's a beautiful teaching. If you don't cling, whatever arises is naturally freed. Because everything is coming and going by itself. So

if we're not grasping at the ill will or anger, we're not identified with it, we're not clinging to it, it may come up because of certain causes and conditions, and then it's naturally freed. It disappears.

But sometimes we may recognize that ill will is there, and it doesn't dissolve. It's not naturally freed in the moment. So here we might want to apply some of the teachings of the law of dependent origination, both in understanding how the ill will arises and how we can cut the chain.

What's the condition for ill will? An unpleasant feeling. So we can turn the mind, after we recognize the aversion, to the unpleasantness—whatever it may be, the unpleasantness of a thought, the unpleasantness we feel in a sensation. We turn our mindfulness: "Oh, unpleasant, unpleasant." And if we're truly mindful of the unpleasant feeling—and the noting is a big help here—in that moment of being mindful of the unpleasant, the aversion is not arising. We've cut the chain.

Sometimes I found it helpful to back up even one more link, because I've had the experience of noting either on the pleasant side or the unpleasant side—"unpleasant, unpleasant"—and still it's not quite enough. There have been times when I've backed up a link and made a double note: "Contact, unpleasant." Because contact is the link before the unpleasantness. Contact means that contact with whatever the object is—an image, a thought, a sensation. So we're acknowledging more fully what actually is happening. There's contact, in the contact we feel it as being unpleasant, and then if the mindfulness is not there, aversion arises. So that double note has really served me well when I felt caught. Contact unpleasant, or contact pleasant on the other side.

There are so many useful suggestions for practice. One teacher said, "You have to accept and watch both pleasant and unpleasant experiences." Let me repeat that: You have to accept and watch both pleasant and unpleasant experiences. You only want pleasant experiences. You don't want even the tiniest unpleasant experience. Is this fair? Is this the way of the Dhamma?

It just highlights the truth of things. Life contains both what's pleasant and unpleasant, and that's just how it is. So our practice needs to be willing to open to the unpleasantness. Here, instead of falling into that common habit of resisting what is unpleasant and trying to keep it out, we really take the opposite strategy and welcome it in. Unpleasant? Fine. Can I feel that?

Another Reason I Don't Keep a Gun in the House:

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on the way out.

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast,
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking.

And now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dogs.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section, barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor who is
entreating him with his baton,
while the other musicians listen in respectful
silence to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.

The barking dog solo. Can we let things in? When we let things in rather than trying to keep them out, the barking dog becomes a work of genius.

There are times, though—many times—when we don't remember to be mindful of the unpleasantness, when we don't let it in, when we get caught up in that conditioned reaction of ill will, annoyance, irritation. Here it becomes extremely helpful to check the attitude we have about the aversion itself. Because very often our attitude toward the aversion is actually what's feeding it. Besides that honeyed tip of self-righteousness, which might be our attitude toward the situation, there might well be feelings of aversion or self-judgment toward the aversion itself, toward the ill will. We don't like it. We feel anger toward it, or anger toward ourselves for having it. Here we're trying to practice letting go of ill will through more ill will. It's not such a helpful strategy.

So we need to keep checking the attitude in our mind at those times when the process has already progressed—when we haven't caught it earlier on, when we haven't been mindful of the unpleasantness and let it in, and the aversion has already arisen. We need to check that attitude so we can become mindful of the aversion rather than feeding it with more ill will.

Thich Nhat Hanh expressed this wise attitude so beautifully. He said, "If you keep breathing, mindfulness particles will infiltrate the anger. When sunshine penetrates a flower, the flower cannot resist. It has to open itself and show its heart to the sun. If you keep shining your compassion and understanding on it, your anger will soon crack and you will be able to look into its depths and see its roots."

It's such a beautiful reminder that even when this unskillful state has arisen—ill will, anger, aversion in any of its forms—we can bring love and compassion to it, which are really contained right within the mindfulness. And as we do, we're not fighting it; we're opening to it. And there's the opportunity to really understand it.

I think it's also important to acknowledge that at times, powerful emotions—anger included—are telling us something important. There's often an important message contained in the emotion. They may be conveying information about a situation. We might feel anger arising at injustice toward people around us or injustice in the world. Anger may arise in a situation where appropriate boundaries need to be set, and that's the emotion that arises to awaken us to that fact. The challenge for us is learning to understand the message of the emotion without drowning in it, without getting lost in it, and then acting it out in ways that may be unskillful.

One of the most challenging of all the Buddhist teachings—because this particular teaching has so many ramifications—is the Buddha's reminding us that one hundred percent of our suffering comes from unskillful states in our own minds. Not eighty percent, not ninety percent—one hundred percent. All of our suffering arises from defilements in the mind.

But there is such a strong tendency for us to blame others for our suffering, to blame others, to blame situations. It's not to say that situations don't cause a lot of pain in our lives, but if we're suffering, that has to do with how we're holding it.

A little humorous example of this: Years ago, I was in a relationship and we were having a small argument. My friend said, "Stop making me feel aversion." And I started to laugh. She didn't like that—my laughing didn't help. But it just struck me as so funny.

Stop making me feel this way. Nobody makes us feel any way at all. How we feel is up to us, and realizing that is tremendously empowering. But it means we take one hundred percent responsibility for how we feel.

There is a teaching of the Buddha which highlights this, and it also highlights the enormous challenge of this. It is not easy. This is a very high bar of understanding and of practice. But I love it because it sets the bar. Even if we're not there yet, it shows us the direction.

This is an amazing teaching. The Buddha is talking to the bhikkhus, and bhikkhu, as you might remember, means everyone practicing on the path. He said, "Bhikkhus, there are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you. Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or connected with harm, spoken with a mind of loving-kindness or with a mind of inner hate." These are all the ways people might address us. "Herein, bhikkhus, you should train yourself thus: our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving-kindness."

Just imagine the situation. Somebody is speaking to you at a totally inappropriate time, speaking lies, in a harsh tone of voice, wanting to do you harm, with a mind filled with hate. "Herein, bhikkhus, you should train yourself thus. Our minds will remain unaffected." Isn't that amazing—in that situation, to even hold that possibility? "We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving-kindness."

This is such a stark example of the Buddha reminding us that ultimately how we feel and how we respond is up to us. It doesn't matter what the other person is doing, what the situation is. This is a challenge, but it's helpful to keep it as a possibility in practice. This is the direction.

We have spoken so much on the unskillful state of ill will. The last of the three unskillful mind states—covetousness, which I spoke of last week, and ill will—is what the Buddha called wrong view. There are many aspects to wrong view; this is a big topic. Tonight I want to emphasize just two of the most important aspects.

The first aspect of wrong view to consider is the belief that there are no results from skillful or unskillful actions. Basically, wrong view is not understanding the law of karma—that all of our volitional actions of body, speech, or mind have consequences, that they bear fruit both in the present and in the future. This wrong view is very

powerful because when it is present, the belief that actions don't have results, it's like trying to navigate through life without understanding what brings happiness and what brings suffering. With wrong view, there are so many missteps and wrong directions.

This is what the Buddha said about wrong view: "Bhikkhus, there is no single factor so responsible for the suffering of beings as wrong view." That's how important this is to understand—no single factor so responsible for the suffering of beings as wrong view. When this is the mind state, when this is the quality, the factor in mind that's present, we don't stop to consider in the moment of acting that our actions are going to bring results. And this is not so uncommon. How often do we really stop and consider when we're doing something—is this action skillful? Is it unskillful? Where is it leading? Do I want to go where it's leading? When wrong view is present, we don't even consider that.

The Buddha gave so much importance to understanding this law of karma. He called it the light of the world, because it highlights the importance of understanding our motivations. This is something we really have to practice bringing into our lives—looking at our motivations, discerning whether they are skillful or unskillful, knowing that they have consequences. Karma is a very big topic, and Guy is going to speak in much more detail about it tomorrow evening.

The other critical aspect of wrong view is the one that is the root cause of so much suffering in our lives. This is the deeply conditioned idea and view and concept of self. When we're not looking deeply

into our experience, into the nature of our experience, and simply live in the world of surface appearances, what happens is we create a reference point for all experience—a someone to whom all experience is happening. We're creating this notion of a self behind experience, to whom it's happening.

How much of our sense of self comes from a superficial perception of the body? It seems so solid. And it's the first reference point—who are you? This is me. It's so easy to identify with the body as being self.

Some years ago, I saw an ad in the New York Times for a t-shirt, and the writing on it said, "Me, me, me." I mentioned this in a talk, and sometime later a yogi gave me a present of a t-shirt that said, "Not me, not me, not me."

When we really investigate and examine the body more closely, we see that it's a composite of so many different interrelated systems—the skeletal system, the muscles, the organs, the circulatory system, the nervous system. There are so many different systems going on. But if we saw the liver or the bladder, we wouldn't say, "Oh yeah, that's

me." We wouldn't be identifying with it. But we wrap it all up very nicely in skin. We create this very nice package. And then it's very easy, as we all know, to get attached to it. We get attached to our own body. We get attached to these other nice packages that are out there. How attached would we be if we had x-ray vision and could really see what was going on?

One of the important consequences of taking this body as being self is the fear of losing it and the fear of death. And of course, if we look on an even deeper level, on the cellular level or on the atomic level, there's almost nothing here. I read someplace that if all the space were taken out from the material elements that make up the body—if all the space were removed—all that would remain would be the size of a particle of dust. So what is it that we're calling self? It's because we don't see that clearly, we don't see that deeply.

As we know from our experience, particularly in meditation, wrong view of self happens when we get lost in and identified with thoughts and emotions, with all the internal stories that arise—stories we tell about ourselves, stories we tell about others. As I mentioned earlier, the thought of something is not the thing. It's a thought. But when wrong view is strong, when we're not being mindful in a clear way, we're not seeing that all of these passing thoughts don't belong to anyone.

There's a wonderful little Tibetan image. It says that thoughts that wander through the mind are like clouds in the sky—they have no roots, no home. I love this image because I love imagining clouds with roots. What would the sky look like if every cloud had a root? It's ridiculous. But that's what we're doing with our thoughts. The thoughts are cloud-like. They're just arising in the open sky of the mind. With wrong view, we're rooting them. And that's where the sense of self is born.

As a little experiment in undercutting this habit of wrong view with regard to thoughts, maybe for ten minutes or so in your next sitting, just imagine that every thought that arises in your mind is coming from the person next to you. You'd probably relate to it in a very different way. Of course, it might activate cowboy dharma—"Stop it!" But it's just a way to play with the understanding that thoughts are arising out of conditions. They're just like clouds in the sky. And through practice, through mindfulness, we can see their impermanent, empty, selfless nature. We free ourselves from this deep, deep habit of wrong view.

We also strengthen the sense of self—activating wrong view—when we create a felt sense of self every time we identify with some emotion. "I'm angry, I'm sad, I'm happy, I'm excited." Or with other mindsets: "I'm mindful, I'm concentrated." This is our usual way of relating to the mind, and it's so ordinary, so commonplace. How are you feeling? I'm angry. How was your sitting?

I was concentrated, or I was not concentrated. This is our ordinary way of relating. And as conventional expression in communication, it's fine. The problem is we believe it. We are identified, very often.

Ledi Sayadaw, the great Burmese master, just nailed the importance of seeing this correctly. He said, "All those deeds, words, and thoughts are egocentric—I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm excited, I'm restless, I'm whatever, apparently good or bad. The delusion of a self in them renders them all unwholesome. They are stumbling blocks to insight knowledge. They are detrimental to one's realization of nibbana. Attachment to the deluded 'I' in all actions is what draws you into the floods of samsara."

That's a very striking teaching because it's pointing to a very ordinary pattern of our lives, one that's well established. But it's a powerful reminder that this is where we have to look, this is where we have to investigate, in order to free ourselves from this habit of wrong view. In all of these rising states of different emotions and mind states, in all of them, the "I" is extra. We're not pushing away the experience. We're not pushing away the emotion or the mind state. There's a full experience of it, but we can experience it without adding to it that identification, claiming it as I or mine.

Moods and emotions are like great cloud formations. Some are heavy and oppressive—big stormy clouds. And some clouds are light and very airy. They all arise when the conditions come together for them to arise, and they pass away as the conditions change. This is the same process with our own mind states. The great liberating insight that frees us from wrong view is that there is no underlying "I" or self behind all of these experiences to whom they're happening. It's love that loves. It's fear that fears. It's anger that angers. Each mind state, each emotion is just manifesting its own nature. This is the unfolding of our lives. With wrong view, we identify with them. With right view, we don't.

Sometimes Dharma teachings come in unexpected ways and unexpected places. I'm a great reader of spy books and detective stories, because I've learned so much from them. So I want to share with you something from a great detective story. It's actually about a Buddhist Thai detective. It's by the author John Burdett, and the name of the book is *Bangkok Tattoo*. You could get enlightened listening to this:

"You see, dear reader, speaking frankly without any intention to offend, you are a ramshackle collection of coincidences held together by a desperate and irrational clinging. There is no center at all. Everything depends on everything else. Your body depends on the environment. Your thoughts depend on whatever junk floats in from the media. Your emotions are largely from the reptilian end of your DNA. Your intellect is a chemical computer that can't add up a zillionth as fast as a pocket calculator. And even your best side is a superficial piece of social programming that will fall apart just as soon as your spouse leaves with the kids and the money in the joint account, or the economy starts to fail and you get the sack, or you get conscripted into some idiot's war. To name this amorphous morass of self-pity, vanity, and despair 'self' is not only the height of hubris, it is also proof, if any were needed, that we are above all a delusional species. We are in a trance from birth to death. Prick the balloon and what do you get? Emptiness. Take two steps in the divine art of Buddhist meditation and you will find yourself on a planet you no longer recognize. Those needs and fears you thought were the very bones of your being turn out to be no more than bugs in your software."

I need to wrap this up. Our practice with this unskillful mind state of wrong view is so powerful—the creation of the sense of self, and understanding how it's created moment to moment. It's not that the self is there and we have to get rid of it. It's not there in the first place.

We simply need to stop creating it in each moment by identifying with what's arising. So it's really very simple, although not always easy.

The Buddha summed this up in one very clear teaching to his son, Rahula. He said that every aspect of mind and body should be seen with perfect wisdom: "This is not mine. This is not I. This is not myself."

We can use these words as a reminder throughout the day. It's a kind of mantra of liberation. With whatever arises in the body, in the mind, in our experience—with whatever arises, sometimes or often remind yourself: this is not mine, this is not I, this is not myself.

It was really out of his great compassion that the Buddha pointed out these ten unskillful mind states, the ones to avoid: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, harsh speech, gossip and backbiting, useless talk, covetousness, ill will, and wrong view. He's reminding us—and we can each verify this for ourselves, it's not a question of belief—it's testing this out and seeing in our own lives that these actions undermine our happiness and cause suffering to others and to ourselves.

It's also recognizing that in the course of our lives, and over perhaps many lifetimes, we have all committed many of these unskillful actions, and will undoubtedly at different times continue to do so. So it's not to set this up as a vehicle for self-judgment. Even the Buddha in his previous lives as a bodhisattva committed many of these unskillful actions. This is part of our life. It's part of our development.

But once we understand these teachings and endeavor to put them into practice, then we are really on an upward trajectory. And as Thich Nhat Hanh so aptly put it: happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it.

CHAPTER 24

Adhiṭṭhāna: Resolution and Determination

Carol Wilson · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Carol Wilson examines adhiṭṭhāna—resolution or determination—as one of the ten pāramīs (perfections) and a crucial mental factor for both meditation practice and daily life. She begins with the traditional story of the ascetic Sumedha making his great resolve before Dīpaṅkara Buddha, illustrating how vast determination must be supported by moment-to-moment resolution. Wilson then guides practitioners in recognizing wholesome determination in their own experience, distinguishing it from striving, willpower, or aversion.*
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> *Drawing on Abhidhamma analysis, Wilson describes determination as "the releasing of the mind onto the object"—a quality of decisive conviction that can be either wholesome or unwholesome depending on accompanying mental factors. She outlines four qualities that characterize wholesome adhiṭṭhāna according to Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu: wisdom (paññā), truthfulness (sacca), relinquishment, and inner calm. When these elements are present, determination brings clarity and peace rather than agitation and struggle.*
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> *Through personal stories—including her experience studying German at the Goethe Institute and the inspiring examples of Chan Master Sheng Yen and the Nangchen nuns of Tibet—Wilson demonstrates how determination supports us through difficulties, transitions, and the unfamiliar territories that deep practice reveals. She encourages practitioners not to shrink from establishing wise aspirations and to call on adhiṭṭhāna as a tool for staying present with whatever arises, remembering the Buddha's instruction to neither shrink from the struggle nor rest content with merely wholesome states.*

So I decided to talk about adhiṭṭhāna—resolution, determination—tonight after it came to my mind this morning. Then just talking with people in interviews today, maybe because my mind was skewed that way, it seemed like it was something I could see happening in people's minds. It's been a particular interest of mine. It's a mental factor, and it's been very interesting and useful for me in the last few years of my life as I've explored it. I just wanted to share that because I've been finding it very helpful.

Resolution or determination, adhiṭṭhāna in Pali, is one of the ten pāramīs—the ten wholesome qualities of mind, of heart, that supposedly in the mythology, however you want to frame it, the Bodhisatta developed over all the eons and lifetimes. These ten beautiful qualities of heart and mind were brought to perfection, and determination is one of them.

Determination is a very interesting quality, both in the broad sweep, in the vastness, and then in the specific moment-to-moment experience. The recognition of this wholesome quality in our mind, in our heart, as part of our meditation experience is enormously helpful, as well as in our daily life.

Determination, resolution, or steadiness of purpose—these are a couple of different definitions. From Sitagu Sayadaw, who's a prominent Sayadaw in Burma: adhiṭṭhāna can be regarded as a foundation for all of the pāramīs, for all of the perfections, because without a firm resolution, a firm determination, one cannot fulfill the other pāramīs. Of course, without some kind of resolution or determination, none of us would still be sitting here, would we?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu has talked quite a bit about it. He says it gives focus, motivation, and direction to our practice, if we're specifically thinking about our practice. And Almaas, who's not Buddhist, talks about it as the quality of being unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement. Some of these descriptions you might hear as similar to viriya, to energy, and I'll talk about the differences and similarities in a minute. So: unwavering in the face of disappointment and discouragement; giving focus, motivation, and directness to the practice or to our life; and serving as a foundational force for all the pāramīs, for all of our practice.

To describe adhiṭṭhāna in vast proportions over time—this broad determination, broad resolve, broad aspiration—I'll tell the story of the period of the so-called Buddha before the historical Gautama Buddha that we know actually existed. To use the language of a very esteemed and revered scholar of Buddhism, Mr. Guy Armstrong: four incalculables and one hundred thousand eons before our present age—which is to say a very, very long time ago. It sort of sounds like a fairy tale, right?

So there was an ascetic named Sumedha who was practicing to become an arahant. That was his aspiration, his resolve. He heard, though—very much like the story of Bāhiya, these stories transpose in different places—that there was a Buddha, a self-awakened one, named Dīpaṅkara Buddha in another village. He went to hear him.

Just in beginning to see and hear Dīpaṅkara Buddha, Sumedha was so inspired—as is the case in these stories—just with his wisdom, his brightness, his dignity, that spontaneously but very profoundly, there arose in him a realization. He saw that sure, if he became an arahant, completely awakened, that would certainly be for his own benefit and the benefit of many others that he would meet. But if he actually resolved to become a Buddha in some future time, that would benefit so many other people so much more.

So out of a sense of great inspiration and great compassion, this spontaneous, deep resolve—adhiṭṭhāna, determination—arose: to do whatever it would take to become a Buddha in a future life. That was this strong resolve spreading over time. It took four incalculables and one hundred thousand eons. That's a long time. That one vastness of determination, of course, has to be backed up by moment after moment after moment of determination arising in the mind and heart. I'll come back to how he had to do that in a minute as I talk about it in relation to us.

As the story goes, Sumedha noticed the Buddha was about to walk through some mud, so he flung his body down so that the Buddha and all the Sangha could walk over him and not get muddy. That called him to Dīpaṅkara Buddha's attention—in a good way. Dīpaṅkara Buddha recognized and gave a kind of prophecy; he could tell from looking into Sumedha the ascetic's mind that in fact he would become a Buddha in a future age. And had Sumedha not made that resolution, he would have become an arahant right there and then. So that's how these things end happily.

That's the story in vast proportions. But you can see in smaller vast proportions just whatever particular resolve or determination—you could call adhiṭṭhāna an aspiration—for our own life, for our own practice. I'll come back to that at the end, just to hold that as a possibility.

We don't just have to mush around, hoping something nice happens. We can really have a sense of purpose and direction. And this is not antithetical to all the instructions we've been giving—which is why this has been helpful to me.

So a lot of what I want to do is talk about recognizing the quality of resolve, of determination, in our mind now, much like we recognize the seven factors of awakening. We've talked with these other factors about how, when we recognize a wholesome factor and understand with wisdom how it works, and we begin to incline our mind towards it, we can actually call on it in times when it's appropriate and really strengthen that quality. So how to recognize it in our own minds is really important, because it gives us the perseverance, the courage in life and in practice to keep going.

As we've talked about, virya—energy—is quite a strong quality, but it's not striving. You've gotten that, right? We have said that, once or twice. Enormous energy can be put out, and it isn't striving. It's not meant to be willpower. It's not expectation, not trying to make anything in particular happen—which is quite difficult for us, how to put out intense energy without any idea of result at all. It just doesn't really compute, but that's what we talk about.

And at the same time we talk about this energy, we also talk about relax, observe, allow. The mindfulness of whatever arises, what we talk about as choiceless awareness—not even the attention, but choiceless awareness, the sense of (and I say it myself all the time) that awareness doesn't care what's happening. This is really learning to radically trust awareness rather than trying to shape or manipulate our experience. We say all these things and mean them.

And I know at times it can turn into something else. When we're not striving but we're so afraid of striving, or we're so careful not to turn our energy into expectation or some view—which I know I went on about all last week, not to have any view of what should happen—it can kind of turn into almost a sense of, "Well, just whatever happens is happening. And anything I do is striving or wanting or goal-oriented or manipulating. So just lie down and let it roll over." How do we find that balance? How do we use skillful means? How do we cultivate the wholesome? How do we recognize the klesha—even meeting it fully with our attention, as Guy was saying, without hating it, without wanting something different, without identifying, but at the same time without just giving up?

Larry Rosenberg, who is really very funny at times, used to talk about how sometimes we just get so concerned with not giving anything any trouble. We should massage the kleshas. Just let them be comfortable. Don't get upset. And so we can go to this side of just fluffing around, and not really know how to bring clarity and strength and power to the virya without using wanting and anger.

Often when we think about how to do something with a lot of force, that's when we can come with ill will, with anger. I think Joseph said sometimes anger feels good—the sense of energy, the sense of our attention and energy all collected and focused. And by gum, we can do something. Unfortunately, what we're doing isn't just the thing we're doing. We're cultivating aversion and suffering. But that's a sidetrack.

So to learn that there can be enormous collectedness of energy, resolution to really do something clearly, in a wholesome way that's not kleshas—you all know this. It's not some magic thing, but just to really bring our attention to it.

A simple example, which we've often said: when the patterns of thought are coming again and again, seven thousand times you've seen them. Just to say, "Not now." That sense of "not now"—you know what it is? When it's not aversion, it's not fear, and it's not a kind of weak "not now," but this real sense of, "No, I don't need to go there." You've had that experience, right? At least once, something starts in your mind: "No, I don't need to go there." And sometimes, as some people were telling me today, it's amazing.

No, I'm not going there. And the whole thing just goes away. You're like, what? You really didn't need to go there. It's amazing. That's a quality of determination.

Or one way I explore this: you're really tired at night, and the metta sitting is over, and your mind is saying, "Oh, just go to bed." But there's this sense where you make a simple resolve in the moment: "I'm just going to do one more walking meditation for twenty minutes." You're not making some huge lifetime commitment, but just this sense of, "No, I'll just do it."

And that's really what it feels like. Just do it.

It's not like, "Oh, I'll walk." And then you start walking, and every minute you're thinking, "Should I or shouldn't I? I'm really tired. Maybe I should go to bed. No, I'll keep walking. Should I or shouldn't I? Why am I doing it?" Or you go, "By God, I'll just do it! I don't care!" And you stomp up and down.

Neither of those is determination, right? They're not. But that sense of just do it—and then whatever comes up in the twenty minutes comes up. You're tired. You're dizzy. You're aversive. You're yawning. You're incredibly filled with light and contentment. Whatever comes up, you just do it. There's not all that dithering. There's not all that wavering, this or that, all that energy that gets just blown away. It's all collected in the simplicity of just doing. You don't have to think about it anymore. And there's that simple willingness to be there.

That's what I mean by the quality of determination, of adhiṭṭhāna.

One way of noticing how it feels—because this quality of determination, when we talk about it in terms of the Abhidhamma, in terms of different mental factors, it's one of those factors that's so-called ethically variable. We've talked about others like concentration, for example, which means in itself it's not either wholesome or unwholesome, but it takes on the quality of the other factors in that moment of citta, that moment of psyche, that come together with it.

So the quality that adhimokkha has as an energy, whether it's wholesome or unwholesome—this is the definition from the Abhidhamma, and I like it because I can feel this in my mind when I imagine it. Literally, this quality is the releasing of the mind onto the object. So it's like a quality of decision or resolution. It's not, "Should I go there or should I not go there?" It just releases. It just lands there. So it has the characteristic of conviction, and it manifests as decisiveness.

And I think really the best slogan for it is: just do it. It's Nike's "just do it." Ajahn Ṭhānissaro really likes that. In fact, he has a big picture of the Nike swoosh, and sometimes he'll just hold that up for people. Just do it.

You can see how that could be wholesome or unwholesome. So here we want to bring it into the realm of the wholesome—just do it in a skillful way. So how do we recognize it as a wholesome state, as a skillful state?

One aspect of how it feels—this is my own experience, and then I'll talk about some ways Ajahn Ṭhānissaro describes it. One way it feels is you can sense the energy, the mental energy, just kind of coming together. It aligns. It doesn't have to be super heavy or strong, but it just comes all together, and there's a sense of calmness.

A sense of peace that accompanies it. You just give attention to that, you just do it.

Here's a very simple example: being in bed in the morning. The bell goes off, or you wake up even better at four, and you're awake, sort of. And the mind is going, "Should I get up, or shouldn't I get up? I could get up, I'm pretty awake, but then I'll be tired later." You know what I'm saying. Back and forth, dithering—should I or shouldn't I? Is it good for me or not good for me? However long we're there going back and forth trying to analyze—just what I call dithering. And it leads to a loss of energy, a kind of doubt, a kind of vacillation, a kind of weakness in the mind.

I've noticed this almost every day of my life when I have to get up. It's not my favorite. That one moment in the day is not my favorite moment. I'm not one of these "Yes, another day!" people. I know some people like that. But I really learned this, and it's amazing. The lying there, the "should I?" and "how do I feel?" and "five more minutes"—all of that is not pleasant. When I just tune into the quality of determination, which is simply: get up. It's really like that. All the energy comes together. It's not a "should." It's not aversion. It's not judgment. It's just: get up. Instead of the energy going into all those other thoughts, it all comes together and I just get up. It really is just like that.

It's not that this is some wonderful thing. But watching that quality—it's just a simple moment, not a big deal. Yet learning to recognize it, and then learning that we can actually call on it, is significant. The mind is much more trainable than you might believe sitting here. We can learn to recognize the wholesome, incline the mind toward the wholesome. And wholesome brings other wholesome factors, and they strengthen. That's the whole gist of meditation practice, right? Of the bojjhangas, of the factors of enlightenment. And with this quality as well—learning simply to recognize it.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about the four qualities that come together when determination is wholesome, when it functions as a parami. It comes together with wisdom, with paññā, with some sense of clear seeing. It doesn't have to be the wisdom of an arahant, but the wisdom of clear seeing in that moment. Then with truth, truthfulness, sacca, honesty. With relinquishment, non-clinging. And with a calm or peace in the mind. A clear, wise resolve comes together with these things.

Let me give you a very simple example so it doesn't sound so abstruse. Say you make a simple resolve here on retreat. Out of a sense of wisdom, you think, "I really would like to work with studying continuity a little bit." It's wisdom rather than wanting, or comparing what someone else is doing, or thinking "my mindfulness stinks today so I've got to do something better." In a balanced mind, you make a resolve: the 8:15 sit in the morning until lunch, I'm just going to be very steady. I'm going to sit. When I'm done with the sitting, I'm going to go walk. When I'm done with walking, I go sit. I'm going to really work with steadiness of attention in the so-called transition times—make that my resolve. It's not that you can resolve to be mindful every moment. That would not be wisdom, not discerning wisdom. But I'm going to resolve to really use this time in that way for this week.

So that's a resolve that could be made with wisdom, depending on your particular circumstances—coming out of a sense of the value of mindfulness and where you're at in your practice.

And then in terms of working with the resolve, we meet ourselves with this sense of truthfulness, which is one of the other paramis. In other words, of course, mindfulness has this quality of truthfulness anyway, just recognizing things as they are. So it's kind of like we don't kid ourselves. We don't say, "Well, I'm going to do that starting at ten, but first, just today, I really need a nap. Then tomorrow at ten o'clock I'll start it." And then the next day we conveniently forgot we took a nap and we really think we've been doing it. Little stuff like that. Just noticing, so that we have a sense of truthfulness—not to anybody else, but to ourselves—to really look and see what we're doing. And if somehow we can't do it, really can't do it, then keep bringing in the mindfulness, the truthfulness, and see why. Sometimes we do have to make adjustments.

The relinquishment is obvious. Relinquishment is just really non-clinging. When we have a particular sense of resolve or determination, of course we don't cling to the other activities that we give up in that time. We don't cling to all the other things that we wish we were doing. And if mental states come up of, "Oh, just be nice to yourself and go have a tea," we don't cling to those either. We see it, we acknowledge it, and we just stay with our resolve.

What comes when it's a wise resolve—and we're meeting it with truthfulness and wisdom and non-clinging—is that it comes with a sense of calm, a sense of peace. If we're making a resolve and in really trying to do it we're getting more and more agitated, more and more upset, or more self-hatred, or more aversion, or more restlessness, there's something off about it. It's not as wise or as clear, or maybe we're not quite seeing the motivation clearly.

For example, one obvious example—the smaller for the broader—going back to Gotama Buddha in at least our historical era: before he became the Buddha, when he made that resolve after all his years of very ascetic practice and all the things he'd been through, the night of his enlightenment, supposedly he sat under the Bodhi tree and made that resolve, right? "I will not get up until I've completely made an end of suffering," or however he said it to himself.

I've always thought that is really interesting. That's a very powerful resolve. And then there's the story about all the armies of Mara and all the doubt and everything he went through. But what I think is interesting is that he had been through how many eons of lifetimes as a Bodhisatta, and how much very sincere, intensive practice in that lifetime, before he sat under that tree and made that resolve. So there was a sense of discerning wisdom—he knew in some way that this was a reasonable, a possible resolve. It was made at the right time, with a sense of the broader situation.

And that can cut both ways. I don't want to tell you, "Don't make a strong resolve." If you feel it's time for you to sit under the Bodhi tree—we could sit under this one—and make that resolve and not get up until you're really free, and you have some sense that's possible, I don't want to squash that. On the other hand, for me, I know if I was to do that, it probably wouldn't quite be based in discerning wisdom. That's certainly not tonight, based on—you know what I mean? And it's not to put oneself down. It's just to see clearly what's possible.

Another way we can notice with smaller resolves: say you're feeling your mind, your body, is incredibly restless. You're just that kind of restless all over, thoughts going everywhere. You come in and sit down, and you make the resolve, "I'm just going to be with this. Mindfulness can be with it however it comes." I'm sure we've all made resolves like that.

Now, in terms of it really being a resolve, the resolve isn't "I'm going to sit here and the restlessness will go away." That's not from discerning wisdom because that's not in our control. But to sit and say, "Okay, I'm just going to sit here and, as Jack Kornfield says, I'll be the first person to die of restlessness, but I'll just sit here and be with it"—that's a resolve that could be from wisdom.

And how do you know it's from wisdom, not from wanting or from ego? Because we could come in and sit down and say the same thing, but it's got that aversion behind it. Or it's got that "by God, I can do it—if that person there can do it, I can do it." It feels like resolve, but it's tinged with kilesa. It's tinged with me-ing and my-ing, with "in order to" and wanting and aversion. And the two experiences will be very different in that case.

So with the sense of resolve—"I'm just going to be with this"—it gives the courage, the strength, that alignment of the mind to just be here.

And there's a calmness with it. The restlessness isn't calm, but the mind isn't caught up in *oh my God, there's no way I can do this, this is impossible, maybe I should get up*—all that dithering just isn't there. And when it comes up, that's just included in the resolve, just part of the difficulty that we stay with for this sitting.

But when it seems like resolve, but it's really willpower or aversion, there won't be that kind of calm. There won't be that peace. It'll be more and more of a struggle.

This doesn't mean we weren't really sincere when we made a resolve that's tinged with klesha. As we know, we just can't always tell. So this is how we learn. This isn't to say you're right or you're wrong, or you can't make a good resolve because this is just another way that you're hopeless. It's to really explore and see, to learn when it's wholesome and when it's not, so we can call on this—not only in our retreat, but in our lives. Really, this is the discerning wisdom, the willingness to look. And we can call on it.

As I said, I've been exploring this a lot in practice too, but also in my life. Just to give you an example—it was really a strong example for me of working with resolution as a factor in my mind.

A couple of years ago, I had taken a few months off, some for retreat, but I also managed to carve out three weeks where I could—for some reason I've always wanted to study German. So I had arranged to go to the Goethe Institute in Munich. It was hard to organize all of that. My German was like non-existent. I was staying with a friend. Given the variables, it was a month-long class, but I was coming a week late, which they'd given me permission to do. You take this little test, and I knew a bit of German here and there from all my years going there and from my friends, but I had completely no kind of structure, no grammar—just a little of this and that. They gave me some tests and put me not in the beginner's class, which was a big mistake, but in the second class. And then I came in a week late.

So I walk in thinking this is going to be fun. The age range in that class was sixteen to twenty-three, and me. These kids were all there gung-ho to study, and they were already a week into it. And it's all in German. I was sitting there with no clue—no clue

what the teacher was talking about, couldn't follow what we were doing in the workbooks. I was back in the horrors of school. Only worse, because I was always okay in school. This was like, *oh my God, I don't know what they're talking about, I don't know what they're doing.* And I have to ask these kids who don't want to talk to granny—they just want to talk to each other about drinking beer in the English Garden on the weekend. That was really all they talked about. We didn't have too much in common.

So the first day I was just blown away. But then I'd go off and work and work and work, and come back the next day. It was really fascinating to see the junk that came up in my mind. I thought, *wow, I didn't know this stuff could still be triggered.* Some days it was really awful. Some days I kind of enjoyed it. Then I'd try to say something in class and I was like the worst speaker because I really didn't learn how to speak.

Anyway, I just kept going like that. And after two or three days, I'd get up in the morning and think, *why am I doing this?* It's totally for me. Nobody else in the world cares if I do this. If I never go down there again, none of them will care.

Why am I putting myself through this?

But I called up the resolution and said, no. First of all, I just really wanted to do it. And whatever I do, I'm going to learn. Just go through with it. So if it's a little difficult, so what? So unpleasant mind states come up, so what? I gave myself a little talking to, and I got clear—yeah, I do really want to do it.

And so then every morning I'd get up and just sit there and call in resolution. And all the "should I go or shouldn't I go" would simply go away. I made the resolution that not only would I go every day, I would never leave early, I would never miss class. And I did—I did every single thing. I did learn a lot. No, I still can't speak German. But the main thing I learned was that it became an amazing kind of retreat for me about the power of resolution in the mind. Not just to do something, but the calmness that comes with it, the clarity, just a sense of, "Yeah, now this is what I'm doing." Some days it was fun, some days it wasn't, but whatever comes up is just the practice. We bring the mindfulness, we bring the resolution to it, and we just go through it.

There's always going to be obstacles, obstructions, difficulties. Whatever comes up, as you know, is the path. And resolution is like, "Oh, okay." It was such a wonderful support and tool to call on. And it's really palpable—you can really experience it. So I just want to offer that. The more we get to use it, the more we can really call on it here in our practice as well.

And as you'll have noticed, we really need it here sometimes, right? Pretty much everybody. Once in a while, someone has a retreat that's mostly calm, blissful, happy—whatever—and they don't feel like they need resolution. That's wonderful for that retreat, but it sets up a lot of suffering for later retreats. It really can.

I have a dear friend I haven't seen in years, but his first retreat was like that. And the next ten years—the next ten years were filled with so much suffering because he never had a retreat, or even a day of practice, that came anywhere close to that first one. Because you think that's how it's supposed to be, right? And all the rest is just hopeless. It's just supposed to be cruising. Well, mostly it's not.

As you'll have noticed, there are times for all of us in almost every retreat—and not just in retreat, but in our life—where it just gets really difficult. For a whole variety of reasons, with a whole variety of experiences, it can feel like we've just hit the wall. Maybe our expectations aren't being met. There's many reasons, and I'll talk about them in a minute. It's too much dukkha.

But the commitment we're making to this radical mindful awareness, this sense of radical presence with whatever arises in our mind, in our body, in our heart, moment to moment—as maybe you've seen, it can call up and take us to places we never would have expected. Some beautiful, some really confusing, some where you can't imagine there's any way this could be useful, wallowing around in this stuff.

So of course we need mindfulness and viriya and faith and confidence and all of that. But here is where resolution is a quality we can really call on. When the sense of our safety net—I like to call it—starts to fray or starts to go away. The safety net can be just the way you've gotten comfortable being in your life, even if it's not a happy way; we're comfortable with it.

Or on retreat, there can be what I call a kind of safety net, a comfort zone. There are all kinds of ways we can keep falling into a comfort zone—maybe with how long you sit, or how much you alternate sitting and walking, or what time you have tea, or how much you sleep, or who you can sit next to at lunch and who you can't. Or where you do your walking. Or what mental states are acceptable and workable and which ones are not. Or just our little habits that we get into without even recognizing them. The views, of course, which I talked about last week—and how when our comfort zone starts to fray, how really unsettling that can be, how difficult.

We're all going to come upon times—and hopefully more than once, hopefully sometimes even often, and I mean hopefully—where it's like what I call hitting the wall, where our mind thinks either "I can't do this,"

Or I don't want to do this. Have you ever come to a place where you say, "If freedom means having to give up this, I don't want any part of it"? Have you ever had that? Even if "this" is just the second muffin at breakfast. Sometimes it's that mundane. "If freedom means I have to always watch what I'm eating, to heck with it."

That's a silly example, but have you noticed things like that in your mind? Or the mind projects further: "If freedom means I don't have any more attachment to my partner and I can't be in relationship anymore and we can't live together anymore, then forget it. I don't want anything to do with it." We go down some road. "If equanimity means you can't tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant, who wants to live like that? It's all some dull gray. I don't want that." And we subtly pull back.

Or sometimes it's just, "If I have to look at this self-loathing one more time, I'm just going to explode. It's impossible. I can't do it anymore." We all have mental states like this. "I can't do it anymore"—that's just a mental state.

Ajahn Sumedho said something I thought was very funny. He was talking about some really unpleasant experience when he was in Thailand, and he said, "This is unbearable. I just can't bear this another moment." Have you ever reached that place?

I remember one practice period in Burma some years ago where this mental state kept arising: "This is completely overwhelming. It's totally overwhelming." Some image would come—I can't remember what—and the feeling was, "I cannot take another step. It's completely overwhelming." I would totally believe it. And then the thought would say, "I can't bear this another moment." And then I'd see that I could. You have another moment? Oh yeah. Okay. Well, I could just be with this another moment.

After some point with that overwhelming state, I suddenly realized—because I'd ask myself, "What's overwhelming?" I didn't even know what was overwhelming. Something was overwhelming. Then I realized, "Oh, this is just a mental state." Overwhelm is a mental state.

So that's the wisdom coming in that can lead to resolution. As soon as I know it's a mental state, I know from my own experience that a mental state is a combination of thoughts and mental feelings and physical concomitants. Whatever the mental state is, it comes, it goes. And I can be with it. I know that. As soon as I saw that, there's the resolution coming from, "Okay, overwhelming. This really feels overwhelming. It still feels overwhelming. But the resolution can just be with it."

So I often ask myself when that comes in—"Oh, this is unbearable"—I say, "Well, what actually is unbearable about this?"

That's a question that just directs the attention back in. Okay, you can just see it. A very simple form of resolve.

Or sometimes, as I mentioned before, the sense of hitting the wall comes when we are starting to experience the unfamiliar in our practice—that familiar sense of who we are, our personality patterns. And sometimes when what we would think is a freeing insight arises... you walk into a situation, say in the dining room, where normally you would be filled with self-consciousness and embarrassment, and you walk in and it's just not there at all. There's just seeing and hearing and smelling, and there's no sense of me at all. And the actual experience is just a relief. That burden, that exhaustion of self-creation over and over isn't happening.

And then something clicks in: "Oh no, how could I live my life like that? What about me?" Let's put on that old coat again that's so familiar, that's so comfortable. It's almost like we want to go back to the garden, the so-called pleasure garden, even though it wasn't so pleasurable. "Who will I be if that impatience goes away? How will I be if I don't have this suffering story to relate to anymore?" As Poonjaji used to say, you don't have to carry your whole past around with you on your shoulder like a corpse. Just being alive and fresh in the moment—but then who am I?

Chogyam Trungpa had a wonderful phrase: "nostalgia for samsara." I want it back. It's so familiar. And we're all going to hit places like that. This is where resolve—just learning how to have the resolve to stay with it, without knowing where it goes—is so important.

Because freedom from clinging, the freedom the Buddha's talking about, radical moment-to-moment awareness, is really uncompromising. And with all of our best intentions and all that we've read—and I'm including myself in this—and all that we know, our mind really can't imagine that from what we know now. It can't. We want to know what we're going to experience and how it's going to be and what it means, to get a landscape ahead of time, which to some extent is helpful. But at the ultimate level, each moment has to be completely fresh, opening to the unknown.

In the moment when there's the resolve and the clarity and the wisdom to do it, it's so freeing. But in the moments when there's not quite, and we want to know, it just freaks us out. "I want to know what's going on. Don't tell me it's unknowable. I want some sense of certainty."

And so that's when bringing in the sense of resolution becomes essential—not about an expectation or "this will happen," but just to have this sense of broad aspiration, knowing that these scary experiences, these difficult experiences, these uncomfortable experiences, these not-knowing experiences, whatever comes from the inside or the outside—it's what's happening now, and so it's part of our path. It's all part of our path.

We never know. In each of us, our own path shows up different from everybody else. That's why *māna,* comparing and conceit—it's very subtle, and we all experience it a lot—but it just makes no sense. What's happening in this particular mind stream at this moment is different from what's happening in that one, or that one, or yours yesterday compared to today. But we compare because we want some kind of certainty. No. Just this.

We never know how our path will go. But the determination, both in the bigger sense of aspiration and then bringing that into the willingness to just show up with this courage, with this not shrinking back from whatever happens, whether external circumstances or internal, is a wonderful support on our path. We couldn't do without it.

I want to tell you a little story from someone whose determination really inspired me when I read his autobiography—the Chan master Sheng Yen. He died about three years ago. He was Chinese, originally from mainland China, but fled to Taiwan in 1949 when the communists won the Civil War. I sat with him a bit in Switzerland and at his place in upstate New York. He was huge in Taiwan—sort of like the Dalai Lama of Taiwan. But we didn't realize that meeting him here, because he was so simple. So loving—he just had the most loving relational heart. Very interested in each person, very kind, very thoughtful, very simple. Just this wonderful being. And then we find out later he's a huge scholar, has tens of thousands of followers in Taiwan. A wonderful being.

And so when I read his autobiography, he talks about his life very straightforwardly. He was born in great poverty in China, again in the 1920s or 30s, I don't remember exactly. Very, very poor, a lot of privation. And he became a Buddhist monk quite young, partly because he had no way to eat, no place to live. But he was very committed, really very inspired by being a Buddhist monk.

From the 1920s and 30s on, there was civil war in China. Great hardship, often hard to have anything to eat, lots of privation. In 1949, when the Civil War ended and basically the Communists took over, he realized that no one was going to be allowed to remain monks and the monasteries were being destroyed. The only way he could get out and get to Taiwan was if he joined the Taiwanese army, because then they would give him transportation to Taiwan.

So he's a monk, a deeply committed Buddhist monk, but he knew he couldn't remain one staying in China. He did what he needed to do, which was to join the Taiwanese army and go to Taiwan. But it wasn't so simple. He was very committed to nonviolence, and so he ended up with a job where he didn't have to perform violence. He was committed to that. But he couldn't get out of the army. It wasn't like he could get over and say, "Okay, thanks, you guys. Now I'm checking out." He couldn't get out of the army, and it was well over ten years.

But he said the whole time, he was very clear: in my mind, in my heart, I was always a monk. He couldn't wear the monk's robes, but in his mind, he lived as a monk to the best of his ability. He performed his duties. To him, being a monk meant being a vegetarian. So usually he would never eat meat, which meant that he was almost starving a lot of the time, and he had very poor health.

He would also use discerning wisdom—he was flexible enough to see when he was actually starving and his health was so bad he was going to die, and he would eat a little meat. But he took that on as having performed something that was unwholesome, unskillful. Later, when he was finally able to get out of the army, doing prostrations was a great way of purifying his heart and mind, so he did endless prostrations to purify what he thought were his unwholesome actions. That was his commitment, his way.

He found a way out after ten years of having no teacher, no other support to be a monk. He was living as a secret monk in the army. This is from him, looking back: "I realized that if I did not have a very strong determination to stay a monk and to return to monastic life, I probably would not have succeeded," because getting out of his particular branch of military service was nearly impossible.

But he had such dedication. He would spend every little short vacation he had going to find a Buddhist master and study with him in a monastery in Taiwan, even though it was very, very difficult. An amazing being. When he finally got out, he went into six years of retreat in a cave on his own, and then became this great scholar. Great determination. But the softest, kindest, most loving person. Very, very inspiring to me, the quality of aspiration and determination.

As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says—for me that story highlights this—in terms of determination, there is the importance of establishing wise priorities or aspirations in our practice, in our life, and then staying true to them regardless of the temptations to sacrifice them for lesser ends. This is personal for each of us. Skillful determination begins with discernment, with wisdom, and continues with it in making wise decisions.

I want to encourage all of us not to shrink from having a sense of what's a deep and wise determination, resolution, aspiration for you in your life, in your practice. Don't feel too caught in a sense of self to shrink back from this. As Thanissaro says, it really is important to establish a clear aspiration and then call on determination, which strengthens our energy, which strengthens our mindfulness, which leads to wisdom. And when we see, "Oh, I really can do this," our faith gets stronger again. That faith gives us confidence and willingness to act, which gives determination and mindfulness. It all circles around and supports each other. The wholesome factors bring each other along, and each supports the next.

Having a sense of your deep resolve, your determination—I think it's so important. You're working so hard here. And I imagine, I know for me, there are certainly times when you're putting in everything you've got, but you forget why the heck you're doing it. It gets kind of dry and dull, or we're doing it to become more mindful. Why? Why exactly do I want to be more mindful?

And sometimes having a larger sense helps with the resolution—not to get there, but to come back, to be present with this moment now. It gives us the determination. Tejaniya likes to say, "Never give up." Never give up doesn't mean holding to an expectation. It means whatever arises, not to settle just for something good enough. "Okay, that's enough practice. That's good enough. I'm not suffering as much as I was. Let's go home." I used to do that a lot. Then you find out, guess what? It comes with you.

But never give up. Moment by moment, really bringing that quality of determination. As the Buddha said—a couple of things he said—two things I never lost sight of: not to shrink from the struggle, not to shrink from the path, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind. These wholesome states of mind are great, but not to rest contented.

So for all of us, having a sense of what the greater aspiration is gives us this determination to keep aligning ourselves with it. And whatever comes up is our path, and it will be different. What my path is differs from anyone else's.

Another story I love about determination and path—probably some of you have seen this video that was made a few years ago with Tsoknyi Rinpoche and some Western women who went to visit nuns in Tibet, called the Nangchen nuns, that Tsoknyi Rinpoche had historically been taking care of.

During the Cultural Revolution, those twenty years, these nuns had a monastery way up high in Tibet. And of course, in the Cultural Revolution, the nunnery was destroyed and the nuns had to disperse. Different things happened for different ones of them. Some of the nuns died. Some were put into work camps. Some went back to their nomadic families. Some managed to flee high up into caves.

And all of them, though—in their different ways, because they came back together after those twenty years—in their different ways they described how in their path, in their heart, similar to Master Sheng Yen, they kept their path of being a nun. The ones who went back and lived at home had to disrobe. They couldn't out loud do any of their chanting or any of their practices because the communists were so on alert for that they would be arrested, their family would be arrested. So they were being secret nuns, nuns in hiding, but secretly they were keeping their practice, their determination going. Same with the ones in the work camps. The ones who went way, way high up into the caves had incredible privation. Some starved to death. Many were incredibly ill.

But in whatever circumstances came, the sense of determination was just flexible with those circumstances while really holding true to what is the key, what's most important, what helps them wake up.

The video showed them going back with Tsoknyi Rinpoche to visit the nuns, who were now allowed to return. They were rebuilding this nunnery way, way up high, hauling these giant stones by hand and wood up these incredible mountains. I mean, I couldn't even walk up the mountain, and they're hauling materials up and building the nunnery back again. This is how they described their different ways of holding to their aspiration, holding to their determination.

And then each moment, it's how determination—adhiṭṭhāna—manifests in relationship to this particular moment, with wisdom, with truthfulness to ourselves, and with an element of calm or peace because our heart's in alignment with what's really true, with what's really important. And if it's not and we get all confused, great—that's part of the path too. We bring in awareness with that.

My favorite part, of course, is at the very end they allowed the women videoing to go up and see the oldest nun, who they said is the most enlightened of all of us. She was lying in a little bed—and I mean, who knows, she looked a hundred and twenty, maybe she was forty, but she looked really old and had a really hard life. She couldn't walk anymore, so she just lay in that bed spinning her prayer wheel. Just one of those beings, you know, where incredible light beamed out of her eyes, even in the video. She was

smiling, and she said, "Well, I just lie here and spin my prayer wheel, and all day and all night, all I do is think: may all beings, wherever they are, may they be happy and liberated."

I thought, wow, what a life. Our lives can take so many different ways. It's not about what it looks like, but don't be afraid to come to whatever resolve is true for you and then call on all the tools we have, moment by moment, just in this moment, to help us keep aligning. Resolution is an amazing tool.

One from the Dalai Lama. He was talking to some Western monks and nuns, and he looked out and said, "Oh, I see you're really so dedicated." He said, "One day you too will become bodhisattvas in reality. And so whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

And that's true for us. Whatever obstacles, however long it takes, do not be discouraged. Just in this moment, we call on resolution.

And this famous passage from the Buddha, describing aspects of the third noble truth, one who's awakened. This is not to compare ourselves, but to see that aspirations can go as high as is possible—not just to feel good:

One who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything in the world, the peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. This I call neither arising nor passing away, neither standing still nor being born nor dying. There is neither foothold nor development nor any basis. This is the end of suffering.

Therefore, the purpose of this holy life does not consist in acquiring alms or gain, or in honor or fame, does not consist in gaining morality, concentration, or the eye of knowledge. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that is the object of the holy life. That is its essence. That is its goal.

So let's just sit for a moment.

From Dilgo Khyentse:

Do not forget the teacher. Pray to him or her at all times. Do not be carried away by thoughts. Watch the nature of mind. Do not forget death. Persist in Dharma. Do not forget sentient beings. With compassion, dedicate your merit to them.

CHAPTER 25

Equanimity: Being at Rest in the Storms

Susie Harrington · 1h00

In this rich exploration of equanimity (upekkhā), Susie Harrington illuminates how this quality appears as the culmination of multiple Buddhist lists—the tenth pāramī, the seventh factor of awakening, and the fourth brahmavihāra. Drawing from personal experiences on Buddhist pilgrimage in India and leading wilderness retreats, she demonstrates how equanimity manifests as a dynamic balance rather than a static state, comparing it to surfing waves or riding a bicycle.

Harrington carefully distinguishes true equanimity from its near enemies: indifference, detachment, numbness, and the false evenness of "I'm fine." She describes authentic upekkhā as having clarity to see things as they are, connection to what's happening, confidence in natural unfolding, and an underlying peace and ease. The Buddha's advice to his son Rāhula—to develop meditation like the earth, water, fire, air, and space—offers a visceral understanding of how disagreeable impressions need not take charge of the mind.

The talk explores how equanimity supports the other brahmavihārās: giving mettā its steadiness, preventing compassion from becoming overwhelmed by suffering, and keeping muditā from sliding into clinging. Harrington emphasizes that equanimity is rooted in wisdom—understanding kamma and not-self—and emerges naturally from moment-to-moment mindfulness. Through the memorable story of a Tibetan lama laughing joyfully while repeatedly failing to climb over a muddy log, she reveals equanimity's lighter nature: not dour solidity, but an open-hearted way of being that plays the ball where the monkey drops it.

Tonight's talk is on equanimity.

You've heard equanimity mentioned in many talks because it comes at the end of many lists. You've heard a number of talks on the paramis, and equanimity is the tenth of the paramis. Greg talked last week about the seven factors of enlightenment, and equanimity is the seventh of those. The four Brahmaviharas—equanimity is the fourth. Equanimity is considered the highest mundane state that we can rest in. That is, it's not Nibbana, it's not the unconditioned, but in the conditioned realm it is the highest mental state and experience and openness of the heart.

As you can tell from these different lists, equanimity has a lot of facets to it, and it has a lot of levels for us to experience. So in many ways our practice is an exploration and an ever deepening, ever subtler understanding of the depths of equanimity. We have new experiences of it, and then we have another one, a little different one. It's like we're working our way around this wonderful many-faceted crystal and finding our way into the depths in the middle of it. I'm going to talk about some of these different facets this evening, though this isn't a definitive, everything-is-covered talk, because equanimity is quite large. It's a very big and important part of our practice.

I want to share with you a story from a trip I took a number of years ago. I went to India on Buddhist pilgrimage, and this is something I highly recommend if you ever get the chance. Many of you may already have done something like this and will recognize what I'm describing. It's quite inspiring to go to where the Buddha was born, where he was enlightened, where he first shaved his head and became an ascetic. Those places you may have heard mentioned—Anathapindika's Park, Jeta's Grove—you can actually visit these places where he gave the very first sutta on the Four Noble Truths. These are real places, and to go there is quite inspiring.

I undertook this journey with a friend. One aspect of it is that these places are all in the poorest part of India, in the poorest state. It can be a fairly difficult place to travel, hard to stay healthy, and I knew that before we went. I had heard a lot of stories, knew lots of things happened. Yet I had an amazing experience on my trip. I had the most consistent, unremitting ease and well-being. Here I was in what I was told were these really difficult conditions, and I could look around and say, yes, these are difficult. And yet there were no problems. There was nothing that overwhelmed me.

This became really apparent—and the reason I mention this is to say this is not true in my daily life. There was a contrast that was quite noticeable. Especially when I came back, I really spent time trying to look at and understand what was different. What was going on during this time?

At one point we had crossed over the border into Nepal, because the birthplace of the Buddha is actually in current-day Nepal. At that time they had enacted a new set of rules at the border: once you left the country, you weren't allowed back in for three months. What we didn't know—and the border people didn't tell us—was that there was a specific exception for people on Buddhist pilgrimage. When the people in Delhi had made this rule, they knew that pilgrims go back and forth there. But it was much more convenient for the border guards not to share that piece of information, because

there was a whole side market going on—all this money you had to pay to be allowed back in, all these shenanigans. It turned out they were basically charging you for what you had full permission to do, but we didn't know that.

So we were coming back in, and one of the little things they told us we had to do was be there at the border at like four-thirty in the morning. We arrived and the border was closed. We were in a car—a local person was driving—and we pulled up with our guide, who seemed to have the situation slightly more figured out than us, though I wouldn't say he had it wired at all. He said, "Okay, follow me." We left our car and walked toward where the border was, and there was nobody there. He wandered around trying to find somebody, then left us. We were standing in this very misty, dark night, with a couple of very raw-looking street lamps. All these cars and lorries were parked along the way, empty. It was all dark. There was nobody around. We were standing next to this building. We weren't even sure if we were in Nepal or in India at this point.

There's nobody around. Our guide disappears. We don't know where the car is anymore. And I remember standing there with my friend, and we were sort of looking at each other, thinking, should we be worried? And we said, I don't think we should bother. We're not going to do anything different anyway.

So we stood there, and twenty minutes went by, and forty minutes went by. Just standing there in the dark, looking at the streetlight, looking at the lorries. We just stood there and waited to see what was going to happen. And I noticed as this was going on: this is different. This is not the way I usually behave. Usually I go and try to solve the problem and figure out what to do, but there was nothing to do. So we just stood there.

Eventually we did get through the border and it was fine. But what was different? A big difference was that we didn't have a lot of expectations of things being a certain way. We really, honestly didn't know how they were going to be. And our task, our total job, was to be present, to be mindful of what was happening, and see if there was some way we needed to respond. And if not, wait and see. There was such ease in that.

And then I come back and I'm impatient if it takes two more seconds than I want for the light to change. Where does all that expectation and idea come from?

The Buddha describes the mind filled with equanimity—and remember I said there were gradations of equanimity, so I'm not claiming that experience at the border was this—but on a higher level, he says the mind filled with equanimity is abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility, and without ill will. That sounds pretty wonderful, doesn't it? Abundant, exalted, immeasurable. That is the movement we're moving towards, this open and expansive mind.

The word *upekkhā* has a few definitions, but if you translate it straight, one translation is "to look over." It expresses this ability to see what's there without being caught. Another translation, of actually a different word that we also translate as equanimity with a similar meaning, is "to stand in the middle of all of this." To stand in the middle of all of this.

The colloquial use of the word *upekkhā* at the time of the Buddha was to see with patience, or you might say with understanding. It's often talked about as grandmotherly or grandfatherly love. Because if you're a grandparent—and I see it in people I know who are grandparents—they have a very different relationship to their grandchildren than the parents do. They've been through it. They know the ropes. And there's a kind of ease that is possible that for the parents isn't.

Other words used to describe equanimity: evenness, spaciousness, openness, unshakability, and steadiness. And then another aspect: relaxed, centered, present, clear. A sense of well-being, of confidence, of vitality and integrity. Some refer to it as the ballast that keeps a ship upright in strong winds. I like that.

There are some elements here that I want to pull out. One is that there's clarity to see things as they are—the mindfulness that we are so carefully attending to here. And there's connection, connection to what's happening. You know that *vicāra* and *vitakka*, being right there with it. And there's confidence and faith that it's unfolding as it should, in a natural way, that there is an understanding that things are playing out in a way that actually makes sense. We may not be able to figure it all out directly, but it is playing itself out.

And with this also comes a sense of peace and ease. That's often the tone. That's almost what we, in your sitting, might connect with first—noticing what's happening with that peace and ease. And then if you look back, you might be able to see that these other factors are in place: that there's clarity and connection and confidence.

You can notice this in your practice, and this is true in life as well: equanimity gives us great energy. It gives us the ability to do things. There's a confidence in our movement. There's a wonderful story about Gandhi at one point leading one of his big marches and actions, and he felt, he could feel his own wanting—

it to happen, wanting it to go right, and that it wasn't going to be okay. Not that it wasn't going to be okay, but that he wanted it very much to be okay, and there was a fear of it not being okay, of it not going well. And he said, "I can't do it." He went back to

his home and sat there for days until he had the ease and the equanimity—equipoise is another word—to be able to step into it fully committed, without the clinging. As soon as we're clinging, we've moved out of equanimity.

I want to say a little bit about what is not equanimity. The near enemy is often spoken of as indifference. And there are many different aspects to that: detachment, aloofness, holding at arm's length, at a distance. You can feel how these qualities do not have those other ones. There's not connection. There's not clarity. There's a distancing, a not actually wanting to contact what's happening. There can be a superiority, a standing above, looking down on. Remember the definition: to stand in the middle of all this. If you're standing above, you're not there. You're not in the middle of it.

I think as children many of us learn, or even as young adults, we learn a kind of false evenness. The classic answer of "I'm fine." "Yeah, I'm fine." "Fine." What's fine? Fine means that whatever's going on here, I'm not going to acknowledge it and I'm not going to tell you about it. We're not going there. It's an avoidance of our discomfort.

And we can use our spiritual practice to go there even more. There's a way we can use our spiritual practice to try to skip over what's actually happening and get to that smooth, easy stuff. I am sure—if you haven't done it yet, maybe on another retreat—but probably almost everybody here at some point on this retreat has tried to get to a place of ease and peace by skipping over whatever was happening. We so want to do that. Did it work? Probably not.

There's also a kind of numbness and dissociation that can look like something calm and easeful. Many years ago, I was a search and rescue ranger in Yosemite. There were many wonderful things about that work. It was wonderful when you found the lost kid, helped somebody get out of a bad situation, rescued somebody. But there was also, unfortunately, some stuff that wasn't very good—picking people up when things didn't go well. I had done this for a couple of years, and I remember somebody asking me, "How is this going?" And I said, "It seems fine. I'm okay. I'm doing this." Not long after that, I had a dream. In the dream, I was standing on one side, and there was a river of blood I was trying to get across. I think maybe something was suppressed.

When we're on retreat, all these places that we push away, that we don't want to face, that have happened in our lives—when we get calm, these things come up. Everything that stands between us and really connecting, really being present with ourselves, really being with what's happening, comes up. That's the practice. That's what we're looking for.

So we're in this space of peace and ease, and everything's fine, and we're there for a sit or two or a number of days, and then there's a big volcano. Sometimes the volcano is triggered by some incident outside us. Sometimes it just seems internal. We don't know, but there's this big upheaval. And that's actually a delicious and wonderful part of our practice, because what's happened is our equanimity is settling. We're going deeper and deeper, and we've bumped into the next layer of what interrupts our practice.

And this isn't always the pattern, but you might notice sometimes that this happens—that you settle and settle, and then what is disruptive, what isn't allowing you to settle deeper, comes in and we're with it. And we have to connect with that.

Ajahn Chah has a wonderful quote that you might be familiar with: "Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become quieter and quieter in any surroundings. It will become still like a clear forest pool. Then all kinds of wonderful and rare animals will come to drink at the pool. You will see clearly the nature of all things in the world. You will see many wonderful and strange things come and go. But you will be still. Problems will arise and you will see through them immediately. This is the happiness of the Buddha."

So even if you don't see through them immediately, we usually see through them eventually. This stillness, and these different animals that come into it—part of our task on retreat is to welcome them, to meet each one.

Equanimity is not a static place. It's not someplace we get to and get to stay there. It's more of a balance, a responsiveness to what's happening. The image often used is that of the surfer. Every wave is different. Every moment on the wave is different. And the trick is to learn to surf with what is happening right then in that moment. And for those of you who aren't surfers, it's not any different from riding a bicycle. It's just that we've gotten so used to riding a bicycle that we forget what an incredible balancing act it is.

Another phrase for equanimity is this: a perfect, unshakable balance of mind rooted in insight. I'm going to come back to that part, the "rooted in insight." But that balance of mind.

Here's a poem from Li Po that I like:

The birds have vanished into the sky, and now the last cloud drains away. We sit together, the mountain and me, until only the mountain remains.

There's a simplicity in this balance. Nothing has to be changed. Nothing has to be modified in the world or in us. There's a wonderful phrase: "and this too, and this too." Ajahn Sumedho has this wonderful gesture, a movement with his hand, "and this too."

Often a word that can be helpful, if we don't grab onto it too tightly, is spaciousness. There's a way that in the place of equanimity, there's room for everything to arise. We don't have to interrupt it. We can let it take its natural course. The space is really big, and it all happens within that. This non-reactive place of composure and evenness, especially in the face of stress.

So that's where it gets a little more complicated, right? Things happen that tend to rock us. As I think Sally mentioned when she introduced me, I lead retreats in the natural environment quite a bit. And one of the things I really love about doing that is that there's a lot you can't control. One of the big ones you can't control is the weather. And of course, as somebody involved in planning them with other people, you try to choose the perfect time of year and the perfect place so that the weather is going to be good. Well, you know how that goes.

This spring, I led a group of dharma practitioners to Peru, and we went trekking in the Andes. And it rained and it rained. During part of it, we were doing a silent number of days, and I remember one day it rained a lot of the day and everybody got quite cold and wet.

And that evening we were in camp, clustered around in a little tent all gathered up. And it was remarkable to me, as I found over and over again, when you bring your mindfulness to it, there wasn't a problem. Everybody there was like, "Oh, yeah, I was really wet. Let's see, I really felt the feeling of wetness on my skin. And then there was the way the cloud moved around the rock. And then there was the thought in my mind, 'I wonder if I'm too cold.' And then there was the bird that flitted by."

It's really interesting to me, and I gained so much faith in the practice, in our capacity to do this. When I go with practitioners, people who are brand new even, and go into that circumstance, when you pay attention, it's actually not a problem. Our mindfulness can take us right through it.

The weather is such a good practice for this because there's no idea that somebody can take care of it. If your room's cold, you might have the idea that something's gone wrong and that somebody should fix it. But if you're out there and it's cold, there's no facilities manager to talk to. And I think this is really helpful for our practice. This is the way it is.

Equanimity is helpful in meeting the vicissitudes of life. The vicissitudes are the eight worldly winds. You may have heard of them. Certainly you've experienced them: praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain.

And I want to say, this comes to us internally too, right? The praise may be external and the blame internal, or they might both be out there. We don't know.

In case you wondered if this is just the way our culture is now, but didn't used to be that way, here's from the Buddha: "They find fault in one sitting silently. They find fault in one speaking much. They find fault in one speaking moderately. No one in this world is not found at fault. There has been, there is, and there will be no person who is only criticized or only praised."

Boy, we're all in for it. And I think we know that. It happens again and again. We have this incredible way that praise bounces off us like Teflon, and blame sticks to us like Velcro. But equanimity allows us to just see: this is happening, this is going by. These are the conditions unfolding.

The Buddha made a recommendation to his son, Rahula. He was giving him a discourse, and I love this. He says, "Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth. For then agreeable and disagreeable sensory impressions will not take charge of your mind. Just as when people throw what is clean and unclean on the earth—excrement, urine, saliva, pus, or blood"—the Buddha never holds back on those words, I've noticed—"the earth is not horrified, humiliated, or disgusted by it. In the same way, agreeable and disagreeable sensory impressions will not take charge of your mind when you develop meditation like the earth."

And he goes on to say, develop meditation like the air, like the water, like space, like fire. And then these things will pass through you. They won't stick.

There's a wonderful story that relates to gain and loss that I really like. I believe it's a Nazarene story, though I couldn't find it—I've only heard it orally. There's a man who lives out on the edge of a village, and he loses his horse. It runs away, breaks out of the corral and runs off. People say, "Oh, too bad. I'm so sorry about your horse." And he goes, "Maybe yes, maybe no."

A few days later, the horse comes back, and it's got another horse with it. It was a wild horse, and he brings it in—a big, beautiful horse. People say, "Oh, so lucky!"

Now you have two horses. Maybe yes, maybe no.

Then his son is trying to break the horse. The horse throws him, breaks his leg. People say, "Oh, that's horrible! Oh my God, how can—oh, now what are you going to do?" Maybe yes, maybe no.

And then the king's conscriptors come to the town and they take all the young able-bodied men. The son with the broken leg stays. People say, "Oh wow, you really lucked out." Maybe yes, maybe no.

And you can imagine the story can continue.

Haven't you seen this in your life? Something happens which seems like it's just not going to be okay. And then—it might be shortly thereafter or much thereafter—you realize, huh, Shakespeare had it right. Much ado about nothing.

Basho says, "Since my house burned down, I have a better view of the rising moon."

There's fame and disrepute. Of course, we can think of many examples of that. All you have to do is look at the political world to see that one.

Pleasure and pain. The body is going along perfectly and then it's not going along perfectly. I love what Thich Nhat Hanh says: you're going along and then you get a toothache and then you're really upset. And then the toothache goes away. And he says, so what I do is remember that I don't have a toothache, and then I'm happy. How many things do you *not* have going on that have happened in your past? The older you are, the more of them you have. I can vouch for that.

And through it all, we just keep winding our way. These ups and downs. There's a wonderful poem by William Stafford, "The Way It Is":

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change, but it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread, but it is hard for others to see. While you hold it, you can't get lost. Tragedies happen, people get hurt or die, and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread.

I see the Dharma as our thread. The ability to see and connect with what's happening, to be in it without being caught, without being swept off our feet. The talk about patience a few nights ago is key in this. Can you feel that? Patience and equanimity are so closely connected.

Also in equanimity is the openness, the warmth of the brahma viharas—that we are right there, that that element of welcoming and accepting is warm.

There's a story about a man who had Alzheimer's. He was living at home, and his wife was there, but he no longer could recognize people. He couldn't recognize his children and other people. It's a wonderful story of him going to the front door and opening the door. It was actually one of his kids, and him saying, "I don't know who you are, but please come in."

I love that. May we be so—to welcome, no matter who shows up at the door. There's always room.

Equanimity gives metta its steadiness, the ability to continue to hold that potential for safety and wellness and happiness for ourselves and for others. You can feel if you just do the metta without any equanimity, you're going to get discouraged, right? Because it's not always there. Metta is about the potential. And we have to be willing to be with the way it is, even while we offer the metta.

Equanimity is an absolutely critical support of compassion,

A number of years ago, we were doing another retreat on the north coast of California—this only happened one year. We were walking up the coast, and there were all these baby sea lions up on the shore. At first we thought, "Oh, isn't that wonderful? Look, they're so cute." And then we started to realize they were really sick. And then we saw a couple that were dead. It was just heart-wrenching.

We see in other beings and in other people immense suffering. And it's equanimity that keeps us from becoming overwhelmed, getting lost in the sorrow. As Nyanaponika says, it gives us an even, unwavering courage and fearlessness, enabling compassion to face the awesome abyss of misery and despair. It's equanimity that keeps us from falling in completely—to actually care about each one of those sea lions, to be willing to connect, and yet to not fall down, to not be unable to move on. We have to have the equanimity.

One way I think of it is that great compassion has equanimity in it. You've seen the picture of Quan Yin, the embodiment of great compassion. She has one tear falling from her eye, and one foot is out in front of her, getting ready to help. But she's not collapsing—the compassion is stable and upright. This is equanimity supporting compassion.

And joy, too, needs equanimity. Without it, when we encounter other people's joy, we can fall into clinging and covetousness. We lose our balance, unable to see it as the natural unfolding of conditions that allowed it to happen. We can take joy in it, but we mustn't get caught thinking that's the way it always has to be, clinging and holding to that.

In our practices of the Brahma Viharas, one of the things we're really working toward—as you've moved through the friend, the benefactor, the neutral person, and the difficult person, this expansion of each of the Brahma Viharas to include all beings—is cultivating this aspect of equanimity, of impartiality, of including everyone, every being.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says, "The perfection of equanimity is the attitude of impartiality toward desirable and undesirable beings and formations, dispelling attraction and repulsion, accompanied by compassion and skillful means." An attitude of impartiality, accompanied by compassion and skillful means.

We start out small in our world. We start with affinity for our family, for those close to us, our friends. And a big part of our practice is this expansion—out into the tribe, out bigger across the world, and to other species. We're stretching. We're developing our capacity. A lot of what we're doing when we sit here on the cushion is developing our capacity, expanding.

It's like we all go along in life with a certain bandwidth in which we're comfortable and okay functioning. And then when we go outside that bandwidth—we get too hungry, we get too tired, things don't go the way we want—our reactivity shows up, and things don't go so smoothly. A lot of what we're doing when we practice is expanding the bandwidth. The mind of a Buddha has no limits to that bandwidth, to its capacity.

That's why it's like rowing a rowboat across a lake. You go out and get in the rowboat, and it's peaceful and calm and beautiful. You row across, and it's lovely. You come back and say, "Oh, it was a great sit." Then you get into the rowboat the next day and the wind is blowing against you and the waves are high. You get about partway across, become exhausted, and get pushed back to shore. You say, "Oh, that was a disaster." Which one did you actually get stronger in? What helped you build your capacity, your willingness to step out into the wind and rain and waves?

That's why we tell you over and over again that those sits when it's rough—something very important is happening there. To be willing to sit through that is to broaden our capacity. We see that we can meet our suffering and know that of others.

The last aspect I want to talk about is the wisdom piece, the "rooted in insight" part of the phrase. Fortunately, I can talk about this rather quickly because you've heard so many Dharma talks pointing to this. This quality of equanimity is not an emotional emptiness. It's actually a fullness of understanding. And fundamental to that fullness of understanding is the understanding of karma.

Here, equanimity has the characteristic of promoting the aspect of neutrality—that impartiality I was speaking of. Its function is to see things impartially. Its manifestation is the subsiding of attraction and repulsion, so aversion and greed subside. Reflection upon the fact that all beings inherit the results of their own karma is the proximate cause.

In order to have equanimity with what happens, with what's going on, we have to see that things are unfolding in a lawful way, that causes and conditions are playing out.

The second aspect of being rooted in insight is the understanding of not-self — not taking anything as I, me, and mine, not taking it personally. We can't even take our equanimity personally.

There's a wonderful quote in the Suttas of Ananda asking the Buddha why some people attain Nibbana and some don't. The Buddha speaks about having abandoned I, me, and mine, about people who have gotten to that point. Having done that, "thus she obtains equanimity, welcomes it, and remains holding to it. As she does so, her consciousness becomes dependent on it and clings to it. A bhikkhu, Ananda, who is affected by clinging does not attain Nibbana." Once again, as Joseph would say, it does not matter to what you do not cling — even equanimity.

So how do we get there? How do we cultivate this? You're doing it. You're already doing it. Equanimity is an emergent quality. It comes out of our practice. We can cultivate it in the Brahma Viharas, which I'll speak about briefly, but even there it's an emergent quality that arises from our mindfulness — the moment-to-moment mindfulness. And it emerges as we move from resistance to receptivity and responsiveness. Each of you has seen yourself do this, either over the long term in your practice, or even if you've been sitting for a shorter time here on the cushion, that movement from reactivity.

I want to read you a little story called "Golfing in Calcutta." The story is told of a golf course in India. Apparently once the English had colonized the country and established their businesses, they yearned for recreation and decided to build a golf course in Calcutta. Golf in Calcutta presented some unique obstacles. Monkeys would drop out of the trees, scurry across the course, and seize the golf balls. The monkeys would play with the balls, tossing them here and there.

At first, the golfers tried to control the monkeys. Their first strategy was to build high fences around the fairways and greens. This approach, which seemed initially to hold much promise, was abandoned when the golfers discovered that a fence is no challenge to an ambitious monkey. Next, the golfers tried luring the monkeys away from the

course, but the monkeys found nothing as amusing as watching humans go wild whenever their little white balls were disturbed. In desperation, the British began trapping the monkeys, but for every monkey they carted off, another would appear. Finally, the golfers gave in to reality and developed a rather novel ground rule: play the ball where the monkey drops it.

That's a good rule for life, isn't it? Play the ball where the monkey drops it.

We can study all the different ways that we are reactive — the ways we build the fence, or we try to trap the monkey, or we try to trick it. This is how we learn about our reactivity. And then, as we learn about our reactivity, we can drop some of that and come more and more to a state of acceptance and responsiveness to what's happening. We can give careful attention to how our balance is lost, where we get confused, and how we might be able to respond differently in that situation. Equanimity is giving up our attempts at control and instead of controlling, being with what is and responding skillfully.

Ryōkan has a wonderful poem:

Without desire, everything is sufficient.
With seeking, myriad things are impoverished.
Plain vegetables can soothe hunger.
A patched robe is enough to cover this bent old body.
Alone, I hike with a deer.
Cheerfully, I sing with village children.
The stream under the cliff cleanses my ears.
The pine on the mountaintop fits my heart.

It's a great feeling, I think, and I believe that a lot of poetry really points us to this state of being. Because equanimity isn't something we acquire or own or can hang on to and keep. It's a way of being. It's a way of interacting, connecting, opening our heart, living in the world.

I want to end by reading you a story that I think is a wonderful example of... we can sometimes think of equanimity as very silent and dour and solid. I think it's something else — much lighter, much lighter.

This is from Ian Baker's book *The Heart of the World*, and they're hiking in the Tibetan rainforest:

"Today was particularly bad for me as the rain would not let up and the leeches were relentless. At one point I counted twenty-two of them sucking on me at the same time..."

Sloshing along the muddy trail in the pounding rain, I came upon a large slimy log that had fallen chest high across our brush-choked path. In my agitated state, I viewed the log as a menacing obstacle that was clearly separate, in my way, and against me. With no way under or around, I jumped stomach first and slid over the top, regaining my balance on the other side. I was infuriated at the mud and decaying mush that seemed to have covered the entire front of my body. Rubbing off the crud, I cursed the log and the goddamn rain.

It was my brother Todd who suggested that we wait and see how the lama would handle this formidable impediment. Surely this test would break him. Hiding off the trail, we peeked through the underbrush just in time to see him trudge up to the log. Ever smiling, he took a couple of steps back and tried his jump with a running start. With not enough momentum, coupled with a portly belly, he slid back down on the same side of the log and landed on his back in a large puddle. Shaking his rain-drenched head, he burst into spasms of uproarious laughter.

Staggering to his feet, he repeated the same maneuver with the same results no less than three times. With each collapse back into the puddle, his laughter grew stronger and louder. On his fourth attempt, he made it over the top and slid headlong into the muddy puddle on the other side. Again, the laughter was knee-slapping. Continuing to chuckle, he wiped himself off as best he could, lovingly patted the log as though it was a dear friend, and proceeded up the trail smiling.

Todd and I just stared at each other.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

Without desire, everything is sufficient.

Since my house burned down, I have a better view of the rising moon.

CHAPTER 26

Transcendent Dependent Arising: A Map of Practice

Sally Armstrong · 1h00

> *In this illuminating talk, Sally Armstrong presents the profound teaching of transcendent dependent arising (lokuttara paṭicca samuppāda) from the Upanisa Sutta (SN 12.23), offering it as a map for the meditative journey from suffering to complete liberation. Unlike the circular nature of ordinary dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda) which describes how ignorance perpetuates suffering, this teaching reveals a progressive path that moves in one direction only—toward freedom.*
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> *The sequence unfolds through twelve links: suffering (dukkha) leads to faith (saddhā), which supports joy (pāmojja), rapture (pīti), tranquility (passaddhi), happiness (sukha), concentration (samādhi), knowledge and vision of things as they are (yathābhūta ñāṇa-dassana), disenchantment (nibbidā), dispassion (virāga), liberation (vimutti), and finally knowledge of the destruction of the taints (āsavakkhaya ñāṇa). Armstrong emphasizes how each stage is a refinement of the previous one, with feedback loops rather than rigid linear progression.*
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> *Particularly significant is the teaching's emphasis on cultivating wholesome states—joy, contentment, and well-being—as essential foundations for deeper practice. Armstrong highlights Bhikkhu Bodhi's insight that happiness (sukha) is the supportive condition for concentration, challenging the common misconception that striving and effort alone lead to samādhi. She encourages practitioners to recognize these states in their own experience and trust the natural unfolding of the path, using the Buddha's beautiful simile of water flowing from mountaintop to ocean to illustrate how practice inevitably leads toward liberation.*

I think we've said a number of times how the Buddha taught about suffering and the end of suffering, and that he never just taught about suffering but always included in his teaching the possibility of the end of suffering—that this is something we can know and experience.

In his many teachings, he gave many variations or lists about both suffering and the end of suffering, and sometimes lists that included both. The Four Noble Truths is the classic concise example of his teaching, where he posited the noble truth of suffering: there is suffering, and the cause of suffering, but also that there's an end to suffering and a path that leads to the end of suffering.

Last week I spoke about dependent origination, which really is an explication of the first two of those truths, talking about suffering and the cause of suffering and how, because of ignorance, we get caught in this cycle of just repeating the same actions. Even though we think that somewhere out there is happiness, somewhere out there we're going to be free of our suffering, we're actually doing the very things that cause suffering to happen, and so we're caught.

Tonight I want to talk about a teaching that takes off from that teaching on dependent origination. I mentioned it briefly in a Q&A session the other day—it's called transcendent dependent origination or transcendental dependent arising, different translations of the term. At this point in the retreat, it's perhaps a time where we might be able to appreciate this teaching because it's somewhat complex. Again, it's a list of twelve causal conditioned links like dependent origination, but it expands the third noble truth, and in some ways the fourth. It's pointing to the ending of suffering and how we experience that for ourselves within our meditation practice.

The fourth noble truth that Greg spoke about last night really is a very practical understanding of the path that includes all aspects of our experience, including our relational aspects like action and livelihood and speech. This teaching, by contrast, is a particularly meditative unfolding. It's really depicting the journey of practice and deep meditation experience. And what's amazing about it is that it starts from suffering. It starts from the human condition, right where we often find ourselves. And step by step it shows how the path can unfold and lead to freedom.

This teaching is not found many times in the suttas, perhaps only a few times. But Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the great scholars of our age, says it's an incredibly important sutta. He has a very long and extensive article on it in Access to Insight if you get interested in it from this talk, and he discusses how important it is and how it reflects the depth of the Buddha's understanding. It's called the Upanisa Sutta—the one I'm going to be referring to is found in the Samyutta Nikaya, though it's referred to in a few other places as well.

Like dependent origination, this is a list of twelve links that influence each other. And just as I said for dependent origination, when we see a list like that, it seems kind of linear and codified, like discrete, separate experiences. But just like dependent origination, it's actually not that way. This teaching is much more fluid. It's not time-bound. It doesn't tick along like the second hand of a clock. There are very different time frames involved here, and also ways in which the links loop back and feed each other. We go through this process many times.

Whereas dependent origination is a teaching of how we start with ignorance and end up in suffering—and because of the depth of the ignorance just keep repeating that same patterning again and again, caught in craving, caught in thinking that happiness is out there somewhere if we can just hold on to it hard enough or fast enough—this teaching starts off at that place of suffering, that place that recognizes life is difficult. The first noble truth: there is suffering. If we have a mind and a body, suffering will be inherent in that condition. But this teaching shows us the way out of suffering. It goes directly from suffering to the freedom that's possible.

We've talked about a number of teachings like this. I talked about the jhanic factors. Greg talked about the factors of enlightenment. And I know as a practitioner, I would certainly hear these kinds of talks and really shake my head and wonder what they were talking about, or why this was helpful. It can seem like teachers are just talking about things that don't apply to me or that I haven't experienced. But we don't give these talks to judge or evaluate practice, to have a sense of not being in a progression where you might feel, here I am and this feels good. It's actually more like a map.

I really like this analogy of these teachings as a map. It does help to locate ourselves, not in a fixed way, but just with a sense that there is an unfolding here. And if we know the terrain, we can perhaps direct our progress with a little more clarity or understanding. Just by naming these particular experiences, states of mind, places in practice, we can recognize them more clearly. And even though this is a teaching that goes from suffering all the way to complete awakening—and we're obviously here because we haven't had that experience yet—I think all of us will know some aspect of what it's pointing to. It gives confidence or encouragement that this can be known. These teachings and practices are available to us.

The Buddha himself said that if it wasn't possible, he wouldn't ask us to do it. But because it is possible, he asks us to undertake this practice to free the mind.

I think of these teachings as guidebooks. You know how when you're going to Italy or France or Cambodia, you might buy the Lonely Planet guidebook with all its sections telling you that if you're in this region or territory, don't miss this site, don't miss that experience? You really get a sense of what to look out for. Well, this is the Buddha's guidebook to the landscape of the mind and to the territory of freedom. If we know what the signposts are, what to look out for, we can see how to incline the mind.

Even when we encounter things like the factors of enlightenment talking about rapture, and people wonder, "What do you mean, rapture? I haven't had any rapture. I don't know what rapture is." But all of us have had some experience in that realm. Standing out on the porch watching one of those beautiful sunsets—it seems like a

while since we've had one—but you stand out there and you're just captivated. The mind is still, absorbed, and it's pleasurable. Or out in the woods when you see a butterfly or a bird or a mushroom that attracts your attention and you're so fascinated by it. That's a quality of rapture. We can know that for ourselves, and knowing it in that experience, we can understand how it might deepen in meditative experience.

So this teaching really is, as I said, showing the terrain of our practice—not to judge ourselves, but to illuminate possibilities and ways to incline the mind. Much of what I'll be emphasizing tonight is learning to notice wholesome states of mind when they are present, to see how they're onward leading, and to recognize that we can cultivate them. The practice of the Brahma Viharas clearly demonstrates this: that we can deliberately, through practice, incline the mind and heart toward more joy, more kindness, more compassion. The mind is trainable, and these kinds of teachings show us the direction we can train our minds and hearts toward.

But when we think of practice as a journey—Greg spoke last night about practice as a path—it can be very easy to think of it as an outward journey, as though I'm here and I've got to get somewhere else, somewhere that's not here, not available here. It's really important to recognize that what we're talking about is an inner journey that's not time-bound. It's certainly not bound by space or any sense of location, but something available and immediate.

As meditation is becoming more commonplace in the West, more understood, more part of—I often say part of the mainstream, though people tell me we're nowhere near mainstream yet. It might seem so to me, but meditation is still way out in left field. Anyway, it's more known than it used to be. You can tell by the number of cartoons that get created about meditating. For a while it was yoga; now it's meditation.

One I saw depicts this idea of meditation as a journey where we go somewhere. A couple is sitting in front of a television, and the bubble coming from the screen is an advertisement for an upcoming show. It says, "This week on The Amazing Race to Enlightenment"—you know that reality show The Amazing Race where they compete? I never watched it, but it's one of those competitive reality shows. "On The Amazing Race to Enlightenment: Can Jim and Susie achieve right mindfulness? And will Bob and Candy eliminate their relentless clinging to self?" They're getting at what we're talking about, but obviously not quite.

This is not an outer journey. You don't get a reward of that kind at the end, or your fifteen minutes of fame. It really is an inner awakening, an inner journey that can be somewhat invisible from the outside. What I love about these teachings is that they show us this possibility. Starting right here, this teaching begins with suffering, the

human condition. We don't have to go far to find suffering—that's not something we need to chase after. And we can see that there is a progressive, processional nature to it. But again, it's not step-by-step, lockstep, linear, with discrete experiences. Rather, there's a flow of experiences that influence each other with feedback loops.

These teachings emphasize how we need a firm foundation to undertake this journey. It's not about just attaining bliss or enlightenment; there are things we can do in the foundational stages—cultivating faith, contentment, a sense of ease in mind and body—that are truly necessary for this whole process to unfold.

I don't want it to seem like you're at one step and then it's like going through school: first grade, second grade, third grade. It's much more fluid than that. Sometimes we go through certain parts of the cycle over and over again, and that's actually helpful and beneficial as we create the foundation for later stages. You can see that this might develop over a long practice period, because the teaching is really talking about full awakening. A long practice period might be something we're working with over a lifetime, over the lifetime of our practice.

Again, in the Buddhist cosmological view, this might be something we're working on over many lifetimes. So it's not a question of getting to the end, some race to enlightenment, but actually just trusting and understanding your practice and where you are right now.

In reading this teaching, you can see how the Buddha gives it. In some ways you can understand how he developed it from his own experience—he was a young prince who lived a life of luxury but gave that up and set off on his quest for enlightenment. But I actually think it probably came more from watching other people as he guided them on this path of practice. I have no basis for this, just my conjecture, but he would see this kind of process unfold over and over again. He gave this teaching at Sāvatthī, the Jeta Grove, and he didn't start teaching there for some time—I don't know how many years until he was given that piece of property and built a monastery there. So it was sometime into his dispensation that he offered this teaching. I just love the sense of the Buddha watching people go through this process and really seeing how it had this developmental nature to it, and that naming it in this way was actually helpful for their unfolding.

As I said, this teaching takes off from dependent origination, but it's not a circle. It's not a list like that. I often think of it as being like fireworks—it takes off and goes in one direction only. And at the end, going in that direction of non-returning to states of suffering.

What I appreciate about this teaching and its relationship to dependent origination is that we can often hear that the only place you can break that chain of suffering is between contact and vedanā, or between vedanā and craving. That's where we have to pay attention, and if we miss that moment, there we are, stuck again on that cycle. I think I said it in my earlier teaching—I don't believe that's actually so. I think wherever we wake up, we can bring mindfulness, clear seeing to the experience and end a particular cycle of dependent arising. But here it very clearly says that we can be in suffering and find a way out. Suffering actually is a doorway to awakening. This, I think, is very helpful for us to see—that we don't have to be a different person to be on this path and to bring understanding to it. It begins right there with suffering. And it shows us the connections.

Why I think this is helpful, as I said earlier, is that it demonstrates how we need to have this foundation of basic well-being, basic trust in our capacity, in our minds and our bodies to do this kind of work. That's important. We can't bypass that, or through our quest, our saṃvega for awakening—some kind of "nibbāna or bust" intensity—it's not that helpful. We really need to do this foundational work to have this process unfold in a deep and powerful way. We need to pay attention and honor the mind and body where it is right now. Spiritual bypass really doesn't work. It's not like heart surgery, this spiritual surgery that we need to do. There's no around—there's only through, through these different kinds of experiences. And this sense of contentment and well-being being essential on the path is really very instructive.

The Buddha himself, remembering his story of leaving his life of luxury, tried these ascetic practices first. He actually dove into the suffering nature and thought that was a way, that just the suffering was a way out. But that wasn't so. And so he took some milk rice, started to take care of the body, strengthen the body so he could have the capacity to go to awakening. This is a real clear indicator to us about what he called the middle way—that it includes well-being, experiences like joy and happiness and contentment, that we really need to recognize and cultivate those as part of our unfolding practice.

In these lists, what we always see is that each stage is a refinement of the earlier stage, is conditioned by the earlier stage, and that there's a thread in the earlier stage which, if we can recognize it, is what's onward leading. That's part of the mindfulness we need to bring to this—understanding these states to see how they merge into each other. Again, they're not static, separate components, but this mysterious unfolding, this connected unfolding.

So the sequence of transcendent dependent arising, like the jhāna factors I spoke about a few weeks ago, or the factors of enlightenment—many of these lists have an arc to them. I found it helpful to recognize that for myself, that most of these lists that are onward leading have a sense of foundational qualities we can actually, with some intention, cultivate. Then they tend to have energizing qualities that give us energy, the energy for practice, that motivation for practice.

They usually go through a calming section and then deepen into the wisdom section. And this list goes through the same kind of sequence.

So as I said, it starts with suffering, with dukkha. That's one of the foundational qualities. But where the pivotal shift comes is to faith, and I'll talk more about this. I'll just go through the list here. Suffering leads to faith—these are the foundational qualities. The energetic qualities we've talked a little bit about: joy, rapture. Rapture is one of the factors of enlightenment, one of the factors I spoke about. The calming factors are tranquility, happiness, and concentration. And then this leads to the wisdom factors: knowledge and vision of things as they are, then to disenchantment, dispassion, emancipation or liberation, and finally knowledge of destruction of the taints.

So that's the whole list. I'll go through them one by one.

It begins with suffering, taking off really, as I said, almost like fireworks. You might think of dependent origination like a Catherine wheel, those ones that go round and round, but this takes off, it explodes, and it only goes in one direction.

So from this first noble truth, the truth of suffering—we have a mind and a body, there will be suffering. But what's interesting is: why is it noble suffering? What's noble about suffering? Suffering sucks, doesn't it? Why would we want to investigate suffering, go towards suffering?

Gil Fronsdal said this so clearly. He said, "It's noble when we find a path in it." And this is what's happening here. It's noble when it turns us to the Dhamma, to seeing things clearly. That's what makes it noble. And it's certainly noble when it leads us to finding a way out of suffering.

As Ajahn Chah said—I think we've said this already—there's a kind of suffering that leads to more suffering, and a kind of suffering that leads to the end of suffering. What we're experiencing here, as challenging as it might be at times, hopefully is a suffering that leads to the end of suffering. Really coming to understand the causes and conditions of our suffering, and not being so lost in it, not being helpless in the face of suffering, but actually using it to understand what this life experience is like, what's happening for us.

We've talked a lot about suffering. It was what got the Buddha on his quest for awakening. He lived a very cosseted life, a kind of prince, very wealthy background, all the sense pleasures. But when he encountered old age, sickness, and death, he was horrified. That's literally the word he would use—horrified. He looked out at the world and said, "How can people go on living as they're doing, knowing this is going to happen to them in some form or other—old age, sickness, and death?" It impelled him on his journey of awakening.

We spend so much of our energy trying to avoid suffering, trying to deny the reality of suffering. Old age, sickness, and death—we hide it away tidily in hospitals and hospices and nursing homes. If you travel in Asia, you see it all around, the difficulties of people's lives and old people out making their way in the world, taking care of things in the way they do. And here, sometimes you can just not see that. You certainly don't see it out on the streets. It's hidden away.

I remember reading about Stephen Levine, who's a teacher in this tradition but often teaches about death and dying. He would give these workshops where people would come to hear those teachings, so he'd be talking about death and dying. And always at some point, he would just drop this question in the middle of whatever he was talking about: "So who right here is going to die?" And he said inevitably, only about half the people would put their hands up. Because it's like, "Well, not me. I'm here. I'm alive. It's not going to happen to me." Yes, we all know in some theoretical way that we're going to die. But me?

You know that this is going to come to an end? It's just so hard to comprehend that the mind simply doesn't go there.

Reflecting on this, seeing that death is inevitable for all of us—this is how suffering becomes a doorway, because we're inspired to find a way out. And of course it's suffering, our own individual suffering, that has brought probably nearly all of us to this path, wanting to figure this out. How do we do this as a human being? How do we make our way in the world?

Perhaps it was extreme suffering of great loss, injury, or grief. But perhaps it was just feelings of discontent or unsatisfactoriness—a sense that there should be more than this to a human life, not just chasing happiness, material possessions, or getting the right kind of career. All of these questions about what life is all about impel us on the path.

And sometimes it seems the path involves more suffering. On a retreat like this, it can seem that way. Retreats are difficult and challenging—mind, body, day after day, the same schedule, the same things happening, the same mind over and over again. It's difficult. Certainly we don't design retreats to be suffering, but it's what we experience. Part of it is that we actually get more sensitive. We really feel the impact of the world, the impact of our mind states. We see the nature of our mind and how crazy it is at times, how it just leads us down these dead-end tracks and we get lost in confusion and hatred and judging. We see our own suffering, and of course we open to the universal suffering in the world.

But we, unlike the Buddha, have a path of practice, have guides on this path. And so we can find how to use suffering as a doorway to deepening and to opening. There are amazing examples of people in this world who have done this. At the moment, Aung San Suu Kyi—she is just amazing. Everything she's experienced in her life: her father killed, all of the tragedies in Burma, under house arrest for all those years, not able to see her family. Her husband died while she was under house arrest; she wouldn't leave Burma and wasn't able to be with him. She didn't see her sons for ten years or more. And yet during that time she continued her practice and did a lot of metta. She came out of that imprisonment as this radiant being of light and goodness. It's just amazing—finally able to receive her Nobel Peace Prize after all those years, having somehow transformed all of that suffering through her practice into this radiant light that she expresses.

So whereas in the cycle of dependent origination we go from suffering through the cycle again and again, getting stuck in ignorance and repeating the same actions, here the shift is that suffering leads to faith. The faith is that there is a way out, that we don't have to be stuck in that cycle, that there is a different way of relating to our experience so that we don't have to keep going in those repetitive patterns.

This is a huge turning point—to really open to the suffering, not deny it, but actually use it as a foundation or fuel for our practice, out of that conviction, just like the Buddha had, that it's possible to awaken, possible to lessen our suffering and the suffering we cause others.

The way the sutta is sequenced, the Buddha says suffering is the supportive condition for faith to arise. Faith doesn't come about just by accident or because we're happy as can be; it's actually suffering that allows us to find this avenue of faith.

The Pali word is *saddhā*, and it literally means "to place one's heart upon." I love that definition of faith—just really landing in something and trusting it. In this case, it's trusting the Dhamma, but also trusting our capacity to practice and to be on this path, seeing how important it is in this unfolding.

I know for me faith wasn't something I had an easy relationship to. I'm not a bhakti type, a person into a lot of devotion. But I do clearly remember my first retreat in India, around 1981, with S. N. Goenka. It was a ten-day retreat, so intense. We were in a kind of tent encampment, very simple accommodations and food. Hour-long sits—I had a towel that I was sitting on. That was my zafu, on a concrete floor. It was very uncomfortable.

But there was a truth he spoke that just lit my mind up. What I can remember thinking was: You mean there's a way out? You mean I don't have to keep causing myself and other people suffering? That was a revelation. Nothing I had experienced so far in my limited twenty-five years of life had led me to think that was possible. It just lit something up in me that really affected the rest of the unfolding of my life, because every time after that when I had to make a major decision about where to go, what to do—I was twenty-five, living in India with a backpack, I could go anywhere—the question was always: How can I get closer to the Dhamma?

How can I be with Dhamma people? How can I serve the Dhamma? And my whole life really unfolded out of those kinds of decisions.

But I also remember at the end of that retreat—there were about a hundred people there, and we were all excitedly talking afterwards. It was my first retreat; I was just blown away. I was speaking to another woman who was much more experienced than I, someone who had been practicing for many years. She said something like, "Oh yes, this practice is so helpful for me. I try to do at least one or two retreats every year."

I remember my young hubris saying inwardly—I didn't say it to her—"One or two retreats a year? How pathetic is that? If you're really serious, it's every month, or nonstop, or you go ordain." I had this fire for practice. And then, of course, reality hit. I had to make a living, and all the other things of life happened. But there really was that initial connection.

I'm sure all of you have similar kinds of stories—hearing the teachings and something inside saying, "Oh yes. Someone is speaking the truth here. I'm hearing something that resonates for me," at whatever level.

There are different types of faith. We can have blind faith, where it's really just trusting the experience or the words of another. It sounds good; we want that for ourselves, but we don't know it yet. And then we can have bright faith, which has a sense of illumination—I think that's what I had. I had a kind of bright faith that was very illuminated, but it wasn't yet grounded.

As we practice, as we go on, we can develop what's called verified faith, where we really know for ourselves that transformation is possible because we've tasted it for ourselves. This can then lead to unshakable faith, where it simply isn't a question anymore—this is the path we're on, and it is possible to find freedom.

Sharon Salzberg has this wonderful book on faith. It's small, but so worth reading because, as I said, even though I have and always have had that kind of faith in the practice, it didn't express itself easily for me outwardly. She writes, "I want to encourage delight in the word faith, to reclaim faith as fresh, vibrant, intelligent, and liberating." This is a faith that emphasizes a foundation of love and respect for ourselves—something that can enliven our practice and support us.

This kind of faith is necessary. And you all have it. No one signs up for a six-week or three-month retreat without a great deal of faith. It may have been challenged quite a number of times already on this retreat, but something has touched you that led you to make this kind of commitment out of faith, out of trust in the practice.

The Buddha said, "Faith is the beginning of all good things." He began his search out of a faith that it was possible, even as he tried all of those dead ends. They were all part of his unfolding, and he never lost that conviction that it was possible.

It's interesting that the next factor is joy—faith is a supportive factor for joy. Faith can sometimes seem a little earnest, perhaps not joyful, but to actually find the joy in faith, how much happiness we can have when faith is really grounded in us, when we have a sense of trust in our capacity, when we're not swayed by thoughts of "Who are you?" and "You can't do this" and "Who do you think you are?" When instead there is simply this knowing—"It's possible. It's possible for me"—a gladness arises out of that.

This is the next factor: *pāmojja*, joy or delight. This kind of joy isn't the joy of getting our sensual desires met, of material possessions, or the giddiness of certain experiences. It's actually a meditative joy. It's the kind of joy that arises when the mind is not so troubled by the hindrances.

As the Buddha says, "Pāmojja develops with the abandonment of the five hindrances. When the practitioner sees the five hindrances abandoned in herself, gladness arises within her. Thus gladdened, rapture arises. And when she is rapturous, the body becomes tranquil."

This is the next part of the sequence: joy, this sense of gladness or delight, this pleasure in experience when the hindrances are at bay. When the mind is not troubled, not pushed and pulled by wanting and not wanting, by restlessness or desire or doubt or sleepiness, we can start to really appreciate ourselves, our capacity for practice, our lives. It's very intertwined with gratitude, which many of you have expressed—gratitude to be able to practice, to this place for supporting us. It's a beautiful quality of mind.

So really see joy in these kinds of states as essential on the path.

This is one of the things I really want to emphasize in this talk tonight. Analayo, the great Buddhist scholar who wrote the book on Satipatthana that I highly recommend, said that the entire scheme of this path, the gradual training, can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy. This is not how we usually understand the path. We talk a lot about suffering. We experience a lot of suffering. But to really see it as a refining of joy is transformative.

I think I mentioned in my other talk the other day how happiness is in right now. So is joy. Joy and happiness really go together. Many of you probably know James Baraz, whom we call Mr. Joy, because he's really made it the focus of his practice and his teachings for many years now. He's written a wonderful book called *Awakening Joy* and also offers a series of monthly classes that literally thousands of people participate in because he makes them available online. I've gone and taught at his class, and it's really a very happy place to be—people practicing joy.

Here is a quote from someone who took the class with James: "I have an increased awareness of joyfulness and the possibility of cultivating it. I also understand better how to experience it, rather than the old random way of simply being surprised, or even worse, unaware of its presence. I now practice choosing to see the joy inherent in many situations rather than the negative or painful aspects."

Again, this is highlighting the choice that we have, more than we think, to experience, to open to, to incline towards this quality of joy and happiness. It's possible that it's here even if it's really subtle, even if it's something very simple—a cup of tea at the right time, a sunset, a warm breeze. To really notice and incline the mind towards encouraging that, and to feel it as beneficial, as wholesome—this is so helpful, so important.

It is said that joy is a supportive condition for rapture. This is the next factor—rapture, or piti. Again, Greg spoke about it in the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. I spoke about it as a jhanic factor. It's a mental factor, a factor of mind, where the mind is so absorbed in its chosen object that it delights in it, that it doesn't want to go anywhere else. It can manifest, as we've said, through strong physical sensations—uplifting, pushing, vibrating, lightening of the visual field, or a sense of lightening in the body, electrical kinds of impulses. It always sounds very appealing, and sometimes it is. But sometimes it can actually be challenging as this energy gets strong or coarse or really insistent.

What's happening, the functioning of rapture, is to increase the absorption. It feeds on itself as we delight in the meditation process and object. It actually creates this very supportive feedback loop. The mind doesn't want to be anywhere else. It's happy to be in the present moment. It's happy to be with this experience.

What's interesting is the next part of the sequence—that rapture is the supportive condition for tranquility, pasaddhi. Again, the same as the seven factors, the same sequencing. It's always interesting to me that such an energetic experience as rapture leads to tranquility. But what happens in this sequencing is that as the mind gets collected, as it gets absorbed—I think I pointed to this in my talk on the jhanic factors—there's always an inclination towards simplicity, towards some kind of refinement. So as the energy of rapture subsides, the mind is collected and connected to its meditation object. As the energy dissipates a little and gets more in balance, naturally tranquility or calm can arise. There's also, as the piti gets strong, a lack of thought. The hindrances are again temporarily kept at bay, so the mind can just kind of settle easily into this calmness. There's this sense of calm.

With tranquility, the mind quieting, this kind of refinement that I've talked about—then tranquility is the supportive condition for sukha, for happiness, one of the jhanic factors that I spoke about. This kind of happiness is a meditative experience. Like joy, it's not an external, really excited experience of happiness, but a quiet contentment, a happy contentment of mind and body that has a sweetness to it.

Often when people report states of tranquility, they can come in saying, "It's boring. Nothing much happening. Where's the drama? Where's the juice in practice?" And we always point towards, well, what's actually there? This is actually calm. The aversive aspect of it is "this is boring." Boredom is just a lack of interest. We get interested in the tranquility, stay connected to it. See if you can find the pleasantness of it. See if you can find the pleasantness in that stillness. That's what leads to this very sublime kind of happiness—sukha.

Then there's another transition that happens that again is really important—not that we have to try to have it, but to understand as we deepen in our practice. Sukha is the supportive condition for concentration.

Most of us think that the supportive condition for concentration is beating ourselves up, trying harder, sitting longer, walking slower, contracting ourselves with gritted teeth and hair on fire or whatever. That is not in this list, that kind of practice. Sukha as the supportive condition for concentration. I found this such a revelation, and it's so hard to remember because we all over-effort when we're trying to get concentrated. It's almost inevitable. And to really trust that what is a supportive condition is a sense of ease and wellbeing and contentment—that's what will allow the mind to deepen into concentration.

Again, you can see how all of these factors are playing in. The rapture, there's absorption, there's tranquility, there's calm, there's this subtle happiness that's sweet and soft. That's what allows the mind to deepen. Not pushing, not striving, not judging, not getting the whip out, but actually allowing this sense of ease and relaxation. This is what leads to concentration, to samādhi.

The kind of concentration we're talking about here develops by successive moments of mindfulness. It's why we've been emphasizing continuity. And of course, it can deepen into jhāna, and that's another whole discourse that could be given about jhāna and the deepening of jhāna. But really, it's just enough concentration. We often talk about access concentration, neighborhood concentration, because it's near enough to jhāna for the mind to really be focused, really be one-pointed, that ekaggatā quality being there. And that's enough concentration for the mind to turn to wisdom.

We don't get concentrated for concentration's sake. It's not an end in itself. As pleasant as it can be and as gratifying—it's like, "I've got it, I got concentrated, I'm concentrated, that's all I'm looking for"—we get concentrated in order to be able to turn the concentrated mind to clear seeing.

One of the qualities that the Buddha talked about that this concentrated mind has is that it's malleable, flexible, and steady. I love these terms. It's malleable—it's trainable, actually responsive. It's flexible—it can shift and move in response to experience and to our intentions and to our inclinations of the mind. And it's steady—it actually can pay attention moment to moment to what's happening.

So we take this concentrated mind and turn it to changing experience. Turn it to seeing things as they are. And as again we've said, what we see when we look with this kind of steadiness is the inherent unreliability of experience. We see how impermanent

it is, that there is nothing solid there at the core, at the heart. This is what the whole cycle of dependent origination shows—there's nothing, there's no self there, there's nothing solid. There's just these processes happening over and over again. And so we see that with this mind that's steady.

Concentration leads to knowledge and vision of things as they are. Yathā bhūta ñāna dassana. I think Carol spoke about this the other night. She was always saying, "Yathā bhūta—things as they have come to be." This is the mind that sees clearly how things unfold. This is the wisdom that Joseph was talking about this morning. When the Buddha uses these terms, knowledge and vision, it's not intellectual knowledge. It's not just seeing. It's really immediate understanding. It's insight. It's direct.

As we start to see things the way they are, this leads to the next of these factors, which is nibbidā. This term used to be translated as revulsion or disgust. And I was always a little confused by that because, you know, we've talked about joy and happiness and tranquility and these beautiful states and clear seeing, and what do you see? Ugh, revulsion and disgust?

Well, who wants that, you know, as a path of practice?

But the more modern scholars have come to see that that's actually a mistranslation of the term. Andy Olenski, who's a scholar in residence over at BCBS, says that most literally nibbida means "without finding" — not able to find. And the translation he and Bhikkhu Bodhi prefer is disenchantment.

I think that's wonderful. We were enchanted. We were caught in craving, caught in all of the lust for experience, blinded by that illusion. And we become disenchanted by experience — no longer so fascinated.

Olenski offers a story from the texts that usefully illustrates the meaning of this most important term. A dog stumbles across a bone that has been exposed to the elements for many months and is therefore bleached of any residual flesh or marrow. The dog gnaws on it for some time before he finally determines that he is not finding any satisfaction in the bone, and he thus turns away from it in disgust. It is not that the bone is intrinsically disgusting. It is rather the case that the dog's raging desire for meat just will not be satisfied by the bone. He is enchanted by the prospect of gratification as he scrapes away furiously at the bone. But when he finally wakes up to the truth that the bone is empty of anything that will offer him satisfaction, he becomes disenchanted and spits it out.

This is a mindset that we perhaps already know. How many things have you been enchanted with in your life that you subsequently became disenchanted with? A love object, some passionate activity, a hobby, some remodel project in your home, some activity that you used to pursue with such fervor. And where is that passion now? It just no longer serves that purpose.

Hopefully by this time in the retreat, you have a little bit of that relationship to your thoughts — just no longer so enchanted by them, believing them, wanting to indulge in them, wanting to cozy up and let them run the show. It's like, "I've just seen that so many times."

A simple example: can you remember, some number of years ago, when happiness was coming home from school and turning on the television and watching Gilligan's Island? Who would want to watch Gilligan's Island now? Maybe in the middle of this retreat you might want to watch Gilligan's Island — anything except my own mind! Just that sense that it doesn't do it anymore. It used to be that was happiness. And this nibbida recognizes: no, it's not there anymore. And so the mind turns away.

This turning away leads to the next factor, which is dispassion — viraga. Raga means lust or passion; viraga, dispassion. Again, not out of aversion or forceful rejection, but because we don't see the satisfaction there, the mind moves naturally to dispassion, to letting go. This is a natural turning away, like the renunciation or relinquishment we've spoken about. It's not out of rejecting, but out of knowing there's not the kind of happiness available that we thought was there. The mind naturally turns away.

It's said that this is a turning point in the path of practice. The previous sequences were in the realm of the relative, and it's at this point the mind turns to the transcendent. It actually lets go of its obsession with the six sense doors and getting happiness or satisfaction through them, and turns to what's called the deathless element, the unconditioned — to what's not changing, to what's not subject to change. A shift happens. There's a real knowing that the mind can open into freedom.

This is the next stage: liberation, vimuti. The freedom that the Buddha spoke about comes out of this mind that has let go of its attachments, is no longer bound, is no longer clinging, is no longer suffering in that same way — the mind that's free of greed, aversion, and delusion. This mind becomes radiant and bright. It's no longer visited by those defilements, those difficulties of mind.

What's interesting is this process doesn't stop there. There's actually another final stage, which is knowledge that this has happened — knowledge of the destruction of the asavas, asava-kaya-jnana. This knowing that liberation has happened, that the mind

has been freed. You'll see this cycle often as the Buddha talks about awakening: there's the awakening moment and then the reviewing moment where one knows, "Yes, this has happened."

This is true. The Buddha says the practitioner understands as it really is: "This is suffering. This is the origin of suffering. This is the cessation of suffering. This is the path to the cessation of suffering. These are the taints. This is the origin of the taints. This is the cessation of the taints. This is the path to the cessation of the taints." As she is knowing and seeing this, her mind is liberated from the taint of sensuality, from the taint of existence, and from the taint of ignorance. When it is liberated, the knowledge arises in her: "It is liberated." This is the Buddha saying, "Done is what had to be done." That this has happened.

Now again, this is pointing to final release, the awakening of full liberation. But we've all had moments here on this retreat of this kind of opening, this kind of deep and profound letting go, where you've seen some particular construct of suffering, some mind pattern, some reactivity, some tendency towards judging—and you've seen it end. You've seen that in that moment it's not there, it does not exist. Not to say that it mightn't come back in some form, but the very seeing of its ending means that it's not permanent. It's not who you truly are.

And we start to trust that—this temporary nibbana that Ajahn Buddhadasa talked about, where he said if we didn't all experience it every day, we'd go crazy. The mind has these moments of release, of letting go, of clear knowing of the possibility of the path and of awakening. We can know this. And on this path there are many moments of enlightenment. Traditionally there are four, but I actually think there are many. And our recognition of their power—of these moments of calm, of clear seeing—reveals that when mindfulness is really clear, the mind isn't troubled. There is actually a freedom from greed and aversion and delusion in that knowing, in that profound depth of mindfulness.

And so to see the possibilities that are here in each moment, to actually incline towards them, to encourage, to find the threads of these different aspects of experience and know that this is the path, this is the direction we go in.

I know this can seem complicated. Anything with twelve steps is inherently complicated and troubling to the mind. I really want to keep it simple, about the central aspects of the foundation of joy and contentment—the gladdening of the mind that's so important, that sukha, happiness, leads to concentration—and that all we have to do is keep going. As Bhikkhu Bodhi said, there are only two things you need to be successful in your spiritual practice. Only two things: to start and to keep going.

This is what these kinds of teachings point to—that there's an onward-leading nature to them, and that we can know this for ourselves. As Ajahn Chah says, if you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you'll have complete peace.

I want to finish with the words of the Buddha, the ending of this sutta, because it offers such lovely imagery:

"Just as, monks, when rain descends heavily upon some mountaintop, the water flows down along with the slope and fills the clefts, gullies, and creeks. These being filled up, fill up the pools. These being filled up, fill up the ponds. These being filled up, fill up the streams. These being filled, fill up the rivers. And the rivers being filled up, fill up the great ocean.

"In the same way, monks, ignorance is a supportive condition for sankaras, karmic formations." And he goes on through the whole chain of dependent origination, but then says: "Suffering is the supportive condition for faith. Faith is the supportive condition for joy. Joy is the supportive condition for rapture. Rapture is the supportive condition for tranquility. Tranquility is the supportive condition for happiness. Happiness is the supportive condition for concentration. Concentration is the supportive condition for knowledge and vision of things as they really are. Knowledge and vision of things as they really are is the supportive condition for disenchantment. Disenchantment is the supportive condition for dispassion. Dispassion for emancipation. And emancipation is the supportive condition for knowledge of the destruction of the taints."

So just as water always finds its way to the ocean, this path goes in one direction only—to greater freedom, greater happiness, and greater joy.

Let us allow these words to settle into silence.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 27

Mettā For All Beings: Guided Meditation

Susie Harrington · 41 min

> *In this guided meditation session, Susie Harrington leads practitioners through the culminating stage of mettā practice: extending loving-kindness to all beings without exception. She illuminates a crucial insight—that mettā is not dependent on its object but is an expression of what already resides in our own hearts. As we move beyond categories of friend, neutral person, and difficult person, the discriminating mind that judges worthiness naturally dissolves.*
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> *Harrington shares a powerful teaching from the commentarial tradition about breaking down barriers: the story of a traveler with companions who must face bandits demanding a human sacrifice. True mettā, she explains, emerges when one cannot prefer any being over another—including oneself. This points to the deep connection between mettā and equanimity (upekkhā), one of the four brahmavihāras.*
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> *The meditation itself begins with receiving the support already present—the generosity of the retreat center, the nourishment of food, the gift of breath from all plant life. From this foundation of being supported, practitioners radiate mettā in all directions: north, south, east, west, above, and below. Drawing on the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, Harrington reminds us that authentic loving-kindness carries tremendous strength, like a mother protecting her only child. The session concludes with the traditional eleven benefits of mettā practice, including peaceful sleep, serene countenance, and mental concentration.*

We continue with the metta practice today, moving to loving kindness for all beings. I think this is a really interesting and powerful place in the practice.

We tend—and you've been moving away from this with working with the difficult person and the neutral person—but we tend to think that the feeling of metta has something to do with the object. As we move through into these different people, into the more difficult person, and then into all beings, it becomes really clear that metta is an expression of what's here, what's here in our own heart.

As we move out to all beings, the discrimination that someone might be worthy of the loving kindness, some being is or isn't—all that has the opportunity to break down. We realize that our hearts are as big as the world and that we can open them completely and let all beings in. When we're in this fullness of metta, it's limitless. It's limitless.

There's a wonderful story in the commentaries that is considered a challenge of your metta practice. Some of you may have heard this before.

So this is the challenge: Suppose a person is traveling with a friend, a neutral person, and a difficult person, with him or herself being the fourth. Then bandits come and say, "We need one of you for human sacrifice." This is a made-up story, it's just a test. So think about it for a minute. One of you has to go. What are you going to choose? How would you choose?

Now, if one thinks, "Let them take this one or that one," she or he has not yet broken down the barriers. And also, if he or she thinks, "Let them take me, but not those three," they have not broken down the barriers either. Why not? Because he seeks the harm of him who he wishes to be taken and the welfare of only the other three. No matter what the choice, you're wishing one not as well.

It is only when he does not see a single one among the four to be chosen in preference to the other three, and directs his mind quite impartially towards himself and the other three, that he has broken down the barriers.

The realization is that it's not possible to choose. It's not about martyring ourselves or preferring others over ourself. It's realizing that there's completely no preference.

You might see and feel in this—the other night I talked about equanimity—and you can really feel the equanimity aspect coming in and supporting the loving kindness as we move out to all beings. The practice you've been warming up for five and a half weeks, all the different elements that you've been doing, allow this quality to develop.

Once we move to all beings, there are a number of different ways to do it. I want to mention a couple just so you have them.

One of the ways is to think of the different categories of beings. Here's one list that the Buddha offers: all breathing things, all creatures, all persons, all who are embodied, all women, all men, all noble ones, all who are not noble ones, all deities, all human beings, all those in states of deprivation. You can, if you're doing the practice, go through each one of these categories and wish the loving kindness phrases, just as you've been doing them, for each of those categories.

Another way to do it is in the directions: to the north and east and south and west, and up and down, as the Buddha suggested. Here's his actual language: "May all beings in the eastern direction be freed from enmity, distress, and anxiety. May they guide themselves to bliss." And so on into the north, the south, the west, and the intermediate directions. May they all guide themselves to bliss.

This quality that we're sending out—many of you have been chanting the Karaniya Sutta every night, and I think it's wonderful. Hopefully you've had the chance not just to chant the Pali words but to actually consider the words and the meaning of them as you do that. If you haven't yet, I really suggest in the next couple of days that you take the time to check in with the words. It's an amazingly beautiful offering—that's why we chant it.

"Whatever living creatures there be, without exception, weak or strong, long, huge or middle-sized, or short, minute or bulky, whether visible or invisible, those living near or far—may they all be happy."

And then there's a quality to the metta that, with this open heart, also has a lot of strength to it. I think this is important to remember: that metta is not weak. There's an amazing power in its fullness. Sometimes we sense this with people like the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh, or perhaps you have people that you feel this from.

In the Sutta it says: "Just as with her own life, a mother shields her child, her only child, from hurt, let all-embracing thoughts for all beings be yours." Protecting her child, her only child—you can feel the strength in that.

So I'll guide us in the practice. I'll offer phrases that are fairly standard, though everybody seems to do them slightly differently.

Use your own phrases, as I invite you to do. I'll bring us into it a little differently at the beginning, so follow along with me at first, and then as we move to the phrases, allow your own to come in and fill out the practice for you. We'll be doing it directionally, radiating out from near to far.

Begin as we always do with the metta practice by making sure that you're as comfortable as you can be. This is not a place to struggle. If you need to move in the middle, allow yourself that.

It's often helpful at the beginning of the metta practice to flash for a moment on your own goodness, realizing your intention for being here, for this effort. Feel how naturally, as you do this day after day, the earnestness, the kindness that is already here in you, and your intention to let that fill and flower and open.

I invite you, as you sit here feeling yourself in the midst of this place, to rest back into the support that is already here. Feel how a quality of generosity and loving-kindness supports you in this place that has been sustained with generosity—this building,

the people who have offered support to your being here, ongoing. Feel the support and nourishment. Receive the gifts of the food. And in the food, the rain and water, the gifts of the sun and the earth.

Feel, as we sit here, the gifts of each breath. As we breathe, we're receiving the breath offered to us by all the plants, the trees, the algae of the oceans that breathe out this oxygen that we can then breathe in. Feel how we are supported on all sides, and let that come into us.

Offering first to ourselves the phrases: May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be happy and find joy in each moment just as it is. May I be healthy and strong, and where that is not possible, may I accept my limitations with ease. May I be peaceful and live with ease.

Feeling the support, breathing in the air as this gift, the strength in your body, the water. May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be well. May I be peaceful and live with ease.

Continue for a few minutes with your own phrases, nourishing yourself. Allow the nourishment to come up through the earth, through your sit bones, through the base of your body, through your feet. Allow the nourishment to come through the air. Allow yourself to be filled.

If it feels helpful to you, you can also include your benefactor—perhaps letting them come and sit beside you, letting this well-wishing flood the both of you.

Let yourself rest into the beauty and wonder that you've seen in this place: the trees and leaves, light, animals. Receive the nourishment of the cooks and the teachers. Feel the nourishment and support of each other. Allow yourself to feel those around you, those whose paths you cross all day.

As we begin to move into sending this loving-kindness out, even though the language is moving out from you, always include yourself. Allow this sense of loving-kindness and support that is coming towards you to merely flow through you, to overflow from you.

Starting with the people just right around you now, just a sense of them, offering them your phrases: May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be well. May you be peaceful and live with ease.

As you feel the sense of it, allow it to flood through the room. Perhaps let images of people that you see each day pass through, letting them go by—no story, just the essence of the person, seeing the basic goodness there and wishing them well.

Continue with the phrases, letting either specific people or perhaps just a sense of all of us here in this room arise, realizing everybody here is offering this metta, and it comes in and flows out.

Begin to let it overflow from this room out into the building, out into the grounds around the building, bringing to mind now the people here and the other creatures—some that you've seen and so many that you haven't. May you be safe. May you be happy.

Now let it stretch, this wishing of well, to all the creatures, all the men, all the women, all the seen and the unseen, the human beings and the other creatures. Send this metta out to the north in a big extending arc from your heart. May all beings in the northerly direction be safe. May all beings be happy.

You can start closer in. Perhaps send to some people, some beings in the States, stretching out as you move north into Canada. As you do this, allow different images that represent different people and creatures to float through, knowing that they are merely representatives of all.

Extending out, going far, far north. It might be helpful to remember that to the north is behind you, if that orientation assists, though it can be more abstract than that.

Then send out metta to all beings to the east, to your left, beginning close by, extending out into the woods. If you've been out there, standing out towards the metropolitan center, Boston and beyond that to the ocean. The creatures of the ocean, creatures of the sky. Across the vastness of the ocean—may all beings be safe.

Continue, remembering to keep your attention, as we have throughout, in your heart center, radiating out from your heart. If you start getting lost in images, come back to the heart.

Then bring the attention back into your heart. Perhaps come back to the room for a moment. Offer some metta to yourself, to the people around you.

Then allow the metta to radiate out from you to the south, straight ahead, out from your heart. Let each phrase carry this wish across the air—all the way across the states and creatures, those that live above the ground and below the ground, those in the density of cities and in the open space of the country. Coming to the edge of this contin-

ent, allow yourself to continue south, going broader and broader, the oceans into Central America. Continue further south into South America and all that vastness, allowing it all to come in, to be included. All the way down to Antarctica.

Then come back again to right here. Feel this place and yourself sitting here in your own fullness, the fullness of heart. Then send out, radiating from here to the west, sending out your phrases and your well wishes with them. Out to the edge of the continent and out into the vast ocean beyond, and across that vast ocean to the land beyond—the many lands beyond the ocean.

Then begin to send out in all directions at the same time. May all beings everywhere, in all directions without limits, may they all be safe. May all beings everywhere be happy. Continue with your phrases, including up and down and out across the universe, leaving out none.

May all beings everywhere be safe. May all beings everywhere be happy. May all beings be well. May all beings be peaceful and live with ease.

For those who haven't heard it, I want to read to you the benefits of metta. And you may feel them right now:

A person sleeps in comfort and wakes in comfort. They dream no evil dreams. They are dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings. The gods guard them. No fire or poisons or weapons will harm them. Their minds are quickly concentrated. The expression of their face is serene. They die without falling into confusion. And even if they fail to penetrate any further, they will pass on to the world of high divinity, to the place of ease.

CHAPTER 28

Questions and Answers

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this engaging question and answer session from the three-month retreat, Joseph Goldstein draws from decades of practice experience to address fundamental questions about meditation and the spiritual path. Beginning with a memorable personal story about mysterious manifestations and the varying interpretations of three different teachers, he illustrates how the mind can overlay experience with meaning—a lesson directly applicable to phenomena like the 'sound of silence' that meditators often encounter.*
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> *The discussion moves through several profound topics: whether psychedelic experiences can serve as shortcuts to realization (acknowledging their potential for opening while emphasizing they cannot substitute for a genuine path of practice), the dangers of using meditation as avoidance or becoming attached to jhāna states, and the perennial question of free will versus determinism in a conditioned universe. Goldstein shares his transformative experience working with deep existential fear, distinguishing between mere recognition of mental states and genuine mindfulness that includes complete acceptance.*
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> *Particularly illuminating is his reflection on practicing across traditions—specifically the relationship between Vipassanā and Dzogchen. He describes his initial struggle with apparently contradictory metaphysical frameworks and the resolution that came through understanding all teachings as skillful means for non-clinging rather than competing statements of truth. The session concludes with practical guidance on integrating relative and ultimate truths, emphasizing that suffering itself becomes a powerful invitation to investigate and apply the wisdom developed in retreat to daily life.*

Is there anybody who hasn't asked questions that would like to?

Is there a beneficial way to work with the sound of silence?

I need to back up and tell another little story first. This is Joseph's miracle story. I've performed one miracle in my life, and it happened in 1975. I was teaching with Sharon Salzberg in Mendocino, California, up in the Redwoods. Just before the 8:30 sitting in the morning, we were sitting together, talking a bit, and suddenly and spontaneously out of my mouth came this big cloud of smoke and ash. It was completely unusual. It was very sweet-smelling, and the ash was tangible. I was just like, "Whoa, what was that?"

But what to do? I had no explanation at all, so I went into the 8:30 sitting. Then it kind of receded into the background a bit, although it had struck me as very odd.

A few weeks later, we were teaching our first three-month retreat. This was before we had IMS, up in Bucksport, Maine. Before the retreat started, I was in the local bank in Bucksport, standing in front of the teller, and again, out came this cloud of smoke and ash. The bank teller looked at me. So this time it really piqued my interest—what is going on?

At that time, Ram Dass was still living in New York, and he was studying with and teaching with this Brooklyn-born mystic. Maybe some of you remember those days; her name was Joya. She had a lot of psychic abilities. I had friends who were down in New York studying with them, and I asked them to ask Joya what this was.

There's this famous saint in India, Sai Baba, and people would go to Sai Baba, and one of the things he did regularly was produce spontaneously this ash, which is called vibhuti—holy ash. When I asked Joya about my experience, she said, "Oh, this is the vibhuti of Sai Baba." I felt pretty good about that.

This story is related to your question in a rather roundabout way.

A few months later, I met with Munindraji, my first Dharma teacher. He was in the States, and I told him about this phenomenon. He just said, "Oh, it is the fire element. It's just some element in the body manifesting."

Months later, I asked Dipa Ma. I think I was in India at the time. I asked her about what this was, and she said, "Oh, you must have some disease."

So from the vibhuti, the holy ash of Sai Baba, to the fire element, to some disease. Which was a very good lesson in how the mind can interpret experience in a lot of different ways. The experience didn't change. The experience was whatever it was. And yet there were all these different interpretations with different feelings about it. So that was a very powerful lesson in the power of interpretation and how that can really be a filter on how we're with experience.

So this all goes back to the sound of silence. There is an experience that people have, kind of an inner sound, and it's usually or often a very high-pitched sound. Some teachers give it the name "sound of silence." Some people think of it as the sound of the unconditioned. When I asked Sayadaw U Pandita about it, he said, "It's the friction of the earth element in the bones in the ear."

This reminded me of the miracle story. There's this phenomenon, a lot of different names given to it, and we might perhaps relate to it differently depending on how we think about it. From the point of view of vipassana practice, whatever has the nature to arise has the nature to pass. So it's another phenomenon which can be experienced, and many people do. When it's a predominant object, it could be fine just to pay attention to it for a while. It could be a good object of concentration where the mind could get really one-pointed on it. I would just be careful about overlaying it with any particular interpretation. Let it be just what it is.

Thanks for the opportunity. I have two questions, and they're not really clearly related to the Dhamma. I asked this because I had dinner with friends and the issues came up, so I'm curious how you would answer. The first is, I wonder how you would reply to the claim that there are drugs you can use in order to have a shortcut to the realization of emptiness and then get freed from illusion.

Let's do one at a time.

The second question would probably push the first one out, so let's begin there.

The question was about conversations with friends where some people claim or think that certain drugs could be a shortcut to the experience of emptiness. Having spent my younger years in the sixties, I certainly experimented a lot with different kinds of drugs and had powerful experiences on them. I think for different people there can certainly be mind-opening, heart-opening experiences. That's clear—it can happen. Though it's not for everyone, and for certain people it could be harmful.

But for me, the big difference is and was the realization that profound transformation requires a path of practice. It is possible that certain drug experiences could open us to possibilities, but they're not really a path. If people try using them as a path, I think that's when it gets quite problematic and dangerous. I see the possibility of a real opening to different and even profound experiences, but in the end we really need to cultivate those understandings and the qualities of mind which make them possible through our own practice and development. Because then it's all integrated. Otherwise it's a moment's experience, sometimes with understanding coming from it. But as I said, it doesn't seem to me a path of practice.

The second question was whether there's a certain downside both to insight practice and jhāna practice—whether you can use it as a kind of avoidance, and whether one can become addicted to the pleasant states of certain meditative experiences.

I think both those possibilities exist, and they manifest in several ways. First, people can misunderstand both the meaning and the practice of mindfulness, particularly with respect to emotions. Some people—and here's where guidance can be really helpful—could be using, for example, the technique of noting not as a frame for then going into the feeling of it, but as a way of pushing it away. They avoid feeling what's coming up. Sometimes people even get dissociated from their feelings. That's not a helpful avoidance at all, and it's not really the practice. But without guidance at certain times, we might not see this. Somebody on the outside can reflect back, "Oh, that's what's happening." So that's one danger.

Another danger, which is not uncommon in spiritual scenes—and I saw it to some extent in myself in my earlier years, not a serious case but a mild case of it, though I've seen it a lot—is that we may have a genuine experience of the emptiness of phenomena, just seeing the selfless, insubstantial nature, and we get attached to that level of understanding without integrating into it the level of interaction that happens on the relative plane. By relative or conventional, I mean self and other and personality and relationship.

There's a very famous teaching by Nāgārjuna, one of the very great Buddhist masters of ancient India, considered by many to be the second Buddha—a very renowned master. He says that being attached to the solidity of things, to taking things to be real and solid, is a big problem. However, being attached to emptiness? It's hopeless. He was really highlighting the danger.

At different times I've seen this—people who may have had a genuine or deep realization of emptiness but in some way are getting attached to it. Then it can manifest in terms of relationships in the world: "Oh, it's all empty, nothing matters." They're not first understanding that the law of karma—how to say this—that empty phenomena are following or manifesting as the law of karma. To see that things are empty doesn't negate how the unfolding process happens. But very often people think, "It's all empty, things don't matter," and so they don't take responsibility for their actions. I've really seen this in different spiritual scenes. People can get into a lot of trouble with that. That's another danger.

The third is the one you mentioned. There's a potential danger, which I've also seen happen, but it's workable. When people do experience highly concentrated states, jhāna states, it is very pleasant, and it is possible to get attached to them and to be practicing just for that. Even though the Buddha spoke often of these states of concentration as a vehicle for liberation, for using them in the service of insight, if one just gets attached to them and practices only for them, it's a stumbling block. People get stuck in that place.

One of the few times that the Buddha is said to have reprimanded Sāriputta, the chief disciple second only to the Buddha in his wisdom, involved an Indian Brahmin who was dying or close to death. I can't remember the story exactly—whether he wanted to do the brahmavihāra meditations in order to have union with Brahmā in the Hindu fashion. But anyway, Sāriputta taught him the brahmavihāras. He attained jhāna. He was reborn in the Brahmā worlds. When the Buddha came to find out, he said to Sāriputta, "That was not correct. This person had the potential to become enlightened, to become liberated, and you taught him a path to just another conditioned existence." So Sāriputta quickly exercised his psychic powers, went up to the Brahmā worlds, and straightened this fellow out.

So there is that caution.

The question was about free will and if everything is conditioned, where does free will come in. This is really a discussion that I started having as a freshman in philosophy in college and have had for the last forty years, and it hasn't really gone anyplace.

The only thing I will really say about it—and I'll put this out not as a conclusion to the question, but as something you might want to think about in your spare time off of retreat—is understanding the difference between conditioned and determined. Because things can be conditioned, meaning they have causes behind them, without the outcome being determined. So that's just one little piece to consider.

The other piece, which I've always been a little hesitant to say, but when I really look at the term "free will" and what those two words mean, I can't come to any understanding of what the term means. We put them together and we assume we know what it means. But as I understand it, the term free will implies someone who has it. And if there's no someone in the first place, then what does the term mean? So I'd like to leave it at that.

What has been suggested, as this topic comes up—which it does, because in a way it's a question that makes sense for it to arise—whatever the philosophic conclusions are, act as if you have a choice and choose the skillful. Whether you're choosing the skillful is predetermined or it's arising in the moment or however it comes about, choose the skillful. Abandon the unskillful, cultivate the mind. That's the best I can do.

Someone asked about existential fear, and whether this would be a time to say something about it. The only thing that comes to mind in terms of that phrase—and I'm not sure this experience actually is that, but perhaps it is—for quite a long period in my practice, fear was a very strong part of my practice. That was the major, big defilement that I was working with, struggling with.

Over years—this was not a quick thing—sometimes I could see the fear arise in relationship to particular situations. There would be some situation, I could feel the fear, and then try to work with it. But at certain times in my practice, especially on long intensive retreat, there were times when the fear was so strong I was actually afraid to go from sitting to standing. So maybe that's what existential fear is about. It was completely irrational. There was no obvious cause for it to be there. But for whatever reason, that was the energy. It was like the primal emotion of fear arising. Very unpleasant. It's not a pleasant emotion.

So I was working with it a lot. Fear, fear, fear, fear. The phrase Guy used the other day, I think, in reference to his coming to understand what real acceptance means—I had exactly the same experience. I was actually doing walking meditation outside here, again having been through this for a long time, and I was creating a whole self story which was just feeding the fear. I was building up this fearful persona. "I'm such a fearful person. This goes back so long. This is going to take thirty years of therapy to unwind." I was really identifying with this. This is who I am.

There were two turning points—big turning points, not little ones. One of the turning points was at a time I was teaching with Sharon Salzberg. We were teaching in Texas sometime, going for a walk after lunch, and I was going on and on about my fear. She just turned to me and she said, "Joseph, it's only a mind state." And of course, that's something I had told different people countless times.

But when you hear something at just the right time, it lands differently. That was one of those right times. Yes, it's just a mind state. I don't have to build a whole self-story around it.

But the fear was still coming a lot. I wasn't so much building the self-story anymore, but it was still powerful. Then later, during a long retreat, I was doing walking meditation out here, feeling the fear, noting it. And in just the way Guy described, at a certain moment my mind simply settled back and I said the same words: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay."

That was the first moment I had genuinely accepted it.

Before that, I'd been noting it. I'd been thinking I was being mindful and accepting, but I wasn't. Behind the note was really "fear, go away." Something I'm sure you've realized by now—you absolutely cannot fool your mind. We can pretend to be mindful, but the mind knows. Is there acceptance or not? And if it's not, it doesn't work. But often we don't see it. We actually think we're being mindful.

So that moment—"here for the rest of my life, it's okay"—"it's okay" actually became a powerful mantra for me. Almost like if a young child were afraid, if we were that young child who was afraid, it's interesting that we would really know the right attitude to have. It's okay. It's okay. We wouldn't try to convince them that they weren't feeling the fear, or judge them for having it. We would have a very intuitive, loving, caring response: "It's okay."

It's so interesting that we have such a hard time having that same relationship to our own emotions. But it's the same thing we need.

This points to another important distinction, which maybe at some point could be a whole dharma talk: understanding the difference between recognition and mindfulness. Because often we confuse the two. All that time until that moment, I had been recognizing the fear. I knew what it was. I could recognize it. I could name it. But I was taking the recognition—which is really the factor of perception—I was taking that recognition to be mindfulness. And it's not. They're two different functions.

So when you're with some deep feeling, whether it's existential fear or existential anything else, and there's that feeling of being caught in it somehow, stuck in some way—if it's a quickly passing emotion, or even not so quickly, but we're with it and we feel it come and we can be with it and it goes away, it's not a problem. But with these things that are deeply conditioned, where we feel caught, then I would really look to see: Are we simply recognizing it? Or are we being mindful in the sense of being totally accepting? It's okay. If it's here for the rest of my life, it's okay.

A retreatant asked about whether the big mind meditation was derived from the Dzogchen tradition, and wanted to hear more about the differences and similarities between Dzogchen and Vipassana regarding mindfulness.

That's a huge question. When I first started doing a little bit of Dzogchen practice, I found that the metaphysics, the philosophical description of reality that the Tibetan tradition used and that, for example, the Burmese tradition used were really different. Sometimes they would be saying opposite things about the nature of freedom.

So the first long Dzogchen retreat I did, I was driving myself crazy—talk about the manifestation of doubt being perplexity! The question that was tormenting me was: "Who's right?" If they're right, then these others can't be right—and back and forth. It was a very difficult month.

But by the second month of the retreat, I really had a shift of understanding, and this became the basis for my writing *One Dharma*—because it was really that dilemma which was behind that book. How can we hold different traditions that may be saying different things, but hold them in a place of unity rather than conflict?

So what happened to me after that month of practice, struggling as I was—it was like the way Zen koans are sometimes described, how you should hold a koan: like having a hot burning something in your throat that you can't spit out and you can't swallow. That was the intensity of it. It felt like my whole spiritual life depended on resolving this question: Who's right?

This is the amazing thing. If we just go on sitting and walking and sitting and walking, somehow the Dharma unfolds in beautiful ways. I realized I was asking the wrong question. It wasn't about who's right. I began to understand that all the teachings—all the teachings—are skillful means for liberation. And so I had this phrase in my mind: metaphysics as skillful means.

Because if we take teachings as statements of truth, one school says this, another school says that, they may say opposite things, so there's conflict. But if we take all the statements of the teachings and understand them as skillful means rather than as statements of truth, then we can learn from any tradition, from any metaphysics, if it's truly skillful for us.

So then the question becomes: skillful means for what? That became very clear, because all of the Buddhist traditions—whether it's Dzogchen or Vipassana or Zen—it's always skillful means for not clinging. That is the bottom line. And when I realized that, all the dilemmas fell away. Is this helpful for not clinging, or not? We can find this in all the traditions.

In the Pali Canon, very often, many times, the Buddha uses the phrase "liberation through non-clinging." So it's very clear that that's the essence of our practice. In the Dzogchen tradition, this appears in so many different places. Patrul Rinpoche, one of the great masters—I think he lived in the 1800s—a wandering vagabond, but one of the very great masters, has a teaching called *Advice from Me to Myself*. It's a wonderful piece, which maybe in the next six weeks I'll read. So if any of you want to stay.

He goes through this whole long teaching and then says, basically, the essence of it all is not clinging. That's what he comes down to. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, one of the great masters of the last century, said that the essence of awareness—so in Dzogchen there's a lot of emphasis on awareness, the nature of mind—he said the essence of awareness is not clinging. If there's clinging, it's not awareness.

So when I really saw what it all comes down to, what all these different metaphysical teachings are about, what all these different skillful means point toward, it seemed to me that this was just the core teaching. And this is what we're practicing. In that way, we can learn from different traditions without conflict, if we understand: Is this helping us to not cling, to let go of everything?

In one of the Pali suttas—one that I love a lot—the Buddha says, "Abandon, let go of that which doesn't belong to you. If you abandon that which doesn't belong to you, it will be for your welfare and happiness." What doesn't belong to us? Everything. So it's the same teaching.

As long as we're identified with any arising phenomena—because again, the Buddha was just so clear: whatever has the nature to arise will pass away. If it has the nature to arise, it means it's a conditioned phenomenon, arising out of conditions. Whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away. And so if we're identified with anything that's arising—a thought, a feeling, the body, a sensation, an external situation—then we're caught. We're in Mara's snare, in Mara's trap. And as soon as we don't identify, as soon as we abandon or let go or let be, whichever phrases work for you, and simply let things arise and pass on their own, then we're in a place of freedom.

So in that way, even though the methods may be a little different and the metaphysics may be a little different, I see the essence as being the same.

Question: I was struck by something you said before. You talked about a similar question of moving between traditions, and you said, "Whatever one you choose, follow it to its end." I'm just wondering, in your own life and practice, how do you know?

Is the end nirvana, or is there a certain awakening that can happen? The question referred to something I had mentioned at the Forest Refuge—that one should practice in one tradition until its end before exploring other traditions. But I'm not sure I would have said "the end." That doesn't quite resonate exactly. What I meant is that I think we should come to some depth of practice, some depth of understanding in one tradition. The real end, the end end, is arahantship or full liberation. I don't think we have to wait until then to necessarily explore some different ways of practice, but I do think it's

helpful to come to where we feel—and this may be different for different people—a real depth of understanding the practice, where we have had deep and transforming insights, and we feel confident in it.

Because then it becomes possible to study and practice in other traditions and with other teachers without it causing confusion. If I hadn't felt so confident in my Vipassana practice, that experience I described when I started practicing Dzogchen, I don't think it would have resolved in the way it did. I think I would have been caught by a lot of doubt and then confusion.

Doubt, as you probably know from times it has arisen, is the most dangerous of all the hindrances. With the other hindrances—as strong as they can be—desire or lust or aversion or restlessness or sleepiness, we're still practicing. It's difficult, we're struggling with those mind states, but we're still on the path. When doubt is there and it's strong and we're buying into it and not seeing it, that just stops us. That's why it's considered so important to understand that particular factor of mind and to work with it.

So that's by way of saying: practice until we really don't have much doubt about our practice. Then opening up to other ways and other teachers can be enriching.

I'll give you one example that was particularly enriching for me, which we've brought into these teachings. Even though this is found in the Pali canon, this aspect was not given as much emphasis as in some of the later traditions—and that's the aspect of bodhichitta, that aspiration that our practice be for the awakening of all.

It's there in the texts. When you read the Pali canon, the Buddha, after the first sixty arahants became enlightened, sent them out: "Work for the welfare and the benefit of all, you who have done your duty." It's there, but as a specific teaching, it's not emphasized that much. Whereas in the Tibetan tradition, it's emphasized a great deal. I found it really inspiring to bring that aspect front and center.

I had always realized that the practice will inevitably help others, because if our minds become more peaceful and more loving and more patient, of course it's going to benefit everybody we meet and everybody we're close to. But the teaching of bodhichitta brings that motivation up front rather than being seen as a consequence of our practice. It can become the motivation for our practice: may my practice be for the welfare and the awakening of all. I found that it just expanded the whole view of practice and was very energizing.

That's an example of how, once we're confident in our practice and then explore other traditions, it can be very enriching. But if we do it too soon, before we're really stable in our understanding, it can get confusing because some of the teachings apparently say different things.

The next question was about other pieces I've brought in from other traditions, and also what other teachers' responses have been—not just to big mind meditation, but to anything brought into the conversation from elsewhere.

I'll answer the second one first. As with every endeavor, there is a liberal-conservative spectrum. This is not to put any hierarchy on it, because I see value in the whole spectrum. Among teachers, some are very conservative, conserving a particular tradition. Each tradition has its own integrity, so they are worth preserving. Other teachers—you might say the more liberal wing—have a different mission, a different interest, bringing in other things and synthesizing.

So it very much depends. Some of my teachers would look upon big mind meditation probably with horror, whereas Munindraji was an example of someone who was very open. I want to emphasize that I really think the whole spectrum is needed. We want to conserve the integrity of particular traditions, and also for some to be exploring synthesis.

Most of what we have brought in has been from the Tibetan tradition, because we've practiced mostly with that. But there's been some Zen influence, particularly from readings. Some of the Zen masters and texts are just so wonderful, such direct pointings. There's one book I mentioned in an interview which had quite a strong influence on me—by the Korean Zen master Chinul. He was, I think, twelfth century or perhaps eleventh, one of the founders of Korean Zen. There's a book of his teachings called *Tracing Back the Radiance*.

What I liked about his teaching was how he framed it all. He had this wonderful phrase—he framed all of his teachings in terms of "sudden awakening, gradual cultivation." The teachings were always pointing to that moment of sudden awakening in terms of understanding the nature of the mind, the empty, aware nature of mind, free of any clinging. It was always pointing to the realization of that, but also acknowledging that one moment's realization, as important as it is for reorienting, is just the beginning. Then it needs gradual cultivation over a long time to integrate that understanding.

That just feels so true to my own experience and to the experience of so many yogis over these weeks. In one way or another, I'm sure you've had moments—aha moments—where you simply understood something, at whatever level it may be, something you

didn't understand before about your mind. We could call that a moment of sudden awakening to something. It needs the gradual cultivation so it grows, it deepens, it matures. This is the path aspect. In a way, that goes back to the very first question. A psychedelic experience might give us a moment of sudden awakening, but it doesn't give us the gradual cultivation. It really can't give us that, and so it's not really a path.

Someone read a definition of insight or vipassana, a kind of working definition, which says it comes from investigating fabrications in an appropriate way. The question was about the balance of understanding the practice being described both as bare awareness, which has this passive, receptive quality, and also described as an investigation into the nature of reality.

What you're really asking about in a fundamental way is a description of the first two factors of enlightenment, the first two factors of awakening. The nature of mindfulness is that quality of just bare attention—it's aware of what's arising without clinging, without condemning, without identifying. So that's very much the first aspect of what you described.

The wisdom aspect of mind, which is the second factor of enlightenment, that investigation of dhammas—I think we talked about this a little bit the other morning. That's the investigation, the more active aspect, which begins to highlight and see the fact that whatever is arising is changing. So we're investigating the impermanent nature of things.

Just one way of doing this, which I think we've mentioned in the hall: when we would report to Sayadaw U Pandita, he had a very specific way of reporting, which was quite challenging. We would need to report what was arising in our sittings or walking and also describe what happened to the object as we observed it. So sitting, rising, falling—describe the different sensations—then felt pressure. As I observed the pressure, it got stronger, or it got weaker, or it disappeared, or something else arose. To be looking that carefully, to see what happens to the object—that's a more active investigation aspect. It's also the investigation of the unsatisfying, unreliable nature, the selfless nature. All of that is part of the investigating faculty.

Someone asked: at what point do we emphasize one versus the other? It seems like the investigating quality is really where the substance is supposed to be, where you build on bare awareness.

The question is, when do you do one or the other? They really work together, because if you're not mindful of what's arising, there's no foundation to investigate. You need the mindfulness and a certain stability of mindfulness in order to investigate. As

you have undoubtedly noticed, in those sittings or walkings when the mindfulness is not particularly strong and we're kind of there but not really there, and the mind's just wandering a lot, there's no basis for investigation. The mindfulness is the foundation. When there is somewhat of a continuity of mindfulness and there's stability, then the investigation not only becomes possible, it almost happens by itself. So you certainly need that foundation of mindfulness in order to investigate. But you're all experienced yogis now, so just play. Really see. Explore.

Another question arose about holding these two truths about self—the absolute truth that we're coming to know through deepening understanding, seeing that clearly, and at the same time honoring the relative, the conventional level of self and other and relationship, alongside the more ultimate level of seeing the emptiness of it all.

It's a really important question—how do we integrate the relative and ultimate levels? I'm trying to think how to frame this. I don't know if you've noticed, but the older one gets, the synapses kind of work slower. Whatever jumps the synapses have a little less oomph.

In the context of retreat, obviously this is a very extraordinary time to be exploring the more ultimate level. There are very few distractions, no responsibilities other than doing this. This is an opportunity to really explore the impermanent, unsatisfying, selfless nature of these arisings.

Whatever wisdom is developed in this context can then be brought to our life in the world where, for the most part, we're operating on the relative level—because we're in relationship to people, we have our responsibilities, and we're just operating in that conventional way.

One of the most powerful practices to bring to our relative world is understanding the importance and power of seeing our motivation behind our actions, because we're acting a lot in the world. We're acting in speech. Everything I said in the last two talks where the Buddha highlighted the ten unwholesome actions—he said these are going to cause suffering—but the only way we can actually avoid doing them is if we're aware in our life in the world of those motivations as they come up. Before we act, what are we doing? Are we aware? Are we mindful? Is this skillful? Is it unskillful? That's an important application. That's still on the relative level, but it's bringing our dharma understanding to that level.

The place where it becomes very useful to call up the wisdom of emptiness—the insights that we've developed on retreat—in our life in the world is in times of suffering. Suffering becomes a powerful signal to us: okay, something's going on here and I'm not

understanding, I'm holding on in some way, I'm resisting in some way. Remember that powerful teaching where the Buddha said we are one hundred percent responsible for the suffering in the mind. Conditions may be painful—that's something different. But if our minds are suffering, it's because there are defilements of one kind or another.

When we're suffering, instead of drowning in it, it actually becomes a powerful call to investigate. That's really a time to investigate. What's happening here? What am I attached to? What am I clinging to? Is it a point of view? Is it a state? Is it a situation? What am I resisting? What am I not letting in? To the degree that we can bring the insight we've developed here on retreat to those moments of investigation, that really is the integration of the two levels.

Ajahn Chah had this wonderful line. He said there are two kinds of suffering. There's suffering that leads to more suffering—that is when we're just drowning in it and lost in it and don't understand it. And there's suffering which leads to the end of suffering—which is suffering in our lives, even not suffering but just difficulties, places where we feel stuck. If we bring investigation to it and ask, what's going on here? What can I learn? Where am I caught? How can I be free? That's suffering that leads to the end of suffering.

Our whole life is our practice. That's a good note to end on. Our life is our practice.

May the merit of all our practice together be dedicated to the welfare, the happiness, and the awakening of all beings everywhere.

CHAPTER 29

Unity of Emptiness and Compassion

Carol Wilson · 1h01

> *In this profound reflection, Carol Wilson examines the essential unity between the wisdom of emptiness (suññatā) and compassion (karuṇā), drawing from both Theravāda and Tibetan traditions. She explores the threefold nature of mind—naturally empty, naturally aware, and ceaselessly responsive—showing how appropriate response spontaneously arises from wisdom, manifesting as the four brahmavihāras depending on what life presents.*
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> *Wilson addresses common misunderstandings about emptiness that can lead to disconnection or nihilism, quoting Nāgārjuna's warning about those who "believe in emptiness." She demonstrates how genuine insight into anattā naturally gives rise to compassion, as self-referencing drops away and energy is released for clear seeing. Drawing on the Eightfold Path, she explains how wisdom purifies intention: clinging transforms to renunciation and generosity, ill will to mettā, and cruelty to compassion.*
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> *The talk offers practical wisdom for engaging with overwhelming suffering in our information-saturated age. Through stories ranging from Vietnamese peace activists to Ajahn Mahā Boowa's teachings, Wilson illustrates how compassion requires the spaciousness of equanimity to remain sustainable. She emphasizes that our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice—allowing difficult experiences to be met with awareness—is itself the cultivation of both wisdom and compassion, as the mind learns to meet each moment without adding unwholesome reaction.*

So tonight I'd like to just share some thoughts and reflections on the unity of the wisdom of emptiness and compassion—like two sides of the same coin, you could say.

Sometimes in our practice, not only here but all through our life, it can seem like what we're seeing or learning or hearing is more focused on the emptiness, the anatta, the wisdom side. Sometimes it can seem more focused, or we need to give more energy, to the compassion side. And sometimes, just being the way our minds work, we can set these two things up as somehow separate from one another—some kind of dichotomy, some way they're in conflict or they don't go together, as if we could separate them, as if they were two separate things.

So just my reflections, only my reflections: of course, they're not.

The Tibetans have a wonderful way—I'm sure you're quite familiar with it—of describing the threefold aspect of the nature of mind. First, that it's naturally empty, empty of self, of any separate individual self-existence. Second, that the nature is naturally aware, naturally awake—the simplicity that knowing is the natural function of the mind, as we've been exploring. And the third aspect: that it is ceaselessly responsive.

This would mean, I interpret, that faced with any need to respond in the world, it isn't just hanging out in the emptiness of nothing matters. But what spontaneously arises in the mind of wisdom is the appropriate response. In terms of quality of mind, you could say it's one of the four Brahmaviharas. Faced with difficulty, with suffering, it would come out as compassion. With joy, mudita. With a complex situation or something out of control, equanimity. With simple connecting with this moment, metta.

There's a saying Guy often quotes, which I just checked with him—he didn't use it yet. He said I could, since it's the end. A Zen Master, being asked, "What's the result of a lifetime of practice?" And the answer is: an appropriate response. Ceaselessly responsive.

So in some ways, just to talk in very simple ways about our practice, compassion and pañña, wisdom, the deep insight into emptiness—just because we have to talk, we talk about them as two different understandings. But they support and interweave with one another, and each needs the other for freedom, for deep understanding.

In terms of compassion, it needs wisdom to be able to open, to be with the vastness of suffering, not to drown, to be able to bring in the vastness of equanimity. This is from the Dalai Lama, talking about compassion. He said it must be derived from our insight into the emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Without the unity of compassion and emptiness, we can easily fall into despair. Because though our compassion may be strong, without this wisdom, it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness, even despair. I certainly experienced that. I imagine maybe you do sometimes. How can we possibly open to all of this? Or even just this knee pain, never mind all of this.

And on the other side, the wisdom of emptiness, of anatta, of nothing separate, inherently me, or anything inherently separate or self-existing—that can verge into disconnection. It's incomplete. It can go into this kind of view of nothing really matters that doesn't have the quality of life, of tenderness for life that compassion has.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo, the Rinpoche that Guy spoke about last night that he met in Nepal. He's talking about the danger of what we could call falling into emptiness:

"The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion and are obscured by concepts. Nagarjuna said, it is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practices, through the ways of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

That's how it feels.

Now, I love it that Guy talked about Nyoshul Khenpo last night, because you get it—he's not just some namby-pamby. He knows what he's talking about in terms of the vastness of emptiness. You get that he's someone who's talking from experience, not from view.

So just to talk a little about each—these are just my reflections, certainly not comprehensive. This is the vastness of our whole path, in my opinion, exploring both of these and how they come together.

I thought about the question of the incompleteness of emptiness, the incompleteness of the wisdom of anatta. These are words that people have said to me at different times on retreat, about either the idea of anatta—which is very different from the experiential knowing of emptiness—or sometimes about the experience itself. You have an experience of not-self, and it can be a little freaky sometimes. People say it's fearful, unsettling, alien, inhuman. Basically unattractive, all same grayness. Disconnected. Nothing matters.

If we say we talk about awareness, doesn't care what happens—well, why bother with anything? Why not just go sit in a room and do nothing if nothing matters anyway? You know, that kind of falling into emptiness is part of delusion. There's a sense of disconnect, of a kind of emptiness in a not-good way. Not something that's really onward leading when we think about it, because that lacks the ceaselessly responsive, connected quality.

So the question arises: if it is true that there's no inherent self-existence in anything, that every arising is really empty, just as empty as any thought when you look at it and watch it poof away—everything has that quality of insubstantiality—what's the point? That's the question, the incompletion of emptiness as a totality of view.

But the experience, as we begin to and continue to experience it and understand it, is really—as I hope you already know—this isn't like... I mean, the vastness of it may be way beyond where we are, but moments of experiencing this we all know. That time when the sense of the energy that's bound up in this obsessive, relentless self-referencing, this undying relating everything back to me as the center of the universe... I don't know if you've noticed, but it's exhausting. It takes up so much energy. Have you ever noticed that sometimes when you have some insight, not even a big one, there's often a lot of energy and enthusiasm? The energy that's all bound up in me, me, me gets released.

But we can't think our way out of that. It's really a misunderstanding. And so when we think, "Well, how would it be?" it doesn't make sense. It has to actually happen over and over and over.

Without that understanding of emptiness, we can think, "Well, we act in a way that's for the good of beings and all." But when it's still coming from that ongoing self-referencing, even with our best intentions, we can't see clearly.

I've used this example before, but I love it. I heard on public radio a couple of years ago a discussion about various economic theories, of which I know nothing. But this one—it sounds ridiculous—the so-called generalized theory, not really scientific, that this program was talking about, was sort of behind the way banks and things were working up until 2008 (although I don't think it's changed), before everything crashed. It was called Acting in Rational Self-Interest. The theory being that if we each act in rational self-interest—what's good for me, but rational—that will be for the good of all. So yes, we can laugh, but do we even know, right?

The example I gave, and this is what I love, is that apparently in London they built this bridge called the Millennium Bridge when they were having this big Millennium celebration. It was a big footbridge over the Thames River, a very fancy thing. When it first opened, the first day when all these hundreds of people were walking over this new fancy architecturally designed bridge—several hundred people on it—there were too many people and the whole bridge started shaking and wavering from side to side. They said on this program that each person there saw how it was leaning to one side. So acting in rational self-interest, each person stepped to the other side to balance it. All four hundred people stepped to the other side, and it just made the whole thing even worse. Because it's my rational self-interest rather than being able to see the big picture. Even with the best intention, without wisdom, our perception is skewed.

So much energy for life is released when this falls away. And the ability to recognize so much more clearly is released. It allows for clear seeing and appropriate response.

And then again the question comes up: okay, so there's not me and I'm not acting in rational self-interest, but... This is from Padmasambhava. Someone once asked, "But once we've realized emptiness, can it still harm us to commit negative acts?" And he answered, "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

So just think, in your own experience, of a very simple moment, which I trust in six weeks you've had at least, and maybe can remember. One simple moment when nothing particular was going on, but there was just that sense of real presence, you know, when the mind kind of clears and suddenly the wanting or the aversion or the confusion that was clouding it just goes away. Someone was even mentioning today some experience where they said, "Oh, that's the aversion"—and then everything just cleared, just from awareness noticing what was happening. Maybe you're outside taking a step, or seeing a leaf, or hearing the rain. Or you've been caught up in feeling judgment of somebody and they walk past and your eyes just meet and all that falls away and you're just there with this clarity. Not comparing to past or future or congratulating yourself. Just the is-ness of that moment. Do you have a sense of what I mean? Very simple.

In that moment, could the thought of harming someone even arise? In that moment, if someone fell or needed help, would you even have to stop and think, "What's the compassionate thing to do?"

Or what about me? It's the appropriate response there, so simple. It's not a big view that we have to cultivate and adhere to and think about. It's just the natural response of the mind in that moment that's not all bound up with a sense of self-referencing. So simple, but as we know, not so easy. Not so easy.

It's absurd to do anything negative. And what naturally arises—now we're switching into the way the Buddha speaks about in the suttas—is that with the arising of wisdom, the link between paññā, between wisdom and our actions in the world, is this second factor: right intention, wise thought. What naturally occurs with the moments of clear seeing, with the moments of this freedom—just this freedom from the contraction, from the clinging, from the self-referencing, just for a moment—is that the habits of thought that lead to action naturally purify.

And it's our old friends: the habit of greed, of clinging, naturally purifies. It begins to shift to renunciation and then to generosity. Renunciation not being a life of hardship where you have to push away everything pleasant. Renunciation is an inner attitude. This is all on the level of intention. It's the natural releasing of the clinging. Renunciation is an experience of the joy of simplicity. It's not the hair shirt where you can't eat

and whatever. Renunciation is when the clinging drops away, and there's just this appreciation of space and simplicity. It's a beautiful quality, which naturally then leads to generosity.

Ill will, the habit of ill will, naturally transforms into the habit of mettā. And that of cruelty naturally transforms to compassion. And ignorance changing to wisdom isn't an act of intention, but arises from the insight, from the clear seeing. So that's the link that the Buddha makes here in terms of how wisdom leads to action and how the action shows up as compassion, mettā, non-clinging.

This is from Stephen Batchelor talking about Shantideva, who wrote *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which Stephen translated many years ago. He says, when Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolved, he did not vanish into the abyss of nothingness. It's not that, "Oh, I realized emptiness and poof." Rather, he realized that to be empty means to no longer be full of oneself. And then Stephen says, for Shantideva, insight into emptiness does not merely change the way he views the world, but it also transforms the way he feels about it. The heart is opened to the anguish of others, prompting a spontaneous longing to assuage their suffering. This is a more emotional way of talking about the movement into compassion. And yet he can also acknowledge the irrational nature of the passion to save all beings, because as a limited human being, that's impossible.

So how to hold the two, realizing even the Buddha couldn't fix the world. He couldn't even fix all his relatives—they went to war and killed each other. That isn't what we can do. And yet, that movement of feeling, being open to, letting the anguish of ourselves and the world touch us and turn it into compassion—this is the movement from the wisdom of emptiness.

So if I was to ask, how does the wisdom of emptiness open into compassion? But also, how does compassion need the wisdom of emptiness? This has been an ongoing question in my life, these two balancing.

One way I put it is: how can we continue to open over and over—because there's never a one-time anything—to open to the beauty and the suffering in this complex and beautiful world? There's so much. Just sitting here, not talking to each other, in our own mind and body, there's so much beauty, there's so much confusion, there's so much suffering. How do we continue to find the courage to connect, to not turn away, to respond in the face of sometimes overwhelming amounts of information, of suffering externally, in the face of external enmity? Or to find the courage internally not to just go to the automatic habit of response—hatred or aggression or fear? That's the work, in some extent, that we've all been doing here together. It's amazing, ennobling work. And as you

find, probably at times, it needs enormous courage. Enormous perseverance. And not to think we're ever going to be perfect in it. But how do we find that faith, that internal wisdom?

As Martin Luther King described, the practice of nonviolence means not only do you not shoot a person, you also refuse to hate a person.

This is really the depth of compassion, and that's not possible, as the Dalai Lama said, without deep wisdom—without the deep wisdom of emptiness. Because as Stephen Batchelor says, talking about Shantideva, it changes the way we feel about the world.

There's a quote from Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

How can I possibly open to all of that? And that's the answer—I can't. As long as it's "I," of course it's limited. Of course. And much of the time that's going to be our experience, sure. That's why we keep on practicing.

So the wisdom of those moments of not-self, of not-separation, of insubstantiality, of emptiness—this allows some opening into the vastness of both the beauty and the suffering. And also the natural purification that comes from our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice, the natural purification that results in changing the habits of our mind. So that even at times when there's a sense of "I," when that natural response of aversion or aggression or hatred arises, sometimes we have the mindfulness, the clear wisdom, and the courage not to at least act from that. It wasn't a natural wisdom that sees through it all immediately, but there's enough wisdom that we can see what's happening and come down on the purification, the wholesome side. That's what we're doing a lot in our practice here. And that counts. It counts.

I hope this doesn't bum you out too much, but I thought—in terms of what we all are in this culture, in this day and age, where there's so much information—the question of how do we continue to open, not shut down, not go into such overwhelm that we just can't take in any more information. I think this is a really crucial thing these days because we have so much information.

I just wrote down what came through today, listening to the news, checking the BBC. Just my normal day's routine—I didn't go out of my way. Liberia: just a mention of how this horrible civil war ended in 2003, and now they're estimating that over one half of all adults in Liberia suffer from some severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder. There was a whole story about teenage girls being kidnapped for sex trafficking in the

United States. A story about Holocaust survivors living in Israel, and when they died, their grandson found that they had remained really close friends with some Nazis in the SS in Germany—and the whole thing the grandchildren were going through, trying to understand how this could be, how this friendship could cross these borders. Eight people killed in a huge car bomb in Beirut. Anything about the election campaign—and that one, believe me, is a lot. A young girl in Pakistan who was shot by the Taliban because she was advocating education for girls, now in a hospital in the UK recovering very well. Other journalists in Pakistan threatened by the Taliban. Gold miners' strike and violence in South Africa. More wildfires than ever this year in the States. Chaos and war in Syria. Violence in Yemen. The EU thinking they might come to some agreement on bank supervision legislation at some year in the future—and also possibly coming to an agreement on aid to Spanish banks. It's a great thing there is an EU working together; if you read European history of the Hundred Years' War and such, that wasn't so long ago. Or World War II—that was even less long ago. Various murder investigations, various sexual abuse cases around the world. Peace talks in Colombia between the government and the FARC rebels. The UN still exists.

And then we have our personal stories. A great friend of mine just took her first steps on her new prosthetic leg and sent me a picture. That's wonderful. And there's suffering in it.

That's really a minimal little thing. I didn't even go into my emails. I didn't look hard. This is the kind of stuff we're flooded with. And how can we find a balance? That's one question. I'm not even going to go much into that, because that's the whole question. But not to either just say, "Well, it's all too much, so I'm just not going to listen to the news"—though we may go through times like that.

I've gone through times where I'll hear everything and see how I'm hearing it and go, "Yeah, that's a shame." It's not entirely superficial—it's not knocking the stories away—but you just can't let each one in. You can't die on the ground with each new news story. You wouldn't get through ten minutes like that.

But I've noticed how I'll be going through story after story, listening, and then one will just really hit me. And I don't mean in a bad way. I see that the difference is that somehow the mind, the heart in that moment wasn't preoccupied with pouring the right amount of milk in my tea—because I'm listening to this while having breakfast—or thinking about what I'm going to say today, or doing something else. In that moment, I was just sitting there, open, receptive, not so self-concerned. And the story goes in. You really get it in its beauty and its suffering and all of that.

You see, it's that sense, that willingness to connect with an open heart and mind, which is the way I like to describe metta. When that connection touches suffering, you get compassion. When it touches a being, however they are, it manifests as metta. And in that moment, even what sounds like a suffering story, you feel that tenderness of compassion and you can hear the beauty in it.

I'll tell you another one I heard a couple of days ago. It was a lovely story, and I just happened to be open at the time of hearing it. They were talking about a hospital in Boston that was about to perform one of the world's first leg transplants. They were going to transplant one or two legs to this woman, and they were interviewing her. She sounded so upbeat, but her story—I just thought, ah, so much going on in this world. She was in her early forties, I think, had three children. Happily married in Texas. But after her third child was born, she got some kind of horrible infection. They didn't go into details, but the only way they could save her life was to amputate both legs and both arms. This was about three years before the story.

So she was talking, and it wasn't like goody-two-shoes, but she had this spring in her voice, just talking about how supportive her husband had been. She had prosthetic devices, but her husband knew that she really wanted more of a living, wanted to be able to hold her kids. He'd been so supportive in searching this out, and she spoke about how wonderful her children were. There was just something about listening to her that was filled with life and vibrancy, love and suffering—just kind of all of humanity in a way. It was like, whoa—I can see some of your faces.

But when I think back on it, what went in, what I really heard, was the courage and the love and the life about it in her particular case. And that's just a moment. I'm not always open like that. But in that moment, the quality of compassion is not depressive or self-referencing or overwhelming. Compassion, like metta, like equanimity, like mudita, is one of the illimitables—unlimited. It's a beautiful emotion, one of the brahma-viharas. It is, in a way, an expression of the vastness, of emptiness, where the vast meets the profound. It's not a suffering state. It arises through the wisdom of the open heart and mind that's in connection with life, that isn't just for whatever reason in that moment needing to block, that isn't colored by fear, by aversion, by "how does this affect me."

So one of the reasons—and this moves us to the Dalai Lama, right? Let's go to him rather than me. He says things better. Talking about how compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is. And guess how that arises? By being present, by focusing on our own experience.

I know Susie talked a couple weeks ago about self-compassion and how profound that can be. And it's also about opening into our own experience. In that moment of self-compassion, that quality of mind isn't colored by aversion, by self-referencing, by greed. So the practice of self-compassion isn't just to make ourselves feel better and accept what's happening. It's actually the practice of wisdom that opens into the vastness, into the profound.

As the Dalai Lama says, compassion develops by deep insight into what suffering is, by being present, by opening to our own experience. And then this strengthens into a sense of empathy, a sense of connectedness with other beings. So we start with what we're presented with in this mind-body—as the Buddha said, in this fathom-long body. I'm paraphrasing; I don't remember his exact words. But something about in this fathom-long body is the whole world. It's the beginning and the end of suffering. We can discover it all right here. And it does open into empathy.

Pema Chödrön quotes Stephen Levine, writing of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness.

And at the point at which she felt she could not bear the resentment and the suffering any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others—a starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. And then she understood that it wasn't her pain, it was the pain of all beings. It wasn't just her life, it was life itself.

Then Pema Chödrön says we awaken this bodhicitta—she's calling bodhicitta "tenderness for life"—when we no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In the words of the Sixteenth Karmapa, you take it all in. You allow the pain of the world to touch your heart, and it turns into compassion.

Maybe not right away, but this is really the natural movement of this practice we're doing. How do we let the pain of the world touch our heart? By simply allowing the sadness, the physical pain, the loneliness, the fear, the arrogance—whatever it is this mind-body is experiencing—by allowing it to be in the light of mindfulness, in the light of awareness, to let it touch our heart. And it's already turning into compassion.

That moment of how our awareness, our attention meets this moment—this is what that teacher was talking about with kamma and result. The creation of kamma in this moment is the way the mind is meeting what's arising. So however terrible or scary or annoying or beautiful what's arising is, that's the effect of previous conditions. The way the mind is meeting it right now is the creation of present-moment kamma. And so all

these moments of simple mindfulness, non-judging, non-clinging—it doesn't seem like such a big deal. But this is the cultivation of non-clinging, and also of compassion, also of non-ill will, of mettā.

And really, in a way, our own particular experience can open to the universal. I remember hearing Ajahn Sumedho say once: you don't need any special experiences to get enlightened. You don't have to have special extreme suffering. The circumstances of our own life are all that we need as a vehicle for awakening and for the cultivation of compassion—when we're sitting here suffering, when we're caught in traffic, when we're having difficulty with the landlord.

And not to think in the other direction either, that our circumstances are so difficult there's no way we can experience happiness or wisdom. Really seeing it's not about the circumstances. We're not limited or defined by our circumstances in either a positive or a negative way.

I was watching a little documentary the other night called *Happy*, about all the research going on these days into the creation of happiness in our minds. It was from researchers like Richie Davidson and others, though it was short on the science, I have to say—they'd show a little chart and say, "Studies have shown fifty percent this and forty-nine percent that," without going into the details at all. But what I loved about it was these little vignettes of different people in different circumstances, exploring what makes people happy.

The very first one is the only one I want to mention here, because it really shows that any idea we might have that our happiness or suffering is defined by external circumstances just isn't true. It started with this man who, in whatever way they were measuring, came up as really, really happy. They were interviewing him, and he seemed genuinely happy. He lived in Kolkata, a very poor rickshaw puller—he walks, pulling a rickshaw that people ride in. These men are really poor; they work incredibly hard in the slums of Kolkata.

And he was so happy. They showed him with his wife, with his kids. He was so happy to come home, and then they showed the little shack he lived in. Coming from our culture, it's easy to look at it and immediately go into this kind of pity—not compassion, but pity. "Oh my god, how can someone live like that, the poor man." But he was so happy to come home, and his son was there waiting, and he was so happy when he saw him. There with his wife, showing all the neighbors, describing how they all support each other. They showed him pulling his rickshaw and describing things that I would hear and think, "Oh my god, how can you bear it?" And he'd say, "Oh yeah, that's just how it is, you know." Really happy. He described himself as really happy.

It was truly so uplifting to see. But it also revealed how easy it is to take a view about ourselves or a view about others—about what's possible, both in terms of happiness, but also when we're feeling overwhelmed by suffering. How we can relate to something as suffering that may not be experienced that way at all by the person themselves.

So opening this question of compassion—how do we continue to find the courage to meet and open to our own suffering and that of others—is supported by these moments of clear-seeing wisdom, but also by our steady practice, our willingness to explore: What intention, what motivation of mind am I landing on in this moment?

Years ago, I read one line that stayed with me from a teacher—I forget who it was, it wasn't a Buddhist teacher—but he said: in every moment of activity, activity of mind, body, and speech, we are committing to something. The question is: to what?

So that's not a judgment, but just a looking and seeing. As Geshe Rapten, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, would ask: How do we meet this moment? And so the cultivation of compassion with wisdom, wisdom with compassion, is looking and seeing. Seeing there are times when we can make a choice to act from non-ill will, from compassion, rather than from cruelty, rather than from ill will, rather than from clinging.

There was a very ongoing, difficult sangha political situation at his meditation center monastery. I don't want to go into it, but there was a lot of name-calling and power-grabbing, and he was really being kind of ostracized. It was an extremely weird, unpleasant situation that went on for quite some months.

I was visiting there in the middle of it, and the whole vibe of the place was really unpleasant. There was another abbot who was basically trying to push Sayadaw U Tejaniya out, although Tejaniya was the teacher and not this other guy. And this other guy was trying to get all the money and trying to work up the lay people who were in charge of running the place, saying all kinds of bad stuff about Sayadaw.

That's how it kind of works in Burma. Everything seems nice on the surface, but in the background, you tell bad stories until someone's shamed and has to leave. It kind of works like that. So that's what they were trying to do.

Anyway, I was there visiting and talking to him, and he was just saying, "Well, I'm not going to leave because I'm here because of my teacher"—who he reveres, Shwe Oo Min—"and he asked me to be here. This is his center, and I owe that to him, so I'm not going to leave."

And then there was all kinds of bad stuff about this other abbot who was doing this, and I said, "Well, why don't you at least tell the lay community this other stuff that's going on? It's not gossip. It's just true."

He said, "No, this is a really interesting situation for me. This is like an examination for my mind—to see how my mind reacts in this really horrible situation. And what's really clear is I'm not going to add more akusala, more unskillfulness, to this situation."

So even though it would have been helpful to give this other information, he didn't want to do it because to do it would come from an unskillful place. He said, "I'm just committed not to add more akusala to this situation."

And it was really great to see. It went on and on for months. And then, of course, it all kind of righted itself. That was a couple of years ago, and it's completely different and fine now. But to just see that quality of wisdom that meets the situation head on and really sees: what's going on here? It's not the external situation that's ever the problem, the source of our suffering or happiness. It's right here. We don't need to let ourselves become a victim of any circumstance or to think we need anything in order to cultivate happiness or compassion.

Oh, that lets me read this quotation from Dilgo Khyentse that I really like. I've been trying to work it in—I try to work it in every talk. So I don't know if it fits here, but you're going to hear it.

He's talking about ego clinging. He said:

"The 'I' is just a thought. Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When the thought of anger arises in your mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is anger brandishing a weapon? Is it at the head of an army? Can it burn things like fire or crush them like rock or carry them away like a violent river? No. Anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no true existence, not even a definite location in the body, speech, or mind. It is just like wind roaring in empty space. If instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, you can realize their essential emptiness—when you see through the hatred within, you will discover that there is not a single enemy left outside. Otherwise, even if you could overpower everyone in the whole world, your hatred would only grow stronger. Examine the nature of hatred. You will find that it is no more than a thought. When you see it as it is, it will dissolve like a cloud in the sky."

That's the wisdom of emptiness brought to bear on an experience of suffering, with an attitude of compassion. I'm not saying that's always possible, but when there is that wisdom of emptiness, we really don't have to be afraid of anything that we experience.

And when we are afraid of it, that's okay too, because that's when we're cultivating, through the moment-to-moment mindfulness, the shifting of our habits. That's what's been happening here over this time. They both kind of work together.

So compassion needs, though—

the wisdom not only of emptiness, but you could say another way, the wisdom of equanimity—the wisdom of knowing the uncontrollability, the vastness of experience.

Now, Susie also talked about equanimity the other night. She mentioned the eight worldly winds, knowing that this is the nature of the world. Like I said, the Buddha knew that even with his vast wisdom and compassion, he couldn't make anyone else wise if they didn't want to open. He couldn't stop the violence even in people that he knew, never mind in the whole world.

And if we have a view of compassion, which I imagine most of us do, and we don't recognize it as a view, it either becomes a should—"this is how I should act in a compassionate way." I mean, that's better than not caring at all, right? But don't we often have that? "I should be more compassionate to myself, to others." And there's a sense of not quite knowing what that means, or how to act, or what's right in this situation. Or we do what seems totally compassionate and wise, but then the result is completely other. And we're so thrown off. We're upset, or we blame ourselves, because we didn't have the big picture.

But mostly we're never going to have the big picture. Life is so complex. It's so ambiguous. We can never control outcomes. We can never control or even predict, most of the time, others' responses, or know what all the situations will be and make all the potential decisions ahead of time. Have you tried doing that about some things here? Figure out every single thing that might happen to cover all the bases? Forget about it.

Even in the little things, like walking into the cafeteria for lunch—where will you sit? You can't even control that. You think you can, but someone else comes and sits in your seat. It's all over.

But take something really more complicated. Have you ever been the medical proxy for somebody who's ill and dying? I have. And even if you go through all the possibilities and you think you know what they want, believe me, the situation that arises will somehow be different from all the things that you went over. They're not able to tell you, and you have to make your best choice as you can. The choice of what you're acting for them, what they would want. As someone told a friend of mine, "You're not making a decision for them—you're being their voice when they can't speak."

But to be able to do that with all the compassion to really be present for the suffering, and as much information as you can have about the whole situation—the medical ramifications, what will happen if this happens, what will happen if that thing is done. Will they get better or will they not? Will this increase the suffering? Will this make them get better? And no one really knows. And you have to make a decision, and the next, and the next.

And then it doesn't go the way you'd hoped. You make a decision thinking things are going to be better in two weeks, and instead, it just prolongs for two months in agony. And to still be open and present and not be beating yourself up for that the whole time. I'm not saying I could do that in that clear of a way, but that's the union of compassion and wisdom. We never know. And then not to back out. And then to turn around and look and see what decision we make the next time, from as much compassion and as much wisdom as we have.

A story I've often told about Sister Chan Khong—she used to be Sister Phong—the nun who's the associate of Thich Nhat Hanh. They both were quite active social workers, peace activists in Vietnam during the Vietnamese War, before they got kicked out of Vietnam. Because they were peace activists, neither side trusted them. That's how it is, and they got kicked out.

But at one point, Sister Chan Khong—she was only sixteen at the time. I mean, she's a firebrand anyway, if you meet her, but totally committed to mindfulness first and then action. She was thrown into jail by the South Vietnamese for distributing peace leaflets or something, I don't remember what. And so she's in jail in a cell with a bunch of other women. There were two young girls, eleven and twelve years old, who were in that cell as well, along with hardened criminals and prostitutes and her. They had been just swept up in a raid—the South Vietnamese army had done a sweep of the village, and anyone they thought was Viet Cong, which was the North at that time—

They threw them into jail. And these two little girls were part of that sweep.

So Sister Chân Không—because her parents were well-connected and knew the police—was released soon. And so she was being released and having a talk with the chief of the prison. It seemed friendly, so she said, "Oh, I just want to tell you, these two young girls are in there, and they're just innocent. They didn't do anything. And with all these hardened criminals, it's really not good for them." Out of compassion and wisdom and action, just communicating this.

And the response from the head of the jail was, "Oh, I see the prisoners are speaking with one another. That's not good, so we've got to really tighten up the conditions here. This won't do." And that was it. That was the effect.

So if we go into anger, if we go into resentment, if we go into hatred—that's not the way of wisdom and compassion.

How vast is this path? How can we do it? If it's trying to do it all, we can't. But one moment—one moment to find the courage not to land in the resentment, in the aggression, just for that moment, even against yourself. "How stupid was I?" That's the way we would go, right? "How stupid am I?" No. We had as much information as we had, but we didn't have it all. The movement from compassion, and now this next situation is complex. We can't control it. How do we keep finding that?

A few weeks ago I read from John Lewis, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and one of the original Freedom Riders in 1959, 1960. I just want to read this because he's talking still again about the practice, the way of life of nonviolence. And I read some of this before, but just again—how do we keep doing it?

Jim Lawson was the man who was training these young students. He was a bit older than they were, an African-American minister from Ohio, I think, who had been a disciple of Gandhi for a long time and was a conscientious objector. He went to jail during the Korean War, so a long time ago. And he was giving many workshops to these young students on nonviolence, satyagraha, as a way of life based in Christian love.

So this is John Lewis again. One method of practicing this approach, when you're faced with an aggressive, even despicable person, is to visualize them as an infant, as a baby. If you can see them as the innocent child she or he once was, it is not hard to find compassion in your heart.

He says, "When you can truly understand and feel"—and to me this is the emptiness and the compassion together—"even as a person is cursing you to your face, even as he is spitting on you or beating you with a stick, if you can understand and feel, even in the midst of those 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."

That's one of the best descriptions of the understanding of emptiness that I could offer. Emptiness is understanding just the causes and effects—yathā bhūta, things as they have come to be.

And it is a way of life. This is something Lawson stressed over and over again: that this is not simply a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when needed. It is not something you turn on or off like a faucet. "This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day. It shapes your response to a curt cashier in the grocery store or to a driver cutting you off in traffic, just as surely as it keeps you from striking back at a state trooper who might be kicking you in the ribs because you dared to march in protest of an oppressive government. If you want to create an open society, the means of doing so must be consistent with the society you want to create. Means and ends are absolutely inseparable."

From a whole different angle, but I think that's the unity of wisdom and compassion.

I want to end with something very different, from a very different culture and training, but expressing the same thing. This is from Ajahn Mahā Bua, one of the most renowned Thai forest meditation masters of the twentieth century. Really very revered, but also very tough. No one would have called him warm and cuddly.

I remember when I first went to Thailand, before I became a nun, I met several Western monks who had come into town after practicing with Mahā Bua. And they were scared to death of him. They respected him, but they were convinced that he could read their minds—which actually, I think he probably could. And in Thailand in general, he was one of the ones really considered to be an arahant.

But he's not like the Dalai Lama. Everyone goes, "Oh, the Dalai Lama!" Mahabua is more like, "Yeah, he's great." Just to give you a sense—there's a book, I think someone may have mentioned it, called *Straight from the Heart*, which is really fantastic. He was tough, rigid, a fighter.

So this is from him. You needed that background to hear this.

He's talking about *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, which I've talked about—the knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be:

"The mind knows and sees things as they are, within and without, through and through, and then it stays put with purity. Whatever it thinks, it simply thinks. The khandhas are khandhas, pure and simple. The body is simply a body. Feelings, labels, perceptions, thought formations, and knowing—cognizance or consciousness—are each simply passing conditions that we use until their time is up. When they no longer have the strength to keep going, we let them go in line with reality.

But as for the utterly true nature of our purity, there is no problem at all. Those who have reached full release from conventional realities of every sort—they don't assume themselves to be more special or worse than anyone else. For this reason, they do not demean even the tiniest of creatures. They regard them all as friends in suffering—birth, aging, illness, and death—because the Dhamma is something tender and gentle. Any mind in which it is found is completely gentle and can sympathize with every grain of sand, with living beings of every sort.

There's nothing rigid or unyielding about it. It's the defilements that are rigid and unyielding—proud, conceited, haughty and vain. When there's Dhamma, there are none of these things. There's only the unwavering gentleness and tenderness of mercy and benevolence for the world at all times."

Let's just sit silently for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

CHAPTER 30

What Are We Doing Here

Pascal Auclair · 57 min

> *In this heartfelt talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Pascal Auclair addresses fundamental questions about why we practice meditation and what makes this inner work meaningful. Drawing from the Rohitassa Sutta (SN 2.26), he shares the Buddha's teaching that the world, its origin, and its cessation are all found within this "fathom-long body" with its perceptions and mind—not through endless external searching.*
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> *Pascal offers a vivid image from the suttas of six animals tied to a single rope, each pulling toward different destinations, as a metaphor for how our six sense doors scatter attention in competing directions. The practice of mindfulness, he explains, is like planting a firm post that allows these senses to gradually calm and find rest. He discusses the practice of "guarding the senses"—staying at the point of contact before proliferation occurs—as a way to cut through self-obsession and meet experience directly.*
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> *Sharing his personal journey of receiving an HIV diagnosis at age 25, Pascal describes how anchoring attention in the body became a survival practice that later deepened into formal meditation. He explores how mindfulness gives rise to wisdom, compassion, and the capacity to hold difficulty with care. Concluding with Bhikkhu Anālayo's distillation of the Satipaṭṭhāna practice into four words—"Keep Calmly Knowing Change"—he emphasizes continuity of awareness, equanimity with pleasant and unpleasant experience, and the liberating insight into impermanence that this practice reveals.*

Good evening.

Tonight I'd like to take the opportunity that is offered to talk about what excites me about this practice, what I love about this practice in different kinds of ways. It might turn out that I'll speak a lot about mindfulness, following on Rebecca's talk last night and adding some things or repeating some things.

One of the first things that I want to mention that I appreciate a lot about this practice is the safe container that we actively create together here so that we can do this work of opening the mind and opening the heart. It's very delicate work and it needs a great sense of safety to be able to do this. In this community here, with everyone's participation, we help create that by sila, by our commitment to the precepts, by the silence we hold, the space, the solitude that we give each other. It's very beautiful, very unique to create that much safety.

Of course, it's relative to each one of us, how safe we feel. But one little piece that felt important to me to help create even more space for everyone to feel at ease here was to say that everyone who is here now is totally welcome here. Sometimes it's not that clear for some of us—like the others, they fit and I don't because of, you know? And the "because of," you can fill in the blank for yourself.

It could be a number of things and I'm going to name a few just to put them out there. It could be because of your ability or level of ability. It could be because of the state of your mind as you came here. It could be because you are here for the first time. It could be because of the color of your skin, the story of your people, your gender or gender expression or sexual orientation, your age. There's probably a bunch of things that I do forget, but I think it's good for me as a gay man to name this, to say, hey, it's a good place to be. This is us. This is the village that we're forming together, and it's made of moi, and it's made of you, and this is it.

I'll add a little thing: I'm aware as we sit here that it's pretty white on stage. We're all of Western descent and I'm aware of this. I'm happy to report that next year there will be one person who is African-American, a person who was born and raised in Uganda, and a person who lives in Sri Lanka. Maybe we'll be able to represent more of the diversity of human life and human experience and cultural experience. So just this little piece there.

There's a story that I like very much that I'm going to tell you. It's from the suttas. This young person—they could actually be male or female or somewhere in between even—is a deva, some kind of celestial being. They have a lot of youth to them and a lot of passion for discovery and investigation. They happen to run into the Buddha. Their name is Rohitasa.

Rohitasa comes to the Buddha with a lot of energy. Reading about them, I feel the character there—full of life, very genuine, in a way naive and open. Rohitasa says, "Is it possible, sir, by walking to reach the end of the world, to reach the end of disease, death, sorrow? Is it possible by walking to reach the end of the world?"

And the Buddha says, "It is not possible by walking to reach the end of the world."

Rohitasa responds, "This is amazing. This is just amazing. I ask you, is it possible by walking to reach the end of the world in sorrow and in satisfaction? And you say very plainly, very directly, no, it's not possible by walking, by traveling to reach the end of the world."

Rohitasa goes on to say, "This is absolutely amazing, because I tried. I personally tried. And as a deva, I have special skills, special capacities. I can actually go really fast."

I can go faster than someone throwing an arrow. And they're very skilled, and they have the best arrow and the best bow. If they were to shoot an arrow, I can actually, by walking, just go faster than the arrow. I'm paraphrasing the sutta here, but pretty close.

And Rohitasa says, "I can actually, with one step, go from the eastern ocean to the western ocean. And I decided that I would actually reach the end of the world. So I decided to try this." And so he walked with his giant steps for a hundred years.

Rohitasa is very candid, I think is the word. It sounds almost like a report, like when we come as yogis to see the teacher. This yogi is describing everything in a very clear report: "I walked for a hundred years. Honestly, I stopped only to eat, chew, taste, to defecate and urinate." I'm telling you, that's in the sutta. It reports everything. "I stopped to rest and sleep a bit, but apart from that, I was walking, walking with the intention to reach the end of the world, and I never did. So I'm amazed that you, sir—I ask the question and you reply very simply: it is not possible by walking or traveling to reach the end of the world."

And so the Buddha adds: "It's true that it's not possible by walking to reach the end of the world. But without reaching the end of the world, it is not possible to put an end to suffering. And I will tell you one thing: the world, the beginning of the world, the end of the world, the path to the end of the world—it's in this fathom-long body." Rebecca used that expression yesterday. It's all within this fathom-long body with its perception and mind. This is where you'll find the world, the birth of the world, the end of the world. You can replace here in this text, if you want, the word "world" by the word "trouble" or "dissatisfaction." It's in this fathom-long body with its mind and perceptions that you'll find trouble, the beginning of trouble, the end of trouble, and the path to the end of trouble.

So it starts very vast—the world, walking for a hundred years, long distance—and it comes right to here. And this is what we're doing here. We're engaging in probably the next inner travel of Rohitasa, the turning inward, reaching and exploring the world, its birth, possibly the end of the world or dissatisfaction, trouble, craving—in here.

I had long periods of doubt. I would sit long retreats and I would have this cloud that would come, sometimes for days, like three or four solid days it seems, this big dark cloud of: "What do you think you're doing? What are you doing here? Everybody is creating families and buying cars and putting money aside and living life, building careers. And you sit on your butt doing nothing all day. Who do you think you are? What do you think you're doing? You're not doing anything for society. What is this?"

These big, thick clouds of doubt would sometimes come to visit me. And it was so debilitating.

Until one day. There was definitely one day I was sitting with this cloud, observing this cloud, feeling the heaviness of it, feeling how this mind state was removing all capacities from the mind, stopping the mind from going further, from exploring. And I don't know how it came about, but at some point, from really deep inside of me, came the sense that this was noble work. That there was nothing more noble to do with the human life than to actually look at it, look at what it means to be a human being. What are the deep, hidden mechanisms of suffering, of entanglement? And not just look, but live in them, live through them, soak in them—these difficult mechanisms. And what are the mechanisms of disentanglement, of liberation? What is, in a way we could say, wholesome and unwholesome—from inside, from direct experience of it, of release, of entanglement.

After I had this clarity—this is how I would describe it, this clarity of vision that this was noble work to do—I don't think I've ever had that thought again. And this has been reaffirmed by seeing how this mind is learning how to cultivate

more freedom and what leads to freedom and release, slowly.

It's the patterns that create trouble for oneself, for others, for oneself inwardly, for others in relationships, but also in community, in society, in a global way, in a very large way.

And also witnessing this—this is where I feel extremely privileged and lucky. This is my job all year long: to sit with people, and a lot of it is actually witnessing. People expressing in their own words their discoveries about freedom and what leads away from it. And so I have great appreciation for the work that has been done here in the last six weeks by some of us, and by what we've started to do, some of us, in this second part. Somebody must know the number of hours we've been here.

My understanding of what we do is that we're learning about a technique. That's certainly one thing we're doing—learning about the technique to gain independence so that we don't have to believe anything. We're creating, training, making this tool that will have clarity, that will be able to pierce assumptions, preconceived ideas, concepts, dive under all of this to meet the world freshly with clarity so that we can see for ourselves what leads to what.

I'm amazed at that. It's not a system of belief. You don't have to believe anything that is said here. You just have to apply the mind in this direction so that you get this clarity of mind that can connect with reality in such a pure way that it can understand exactly what is what, what leads to what.

So maybe I'll bring another image that comes from the texts, describing part of what's happening here. You have to imagine on one long rope, maybe the length of the stairs here, six animals being tied at different lengths on the rope. So you have perhaps a crocodile that is tied to the rope here, and you have a snake here, and a dog here, a monkey, a hyena, and an eagle. Imagine all these animals find themselves tied to the same rope. The crocodile wants to go to the swamp. The snake wants to go to the grass. The dog wants to go to the city. The eagle wants to go to the sky. The hyena wants to go to the charnel ground. The monkey wants the jungle. All of these animals are pushing in one direction and another, and it's a big mess.

In this image that is used in the sutta, we say that what we're doing now is exchanging this situation we find ourselves in—with the six senses pushing in all directions. These animals represent the senses. Oh, I hear a little construction. I wonder by what date they'll be finished. Usually that size, what I've seen in the past... And then there's a sensation in the body—ah, that old familiar one. It's been there for so long. I wish... And you go like this, and then there's something that crosses the mind, an image, and whoops, you go that direction.

That's how a lot of us live our lives. We just follow in that direction for a while, and then in that direction, and that direction. It's not an easy situation to find oneself in.

What we're doing here, bringing mindfulness—the image that is used is that we put the pole in the ground, the stick very deep in the ground, and now we find ourselves with one rope for each of the animals. They will learn that the stick is so solid that it's not going anywhere, so these senses will learn to calm down and find rest for their own sake also. They will learn how to find rest.

And so that's part of what we're doing here: we're not following all the senses and sense impressions and contacts that we have. That's what this mindfulness is doing. One way that I like to practice, that fits with this image—I think the expression that has been used to describe this method is called guarding the senses.

The way it works in Buddhist psychology says that when there is a contact with a sound in the ear, or a sight—something seen—or taste on the tongue, and so on, mind and image, impression, thought—when there is a contact, there's a concept that follows. So I hear a sound, and it sounds like a hammer. It comes with this. And it says that often

when there's a contact followed by conception, organizing of the world and naming of the world, there's also proliferation that can follow, especially if there's no mindfulness. So the mind can get lost in a direction until there's another contact and another concept and another proliferation that can come.

As we come on retreat, often that's what we find ourselves in the midst of: the version of all the animals going in all directions. But what we learn to do is actually keep the practice very simple and stay at the point of contact.

That might be something that will interest you. In the following days, that's something I practice a lot—staying very close, becoming intimate with the contact at the ear door, with the sensation of the breath, if I name some of the anchors that we use. This beautiful practice of giving, generously offering full attention to life as it's happening, as it's contacting the body with all its doors, all its sense doors.

What it helps do for me is cut through the self-obsession or fascination. I don't know if I'll be the only one around here plagued by that—what I'm going to do, what I think about this, what I prefer. It's as if I live a life with those glasses always on. What is my opinion about the person sitting next to me and how they should breathe? The pile of laundry and how much I'll put in there and keep for myself. The mind can be kind of obsessed with self-ideas and selfing. This is one beautiful way to cut through: to give full attention to the experience, the phenomena happening here now. Hearing. Somebody joining us right now, maybe. Breathing. You see the tendency of the mind to proliferate on ideas or on sensations, and then the practice of renunciation, of letting this go.

I remember in the first few retreats that I did, maybe the first retreat, somebody was paraphrasing the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse that we use a lot to do the practice we do here. They were saying one finds a quiet place, sits down, and puts as a first value mindfulness in the forefront—presence, you could say, as a primary value. And dropping—that's the sentence that really stuck in my mind—dropping all concerns for the world. All kinds of obsession about the stories that we tell. The invitation is to drop it, to just meet, maybe in the first few days of this retreat, the experience in the body. Rebecca talked about this a lot yesterday. So dropping all stories, and again and again if we have to, to really come here.

To me, the image that you see of the Buddha behind me with this mudra of touching the earth has this quality to it also. In his experience, there were all these stories: Who are you to be sitting here? Who do you think you are? There's no point in sitting here. You're not going to find anything by sitting. And then suddenly, this touching the earth,

coming back to something extremely simple. Not "Who am I in the world? Am I worthy of what will happen to me? What was I? What will I be?" Dropping all this and touching pressure on the finger, touching the earth.

To me, this is such a simple practice. It's amazing that this would be the doorway towards insight, towards revelations—I don't know if that's the right word—but discoveries about the world.

At Spirit Rock, another center on the West Coast where I practiced a lot and teach sometimes now, there's a little gratitude hut. It's this little kuti with pictures of all the masters that have taught us or taught our teachers. It's a very beautiful, inspiring place to stop by when you're dejected, to be beheld by these elders, male and female. There's a quote there by Ajahn Mun that for me is very, very central in practice. You might have heard this or seen it in the Gratitude Hut:

"In your investigation of the world, never allow your mind to desert the body. Examine its nature. See the elements that comprise it. See the impermanence, the suffering, the selflessness of the body while sitting, standing, walking, or lying down. When its nature is seen fully and lucidly by the heart, the wonders of the world will become clear. In this way, the purity of the mind can shine forth, timeless and delivered."

The instruction, the important instruction for me is: in your exploration of the world, never allow the mind to desert the body. Ajahn Mun was known to be a very realized master. So that's a statement I want to consider.

A personal story. When I was twenty-five years old, I didn't have any Buddhist practice, any practice of any kind. One day I went to the doctor and found out that I was HIV positive. At that time, there was no medication like there is today. A strong shock, we could say. The moment I was in the doctor's office and he said, "Your tests are... it's not good. You're not healthy actually. You have almost no immune system at all"—that was not my experience, my understanding, my perception of what was happening.

There was a big shock. Actually, the shock was a spiritual shock. It was a waking-up moment to the unsolidity of the world, I could say. My impression, my unconscious belief, was that I was young forever. I would not have said that, but that was revealed with this news. That was the way I was holding this—that I was young and was going to live forever, and also was healthy.

I was identified with health. And suddenly, all of this got shaken—very strongly. I was given a few years to live, and then I was sent back out onto the street. I was very much lost.

For the weeks and months that followed, it was extremely difficult to be in this mind. There was not much wisdom about impermanence, about things changing, about matters not being in our control. I didn't have references for this readjustment. I was lost.

I had one teacher—a drama teacher who was, at that point, the wisest person I had around. I went to see him and told him what was happening: "I don't sleep. I don't know what to do with this." Plus there was the shame. There were many levels of difficulty for me.

My teacher had gone to war before, and he said, "I found my place in a situation like yours, it seems, in the past. What helped me was to get out of the mind and connect with reality, because the mind was a dangerous place to be." Later I heard Natalie Goldberg say something similar: "Your mind is a dangerous neighborhood. Don't go there alone"—meaning go there accompanied by mindfulness.

He said to me, "What I did was decide to see colors—be very aware of red for a few minutes, then see green. Just to get outside of my mind, because it was not a good place to hang out. Maybe you could try this and see how it goes."

I didn't do the color thing. But because I had training in dance and movement, the body was something I knew well. So I decided to actually be present when I walked in the street, instead of thinking of my problems. I trained myself. This was a survival kit. It was an emergency, so there was a really good incentive to practice.

I worked a lot at coming back into the body—feeling the body as I was walking, feeling the eating as it was happening, feeling the body laying down at night. Because the mind always wanted to shoot off into catastrophe, and there was not much wisdom available.

There's an interesting teaching that says when one is mindful, wisdom becomes available again—even shaky wisdom, even something you just learned about that isn't yet integrated. When there is mindfulness, even uncertain wisdom becomes accessible. But when an afflictive emotion creates disturbance in the mind, even well-established wisdom or values can be lost. Great anger or great desire can make me forget that there might be consequences to my actions or words, can make me forget that I actually value respect.

And in the other direction, if I bring mindfulness, I might gain access to so much more. This is the beauty of this practice—something I love about it. When I'm able to maintain mindfulness in the midst of an afflictive emotion, I gain far more than just being present. I gain access to patience, to acceptance, to friendliness in the mind, to hope that a solution is possible.

In the wake of mindfulness, several qualities are developed. This is what we're doing here all day long. When we apply mindfulness, we're inviting the power of amazing qualities of mind. We could name the seven factors of enlightenment: the quieting of the mind, concentration, equanimity, energy, curiosity, enthusiasm, and confidence—the sense that I can be with this, I can meet this moment, and this moment again.

We could name the brahmavihāras: compassion, the capacity to rejoice and appreciate. When we're present and something is precious, we don't bypass it or miss it. With full mindfulness, what is precious becomes outstanding. We're touched by a simple gesture of generosity, by the beauty of nature, by this capacity to remember, even for a moment, that I can be here. I don't have to push away what is difficult.

Compassion too is born from mindfulness. I was telling someone today in interviews that one of the greatest benefits of this practice for me is that I learned how to be with the difficult in a friendly, caring way. So much so that sometimes I feel like shit—there's anxiety or pressure on the chest, something in the heart-mind.

And because of the capacity to be attentive, it gives birth to compassion. "Oh, it's not easy, Pascal, to be this being right now." This caring quality becomes such a beautiful container that sometimes I feel happy. Like I didn't get what I want. The body is reactive. It's tight. It's contracted in the heart. There's dejection apparently, but there's such a beautiful holding, such caring, that it doesn't seem like it needs to change in any way. It seems complete.

Many years ago, I heard Jack Kornfield say—and I'm always taking a chance here because you know how the mind will reorganize reality—but I think he was describing compassion as a state of happiness, as one of the expressions of happiness. And I remember thinking, that doesn't add up, because compassion involves being with the difficult. Happiness in my mind at that point didn't involve the difficult. It involved getting rid of it. But now I can see, touch this sometimes. It's like, wow, it's not easy being in here, but there's such a capacity to be with it that this is life happening without any problem in a way.

I'm a little random here. I hope that works for you.

Another thing that comes to mind that I cherish a lot about this practice is that there's not taking so personally what is happening. There's a very precise way that I want to name it just now. It seems like my job, part of it certainly, is to be aware of states of mind that arise so that I can appreciate and cultivate the ones that are helpful, onward-leading. And the ones that are bringing distortions, wrong perceptions—difficult to feel, but also having an influence on how I see the world, distorting the world in

some ways—I can accompany these mind states towards the exit slowly, and not make it so personal. Not "I'm so like this, I'm so like this." Rather, "Oh, here is this state of mind that is here. What is the appropriate response?"

And this thing that I see sometimes arise, that I find so beautiful and I'm so thankful for, is that sometimes I'll see a state of mind arise in somebody else. In this practice that we do, we're invited to see internally and externally. In the sutta it says that: notice your mind state internally and externally. And one interpretation of this is to see it in other beings. Sometimes a mind state will arise in someone, and it's so not important that it's me having this mind state or them. That's not the way I understand the world anymore. It's just, wow, there's generosity. How beautiful is that? There's benevolence. How beautiful is that? Oh, there's agitation. There's dissatisfaction. There's closing down. Here, there—not so important. What is the appropriate response? Because this is something that we need to care about, either rejoice about or help accompany to the exit.

I've seen this develop with this practice. I like to think about this when I'm practicing here, that I'm not just taking care of this being, but it's opening this being, this capacity to accept, to consider what has arisen and how it can be treated, for lack of a better word. As I'm talking about this, it's not so important if it's there or here, but what to do with it.

For me, what comes with sati, with mindfulness, is this recognition that in this practice we're doing here, it's a different frame of understanding. It's not so personal. What I'm doing is not so personal. I'm studying nature, human nature. This is very central for me in this practice—that I'm looking at phenomena, how phenomena arises, what different phenomena create.

I think it's very important that we have this right view as we practice, that we're here doing something universal. We're looking at what worry creates in the mind, what landscape it creates, what devastation it creates. We have the chance to see this in a very close and intimate way in this being, but this is not personal. You read suttas from 2,600 years ago, and people have the same things that arise—the same agitation, the same doubt, the same insights. There's nothing personal about it.

It's very important when we start to practice, or continue practice, however you want to see it, to remember that this is where we're discovering human nature, nature itself. I even find myself using images here. Talking in terms of mind states, sometimes I find myself in the national park of fear, or in the national park of calm and peace. Am I going to own this?

What am I going to do with this? This is nature that is happening—the nature of calm. Let me get to know this in the same way that I would want to visit a national park. Let me feel this, see this. I think of it more in terms of savoring, tasting. Let's take time to taste resentment, to really know from the inside the experience of resentment. Not the story about it, not the fascination with the object, but turning the attention the other way and feeling the effect of resentment or any other mind state, discovering it fully.

And I truly believe that inside of us, with this mindfulness, there is wisdom that can become available. If we touch intimately enough these mind states that I've been talking about, when we touch them intimately, that's how we can deeply realize: this is not helpful for me. This is entangling. I don't have to think about it—by soaking in it, it becomes obvious on a skin and bones level that this is not liberating. And when I have full intimacy with another state of mind that is beneficial, I don't even have to think about it. If I'm in it, I will feel that this is for my good, for the good of others. That's certainly been how it's shown up for me. And so for me, there's this commitment to actually know what is happening as it's happening, to know the resistance, know the agitation from within.

So maybe I'll finish with a book that perhaps some of you have read by Anālayo—it's about the Satipaṭṭhāna. It's a study of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, this text that we're using to guide the practice we do here. It's a big volume, it's rich, there are so many details, and it's just an amazing work on all the ways one can understand this sutta. At the very end of the book, he says—again, this is from my memory—we could sum up this book or this discourse using four letters, and that would explain or define the practice. Are you curious about the letters? The letters are K-C-K-C: Keep Calmly Knowing Change.

He says that this defines what we're doing here. And every one of these words is very important. The "keep" points to continuity—this beautiful continuity of practice, of being there while brushing teeth, going upstairs, putting on shoes, feeling the body, being aware of the mind state. What is the mind state that is putting on the shoes? The mind state of rushing, or the mind state of connecting with reality?

I'm reminded of a retreat I sat where every day they were inviting us to go slower and slower, and at some point it was really slow. Sometimes I was feeling a little agitated, and Chaz was one of my fellow yogis on the retreat, and he was so slow. Sometimes he would just pass by and I wanted to get in front of him in the corridor because he was so slow. And then I would say to myself, "Get on his bus. Pascal, get on his bus. Let him drive." I would let him go by and just get behind him and learn from Chaz to slow down.

One of the teachers at that retreat would come to the dining hall at lunchtime and say, "I see you guys oozing out—you're leaking, you're leaking. Such beautiful practice you do as you sit and walk diligently, and then at lunchtime you're just oozing out." I remember hearing that and reflecting, and he was inviting us to bring as much awareness when we were sitting to eat as when we were sitting in the hall. So many discoveries I made by bringing attention—and not forcing, this is extremely important—not forcing but tending towards presence. Sometimes you check out for a little while because there might be some benefit to it, but doing it as a choice—that's the thing about presence: you can choose to go off or to stay. When there's no mindfulness, it's just habitual ways of being.

So, keep calmly. The "calm" points to the equanimity we're developing, the capacity to stay balanced with the pleasant and the unpleasant, or even the neutral—maybe more challenging than anything. The capacity to stay calm, equanimous, with having what I want or not having what I want, with things turning out not exactly the way I want. Keep calmly knowing—"knowing" is sati, the mindfulness. And "change" is all the fluctuations we see in sensations, in pleasantness and unpleasantness, the fluctuations of mind state, of perception. I'm the best yogi. I'm the worst yogi.

"Get me out of here." "I want to stay here forever."

Keep calmly knowing the change of thoughts, perceptions, feelings, states of mind. The change of moment—present moment disappearing, being replaced by a new one. The change of the quality of consciousness, the new consciousness arising. Consciousness of feeling the feet now. Consciousness of hearing. Just seeing this.

Continuez calmement à connaître le changement.

Continue calmly knowing change.

Thank you very much for your attention. Maybe we take just a moment to feel what it is to be a human being right now.

CHAPTER 31

Loving Kindness Meditation (Mettā)

Winnie Nazarko · 42 min

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Winnie Nazarko offers a comprehensive introduction to mettā (loving-kindness) meditation, situating it within the Buddha's Eightfold Path as part of sammā saṅkappa (wise intention). She explains how mettā provides essential support for intensive practice, helping practitioners meet difficult experiences with friendliness rather than struggle or self-judgment.*
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> *Nazarko explores mettā as a naturally occurring human quality, pointing to our long dependency period as evidence of our innate capacity for care and connection. She distinguishes mettā from its near enemy (attachment and desire) and far enemies (aversion, hatred, and fear), addressing common concerns about whether cultivating loving-kindness might leave one unable to set boundaries or protect oneself. The talk acknowledges the Western tendency toward self-criticism and offers practical guidance for those who find it difficult to begin with self-directed mettā.*
>
> *The teaching covers the three essential strands of mettā practice: generating the intention, connecting with the being to whom mettā is offered, and extending the phrases. Nazarko guides practitioners through the traditional progression—from self or benefactor, to dear friend, neutral person, difficult person, and finally all beings everywhere. The session concludes with a guided meditation that includes reflection on times of receiving kindness, followed by the offering of classic mettā phrases while encouraging practitioners to make the words their own.*

Good evening to you all.

The first few days of retreat are always a challenge, as are the rest of them. So we need metta to do this.

If you think of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, the second step is wise intention, which is usually talked about in terms of renunciation. But it also includes the cultivation and understanding of metta and compassion as being integral to the process of liberation.

You can really see, doing the sitting, doing the work that you're doing here, how important it is to have at least provisional friendliness towards yourself and towards what you're experiencing. Because if that's completely absent, then when things arise in the

mind that are difficult or painful, we can get into a real struggle with them or take them as evidence about something about us that usually isn't very complimentary from the position of our ego.

But if the mind is loyal to itself in some basic way, has a foundation of kindness, then we believe in ourselves in a certain kind of way. We just see what we're experiencing, which may be difficult, as simply something that's difficult. And it calls forth compassion and kindness and metta to be met.

This quality of metta is pretty powerful stuff. It's usually taught at these retreats, especially longer retreats, in conjunction with Vipassana practice. It can bring a softness of mind, a softening of the heart. It can bring a kind of brightness to the mind and happiness as well. It helps to relieve the dukkha—the suffering, the difficulty, the contraction of mind that sometimes happens when we come into contact with things that are unpleasant or unwanted. So it's powerful medicine.

There's a lot that can be said about metta, and it's important. So let's talk about this.

What is it? M-E-T-T-A, metta—the Pali word usually translated as loving-kindness or friendliness. Goodwill is another word that's used. It's a naturally occurring human quality. We have it naturally in our minds.

The Dalai Lama often points to the fact that humans have a very long dependency period. When you think about it, when we first arrive, we're utterly incapable of caring for ourselves.

and usually more than one person, to take care of our basic needs and protect us and bring us forward into childhood, keep us on the right path, and help us develop until we become able to care for ourselves in late adolescence.

So we all receive a lot of caretaking as we grow up. Maybe it wasn't the best or ideal from our perspective, but someone—or some combination of beings—has offered us love and care, or we never would have survived.

You've all experienced this quality within yourself, arising kind of organically, usually most easily with people you know closely and love. Sometimes people recognize this quality most strongly not with other human beings, but perhaps with companion animals. Some may feel it in relationship to the great chain of beings. For others, they recognize this quality most strongly in some figure they know and respect but may never have met—someone like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr.

So we've all known this quality, we've all touched into it. And we've all touched into what are considered the opposites of metta, the enemies of metta: aversion and hatred, anger, fear. This is all part of our mind stream too. And this is, at least in part, our animal inheritance. If you look at our physical setup, we have this primitive brain stem that's hyperactive and vigilant, always looking out for what can get us. It's easily triggered to either attack what's perceived as dangerous or to run away from it.

So we shouldn't take the presence of anger or aversion or fear personally in a way. But it's clear we don't want to cultivate it. The Buddha talks about anger as picking up a hot coal in order to throw it at somebody else. He really points to the fact that cultivating that particular quality of mind in self-defense is actually self-defeating, because it burns ourselves. It's unpleasant and painful. And when we act out of that kind of mind, we create a lot of chaos—and part of that chaos and injury comes back to ourselves as well.

Now, one thing I want to touch on briefly, though much more could be said about this in a future talk—so I suppose I'm announcing I'll do a metta talk—is this: sometimes we get the idea that if we don't have anger to protect us, we can't protect ourselves. That somehow it's going to make us a victim or an easy rollover for anyone who chooses to exploit us, that we can't set boundaries. But that's not really the case.

We may also think that if anger is present, we can't act, or we shouldn't act. That's not necessarily true either. There are many, many mind moments in any kind of action. The action itself may be wise and necessary, and yet there can still be moments of anger woven into it. It's a question of what it's coming from at its most basic level, and what the intention is. We can't necessarily act with totally purified mind streams because we don't have them. We have them intermittently maybe, on a good day, during a good sitting. But it's a tapestry—a tapestry of dark and light in all of us.

The near enemy of metta is attachment or desire. And again, to quote the Dalai Lama, human beings usually have attachment in our closest relationships. We love and care for people, we genuinely wish them well and want them to be happy. But we also want them to stick around, and we want them to continue liking us in the way we like to be liked. This is human too.

You can see that when attachment is strong and goes unseen, it can create behaviors that cause alienation—even on the part of the very object of that mixed metta and desire. It becomes controlling and clinging in order to continue some desired relationship of something like ownership. We usually don't think of it that way, but sometimes that can get triggered.

So the question becomes: how can we use our minds in a way that really strengthens this metta in its purest form, its most powerful form? How can we do that?

This is really the genius of the Buddhist system. I don't know about you, but I was raised in a particular Christian religion. Christianity is full of encouragement to love one another, toward agape—it's very much a predominant strand in that religious view. But what I never got a clear answer about was: how? I understood that you should. And I was on board with that—yes, that's good, you definitely should. But the question is how, given the mixed texture we have in the mind stream. How do you encourage the wholesome, the good?

How do you purify metta, strengthen it, and extend it? This practice of metta is how we do that. It's one of the ways we do that.

There are basically three strands to this practice. First, there's the generation of the intention to summon metta and to offer metta. Then there's a connection with the being to whom we're going to offer metta—this can be done by bringing up an image of a person, or perhaps a felt sense of the person. Some sort of way where you energetically and psychologically, psychically, however you want to say it, connect with that being and hold them as a focus. And then there's the offering of the metta phrases that represent this intention, extending these phrases towards the person. Those are the three strands of the practice.

The way the practice works is we start with wherever it's easiest in terms of who we're offering metta towards. You want to start with where it's easy—this is a basic premise of metta. Wherever it feels most organic.

Now, generally, the way this is traditionally taught, you would start with yourself. There's an assumption in that, which is that you're okay with yourself, that there's not super strong hatred or active dislike going on. It's common in our Western psyches for there to be a lot of self-criticism and self-hatred, and the reasons for that—well, I guess that will be part of the meta-talk. If that's the case for you, then don't start with yourself. Start someplace easier.

You could start with what's called a benefactor—someone who has, as my niece says, done you a solid. Somebody who's done well by you. It could be somebody who's been a teacher, somebody who picked you up literally when you were a mess and helped you out. Somebody for whom you feel gratitude and respect. Perhaps a parent or a grandparent, or maybe somebody that you really respect for standing up for human rights or

whatever. Somebody that you can form an image of and feel a felt connection with, and at least initially, a somewhat unambivalent desire for their well-being. You could even use a pet if that's an easy place for you. Wherever it's easy.

The progression would be: you start wherever it's easiest, you work with that being for a while. When the metta is pretty well established in the course of the practice, then you move on to the next ring out. That might be the benefactor at that point. Then you work with them for a while, and when metta is established and flowing, you move out to a dear friend. Then you move out to what's called a neutral person—somebody you don't really know, maybe you don't think much about them, either pro or con, they're just kind of there. Then you go to what's traditionally called the enemy, or it's softened sometimes now as a difficult person, but sometimes it actually is enemies. And beyond that, metta gets extended through working with a number of different categories of beings until it's global, until it includes all sentient beings in all dimensions.

So you can see what's happening and how this has developed. There's the progression of going from where it's easy, getting it going, and then seeing: can this same attitude and intention be pushed out? Okay, it's going. How about here? How about here? Eventually we're moving in the direction of repeatedly summoning this quality of mind, bringing it to mind again and again, strengthening it as a tendency in the mind—this tendency towards goodwill and wishing for the well-being of others. By the time we get to the more difficult people, we've got some momentum going. It carries over.

This is how we as human beings can learn to do what we really need to do, individually and as a species: to take that capacity we have for caring and connection and broaden it. Pascal talked a little bit last night about the village. This is the village of us now, however we are, whoever we are, as we are here. The world would be tremendously different if it was us—if it was just us, if everybody was us, if it's all us.

So this is how we can learn to do it. All right, are you ready to do the practice?

Settle in and make yourself comfortable. With metta, you want to be comfortable. With vipassana, you might be encouraged to stay with discomfort when it's there and predominant, working with it skillfully. But with metta, if it starts to get uncomfortable physically, feel free to ease your posture. We're starting with ease of mind.

It can be useful to begin with a reflection, so I'll offer one and then guide you through the practice.

Allow yourself to bring to mind something that happened in your life—a period of time where there was difficulty and you were met with kindness or support from another. It doesn't have to be a big thing. It might even be your dog coming to you at the door, all happy when you came home from a hard day at work. Or it might be a grandmother who cared for you when your parents couldn't. It could be anything.

Remember how it felt to be met with kindness and warmth and appreciation—to feel responded to and cared for. Then, knowing this, consider the value of this attitude of care and goodwill. The way that friendliness and warmth can connect us and support a feeling of safety and community with others can remind us that we're not alone.

Allow the intention to develop this potential for metta to arise in the mind, seeing its value.

Bring to mind an image of a being to whom you wish to offer this goodwill and friendliness. If it's easy access for you, pick yourself. If that's not accessible right now, pick someone else—someone for whom you do have at least basic goodwill.

You may not be feeling a lot of warm fuzzies right now, and that's okay. The feeling of metta may or may not be present while you're doing metta practice, and it doesn't have to be present. You can invite it if you wish by putting your hand on your heart. But if it doesn't come, the practice still works.

It's all about the three strands: the intention, the image or felt sense of the being to whom you're offering metta, and the recitation of the words that extend this wish towards them.

Hold the image or felt sense. It might be clear, it might be fuzzy. Maybe you don't feel much. Maybe you don't see much. That's okay. Just shoot it in their general direction. If it's not clear, it's still good.

Begin to offer the metta phrases:

May I be happy. Or *May you be happy.*

May I be safe. Or *May you be safe.*

May I be healthy. Or *May you be healthy.*

May I live with ease of well-being. Or *May you live with ease of well-being.*

These are some of the classic ways of saying this, but you can use your own words. You can make them your own. You could say, *May you be protected from harm.* You could say, *May you always have enough.* You could say, *May you be as well as you can be.* You could say, *May you live in joy and awaken.*

I'll repeat the classic formulation, but use your own if you wish.

May I be happy. May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I live with ease of well-being.

May I be happy. May I be safe. May I live with ease.

You may experience the opposite of metta.

Sometimes this practice can bring up the opposite of metta—anger or sadness may arise. This is okay. Metta is a purification practice.

Now, if you wish, you can either stay with the person you're offering metta to, whether that's yourself or someone else, or you can bring to mind a benefactor—someone who has helped you or inspired you, someone you respect and find it relatively easy to wish happiness for.

Remember that person. Bring them to mind in some way—an image, a felt sense, perhaps how Grandma's kitchen used to smell. Bring it up.

May you be happy.
May you be safe.
May you be healthy.
May you live with ease.

May you be happy.
May you be safe.
May you be healthy and live with ease.

Now imagine your metta has the power to radiate out from your heart in all directions, touching all sentient beings and creating the well-being that you wish for them.

With the intention to offer metta to all beings, you can offer the phrases:

May all beings be happy.
May all beings be safe.
May all beings be healthy and live with ease of well-being.

May we all be happy.
May we all be safe.
May we all be healthy.
May we all know ease of well-being.

May all beings be protected from harm.
May peace prevail on earth.

CHAPTER 32

Morning Instruction - Body, Mind-States and Q&A

Pascal Auclair · 44 min

> *In this morning instruction from the three-month retreat, Pascal Auclair offers a contemplative exploration of body and mind through direct, non-conceptual awareness. Drawing on the framework of the four great elements (mahābhūta)—earth, air, fire, and water—he guides practitioners to discover heaviness, movement, heat, and fluidity as impersonal natural phenomena rather than self-owned experiences. The repeated reflection "not me, not mine, not I" points toward the liberating insight of anattā.*
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> *The instruction then shifts to the third foundation of mindfulness (cittānupassanā), investigating the qualities and states of mind as they naturally arise. Auclair encourages practitioners to notice whether the mind is calm or agitated, gathered or scattered, and to discover these states through direct experience rather than conceptual labeling. This approach echoes the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), where the Buddha instructs practitioners to know the mind as it is—with desire or without, contracted or distracted, concentrated or unconcentrated.*
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> *Particularly valuable is the attention to the quality of awareness itself: Is the attention nonviolent? Is there friendliness and benevolence present? This investigation includes recognizing both hindrances (nīvaraṇa) that afflict the mind and wholesome qualities that free and beautify it—such as trust (saddhā), clarity, and balance. The guidance offers a foundation for understanding how meditation is not about producing special states but about receiving and knowing experience as it unfolds moment to moment.*

Landing in this moment, in this body—we have never been in this body now before. This is a completely new experience right now. Never been here now before. What is it like to be incarnated, embodied, now? How does it feel?

Remembering that we have nothing to produce here, nothing to create, just opening up, learning to receive. Learning to receive experience at the sense doors. Being particularly interested right now in sensations, touch. Allowing sounds to appear in the field of consciousness as they will do, nothing to reject.

Letting mindfulness of the body become the body's mindfulness, as Dogen would say. Letting the feet know the feet. Letting the breath know the breath. Even letting hearing hear. Letting the earth know the earth—not mine, not me, not I—just heaviness or lightness, hardness or softness. Letting the air element create vibrations and movement—

not me, not mine, not I—just the arising and falling of belly nature. Letting the body radiate its heat—not me, not mine, not I—just heat, fire, coolness. Letting the fluidity and the tightness be there. Not I, not mine.

And in the middle of this embodied experience, discovering the state of mind, the qualities of the mind. Discovering the presence of interest or not, calm or not, the presence or absence of joy, enthusiasm. While hearing, breathing, sitting here in this body with these senses, discovering the fluctuations in the attention—sustained or intermittent, shaky or well-established. No judgments. We just want to know the state of this body, heart, and mind.

Discovering the nature of the body and the nature of the mind-heart. Not telling phenomena or experience what they are, but discovering them, tasting, feeling, sensing the elements of the body, maybe the qualities of the mind also. Tight mind feels like this. Open mind feels like this. Scattered mind or gathered mind feels like this.

And we keep calmly knowing change. How is it to be in this body now? And in this mind? Is this mind, this attention, non-violent? Is it friendly, benevolent? Become aware of this quality of mind, the presence or absence of friendliness in the heart-mind.

If you wish, you can again take a moment to see what qualities of mind might be hindering or afflicting your experience right now, what qualities might be entangling here—some aversion, or slight or intense wanting of something else. It is good to recognize the presence of these in the mind.

Similarly, there are qualities present that are for your benefit, freeing the mind, making the mind beautiful in a way. Take notice of that—the trust, the confidence, the balance of the mind, the caring, or the clarity.

CHAPTER 33

Renunciation - The Wisdom of No

Joseph Goldstein · 58 min

> *In this profound dharma talk, Joseph Goldstein shares his personal journey from the Peace Corps in Thailand to studying with Munindraji in Bodh Gaya, weaving together autobiography and essential Buddhist teachings on renunciation (nekkhamma). Drawing from the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (MN 19, Two Kinds of Thoughts), he explores how the Buddha himself learned to distinguish between thoughts rooted in sensual desire, ill will, and cruelty versus those of renunciation, goodwill, and compassion.*
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> *Goldstein reframes renunciation not as deprivation but as the liberating experience of non-addiction. He examines how we become entranced by sense pleasures—whether obvious ones like food and comfort, or subtle ones like meditative states and even the habit of wanting itself. Through the Buddha's teaching that "whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind," he illuminates how our thought patterns shape our lives and why cultivating Right Thought (sammā saṅkappa) is essential to the Noble Eightfold Path.*
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> *The talk introduces "the wisdom of no"—practicing wise restraint without repression or aversion, like a loving parent guiding an inner two-year-old. Through personal stories of attachment to meditative experiences and poetry by Stephen Mitchell, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Mary Oliver, Goldstein invites practitioners to investigate their own experience: noticing the transition from wanting to not-wanting, and discovering for themselves that there is greater ease in a mind free of desire. This teaching offers practical guidance for recognizing that at any moment, we are permitted to step aside from our mental proliferation and simply be at home.*

I first became interested in Buddhism when I was in the Peace Corps in Thailand. This was back in 1965, so it's quite a while ago. It was my very first introduction to the Buddhist teachings and just a very little bit of meditation.

When I came back to the States, I tried to practice by myself and realized that I really needed a teacher. It was just too confusing to figure out exactly what to do and how to do it. So I decided to go back to Asia—this was in 1967—to look for a teacher. I stopped in India on the way. I went to different ashrams, I went up to the mountains looking for some Tibetan teachers. I didn't have any particular names or destinations.

After traveling for some time around northern India, I ended up in Bodh Gaya, which, of course, is the place of the Buddha's awakening. Munindraji, my first Dharma teacher, had just come back from nine years of practice and study in Burma. At that time, there were just a very few Westerners in Bodh Gaya—about half a dozen of us. We were all practicing at the Burmese Vihara.

Munindra said something at the first meeting which made so much sense to me that I knew I really had found what I was looking for. It was just the very simple statement that if we want to understand our minds, we need to sit down and observe them. That was all. There was nothing to join and there was no set of beliefs I had to subscribe to and there were no ceremonies or rituals of any kind. It was just that very simple, common sense instruction: if you want to understand your mind, sit down and observe it.

Of course, this proved to be both very profound as an instruction and also in its application, in its depth. As Munindraji would often say, it's simple but not easy. I'm sure you have observed that for yourselves.

We can begin this observation of our minds, this coming to understand ourselves, by paying attention to one very obvious aspect of our minds: both the content and the nature of our thoughts, and all the attitudes in the mind that our thoughts condition.

The Buddha said that whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind. That's a simple sentence, but it has tremendous implications for our lives, our actions, for understanding what conditions us.

This really points to the very great power of habit and habitual tendencies in the unfolding of our lives. The more often a particular thought or kind of thought arises, the more frequently it will arise. It's not that it's just happening in the moment and gone. Each moment is actually conditioning the arising of subsequent moments. The more often particular kinds of thoughts arise in the mind—particularly when we're lost in them or identified with them—the more often they will continue to come until it becomes the inclination of our minds.

It's this understanding of how the mind works and how it's conditioned that led the Buddha to give so much importance to the second step of the Noble Eightfold Path, which he called Right Thought. Given that our actions are conditioned by how we think about ourselves and how we think about the world, and that wholesome and unwholesome actions bring their respective results, we need to understand that our actions are conditioned by how we think, and the actions themselves bring karmic results, either wholesome or unwholesome.

It's not hard to see that an essential part of our practice is the cultivation of those thoughts and intentions which bring about happiness, which bring about peace, which bring about understanding, both for ourselves and others.

As with so many other parts of his teachings, the Buddha didn't just stop with this general principle of paying attention to your thoughts, cultivating the wholesome ones, letting go of the unwholesome ones. He was very specific about what kinds of thoughts should be cultivated.

He is speaking to the bhikkhus. And remember, bhikkhu in its broadest context means everyone walking on the path—so he's really speaking to us. "And what, bhikkhus, is right thought? It is the thought and resolve of renunciation, free of sensual desire. The thought of goodwill, free of ill will. And thoughts of compassion, free of cruelty."

This is very specific. What is right thought? Thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of goodwill, of mettā, thoughts of compassion.

The question for us is how to put this very specific teaching into practice, not only on retreat but in our lives. How do we cultivate right thought, both here on retreat and in our lives in the world?

Again, the Buddha gives some very specific advice. There's one discourse in the Majjhima Nikāya, the Middle-Length Sayings, and the sutta is called "Two Kinds of Thoughts." In it, he describes a way to begin this practice.

Notice what the mind does when we hear these repetitions. After the second or third time, does the mind just space out? Think, "Oh yeah, he said that already, I know this"? Or can we understand that the Buddha may be repeating it because it's important, and so we should take it in each time and really see what it means for us.

This is from the sutta, Two Kinds of Thoughts:

"Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened bodhisatta, it occurred to me: suppose that I divide my thoughts into two classes. Then I set on one side thoughts of sensual desire, of ill will, and of cruelty. And I set on the other side thoughts of renunciation, of goodwill, of compassion."

So he's discerning what kinds of thoughts are arising in the mind, setting on one side the unwholesome ones, on the other side the wholesome ones.

"And as I abided thus, diligent, ardent, and resolute, when a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I understood thus: this thought of sensual desire has arisen in me." This is the important reflection: "This leads to my own affliction, to others' affliction, and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties, and leads away from nibbana. When I considered this leads to my own affliction, that thought subsided in me. When I considered this leads to others' afflictions, that thought subsided in me. When I considered this leads to the affliction of both, that thought subsided in me. When I considered this obstructs wisdom, causes difficulty, and leads away from nibbana, these thoughts subsided in me. Whenever a thought of sensual desire arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, did away with it."

Then he goes on likewise with thoughts of ill will and cruelty.

One of the most interesting things for me in reading the suttas, the discourses, is remembering that all of them are really instructions to us. It's not about Buddhist philosophy. Over and over again the Buddha is telling us this is a way to practice, and it's always surprisingly shocking that when I do put these instructions into practice, they work. So it's definitely worth at least making the experiment.

Following in the bodhisatta's footsteps, we too can cultivate a clear discernment about the kinds of thoughts that are arising in our minds, particularly the repetitive ones, the patterns of thought that keep coming again and again. We can begin to notice which patterns are rooted in sensual desire, which are rooted in ill will or cruelty. We can consciously reflect on the harm that they cause both to ourselves and to others, that they lead away from clarity, from wisdom, from nibbana. We can consciously reflect on that and let them go. When we notice, when we pay attention to those patterns of thought that are rooted in one way or another in renunciation, in goodwill, in compassion, we can reflect on their value, on their skill, and strengthen them in our lives.

All of this is the use of wise reflection in the service of the path. We want to use our intelligence as we undertake the practice. The Buddha, as you can see, is very specific about the kinds of thoughts that are harmful, the kinds of thoughts that are for our welfare.

One of the things that happens, of course, as we become mindful of these two kinds of thoughts—the unskillful and the skillful—is that we can become increasingly aware and sensitive to the strength and seductive power of the unwholesome patterns. We find our mind getting seduced by them again and again.

Ill will and aversion are said to be more dangerous than desire, than greed, but easier to uproot. Desire is less dangerous—it causes less obvious harm—but it's harder to uproot. Why is this?

When we're experiencing thoughts of ill will or aversion of one kind or another, the suffering is very obvious. These mind states generated by ill will and anger and aversion and hatred are always unpleasant. We're always suffering in the midst of them. Even though they're very harmful, very dangerous, causing a lot of harm, once we start paying attention to them, we're more motivated to see through them and to let them go because we see the suffering so clearly.

Sense desires, on the other hand, are often associated with pleasure. We get pleasure from the gratification of our sense desires. So it's not always apparent why renunciation of sense desire is a good idea. Why should I give up these pleasures? The Buddha himself acknowledged this situation. This is not just us in the twenty-first century West. People from the Buddha's time onward have been entranced by sense desires, sense pleasures.

So one time in the time of the Buddha, a group of lay people were meeting and discussing this very question. They brought this discussion to Ananda, the Buddha's attendant and cousin. This is what these householders had to say:

"Venerable Ananda, we are householders who indulge in sensuality, delight in sensuality, enjoy sensuality, rejoice in sensuality. For us—indulging in, delighting in, enjoying, rejoicing in sensuality—renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off. Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline, the hearts of very young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. So right here, this doctrine of renunciation is contrary to the great mass of people."

I think we can relate to that. Just as lay people, we rejoice and delight and enjoy sense pleasures. And it struck them as odd that the young monks, the young nuns, would leap up—their hearts would leap up—at the thought of renunciation. These lay people were confused. Ananda himself was a little confused at this point, I think. So he said, "Let's go ask the Buddha about this." They went off to where the Buddha was staying, and Ananda recounted this conversation.

This is the Buddha's reply: "So it is, Ananda, so it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, while I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, thought, 'Renunciation is good, seclusion is good,' but my heart didn't leap up at renunciation, didn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace. The thought occurred to me: What is the cause, what is the reason why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation?"

This is a question we might all ask. Why don't our hearts leap up at renunciation? Why don't they grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace?

Then the thought occurred to the Buddha: "I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that understanding. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation. I haven't familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace."

I think that's true for a lot of us. We haven't understood the reward of it. We haven't familiarized ourselves with it. So tonight I'd like to reflect a little bit on the drawbacks of sense pleasures and familiarize ourselves, at least a little bit, with the rewards of renunciation.

Our first challenge is just hearing the word *renunciation*, because for many of us—and certainly quite predominantly in our Western culture—we associate renunciation with a repression of desires, with deprivation, with a rather bleak and austere lifestyle. If this is our association, it's no wonder that our hearts don't leap up at the thought of it.

But if we understand renunciation in a different way, we might begin to get a sense of the potential within it for peace and freedom. And that would be understanding renunciation as the experience of non-addiction. That's really what renunciation means: the mind is not addicted.

We all know the suffering of addictions to whatever they might be—addictions to food, or to drugs, or to alcohol, or to sex, or perhaps even more unnoticed addictions to work, or to power, or to wealth, or to fame, to comfort. And here on retreat, we can also unknowingly become addicted to and entranced by different meditative states, different mind states, different emotions. We're often addicted to excitement, when exciting things happen. We love that feeling and go after it. Even more strange, some people are addicted to the feeling, the emotion of fear. I've always been struck by how popular horror movies are. The scarier the better. Many people just love that rush of feeling terrified.

We become addicted not only to the gratification of our wants, but also to the mental habit of wanting itself. I've seen this very clearly in a state of mind I call "catalog consciousness." Do you know this experience? Of course not while you're on retreat, but being at home, you get one of these endless catalogs in the mail, and you make the mistake of opening it. As soon as we open the catalog, we keep turning the pages, waiting for something to want, just hoping, "Oh, maybe I'll want something on the next page." We love the feeling of wanting, and we keep hoping.

that there'll be something we want.

Yogis get addicted to different meditative states of rapture or calm or concentration. But sometimes we can get addicted even to the interest and power of investigation. And all of these are factors of enlightenment, so these are wholesome qualities which we're cultivating. But do we become attached to them? Do they come out of balance? How often in our practice are we trying to hold on to or recreate some pleasant, good experience?

I had this happen so many times in my practice. There was one time I had been practicing with Goenkaji for a few years. He does this sweeping practice, sweeping the body. After some time, my whole body had opened and become this body of light. Every time I sat, there was just this bliss—fluid light. It was fantastic. Then I ran out of money and had to come back to the States to work for a little bit. I couldn't wait to get back to India, to my body of light. I went back to India, and it had become a body of twisted steel. I don't know what happened back here. For two years I struggled to get back that experience. It was the worst two years of my practice because I was in a constant state of struggle, frustration, discouragement. It took two years to finally learn that it's not about getting anything back. It took all that time to learn to simply relax back into what was arising rather than trying to get something back or hold on to something.

So I share this story just so you don't spend two years doing this. Five minutes is enough. The practice is not about getting anything back. It's not about holding on to any particular experience. It's always about letting go.

I was mentioning in one interview an experience I had in my time with Munindraji in India. I'd been there for some time and again had just a powerful experience—it felt like the whole idea of subject and object fell away, the awareness was spontaneous, and whatever I did, awareness was there. I felt completely free. I went running to Munindra to tell him about this great experience, and all he said to me was, "Joseph, don't recondition your mind with this concept of freedom." I thought I was just reporting this wonderful, fantastic experience. And he was saying, don't hold on to this. Don't create a concept about this. Don't reify this. So over and over again, we need to be reminded: practice is not about holding onto any particular experience, no matter how wonderful or freeing it may feel.

Now, what's so beguiling about our addictions, whether small ones or very big ones, is that in the moment of gratification, they actually do give us pleasure. That's why we get seduced by them. But then, because of our conditioning, because of the pleasure we get, because of the gratification we get from them, we begin grasping at them, trying to hold onto them, and then suffer when they change, as they always will. So then we reach out for another one and another one and another one, and this becomes our lives

—continually trying to get the next hit of gratification, not learning the lesson that even though they do give pleasure in the moment, they're not capable of fulfilling us because of their impermanent nature.

It's very interesting to observe ourselves, and here on retreat it's such a gift because you have nothing else to do all day long except observe the mind and your actions and your thoughts. This is a great laboratory of understanding. We can really see with tremendous clarity and depth just what our patterns are, what our conditioning is.

Just as an experiment, it would be interesting to look at the pattern of your habitual actions during the day. You might not think of them particularly as addictions, but how easy would it be to let go of some of the things that have simply become a habit? Nine-fifteen in the morning, sitting is over, cup of tea, and then I'll go walk. Nothing wrong with a cup of tea, but has that become a habit? And if that has become a habit, how hard or easy would it be to let it go? Something as simple as that. Or do we go to bed at night at a certain hour, a certain time, or when we actually are feeling really tired? Have we gotten into a habit, or are we responding to how we actually feel? Do we have certain habits about how much food we take?

Could we take less? Again, there's nothing inherently wrong about any of these things. It's just an opportunity to investigate the power of habit in the mind. Because habit is just a more polite word for addiction. We're really caught in a certain way of doing things.

So it's possible to relate to desire in a much different and freer way. This is where we can begin to explore the meaning and the freedom of renunciation. Because it's possible to develop an attitude, instead of addiction to habit, of wise restraint—particularly with those thought patterns or patterns of action that are rooted in greed or sense desire or ill will.

We can practice settling back, seeing the desire arise in the mind, and realizing we have the freedom to not act. It's not repressing the desire, it's not pushing it down. We're seeing it arise, but we're bringing some wisdom to that moment and saying, "No, I don't have to act on this."

A very interesting experience happens from this experiment. And it's worth looking at this carefully because it can begin to shift our understanding of how we're living in the world. We can begin to see, even in small things—we don't have to start with the big ones—even in small things we can taste for ourselves that there is greater ease in not wanting than in wanting.

This is not something to believe or to take on faith. This is a suggestion to look carefully at your own experience. Pay careful attention to those moments when some desire, some wanting, some holding is arising in the mind. And pay attention to the moments of transition where we go from wanting, desire for whatever it may be, to the moment of not wanting. Because at a certain point, if we're just sitting or walking and observing it, it will arise and it will pass away.

Notice the quality of that transition. It may be that we're lost in some kind of sensual desire. It may be some kind of sexual fantasy. It may be thoughts of what you're going to do when you leave retreat and go on some fantastic vacation, whatever it may be. Notice what it's like when we're lost in the wanting. And then notice what it's like when the mind is free of the wanting.

For myself, it has always felt in that moment of transition that I'm being let out of the grip of something. It's like the desire had been gripping the mind. And then when the desire goes, the wanting, I'm being let out of the grip of it into a freer, more open, more easeful space.

There's one verse in the Dhammapada which highlights this experience. And it's worth our looking in our own experience at this, so that it goes from being some kind of theoretical understanding to something we actually know for ourselves. The Buddha said, "If by giving up a lesser happiness a greater happiness could be found, a wise person would renounce the lesser for the sake of the greater."

It's just that commonly we don't pay enough attention to our experience to know for ourselves that yes, the gratification of sense desires does bring a happiness—that's true—but there's a greater happiness in the mind being free of desire. We need to see this, we need to actually experience this for ourselves, and then renunciation is not a burden. We're actually settling back into a place of greater happiness, of greater ease.

In these moments, even if they're just for short moments at first, we might get an inkling of understanding how our hearts might leap up at the thought of renunciation, growing confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. Because we've tasted it, even for short moments.

But even when we've had this experience in our practice and in our lives, still the strengthening of the *pāramī* of renunciation is a gradual process. Because there's often an initial fear or anxiety that we have to overcome about renouncing something that's familiar, until we've seen for ourselves that it actually leads to greater happiness.

Just two little examples of this. The first years I was in India, I was there just as a lay person, but I was practicing intensively. In those years, I had a lot of hair. And I had the thought, "I'm going to shave my head." So, first time, you know. And it was amazing how much—I don't know, it wasn't exactly fear, but it was something. "Oh my God, shave my head. What's that going to be like?" But I was just motivated to do it, and okay, so I shaved my head.

And it was so interesting. About three and a half seconds after the head was shaved, I realized that was nothing at all. What was I attached to? It meant nothing. It changed nothing. There was nothing about either having hair or not having hair that meant anything.

Fortunately, I've learned that lesson. But the contrast was just so striking—the shift of my mind state from one moment to the next.

Years later, after all my practice in India, when I first went to Burma, some friends had gone before to the monasteries and were describing what a great practice situation it was, but also that the conditions were pretty hard—not a comfortable place to practice. The night before I left, I had this anxiety dream. I dreamt that I arrived in Burma at the monastery and they took all the zafus away. Oh my God, what am I going to do now? No zafu to sit on. They didn't actually take the zafus away, but it was just indicative of that anxiety about renunciation.

Sometimes there's anxiety about being in solitude—just being by oneself and not speaking, the renunciation of all that's familiar to us. But with experience, what creates anxiety at first can turn into an appreciation of just the great joy of it.

I had a powerful experience of this just last year in March. I was teaching in Italy with my colleague, Stephen Kamala, in a thousand-year-old monastery in the hills of Tuscany—a Catholic monastery where we were renting some of the facilities. Three miles above the monastery, there was a hermitage where monks would go in for life. Each one had a little cell and an enclosed garden, and that was it. They go in for life. They had one cell and garden that was open, where visitors could go just to see what it was like.

We went up there, went through the walls of the hermitage, and into this one cell that was open. I started doing some walking meditation in that garden, and I had this thought—it was so amazing just to imagine going into that little compound of cell and garden for life. Surprisingly, I was just so inspired by the thought. It was not disconcert-

ing at all. The thought that came to my mind was: entering this for life, where one's only companion is awareness. That thought was just—whoa. To be in a situation where awareness is one's only companion.

I was struck by how different that response was from what it would have been in my early years of practice. Obviously, I haven't entered that cell yet, but just the thought that it was inspiring was itself inspiring.

Being on retreat, there are so many opportunities to practice and explore this aspect of renunciation—what it means, and the possible peace and happiness that it can bring. Pascal spoke this morning about the eight precepts. For those of you who are interested, even if it feels like it might be a little edge—what would it be like? Especially not eating after the noon meal. In Asia, in the monasteries, this is just common. Everybody who goes to practice is always on eight precepts, the lay people. It's not special at all. Here in the West, it's a bit more of an edge. It's not something where you feel you *should* do it. It's a question: if there's interest in exploring in that particular way, it might be worth doing for a while just to see what it's like.

We can practice renouncing complexity. That would be a really good one to renounce. Because so often, as you well know, we're just lost in the stories and dramas of our mind, our thoughts and emotions. And we in some way relish them. We just love our stories. We can create very complicated lives for ourselves.

Yet when we investigate our experience, even when we're lost in some big drama, when we really investigate what's going on, as the Buddha said, there are only six things that are ever happening: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and objects of mind—and the knowing of them. That's all that's ever happening. Yet out of these building blocks of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and sensations and mind objects—thoughts and emotions and internal images—we create whole movies, whole dramas, getting lost in them, forgetting what is most essentially happening.

So is it possible to remember, as we're lost in this proliferation of our stories, can we practice—at least at times, at moments—renouncing our addiction to papañca, renouncing our addiction to the proliferation of these mental stories?

Stephen Mitchell, who is a poet and a great translator, wrote a book of his own poems called *Parables and Portraits*. One of the poems in this book he calls "The Myth of Sisyphus." If you remember that Greek myth, Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to roll a big boulder up a hill. Every time he gets it almost to the top, it falls back down again. He's condemned to push it back up. Endless toil.

This is Stephen Mitchell's take on the myth of Sisyphus:

"We tend to think of Sisyphus as a tragic hero, condemned by the gods to shoulder his rock sweatily up the mountain, and again up the mountain, forever."

The truth is that Sisyphus is in love with the rock. He cherishes every roughness and every ounce of it. He talks to it, sings to it. It has become the mysterious other. He even dreams of it as he sleepwalks upward. Life is unimaginable without it, looming always above him like a huge gray moon. He doesn't realize that at any moment he is permitted to step aside, let the rock hurtle to the bottom, and go home. Tragedy is the inertial force of the mind. Tragedy is the force of habit.

I love that because it's so descriptive of how we relate to our own mental proliferation. We're in love with it. We're in love with the story. And we don't realize that at any moment we're permitted to step aside, let the thoughts, let the story, let the drama subside, and be at home. We don't even have to go home—we are already there.

There's also one other aspect of renunciation that's really part of it all, and it's what I call the wisdom of no. So often in spiritual practice and in spiritual scenes, we emphasize the yes—the yes of acceptance, the yes of openness, the yes of receptivity, the yes of fullness of experience. This is all an essential part of our practice, because this yes is often the antidote to self-judgment, self-criticism, to contraction, to limitation. We're learning to open. We're saying yes to experience, yes to the world.

But there is also a wisdom in no—recognizing that some things are not skillful, are not helpful, are not leading to happiness or to our well-being. And in these times, we can practice saying, "No thanks, I'll pass on this one."

It's important to understand what this quality of restraint really means, because it's at the heart of our practice. Practicing the wisdom of no is a great art, because we need to learn how to do it in a wise and loving way. Restraint is not repression. It's not avoidance. It's not denial. It does not mean being judgmental about what's arising or having aversion to what's arising. With wise restraint, we can open to every single part of our experience. We're practicing that openness, but we're learning to see what's arising with discerning wisdom. We see what thoughts and what actions are skillful, leading us onward to happiness, to peace. And we see what is unskillful, leading to further conflict and suffering.

It's like a parent saying no to a child who's about to do something harmful. It's not the no of aversion. It's a no of love. It's a no of care. It's a no of concern. And as most of you have probably noticed, we all have this inner two-year-old who is quite active in our minds. We need to be a wise and loving parent with this inner two-year-old. When different kinds of unskillful thoughts come up—what the Buddha highlighted as

thoughts of desire, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of cruelty—when we recognize them, see them, understand them as being unskillful, we can say to that inner two-year-old, "No, that's not a good idea."

It's interesting just to watch our minds through the day and practice this wisdom of no even in small things. The Buddha suggested asking a few very simple questions regarding thoughts, desires, and actions. When we become aware of them arising, we could ask the question: Is this necessary? Is this helpful? Oftentimes they're not. And if we can see that in the moment, we recognize this is not necessary, this is not helpful, and we simply let them arise and pass away. No, I don't need to do this. No, I don't need to carry on with this thought.

There's a wonderful poem by Naomi Shihab Nye called "The Art of Disappearing":

When they say, don't I know you, say no.
When they invite you to the party, remember what parties are like before answering.

Someone telling you in a loud voice they once wrote a poem, greasy sausage balls on a paper plate, then reply. If they say we should get together, say why. It's not that you don't love them anymore. You're trying to remember something too important to forget. Trees, the monastery bell at twilight. Tell them you have a new project. It will never be finished. When someone recognizes you in a grocery store, nod briefly and become a cabbage. When someone you haven't seen in ten years appears at the door, don't start singing him all your new songs. You will never catch up. Walk around feeling like a leaf. Know you could tumble any second. Then decide what to do with your time.

This poem just captures it. We're so caught up in the habits—the social habits of our lives and the internal mental habits. But if we really recognize that we're like a leaf that could fall any time, then we decide what to do with our time. What do we invest in? What thoughts do we invest in? What actions do we invest in?

In this way, we really begin to see that the wisdom of "no" at the appropriate times is the expression of a free mind.

The night of the Bodhisattva's enlightenment—the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree—he was attacked by all the forces of Mara: desire and fear and aversion, all the forces of delusion. Joseph Campbell, the great writer of myths, describing that evening, had a line which I have loved and which has been such an inspiration for my practice. Campbell describes the attack of Mara, the Bodhisattva sitting under the tree, and writes: "The mind of the great being was not moved."

I love that. It's a possibility for all of us. As we sit or walk through the day and all of these different forces arise in the mind, arise in the heart, can we be like the Bodhisattva? The mind of the great being was not moved. There is tremendous strength and freedom in that.

It's through the power and understanding of renunciation that we can, at least for times, remain unmoved in the face of strong desire or aversion or ill will or cruelty—the unwholesome thoughts the Buddha pointed out.

I'd like to close with a poem by Mary Oliver that I came across, which in some way really describes what we're all doing here. She called it "The Old Poets of China":

Wherever I am, the world comes after me. It offers me its busyness. It does not believe that I do not want it. Now I understand why the old poets of China went so far and high into the mountains, then crept into the pale mist.

So you're all the old poets of China, climbing far and high into the mountains. It's really what a retreat is about—creeping into the pale mist.

CHAPTER 34

Morning Instructions - Working with Thoughts

Joseph Goldstein · 45 min

> *In this morning instruction from the 2012 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein offers a comprehensive exploration of working with thoughts in meditation practice. He begins by highlighting a fundamental insight: thoughts, despite their enormous influence over our actions and emotions, are inherently insubstantial—mere blips of energy in the mind that only gain power through our unconscious identification with them.*
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> *Goldstein presents several practical approaches for developing mindfulness of thought. The first involves highlighting the moment of awakening from being lost in thought, using this transition point to clearly recognize the difference between being caught and being aware. He suggests holding the investigative question "What is a thought?" not to find an answer, but to direct attention toward thought as a phenomenon. For repetitive thought patterns—whether planning, remembering, or judging—he recommends setting an intention at the beginning of practice to watch for these familiar trains of association.*
>
> *A key distinction emerges between investigating the nature of thought itself and discerning the content of our thinking. While random thoughts can simply be noted and released, repetitive patterns warrant investigation into whether they are wholesome or unwholesome—rooted in desire, ill will, and delusion, or in generosity, kindness, and understanding. The simple question "Is this necessary?" can release us from the grip of unhelpful thinking. Goldstein concludes by encouraging practitioners to settle into awareness of the body while remaining attentive to thoughts, both their content and their empty nature.*

One of the most interesting aspects of meditation practice is working with thoughts—becoming mindful of thoughts, taking thought as an object of meditation.

Thoughts play such a powerful role in our lives. They condition so many of our actions. They condition so many of our emotions. And yet, as you've probably recognized, they often slip into the mind unnoticed. They have all of this power precisely because we don't notice that they're there.

The amazing thing to learn about the nature of thought is that in and of themselves, they don't have any power at all. The only power is the power that we give them. When we really look at a thought, when we can become mindful that a thought is present and are looking at the very nature of thought—thought as a phenomenon—we see that it's

really little more than nothing. It's like this tiny little blip of energy in the mind, completely insubstantial, uninvited, coming and going rather quickly when we're not invested in it.

And yet when we're not mindful of the fact that we're thinking, we see over and over again how the thoughts proliferate, how we hop on trains of association, having no idea that we've hopped on the train, having no idea where the train is going. Then sometime later—whether it's thirty seconds or a minute or twenty minutes—we find ourselves off at another station, in a completely different mental environment.

So the first thing to practice is to change the attitude in the mind from having thoughts be a problem to simply taking interest in how they're arising, what their nature is. It's like discovering this whole internal realm that's of such significance in our lives, and yet one which we hardly pay attention to. Every time a thought arises in the mind, instead of having a judgment about it or a judgment about oneself, you might say, "Oh good, here's a chance to explore what a thought is, how it functions, what its nature is." We come to understand so intimately and so directly in our experience how it's working, how it's functioning in the mind.

There are a few different levels on which we can do this.

First, it's extremely instructive to pay attention to the moment of awakening from being lost. A thought arises, and we very likely are not mindful of it in the moment of its arising, but then at some point we become aware: "Oh, I've been thinking." Right in that moment of waking up, highlight the transition. Highlight the difference of experience you've had between being lost and being awake to the fact that a thought was present. It's just in that moment of transition that we can experience the difference very clearly, because we've just gone from being lost to being awake.

The more we can see the difference—being lost was like this, being awake is like this—it reveals to us both the seductive power of thought and the nature of awareness. The nature of awareness becomes so clear in that moment because we've just been unawake, unaware, and we can see clearly the contrast.

The good news about working with thoughts in this way is realizing that for as many times as we're lost, that many times do we awaken. Nobody stays lost in thought for three months. It's for some relatively short period of time. So for each time of being lost, that many times do we actually wake up. But the tendency of the mind is to judge ourselves for being lost instead of to appreciate and understand the quality of wakefulness. So highlight that moment.

Another useful exercise in the moments of waking up from being lost is to sometimes ask the question, or hold the question in mind: What is a thought? On this level, it's not so concerned with the content, but just with investigating or seeing directly for ourselves what this phenomenon is. In doing that, it's not that we're looking for an answer. Rather, simply by asking the question, we're directing our mindfulness to the thought phenomenon as an object. And in doing that, we begin to see for ourselves its very empty nature, see how very insubstantial it is. So at times—not necessarily each time, but at times—just holding that investigative question: What is a thought? Not looking for the answer, but using the question to focus the attention.

There are other times when we do want to relate to and understand the content of our thoughts. We can begin to recognize perhaps certain repetitive patterns. Many times thoughts are just random—they come and they go without any particular pattern. But as we become more mindful of thought over time, we might begin to recognize very familiar patterns that seduce us again and again, the trains that we hop on repeatedly. It might be planning, a lot of future-oriented thoughts. It might be memories. It might be judging thoughts, either self-judgment or judgment of others.

If you begin to recognize some common patterns of content, then it might be helpful at the beginning of a sit or the beginning of a walk just to recognize: "Oh, this is a pattern that I often get caught up in. Let me keep an eye out for the arising of these thoughts." We set a kind of intention. We set the radar in our mind for the arising of those particular patterns.

Simply by setting the intention, it can help support a quicker awareness of that pattern.

It's so interesting to just watch the mind-created worlds of thought. Those of you who have ever read comic books know all the characters, and then they draw these little bubbles where the dialogue or what the character is saying appears, printed in these little bubbles. Well, we're kind of like these cartoon characters. And these thought worlds are just what's happening in the script, in the little bubble of thought in the mind. It has no other reality than as a thought in the moment.

So all the future thoughts you have are just thoughts happening now. All the past thoughts you have are just thoughts happening now. Beginning to see that over and over again is very freeing.

There is another level, though, where we do pay attention and discern the difference in different contents. That's what I talked about the other evening, where we begin to discern, particularly with repetitive patterns—not so much with quickly passing thoughts—are the patterns wholesome or unwholesome? Are they rooted in desire, ill will, delusion? Or are they rooted in generosity, kindness, understanding?

So with repetitive patterns, we do want to understand their content, particularly with regard to whether this is wholesome or unwholesome. That gives us a framework for understanding which patterns of thought we should really practice renunciation with. These are not helpful. These are not skillful, either for myself or for others. And to recognize those patterns which are wholesome, as when we're doing the *mettā* meditation—wholesome thoughts, these are to be cultivated.

As a reminder of two questions that you might bring into your practice with regard to repetitive patterns of thought: we can ask ourselves, is this necessary? Is it helpful? Is it skillful? Just that simple question can be enough to release us from being lost, release us from the grip of the content.

So settle back into awareness of the body. If you found it helpful to use that phrase, "there is a body"—and again, that's not a metaphysical statement, it's just the most gentle framework for settling back, aware of our physical presence in the most open, gentle, receptive way. Not looking for anything in particular, simply settling into the framework "there is a body" and then becoming aware of whatever reveals itself. It might be the feeling of the breath, might be different sensations, might be sounds arising.

And begin to pay particular attention now to the arising of thought, both discerning its content and taking interest in its nature.

CHAPTER 35

Finding the Truth Through Truth

Chas DiCapua · 47 min

> *In this profound talk from the IMS three-month retreat, Chas DiCapua presents a compelling framework for understanding how truth-knowing operates at multiple levels of our practice. Beginning with Gandhi's assertion that "God is truth," he guides practitioners through three progressive layers of truth: mundane truths about ourselves and the world, deeper truths of the three characteristics (anicca, dukkha, anattā) and the Four Noble Truths, and ultimately the absolute truth of Nibbāna.*
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> *DiCapua emphasizes that clear seeing requires working skillfully with the defilements (kilesa) that cloud the mind's natural luminosity. He offers practical examples—from weather observation to ice cream consumption—demonstrating how paying attention reveals the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and conditionality in all experience. A crucial teaching throughout is the importance of not identifying with what we observe, as this identification creates a "double whammy" of suffering in the moment and obstruction to clear seeing.*
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> *The talk illuminates how understanding dukkha as the First Noble Truth leads naturally to recognizing craving (taṇhā) as its cause. Drawing on the Buddha's teachings about craving as the fetter that keeps beings wandering in saṃsāra, DiCapua shows how the progressive abandonment of craving through clear seeing opens the door to the unconditioned element (asaṅkhata dhātu). The practice instruction is elegantly simple: ask "What's being known right now?" and notice the truth of each successive moment without trying to change, get, or get rid of anything.*

During the time when India was fighting for its independence from Britain and Gandhi was really on the world stage, there were lots of reporters and news about him, and he was followed everywhere. One day a reporter asked him, "Gandhi, what is God?" Gandhi went through periods of not talking as a practice, so he got a paper bag, wrote on it, and gave it to the reporter. It said, "God is truth."

And so if God is truth, then the way to God is through truth. Tonight I want to talk about how the way to the truth that sets us free—the path to that—is the path of knowing what our truth is in each moment. The way to truth is through truth.

On every level, from the grossest example to the most subtle, sublime experience, our practice is to know for ourselves, as best we can, the truth of that experience. There is a good analogy that's often used, and I think it's often used because it's a really good analogy: the analogy of climbing the mountain, where there is a discrete goal and this sense of wanting to get there. People who climb mountains really want to get there. There's a strong pull—it may not be as wholesome as wanting liberation, but nevertheless there's a very strong pull, a discrete goal, a path, and techniques of the body to get there.

And yet, the whole climb, everything hinges—and this is why I think people like climbing too—on being really present with this step so that you don't slip. That's the whole key to all of climbing: to be fully present with where your feet are, and also your hands. There's this sense of how you get to where you want to go by being fully present and knowing this moment and taking care in that way, and then it unfolds.

This seeing of the truth, and the development of our heart and mind so as to be able to ascertain the truth, is something that each of us must do if we want to know the deepest happiness that our hearts so want.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end. If you look for comfort, you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin, and in the end, despair."

It's a calling I know that we all have, and it's a path that we have to walk. It's not an easy undertaking, as we all know. Any yogi can know that. The habits of the heart and mind that have been built up and developed tend much more—at least in the beginning, and not just in the beginning—towards wanting, as C.S. Lewis said, comfort. But you could read "comfort" as wanting pleasant sense experiences.

The Buddha said, "Luminous, bhikkhus, is the mind, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements." When our minds are clouded by the defilements, our ability to see clearly, to know the truth, is hindered. The classic example that I can almost guarantee everyone here has known is when we fall in love. We don't see clearly. We see what we want to see. That clarity is hindered by deep, deep wanting. Not that it's even unwholesome wanting, but there's such strong wanting that there can be very clear personality traits that we just don't see. This can happen on the grossest level or at the most subtle level whenever the mind's natural luminous quality is hindered.

As we walk this path to truth, there are countless truths and layers of truths that we come to know and see by just paying ever closer attention to our experience. But to show how the truths deepen and build on one another, tonight we'll look at three basic layers of truth that we can experience walking this path.

First, what I would call mundane truths: truths about our personalities and the contents of our hearts and minds, and then extrapolating from that, truth about others, truth about the natural world we live in, the truth about getting things and wanting things, and the truth of the law of karma.

Then what I would call deeper truths: truths of the depth and breadth of how the defilements are in the heart and mind, truths of the three universal characteristics, and the truth of the Four Noble Truths.

And finally, what we would call the absolute truth or ultimate truth: the truth of the existence of Nibbana.

We'll look a little bit at these three truths and how we connect with them in our practice. The mundane truths are what we can know quite quickly and easily simply by consciously starting to pay attention to our lives—not even necessarily through formal practice or an intensive retreat, but just by intentionally looking at our lives in a way that perhaps we hadn't before.

And we bring our attention to our lives—to the inner world and to the outer world.

With the outer world, unfortunately, when we start to bring attention and pay attention, the thing that becomes quite immediately apparent is the condition that our outer world is in. You could call it nature or the biosphere. The level of destruction that humans through different activities are causing to the biosphere—it becomes very clear very quickly. You could say the truth about this is known.

By paying just a little bit more attention to, say, a kiwi fruit, and learning about it—that they're actually not available here, they're not grown in this country, and in the middle of January they have to be flown in from Chile at the very other tip of the hemisphere—the truth of the cost to the environment becomes clear just by paying attention, perhaps in ways we hadn't known before. It's no longer hidden with just a little bit of attention. "Oh, I didn't know that. Now I know that." Connecting with the truth of that.

The other wonderful thing about paying attention to our outer world is that it begins to show us in very simple, concrete, clear, mundane ways some of the deeper truths of the three characteristics: change, cause and effect, uncontrollability, and not-self.

I'm kind of a weather nerd, so I'll use weather examples, which are always around us. When you pay attention to the weather, to our outside environment, you can't miss change. It's just always happening. When we pay attention to the weather, we totally see uncontrollability. Things are happening through cause and effect. You're not in control. Things are just playing out very lawfully. You wanted to do something with a friend outside one day, hoping for some nice weather, and it rains. It pours. There's no control over that. When the conditions come together for rain to happen, that will happen. It's very lawful. And it doesn't happen or not happen according to our wishes.

Very simple things, but just by looking in this way at our outside world, we can see these truths and many more with nature. Nature is such a great teacher.

So we pay attention to our outside world in a very simple way. And we also pay attention to our inside world, the inner world. When we do that, one of the things that comes right to the forefront is the truth of the state of our hearts and minds. All you have to do is sit down to meditate once or twice. It might take a couple of times because you might fall asleep the first time. But if you can stay awake, the truth that becomes known is the state of our hearts and minds, much of the time.

When I first started practicing, one day we were sitting around talking after meditating, a weekly meditation group, and we asked what all yogis ask, rightfully so, of the teacher: "Well, what effect has this had on you? This is hard stuff. What's happened for you?" He'd probably been practicing maybe fifteen or twenty years at that time. He said, "Well, basically, I've seen what a jerk I am."

I remember that. That makes me want to meditate.

But through speaking with him and through my own understanding, I came to see that he wasn't just being funny or self-deprecating. There was that level to it. But he was also letting us know one of the truths of how this path unfolds. And that is: to the sense of self, this path is totally humiliating and humbling. We need to be ready for that and work with that.

I think most people consider themselves to be fairly present and caring. No one considers themselves to be a jerk. But after just a short while meditating, the truth of the condition of the heart and mind starts to show itself. And that truth is that most of the time we're not present, thinking primarily about ourselves. And when we are thinking about others, it's with either desire or aversion.

Now, usually what happens is that we have to go through a period—even though we're told not to identify with this, most of us, and I know I have—

We create a self around what we're seeing and then create a second layer of suffering with what a bad person or a bad meditator we are.

There's this great quote by James Garfield: "The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable." He's talking about that first stage—when we identify our experience with the self, that will be miserable. Then of course we learn how to work with that.

Through continued practice and support from teachings and teachers, this identification with the defilements can begin to subside. The second layer of suffering perhaps isn't quite so strong anymore. And that starts to open up the possibility for seeing clearly. Because when we're reacting to what we see with defilements in the mind, there's simply no ability to see clearly.

I want to highlight this point because it's really important in practice. When we identify with anything—including our character flaws or whatever we're noticing in our hearts and minds that's difficult—not only do we suffer from that identification in the moment, forming a self based on how bad we are or what a terrible meditator we are, but the ability to see clearly is also hindered. So it's like a double whammy. It doesn't feel great, it's suffering in the moment, and it creates conditions that are not supportive for clear seeing.

When we form a self based on anything and we're not noticing that—that's the key, we're not waking up to it—it becomes difficult to know the truth of our experience. I'll revisit this a little later in the talk, and I think later in the retreat I'm going to give a talk just on that: how the delusion of forming a self based on "not good enough" operates. I can speak about that.

Then again with the outer world—when we pay attention to our outer world, it includes the people in our lives that we know well. As we begin to know our own inner life through meditation, and the forces that occupy and shape our life, our internal forces, we can extrapolate and get to know the forces that shape and occupy the people we're close to. Just as we come to know our own difficulties and the unwholesome behaviors and mind states behind them, we get to see those of our friends and family and intimate partners as well. That also starts to become clearer.

Now, how we relate to them when they're exhibiting these behaviors based on internal processes will be the same way that we've developed in how we relate to ourselves. This is another important point about why it's essential to try not to identify

with what we see in our own experience, in our hearts and minds. Because if we do identify with it, we will give ourselves a hard time. It's not like we might—we will. And as that builds up into a pattern, we're going to do the same with other people.

I saw that really clearly. I was just on retreat myself. You know when you're on retreat and you feel past behavior really strongly? Well, one episode came up powerfully for me with my wife, and it was like, ouch. But it's good. The ouch is good. It kind of sets us straight. What came to my mind right in that moment is when kids go bowling and they put up those bumpers—they block the gutters with those boards. Have you ever seen those? The ball goes off course, hits the bumper, and it sends it back on course. When we touch these painful parts, it sends us back on course. It automatically sends us more straight toward where we want to go.

But anyway, I could see that the reason I was behaving in that way towards her was directly—directly—related to how I was with myself in a certain way. It was just so clear. So this is another important reason to practice and work with trying not to identify with what comes up in our practice. Because as we are with ourselves, we will be with others.

As we hopefully start to learn not to identify so much with what we see, and we keep paying attention to our inner world, another truth begins to emerge. We start to see that this acquiring of material objects and pleasant experiences is empty. We start to notice that hollow feeling that comes with it. And we start to see that it's not as fulfilling as we once thought it was.

I used to really enjoy snow skiing, downhill skiing. If someone asked me what my favorite thing in the world was, I'd say downhill skiing without hesitation. You're outside, carving these turns—it's just the best. That perfect turn was the one thing I keyed in on. That was the whole experience of downhill skiing in my mind.

And then, even before I came to the Dharma, I started noticing other things. It's a long car ride—three hours each way. It's expensive. It's freezing on the lift. The snow in New England is terrible. It's crowded, and the slopes get skied off quickly. There's maybe one good turn on your first run, and then it's all ice. Just broadening the view to see that this experience is so much more than that one perfect turn.

As that happened, I just started skiing less and less until I stopped altogether. It wasn't a decision, like "well, I should stop skiing." Somehow, by paying a little more attention to my experience, these other truths about skiing emerged. It wasn't just that one wonderful turn.

We start to see this in all things in our life. With so many pleasant experiences and sense pleasures that we pursue, the view broadens and we begin to see the hollowness, or even the suffering and difficulty, that is tied up in them—even in mundane ways. We're not yet talking about deeper truths; just practical things like the expense of skiing, the long drive, the cold.

Now, if we can avoid turning away from some of these other truths about pleasant experience—either through denial or through beating ourselves up for wanting pleasant things, or through simply engaging in more acquiring behavior—then some of these deeper truths can start to be revealed when we really begin to look. We can start to see some of the deeper truths of suffering and craving, the first and second noble truths.

At the risk of being redundant, I want to point out again that when we see this level of desire operating in our hearts and minds—this desire for sense pleasures and experience—it's so important not to identify with it, to rejoice rather than beat ourselves up. Beating ourselves up is just not a great place to meditate from. There's very little clear seeing that happens when we're in that place. The truth of dukkha and its connection to craving will simply be missed. We're too busy beating ourselves up.

Bringing some understanding or wisdom to our practice about the importance of not identifying with experience is really helpful in not getting stuck. This is where Sayadaw U Tejaniya's teachings are so important. He says to bring some wisdom to your practice—don't go in without any understanding.

There are three layers of wisdom. First, the wisdom that we can know through reading or hearing—we hear something and think, "yes, yes, I understand." Then there's wisdom through reflection, where we think about it and recognize that it really does make sense, that it resonates with our experience. And then, of course, there's the wisdom we're ultimately after in this practice: wisdom through our own direct experience, through the unshakable knowing that yes, this is true for me.

We can't necessarily bring that third level into our practice from the start, but we can bring those first two levels. They prepare the ground.

The last mundane truth I'll discuss is that of karma. When we pay attention to both our inner world and our outer world, the truth of cause and effect is right there. I mentioned with the weather—it's very easy to see cause and effect. It's everywhere. It's really all that's happening.

Now, not all cause and effect is karma. If the wind blows, the trees sway. That's cause and effect, but there's no karma there because there's no intention. Karma, while being cause and effect, is based on intention—with unwholesome intentions giving rise to unwholesome effects or fruits, and wholesome intentions giving rise to wholesome or happy results.

As we pay attention to our inner world, we can start to see the various intentions behind our thoughts, speech, and action. These intentions are normally not known. They usually operate underground with people who don't have a practice of watching their own mind and heart. But when we do watch, we can start to see and know these intentions. And as we continue to pay attention, it becomes possible at times to

clearly see the effect of those intentions, both in our inner and outer worlds.

One time this happened to me so clearly. And it's not always this clear, right? Because the Buddha said, don't try to figure out karma because your head will explode. There are so many effects going into a single cause, a multitude of conditions. But sometimes it can be quite clear.

Our family was at the beach, and I was just being kind of a jerk. I was throwing rocks at my nephew, just little rocks, bugging him. And at that time, my niece was about three or four. All of a sudden, I knew—I saw it all in the corner of my eye. I saw it coming. She had picked up a grapefruit-sized rock, and she came over to me, and as hard as she could—I just saw it coming—wham, she nailed me on the head with it. I saw stars, the blood's coming down. It was quite a scene. Poor gal, she really felt bad. She just wanted to play. She just wanted to join in the game that uncle and nephew were playing.

And it was just so clear: cause and effect. I had some unwholesome intentions, just kind of being a scoocher. And wham, there it was. Okay, I get it.

Another way this becomes apparent, one that I feel as more intense, is when you notice the habitual places where your mind goes when it wanders. And you see: that's conditioned. My mind goes there because it's gone there a lot. And it's like, whoa. I've conditioned that to happen. And as it's happening, it's conditioning it more. We see that. It's not always a terrible place, but the mind can go to quite self-centered or fearful places. And you can see very clearly: yes, that's conditioned to happen when there's not mindfulness.

Seeing the truth of karma is really helpful because we see that everything we do matters as far as our happiness or lack of it is concerned. And this tends to make us want to pay more attention. When we see that—at least for me—the result is like, oh, I really want to pay attention.

So those are some of the more mundane or evident truths we can know just by starting to pay attention to our lives. Truth about ourselves and others. About the natural world we live in and how we're affecting it. The truth about the habit of wanting and sense pleasures, and the truth of karma. And even the beginnings, in a kind of mundane, natural way, of noticing the three characteristics: change, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self or conditioned arising. These insights naturally deepen over time into seeing more profound truths, or seeing these same things at a deeper level.

As we continue to be mindful, lots of things become apparent—which is why I said at the beginning of the talk that there are lots and lots of things we see. I'm just choosing this particular progression to talk about. But as we get more and more mindful of our experience in a more nuanced way, we see in a more nuanced way how the defilements are kind of omnipresent in our experience—especially moha, especially delusion. You could say the truth of this matter comes into view.

As we're able to be with this truth and take it in and not react to it—that's the key—as we're really able to take this in saying, "Yes, this is how it is," and not react to it, or as Steve Armstrong says, as we're able to bear our karma, two things happen. Actually, many things happen, but I'll highlight two.

The more we see the defilements and don't react to them, naturally there's less reactivity in the mind. In the moment, there's less reactivity because we're not reacting to them. But in the long term, because we keep seeing them, slowly they start to diminish. Both of these conditions—not reacting in the moment when a defilement becomes known, and then the slow diminishing of defilements through the seeing of them—support us in having a clearer lens to our moment-to-moment experience.

And with this clear lens, the three characteristics of everything that's happening—it's like the grain starts to raise. If you had a board, a sanded but unfinished board, it's just kind of dull. And then you take linseed oil or some kind of finish and you paint it on... Anyone a woodworker here? It's the best moment. It's like, wow. And you see, oh, look—there's the grain. There's the beautiful grain.

So our clear seeing is the linseed oil. It allows what's there to be known, to be seen clearly. These truths have been there all along. Everything is shouting to us the truth. It's just that the apparatus isn't quite honed in to see it.

Another example. I used to love ice cream—actually, I still love ice cream. I'm definitely a greed type. And ice cream was really one of my favorite sense pleasures. There were times I would have ice cream twice a day. Once, a long time ago, in another mar-

riage, we went out for ice cream in the middle of a blizzard. The guy behind the counter was like, "What are you doing here?" We wanted ice cream. It was just a great sense pleasure—a fun thing to go out with people, cool in the summer.

Now, this example comes from after I had been practicing for a while. I just started to look at my experience. It was like, this is happening a lot. Let's check this out. I began to notice my mind state and also how one thought in the morning—maybe I'll have ice cream today—when not really seen, could condition the whole day and end up in the fruition of me having ice cream. Not that that's even a bad thing, but just by starting to pay attention, I began seeing the cause and effect process with mind and body, and how much power thoughts have when we're not mindful of them.

So I started to look at ice cream on that level, starting to feel the desire for it even before I got it, noticing what that was like in the mind, how that thought—will I have ice cream today?—actually carried a lot of suffering throughout the day. And then more about eating ice cream itself. It's cream. It's heavy. It's really heavy. It's like taking a pint of heavy cream and just drinking it. I started to really tune into my body. The feeling in the stomach, in the mouth. I would notice I would get incredibly thirsty. I started to notice that and put it together—oh, I'm thirsty every time I eat ice cream.

Just slowly seeing, bringing attention to the process more and more. And without trying, without saying ice cream is bad to eat or I'm bad for eating ice cream, through connecting with the truth of the moment about the experience of eating ice cream, I just started to eat it less and less and less. And now I really don't eat it that much. It's not like I never eat ice cream. But I just know. It changes. It's very short-lived. It's impermanent. It's unsatisfactory. There's actually suffering wrapped up in the whole thing.

This is a fairly gross example, but this process of looking, seeing, understanding, and then release is the same for every level of our experience, from the grossest to the most subtle.

That can be the first thing that happens. And then our continued mindfulness becomes the ground for noticing dukkha as a characteristic. It's also the ground for knowing dukkha as the first of the noble truths. Through the heightened sensitivity to our heart and mind and to our experience—and how we're relating to it—that constant or at least consistent mindfulness cultivates, we begin to understand that dukkha isn't just when we stub our toe or when we get jealous. It's a truth of every moment of our experience, including the happy ones.

My best example of this, on a mundane level, is this: let's say you're away on a vacation. You're hiking or whatever you're doing, for a week. It's about early afternoon of day four. And you notice what day it is. And it's like, oh. It's coming. The end is coming.

Have you felt that? That's the dukkha of pleasant experience—because it's going to end. And you can feel it.

But this truth, far from being a bummer, when understood rightly, really shows us the reason we've suffered in the past. It points to this: the not understanding of dukkha is why we've suffered. And the result of that misunderstanding was craving.

We can start to see this for ourselves. We can start to see what the Buddha meant when he said, "And what is the cause by which stress comes into play? Craving is the cause by which stress comes into play." And then he said, "Monks, I don't envision one other fetter, fettered by which beings conjoined go wandering and transmigrating for a long, long time in samsara, like the fetter of craving. Fettered with the fetter of craving, beings conjoined go wandering and transmigrating for a long, long time."

The cause of suffering is craving, and craving arises dependent on the ignorance of dukkha—also on the ignorance or delusion of a sense of self. But a big underpinning for the arising of craving is the ignorance of dukkha. When dukkha is seen clearly, craving is seen clearly. They're very much together.

The Buddha said this first noble truth of dukkha must be understood. And we understand it by seeing, by looking at our experience, at the truth of our experience. It seems like every dharma talk I say this, no matter what the topic: you could say the whole practice boils down to one thing. So tonight I'm going to say, you could say our practice boils down to deepening and refining our understanding of the truth of dukkha. One could make an argument that that's basically what we're doing.

So we move through more mundane truths of our life and our world, and then deeper truths about the depth of the defilements, about the universal characteristics, the noble truths, and finally the deepest truth—absolute truth that can be known. To the degree that the truth of dukkha is understood is to the degree that craving is abandoned.

When craving is completely abandoned, the mind simply dwells in its natural state of knowing. That's what the mind does. It does it very well when it's not hindered—clearly knowing the truth of each moment. And the result of clearly knowing the truth of each moment, when it's not defiled, is that the mind is filled with deep equanimity. It simply dwells with equanimity.

And when that is matured, when it's accompanied by the maturation of the rest of the paramis, then the door opens to the most important truth we can know: the third noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering. As Bhikkhu Bodhi says, by putting an end to the constructing of conditioned reality, we open the door to what is ever-present but not constructed, not conditioned—the asankhata dhatu, the unconditioned element. This is nibbana, the deathless, the stilling of volitional activities, the final liberation from all conditioned formations and thus from impermanence and death.

So that's the top of the mountain.

If you believe that the truth will set you free, and you want to know for yourself, in your own experience, the deepest happiness that's possible for a human being, then start noticing what's true right now. The way to truth is through truth. It's that simple.

And how do we do it? Very simply, we ask ourselves: What's being known right now? What's the truth I can know right now of this moment?

Hearing sounds. Great. What are they doing? Arising and passing away. Great. What's my relationship to them? I don't like them. Great. How does that affect the mind? It's suffering. Great. Great to see. Pushing away experience leads to suffering. Great.

Or the breath is known. In this moment, I know the breath. It's just the truth of this experience. Great. What's my relationship to it? There's no wanting or not wanting.

How does that affect the heart and mind? There's no suffering. Know that.

Notice that in either example, nothing was changed, gotten, or gotten rid of—just connecting with the truth of each successive moment. That's all. It simply unfolds from a clear, simple, non-judgmental knowing of the truth of just this moment.

And again, I'm using "truth" not like some absolute thing. It's simply what we can know, as best we can, about our experience in this moment. That's what I mean when I say the word truth.

Eckhart Tolle says, "Whenever you deeply accept this moment as it is, no matter what form it takes"—and we have to remember that one a million times, *no matter what form it takes*—"you are still. You are at peace."

Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. Just look and listen. No more is needed.

So let's just be still and look and listen, just for a moment.

Wisdom comes with the ability to be still. Just look and listen. No more is needed.

CHAPTER 36

Instructions On Intentions and Q&A

Pascal Auclair · 1h03

> *In this illuminating dharma talk, Pascal Auclair offers a passionate exploration of the five aggregates (pañcakkhandhā)—one of the Buddha's most central teachings for liberation. Beginning with the story of Rohitassa's search for the end of the world, Pascal guides practitioners inward to examine how our experience is constructed moment by moment through five dynamic 'rivers': form (rūpa), feeling tone (vedanā), perception (saññā), mental formations including intention (saṅkhārā), and consciousness (viññāṇa).*
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> *Pascal emphasizes that this framework, which formed the basis of the Buddha's second discourse where five practitioners attained liberation, serves as a powerful pair of 'glasses' for seeing through the illusion of a solid, permanent self. Using the Buddha's evocative images—foam, bubbles, mirages, plantain tree trunks, and magic shows—he illustrates the insubstantial, ever-changing nature of what we typically identify as 'me' or 'mine.' The talk pays special attention to how feeling tone activates tendencies toward craving and aversion, and how intentions, though feeling most personal, are themselves conditioned.*
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> *Practical guidance is offered for working with the aggregates during walking meditation, progressively attending to each river of experience. Pascal encourages practitioners to recognize these aspects in their own experience, seeing their impermanent and unsatisfying nature, ultimately discovering that none can be truly owned or controlled. This investigation, he suggests, leads to a more fluid sense of self—one that can be employed when useful but released when it becomes a source of entanglement.*

First thing I will say is how exciting it is to actually be talking to people who are devoting so much time—I use the same phrasing these days—to discover the human nature, and nature in the larger sense. Some of you for weeks now, and all of us for many weeks, taking really the time to stop and reduce the amount of stimulation, calm the mind, pacify and unify the mind enough to be able to discover what this experience is made of. It's really a privilege to be able to bring some thoughts here tonight in this context.

So last week, if you remember well, there was Rohitassa, this beautiful, candid trans person it was at that point, I think. Neither male nor female. I like that. So that's for my own little feeling tone, personal tone, to bring in a trans person. Rock the boat maybe a bit or not. And so this beautiful being with a lot of energy for practice, describing their search to reach the end of the world to the Buddha. If you remember well, they were

asking, is it possible by traveling to reach the end of the world? And the Buddha said, no. By traveling, it's not possible to reach the end of the world. But I'll tell you one thing: without reaching the end of the world, there will not be a stopping of ill or suffering.

This nuance, the play with the two words *world*—the world as the outside world and the traveling in the world to reach the end of it, and the other meaning of world: "Oh, I'd like to be in your world," the world of experience. So when we left Rohitassa last week, they were about to switch practice, turn from the world to the inner world, the world of experience.

Tonight I would like to continue speaking about this investigation that we're on: How does this world that I find myself in get created? How does the suffering get created? Again, the mechanism of suffering and stress and the mechanism of disentangling and liberation. Tonight I'd like to take a very special teaching and explore this with you—the teaching of the five aggregates. Because to me, it's been very central in my practice, so I'm kind of passionate about this system for practice. And you might also be at the end, and you might also not be at all, which is fine because that's just one other tool. There's many tools to investigate the world, many ways to do that. This is one of them.

Now my little selling pitch to start with, to get you interested. If you didn't know, when the Buddha gave his first teaching to five of his old yogi friends, we could say, he mentioned the five aggregates, but only in passing. The teaching was powerful, but the second teaching of the Buddha was the one where these five practitioners got freed in the discourse, in hearing it. Their mind was cleared from any confusion. That discourse was about—what could it have been about? It was about the five aggregates. There's hundreds of discourses where the aggregates are mentioned.

So what they are is a description or tool, rather—a way, a reference. It's almost as if I go around the world living my life with the glasses of me and what I want and how it should be for me and what I should do and how they should treat me. And when we come to the Dharma, we remove these glasses and we put other glasses. That's one way I see it. The five aggregates is one pair of glasses that can be used as a reference to understand experience, understand what's happening now. So it's one of the glasses. I'll try to have them fit on you tonight a bit so that you can use these glasses if you see fit and practice with them.

The aggregates are a way to divide our experience. Any experience that we have while we're here, for example, could be seen through the aggregates, understood through them. So I'll name them quickly and then I'll go over them again during the talk. The five aggregates that constitute the fullness of our experience: the first one is form, the physicality. The second one is *vedanā* or feeling tone that we talked about yes-

terday. The third one is perception, and I'll talk about this later. The fourth one is—quickly I'll just say it's intention that we spoke about this morning. And then the last one is consciousness.

This would be a way that we would divide our experience, divide our reality from the point of view of experience, from the point of view of the one being in there experiencing life. We could have decided to divide reality in two. Let's say we decide, let's observe the world, feel the world, experience the world through mentality and physicality.

We could have decided to divide reality in this way. There are many ways one could decide to divide experience. This is just one way, but apparently it was particularly potent in terms of freedom, in terms of bringing forward freedom, release from suffering. I think that's why the Buddha devised this way of dividing experience into five.

One of the main things that it does is that it helps break the idea of *moi*, me, self—that we go around being moved by, fascinated by, obsessed with, needing to defend and promote. To break that perception some, this is the model that is used: the five aggregates.

My understanding—and this is perhaps a wider parenthesis—my understanding of what we're doing here, certainly partly and in large part, is that we're moving from seeing the world only in a conventional way toward going more towards ultimate reality, or at least balancing out these two levels of reality: the conventional, the way we usually understand the world and go about it, and bringing an understanding that is more ultimate and liberating. Using the five aggregates is moving a little bit toward the ultimate.

First, the word aggregate, *khandha*—I don't know if it means something to you in English, aggregate. It's not something that is often used, or maybe it's very technical. Some of the other more usual words that are used are "heap" or "grouping." The way I like to think about this is *river*, as if there were constantly five rivers running through that make what we call being me hearing the wind. There are always these five rivers. They're very dynamic. So they're not things, but kind of activities that make being me. And they influence each other and co-arise together.

As we're sitting here having this experience of the talk being given, these five rivers would be running through. There is the river of physicality. As you're sitting here, on your eardrum there's the vibration of sound. This is the physical world. There are

waves that hit you. This is happening right now. This is the physicality. It's always there. Either you're hearing me, and if you're not hearing me, you're feeling your seat. There's something happening. There's some physicality that is present. So that's the first river.

The image that the Buddha used to talk about this river or heap or grouping of experience is a lump of foam in the ocean. For me, and probably for you also, the image of foam points to the ephemeral nature of the physical experience. The experience of this body sitting here now is like this. When the body was doing walking or drinking tea or lying down in the bed earlier, the foam was different. It had a different shape. It was a different experience of body.

When we think of the body as something very solid—"it's me, it was me, I came here last week or seven weeks ago, I'm here at the end of the retreat, I'll go home, that's me"—this starts to break that down and says, let's bring attention to this. And we discover that all of what we call this form, me, the body, is actually changing all the time. So that's why it's a river—because it's changing all the time. If you stand up now, it's going to be a different experience.

If you think of your hands or feel them—because it's very predominant for me in my experience right now—there is a river of sensation. It's a river of tingling. It's a river of heat radiating, or experiences of coldness perhaps, or pulsation. This is one of the rivers that makes the being we are: the river of form. And there can be attachment to this, identification with this. *This is me.*

And so not on a conventional level. On a conventional level, we can use that languaging: "Oh, I will meet you there at that time." That's very useful. But actually, like many of us—most of us, us being the wide world now in my mind—most of us have left the conventional reality of "this is me." It's not conventional for us anymore. It's become a complete explanation of reality: this is me. So there's a complete identification with this physical form, which can change. And so by being attentive to body and form, we can discover that it's changing, it's impermanent. And that can help release the notion of "I, this is me."

Actually, the Buddha said there were four kinds of basic views that one could have in identifying with any of these aggregates. And let's take form now, since I'm talking about that aspect of reality. He said you either think that this is you, or you think that this is yours—no, it's not me, but it's mine. Or you think that you're in it—no, it's not me, it's not mine, but I'm inside the body. Or it's inside of you—I'm the universe, and this body is inside of it. So it's either one of these. You might not be conscious of it. And this will apply to any of the other aggregates we'll look at. It's either me, mine, I'm in it, or it's inside of me.

Okay, let's try maybe a second river that is there. So the second river is the river of feeling tone that we talked about yesterday. With any experience—and we said this yesterday—with any experience, being heard, smelled, thought, sensed, naming the six senses there, with any experience, there's always this quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality. We could say, "Well, there's neutrality, so it's not there." Well, actually, it's there because it's very important—it's going to provoke a bunch of things if it's neutral. So it's very important.

And so this feeling tone is, we could say, a little bit of a... I read this in a very old book. It's almost like the contact between, let's say, the eye and the sight. There's a contact. There's a kind of pressing against each other—a sound in the ear, there's a pressing. Out of this pressing comes a juice. You could say it's the juice of feeling tone. It's the juice of life for many of us. It's pleasant, I like, it's good.

The image that the Buddha used for that aspect of our experience, or that river flowing through of feeling tone—pleasantness, unpleasantness, or absence of either pleasant or unpleasant—the image he uses is the bubble. The way it's described in the text is when it rains, at the surface of the little puddle, there are these little bubbles when the rain drops in. I, being of a French culture, like to think of champagne personally. As good as they are, they're impermanent, the bubbles. And so the image used is bubbles.

And for me, these images of the foam in the river or the ocean, the bubbles and the other images coming, are extremely important. To me, they point really well to the experience of feeling tone, how changing it is. As you're sitting here, even you might be experiencing it. Experience it, yeah? So something is said that's pleasant to you, and then something is said that's unpleasant to you, or a feeling in your lower back, and suddenly—boom—it switched to unpleasant. It's very changing, very rapidly. Somebody was even mentioning this yesterday morning at the Q&A, saying it goes pretty fast. So we're invited to put attention on this and see how little control we have over it. The pleasantness, unpleasantness, is hardly controllable.

And so we might ask: Are feelings of pleasantness or unpleasantness yours? Are they you? Are they inside of you? Or are you inside of them? "My pleasure. You destroyed my pleasure. I was having a good night until you started breathing in the hall." We can get really attached to the pleasantness.

Yesterday, Annie talked about the tendencies that can come out of the feeling tone. This is a very central point to get interested in if we are interested in freedom, because that's where grasping and clinging can happen. The tendency Annie described was that when there is pleasant—it doesn't happen all the time, but it's good to actually see it

happen—there's this: "Good. Want more. Want to keep." And she mentioned the tendency being activated with unpleasant: rejecting, fearing, wanting to destroy, wanting to avoid.

There's actually a second tendency that I find interesting. In one text, it says the untrained mind, when meeting a difficult or unpleasant feeling tone, not knowing what else to do, tries to avoid it, resents it, tries to run away from it. That's the first tendency. But having no other way to deal and cope with it, the untrained mind—if there was one here tonight—activates a second tendency: because of no other idea how to cope with unpleasantness, they turn to look for something pleasant. Have you noticed this in your life?

So you sit here. It's getting a little boring. The neutrality is not so well met, so it's becoming unpleasant. And then, well, let's check out into the world of fantasy and create something. The tendency when meeting the unpleasant is to actually turn toward something pleasant. We see this in life. You read an email that is unpleasant, and you just reach for the fridge door to cope. Because unpleasant, you don't know what else to do with unpleasantness—pile pleasantness on top of it.

I'm saying this because that can be interesting to watch: the tendency that gets activated while we're here. For me, there's a special kind of joy. We talked sometime about the vipassanā joy, and it's a very twisted kind of joy, I want to say. It's when we actually see the teaching in action. So if I am actually there—there's unpleasantness, it's unnoticed, but it leads to looking for pleasantness—I'm walking, it's getting a little hard on the legs or something, there's unpleasantness, "but just go rest a little bit in my room." And suddenly I'm resting in my room, and I'm like, "Oh." It was unnoticed, but what happened is there was this turning toward pleasantness, because there was the incapacity to recognize unpleasantness.

In the same text it says, on the other hand, the well-trained mind will know that unpleasantness comes to pass. They will be able to be with it, knowing that it will pass. Just this recognition of the impermanence of it. One of the great teachings around the feeling tone that I've heard is that when pleasant passes, it's unpleasant; when unpleasant passes, it's pleasant. So they contain both, each of them.

And the tendency with neutral is to not talk about it in Dharma talks, because it goes unnoticed. The tendency is to check out, to miss this. So there's the clinging that can happen with this feeling tone, but also the owning of it, the identifying with it. Sometimes we can even get stuck.

The image of the bubble becomes vivid here—like a huge bubble from that night in 1982 when someone said something so unpleasant. We get stuck, clinging to a feeling tone that is long gone, that lasted only a moment, but the mind became fixed on it. There's rehashing: "This is what you said, and this is what I said, and if I had said this instead..." This trying to resolve a past unpleasantness. Or past pleasantness—back in the days when the feeling tone was a beautiful, pleasant bubble, and now it's gone.

I'm laughing because I'm caricaturizing a little bit. But still, it's good for us to notice this—how pleasantness and unpleasantness can rule our world.

Let me go one step back to form, because there's something in the text that I find interesting. There's a similar kind of wording where it says the untrained mind with form will feel the earth element—the hardness, softness, harshness, or smoothness. The untrained mind will recognize it as the earth element, like sitting now, perhaps there's hardness. So the untrained mind will recognize it as the earth element, but will make this small little mistake out of which suffering will come. They will think, "This is earth element, and this is mine. This is my earth element."

In this text they say the trained mind doesn't go that far. It simply stops at: "Oh, this is earth element. This is hardness. It can be known." Much of the work we do here is to release that false view. I've heard it said many times: "Earth element, pressure—it's public property." How can you actually claim hardness? Hardness is there, available. Many people will feel it at some point. Plus, it's passing as soon as the body leaves the cushion—the hardness is no longer there. How can it be yours? How can it be mine? It's gone. It's interesting to see what the untrained mind does and what the trained mind or freed mind does—the level of understanding.

So the third river: there's a river of sensations through the five senses, the river of form running through all the time, and it's changing constantly. Sometimes we feel joyful and light, so the experience of the body is light. Sometimes we feel oppressed by something, and the experience of form changes. The river of form really is a dynamic river, and we're invited here to learn to see this—how it's changing all the time, cannot be owned, is not solid or permanent.

Same with the river of feeling tone—constantly changing. A moment of thinking an unpleasant idea, followed by a pleasant sound, followed by something else. How it changes all the time, how it's conditional.

I remember one time sitting in the hall and there was this sound. It was a yogi making this sound—really annoying, and it kept repeating itself. So unpleasant. I couldn't believe this yogi was making this sound. Suddenly, there was a perception change. It got more refined and accurate, and it became clear that it was actually a frog outside making that sound.

It was interesting to see how suddenly it was pleasant. Same sound. But the relationship to it had changed. Some conditions had changed—it was not made by a human being but by an animal. And suddenly, the feeling tone was pleasant.

I mention this so that we don't go thinking that the feeling tone is inside the object.

The feeling tone is one of the aggregates on this side of reality. The feeling tone is conditioned here—it's happening in this mind. It's not that person who is unpleasant. The experience is here. It's here. We can do something about it. A lot, at least.

So we have form, feeling tone, and the third river running through is the river of perception. It's been happening the whole time—the whole time since many years ago, and the whole time since we've been sitting here tonight.

Perception, in this very precise understanding of the five aggregates, is the organizing of the world, the recognition of what is what. The sensations you have in your body—you don't have to work really hard. This river suffers freely, organizing the world. You know that these sensations are hand-tingling, that these sensations are butt resting, or feet feeling heat or cold. As you're hearing me talk right now, there are these vibrations at the ear door, and perception makes it make sense. You recognize the words. You don't have to work really hard. There's a recognition of what's happening. As you look around right now, as I look around right now, I can see that my mind—I don't have to—it's not just colors and shapes. It's a cushion, person, yogi sitting, blanket. It recognizes. This river flows all the time, organizing the world.

Do you recognize this in your experience right now?

This is offered freely. You don't have to do much. It just does that. Often we take this to be reality—whatever I perceive, for me, equals reality. And so in this practice, we start to bring really close attention to how perception works, like in the example of the yogi making the sound becoming a frog making the sound.

What we're doing here on this retreat is actually refining perception. In the same way that you might see a branch in the path in the summer—you see a branch, you walk closer, and you see actually a group of ants walking. It was not a little branch. It was a group of ants. You break down reality. You correct reality. Then when you come closer still, you see one ant walking in the paw, or whatever it's called, of this little ant.

In the same way, I sit here with my breath. The breath—it's always been the same. Why would I watch the breath? It's in, out. I know. Suddenly, something appears. It's like, "Oh, this breath, maybe..." Even what I call "this breath" becomes cut into the beginning of the breath. And so at some point, this thing that I call the breath—I notice that this is not actually a solid thing. When there's the beginning of the in-breath, the end of the in-breath actually doesn't exist at all. And when there is the end of the in-breath, the beginning doesn't exist. But I make them together. I put them together. So there's the refining of perception that happens.

Is this perception, this river of perception, always happening? Is it you or yours, your perceiving? Is it happening in you, or are you inside perceptions? That's how the mind will own it, cling to it.

There are so many things around perception. There's the owning of it, like with the other aggregates, but there's also the functioning of it, how it's conditioned. Some of the distortions of perception that we clarify here: "This will be satisfying. This will bring me complete happiness." This next meal, or this next sit—I feel it's going to be it. Or this talk. And in the end, you say, "Oh no, it didn't quite do it."

Neither the meal, because it's gone, nor the talk, because this is samsara. The phenomena cannot bring complete satisfaction. It's not in their nature. They simply can't.

So there's a refinement of perception that we do on this retreat. We refine perception. And one of the perceptions is the perception of self, of "me," that we're going to break down into many moments of many different things—many different sensations, many different mind states. And suddenly the idea of "me" is not so clear and solid. It's like, wow, this is very conditional. There are things appearing, disappearing, things that can be controlled, others that can't.

The image for perception, and this is very important—the image is a mirage. You see how this image speaks to how we can see in a certain way and how the seeing can get clarified or refined.

So the next river that I named at the beginning of the talk is this river of intention. There's always intention. Actually, it's a much wider river or heap or grouping, this aggregate. It includes everything else that is mental, that is happening—emotion,

everything else. We could say that feeling tone is affective—how we're touched by the contact with the world. It's pleasant, it's unpleasant, it's neither one nor the other. Perception is cognitive—this is a tree, this is male, female if we think in these terms, this is food. It names. This is cognitive.

So this "all other" heap or river is the river of, we could say, the reactive or responsive—or I read somewhere "purposive," if that means something to you. It's how the mind engages with what is born out of contact with reality. So "I want," or "it hurts, I want to move my leg"—the intention to move would arise out of that. The conditionings of, you know, "when somebody says that, it always makes me laugh," or "when somebody does that..." There's a conditioning to respond. "When I hear that, I always get scared. This is how I am." You see?

So that's another area where identification can come. I don't know if you studied intention today in your day of practice, if you were aware of this. This is one of the places where, at some point in our practice, we can say, "I'm not the body." Clearly, there is a body—I agree with Joseph. There is a body. It's not mine. It's not me. It's there. It doesn't disappear, but it's not me. It's known. Okay, I agree with that. I agree with the fact that I'm not the feeling tone. They do happen and they change quickly and I don't have control over them.

But the one who really goes to do the walking—this is me. The intention to stand up and go—this is me. I agree with everything else you say, that's fine. But intention, that's me.

In Buddhism, it goes so far that it questions every aspect of reality: Is it really you?

Can this really be owned? Do you have mastery over this, or is this conditional? I talked about this this morning—how intentions are conditional. And so that's one of the, what is the expression, hideouts of selfing. "This one I'm going to keep identifying with." That takes really refined attention to be able to notice. It needs a mind that is really able to be concurrent with the unfolding of events, an attention that is sustained over time, to be able to catch how decisions are made because of circumstances.

I've been playing with this a lot in the last few days, knowing that I would be talking about it. It's still so fascinating to me how suddenly at seven-something, I'm in the office up there, and I have the idea that I could go down. I'm giving a talk at seven-thirty. So of course at seven-something, if things are right, the idea to go down will come. It's conditional in this way. But I can really be misled thinking that I'm deciding to go. On a conventional level, totally. But when we yogis really slow down and take a good, sustained—I want to say profound—look at reality, we notice how we're conditioned to.

If you're interested right now, or if you're disinterested, it's not so much a you that decides this. It's the temperament. It's what you're used to. It's what you've trained yourself to be interested by. It's the biological level of energy available. It's many things that will make you want to listen or want this to end. It's not so personal.

This—do not believe me—this practice is an invitation to actually slow down enough, gain enough attention to maybe see this or see something else.

Perhaps one important thing to say about intention, to revisit what I said this morning: all these little chapters, rivers of experience—I think the Buddha divided them like this because they have so much meaning in terms of freedom and suffering. This intention, for example, is what's going to condition the experience of further aggregates, further rivers, all the rivers. If I train worry, resentment, my experience later reflects that. And neurology agrees—there are these neural pathways that even become physical in the brain. And so the way I use this mind, these intentions, will have an impact on how I experience life later.

I was just about to say "the Buddha," but what I meant was Joseph. I had a moment of delusion—or clarity. A number of nights ago, you will remember, he was talking about renunciation. And I think, if I remember well, that's when you talked about this, Joseph—about these two ways that the Buddha divided his experience.

These are in my words this time. But I always found this very fascinating: that the Buddha at some point said, "I'm going to make a division between two kinds of thoughts or intentions"—that's this river that I'm talking about now. "I'm going to put in one category all the intentions of renunciation, generosity, kindness—all these wholesome intentions. These I'm going to cultivate. I'm going to appreciate. And every time there's an intention that is related to hatred, greed, aversion, delusion, or cruelty"—these are my words, not exactly his or theirs—he said, "I'm going to actually abandon this."

So he was basically looking at this aggregate and saying, "I'm going to act on a certain kind of qualities of mine, and I'm going to abandon certain other qualities of mine. And in this way, my life should gain in freedom and ease. I should go in the opposite direction from suffering."

And when I read this, I think, "Wow, this is so simple. I just have this to do." And then practicing—how complex it gets. Is that this intention or that? I'm not clear if I'm being generous right now or if I'm looking for vengeance as I'm generously giving this feedback to this person. What's happening here? What is the motive, the intention? So it's not easy to do.

But at the same time, I have to say that these days it's very much in my mind that it's actually pretty simple, if one can recognize and just joyfully abandon. Joyfully—because knowing this is going to lead to trouble. And if something of beauty, beautiful states of mind are there—I'm talking about the highest kind of aesthetic, related to beauty, at least in French it is—

So when I see beautiful states of mind, I rejoice, feel them, sense them, nurture them. Then there's something very simple about this—very, very beautiful and wholesome and truly liberating.

So maybe that's a few words on that river that is running through also. It's always there. As you have the intention right now, maybe to listen, or the intention to think about something else that is more pleasant—still it's somewhere effective, somewhere in there.

And the last river is this river of consciousness. This is the activity of knowing. It's something actually extremely simple, maybe also mysterious, but it's this knowing that is happening with any of these other aggregates or in any experience that we have. There might be the recognition of what it is—that this is plaid and this is striped—but there's another kind of knowing that is extremely simple. It's the actual connecting, receiving the experience. So it's not the organizing of the world, but the being-there-ness, we could say. The awareness that it's happening.

Now, if you manage to clarify that all the others are not me, not mine, they're really happening out of conditions—but the observer is *moi*. Again, I don't want... Very important here not to think that I should not perceive reality like this. "Oh my God, I'm perceiving that I'm lifting the glass of milk. Wrong. Everything's wrong." It's not like this. In practice, I would just become aware of it, like, "Wow, it really appears like this." You know, it appears—it's really convincingly, three-dimensionally, totally appearing like I'm... it's felt like this. Being aware of it, being aware of the way it's perceived. Or, "What is he saying? I'm here listening to the..." There's nothing wrong with that. You can totally be aware of this. It feels like "I" is experiencing this, when actually we could say it's just a factor of mind. Generosity sometimes is a factor of the mind that is in there, and it wants to give, it wants to share—that's its function. And this consciousness, you could say, is also something, a function in the mind that is knowing experience. Nothing personal about it. But you see how sticky it can be. "But it's really me. It really appears like it's me."

One way to break it down maybe a little bit is to talk about the six kinds of consciousness. The consciousness of hearing at the ear door, the consciousness of sensations, the consciousness of all these senses—smelling consciousness or tasting con-

sciousness. Try to hear the bell. That's the classic example here. Try to hear the bell, to have the hearing consciousness. Hear the bell before it actually rings and after it will have rung. Bell-hearing consciousness is concurrent with bell ringing. It cannot happen before or after. It doesn't last after. It arises with the experience and dies with it.

Consciousness of feet right now appeared conditionally to me suggesting it, and it didn't appear before the sensation or after—it's concurrent. It appears with it and dies with it when you bring your attention to your earlobes. If you do. So there's this consciousness we might perceive as something that has duration. It stays. It's me. But in this way of using the aggregates, I start to see how it arises with experience. Hearing consciousness arises with that. Consciousness of your father arises with that image in mind—the thinking consciousness. Arises with it and dies with it. It lasts only the moment that it's in contact with the experience and dies right there.

And so we can become aware of this in our practice, to see how consciousness of a certain kind arises with the experience. It's mixed and it's impossible to remove it, but it's the knowing aspect of the experience. It's not the bell ringing, it's the knowing of it.

So these are the five rivers constantly running through. If you want to play with this, what I like to do often is—and you'll adapt this as you want—but in the right weather conditions,

I'll take a walk around the loop at lunchtime, and I'll just spend a few minutes being aware of form, the river of form. As I walk, it's constantly changing—hardness, lightness, movement. There's hearing vibration, feeling the body, the form, the physicality of the material world. I can feel this.

Then I'll spend another thirty or forty seconds just being aware of feeling tone. I zone in and focus on pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality. As I'm walking: oh, beautiful tree—pleasant. Car coming—unpleasant, fear arises, unpleasant sensation. Car passes by, release, feels pleasant. I can be aware of just the changing nature of pleasantness and unpleasantness.

Then I go to the next river. As I'm walking, I can totally experience that this mind organizes the world. It's trees, road, left side of road, car—it names things. What is happening? It knows. It organizes in a certain way. I can see this.

And then I spend another few seconds just noticing that there's an intention to walk, an intention to look in that direction perhaps. Or the production of thoughts—that's also part of this aggregate. I see something and think, "These walls, we don't have these

walls. Is it only in Massachusetts they have these rock walls? There's so many of them. This farmer, who did that? Who was paid? Were they paid?" It's like, wow, it's producing a lot. There's visual contact, and it's producing stuff. This is that river running.

And then there'll be the last river: wow, there's consciousness. Through all of this, there's a knowing. There's an awareness of all these different things, and it's happening now. There's a knowing quality.

This slowly breaks the notion of "me walking." It's just these things working together. This is human experience.

So that's one way to work with it. The invitation, if you take this on, is to use these as glasses to look at the world as dharma, rather than as "what I want in life." You can take another pair of glasses. If you don't like the five aggregates, you can put on the four noble truths. Or you can put them down and take another pair—something else. I don't want to get you too confused, but there are many of them. The brahma viharas: Is there presence or absence of care in here? Or the hindrances: Is there presence or absence?

So if you take on the five aggregate glasses, then you would learn to recognize them in experience. That's already a skill to gain. And then you would see their impermanent nature, their unsatisfying nature—beings changing all the time. How many thoughts will it take, as I've heard Joseph say many years ago—which thought will be the satisfying one? Which feeling tone will be the one that will do it? None.

So we see the impermanence, the unsatisfactory nature of them, and the incapacity to own any of this. Because it runs by. Because it arrives uninvited, as I heard someone say here in the hall.

Thank you.

Ally, I love these images too.

For the mental formations and intentions, the image is a banana tree trunk, because we can see that there's no hardwood or heartwood in the banana tree. It bears its fruits, and then it falls flat on the ground.

You see this when you're sitting here and suddenly there's this mental formation of, "Oh, where I want to be is not here," because there's an experience of wanting to be in this place with these people or that person. There's this big production—the banana tree with its great fruits and beautiful leaves. It's a big production. And after it has borne its fruit, it falls flat on the ground. And I'm like, "Oh, there was a big production and it had no substance to it. It was an empty arising."

It felt like I am the one turning when I reach the end of my path, but if I look closer, there's no core, there's no essence—no Pascal that is turning. It's a bunch of conditions that make turning happen.

So, the plantain tree trunk.

And the last one, consciousness, is the magic show—or the magician, you can choose. It gathers all these sensations, feeling tones, and it knows all this, and it makes it feel like, "Wow, it's really happening to me!" It creates this illusion of continuity of *moi* that is very enticing.

These are the images: foam and bubble, mirage, plantain tree, and finally, magic show. Hopefully there was something in there for you.

Let's finish by just sitting a moment in these rivers, maybe. See if you can remember and recognize them in your experience right now, or some of them—the most apparent, perhaps.

May we all have a fluid sense of self that can come in when useful and be dropped right away, instead of a rigid sense of self. May we all know freedom within these five aggregates and use them to free the mind rather than to entangle it.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 37

Introduction to Compassion Meditation

Rebecca Bradshaw · 47 min

In this comprehensive introduction to compassion meditation, Rebecca Bradshaw guides practitioners through understanding karuṇā as the second of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes). She begins by placing compassion within the larger framework of all four qualities—mettā (loving-kindness), karuṇā (compassion), muditā (appreciative joy), and upekkhā (equanimity)—showing how together they form a complete and balanced approach to relating with others and ourselves.

Bradshaw carefully distinguishes authentic compassion from its near enemies: pity, which creates separation and hierarchy, and grief or despair, which involves drowning in suffering rather than holding it with care. She shares the Dalai Lama's teaching that while first touching another's suffering may bring momentary pain, the compassion that follows is actually sweet. The Pāli term for compassion points to 'the quivering of the heart in response to pain'—a natural capacity we all possess rather than something we must manufacture.

The guided meditation offers practical instruction for developing this quality, beginning with someone whose suffering is manageable rather than overwhelming, then turning toward oneself, and finally expanding outward to all beings. Throughout, Bradshaw emphasizes the delicate balance of touching suffering while simultaneously accepting it—wishing to alleviate pain without attachment to outcomes. The session concludes with Thich Nhat Hanh's profound poem 'Please Call Me By My True Names,' which illuminates the deep interconnection and equality that authentic compassion reveals.

Tonight we're going to move on to the Brahma Vihara of compassion, and I want to say a few words first before we begin.

Winnie mentioned last week that there are four Brahma Viharas: metta, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. I love looking at these four together because to me they seem like a great package for how to relate to other people with sanity.

You start with metta, and metta is just developing this sense of friendliness, kindness. It seems like a good foundation—just basic friendliness. Then with compassion, we take that friendliness and turn it towards acknowledging and caring about suffering. And yet life isn't only suffering, so the third Brahma Vihara, appreciative joy, is

when we take that kindness and orient it towards appreciating the success and happiness in other people's lives. Right there, there's balance—orienting towards the suffering and orienting towards the joy.

The last Brahma Vihara, equanimity, is basically letting go of any attachment we may have developed over doing the other three Brahma Viharas. Attachment to results, you could say, or to things being a certain way, or to people being a certain way. Letting go of fixing people, controlling people, taking too much responsibility for other people. It's an acknowledgement of each person's destiny and each person's responsibility for their own lives.

All four of those together—it's just so sane. It's so friendly, and yet it's balanced with the capacity of heart of equanimity that can hold that all lives include joy and sorrow. This equanimity is important underneath or supporting each one of the Brahma Viharas. It's important in metta. It's definitely very obvious it's important in compassion. It brings the balance.

Each one of the Brahma Viharas is primed by a certain orientation of the heart and mind. Metta is primed—or the proximate cause of metta—is seeing the good in yourself or someone else. When we're cultivating metta, we're orienting towards what's good about a person. You've probably heard the instructions to think of the good qualities in this person, think of why they're so easy to love, think of your own good qualities, touch into your basic goodness. All of that is orienting towards the good, and it's meant to bring up metta, friendliness.

With compassion, we turn that friendliness towards suffering. We pay attention to the suffering in our own lives or other people's lives. As you can see, this might be a bit harder. Most people find compassion a little more challenging. Though interestingly, some people are naturally drawn towards compassion and notice they've actually been doing the metta practice as a compassion practice—they have been orienting towards suffering. For some people, the avenue into their heart is really through suffering or touching suffering. You may notice that for yourself. But there's a difference between the two: metta is oriented towards what's good, and compassion is oriented towards suffering.

There's just one traditional phrase for compassion practice: "May you be free of suffering," or "May I be free from suffering." There are some more modern phrases that people have used: "I care about this pain," "I care about this suffering," or simply, "I care."

The trick with "may you be free from suffering" is to elicit the care in the heart without eliciting attachment to the suffering going away. That traditional phrase has a kind of challenge to it. You're wishing for one to be free from suffering like this rather than like that. I guess that's the whole practice of compassion—understanding how to relate to, touch, and care about suffering like this rather than finding the heart starting to contract. You can use either phrase that you like: "May you be free from suffering," or "I care about your suffering," or "I care about this suffering."

Let's talk a little bit more about what compassion is and what it's not. We could say that compassion is the heart that can touch suffering with openness and with care. I experience it as a kind of bittersweet feeling, a sweet, poignant feeling. The sweetness is the connection, and the poignancy, obviously, is that we're talking about suffering.

The near neighbors—the experiences that can pass for compassion but aren't compassion—include, for example, pity. With pity, we have that sense that we are caring, but there's a separation there. There's an "oh, you poor thing over there," or "you poor thing down there," or "I'm so glad that's not me, you poor thing." It might look like compassion, but there's separation. True compassion is a relationship between equals. It's like, "I know that suffering." Or, "You could be me."

You see the difference, right? There's that connection.

Another near neighbor of compassion is grief or despair—a kind of drowning, a wrenched heart around the suffering. And please don't misunderstand me. This doesn't mean that grief is bad. Sometimes we go through a grief process, and that's part of being human.

I love this story that Sharon tells about going to teach in Russia. She had a translator, and she was talking about compassion, and she kept thinking there's something about this translation that's just not quite working right. So she asked the translator, "What are you translating as compassion? How do you understand it?" And he said, "It's a state of being terribly overcome with someone's sorrow, like having a stake through your heart and the burden of someone's pain burdening you too."

That's a near neighbor of compassion. We kind of laugh, but sometimes we—not other people, but sometimes we—have the idea that if we're not suffering horribly, we're not actually feeling compassion. Sometimes we have the idea that if we're feeling compassion, we ought to be suffering.

I was reading something by the Dalai Lama's translator. Somebody asked the Dalai Lama, "Does compassion hurt? Does it have to hurt?" And his answer was so interesting. He said that when you first touch the other person's suffering, yes, there is some

pain in that moment. But after that, the feeling of compassion that takes over is sweet. He said that sometimes Westerners get confused about the boundary between the other person and themselves. They forget that that is actually a different person. It was really amazing.

And I think that's pointing toward the last Brahma Vihara of equanimity—understanding that this is another person with their own destiny, and holding that. It can help sometimes, keeping us from drowning in grief and despair.

The far neighbor of compassion is cruelty. We're not usually going to mistake cruelty for compassion, but it's the hard heart—the heart that maybe kind of wants somebody to suffer. Unlike cruelty, metta and compassion are natural for us. We don't have to dredge this up or manufacture it. We have hearts that naturally respond to suffering. One translation of the Pali term is "the quivering of the heart in response to pain." We have that natural capacity to empathize.

One of my favorite compassion phrases is from the Zen monk Ryokan. He says, "Oh, that my priest's robes were wide enough to gather up all the suffering people in this floating world." You know that big heart? But he says "this floating world," which I find so interesting. There's a certain lightness to the compassion. It's not heavy. It's light.

So with compassion, the first person we start with is somebody that we know who is suffering. It's meant to trigger that response of the heart. I usually recommend you don't choose somebody who's suffering too horribly much. When I first did this as an intensive practice here at IMS, the first person I chose was my very dear friend who was suffering from a pretty severe depression. And it didn't work. It was too much. It brought up too much grief for me, too much sadness. So I switched, and the first person I worked with was a co-worker whose husband was dying. I wasn't super close to her, but I liked her. That level was the right level for me to really start to understand what compassion was and how it felt.

So if we start with somebody who's too hard, we don't always get the flavor, because the grief or the sadness takes over too much. And by hard, I mean somebody you care about deeply or are very close to.

All of these Brahma Viharas are explorations of the heart. We're learning all the flavors of our heart and how they respond to life. And I want to emphasize that they're explorations. So as you do the practice, you're going to sometimes feel compassion, but you're also sometimes going to feel these other near and far neighbors—the other qualities of the heart that can come up, including the afflictive qualities. It's not bad. It's using it to understand.

So yes, if you're working with somebody and it's too intense and there's lots of grief and despair, that's a sign to move to somebody easier and see if we can cultivate the flavor.

The trick with compassion flavored with equanimity is the ability to touch and feel suffering while at the same time accepting it—to wish to alleviate it and to accept it. It's a delicate balance. When I first did it on retreat, I found it difficult. I was interviewing with Joseph at that time, and I went in and said, "I got an A in metta and I'm getting an F in compassion." You don't need to grade yourselves.

So we develop compassion as a Brahma Vihara, as we're going to do tonight, as a practice to encourage the quality very directly. And we also develop compassion in our own practice when we learn how to relate to our own suffering with kindness and care. We get to practice it formally here, but we're really practicing it informally this whole retreat—unless there's anybody out there who's not suffering at all. But if you're suffering, part of your practice is developing mindfulness and developing care. So you're developing compassion informally the whole time you're here.

I think that's enough introduction. I will lead you a little bit, and then I'll set you free. We'll start with somebody easy—well, somebody who's suffering who's easy. Then we'll do ourselves for a while, and then you can choose one or two other people. It's often helpful to have your four: your easy person, your good friend, your neutral person, your difficult person. You could choose a couple of them to do, and then we'll end with all beings.

So start by taking a comfortable posture or position. Allow yourself to settle into your body here, sitting. Perhaps you can feel your heart center if you wish. You can put your hand over your heart—this beating, feeling heart. Maybe even offer a couple of phrases of just wishing yourself well: may I be free from suffering.

You can call forth that quality of care, especially as you learn the flavor of it. If you want, take a moment to let it permeate your body, flow through your limbs, your torso. Just a sense of care.

And then if you wish, you can bring to mind somebody who you know is having a hard time. If you can, bring forth an image of them, or if that's difficult, just a felt sense of them. You can contemplate the challenge or suffering in their life. And you can see how the heart responds.

This is one way you can do all of these Brahma Viharas: you can do them wordlessly by noticing or focusing on the person and, in this case, their suffering. Let the heart respond. If you notice a sense of care, focus on that, sending it towards them. Very gentle.

And sometimes the phrases help prime this feeling: May you be free from suffering. A sweet, gentle wish. I care about your suffering. I care about this pain.

Relaxing the body, mind, and heart. Relaxing into compassion. Using the phrases if that helps prime the feeling. Connecting. Caring. Feeling the sweetness of the connection, the sweetness of the heart that cares. It's a huge gift in this world, a heart that cares.

And if you find that grief, sadness, pity, or other emotions arise, you can see if it helps to move closer to the suffering or move back a little bit. It's almost like you play with the distance, how close you get. If it's too tricky, see if you can find somebody easier. You can audition people. Your heart knows how to care. You can trust that.

If it gets too intense, you can also come back and focus on the strength of your heart. Feel free to experiment. Your heart is strong enough to hold this suffering and to care about it.

If you find your attention wanders, you just come back to the image, the reflection on the suffering, the response of the heart, the phrases if they help support that response. If you're enjoying this exploration of the specific person, you can continue.

Or if you wish, now you can turn towards yourself. Take a moment to contemplate the challenges of your life, the difficulties—not in great detail, as we don't want to send you down thinking trains, but simply acknowledging perhaps the ways you suffer in heart, mind, body. And calling forth that quality of heart that cares.

Perhaps you can remember some of how it feels from the person you were just practicing with, or you can simply call it forth. Feel the compassion or the caring of heart spread throughout your body, from your heart throughout. Allow it to spread. Or if you prefer, you can use an image of yourself and send it to yourself, relaxing into the care.

May I be free from suffering. A very beautiful wish for yourself. *I care about this suffering.* Whichever phrase helps you connect with that caring feeling—receiving that care, showering heart, mind, and body in that care. Sometimes it might just be that simple wish: *May I be free from suffering.* That's enough. That simple wish is a sign of care. It's a wholesome thought.

At this point, *I care about this suffering* may be just an intention. It may not feel like a lot, but it's a wholesome intention, planting seeds that will sprout in their own time. Accept whatever your experience is here as you explore your heart. Perhaps you experience the compassion as a sense of softness towards the suffering, a relaxation with the suffering. It has that flavor of acceptance while still wishing to alleviate pain.

You can continue with the development of compassion for a person who is suffering or for yourself. Or if you wish, bring in some of your easier people, bringing them to mind, connecting. If you know ways that they are suffering, you can connect with those. Or if nothing specific stands out, you still know that all human lives contain this mix of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. You can connect with that truth—that there is suffering in our lives.

And again, exploring how the heart responds, encouraging that sense of care or softness, using the phrases if they help support. Some people even use the metta phrases but orient them towards suffering. You can try that too if it is helpful, easing your way into this kind empathy with this person's suffering.

Compassion is the great gift that we give ourselves and others—the gift of care which makes suffering bearable, able to be held.

Let us take a moment at the end of this sitting to send this sense of care throughout our meditation hall to each other. We all know that in even just a single yogi day there is joy and there is suffering, and that we all here are holding our own private suffering, the ways that we are challenged. Sending that sense of care out to each other, our fellow yogis: *May you be free from suffering. I care.* And if we wish, sending it out further, out into the universe, this sense of care to all beings.

I'd like to end with a beautiful compassion poem by Thich Nhat Hanh called "Please Call Me By My True Names." The poem reflects that sense of connection that comes from compassion, and that sense of equality with those who suffer—the humbleness of compassion, in the best sense of that word.

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow because even today I still arrive. Look deeply. I arrive in every second to be a bud on a spring branch, to be a tiny bird whose wings are still fragile, learning to sing in my new nest, to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower, to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive in order to laugh and to cry, in order to fear and to hope. The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river, and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond, and I am also the grass snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks, and I am the arms merchant selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the Politburo with plenty of power in my hands, and I am the man who has to pay his debt of blood to my people, dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life. My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills up the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are but one.

Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up—and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.

CHAPTER 38

Integrity of Effort

Winnie Nazarko · 51 min

> *In this dharma talk, Winnie Nazarko offers a nuanced exploration of wise effort (sammā vāyāma) as the sixth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. Rather than focusing on the quantity of effort—whether we're trying too hard or being too lax—she examines what actually makes effort wise and how it integrates with mindfulness and concentration in the path's final triad.*
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> *Nazarko presents the Buddha's teaching on the Four Great Endeavors: preventing unarisen unwholesome states, abandoning arisen unwholesome states (hindrance practice), arousing unarisen wholesome states, and maintaining arisen wholesome states. She emphasizes that wise attention (yoniso manasikāra) is the key to working with the hindrances of sense desire (kāmacchanda), ill will (vyāpāda), sloth and torpor (thīna-middha), restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca), and doubt (vicikicchā). The primary strategy is always to restore mindfulness, as this naturally weakens unwholesome states while strengthening wholesome ones.*
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> *The heart of the talk addresses how personal agendas and goals—wanting to eliminate difficult emotions, attain special experiences, prove something, or become a 'good yogi'—can undermine practice when pursued directly. Nazarko offers four skillful approaches: recognizing and letting go, reframing goals to align with the path, practicing renunciation by treating these desires as meditation objects like everything else, and observing closely what happens when we practice from these perspectives. She emphasizes that integrity of effort means having 'everything in the pot'—an integrated, non-fragmented approach where even our personal wishes become objects of wise attention rather than hidden drivers of practice.*

I see I'm surrounded here by the work of yesterday on behalf of the staff. I remember the first long retreat I did here was the first year they did this, so we had no idea it was coming. You can imagine walking into the hall for the first time—nobody who was sitting knew this would happen. I can just remember walking in and laughing. So funny. And it was funny. And then of course other people had other reactions too, like "this is really weird" and "this is how they spend their time." The mind—it's all so individual.

So tonight I'm going to offer a teaching on wise effort.

Often when you think about effort, you may be thinking of it in terms of trying hard, trying a lot, or maybe being lazy. You think of it in terms of volume of effort, perhaps. There's either a lot of it, or there isn't very much, or maybe there's some place right in the middle where it's just right—but that seems to be kind of elusive. To start talking about effort, I'm not going to talk about it so much in terms of how much effort as I'm going to talk about what makes effort wise.

To begin with the classic teachings on effort, we'd have to locate it on the Eightfold Path. It's step number six, wise effort, coming after the sila group. It's part of the last set of things, followed by wise mindfulness and wise concentration. These three together are considered to be the concentration set in the Eightfold Path. If you think of it, you can see why they're clustered together. There needs to be some sort of effort made in order for mindfulness to arise. And once mindfulness is there and it's sustained, it supports the arising of wise concentration. So they come together. It's really clear that the path calls for the summoning of a certain kind of energy. No lazy people ever get enlightened, seemingly.

So that's wise effort. But then the next question is, well, wise effort to do what exactly? And like other steps on the Eightfold Path, it's wise effort to do the path. But there's another way to explain it, and the Buddha talks in terms of the four great endeavors. He says we're really making effort to do four things.

The first one is to prevent the arising of unarisen, unwholesome states. So you've got a double negative there—to prevent the arising of unarisen, unwholesome states. Or as a friend of mine says, keep yourself out of trouble. When he's talking about unwholesome states, he's talking about the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion, and the other states that flow from these. These other states are variations on a theme, all of which are states of suffering.

So how do you prevent these from arising? Well, there's sila, the practice of basic morality. There's the practice of the paramis, the perfections of mind. There is sense restraint, guarding the sense doors—so hearing, thinking, smelling, touching, tasting, emotions aren't running rampant without there being any adult supervision. Another way to say that is maintaining continual mindfulness. Good luck with that one, at least in the short term.

The second of the great endeavors is to abandon unwholesome states that have already arisen. They're there, these states—versions of greed, hatred, and delusion—present in the mind. What to do? These are the hindrances. So this is hindrance practice, practice with the hindrances. A lot of our practice on retreat really takes place in this particular zone, doesn't it? Variations on these things—they may be subtle, they

may be gross, but they're frequent. If you were going to articulate a slogan for practicing with this endeavor, you'd say something like: don't cling to suffering when it arises. See it for what it is. Bring wisdom to bear.

These states can obscure the mind and keep mindfulness from arising and being operative. And if mindfulness isn't present, there's no ability to see clearly what's happening, nor to observe moment-to-moment experience. When you lose awareness, you lose mindfulness, and you lose the basis to establish any kind of concentration. That's why they're called hindrances to concentration.

So always in practicing with the hindrances, the primary task is to restore mindfulness. That's really the key strategy. Because if you can restore mindfulness and maintain it, then concentration will arise. And if you can know what you're experiencing continuously, your understanding will gradually fill in over time. There'll be fewer breaks in what you're observing. You'll see things more as a stream of experience, and you're really entering into a virtuous cycle.

Let's spend a few minutes talking about the hindrances, because I don't think we've really had a full hindrance talk, have we? We've had plenty of hindrances, but no talk. That doesn't seem right.

So: sense desire, also known as craving, thirsting, *taṇhā*. Ill will, also known as aversion—which can also manifest as the fear branch of that. Those are the two big heavy ones, the ones you really need to learn how to handle and work with. And then the other ones are dullness and drowsiness, better known as sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt.

In order to work with these, you need wise attention. This is a key point, because it's not like just any attention given to these things is helpful. There are ways we can attend to these things that actually fuel them. So what would that way of attending be that fuels them? Identification with them as a me or a mine or an owned-by. Enmeshment with them. Or in some cases, indulging in them—because sometimes they can feel kind of pleasant.

For instance, if you have a craving for, let's say, lunch—because that's a major event here, isn't it? A particular thing at lunch. Say something was on the table early in the retreat, and it was just the right thing for you, very satisfying. And you're sitting in practice and you think of this. "Oh, that was so good. I wonder if they're going to have it again. I wonder if I left a note for the kitchen and told them I was having a psychologic-

al crisis and this would help me feel more grounded. And other people probably felt that way too. And then they would put that out on the table, and it would be for the benefit of all beings. So I think I'll write the note."

And so it goes into *papañca*, right? It proliferates. And then maybe there's a fantasy of actually having the thing, and that can be kind of pleasant too. "It's going to be so good. I can imagine how it tastes." And then it can suddenly turn unpleasant because you realize you're probably not going to get it, and it all crumbles. Then it's a state of suffering. There's probably a state of aversion and judgment there.

So that's an example of unwise attending.

How then to attend wisely? The primary task is always to restore mindfulness. Always. There are many different ways to work with the hindrances, and some of them are specific to the particular hindrance. I'm not going to get into that level of detail. But just to say, some of the general techniques for working with these things include recognizing it—that is, bringing perception to bear—naming it,

noting it, which supports the arising of mindfulness. Notice if you're clinging to it, holding on to it. See if there's identification there with it. And then, of course, opening to it and investigating it—in other words, turning the mind towards it, going into direct observation of all the twists and turns that are involved with this particular state of body and mind.

Or you could employ some of the particular remedies. For drowsiness, sometimes it's suggested that you open your eyes in sitting, or stand up. With doubt, sometimes it's suggested that if there's a particular dharma question that keeps cycling and cycling, you ask the teacher the question so you can at least have it addressed. So there are particular remedies too.

But the important thing to know is that when you connect with unwholesome states skillfully, they weaken and decrease. This mindfulness stuff is pretty powerful. It has the capacity to weaken and, in some cases, suppress unwholesome states. And it simultaneously has the capacity, when directed towards wholesome states, to encourage and strengthen them.

So when we cultivate what supports our well-being, overall we're entering into this virtuous cycle where the mind is moving in a direction that builds energy, that builds capacity. If you think in terms of the seven factors of enlightenment—which I think someone is going to give a talk on pretty soon—one of these leads to another. Mindful-

ness leads to investigation, leads to effort and energy, leads to pīti or enjoyment. But you'll get the rest of the story later. The point is, there's a lawfulness to it all. How you look helps shape how the experience opens. So this wise attention is important.

The third of these four great endeavors that the Buddha talks about is to arouse wholesome states not yet arisen. If you were going to sloganeer on that one, you could say that wise attention makes wholesome seeds sprout. And how do we do that on retreat? Well, the process starts with the meditation instructions that we give you, because the whole point of the meditation instructions is to help you bring forward and maintain a wise view, wise attention towards what you're experiencing. The instructions I'll say to you: look at it like this, notice this, focus the mind like this. Mindfulness is partly stimulated in this kind of setting by the meditation instructions that you're given and by your implementation of those.

The last of the great endeavors is to maintain and perfect wholesome states already arisen. The slogan I originally had for this one was "wise attention is like fertilizer." But I thought, no, not fertilizer—make it something nicer than that. So I said compost. Wise attention is like compost. In the recognition of these states, you're supporting their presence and their strengthening. And overall, when you connect with wholesome states, they increase.

These endeavors related to wholesome states are important because very often we don't see them. That's a whole other talk, but for some reason, often these don't register—at least in part because they're frequently a regular part of our baseline consciousness. We don't really necessarily see them as any big deal or any particular thing. We operate out of them a lot, actually. Or at least people do who wind up going to things like this. I mean, this is not most people's idea of entertaining themselves for three months or six weeks. So there are already a lot of these in the mind stream, but they're not necessarily seen.

So that's a good chunk of what the Buddha says about wise effort. Now I'm going to talk about an aspect of effort that is sometimes made on retreat—often made on retreat—because this is part of how we are as humans. Our mind streams are a mix of things, right? Wholesome and unwholesome things. And so when we come to practice, our motivations are also mixed. When we undertake the journey and come to practice, there are a lot of different intentions in play.

For instance, we may have a picture of where we want to go in practice and what we want to accomplish when we're here, and we want to use the retreat to get there. And often we have a very specific idea of how this should happen, where we should go, and

what should happen. I'm going to give some examples of these things because I think it helps to make it specific. These are examples of some motivations and agendas that we often carry with us, whether for a whole retreat or for a sitting.

So these are kind of add-ons to the four great endeavors—our customized, idiosyncratic additions to the task that the Buddha has defined as the one we're aiming the mind towards on this retreat.

To get rid of a particular emotion or emotional pattern. To make ourselves different, into a preferred version, in some essential way. One example of this that a friend of mine gave me—and I think she'll be okay with me saying this—was that she's very extroverted, and she thought, "You know, extroversion is... it's better to be an introvert, not really needing to get the juice from people. Better to be an introvert." That would be an example of making yourself different in some essential manner. But your mind may have filled in the blanks in a different way.

To attain a particular kind of spiritual experience we've heard or read about. "I heard about this guy, he went on retreat and it was so far out—he totally left his body and was hovering above."

To prove something to ourselves or someone else. "I've never been the kind of person that could stick to something that was hard." "My husband said I'd never be able to make it without talking for six weeks. I'll show him." Don't tell him you have teacher meetings.

To experience pleasantness, bliss, or concentration—or maybe to have a psychic experience. To impress the teachers, get recognized as special. Or for those who are into non-existence, to have my ego and/or personality disappear.

To experience again something from a previous retreat—some really good sit or realization or something—to get it again, get it back. Or, depending on how previous retreats have gone, to *not* experience something from a previous retreat.

To be a good yogi. Great, if possible.

So what happens when we use the practice to pursue these goals? If we don't identify or acknowledge these specific personal additions to the four great endeavors, or if we practice in a way that attempts to achieve these goals, this is what happens: We're looking for a particular result related to the goal. "Is it there yet? Is it there yet? Am I getting better? Is it getting closer?" We try to control what arises and what doesn't arise, because we've already said what we want to have happen. We don't bring a fresh mind to

the instructions. We apply the instructions with an end in mind, or we completely disregard the instructions and do something else. It's interesting to find out on retreat how often that happens—it's like the instructions have never been employed.

We're always grading ourselves against what we want to have happening. So then the ego inflates and deflates based on our sense of success. We're not receptive to what is, so we're generally out of connection with or contact with what the predominant experience actually is. Struggle, fatigue, hindrances arise. There's an attempt to exert control, and when that fails we tend to get mad or sad. With that comes the self-judgment, the doubt, the fatigue, and lots of other hindrances.

So there are a number of problems if we don't see these agendas, if we're actually standing in them or lost in them, practicing from them and proceeding from them as a starting point and as a standard for measuring how we're doing.

Some of the problems are: We're trying to squeeze our spiritual practice into a context that's much too small, much too closed-ended, and much too specifically goal-oriented. We're starting from the wrong base and bringing an overlay to the whole situation. Instead of proceeding simply, we keep our usual approach going at the same time we're simply trying to be aware. So it's almost like there are two different things going on, which is way too complex. There's a split focus happening.

What was the phrase used to describe the process of waking up? "Untangling the tangle. Who can untangle the tangle?" This is an example of a tangle, right? There's a mental tangle, an emotional tangle happening.

We aren't really open to what is happening because we're too busy trying to make something specific happen or to make it not happen. Since we actually don't have the ability to implement our preferences—to make happen what we want to have happen in practice—we fail. And this is always, to me, the fatal defect in any strategy: the failure of it.

I'm willing to work hard if something can work. But when it really can't, then I guess I move to the lazy end of the spectrum. I take the easy way out, which has more to do with actually working with reality in a simple way.

The other part of it is that rigidity causes suffering because it resists what's actually happening—which is another way of saying it's resistant to the truth. Our task here is actually to harmonize with the truth and not to argue with it. And as we're learning as we go along, things arise and pass away according to their nature and not our wishes.

There's this line from a song that sometimes runs through my mind when I catch myself being in opposition to what's actually happening—when I'm doing sitting practice or just in daily life. This old country western song goes, "I fought the law and the law won." It's the law. Cause and effect, it's the law. It always wins.

Now at this point you might be saying, "Well, yes, but..." Yeah but, yeah but. You know, it would be great to get rid of this pain in my back that I think is associated with chronic tension, and my life would be better and there would be less suffering if I could get rid of it. Or you might say, it is true that my mind has a lot of aversion and it's very painful and I do want it to go away.

This mix of motives can be very mixed in terms of their wisdom and delusion. Very often there is a seed of wisdom in some of the things that we want, because really what we all want at the bottom of it is the end of suffering. Where we get crossed up is when we get very, very specific about how we imagine that should come about.

So then the question is: if these are actual things that come up for us, goals that have some wisdom in them, is there a way that we can practice with them and actually integrate them into what we're doing here? Is there a way to practice that can acknowledge these without getting entangled in them and drowning in the downside?

And the answer is yes—if there's integrity of effort. Integrity of effort. Integral, congruent, integrated effort. Now we're not talking about whether we're trying hard or whether we're not trying. We're looking at things from the point of view of: is everything in the pot? Is it all in the pot? Is there one thing going on here when we're doing practice? Or is it fragmented? Are there things outside of the practice that we're using the practice to try to make happen? Or is there some way that we can bring these to be aligned?

We can practice in a way that's integrated and has integrity, and it calls for sincerity and commitment and resolve. And what's the resolve then in relationship to these personal goals and agenda? It's to regard these personal goals with wise attention when they arise. This means being process-focused in relationship to them and not outcome-insistent.

Let's talk some more about how to work with these in an integrated way. There are different things you can do when they're present. One is to recognize them and choose to let them go. You're acknowledging them, you're opening to them, and you're saying, "Okay, I see that, I see that, and I'm just going to let go of that." Sometimes this is

possible. And sometimes it's not—because sometimes it's stuck to you like super glue. The truth is you do want. You do. So it's important on some level, and it's not really possible just to put it down, put it to the side.

There's a way to work with it where you can find the seed of wisdom within the goal or the agenda and refine it. You can actually reframe goals so that they become aligned with this process and not interfering anymore. This is reframing these motivations and desires in a way that's more skillful, so they can actually become stepping stones instead of obstacles.

Let's talk about how that might be. I read you the original list. You may wonder how I come up with these lists. Well, I have a mind and I watch it.

To get rid of a particular emotion or emotional pattern.

A refined or reframed version of that might be: to learn to meet difficult emotions with compassion and courage. "To make myself different in some essential manner" could become: to open to my full potential by developing new strengths. "To attain a particular kind of spiritual experience we have heard or read about" could become: to recognize new growth and insight without attachment. "To prove something to ourselves or someone else" could be: to develop confidence and faith in my true nature. "To experience pleasantness, bliss, or concentration, maybe even a psychic experience" could become: to recognize pleasantness, bliss, and concentration when they arise, without attachment. "To impress the teachers, get recognized as special" could be: to develop my potential in order to serve others. "To have my ego and personality disappear" could become: to recognize my true nature. "To experience something again from a previous retreat or sitting" could become: to let go of all expectations, seeing the unique truth of each moment. "To not experience something from a previous retreat or sitting" could become: to let go of all expectations, seeing the unique truth of each moment. "To be a good, maybe great, yogi" could become: to practice with integrity regardless of the immediate experience.

These are examples of reframing our goals so that they become aligned with practice and non-interfering.

The third major strategy of working with these I would call renunciation. Joseph gave a whole talk on renunciation, so I'll simply say that renunciation in this context means including them in the practice, just like everything else. "Oh, but they're special. This one is different." Notice the screaming mind of clinging. "But this one is different. No, this one is really—I need this one." To include them in practice, just like everything else, nothing special.

With wise attention, you can develop a skillful relationship to these motivations, noticing when they've become goals and not just thoughts, noticing when they're not objects of awareness anymore but there's almost the feeling that you've stepped out of meditation back to your regular self, and it's telling you what should happen.

That's an interesting point in practice, isn't it? When it kind of feels like you're meditating—you're sitting there, things are coming and going, breath is coming in and going out, hearing, seeing, smelling—and then a certain thought will arise. What I call it is falling out of meditation. There's almost the experience like you were meditating and now you're not. Now you're your regular self trying to figure out how to get back into meditation. Very often this kind of thing is operating when that happens. You're noticing when you're practicing out of, not in, the meditative process. It's almost as if you're standing in them and practicing from them.

So what happens next? You make the determination: they're in the pot too. Put it in the blender with mindfulness, just like everything else. "Oh no, not that one. Too personal. It's precious. It's important." And it is important. Very often these things are important. There's an underlying kernel of wisdom there. But the delusion is thinking we're somehow going to make it happen by something that we do that's mixed with delusion.

So we notice when these have become goals and not objects of meditation. And then what do you do? You apply the meditation instructions to them just the same way that you do to everything else. You see the arising of these personal goals as meditation objects. You can note them and name them. "Oh, this is wanting. This is fantasizing. This is trying to make something happen." And you use the standard practice instructions with them, recognizing and investigating what they are. This is a thought of a particular type. This is an emotion of a particular type.

These are the body sensations that arise after the thought or together with the thought. These are the sensations in the body that are part of this wanting. This is the vedanā of it—this is pleasant, this is unpleasant, this is neutral. The same basic process of touching, opening, examining things.

The hard part about this has two aspects. The first is the recognition that that's where the mind has gone, that's what it slipped into. And the second part is the renunciation required to actually say, "I will treat this just like everything else." You'll really see where the kick of identification is, because it very often comes up framed in these kinds of ways.

So that's the third way to work with these: recognize and let go; reframe in a way that brings them into alignment; and the renunciation of practicing with them just like you practice with anything else.

The fourth strategy is to observe closely what happens when you attempt to meditate from these perspectives. The feedback will help inform your effort, because that feedback is going to have a lot of hindrances in it and a lot of frustration in it.

Now I do want to say something about the fact that within all these very particular motivations and agendas, there is self-compassion. That's part of the mix. We don't want to suffer. We do want to know. We do want to get rid of the back pain—and of course you do. You do want a better relationship with somebody you care about. You do want to be able to solve a life issue. You do want to have a happier mind. You do want to have a healthier body. We all do. There's nothing wrong with this.

The question is: what's the best strategy for bringing forth what's beneficial in all these very specific, personal aspects of our lives? How do we bring that forth in the best kind of way, given the main process that we've entered into here—which is the practice of the four great endeavors, in the interest of liberating the mind from suffering of all kinds?

The answer is to not crisscross these things in a way that undermines the primary goal that we're here to do.

There's a very paradoxical part of this too. In foregoing the direct pursuit of these kinds of things here, and allowing the mind to settle and clarify, allowing the body to calm and rest and to open, and to develop a certain kind of energy—with the whole process held with mettā and compassion, the energy of acceptance, the letting go of resistance, letting go of the contraction of having to have it be a certain way—you're actually setting up the circumstances for maximum benefit in many of these particular areas that are of concern.

There's a reason that mindfulness meditation is recommended for things like high blood pressure and stress-induced illness and depression and various kinds of physical diseases and conditions that are related to stress. This is good for you in a lot of different ways.

So the question is: can you trust that you will be getting benefit from this, generic benefit from this, and let go of the temptation to turn it specifically towards trying to make a particular thing happen while you're here?

To close, then: what I wish for you all is happy bodies and healthy minds, happy minds and healthy bodies, all good things in all dimensions of your well-being. May you be able to fully open to and participate in this process of the mind's unbinding—for your benefit and well-being, and for that of all beings.

Let's sit for a minute and let it settle.

CHAPTER 39

Boredom

Rebecca Bradshaw · 57 min

> *In this engaging dharma talk, Rebecca Bradshaw offers a thorough investigation of boredom as it arises in meditation practice. Drawing from Buddhist psychology, she explains that boredom is not a single mind state but rather a complex mixture of disengagement, low energy, lack of mindfulness, and often subtle aversion or craving. She explores how neutral vedanā (feeling tone) conditions the mind toward spacing out when mindfulness is absent, leading to the disconnection we experience as boredom.*
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> *Bradshaw introduces the Shambhala tradition's distinction between 'hot boredom' and 'cool boredom.' Hot boredom contains an edge of discomfort—either aversion to the present moment or craving for something more interesting to happen. This type reflects our unmet expectations and self-aggrandizement plans. Cool boredom, by contrast, approaches disenchantment (nibbidā) and equanimity—a peaceful settling into ordinary experience without needing anything special to occur. She references Paṭācārā's enlightenment poem from the Therīgāthā, noting how awakening often arises in completely ordinary moments.*
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> *The practical guidance offered includes working skillfully with energy cycles, using questions to spark curiosity, and cultivating 'defamiliarization'—meeting each moment with fresh attention rather than assuming we already know what the breath or step will be like. Through stories of John Cage's avant-garde compositions and Charlotte Joko Beck's piano lessons, Bradshaw illustrates how refined attention reveals the extraordinary within the ordinary. The talk invites practitioners to embrace retreat as a 'revolution in slowness,' discovering contentment in each unremarkable yet utterly fresh moment.*

So as promised this morning, tonight's talk is on boredom.

Last December, I went to the dentist to have a root canal and root canal prep. The assistant and I got to talking, and there was some question about whether I needed to actually have the root canal done then. But I said I travel internationally sometimes, and not places where I'd want to get an emergency root canal, so I should probably do it. She asked what I do, and I said I teach meditation. She said, "Oh, I tried that once. I wound up thinking, is this it?"

So I said to her, "Well, sometimes it's boring." And she was so relieved when I said that—that that was a normal experience. Sometimes it can be helpful to know that nothing super special is supposed to be happening here. It's just life, ordinary life.

Trungpa Rinpoche is known to have said, "Practice is boring, boring, boring." It might be a little bit like this show I heard is on cable television in England called *Watching Paint Dry*. What they do is paint a wall a different color each day, and then you can watch it dry for 24 hours. I found that kind of interesting, actually.

A few years ago, a friend of mine sent me a link to a blog titled "The Dullest Blog in the World."

"Opening a Cupboard Door, October 16, 2005. There was a cupboard in the corner of the room. I reached out my hand and gripped the door handle. I pulled the door towards me, thereby opening the cupboard."

"Scratching my knee, September 10, 2004. My knee had a slight itch. I reached out my hand and scratched the knee in question. The itch was relieved, and I was able to continue with my activities."

It goes on and on like that, and I couldn't help but think it sounded like a meditation retreat.

So we come to meditation and it seems to be pretty ordinary—opening cupboard doors and scratching itches. And the question occurs to us: can anything be happening here? I came here, I came to meditate, to be enlightened, and something's supposed to be happening. And really, I'm just bored.

Practice definitely ruins our self-aggrandizement plans, our plans to get something. One teacher said it's anti-credential. It really doesn't give us any place to hang our ego on. We can't get a PhD in Dharma announcing our great attainments, right? Because then the next sitting or the next day, it's not so great anymore. I have to take the sign down.

It's actually great that it works that way. A big part of practice is learning how to connect with what's ordinary, with ordinary life. And this doesn't come as easy as it sounds like it should, perhaps.

What happens when we meet ordinary life? What happens when we contact experiences that are fairly neutral, like the breath, for example? We talk a lot about vedana—pleasant and unpleasant—the conditioning, how when something's pleasant we tend to grasp at it, and if it's unpleasant we tend to push it away, try to get rid of it. We talk about how this conditioning is obviously problematic, the root of much suffering.

We don't talk as much about neutral conditioning, so I'm going to address that a little. What happens if an object is neutral and there isn't mindfulness? We space out. We disconnect. We're not interested. We start to run on autopilot. So the conditioning with neutrality—neutral experiences, neither pleasant nor unpleasant—if there isn't mindfulness, is to not be engaged. And then we get bored. We're not engaged, so there's some disengagement, and then there's boredom. It's not so interesting. We're not so interested in it.

Boredom is anathema in our modern culture. I wonder if many people don't quit meditating simply because they're bored. We'd almost prefer any mind state but boredom. I know on my first long retreat here, I had really strong pain across my shoulders and neck. And I actually preferred being with that pain to being with the breath, because the breath was, to me, boring. At least the pain was interesting.

I love John Cage concerts. I've mentioned them in a number of my talks because I think he was one of the great avant-garde composers. He came up with these very unique musical compositions. One of them, called *Empty Words Part Four*, was two and a half hours long and debuted in 1974. He said, "I gave a performance of my piece called *Empty Words Part Four* for the students of Chögyam Trungpa at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. The piece goes on for two and a half hours and contains long silences of four or five minutes duration. Then out of that silence, I say just a few letters of the alphabet, following a score which was written through chance operations from the Journal of Henry David Thoreau. Meanwhile, there are these very faint images of Thoreau's drawings being projected on a screen behind me, but they are very dim and hardly change at all, perhaps once every twenty minutes. I thought it was an ideal piece for a Buddhist audience, but they became absolutely furious and yelled at me and tried to get me to stop the performance. The next morning, I had a meeting with Chögyam Trungpa, and he asked me to join the faculty at Naropa."

So I thought about that—why were they so upset? Maybe they were bored. They were hoping for something more interesting than four or five minutes of silence and images that change every twenty minutes. I think they couldn't bear it.

One more little story like that. I had a student last year who taught a graduate class on something to do with education, and I think it had something to do with mindfulness too. Each class they started with a ten-minute mindfulness meditation, and at the end they asked the students to evaluate the class, including that component. She said half the students liked the meditation and the other half didn't like it at all. Some got angry

that they had to do it. One even calculated how much those ten minutes cost him from his fees. Again, I wonder if they were just bored. Not much happening, and they wanted something to be happening.

So what is boredom? Let's look at this in a little more detail. I don't see it as a single mind state. I may be wrong, but I don't believe it's listed as a mind state in Buddhist psychology. I see it as a mix of different things happening. And I hope you got a chance to look at this yourself today after I suggested it this morning.

The first thing with boredom is there's usually some pulling back, some disengagement from what's happening. Then there might also be in the mix some low energy, a lack of interest, a lack of mindfulness, and perhaps some aversion and craving. Quite a mix in there. Sometimes it's a sign that our expectations aren't being met, that our agendas—which Winnie mentioned so beautifully last night—aren't performing very well. When all this happens, there can be a sense of restlessness, and the mind starts looking for something interesting or stimulating. And then we really have a multiple-hindrance attack on our hands.

So it's important to be mindful of boredom. I think sometimes we try to skip over the mindfulness of it because we don't even want to know that it's there. How many times have you read the signs in the bathroom? The mind is craving stimulation. So we cruise the bulletin board, hoping maybe there's something interesting up there. I had all the signs here memorized everywhere, I'd read them so many times. I think it's a pretty common experience—that wanting something to be happening.

So let's look at some of these pieces of boredom. We could start with what you might call our garden-variety boredom, which is simply not being interested, not engaged with what's happening. Sometimes it's useful to know why that's the case. Why are we not engaged? Why are we not interested?

Sometimes this has to do with low energy. Every day of our lives, and every yogi day, has ups and downs of energy. You've probably noticed that. There are times when you feel kind of "on," and then there are times where the energy is quite low. During those times when the energy is low, sometimes it's hard to find the energy or the interest to really connect with what's happening, and then we might get a little bored.

With low energy, one thing we can do is wait it out—to keep going and wait it out, or to bring a kind of light attention to what's happening while we're waiting for the energy to change. Or we can raise the energy, perhaps walk outside or walk faster. Or connect with something pleasant. Sometimes that will re-energize the mind. Drink some caf-

feine. Splash cold water on your face. All kinds of things that we can do to bring the energy up. And then often, if this is the cause, we'll be interested again in what's happening. We'll engage again.

Sometimes it's good to know, as a yogi, your general energy cycles, and you can figure out what's most helpful to do at certain times. So if at the same time every day you find yourself getting very bored in your meditation, it might be that that's just your low energy time, and maybe that's a good time to do more walking meditation.

I used to, when I was on retreat—I'm a morning person, so I wake up ready to go, I have lots of energy in the morning, and then it kind of goes down as the day goes on. After six o'clock, I'm not the world's best yogi. I used to save all my chores, my yogi tasks, for the evening because that was a time when I didn't have as much energy for sustained interest in sitting or walking meditation. If I had to clean my room, that's when I would do it. Sometimes I'd have a yogi job that I could do in the evening. Or if I had to take a shower, I'd take it in the evening. It was just a way of working with my energy cycle.

So that's low energy. What about just pure lack of interest in what's happening? I was thinking about this—it's like a preemptive giving up on the moment. Boredom assumes that we know what this moment is going to be like, and it doesn't have anything to offer us. We already know this breath. We know this step. We know the taste of this food. We've already given up on the moment.

If we look more closely as we investigate boredom, we see that it's not so much the object or the event that is boring, but rather the quality of mind and heart that we bring to our engagement with what's happening. So boredom can be a sign that we need to bring closer attention to what is happening, to get more engaged, to get closer, and out of that the interest returns.

One yogi mentioned last week that he had this fascinated interest in the breath. So obviously the problem isn't the breath, right? It's our attention to the breath.

I like to ride my bike for exercise, and I go on rides near my house along country roads. There are weeds and grass on the side of the road. Mostly I didn't pay much attention to it—kind of boring, right? Weeds and grass by the side of the road. Then one year my partner gave me a book of wildflower identification as a gift. So I got interested in wildflowers, identifying them and seeing what was around. There was this one patch of road that I started to pay attention to, and over the summer, I identified about fifteen varieties of wildflower in a few square feet of roadside grass and weeds. I got really in-

terested in it by paying attention. And I saw it so differently. When I just rode by, it was just some weeds. When I really paid attention—wow, there was a lot going on, a lot more depth, you could say, than it seemed on the surface.

Our meditation can be the same. We think, "Oh, just another breath," and kind of cruise the surface. And then what happens if we bring more interest? We get closer. Get closer and see what's really happening. We see in meditation if we can bring a fresh mind to our experience. When we live in the conceptual realm, things are actually more boring.

When we live in our ideas of how things are, it's pretty stale. There isn't a lot of change. But when we get closer to what's actually happening, we see that no two moments are alike. Every moment that appears in life is new and fresh—a new combination of causes and conditions. It's never been here before, and it's never going to be here again. Different and fresh every moment. How could that be boring?

I read that there's a German word—I don't know what it is, and I probably couldn't pronounce it if I did—but it translates more or less into English as "defamiliarization." The idea is that when we give up on the moment prematurely, there's a sense that we already know what it is, that we're familiar with it. Defamiliarization is looking at things with fresh eyes, as if we hadn't seen them before.

I know that before I started meditating, I thought I knew what rice tasted like. Then when I started to meditate here and had rice for lunch and began to actually taste it, I'd think, "Wow, a mouthful of rice is not just a single experience." Chewing a mouthful of rice reveals so much. It's this mind state of not assuming that we know what an experience is going to be. It's attuning our attention to a slower pace of life, you could say.

I read a book last year called *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. It was the story of a woman—I think she was a meditator—who had this illness where she had to lie down all the time. She couldn't even stand up very long because strange things would happen with her blood pressure. For a long time, she was bedridden. A friend gave her an aquarium with a snail in it, and the book is all about her friendship with that snail over the course of a year. She talks about how her attention got really quiet, so that it was at this pace where being with the snail was interesting. She could hear the snail eating—the sound of a wild snail eating. And snails don't move very fast, right? But it was enough for her.

I think about how quiet the mind must get for that to be enough.

In many ways, on retreat, we're in the same process—letting the mind quiet and attune to this slower level of life that we have here, this less stimulated level of life. The attention gets subtler rather than needing events to be more dramatic.

Charlotte Joko Beck is one of my favorite teachers. She was a Zen teacher, no longer alive. Here's a story of hers about paying attention:

"Many years ago, I was a piano major at Oberlin Conservatory. I was a very good student—not outstanding, but very good. And I very much wanted to study with one teacher who was undoubtedly the best. He'd take ordinary students and turn them into fabulous pianists. Finally, I got my chance to study with him. When I went in for my lesson, I found that he taught with two pianos. He didn't even say hello. He just sat down at his piano and played five notes, and then he said, 'You do it.' I was supposed to play it just the way he played it. I played it, and he said, 'No.' He played it again, and I played it again. Again, he said, 'No.' Well, we had an hour of that, and each time he said no. In the next three months, I played about three measures—perhaps half a minute of music. Now, I had thought I was pretty good. I'd played as soloist with a little symphony orchestra. Yet we did this for three months, and I cried most of those three months. He had all the marks of a real teacher—that tremendous drive and determination to make the student see. That's why he was so good. And at the end of three months, one day he said, 'Good.'"

Think of the attention needed to do that over and over and over again. He was waiting for her to really hear. He was waiting for her attention to get that attuned.

It's kind of like what we're doing here, right? Over and over and over again. Most days it's a breath, a step, eating, thinking—over and over and over again.

We see if we can attune our attention to be interested in all of it, even the very ordinary.

Sometimes when the interest is low, we can ask ourselves questions to raise the interest level, to help us connect more with what's happening. We drop in questions that pique our interest, and the idea isn't to answer the questions or to think about them, but to have the questions draw us closer to our actual experience. Again, it's that getting the attention closer.

A question might simply be: What's this? Or: Who am I? What's the attitude in the mind? How does it change? Is clinging present? We don't stop and think—we use those questions, or others that work for you, to connect more with our actual experience.

We can also get interested in boredom itself. If that's what's happening, we can get interested in it. As I said this morning, let yourself be thoroughly bored. What is that experience like? What's happening in the mind? What's happening in the body? There's probably some sense of pulling away or some disconnect. Perhaps there's aversion present, or craving.

I'd like to move on and talk about the possibility that aversion and craving have a lot to do with boredom. In the Shambhala tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, they talk about hot boredom and cool boredom. We're going to explore those for most of the rest of this talk.

Hot boredom is boredom as an experience of subtle or not so subtle aversion or attachment—that's what's going on underneath, craving or aversion happening.

Let's look at aversion. Sometimes what we call boredom is actually aversion. We're pulling away from the present experience. Sometimes I'll ask myself, what's wrong with the present moment? Again, not to answer the question, but simply to look at what's happening so we can get interested and connect with that experience of pulling away.

I remember one retreat where I watched, in a single breath, how many times I wanted to not be here—to fall asleep, to disconnect. We all wish to be present, and we might as well acknowledge that there's some ambivalence about that. There's also a desire not to be here, and sometimes that's what's happening when boredom is present.

Or we may be experiencing fear about the relative lack of stimulation. It seems like it leaves way too much room for trouble. Our societal answer is really to fill up space. We're not used to so much space and quiet and lack of stimulation.

There was an article in the New York Times, an interview with a CEO of Disney named Roger Iger. It's called "Quiet Time." He says: "I get up at 4:30. I like the quiet time. It's a time I can recharge my batteries. I exercise and clear my head. I read papers and look at email and surf the web. I watch a little TV all at the same time. I call it my quiet time, but I'm already multitasking. I love listening to music, so I'll do that in the morning too when I'm exercising and watching the news."

That's kind of the pace of modern life, right? Maybe it's not that extreme for all of us, but there's some sense that that's what we come from. And then we come here, and it's a little different. Our quiet time is a little different.

It can be a little shocking—the lack of stimulation. We're really used to moving fast. Sometimes I like to think of a retreat as a technology cleanse. For some people this is really a practice, especially as the years pass and the constant stimulation of technology becomes more of a reality in the modern world. For some people it's genuinely a practice to come here and let that go.

I've noticed in recent years that yogis can have a really hard time letting go of using cell phones. I'm not directing this at any specific yogi, just to make that clear. I think about it a lot.

I think about it as a teacher. How can I convince yogis to let go of using technology during their time at retreat? And I wonder sometimes if this difficulty in letting go of technology relates to something deeper. I wonder if there's a sense that when we engage with our technology—whatever it happens to be—there's a way we re-solidify the self. When we come here and there's so little happening, there isn't that much to shore up ourselves. I mean, obviously we can find things, but there's not as much as out in the world, out in the outer world.

I wonder about that sometimes. When there's less stimulation, less happening, there's a sense sometimes of the pause or the gap. It's not so filled in with who we are or what we are. It's so open, and sometimes it's so frightening. It's so unpredictable, because that's how life is. And yet it's also a doorway to freedom. So we find the courage through meditation to leave some gaps—leave some gaps in our plans and life—and to see what happens. To open to the moment just as it is.

A number of years ago, I went to the end of a Thich Nhat Hanh retreat where you can take the precepts and just come in for that part. I wanted to take the precepts with him and the group. It was at six-thirty in the morning and two hours from where I lived. I got up early at three-thirty or four and drove fast and hard to get there on time. I parked my car and was rushing up to the tent to make it in time for the precepts. At that moment, Thich Nhat Hanh was coming from the other side with his entourage. The way he walked absolutely stopped me in my tracks and was my best teaching of the day.

I'd never seen anybody walk like that—completely in each step. There was no sense of him being ahead of himself. I was definitely on the other side of the spectrum that morning, so I think that's why it made such an impression. It was like a step, a step—just here, just here. I think of that sense of being fully just here as the antidote to boredom. It's the opposite of boredom. It's that contentment and willingness and openheartedness in just this moment. It was my biggest teaching of that morning, and I've never forgotten it.

So that's one kind of hot boredom—aversion, not wanting to be here. Then the other type of hot boredom, related and which I may have already touched on a little bit, is craving—wanting something to happen that isn't happening. In this kind of boredom, we're waiting for something interesting to happen. It's a kind of impatience. We want to get something from our practice, and we want to get it now.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya said, "Boredom comes when we want results too quickly." I think that's related to this craving. The moment isn't giving us what we want, so we're not so interested in it. We want something better. We want a new and improved moment, not the one we got. Or at least we'd like something dramatic that gives us a good place where we can hang our sense of self—and a good-looking self, too, we hope.

Sawaki Roshi said, "No matter how many years you sit zazen or meditation, you will never become anything special." I love this. It's fantastic. It means we can give up that project. It's such a relief. Or Pema Chödrön tells of the time she met her teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, and he told everyone present that if they'd come to get their act together, they should just forget it because they never would. That just makes me happy. Maybe for some of you it's a little disappointing, but wow—it's so much work to try to get our act together. It's so much work to try to be something special. It's so much more relaxing to be ordinary. And if we hope meditation will make us special, we get disillusioned pretty regularly, don't we?

With this kind of hot boredom, the boredom that has craving in it, we pretty much miss life waiting for something else to be happening—something that seems more worthy of our time and attention. But where do we draw the line between what parts of life are worthy of attention and what parts aren't? I read a story about a man who calculated how many hours of his life he spent tying his shoes and putting on his belt, and he decided it was too much. He bought only shoes with Velcro and pants that didn't need a belt.

So where do we draw the line? Here on retreat, we obviously pay attention when we tie our shoes and put on our belt. We think it's worthy of our attention. This attention helps us cross the divide of disconnect.

It helps us to connect to our lives just as they are.

One of the stories of the Buddha, or the Bodhisattva Siddhartha, tells of how he engaged in many quite ascetic practices, pretty extreme practices. And then at one point, he remembered a time when he was a child. He was trying to understand: what's the way to do this meditation? What's the way to be with practice? And he remembered sitting under a tree during the harvest festival. It was a very ordinary moment, but he re-

called being very joyful—just being there under the tree, being ordinary. It changed his whole practice, remembering that. He dropped his ascetic practices and came to a more balanced approach.

So you could say he changed his practice into something quite ordinary. And many enlightenment poems describe a moment of ordinariness. There's nothing super special happening.

One of my favorites is Patacara, one of the nuns from the time of the Buddha. Most of the nun stories involve pretty difficult lives. The women who come and become nuns—their lives contain so much suffering. Patacara lost her child, two children, and her husband and her family. Lots of suffering. And so she comes and she meditates for years and years. At one point she says, "I've done everything right, and I followed the rule of my teacher. I'm not lazy or proud. Why haven't I found peace?" A question we might ask.

Next stanza: "Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope. I concentrated my mind the way you train a good horse. Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed, and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

Completely ordinary. Bathing her feet, sitting on the bed, putting the lamp out. So you don't need to get anywhere that's super extraordinary. Just connecting with life.

With hot boredom, there's this edge to it. There's a certain discomfort—the aversion and the craving. As we know, they're not exactly pleasant mind states. So there's an edge of discomfort to the hot boredom.

Now I want to move on to what we could call cool boredom, which is pleasant. Perhaps we can't even call it boredom, but for the schema here we will. This cool boredom is more like what we call dispassion or disenchantment. And it comes from a deepening wisdom about how to relate to this world of change that we've taken birth into.

With cool boredom, again, there might not be anything super special happening. So it's the same scenarios, but the relationship is different to what is happening. We're connected. We're engaged. And there's no need to be anywhere else than right here and right now. There's an absence of craving or aversion. Cool boredom is not so far from peace.

Perhaps the first hint that we're relaxing more into cool boredom is that we start to get really bored with our stories. All our stories about me, me, me, me. The same stories. At a certain point we kind of wear them out.

Leonard Cohen, the singer, was a Zen monk for quite a number of years, and he writes about this really well. He says, "What happens in meditations that last ten, fifteen hours is that you run through your top ten erotic fantasies, ambition fantasies, revenge fantasies, global ratification fantasies. You run through them all until you bore yourself to death, basically. And the faculty that produces opinions and snap judgments and unrealistic scenarios of your own prominence—after you run through them for a number of years, they cease to have charge. They bore themselves into non-existence. You see them as diversions from another kind of intimacy that you become more interested in. And that is what Socrates said: know thyself."

I love that. Your stories bore themselves into non-existence. Basically, you start to get not so interested in your drama. You see that meditation isn't so much about accumulation of things and events and experiences, but rather the letting go.

So this is closer to what we call equanimity, or the non-reactive heart and mind, the balanced heart and mind. People can relate to this differently. Those who have a more wanting-type personality, they're not so sure what they think about equanimity. Sometimes it's close to boredom for the wanting types. They may be thinking, "Where's something fun happening here?" Now those who are more aversive types, equanimity and this calm and quiet of this cool boredom—it's like, wow, thank God. This is fantastic. My aversive mind is not going nuts for a change.

So it's kind of interesting how the different types may look at it. Being an aversive type, I understand that one very well. It's like, "Oh, the mind's quiet—yay!" And the more wanting types might be, "The mind's quiet... where is something? Where is something fun?"

So this kind of cool boredom is closer, as I said, to disenchantment. I love that word, *disenchantment*. The spells get broken—the spells of our own drama, stimulation, excitement. But it's not detachment. I want to make that clear. It doesn't mean that we don't have passion for life or love or compassion. It doesn't mean that we turn into something flat. What happens is we wear out the more afflictive dramas of the mind. And when we wear them out and we're not quite so interested in them anymore, then the more wholesome factors of mind—like love, compassion, calm—can come forward.

So this disenchantment is not about detachment, but about engagement. We're engaged. We have a full engagement with this ordinary life, the whole spectrum of life, with balance, with calm. And we start to see that all that arises passes away, that none of it can be truly owned. So there's no point in getting too dramatic about it all.

It's a subtler kind of happiness than the happiness perhaps of sense pleasures or stimulation. The heart and the mind cool off. It's like taking a dip in a cool lake on a hot summer day. It's refreshing.

From Jack Kornfield's book, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, this is by one senior Lama. He said: "Perfection must be around here somewhere. Where is it? Is it the next experience or the one after that? My true practice is patience, not wanting anything special or unusual to happen. As soon as I see striving and expecting, I know I've lost the great perfection. The hardest thing I still have to pass through is a realization that there is no final perfect condition to rely on. It is all fundamentally insecure and changing. You don't learn this quickly. You have to let go into this ordinary perfection again and again."

So with this cool boredom, there's a sense that we can settle into the present moment—all of the seemingly insignificant moments that make up our life. We don't need that next hit of entertainment. And so there's a sense of contentment and simplicity.

Many of you probably had moments of that, tasting that on retreat. I would assume moments where it doesn't really matter what's happening, but you settle, come right into the present moment, not wishing or wanting to be anywhere else. And there's such a sense of joy. It breaks the spell that our happiness depends on what's happening.

So there's another John Cage concert. It's called *Four Minutes and Thirty-Three Seconds*. And basically the person, the pianist, comes on stage, sits down, opens the piano, and then closes it and sits there. I think it happens two or three times. And nothing happens. That's the piece.

I mean, nothing happens in a performance sense, but a lot happens. There's the rustling of programs. There's the sound of the siren out in the street.

There's the thoughts and wishes of all the people there, perhaps their movements. The composition is what's happening in the hall for those four minutes and thirty-three seconds. It's just ordinary life. I heard that he got quite a reaction for this one.

Sometimes I think of our meditation retreat as one long John Cage concert. It's not four minutes and thirty-three seconds—it's eighty-eight days, or however many days it is. And the composition is simply our lives, moment after moment. As we sit here, hearing, thinking, seeing, breathing, sensing. Just ordinary life.

In this quieting process of settling into our practice, we see life as it is. It's always changing, flowing, not personal, mysterious, undefinable, fresh, awesome, full of spaciousness and freedom—when the boredom is of the cool type.

I'll finish by reading about one more John Cage concert. This was from a book called *Slow Movement*:

"Another marathonic musical event is underway in Halberstadt, a small German town famous for its ancient organs. The local St. Burchardi Church, a twelfth-century pile that was sacked by Napoleon, is the venue for a concert that will end in the year 2640, sponsors permitting. The featured work was written in 1992 by John Cage, the avant-garde American composer. Its title, appropriately enough, is ASLSP, or As Slow As Possible.

How long the piece should last has long been a bone of contention among the cognoscenti. Some thought twenty minutes enough. Hardliners insisted on nothing short of eternity. After consulting a panel of musicologists, composers, organists, theologians, and philosophers, Halberstadt settled on 639 years.

To do justice to Cage's piece, the organizers built an organ that will last for centuries. Weights attached to the keyboard hold down notes long after the organist has left. The ASLSP recital began in September 2001 with a pause that lasted seventeen months. During that time, the only sound was that of the organ bellows inflating. In February 2003, an organist played the first three notes, which will reverberate through the church until the summer of 2004, when the next two notes will be played.

The notion of a concert so slow that no one who attends opening night will live to hear the final note clearly strikes a chord with the public. Hundreds of spectators descend on Halberstadt each time an organist comes to play the next set of notes. A guide described the 639-year rendition of As Slow As Possible as 'a challenge to the breathless, haste-ridden culture of the modern world.' As we walked away from the church, leaving the organ to fill its vast lungs, he said, 'Maybe this is the start of a revolution in slowness.'"

So perhaps we can have our own revolution in slowness here at IMS—our own John Cage concert. Eighty-eight days, we'll call it, or forty-two, settling into our ordinary lives with engagement, kindness, interest, and a cool heart and mind.

Let's sit for a minute.

Just this moment.

Just this ordinary moment.

CHAPTER 40

Refuge

Chas DiCapua · 1h00

> *In this comprehensive talk, Chas DiCapua examines the Buddhist practice of going for refuge, unpacking what it truly means to take shelter in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha. Drawing on teachings from Bhikkhu Bodhi and Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, he explains that taking refuge is essentially an act of committing to the doctrine of kamma—understanding that skillful intentions lead to happiness while unskillful ones lead to suffering.*
>
> *DiCapua systematically explores the three categories of dangers we seek protection from: dangers in this present life (war, disease, uncertainty), dangers in future lives (rebirth in lower realms, generating unwholesome kamma), and the dangers inherent in conditioned existence itself (saṃsāra and the dukkha within it). He explains how the cultivation of sīla, samādhi, and paññā provides true refuge from these dangers—refuge that actually works and cannot be taken away.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance on recognizing false refuge—our habitual tendency to seek happiness through sense pleasures and avoidance of unpleasant experience. Using the analogy of drinking seawater to quench thirst, DiCapua illustrates how pleasantness does not equal happiness. He introduces the concepts of purity and purification stages of practice, emphasizing that seeing our defilements clearly is equally valuable practice. The talk concludes with verses from the Dhammapada affirming that true security comes not from external refuges but from seeing the Four Noble Truths with right discernment.*

During the week-long retreats throughout the year, it's very common for someone in the hall to ask, or someone will write a note saying, "What is the meaning of the bowing?" This comes especially from folks who may not be used to seeing that or doing it.

The main answer is: it depends. If you asked a hundred people, you might get a hundred different answers.

One thing I really like is the lowering of the body. The Buddha is on the altar, and the etiquette is that there not be anything higher than the top of the Buddha's head—not where anyone is sitting, not anything on the altar. Maybe that flower is a little higher, but certainly not us. The gist behind this comes from when someone asked the Buddha, "Who are you?" when they first met him, and the Buddha said, "I'm awake." So that

statue represents awakeness and awareness. Putting the self lower than that, or elevating awakeness and awareness higher, means holding that as a value in our lives above anything about the self or ourselves.

But generally, when someone bows three times, what they're often doing is, in some kind of form, taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. And then again, what does that mean? What does taking refuge in the Buddha or the Dharma and the Sangha mean? If you had a hundred people and you asked them, "What does that mean for you exactly? How do you resonate with refuge in Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha?" you might again get a hundred different answers.

But even though you might get a hundred different answers from a hundred different people, going for refuge on the Buddhist path is a teaching in and of itself. And that's what I'd like to talk about tonight—going for refuge.

I want to read something I found very interesting in some writings by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He was writing about going for refuge, and he talked about two different people.

The first person was living by natural morality. You just know some people—they might not be spiritual, they may not be religious, but they're just good. They have a goodness to them. Living by natural morality, they're meditating each day, but they haven't gone for refuge. They don't feel that the Dharma is really necessarily their path.

The second person is not able to exactly live by the precepts yet. They don't have time to meditate every day. But they've sincerely gone to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for refuge.

It is said that this second person has a greater chance for attaining unconditional happiness, precisely due to the power of them going for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and the influence it will eventually have on their life.

So the first person, if you use the precepts as a guide, is living by the precepts and meditating daily, but they haven't gone for refuge. The second person is not really living by the precepts so well, not meditating, but has sincerely gone to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha for refuge—and it is this person who will have a greater chance for achieving deep happiness. I thought that's a powerful statement.

This is Bhikkhu Bodhi talking about refuge: "The door or entrance to the teachings of the Buddha is the going for refuge to the Triple Gem. As slight and commonplace as this step might seem, especially in comparison with the lofty achievements lying beyond, its importance should never be underestimated, as it is this act which imparts direction and forward momentum to the entire practice of the Buddhist path."

Thanissaro again: "The act of going for refuge marks the point where one commits oneself to taking the Dhamma, or the Buddha's teaching, as the primary guide to one's life."

You hear these words—direction and guide. They show us what direction to go in. They help guide our life in the direction that will bring happiness.

I thought I would look up "refuge" in the dictionary. I was curious to see what the meaning was. At least in the dictionary I used, it was "shelter or protection from danger or difficulty." Then I was curious what a "refugee" was: "one who flees from home or country to seek refuge elsewhere."

Refuge is shelter or protection from danger or difficulty. A refugee is one who flees from home or country to seek refuge elsewhere. And of course, the home and the country, in our case, is more an interior space—where we may have used to been inhabiting in our hearts and minds.

We look to seek refuge elsewhere.

Given these two definitions, a couple of questions came to my mind. What dangers or difficulties are we seeking protection from? Refuge, after all, shelters and protects you from danger or difficulty. And then the next question is more pragmatic: What is it about this particular refuge that will provide protection from these particular dangers or difficulties? What are the dangers we're talking about? And what is it about these three refuges that actually gives protection from them?

I want to explore those questions now.

The dangers are categorized in the teachings into three different types: the dangers of this present life, the dangers in future lives, and the dangers of conditional existence itself. Each one has an outer and inner dimension—dangers in the outer world and dangers inherent in the heart and mind.

In this present life, what are the outer dangers? War, disease, old age, sickness and death, political and social unrest, and the uncertainty about when they're going to occur. That uncertainty is more of an inner danger. Other inner dangers include the way we respond to these occurrences. But even more deeply and more insidiously, there's the simple fact that they happen at all—that they could happen at any time.

Today I traveled about an hour and fifteen minutes to go teach a daylong retreat. I get there and the retreat manager hadn't arrived yet to unlock the center. We're waiting, waiting. They never showed up. I made a few phone calls, tried to see if someone had a key. No key. All right. No retreat. Okay. And I was talking to the people while we were waiting, asking them, "Did you even have one thought this morning that this retreat wouldn't happen?" No. It's like these things—that this can happen—that's an example of the inner danger. Anything can happen anytime in this life.

Bhikkhu Bodhi describes it as "an unlocalized fear that our familiar supports will suddenly be stripped away, leaving us without our usual frame of reference." He's speaking to that inner danger in this present life.

Things happen that we don't like. Have you noticed? Things happen and we don't like them, and we want them to be different. Again, Bhikkhu Bodhi: "A fundamental disharmony emerges from the cleavage between desire and the world, and the result for us is suffering."

Luckily for me, I had a bunch of housework that I had actually been trying to find time to do, and I thought, okay, we're not going to have the retreat? Great, I have some time on my hands. So there wasn't a lot of attachment and suffering, but there easily could have been.

We can't control the world and the events that make it up. We try our hardest. And what's interesting—what can make it confusing—is that we do exert a lot of control over the world. It's thirty-eight degrees outside right now and sixty-eight in this hall. We exert a tremendous amount of control over our environment. And so we can be lulled into thinking that we have ultimate control, or that we should be able to control everything.

Some people have this sense about global warming: "Yeah, it's happening, but we can fix it. We have the technology and we can fix it." That's the deluded, rather arrogant view that we can actually control whatever we want.

This is from the Tao Te Ching, which often speaks about the master and the master's qualities:

She understands that the universe is forever out of control, and trying to dominate events goes against the current of the Tao. The Tao is often used, one way that Dharma is used, as the truth of things, or simply how things are.

So those are the dangers of the present life, outer and inner. What is it about refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha that gives protection from these dangers? It is the cultivation of the heart and mind that does not react with suffering to the events of the world. This is the refuge that will give us protection from the dangers of this present life. We can't control what's going to happen, but we can cultivate our heart and mind so that we're not suffering.

Then there are dangers in future lives. Outwardly, there is the possibility of being reborn in a lower realm. If you take the Buddhist cosmology as true or real, that is a genuine possibility. There are lower realms and very distinct ways in which a being is born in those realms. They are really hard to get out of because the suffering is so difficult and it's hard to practice. Also, when you move in either direction from the human realm, time becomes really, really long—one year could be like a million of our years. So you can be in these places for vast stretches of time, and the higher realms stretch out as well.

That's the outward danger: depending on how we practice sīla, samādhi, and paññā in this life, there is cause and effect. There is karma. It's real. It's a law. We can't escape it. And just to say, if you haven't looked at the cosmology much, you have to be pretty bad to be reborn in a lower realm, so don't freak out. But it is a possibility. It's a danger. It's an inherent danger.

There is also an inner danger that relates to future lives: generating wholesome karma and avoiding unwholesome karma, just what I've been talking about. We need to be clear which is which, as well as cultivating the ability to resist the conditioned habit patterns that lead us to produce unwholesome karma.

To answer the question of what gives us protection from this type of danger: ethical conduct helps us be clear about which is which as far as karma, and development of the heart and mind helps us recognize and not follow unwholesome habit patterns. Practicing with sīla and practicing with mindfulness to notice when unwholesome habit patterns come up in the heart and mind allows us to let them go. We're not generating unwholesome karma.

Again, Thanissaro Bhikkhu writes: "When a Buddhist takes refuge, it is essentially an act of taking refuge in the doctrine of karma. It is an act of submission in that one is committed to living in line with the principle that actions based on skillful intentions lead to happiness, while actions based on unskillful intentions lead to suffering."

How often is that in our mind? How often is the clarity of that fully present as we go about the day? I don't know about you, but I know that truth, yet in the moment it's kind of like, "Well, I know that." I know two plus two is four, but as I'm walking down the street, I'm not thinking two plus two is four. It's like that. It needs to be, or it's helpful if it's really, really present so that this template is informing everything we're thinking, saying, and doing.

"It's an act of claiming protection in that by following the teaching, one hopes to avoid the misfortunes that bad karma engenders. To take refuge in this way ultimately means to take refuge in the quality of our own intentions, for that's where the essence of karma lies."

So sīla and samādhi are what give us refuge from the dangers of future lives—working, continuing to refine ethical conduct and continuing to cultivate awareness and mindfulness to notice in the moment if our intentions are wholesome or unwholesome.

Then there are the dangers of conditioned existence itself: samsara and the dukkha inherent in it, craving for existence and the ignorance that underlies that craving. It is wisdom, paññā, that gives us protection from that ignorance. Wisdom uproots ignorance. We go from avijjā to vijjā, from not having clear seeing to having wisdom.

A teacher and the teachings of how to develop wisdom are what give us refuge from the dangers of conditioned existence: being shown what the path is, the teachings, walking the path, and support from spiritual friends and teachers so that we can continue to walk the path towards clear seeing. That is what gives us protection from the dangers of conditioned existence.

So that's what we're taking refuge from. It is just this cultivation of our heart and mind—of sīla, samādhi, and paññā—that is our true refuge and what gives us protection from these dangers. I use the word "true refuge" for a reason.

And why? Why is it a true refuge? Because it actually will give us protection from the dangers that we're seeking refuge from. It works. That's the first thing—that it actually works. And the second is that it can't be taken away.

So if that's true refuge, then what constitutes false refuge? Before going to specifics, just two aspects of false refuge, which of course is the opposite of true refuge. When we take refuge in false refuge, the reason it's false is that it doesn't work. It actually doesn't give us the protection that we're looking for. And false refuge can be taken away, because it's more of an outward thing.

When we take refuge in sila, samadhi, and paññā, it can't be taken away. Can someone take your insight into whatever you know to be true away? No. It's not possible. But if I look to eat a cookie every time I have a difficult emotion—if I look to refuge in the cookie jar—that's a common form of refuge. I remember one time Christopher was teaching, and he was talking about going to the refrigerator. He said, "The refrigerator is the Western pagoda." We go for refuge to the refrigerator a lot.

So false refuges don't work, and they can be taken away. There are many, many ways that we go for false refuge, but just for time's sake, I want to talk about how it is that we go to sense pleasures for false refuge.

We're kind of tragic in a certain way, us humans. We know that they don't work, but we keep trying. And I'm sure you've heard this in some dharma talk—it's kind of popular—but the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

When I first came to the dharma, I remember my first teacher—I had just met them, maybe a week I had known them, and not really been with them that much. So all of a sudden I was just with them one day, and he just looked at me and said, "Chaz, you know you're insane, right?" I was like, "I'm not insane!" But what he was speaking to was how when there's not wisdom, when we don't have any sila, samadhi, and paññā, we live our lives in an insane way. We live our lives trying to be happy in ways that don't work, and we continue doing the same thing. So he was pointing to that, but at that time I didn't know—I thought he really meant it.

There's a great little story or parable about this, about Nasruddin, the Sufi wise man slash fool. His friend came over to see him one day and found Nasruddin sitting in front of a huge pile of hot peppers—those thin red ones—eating one after another with tears streaming down, hiccuping. But he kept eating them. This friend comes up and says, "Mullah, what are you doing?" And he goes, "I keep waiting for a sweet one." Tears running down.

This taking refuge in pleasant sense pleasures, pleasant experiences—now biologically, we're primed to shrink away from what's unpleasant and to go toward what's pleasant. When a baby is born, the way it knows to go for food, the way the hand pulls

off a hot stove—it's just how we're made up. And it serves us. It really serves us on many levels. But it doesn't serve us on this level. This level meaning developing wisdom and compassion. Because on this level we're after one thing and one thing only: unconditional happiness. Happiness that can't be taken away. Complete and unshakable freedom of the heart and mind.

Now what happens is we get confused. And that's what the word ignorance is—avijja in Pali. You could translate it as confusion, not wisdom, not clear, not knowing clearly. And this wisdom is the wisdom that knows based on seeing the truth of how things are. It's through seeing the truth of how things are.

When we see that, it's not as though some additional wisdom arrives, informing us what leads to happiness and what doesn't. The wisdom is right there in the seeing of how things are—it knows what leads to happiness and what leads to unhappiness. It's right there in that seeing.

And of course, the mistake we make is that we mistake pleasantness for happiness. We make that equation. Somehow we've gotten into the habit of hooking those two together—pleasantness equals happiness. And so we spend our lives seeking after and holding onto pleasant experiences while avoiding and pushing away unpleasant ones.

Now, if this worked, then most people in the Western world would be very, very happy, because we have so many resources and conditions to keep unpleasantness at bay. Being cold, for instance, doesn't always have to be unpleasant, but it often is. I remember once watching some documentary filmed in Ladakh. They were in someone's home, and you could see their breath. It struck me—when it's winter, they're simply cold inside their house. We can avoid that just because of the circumstances we find ourselves in. We have tremendous resources available to us, and so we can really up the pleasant ante.

But does that lead to happiness necessarily? No. We can know that. It's not just an on-off switch. Probably no one here would dispute what I just said. But again, in the moment do we know it? And at what level of subtlety do we know it? When we take the time to look—to the degree that we take the time to look—it becomes very clear that pleasantness does not equal happiness.

Atisha was a Tibetan practitioner quite a long time ago, eleventh or twelfth century, I believe. He said, "Friends, the things you desire give no more satisfaction than drinking seawater. Therefore, practice contentment." That's just such a pithy statement. The things you desire give no more satisfaction—read happiness. Satisfying what? Our heart's desire for peace, for freedom. Everyone has that. Every human being comes

with that built into the hard drive, so to speak. And there's only one way we get deep satisfaction: when the heart and mind come to complete peace. So these things we desire give no more satisfaction than drinking seawater to quench thirst. It doesn't work. Therefore, practice contentment—being content with what is, with what we have.

So that's false refuge and how it works, how it comes to be: all the different ways we try to escape difficulties, both outwardly and inwardly, especially inwardly in the heart and mind, by saying basically, "That's unpleasant. I don't like that. I want to change this experience to one that's pleasant."

So that's false refuge. Now, how can we become aware of it when it's happening? How can we start to become more aware of it in a skillful way? Sometimes we might be aware of grosser examples of how we use false refuge, and we can recognize those. But our whole practice is simply increasing the subtlety with which we know.

I may have used this quote last Saturday, but I found it really interesting. Someone once said that the practitioner who sits down for their first time to meditate, being with the breath, and the practitioner who is at third stage enlightenment—one mind moment away from arahantship—they're both doing the same practice.

They're doing the exact same practice—it's just they're doing it on different levels of subtlety. I thought, that's true.

So how can we learn to be more and more aware of false refuge on a subtler and subtler level? Well, first by simply hearing teachings that there is false refuge. There's true refuge, there's false refuge. And knowing what it is and how we engage in it in our own lives. Reflecting: How do I engage in false refuge? When I get pushed to my edge, how do I try to cope? When I'm bored, when I'm home and no one's there and I don't know what to do—standing in the middle of the living room, don't know what to do with myself—where do I go? What do I reach towards if there's not enough presence? Just really reflecting and knowing what it is that we do.

Knowing that false refuge exists and reflecting on the ways that we engage in it—it's like we can be on the lookout for it as well as our conditioned response to whatever it is we don't like. Can we notice? And of course, again, the template is: something is happening that's unpleasant, and we don't want it. We want to replace it. We want to move away from it and replace it with something that's more pleasant. That's the template. How we all do it involves huge variation on that theme.

So can we begin to notice this occurring again on subtler and subtler levels? How does this happen for you here on retreat? How do you move away from what's unpleasant to what's pleasant on retreat?

I notice an interesting thing in sitting meditation. If it's kind of towards the end of the sit—the sit's been going on for a while and the mind is not really grabbing onto anything, but it's kind of pleasant, pleasant, pleasant, pleasant. You can tell I'm a greed type. Pleasant, pleasant. I've learned that at a particular time in the sit, when maybe the body might be getting a little achy—there's not extreme pain at this moment or else it would have the attention—I notice the mind doing that, and then I'll go, "Ah," and I'll look back to the body. There's some moderate pain going on that I didn't even notice, and the mind was just thinking, let's stay with something pleasant instead of feeling that. Not even intense pain—moderate pain. That's one example. Not that it's wrong or bad, but again, to notice so that we can work with it.

And then, what supports the noticing of it itself? What supports us waking up to these habit patterns, these particular ways? Maybe, again on retreat, some of the subtler ways that we go for false refuge. What supports this?

First, mindfulness. Cultivating mindfulness supports it. Sometimes there can be moments—or more than moments—where we think, "Why do I have to be mindful of this? What is this doing?" When we're cultivating mindfulness of the breath, it doesn't just help us with mindfulness of the breath. It helps mindfulness as a mind state get stronger. And of course, that mindfulness can come up anywhere. In this case, as we're talking about, the strength of that mindfulness can come up and notice as we go for false refuge. Or even start to make that movement from unpleasant towards pleasant. Or even noticing that we don't like, that there's aversion to the unpleasant. As we support mindfulness in general, it comes to bear on more and more of our experience.

This is the intention behind more and more continual mindfulness. It's like the pearls on a string. You start off and there's a pearl here, there's a pearl there. Twenty feet down, there's another pearl. As mindfulness strengthens, there are more pearls. And as mindfulness gets really strong, there are so many pearls that they start to touch. That's where you can start to get more continuous mindfulness. And it comes to bear, as it's more continuous, on more and more of our experience.

And so this seeing of these habit patterns—on whatever level, from the most gross to the most subtle—this habit pattern of moving away from the unpleasant, this seeing of it is the purification practice. It's the purification stage of our practice.

Our practice moves and flows between two different stages, and there are different names for them. The way I learned was purity and purification. The purity stage is when something unpleasant comes up and there's strong mindfulness, strong equanimity, no suffering. There's no problem. That's the definition of when we're in the purity stage.

When we're in the purification stage, something unpleasant comes up, there's aversion to it, we start to move away from it, we look for pleasantness—and that movement is seen. That's the purification.

What happens is, because one feels better than the other—again, back to liking the pleasant—because the purity stage is often a more pleasant experience, we like it better. But we also then mistake it for better practice. This was really helpful when it was pointed out to me: the purity and purification stages are both equal as far as being supportive to our own awakening and our own happiness. The purity stage isn't better. They both just work in different ways, and they're both equal.

So as you're practicing during the day and you're seeing—basically seeing the defilements, which we do a lot—then maybe it can be helpful just to know: "Oh, I'm in the purification stage. Great. This is good. This is just as good as the purity stage." This also helps us not judge ourselves for what we're seeing. Again, we practice to understand, not to judge.

Purification stage. Oh, look at that. It's really true. It's really true that the habit pattern of the human mind is to move away from unpleasantness and grasp after the pleasant. Look at that. It works. I'm not an exception to that.

I think I mentioned this perhaps in the other talk, but there's this importance of not judging our practice and not judging ourselves—not only just because it's painful and it hurts, but equally important because when we judge ourselves, in that moment when the judging arises—aversion directed inward—when the mind contracts around that, when that clouds the mind, there's no clear seeing. It blocks any clear seeing.

And there's so much great clear seeing available in the purification stage. It's pregnant with the possibility for understanding. But once we go into judging and that clouds the mind, we can't see.

There's a famous part of what is actually a very long treatise by the Third Zen Patriarch: "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences." Do we have a preference between the purity and purification stages of practice? We probably do.

"The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything"—especially your experience in the moment. "If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinions for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind."

And when that happens in the moment, we can't see clearly.

Speaking to this in a slightly different way, Pema Chödrön says, "Trying to fix ourselves is not helpful." Very pragmatic. "Trying to fix ourselves is not helpful. It implies struggle and self-denigration. Denigrating ourselves is probably the major way that we cover over bodhicitta"—bodhicitta meaning the awakened heart-mind. Awakened, seeing clearly. We cover over the seeing clearly when we're denigrating ourselves.

Okay, let's assume we notice this movement towards false refuge. We can avoid—or mostly avoid—the judgment of it. Now what? Now what do we do? Two more things.

If it's in the phase where it's just arising in the mind, notice what that experience is like. Notice what it feels like in the body, in the mind, to move away from life, to start to pull back from life. It has a very particular feeling to it. We have to look and see. But my experience of it is that it's not happy-making. It's not pleasant at all. Is that experience relaxed? Is it content? Is it at ease? Or is it agitated, filled with unsatisfactoriness, and not at ease? We have to look and see, right in that moment for ourselves, what the truth of that experience is like for us. And again, for me, it's a very unpleasant experience.

This is Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche: "Rest in natural great peace, this exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thought, like the relentless fury of the pounding waves in the infinite ocean of samsara. Rest in natural great peace." We can tap into that. You can actually feel that—beaten, helpless by the waves of samsara. We can feel that in the moment of moving away.

And then, if we notice this moving away from unpleasantness towards pleasantness during or after it's occurred, we can still practice with it. We can ask ourselves: Did this satisfy me? Did this give me protection from the danger I was seeking shelter from? Is it the refuge that I'm looking for? We can ask and look and see. Or has it left me, like poor Nasruddin, waiting for something? Still waiting, waiting, waiting.

This is all we need to do—this kind of looking, this kind of investigation and questioning. It's all right here. Whether it's in the purity stage or the purification stage, we just need to connect and look. Because when we do, we begin to see clearly.

So that's false refuge—how it comes into being, how we can skillfully be aware of it and work with it. But how is false refuge integral to our awakening? It happens so much. Is this just some abhorrent, separate thing? Could it be integral to our awakening? Isn't it something bad that we have to get rid of so that we can have true refuge?

Yes and no. We definitely won't find true refuge. We will not liberate our hearts and minds if we constantly and continually seek false refuge. That's true, absolutely. Yet it's through seeing—on subtler and subtler levels, from our own experience—that false refuge does not provide us with the refuge we're seeking, that it does not provide us with the happiness we so want. When we see that, we turn towards true refuge. And in the seeing of that, it's not like we see it and then go, "Well, now I think I'll turn towards true refuge." In the clarity of seeing how false refuge doesn't work is the turning towards true refuge.

We're going to take refuge in false refuge until we don't. That's kind of how we are as humans. So the only sane response for someone who really wants to be free is to start paying attention to exactly how you take false refuge and what that experience is like. Because as human beings, we're a bit slow and deluded. No, really. Think about it—as a species. But we're not completely dumb. When we start to actually see what leads to happiness and what doesn't lead to happiness, when we actually start to see that false refuge doesn't work, we act. We do act. We do have the capacity to do what's needed for our own happiness.

But we need patience. Patience is a powerful, powerful and necessary mind state that we need to cultivate on this path. It's one of the paramis.

As the Buddha pointed out in so many different times and ways, even in how he taught, this is a gradual process. Even when we begin to see, it still takes time. We don't just instantly change. You see something in your own experience, but habit patterns are strong.

The example I like to use is this: imagine a two-mile-long, fully loaded freight train going sixty miles an hour, and the engineer decides to stop. It doesn't just stop. That freight train will take ten or fifteen miles more before it actually comes to a complete halt.

One of the really good benefits of a long retreat like this is that it shows us just how important patience is. You really get to learn about patience on a long retreat, because these things don't turn on a dime.

Most of you have probably heard this, but in case someone hasn't, it's such a lovely poem by Portia Nelson called "There's a Hole in My Sidewalk." It speaks to this process:

I walk down the street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in. I am lost. I am helpless. It isn't my fault. It takes forever to find a way out.

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it. I fall in again. I can't believe I'm in the same place. But it isn't my fault. It still takes a long time to find a way out.

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it there. I still fall in. It's a habit, but my eyes are open. I know where I am. It is my fault. I get out immediately.

I don't like the "fault" thing—there's got to be a better word.

I walk down the same street. There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

I walk down another street.

Then the addendum is: you stand next to the hole and you help people out when they fall in.

As a way to begin bringing this to a close, some more words from Bhikkhu Bodhi. He's so clear—I love how he writes about the Dharma.

He writes: "The Dhamma is the actual refuge. As the goal of the teaching, the Dhamma is the state of security, free from danger. As the path, it is the means for arriving at the goal. And as the verbal teaching, it is the body of instructions describing the way to practice the path. But to make effective use of the means at our disposal, we need the help of others who are familiar with the path. Those who know the path make up the Sangha, the helpers in finding refuge."

Remember, we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

"Those who know the path make up the Sangha, the helpers in finding refuge—the union of spiritual friends who can lead us to our attainment of the path. We need a doctor to diagnose our illness and prescribe a remedy. We need medicine to cure our illness. And we need attendants to look after our requirements. To get well, we have to take the medicine. We can't just sit back and expect the doctor to cure us all by him or herself. In the same way, to find deliverance from suffering, we have to practice the Dhamma. For the Dhamma is the actual refuge, which leads to the state of deliverance."

And that's what each of you is doing here, very steadfastly and beautifully. You're actually practicing the Dhamma. This is something you can reflect on from time to time—it can really brighten the mind. You're actually practicing the Dhamma. You are cultivating true refuge, refuge that's unshakable, that can't be taken away, and that works.

And if there's anyone sitting here right now thinking, "He's not talking to me. I'm not practicing the Dhamma. I'm not doing this very well. I'm not creating much of anything here"—I just want to say that that's not true. It's simply not true. Those are just deluded thoughts. We all have those thoughts at times. Your presence here is not accidental. You are practicing the Dhamma. And it's really an inspiration for everyone.

Just to close with something from the Dhammapada about refuge:

They go to many a refuge—to mountains, forests, parks, trees, and shrines—people threatened with danger. That's not the secure refuge. That's not the highest refuge. That's not the refuge, having gone to which you gain release from all suffering and stress.

But when, having gone for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, you see with right discernment the Four Noble Truths—stress, the cause of stress, the transcending of stress, and the Noble Eightfold Path, the way to the stilling of stress—that's the secure refuge. That is the highest refuge. That is the refuge, having gone to which you gain release from all suffering and stress.

So let's sit quietly for a few moments.

CHAPTER 41

Faith

Greg Scharf · 51 min

> *In this profound exploration of faith (saddhā), Greg Scharf traces how genuine spiritual practice begins with opening to dukkha—not merely as unpleasant experience, but as the fundamental unreliability and insecurity woven through all conditioned existence. Drawing on the teaching of transcendent dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), he illuminates how this honest encounter with unsatisfactoriness naturally gives rise to faith, which then flows through the five spiritual faculties (saddhā, viriya, sati, samādhi, paññā) in a mutually reinforcing cycle leading toward liberation.*
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> *Scharf distinguishes between the bright, borrowed faith that often initiates practice—inspired by teachers or awakened beings—and the more mature, verified faith that develops through direct experience. This deeper confidence emerges when we discover we can actually be with difficulty, that awareness itself remains unaffected by whatever arises, and that wisdom does genuinely unfold through practice. He shares how resolving to sit through intense dukkha on retreat revealed an unexpected inner strength, illustrating how challenges become opportunities to verify the path's validity.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with doubt, one of the five hindrances, and points toward an unshakeable trust in awareness itself—recognizing that the awareness of fear is not afraid, the awareness of anger is not angry. Quoting Ajahn Chah extensively, Scharf concludes with an invitation to let go of becoming anything, allowing the heart's natural wisdom to emerge like a clear forest pool where truth becomes visible in all directions.*

If we were to look at the motivation that would inspire us to undertake a spiritual life, a life in meditation—whatever form that might take, however we might hold that in our hearts and minds—each of us would find something particular and individual. But if we look beneath our own personal stories, I think we would all find, in some way, at some point, a connection to some sense of dissatisfaction or a lack of ease. Some connection to a feeling that things just are not quite right in our lives, in the world. You could say a connection to stress or suffering—seeing this personally in our own lives, seeing how it manifests in the world. This connection leads us to look for some sort of answer or understanding of the human condition in relation to that.

If this weren't true on some level, there wouldn't be a lasting energy for our practice. If it were merely a motivation of curiosity, for example—and this quality of curiosity is really important, essential on any path, this desire to know, to understand—but in and of itself, it may not be enough to sustain us in the long haul. Curiosity only goes so far as a kind of inspiration.

For this sense of dis-ease or lack of satisfaction to really serve us and lead us to a genuine spiritual search, to lead us to a search that goes to any real depth, we need to really touch the depth and breadth of the insecurity that underlies that stress or suffering. We need a meaningful relationship to dukkha, to what is called dukkha in Pali. A familiar term to all of you, I know—you don't spend any time around places like this without hearing dukkha a lot. But I think sometimes we can fall into a somewhat superficial relationship to this word, so I'll start out tonight by talking about it a little bit.

We can think of dukkha as just pointing to unpleasant sensations in mind and body, difficulty in that way. But fundamentally, this quality of dukkha points to the fact that inherently, by its very nature, life in this conditioned realm—life in samsara, you might say—is fundamentally flawed a bit. It just can't ever be quite right. It can't be made right. It points to the fact that it's not always smooth sailing.

This is not the pessimistic view that is sometimes ascribed to Buddhism—"life is suffering," right? That's a misunderstanding of this teaching, a misunderstanding of the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering. It's not a statement that life is suffering, though one hears this sometimes in the world. It's not that superficial. Of course we have good times, happy times. It's not like it's all a complete drag all the time. We have ups and downs. But a practical assessment of the human condition points to this unevenness.

I heard Joseph Goldstein give a definition of dukkha as being two parts—I don't know which part is which—but having to do with the hole in a wheel and an axle. It's an axle that doesn't fit quite right, a badly fitting one. The image is like an old ox cart where it's a bumpy ride. It doesn't fit well, so it's a square axle in a round hole or something like this. We get a bumpy ride. It's up and down. It has that quality. And this is just the nature of this conditioned life, isn't it? We all get that bumpy ride.

But suffering in relationship to that is another thing altogether.

We can understand dukkha on the level of painful experience, difficult experience, experience associated with bodily life and the process of aging and illness and all of the things that happen to us if we live in a body—difficulties, turmoils of mind, dukkha in that way. And then there's this more subtle understanding, this quality of insecurity or unreliability, which is an intrinsic part of everything, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

This is important: pleasant experience is also imbued with this quality of dukkha, because it's not secure, it doesn't last. A definition from the Buddhist dictionary speaks to this: "The term dukkha is not limited to painful experience, but refers to the unsatisfactory nature and the general insecurity of all conditioned phenomena, which on account of their impermanent nature are all liable to suffering. And this includes also pleasurable experience." Hence, unsatisfactoriness or unreliability or liability to suffering would be a good translation of this.

On this level, this quality of dukkha points to a kind of inner anxiety or unsteadiness that is the result of the constant change of things. Pleasant experiences don't last. Things don't stay the way we want them to. Things fall away, they fall apart. Everything is changing. It pervades all of life.

Somehow, I think we get conditioned—perhaps out of our culture and the things we see in media—to believe that we're supposed to be able to get it all right, so that it's always how we like it. And that somehow if we can't manage this, it's our fault. We're not trying hard enough. We're missing something. As though it were possible. As though life could somehow be like a TV commercial where everyone is beautiful and having a really good time. As though it's supposed to be like that, as though that were a possibility.

But the deal when we take birth in this realm is that we get the full range: pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, happiness and sadness, all of these worldly conditions. The ten thousand joys and the ten thousand sorrows, as it's sometimes spoken about. That's what we get. We get the whole deal. That's part of what this is.

We think it's bad news or a mistake, and secretly we're holding out some hope that we're going to find the key—maybe through our meditation—that's going to get it to where it's always pleasant and always the way we like it. None of us would admit that if anyone asked us, but sometimes I think we secretly hold out a little hope. As though, okay, maybe that's what enlightenment means—it's only pleasant all the time. Secretly we're kind of hoping that's the deal we're signing up for here.

But the Buddha had bad days and backaches and had to deal with people he would really have preferred not to deal with. Yet suffering in relation to all of that was not there.

We're not going to be able to get it to where it's always and only the way we like it. That's not possible. And so we really have to open to this truth. The reason it's the first noble truth is that really opening to it fully is where we start. It's where the Buddha started. This is the beginning point of our practice. Because until we really open to this truth, we're always going to be looking for a way out or a way around it. We'll be turning to that which is, by its very nature, incapable of providing a lasting, satisfactory happiness. We'll be turning to that which is not reliable.

But opening to dukkha will lead us to turn towards something which might actually be a reliable source of real, true happiness—of peace.

Ajahn Chah put it this way: "In Dhamma practice we begin with the truth of dukkha, the pervasive unsatisfactoriness of existence. But as soon as we experience this, we lose heart. We don't want to look at it. Dukkha is really the truth, but we want to get around it somehow. Dukkha is a noble truth. If we allow ourselves to face it, then we will start to seek a way out of it. If we are trying to go somewhere and the road is blocked, we will think about how to make a pathway."

There's a core teaching that it's said came to the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment, on the night of his awakening, through the three watches of the night. This is the teaching on dependent origination or dependent co-arising—paticcasamuppada in Pali. One of those great Pali words. They roll off the tongue so nicely. Pali just adds another syllable when you want to extend the meaning of something.

This teaching is a chain of causal links, which I'm not going into tonight, but it shows how, with ignorance as a causative factor, through this chain we arrive at suffering. It's a very deep, penetrative understanding of the law of cause and effect, and how ignorance leads to suffering in our lives and in the world.

that's kind of an extension or a following on from dependent origination. It's called transcendent dependent origination, familiar to many of you, I'm sure. This teaching begins where the other one leaves off. It begins at dukkha, and it extends what happens with dukkha as a causative factor. In this teaching, the opening to the understanding of dukkha is seen as the cause for the rising of faith or confidence—saddha in Pali. Dukkha, seen as leading to the rising of faith.

And then there's another chain of causal links: faith, saddha, confidence, trust, leading to the arising of joy, leading to the arising of rapture, of deep joy, spiritual joy, leading to tranquility, happiness, concentration, knowledge and vision of things as they are. This leading to disenchantment, to dispassion, to emancipation, and to knowledge of destruction of the taints, of the cankers, of the kilesas. Dukkha leads right to liberation.

Opening to dukkha as this starting place in terms of our practice leads then to this quality of confidence or faith. But we need something to have faith or confidence or trust in. We open to dukkha so that we see there's a problem here, something we have to do something about. And then hopefully we can encounter something that points to a possibility for an understanding that will lead us through these stages to peace, to freedom.

Quite a few years ago, one of my teachers asked me to name the one thing that I thought was most important in our practice—the one thing, pick one thing that would really be the most essential quality of mind, of heart leading to the unfolding of the path. I remember at the time I said I thought perseverance: steadfastness, stick-to-itiveness, doggedness, some quality of keeping going. It seemed like a good answer. We're not going to get very far if we don't stick to it, on anything we might do.

Then I asked a friend of mine, a meditation teacher, the same question, and immediately, without thinking, she said faith—the most important thing. I thought it was a trick question that I had not gotten right somehow at the time. I was struck by that. It wasn't my first response.

This quality of faith—the Pali word is saddha. Faith, I know for some people, points to something that this word does not point to, because it's not a faith that is a kind of belief. It's not a belief. So confidence, maybe, or trust. But I'll use the word faith tonight. What I'm pointing to is a kind of inner strength of confidence. This is a core issue, a real fundamental aspect of the practice and the path.

Without this quality of faith, no real effort will happen in our practice. We need some sense that it's worth doing, it's worth making effort, because it's not easy to keep going on this path.

The teacher Sayadaw Tejaniya speaks about faith in an interesting way in terms of what are called the five spiritual faculties. This is a quotation from a teaching he gave: "When there is faith or confidence, saddha, effort will arise. When there is effort, virya, the second of these five faculties, mindfulness will become continuous. When mindfulness, sati, the third of these, is continuous, concentration will become established.

When concentration, samadhi, the fourth of these spiritual faculties, is established, one begins to see things as they really are. Seeing things—this is the wisdom, the fifth of these spiritual faculties, paññña. When one starts to understand things as they really are, faith strengthens, and so on. With the strengthening of faith, effort becomes more balanced and continuous, and so on."

There's a circular feeding around through these spiritual powers or faculties. We can see faith is really essential in that flow.

When I went to my very first meditation retreat quite a while ago, I had never meditated before. I went to a ten-day retreat on the suggestion of a friend who was meditating. I said I wanted to learn how to meditate, and she said, "Here, sign up for this ten-day retreat." I had no idea what I was getting into. Literally, I hadn't meditated for even a second. My friend made me promise to stay for three days because she thought I would probably run away. She thought I was a good candidate to bolt out of there. And I did think about leaving every day—not just once every day. The teachers didn't look so much like my idea of what great spiritual masters might look like. They looked kind of like me. I was a little disappointed.

No white robes or flowing beards or whatever I might have had in mind. But what they said made sense to me. They seemed to be actually telling me the truth. It resonated in that way. Every day, at least something resonated in a way that felt like, oh, people are telling me the truth.

And the thing that I think got me the most was that there was nothing I was supposed to adopt as a belief or a stance or a philosophy. It was just, check it out. See for yourself. This is the beauty of these teachings. It's summed up in the word *ehipassiko*—come and see for yourself. *Ehi*, come. The beauty of the teachings is just check it out. See for yourself if there is value or benefit here, directly in your own experience.

And so there was this sense of possibility that came from that time. There was this confidence that the teachers had that I think I borrowed every day. I borrowed a bit of that confidence, that faith that they seemed to have so strongly. And then by the end of that first retreat, I felt I had tasted some of that possibility very directly for myself. It seemed like strong medicine. It seemed to work despite me, because I wasn't a model yogi by any means. But something seemed to happen. It was like magic to me.

And so there was this bright kind of faith there initially. Yes, okay, I could do this. This is possible, even for a schlemiel like me. That was the feeling. I can take the next step. Martin Luther King once said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." That was the sense. I had no idea of the trajectory of things, but there was this confidence that I could take the next step.

In the texts, sometimes they have technical definitions of terms like faith. Faith is described as a confidence that allows us to enter into or set out to cross something. There's an image there—it's said to be the confidence that allows one to set out across a flooded area, to cross a flood, to enter into new terrain, to enter into unexplored territory. Which is really what we do every time we sit down. We think we know what's coming. We do get familiar with the inner terrain of this mind and body and heart, but who knows? We don't know.

It's said that faith should be regarded as a hand, because it takes hold of profitable things, of useful things, of good things. I like that image of faith as a hand that takes hold of that which is helpful for us, profitable. And faith is likened to what's called a water-clearing gem. They have this image in the time of the Buddha, in that part of the world, of there being a kind of gem that had this function, this ability to purify water—to clarify and purify, to settle out impurities. And you could see this quality of confidence or faith as purifying in the way that it helps us to see what matters. It helps us to get our priorities in line and see what's worth doing.

So we could see faith as a kind of energy, an energetic quality of mind and heart that has this ability to seek out that which leads to freedom, that clarifies what's important and meaningful in a life. It takes hold—like that hand that takes hold of useful things—it takes hold of this energy and leads to effort, leads us to actually set forth on the path.

And we could say that faith combines this wholesome yearning for understanding, for freedom, for liberation—wholesome desire, this *dhammachanda*. It combines that with aspiration, a determination to fulfill that yearning, with a trust that it's possible to actually set out on such a journey. That we could realize greater ease in our lives and find balance with the changes that are just an inherent part of life. The ups and downs that will come. Some balance with that. The ability to be with the good times and the joys and the happiness without demanding that they stay, letting them fall away when they change, without grasping at them, without falling into addictive patterns. And conversely, the ability to be with difficulties, with sorrows and that which isn't so easy, without being crushed by that or falling into despair or a state of struggle, struggling with the truth of things.

And so we see this yearning for freedom

This aspiration for liberation — we could see this as the desire to be free of the habits of mind, free of the habits of reactivity that lead to suffering. Free of the defilements of mind, no longer under the sway of greed and hatred and delusion, of confusion, of all the ways that these root causes of suffering manifest.

I think it's important for us to reflect on some quality of aspiration in this regard, this movement to freedom. Really to bring it into our minds and our hearts. Not maybe so much as some kind of goal or a naming of a goal — goals, they may change over time. But we can reflect on it in terms of a direction that we're steering in, a course that we're setting sail with a compass heading. We can hold an aspiration as a direction that we're aiming towards. There's a dynamic aliveness to this, where it's not so much a fixed goal of a journey, but a steering towards greater freedom, towards realization. We see what leads in that direction, and we make that our compass heading. We see what leads in the opposite direction, and we steer away from that when we become aware of it.

This quality of faith — sometimes initially, as I was describing for myself, it may arise in relation to a teacher. Or perhaps we may read about or have heard about some inspiring figure that brings a quality of faith, that points to this possibility. Think of someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who seems to serve as a source of inspiration to so many people — people who have no idea who he is, but there's something about him, about his being, that people find inspiring. Or someone else, maybe Dipa Ma, some of us may have heard about or read about. A great teacher, a very inspiring figure. We can find qualities of confidence and faith, this kind of bright faith that comes in relationship to people like this who just inspire us so much, who point to this possibility. These are real living beings.

Some of the beings I've met when I've traveled to Burma — for me there's one monk in particular who's the happiest being I know. He's so light. I'll travel all the way to Burma just to sit with him for a little while. He brings so much joy, and these things inspire us, bring faith. Because this is someone I know, someone I get to spend time with, by some grace of God or some good deeds I did sometime in the past.

These people, these beings that we hear about — or maybe we're lucky enough to meet — they point to the fact that this path actually can be walked to some place of great depth, maybe to completion. The Buddha said, when he said, if this were not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it. Figures like this point directly to that truth, to that possibility for us. We draw confidence from that because we get a sense, tastes at times:

"Oh, I'm following the same path. Or at least I'm walking in the same direction. Maybe it's not the exact same route, but it's going that way." And it strengthens this bright faith that we may begin with.

But then we have to do the practice. We have to actually slog it out. And it's not easy. So we have to find a deeper source of strength.

I was thinking about this first retreat. I remember how high I was after that — I just thought, "Yes!" And then it started to wear off. "What happened? What did I do wrong?" So I wanted to get back on retreat as soon as possible to get it back, as though that were the point, as though there were something to get back in that way. And then it wasn't so easy. It wasn't so sweet. It was hard work, with a lot of doubt coming up. "It's too hard, I can't do it. It was fake somehow." This initial, bright kind of faith that may come like that — it's tender.

It's not sustaining in the long run. We borrow others' faith. We get this bright faith, but it can get swept away. And so we need a more mature, deeper sense of trust and confidence to continue. This unfolds if we can stick with it, if we have enough to keep going. I know for myself it just didn't take very much to keep me going.

We can see the need for this more mature, deeper kind of faith in terms of the hindrance of doubt, which is something we all have to work with over the years. It's going to come up at times. We're sitting there thinking, what does this have to do with anything? What does watching my breath have to do with liberation? This quality of confidence is an antidote to this. We find it in different ways—reflecting on inspiring beings we may have heard of or know, reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha.

Because we're going to run up against it. Think of the Buddha on the night of his enlightenment. He was a pretty good yogi. And he's assailed by the armies of Mara—all these torments and awfulness, and then seductions. Finally, the last thing Mara used, after everything else was exhausted, was doubt. Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to sit there and say, I won't get up? To make that kind of determination: let my bones, sinews, blood—let it dry up. And the Buddha just touched the earth to bear witness.

This doubt will come at times, whether we're fairly new to practice or we've been at it for thirty years. There are times when it will assail us. But our willingness to open to the moment, to the truth of the moment, to really just directly touch—this is how it is right now, let me be with this—begins to strengthen this quality of faith, of confidence,

this willingness to be with the truth of things. We take our stand on reality, and this begins to strengthen this quality of trust. It leads to surrendering to the truth of the moment, which really opens the heart to a deeper kind of confidence.

We find a strength that allows us to not be perfect and to stay steady anyway. I think for myself, this is one of the greatest gifts of the practice over the years—the willingness to not be perfect, to not do it perfectly, to allow that for myself. A huge gift. And we find this confidence that we cannot ever really totally blow it in this practice, because we always can start again in any moment. That's all we are doing all the time anyway. So no matter what, right now, we can start again. We start to really taste the truth of that, and our confidence grows.

There's a beautiful line out of a poem called "Verses on the Faith Mind" by the Third Zen Patriarch: "To live in the highest realization is to live without anxiety about non-perfection." To live without anxiety about non-perfection. To me, this points to a couple of things. It points to a deep acceptance of the inherently imperfect, unreliable, flawed nature of conditioned existence, of samsara. And it points to a confidence where we allow ourselves to be who we are in the moment and to not take everything so personally. We don't have to try to fix ourselves or fix reality or fix life, or try to control it to be any particular way.

When we start through this opening, we start to touch a more mature faith. This mature, bright faith can arise at times of difficulty and challenge in our lives. It's one of the times we start to find this—when we get through something that's really hard. I think of my first long retreat, when one of the teachers suggested resolving to sit without moving for an hour. Big deal, right?

But I didn't think I was going to make it. When I did that, I couldn't move. My resolve was so powerful. I thought I was going to die there. The combination of physical and psychological dukkha was so intense. Ring the bell. Ring the bell. Oh.

But then when the bell rang, I didn't move. It's just—I could. That was what I needed. But I just remember thinking, if I could live through that, I could take anything. Do you remember how much confidence and strength came from something as simple as that? We all have stories like this. I remember my first long retreat in Burma, being pushed beyond what I thought possible in terms of effort and tiredness. We get through these things. We find, "Oh, I can't take it," and then we discover, "Oh, I can take it. I actually can." It's good to reflect on times where we find we're actually stronger than we think we are.

We can develop faith in another way—by looking at our relationship to the whole realm of our mental world, of thoughts and thinking and all that goes on there. We start to see the uncontrollability of that whole world and how these things arise. We don't choose them. We're minding our own business and this stuff just comes, whatever it might be. And we start to see that we don't have to inhabit that whole world, take it as reality, live in the universe that gets created there. We start to see that it's just empty phenomena. It's just nature. It's just mental energy, this effervescence of conditions and causes coming and going. We see the fleeting nature of that mental world. If we don't identify with these things, they just come and go. We don't have to struggle with them. We don't have to believe in them or buy into them.

And so we start to discover this stronger, more mature, more verified faith where we see for ourselves in our own experience that this practice actually is leading to greater ease and freedom in our lives. We start to touch that in some way. And things we've heard, teachings we've heard, move from the realm of the theoretical to something we see has practical application. This is just something we start to notice has happened. We see that it's happening. It's happened on its own.

It might come in a deceptively simple way. We hear over and over again teachings on impermanence—all things are impermanent, that which is subject to arising is subject to passing away. We hear this a gazillion times, and then we start to see that there's some way in which a deep understanding of that has taken root. That's not something we figured out. It's not because we decided to believe in it or adopt it as our philosophy. We start to see that it's actually informing how we live. It's permeating our existence in a way that's subtle but profound and transforming.

We see that if we try to hold on to that which is changing, we're just setting ourselves up for suffering. And if we just sit with the truth of this, with the truth of impermanence and change, a lot of struggle and fight starts to fall away. This connection to a deep understanding on a pre-verbal, almost cellular level starts to inform our lives—the rhythms of change, the rhythms of nature. We see, "Oh, that's just in there now." It's informing our very being and the depths of our being. It's in there. We see that actually there is wisdom. Wisdom does arise. Understanding does come.

And so we have this more verified kind of faith, and we start to live more from that place. We start to find a faith, a trust in the quality of awareness itself and the knowing mind. We see that awareness can hold anything that arises, that awareness is not affected by that arising and passing, that flow of change—it can hold anything.

We start to see that the awareness of fear is not afraid. The awareness of anger is not angry. We touch that purity of knowing. We start to touch a truth that was there all along, because the truth is always the truth. There's an inner wisdom that's always been there. We start to touch that place inside the heart that knows the truth, because we're swimming in it all the time. We start to trust that.

And this is pointing towards a real unshakable kind of faith or confidence. There's nothing that arises internally or externally that can really shake that. And there's an understanding—maybe it's a long path—but our confidence in the onward-leadingness of the practice, in the trajectory of things, is strong. A deep abiding sense of that.

We see, of course, that these habits of mind and heart die hard. It's a big project. But we have this faith and confidence that we're moving in that direction, that the momentum is powerful and strong, and that this untangling is happening, will happen, does happen. It's an organic process that results from our willingness to show up and be there with the truth of things.

And we start to really touch into this possibility of a deep balance of mind and heart in the direction of our highest aspiration—this possibility of the deepest peace.

I'll end tonight with a couple of short quotations from Ajahn Chah. He has such a beautiful, simple way of saying things:

Do not try to become anything. Do not make yourself into anything. Do not be a meditator. Do not become enlightened. When you sit, let it be. When you walk, let it be. Grasp at nothing. Resist nothing.

You will reach a point where the heart tells itself what to do. Try to be mindful and let things take their natural course. Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a clear forest pool. All kinds of wonderful, rare animals will come to drink at the pool, and you will clearly see the nature of all things. You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still. This is the happiness of the Buddha.

The Buddha taught us to lay down those things that lack a real abiding essence. If you lay everything down, you will see the truth. If you don't, you won't. That's just the way it is. And when wisdom awakens within you, you will see the truth wherever you look. Truth is all you'll see.

CHAPTER 42

Four Attachments

Pascal Auclair · 1h06

> *In this illuminating talk from the 2012 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Pascal Auclair presents a comprehensive exploration of the four types of upādāna (clinging or attachment) that the Buddha identified as fuel for suffering: clinging to sensual pleasure (kāmupādāna), clinging to views and opinions (diṭṭhupādāna), clinging to rites and rituals (sīlabbatupādāna), and clinging to notions of self (attavādupādāna). Drawing from his first encounter with these teachings during practice in Thailand, Pascal demonstrates how these forms of attachment often interweave in our daily experience.*
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> *The talk skillfully distinguishes between the Buddhist approach to happiness—which emphasizes non-thirst and freedom from craving (taṇhā)—and the worldling's approach of seeking satisfaction through desire. Pascal introduces the framework of gratification, danger, and escape as a practical system for investigating attachment, and explores the three lines of defense: sīla (ethical conduct), samādhi (concentration providing seclusion from hindrances), and paññā (wisdom that uproots confusion). Personal stories, including a poignant experience of encountering prejudice and his journey with chronic illness, illustrate how clinging to views can cause tremendous suffering and how releasing such clinging brings freedom.*
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> *Pascal addresses the conventional versus ultimate reality distinction, showing how we can cling to norms, conventions, and social expectations in ways that cause suffering for ourselves and others. The teaching culminates in an examination of self-view—how the conceiving of 'I am' creates separation and stress—while pointing toward the luminous nature of consciousness that becomes clear when attachments are released through mindfulness practice.*

So the way we habitually go about finding happiness is as worldlings, untrained hearts and minds. The way we habitually go about finding happiness is by the satisfaction of thirst—a thirst, a desire for something. And getting it is what we think of as happiness.

The Buddhist approach is very different. It's about non-thirst. And so the practice that we do here is to actually get interested, amongst many things, in thirst, desire, wanting to have, wanting to be or not be. We look at this, and maybe it is revealed to us that although it seems like it's talking about happiness—"When you get this, you will be

happy, I promise"—although it seems to be talking about happiness, when we pay closer attention, what we find is a direct experience, an immediate experience of lack. Something is lacking here.

And so this subterfuge is revealed. Although it speaks of happiness and points towards it, the experience is more akin to the carrot for the horse—the famous carrot that dangles and keeps you going.

This is known to be the cause of our suffering: the desire, the taṇhā. There's another word that is also used: upādāna, translated as perhaps attachment or clinging. One literal translation is "fuel." So clinging or attachment as the fuel for suffering.

So tonight, in the true Buddhist spirit, I would like to present a list of a number of things. There are two variants: the number and the things. Tonight, the number is four—the lucky number is four—and the theme is attachment. So: the four different kinds of attachments.

The first time I ever practiced and learned about Buddhist practice was in Thailand. During that week of retreat, this teaching was given. And I found that particular list extremely practical, very useful for seeing how freaking out—another translation for upādāna—happens. Getting bugged by, getting tight around. Clinging happens.

So these four fields are: clinging about sensual desire; clinging onto views and opinions—can you relate?; clinging to rites and rituals, the classic naming of this third one; and then the last one, this month's or these six weeks' favorite, clinging to self or idea of self—or another Pali word, *moi*—clinging to things as "me" or "mine."

These are the four fields I would like to explore a bit tonight.

So the human predicament: we find ourselves here in this life, sensitive, with senses. It means we're constantly impacted, impinged upon. The human predicament is that we have senses, we're sensitive. So we're constantly encountering pleasantness and unpleasantness.

And it makes sense that if you have sensitivity—many doors of sensitivity—and that there can be an experience of enjoyment of that sensitivity, it would make sense that one would try to accumulate or turn towards the pleasantness rather than the unpleasantness. And so there's this search that can happen for the pleasantness.

I was reading something that presented pleasantness and unpleasantness and neutrality as winds, coming back to the idea I've used before of these as bubbles. It was saying that to actually get all worked up and want to have pleasantness rather than un-

pleasantness, in this way that we go about a lot—it's a little bit like if somebody was fighting against winds. Wet winds or dry winds, cold winds or warm winds, wanting the warm winds to be cold or wanting the wet ones to be dry—it would be mad. Yet this is a lot of what we do in our life: try to make pleasant stay, or make unpleasant become pleasant.

So there's a lot of this happening. There's a system that I like very much to use to look at this.

It comes from a few different suttas of the Buddha where he talks about gratification, danger, and escape. In one sutta that I'm paraphrasing now, the Buddha—or rather, the Buddha-to-be, speaking about his earlier practice—asks: Why do I still do this? Why do I keep repeating this certain pattern? And the answer is: because I see only the gratification. If I saw the dangers, the drawbacks, the disadvantages of this, then it would be easy to find the escape, the freedom from this.

I think of it as a little system: gratification, danger, and escape.

The gratification or enjoyment is often very obvious. We say that with sense pleasure, the dangers are hidden—unlike a blazing fire or a very sharp weapon where you can see right away that the danger is obvious. But with sense pleasure, it's not clear because it's enjoyable. So we need, through this practice—to me, that's a lot of what we do—to become more realistic about that aspect, among many other aspects of reality: the unreliability of pleasure, of sense pleasure. That's one of the dangers that becomes more obvious.

Another of the dangers is the agitation that arises when we look for it. When I want pleasantness, there's a price to pay that comes with it—the agitation. And here in the silence of meditation, of the retreat center, it can become like an echo, a very strong echo. I find how agitated I get. Because getting what I want is hard. Not getting what I want is hard if I don't get it. If I get it, keeping it is hard. And when I lose it, that's hard too. So there's no point along the way where there might be enjoyment without stress also being present the whole time.

A way I think about this is that the pleasures at the sense doors—the five senses, and the sixth, the pleasure of nice ideas, beautiful ideas. I want beautiful ideas. I want to think about fantasies, for example. They're pleasant. The words that come to my mind are *low-quality happiness*. It's kind of cheap happiness. Maybe it can be instant gratification, available quickly in some instances, but it's very cheap because it's unreliable, it's changing, it's conditional. It depends on many things to happen.

There's one little story I like to tell about this. It's kind of dramatic, but maybe that's just my way—to highlight one version of how pleasantness is conditional.

Not this summer, but the summer before, I was with my partner. And we had the chance to go to the countryside to spend the day. We were going to a place with a river in a park, kind of a forest, and there were waterfalls there. At that exact time of year, the water is falling at just the right volume, the right pressure, so that if you get the right angle—and that's a fun part of it—you can actually go under the waterfall. You're hidden under it, and there's a wall of water in front of you, and the light is diffused. There were several of these waterfalls you could go under.

So we were there, my partner and I, and it was beautiful—very green, a beautiful day, warm sun, refreshing water, going in and out. Very, very pleasant at the sense doors.

At some point, my partner was sitting on a rock with the light falling on him, and it was very beautiful, and I find him beautiful, so I took the camera out to take a picture. I like to take pictures, so I spent a few minutes there, trying this angle, adjusting for a few seconds.

On the other side of the river, there was a group of young men. And for them, there was just a little too long of a man taking pictures of another man. There was something they recognized there. We hadn't kissed—we knew about that. But the picture-taking got their adrenaline and testosterone going. So they started to shout things. Because of the waterfall, we couldn't really hear, but it was pretty clear what was going on.

And it was very interesting to see how suddenly the enjoyment, the pleasure in the greenery, the sun, the waterfalls—the pressure hadn't changed. There was no cloud that had come. It was still beautiful, a chlorophyll-suffused environment, very green.

But the capacity to enjoy it—completely gone. Unreliable.

I told you it was going to be dramatic. But that's part of reality, apparently.

I can say also that as a white male, I'm not exposed very often to this kind of danger, this kind of oppression. I've been very much spared from that. So it was very triggering in a major way.

The idea I want to give here is the idea of the low quality of happiness that we can have from the senses, the pleasure at the sense doors. Then there's a different kind of something that has more value and more depth to it. And I could see that at that moment at the river—maybe not in the first few minutes, but soon enough—there was a

gathering of something in the heart-mind that was of greater value. There was some clarity in the heart and mind. There was clarity about hate and how the message of hate that was given should not be believed in. There was clarity that was protective. There was a level of freedom that one could gain access to.

It was a completely different aspect of reality, where it was suddenly very clear that if one is to put some eggs in some basket, that would be the basket to put the eggs in. Do you follow me here? That the looking for pleasantness didn't have so much depth as clarity about the world—clarity about what one can or cannot be, about nonviolence, about the value of nonviolence and understanding. Maybe I don't find the right words tonight, but I bet you can make your way into this.

And I can use the same example, I'll try, to say how latent tendencies that we have in the mind—latent tendency to greed, wanting the pleasure; latent tendency to hate what is unpleasant—these tendencies have an impact on perception. The senses that are such beautiful doorways for understanding and liberation, for wisdom—this is what we're using here. We're using the senses to find the way towards freedom for oneself and for others. But the latent tendencies of the mind can actually hijack the senses, so that the senses become slaves, if I can use that word, to these tendencies. So that the eyes, the ears, can become radars looking for satisfaction, looking for pleasantness. And we live in that often—or looking for something to push away. Perception is distorted by these tendencies of mind, so that I go around, and because there is this looking for pleasure, there will be a projection. "Oh, pleasure is in this." It's not inherent in this thing, but the mind will project it.

One very classic example is the Vipassana romance at the retreat center. The mind will project onto something complete satisfaction—the soulmate. "This is the person." Or, "This will solve my boredom, my solitude. This person." And suddenly there's this... I remember one yogi one year describing—it was good because they could see their mind—they were saying, "This person that I zeroed in on, the mind is projecting so much happiness. I see us traveling in India together for years and years, having kids and the whole thing." And I was like, "But in India, you guys are going to get sick?" And he's like, "No. It's all going to be pleasant. Nobody's going to get sick, and it's going to be beautiful and comfortable always."

So the mind does that—can hang on like this to experience, or find something to hate, maybe even the enjoyment of hating. The pleasure at the sense door is unreliable. It's conditional. It's also that because of the enjoyment itself, the danger is hidden. It's the addiction that can come because of the enjoyment. So one has to be very mindful.

When encountering pleasure.

At the time of the Buddha, there was a belief that pleasure was the problem. So you would have to stay away from pleasure at all cost—eat little, don't lay down, because if it gets pleasurable, you're going to be stuck.

In my understanding, one of the Buddha's contributions to spirituality and freedom was recognizing that it's not the pleasure itself. It's the addiction, the compulsion, the clinging, the freaking out, the getting obsessed—this is what we have to care for.

The way I present this, with the word "danger" and this image of licking honey on a razor's edge—I remember hearing that about sense pleasure and thinking, "Wow, this is heavy stuff." And so just to remind us: what really hurts is not the pleasure itself. It's the clinging. We bring attention to this in our practice. Where is the clinging? Not the enjoyment itself that is the problem, because that's one of the wins. It will come, enjoyment. And it's possible to meet it.

The best strategy to meet it, and to meet life, I think, is with mindfulness. Because if there is the presence of pleasure and there is a knowing of its impermanent nature, then it can come through and be felt very fully. Whereas when there is clinging, it's not possible to actually enjoy something, because the mind is bugged by fearing losing.

Perhaps in our practice we can notice the absence of clinging or wanting, the absence of desire for sense pleasure when it's present, and feel the freedom in that. And that experience of non-clinging sometimes is in the midst of neutrality, in the midst of unpleasant, or in the midst of pleasant experience—the mind can meet pleasantness in a very balanced way, and actually get intimate with the experience at the sense door.

Philip Moffatt has an equation that I like. His equation is: pleasantness times attachment equals suffering. So your pleasantness on a level of one to ten, times your level of attachment to it from one to ten, equals the amount of suffering there will be. You could do the same with displeasure plus the amount of reactivity, the amount of not wanting.

All the teachings from my teachers keep coming into my head. I hear Christina Feldman sitting here and saying: to the amount that we're attached to pleasure, to the same amount—and it's not possible to do otherwise—to the same amount we will fear displeasure. That is not a fun situation to find oneself in. Fearing, wanting, fearing, wanting.

A lot of what we do here is actually find balance and intimacy in the passages of feeling tone at the sense doors.

One way I've been taught to think about this: what are the ways we deal with these tendencies of mind, the tendency to look for pleasure, the tendency of greed, the tendency to reject what is unpleasant?

The first kind of baseline—please be here for this one, I think it's very interesting—the first line of defense, I'll call it, is sīla. Knowing that in this psyche there will be confusion, there will be the presence of greed, of believing that the pleasantness I'll get from this will solve my problem. Knowing that there's confusion about what leads to what and what leads away from what, then I have a first line of defense called sīla.

I say, although I might want something very much, I'm going to give myself ethical rules that I'm not going to break. So I'm not going to take what is not offered freely. Although I might want something, really believe this is what I actually need, I'm not going to break that line. This is my outside line. There'll be confusion in here, but it won't leak outside in this dramatic way. Or because I want something so much, or want to promote myself in some way, I'm going to tell something that is not true—so I say no, I'm actually going to stick to honesty. That's a line of defense against these tendencies of the mind.

The second line of defense we work with here is samādhi, seclusion. By developing concentration, what happens is that during the time of concentration, when it's well established, the hindrances are gone. I'm secluded from the hindrances. There is not the wanting for something else. Full attention is given to breath, to sound in a sustained way, to ease of the mind, to some object—fully given to it. During that time there's not "but I want something else" or "I don't want this." This has gone.

We can have this experience sometimes for a few seconds, sometimes for longer on retreat, where suddenly we're secluded. It is so good. It is so—here's another way to live, where there's not this constant wanting. Not "what I want is just a little bit more comfort, or just a little bit more this," or the mind a little like this. It's just: wow, this is like this right now. Sustained attention, concentration, can bring seclusion from this wanting that is so bugging us.

And the third line, which is perhaps the most important one, is paññā—wisdom, the uprooting of any confusion about sense pleasure.

The clarity—the complete clarity—that sense pleasure is not providing anything sustainable of depth. Let me know it as it's here. The quality of the mind suddenly becomes so much more important than what is being felt. The quality of responsiveness, of appropriate response. Knowing deeply that some things cannot provide, and finding peace with that.

So that's just the first of four—sensual pleasure. I moved away from it a bit and back and forth, but that's a field anyway.

The second one I want to talk about is views and opinions. How the mind, on retreat and off retreat, can cling to views and opinions, and the suffering in that.

It's very interesting that this follows talking about pleasantness and unpleasantness, because in the Buddhist teachings we're invited in a very sober way to look at our views and opinions and see if they're really based on reason and great understanding, or if they might be a little more shallow and based on feeling tone. Apparently, if we research this well, we might find that many of the views and opinions we hold are basically just starting from pleasantness and unpleasantness.

"It should be warmer in here." You have a view, an opinion, that it should be warmer in here. How would that come about? "This person should breathe differently. It's not a good way to breathe for them. I should actually write them a note, or offer my wisdom around breathing." How would that opinion come about?

Even sometimes, getting news, I can see how my view about peace is so shallow. It's not based on compassion, on being touched by suffering and how that suffering could be relieved—if there is war, for example. Sometimes it's just this reactivity to unpleasant images or ideas. There's no depth to it. Although it might look like a beautiful view and opinion, it has no depth. It's just simple reactivity to vedana.

That's something I find very sobering to come back to sometimes. What's the feeling tone aspect of this view, Pascal? And see what can be revealed in there. That can help release some of the clinging sometimes. "Oh, unpleasant feels like this"—and open the door to access something deeper.

In my practice for many years, clinging to views and opinions was not in my field of awareness so much. Then a few years back, I did a long retreat, a little bit like this one. In the mid-course of the retreat, there was a changing of teams, a change of teachers.

To contextualize it even more: in the first part of that retreat, I had been doing the Brahma Viharas. I was practicing mudita for several weeks, and I had gotten very cozy in my little mudita world. I had one person to whom I was wishing that their happiness and good fortune increase and never wane. One sentence, several weeks. It was a very beautiful world I was in, very flowing, because the person I had chosen—I had made a really good choice. It was somebody with beautiful qualities of heart and mind. When I was saying, "May your good fortune increase," I was thinking a lot about their qualities. "May they increase and never cease." It was unimaginable that their qualities of mind would not continue to be cultivated, given the way they lived their life. There was no

way their good fortune—their inner good fortune as I was thinking about it—would diminish, because of how they lived. And so it was very easy, and I was very protected. There was a lot of concentration.

Then the new team came, and with them, I decided I would do vipassana—looking at reality—in the second part of my retreat. The team of teachers arrived, and they were not the other team. I started having opinions about them. Very strong opinions about how they should be, what they should talk about, how they should do this and do that. It was kind of unnoticed at first. Actually, I got pretty desperate and pretty stuck. One day I sat down to meditate, and I was in such a bad state because of my views and opinions.

I thought, "Next week, in a few days, in the local paper, you might find on the front page: 'Yogi Found Drowned in Their Opinions.'" Literally death by opinions—self-imposed—because it was so incredibly painful. And even more so because I was very sensitive from the practice I had been doing. It's as if somebody had removed my... I was regressed a bit, you know, like we can get on retreat—we can become very young. It felt like I had a blanket; I was secluded from the entrances with my concentration blanket, and I had my metta teddy bear. And suddenly somebody had taken my metta teddy bear and my blanket, and I was like this trembling creature, and there was this new team of agitated beings.

Luckily, one of the teachers—who was not my assigned teacher—just from a question I asked in the hall, got that this person is not well. They need a rescue. They need a buoy or whatever you call it. They're drowning in their opinions.

And so I met with this person, and they said, "This is what's going on. You don't have to show me all the letters you wrote—I'm sure you wrote a few. We're going to go very slowly out of this." This teacher was very helpful, and I found my way out.

After this experience, I was shaken deeply around opinions and how opinions can create such suffering for self and eventually for others. I became very aware of this. And of course, I still get caught in opinions. Even just a few minutes ago, before coming here, I heard myself say something. The saying was fine, but the tightening around it was very surprising. Suddenly I noticed: here's an opinion I'm clinging to, because there was a tightening in the heart.

This practice of bringing attention to that aspect of reality—our views and opinions—from the Buddhist perspective, is meant to bring freedom, to bring ease of mind, release, dispassion. So it's interesting to view the opinions we have in that light. Is this bringing calm to the mind? Is this view bringing calm? Is this view liberating or entangling? This is an interesting way to look at a view or opinion we might have.

And this inquiry might reveal views that are actually even more dangerous than just clinging to a view—clinging to an *unwise* view. In Buddhism, we talk about wise view and unwise view. Clinging to a view is painful. Clinging to an unwise view—for example, the view that this action of mind or speech or body will have no repercussions whatsoever—this is not the training of the mind. The view that things don't have consequences can be very dangerous, because it makes me lose the wisdom I have gained. Remember when I said that when there's an afflictive tendency of the mind that is active, we lose the wisdom we have cultivated? It's with mindfulness that wisdom can be brought back.

So if I'm under the influence of greed, I might really think—and it happens all the time in this society we live in—that there are no consequences. "Just take this. I deserve it. There are no consequences to it. It's not mine, but hey." And suddenly something is revealed later: there was a consequence. It had an impact on the safety of others, or on the way people perceive me.

Clinging to a view of permanence, a view of satisfaction, the view of self, of "selfing"—"It's really, really *mine*. It's my bicycle"—and then it's gone. If there's a real clinging to a wrong view, the pain is going to be doubled.

This is what we're doing here: clarifying views about the world, learning also the pain of clinging to a view. And sometimes—I think I said this before, and I really believe it—soaking in clinging a little bit more so that I can really feel the *ouch* aspect of it, the devastation of clinging. Not rejecting clinging so quickly. It holds a lot of information. When I'm in it, let me bring mindfulness there and see: being uptight about this, that they should have done that...

There's one particular view I had at some point, unnoticed. I'm bringing back the idea of the disease I live with. For many years, I would spend time thinking, "If I didn't have that, I could so easily travel."

Let's say that was one of the views. I could travel in India because my medication would not need to be refrigerated. And my immune system would be stronger, so there wouldn't be so much danger of visiting countries where my system is not adapted to.

And if I didn't have this... there was a view of this other life without the HIV. And it seemed actually that it was giving me a rest from my life. I could sit on the cushion, like you are, and take a little break and just think of my life if there was not that.

And one time, because of a prior moment of mindfulness, there was suddenly a moment of just coming back from that view, from that trip. And I saw that this was actually not helpful. Although it seemed like something good—a fantasy that was good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end—it was actually not. Because compared to my imagined life, my real life was miserable. My real samsaric life was definitely failing compared to that made-up, fictional generation of the mind.

And so this view got corrected. Oh, this is not for my benefit. This is not for my benefit. I can let go of that view right then and there.

And then the little funny part about this is that I had this kind of fantasy, this little thing I saw—that I would actually marry my life. So I imagined a wedding setup where I was there with my life and I was committing to my life, saying, "I'm not going to look at other people's lives and want their life. When I go to bed at night, I'm going to cherish my life. And when I wake up in the morning, I'm going to cherish my life again. When I walk in the street, I'm going to walk with my life. For better and worse, or however we say it, I want to commit to this life." And there was this wedding of moi and my life.

And it brought some ease into my life. There was a level of acceptance, a better view of what was happening in this life and how one could be committed to that version.

The beauty of it came out in another way that I often thought about. I had this image of a spear, a long spear. Every time there was something wrong—hyena, spear, subterfuge. So it felt like I was living with a spear on the side. I would want to have a normal life, just go through a door, get inside the car, but there's a spear coming out of the side, so I have to go in the doorway this way. I want to get in the car like a normal person, but I have to go like this because there's this spear. It would always be in the way somewhere.

But then—how can I live my life with a spear? Is it possible to live a whole life accommodating, giving space to that thing? And actually, yes. Actually, there's some beauty in it. How can one have gracefulness with a spear on the side? And actually, yeah, it's possible.

So you see how the view changed—that there should be another life, or if there was another life.

In these four categories of sense pleasure, views, rites and rituals, and clinging to notions of self, attachment to self—there's this division in four, but in actuality they're often mixed together. So if somebody comes in late, you might think about rites and rituals, this convention that we come in time for the sitting. You might cling to this because they're destroying my concentration—so there's a little selfing in there. And it's about sense pleasure, that it was quiet here and I liked it. So in actuality, it might be more mixed than the four divisions suggest. As I'm talking, I'm aware that we could have put maybe that example in another of the categories.

So these are a few thoughts about views and opinions.

I'll talk now about rites and rituals, and I make this much larger. The way I think about that category is rites, rituals, conventions, and norms. I make it very wide—how we can cling to conventions and norms.

I spoke last week about the two realities, the conventional reality and the ultimate reality. I always liked the idea of conventions. I come from the world of theater. In the theater, conventions are very, very important.

So we'll agree that we're brother and sisters. We have this big fight and everybody in the audience agrees that we're brother and sisters. "Oh my God, the way he talks to his sister." And then everybody goes back home. And if Rebecca was to call me after the play and say, "Pascal, you're my brother. I can't believe you talk like..." I would say, hold on. This was a convention. This was an agreement. This is a theater convention. This is very important. You leave it there when it works. We agree on that, but it's not ultimately true. It's just good for the moment it lasts.

Why do I like convention in the theater? One example that was so delightful for me: there was this play happening in summer in my country where I lived. We have a lot of mosquitoes, and I think there are some here too. There's a culture that when you come in, you close the door because the flies and the mosquitoes come in. And in that play, it was really fun because every time—it was a family, and the mother was inside—and every time one of the kids would come in, there was a little recorder there. They would press play and you would hear wind and things like this, and they would not press stop. So the mom would say, "Close the door!" And then they would come back to the side of the stage where they came in, they would press stop, and the sound would stop. So there was a convention. This is the door. The door is a recorder making the sound of outside. And even in the winter, there would be something more stormy. And every time somebody would come in the play, they would never close the door. And the mom would always say, "Close the door! The flies!" They would go back. And I was sitting

there thinking, ah, I love conventions. Because here are nine hundred people who agree this is a door. But we all know it's not a door. But this is delightful. It's conventions.

And so this applies also in the life we live, where there are conventions that we agree on, but they're not ultimately true. It's just agreement. I give you this example. One time I was on retreat and we had a little group meeting like we sometimes have on the shorter retreats. A group of us came together with one of the monks who was leading the retreat. And one person who was there said, "I'm really bugged because I own a restaurant in town. And every few weeks, there's somebody who comes and does graffiti on the window of my restaurant. Graffiti is illegal. This is my restaurant. What am I supposed to do with this? This is bringing suffering to me."

And so the monk said, "Hmm, now I think it's important that you bring the two realities together. You balance the two realities. That's how you might be able to relieve some of your suffering. Conventionally, we all agree that there's a law. You don't paint on walls. There's an agreement. But it's conventional. Anybody can break it at any time they want, you know? And your restaurant is also a convention. You go to a lawyer. They write papers. And we all agree, when you have these papers, this is your house. But it's not possible to own anything, really. So if you bring a little bit more of the ultimate reality back into your conventional, and you see the nuances of both, maybe you're going to let go of the clinging to 'it's really mine.'"

It's really the law. You see? So we can cling to conventional reality in a way that is out of proportion, not balanced with the ultimate.

Was it this week or last week that Joseph used this idea of coming back to sit here and suddenly somebody is in your seat? That's a place where you would really want to bring back ultimate reality. Ultimately, it was agreed that it was mine, but this is shaky. This is conditional. It's not stable, grounded, permanent reality. It's a reality that is movable. And so we need to bring attention to this.

To me, the rites and rituals—I include in this the conventions, the ways of doing things. There are also the norms. How we can cling individually, or as groups, or as a society to norms, really reminding somebody of the norm.

There's Rita Gross, the Buddhist author. I remember her writing a little article in Inquiring Mind where there was this paragraph that stood out so strongly for me. She was writing, "Although I clearly have a female body—there's no doubt about this—people always assume that either I have children..." It's not a given that she has children, could have children. The form doesn't say that. Ever wanted children, likes this or

that—it doesn't come with the shape. That this person has this kind of temperament or likes this and not that. And constantly she's reminded that when you have this form, this is what you like, this is what you don't like. People assume that her partner will be of a certain sex. But the form doesn't say that. There's a kind of norming that she's reminded of constantly, and the clinging to this.

That's one aspect of it. There are so many other norms. Here in this room, there are many norms. When we can see how we cling to norms or conventions like this, or when another does—these things have to be seen internally and externally. We can see also the suffering when another group clings to a norm. Like me at the waterfall—that was a place where norming was happening very strongly. You know, men don't take five-minute pictures of other men. It's not okay. So we can see, we can be alert to how norming happens.

To me, the beautiful practice is to become aware of norms and see the way that I buy into them, or the way that they're useful, or the way that I can cling or others can cling—and then have the freedom to follow the norm or to veer from the norm.

The freedom that we're looking for is not going to be only personal, psychological—I don't know how to put it. It's going to be also societal. It's going to be about the way we live, the way we promote freedom, defend freedom, offer freedom and protection, and the way that it's cut for some groups, the way it's cut for some targeted groups of us. You see the clinging, that rite and ritual clinging, in religious beliefs—how there can be so much clinging and so much suffering that comes in the world around that area. That's one thing we want to become aware of also and find freedom in.

There's a beautiful saying—I always forget the source, so I should just say some really wise person once said, and they happened to practice Buddhism also, Tibetan Buddhism more particularly—"Although my view is vast as the sky, my attention to details is as refined as a particle of barley flour." This speaks to having a wide view while also knowing conventions, knowing when to respect them, knowing how to be with them in a very precise way.

So although it's conventional that this is my chanting sheet and that one is your chanting sheet, although it's just conventional reality—it's not ultimately true, and I see that, my view is vast as the sky, you cannot own a printed sheet of paper with a chant on it, it's not possible ultimately to own paper—conventionally, I'm very detailed. I really respect your things in this way.

How can we play that dance freely and gracefully? Knowing the world of convention, knowing how to respect the convention so there's no hurt being done, or knowing how courageously to sometimes break the conventions because of a greater good or something like that.

So I'm saved by the bell around selfing. It's a very wide subject. Maybe I'll just do a few quotes to finish around this last one of selfing, on which we've already spent some time. But it's something we could spend much more time on. This is from *The Island*:

Trying to find a "me" without a world that burdens it is like trying to run away from your own shadow. No matter how fast you run, the effort is bound to fail, as the one form generates the other. When there is this me-clinging, this identification—sometimes not subtle at all, but sometimes extremely subtle—when there's a me-making, suddenly there is a world. There's me, other, and this appears viable. But it's going to take a lot of work. It's going to take a lot of defending, a lot of strategizing. This view, this separation, is very painful. Part of what we're doing here is to release some of that view, some of that extra charge that has this me-ing, this owning.

This is the Buddha: "I am—this is a conceived idea, a made-up idea, generated in the mind, a fiction. I will be—this is a conceived idea. I will not be—this is a conceived idea. Conceived ideas are a disease, a boil, a dart." It's laid out pretty plainly, I would say.

Here's another version: "Ninety-nine percent of our thoughts are about me, and there isn't one. No wonder we're stressed out." That's Wei Wu Wei.

Seeing how this arises, this owning, this me-ing—perhaps you can identify the separation that comes with it and feel it, the texture of being separated from the world. Sometimes I think of it as a tapestry. In the tapestry, there is a unicorn or a woman playing a harp, and we really think there is a unicorn standing there independently. But when you start doing vipassana, mindfulness, you begin to see how when you pull on a little string, the harp is coming, the woman is coming, the unicorn is coming. They're all enmeshed together. It appears like there is a unicorn standing out, but when you sit here and start to see how conditional things are—how this could not happen without this, and this, and this that is happening—you realize that nothing you experience is outside of the world. It's totally enmeshed in it. You begin to see how much part of the tapestry you are, and that there is just a conceiving, a delimiting, and that's very arbitrary. This is mine, but this is not mine. This is yours. This is not yours.

It's important in our life, as we grow, that we make this differentiation. That's part of evolution. As a baby, we need this. But as a spiritual being, this we can let go of slowly—this way of dividing reality. And perhaps move on to something else: What's here? How to take care of it?

The Buddha: "If it were not possible to free the heart from entanglement in greed, hatred, and fear, I would not teach you to do so. Luminous is consciousness, brightly shining in its nature, but it becomes clouded by the attachments that visit it."

of the lovely clarity of mindfulness that you can let go of grasping after past and future, overcome attachment and grief, abandon all clinging and anxiety, and awaken an unshakable freedom of heart—here, now.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 43

The Greatest Disappointment... Or Aniccā and Letting Go

Rebecca Bradshaw · 1h00

> *In this profound talk, Rebecca Bradshaw explores aniccā (impermanence) as one of the three doorways to liberation, alongside dukkha and anattā. Drawing from teachers like Suzuki Roshi and Ajahn Chah, she illuminates how the seemingly obvious truth that "everything changes" contains depths that can transform our relationship with life itself. The talk examines how aniccā is the most elemental of the three characteristics, as constant change naturally implies that nothing can be permanently satisfying (dukkha) and that no fixed, independent self can be found (anattā).*
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> *Bradshaw distinguishes between psychological insight—understanding our personal patterns and conditioning—and meditative insight, which reveals the universal truth that all that arises passes away. She examines the three roots of suffering (delusion, aversion, and grasping) as strategies we use to resist the truth of change, creating an illusion of control that ultimately leads to suffering rather than security. Through personal stories, including navigating uncertainty during a health crisis, she demonstrates how surrendering to uncertainty can paradoxically become a place of rest.*
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> *The practical heart of this teaching lies in studying how we relate to change in every moment—from small losses like breakfast ending to major life transitions. Rather than forcing acceptance, we're invited to bring curious, non-judgmental awareness to our resistance and clinging, allowing the process of letting go to unfold naturally. The Buddha's final words frame this practice: "All conditioned things arise and pass away. Work out your liberation with diligence."*

There are two possible titles for tonight's talk. The first one is "The Greatest Disappointment Leading to Peace." And the second one is "Anicca and Letting Go."

I read a book with little stories about Suzuki Roshi recently—just little one-page stories with great little teachings. In one story, a student says to Suzuki Roshi that he's been listening to him for years, and he's confused. He just doesn't get it. Would Suzuki Roshi give him a one-sentence explanation of what Buddhism is about? Suzuki Roshi replied, "Here are the succinct secret teachings for you all: Everything changes." That was all he said. Everything changes.

All of our practice—the wisdom part of our practice—is about making peace with this truth. Everything changes, or anicca, impermanence. Anicca has far-reaching implications for how we understand happiness, how we live our lives. If it's carried through to its end, it really means that living in harmony with this world means understanding that there's only peace in letting go. The Buddha taught this as the heartwood of the practice: this truth that letting go is what brings the deepest peace or freedom. This is the freedom of an unfettered or uncontracted heart-mind. Ultimately, we're talking about letting go of clinging—clinging to any experience. This is what anicca teaches us.

It's said that there are three doorways to freedom in our practice: anicca, dukkha, and anatta. We've touched on all of these, surely. I know that Annie gave a talk on dukkha, and we've talked a lot about anatta, or not-self. Tonight, I'm going to round it out with talking about anicca, or impermanence.

Anicca is really the most elemental of these three truths or doorways to freedom because the other two are natural corollaries of this one. The fact that change is ceaseless, that we live in a world of constant change, means that things are not going to be permanently satisfying—that they're unsatisfactory or suffering, dukkha. And this truth of change also means that what we take to be ourselves is this process of constant change, and that we can't find a solid, independent, core self because of this.

Any one of the three leads to the other two. They're intricately intertwined—anicca, dukkha, and anatta. Often we'll have one that we connect with more than the others. It's kind of our doorway to freedom. Or sometimes you'll find that at certain times in practice, one will really be noticeable and up for you, and then that might shift in other years of practice. It's said that at the moment of enlightenment, one of these three truths crystallizes in the mind—that our understanding of it is so profound that it pierces the veil of delusion, of not seeing how things are. Understanding these characteristics—anicca, dukkha, anatta—is the insight that leads to freedom, to the liberation of the heart and mind.

The other day we had a question that I answered, and there was a part of it that I didn't get into that I want to mention tonight. I think there was a question implicit about the difference between psychological insight and meditative insight. What exactly do we mean by insight in this practice?

Psychological insight is, you could say, a byproduct of practice. We sit here and we get certain understandings about how we as unique individuals work—our patterns of conditioning, the ways and stories and beliefs we get stuck in, ways we relate to others. This happens in practice, and it can be good and supportive of our practice if it leads to

the unbinding of the heart and mind. Perhaps it leads to us making a commitment to live with better ethics, with more integrity, or to living with more compassion—if it clears the heart and mind of contraction.

However, it's not so helpful if the psychological insights just serve to strengthen our sense of ourselves—like, "Oh, so this is how I am." If we become overly fascinated with this kind of insight, we can actually take away from the greater benefit of what we call meditative insights: insights into anicca, dukkha, and anatta.

Meditative insights are much less personal. They're not about my personal story or who I am. The content doesn't matter much. Basically, they're the truth that all that arises passes away, the truth that because of that, things of this world—experiences of heart, mind, body—are not going to be ultimately satisfying, and they can't be claimed as me or mine. Meditative insight is all variations on those three themes.

So let's look at anicca.

Well, we will be looking at dukkha too. Can't avoid it.

The first time I heard the teachings of anicca, or impermanence, was in my eighth grade science class. I still remember where I was standing. I was hit so profoundly with this teaching. The teacher said, "The only thing constant is change. Change is the only thing that doesn't change." And I remember thinking, *wow*—and thinking, *that's true*.

Years later, I can still remember what he said. What I didn't know at the time was that 2,500 years earlier, the Buddha had taught the same information as a key point for us to understand if we wish to travel this path of liberation. Maybe my teacher was a Buddhist, or maybe he was just a scientist. Some similar things are being understood in both paths.

The Buddha himself, in a well-known phrase, described anicca poetically by saying: "Thus shall you think of this fleeting world: a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream." All of those images have the sense of here and gone. *Thus shall you think of this fleeting world.* It's kind of poignant.

So we may think to ourselves, well, everybody knows that everything changes. What's so profound about that? I know that. Yes, ask the average person, do things change? They'll usually say yes. I tried this experiment once when I was writing my first anicca talk, and people didn't have any trouble agreeing that things change. And

then I asked them, "Everything? Does everything change?" This people weren't so sure about. One person said 95% of things change. Other people didn't know what to make of me for asking that question.

But we can miss out on the profundity of this teaching because it seems kind of obvious. The depth and breadth of this truth of anicca and its implications for how we live aren't usually contemplated. For one thing, the speed of change looks different to the untrained worldling than to those who meditate. Harper's Index once asked people—I think Americans—how long does the present last? The consensus was that the present lasted three seconds. That seems really long to me. Maybe to you too.

Well, the Buddha was a bit more refined in his present moments. He said that there are thousands of mind moments in a second. So that's a little different.

There's a Japanese teacher named Jakusho Kwong, and he writes about it like this: "Everything is changing. In one way, it's complete freedom. It is said that there are 6.5 billion instances in 24 hours. And in one second, there are 7,000 instances. As we are sitting here, they are continuously coming and going, continuously coming and going, just like when I strike my stick on the floor. Bam, bam, bam, bam. Isn't that wonderful? This is complete freedom. We see ourselves as firewood going to ash. We see ourselves 30 years old going to 60. My God, look out, here comes 70. We see ourselves only in the linear, the sequential, moving toward an end. We don't understand that within each 24-hour day there are 6.5 billion instances of life, death, life, death, gain, loss, gain, loss, dark, light, bodhisattvas, clouds, cars, you and me. All the dharmas are appearing and disappearing continuously out of the beginningless beginning and the endless end. This is really fantastic. It gives us such a very wide liberating view that to even call it Buddha Dharma or anything else diminishes it."

That's a different feel than three seconds.

So, anicca.

The biggest challenge for us in this life is that things are always changing, that we can't peg things down, make them be like we want them to be. Now, of course, we have influence. I don't want to say that we're completely powerless or that I'm talking about passivity. But yes, we've taken birth in this tough universe. It's tough to navigate because there is this wild speed of change. It's a wild, wild ride, this human life.

You may have noticed this in your meditation. Life or reality is intense because it includes such a wide variety of experiences constantly changing—sometimes described as the 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows, or sometimes described as the eight vicissitudes of life: pleasure and pain, loss and gain, praise and blame, fame and disrepute. These

eight worldly conditions are always changing. We hope, we wish we could just have the praise or the gain or the pleasure, but it doesn't work that way. That isn't the kind of universe we've taken birth into. It's a wild ride.

The Buddha said the entire universe is fluid. Everything in conditioned reality, this manifest world, is in a constant state of flux. Nothing in this world escapes this truth. And in meditation, we contact our own experience of heart and mind to see the truth of this reality right within our own experience.

Think about your last sitting. What happened? It was probably a pretty constant experience of change, a process of change. The breath, a pain, a thought, an emotion, hearing, the breath, thinking. Or today—what happened to lunch? It's gone.

I remember my first retreat here. Every day I would look forward to lunch all morning. Thoughts would arise: What's for lunch today? Sometimes I could even smell lunch from the meditation hall, and I'd know what we were having. I'd go in and enjoy lunch, and then somewhere in the middle—usually about two-thirds through—I would realize it's going to end. As you may know, there's not a lot of entertainment around here, so I found that quite disheartening. And then lunch would finish and I'd just sit there. Gone. It's gone. I did that every day. Sometimes we're a little slow as human beings.

So this is the kind of universe we've taken birth into. It's not a picnic. Personally, I think it's a kind of intense universe. What are we going to do with all of this change? I just want to peg it down. Don't you?

So we humans aren't always too excited to hear about this truth of impermanence. If we resist it, if we resist this truth, a lot of fear can arise. And then we even seem to think that there's something wrong if change happens. We seem to believe that we should be able to control change. The computer quits working. Our next sitting isn't as nice as our last sitting. We should be able to get back to that sitting, shouldn't we? There's some kind of unconscious belief that we should be able to do that. But it's not true. This is the kind of universe we live in. Things keep changing.

Ajahn Chah, as you may have noticed, is one of my favorites. He translates Anicca as "uncertain." In his book, *Food for the Heart*, he says, "People say Ajahn Chah only talks about 'not certain.' They get fed up with hearing this and they run away from me. 'We went to listen to Ajahn Chah teach, and all he talked about was not certain.'"

They can't bear to hear the same old thing anymore, so they leave. I guess they are going to look for some place where things will be certain. But they'll be back.

So our practice is a study of anicca. And when we meditate, we put a lot of emphasis on experiencing direct sensations, because on the level that we usually look at life—the more superficial, conceptual level of life—things don't appear to change very much. There can be a fixed perception of life when we live on the conceptual level. What we see on the conceptual level is more our ideas about how life is rather than what's really happening.

When we get close, as we do in meditation, we see this constant process of change. We may have an idea of a headache, and it seems fairly fixed—it doesn't have that sense that it's always changing. We think we have a headache and it's lasting and lasting and lasting. But if we get close to this experience of headache, what do we see? We may see pulsing and throbbing and movement and intensification and lessening. Constant change is what we see when we get close to life.

So even if we're using an anchor a lot in practice, as I mentioned the other day, we relate to it by seeing change. If we're with the breath, we're with the actual experience of the sensations of breathing through the in-breath and the out-breath. And what we'll notice is change. That's one of the reasons that for Vipassana meditation, counting breaths isn't considered Vipassana—because the counting is more on the conceptual level. We want to get close to the actual experience. This is why concentration practices aren't Vipassana, because they aim to fix attention or to fix reality. With Vipassana meditation, we want to see things as they are, which means constantly changing.

And so then we notice in our meditation this thing that we call ourself. The five aggregates: body, form, feelings, consciousness, volitional formations, perceptions. What happens when we check this out? Again, we see this process of constant change—changing sensations, changing perceptions, changing feeling tone, rolling on and on. Where is the fixed, solid me?

When the Buddha, in a number of discourses, was contemplating with his monks whether something could be called self or not, he would ask two questions. One was: does it change? And: can you control it? Does it change? If it changes, how can you call it self? How can you make it into something fixed, independent, permanent? And can you control it?

I don't know if we relate to this second one. I think the change one we can relate to more. But over the years, I relate more to this control one. There's a certain uncontrollability. Somebody mentioned it in interviews today. This mind—we want to control it, but can we? If it were me, wouldn't I be able to control it?

So if you really want to understand not-self, just go for anicca. Notice impermanence. Notice how it all changes. Rolling on and on.

As I said, when we resist this truth of change, a lot of fear arises in our practice, in our lives, in our minds and hearts. But when we don't resist the truth of change, when we can relax into this constant flow of life, we see that we live in an amazing universe. We relax into don't know. This world of change is fresh and vivid and amazing. It's really the only way to be alive, because life is change. Not that there's change in this world, but that the very fabric of life is change. The very nature of this world is change. We couldn't have this universe without it.

Lin Jensen, another one of my favorite Buddhist authors, describes it this way: "Life is just a collective term for the movement the universe makes, which is to say that life is a manifestation of impermanence. Even solid rock in its apparent impenetrable fixity gradually disperses towards delight. If it did not, there'd be no soil, no flower, no pollinating insect, no grazing or browsing animals or bird or human. Whatever delight you and I have ever experienced is the gift of broken rock."

Impermanence is also the true meaning of the word emptiness. We hear the word emptiness in the teachings and we think "void," and it can bring up fear. But the true meaning of emptiness is that we live in a world that's awesome and mysterious and alive and indescribable and vast and vibrant and full of possibility. That's what anicca also means.

However, it doesn't always feel that way when we are dealing with change. So in practice, we get interested in how we relate to change.

A number of years ago, I was the Buddhist advisor at Mount Holyoke College, not far from here. One day I was talking to the young women there about anicca, and I was saying, "So everything changes. Why does that matter in Buddhism? Why do we care about that?" One of the young women said, "Because that's basically the way things are, and if you have issues with this, you need to deal with them." That kind of sums up the meditation practice. We're looking at our issues with change. And believe me, we have some. I think you probably know that.

All of these billions of mind moments that Kwong described means that we're constantly being hurled into the unknown. There's so much openness in that, in the truth of change. Can we hold that much openness? Not always. That's what we investigate in our practice.

The heart-mind develops strategies to deal with this truth of vulnerability that we feel in the face of all this change. Our deeply conditioned strategies for dealing with change are known as the three roots of suffering: delusion, aversion, and grasping, which you've heard a little bit about. These three roots of suffering are really about controlling—trying to control the truth of change in this world. We'll look at them briefly before moving on.

The slipperiest of these three roots of suffering is delusion, or ignorance. There are many different ways we could look at it, but in the sense I'm talking about it here, if we can't handle the truth of change, we live at a slight remove from life. We can't connect fully. Another part is that we don't see life as it is. Delusion is not seeing life as it is—seeing it as we want it to be, or as we perceive it to be on a superficial level, seeing permanence where impermanence is true. There's a certain sense in this protective strategy of delusion, a sense of denial about the truth of life.

You could say the biggest manifestation of impermanence is death. It's as if we don't believe we'll die. That could be an aspect of delusion. It's really quite incredible how often we don't think we'll die when it's the truth of everything.

I turned fifty a couple of years ago, and I spent my fiftieth birthday at the crematorium of somebody who was dear to me. It was an amazing fiftieth birthday, and I think about it a lot since then. But before that, I'm not sure how much I thought about it.

A number of years ago, I took my goddaughter on a trip for her graduation. Afterwards, she was showing me the pictures from the trip, and there was this one picture. She was standing next to this woman who had a lot of white hair. My first thought was, "Who is that woman?" It was me. There's some delusion there, thinking that I look like I looked twenty years ago rather than recognizing that's me—I have white hair now. It was so interesting to watch the mind look and wonder, "Who is that person?" Delusion. Denial.

This protective strategy of delusion denies the truth of how things are, or holds us at a slight remove from life so that we don't really see the truth of how things are. And out of that, we have the other two control strategies: attachment and aversion, or grasping and aversion.

So we try to micromanage life, thinking that we can make it satisfying. We hold on, or try to hold on, to what's pleasant, and we push away, or try to get rid of, what's unpleasant. This is the human answer to the question of happiness—that maybe if I just try hard enough, I'll get it right.

The major advantage of this micromanaging, this clinging with its aspects of attachment and aversion, is that it gives us the illusion of control. It feels like security to us. It's kind of like magical thinking. If I stay attached, I'll have more control over the outcome.

We all do this. I can watch it when I'm flying somewhere and there's a canceled flight. I'll look at the board, and first of all, there will be denial. It's not true. It's not canceled. But after that, I'll keep looking at the board because I keep thinking if I look at it enough times, it won't be canceled. It's the attachment. There's this illusion that somehow through the attachment, I'm going to be able to control whether my flight was canceled or not. It gives us that illusion of control. And we humans, as much as we wish for freedom, also have this deep wish for security and for control.

I was teaching in April in Ohio, and I had a younger friend with me who was assisting me, a mentee. I was talking with her at dinner—I think I was giving a similar talk to this one—and I was talking with her about clinging. She said, "I like clinging. It makes me feel better. Kind of."

That was such a great summary. "I like clinging. It makes me feel better." The clincher is the "kind of" part. There's a way that it seems to make us feel better, but it has such a high price. That's the "kind of" part—the price of the bound heart, the bound mind. It doesn't lead to peace. We know that.

So we all have our favorite control strategy. Of course, we use all three. But reality always wins. Anicca wins. That's the way this world is. And when we rely on these control strategies, there's one big problem: there's no place to rest.

A few years ago, I was teaching in Burma, and we had a question and answer period. One woman raised her hand and simply asked, "Where can we rest?" Such a poignant question for all of us. Where can we rest? Well, it's clear we can't rest with grasping, aversion, or delusion.

So the greatest disappointment leading to peace is the truth that we can't control this world or this life. We live in a world of constant change, which means we live in a world of uncertainty, of unknowing. Sometimes this bums me out. That was the way I was planning on solving the human predicament—through control. But it doesn't work.

So we make a study in our practice of how we relate to change. That's our whole practice, really. We notice how we try to control, fixate, make this world known and secure. And then we notice when we can let go—let go of clinging. I love to watch my

mind when something changes that I'm not happy about. I get very interested and curious to see what it will do and how long it will take to accept the truth of the way things are.

It's easy to lose earrings. Most of the women here, those who wear earrings, can probably relate. So at first, the earring's lost and you can't find it. At first there's denial, usually—it's not lost. And then after the denial passes, it's like, "Oh, I really liked that earring"—attachment. And there is this kind of hidden belief that somehow liking that earring and wanting it will make it come back. And then at a certain point, it's gone. And we can feel the release of the attachment, the tension leave. It feels good. It feels good to let go.

That's just a small example, but we have so many examples because life is changing so much. We have so many chances to notice how we relate to change. Just think back to the good sitting, right? You had the good sitting, and the next time you come back, sitting's not so good. You believe if you hang on enough, you'll have that good sitting that you had before. How long does it take? Be curious. How long does it take into the sitting when you say, "Oh, this is the way things are right now"? And then it feels good. It feels good to let go.

The Buddha taught—and this is the good news—the Buddha taught that understanding impermanence frees the heart and the mind. In chapter twenty of the Dhammapada, he says, "Everything changes, nothing stays the same. Having gained this awareness, one is free 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 of purification."

That's a pretty bold and definitive statement—that through going deeply into the truth of change, this is the way to free the heart and the mind. So we study clinging or letting go in the face of change, seeing what happens in our practice.

There may be times you're sitting in your practice and you just notice some contraction of heart and mind. You turn the awareness towards it and it dissipates. Sometimes that happens—awareness is strong and it vanishes. Sometimes that's all that the heart and mind is interested in: Is there clinging? Is there contraction? Or is there non-clinging, freedom from contraction?

And then sometimes when the attachment is stronger, it takes a long time. It's a process. It can take months, even years for certain attachments, right? A big loss, a loss of a loved one. I read somewhere—I don't think it's ascribed to any certain person—but the quote is, "Everything I've let go of has claw marks all over it." Those claw marks are the attachment, the clinging. And sometimes it's like that.

I read a great book called *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, and it was about the year after her husband's death. They'd been married for decades. I love the title, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, because basically she was talking about this whole process of attachment and letting go. She didn't use those words exactly, but she would talk about things such as going into a room and expecting her husband to be there. She called it magical thinking—all the ways that the mind tried to deal with the enormity of her loss, the different ways of, you could say, delusion and attachment. She didn't use those words, but she was really interested in the process. That was one of the beauties of it. She was curious. She wanted to just see, see what was happening.

That's what we do in our meditation practice. So when the attachment is

When the attachment is deeper, stronger, we let ourselves go through the process, whatever it is—the anger, denial, craving, grief. We let it move through, and we find in our own time that peace comes, understanding, acceptance, freedom, compassion. We let awareness of the process do the work. The awareness and our intention to be free do the work. Eventually we get that things change.

A number of years ago I was in an organization, and things changed. Part of the change meant that I needed to resign my position. I hadn't done anything wrong, that wasn't it, but I needed to resign so that I could let people figure out things without my influence. It just needed to be that way. It was a really hard process for me, a number of months. I was very attached to this group and to my place in it, and I had to let it all go. There were a lot of claw marks. There was grief and anger and resentment and a bunch of feelings, but I just let myself be with them. I let myself feel them. I trusted the process of awareness.

I remember the day it shifted. It shifted when I had this thought: Did I think it wouldn't change? And I was like, oh, this is life. This is how life is. And then that was when I was able to let go and be at peace. Did I think it wasn't going to change?

So in our practice, we study how we try to control the world. Where is there tightening? How do we let go? How does letting go happen? It might be little things like breakfast and bagels. Bagels are pleasant, perhaps, and we can enjoy the pleasantness, but when does grasping enter? When do we try to not have that experience end? Or we're

sitting in the hall and we're having a fine sitting, and then some noise starts, a certain sound starts. How do we respond to that change? Is there aversion? Or are we able to let go? This is the way things are right now. Even in a yogi life, there are endless opportunities for seeing how we relate to change.

All of the challenges that we get, whether it's a little thing like bagels or a big thing like a major loss in our lives, we see that these challenges are the teachers that we need. Charlotte Joko Beck says, "Life happens to be a severe and endlessly kind teacher. It's the only authority you need to trust." And this teacher, this authority is everywhere. Life is always offering us opportunities to learn.

So we get interested in our issues with change. We notice how the heart and mind feel with the grasping and aversion, how clinging feels, and then we notice how the heart and mind of non-clinging or letting go feel. We practice clinging with awareness and we practice non-clinging with awareness. Which one feels better? We check it out for ourselves. We see for ourselves.

As I mentioned in the other talk I gave, health problems can be a great teacher of letting go. Our body challenges of all kinds—aging, health, sickness. This has been one of my great teachers, one of those severe and endlessly kind teachers in my own practice.

A number of years ago, I got a flu shot and about four days afterwards, I started having neurological symptoms on one side of my body—numbness and tingling and things like that. So I went to the doctor and I said, "Do you think this could have anything to do with the flu shot?" And she said no, no. They were all worried that I had something rather severe. They did their initial assessment, couldn't find anything, and they were talking about pretty severe illnesses.

And so then they sent me to the neurologist. And the neurologist said, "Oh, it looks like you had an autoimmune reaction to the flu shot." He said if that's what it was, it would clear up in about eighteen months to two years.

So basically, I was sitting there with certain symptoms, and I had no idea if it was something that was going to resolve in eighteen months or two years, or if I had the beginnings of a very challenging and difficult neurological disease. And I wasn't going to know for months, because it would be slow to heal if it was the autoimmune reaction.

Meditating during that time was fascinating. It was really fascinating just to watch what my mind did with the situation. It would try to manage it. The first thing would be to imagine the worst. "Okay, it's going to be that. It's going to be one of those diseases that they mentioned." And then I would go over in my mind, "Okay, I can deal with that. I'll be able to deal with that." And then I'd go to the other side: "The neurologist knows

more than the primary care physician, so he's probably right. This is going to clear up and I'm going to be okay." The mind would go back and forth, back and forth—lots of fear, resistance to the truth of that moment.

And then, at a certain point, I started to get good at surrendering to the truth of the moment. And the truth of the moment was that I really didn't know. Uncertainty. So I started to investigate what uncertainty feels like. And I found that when I could rest in this uncertainty, really rest there, the world was wide open. There were no problems. Anything could happen. It was vibrant and alive and completely okay. That was a place I could rest—I could rest in the truth of uncertainty. Surrender. It took the surrender into that truth of uncertainty. Usually we try surrender as a last resort. It's not usually our first move. But hopefully we get there.

Anyway, after a number of months, it started to improve, and in about eighteen months or two years, more or less, it resolved—just so you know the end of the story.

It taught me so much. I mean, we're always in that place, really, all of us. Uncertainty. As Ajahn Chah says, "Just say 'uncertain.'" If it's pleasant, say "uncertain." If it's unpleasant, say "uncertain." Just notice beginning, ending—how everything arises and passes away. This is the truth of life. And sometimes it just takes a kind of serious diagnosis or something to really bring that to our awareness, or a serious loss, perhaps. And we learn how to relax into this truth of life, this vulnerability in the face of change.

So what happens when we stay with this process of change? First of all, there's the learning to let go. We learn that attachment doesn't work and it's not worth the price. That delusion of control that we get isn't worth the price. The way I was working with that diagnosis, trying to find some place that I could hang on to—it wasn't working. So that's what we learn. And we learn the freedom of the heart that doesn't hang on, that lets go. And I'm not talking about hanging on to the thing. I'm talking about hanging on to the attachment. The thing's gone anyway. It's going to go away. Everything's always going, going, going anyway. But what we're letting go of is the holding on. So that's one part.

The other thing that happens when we stay with this process of change is that we come to a place of compassion in this world. We start to see and understand that all of life is borrowed, that nothing is guaranteed.

And we start to understand that we all share this. All beings share this truth. And a great compassion for all of life can arise out of relaxing into this truth.

Life is impregnated with loss. One way we might choose to deal with that is through detachment or disconnect. This is the path we choose if we can't deal with reality. But the other way that we can deal with it is the path of love. It means that we connect with this world, with experience, and we love it even knowing we'll have to let it go. That's our challenge. That's the challenge of the open heart.

I like to read the poetry of Pablo Neruda. In his last year of life, he wrote a book of poems. They're not all finished—there were some fragments. This is one that came from that final year. He knew that he was dying:

We, the mortals, touch the metals, the wind, the ocean shores, the stones, knowing they will go on inert or burning. And I was discovering, naming all these things. It was my destiny to love and say goodbye.

It was my destiny to love and say goodbye. That's our destiny in this world. What I love about that poem is this sense of fully experiencing the world through the senses, that connectedness, and that understanding that none of it can be held on to. We must say goodbye over and over again. We develop a mature love for this world that acknowledges this truth.

So in our practice, we study change and how we relate to it. There's no correct answer. It's not about trying to make acceptance happen—you can't do that. But it is about being curious and nonjudgmental in our awareness, our attention, our mindfulness. And inviting in the sense of mettā, our kindness. Mettā softens the hard edges of control. It offers us a certain protection in its inclusivity, in how large our hearts can get. It's a better protection than delusion, grasping, and aversion. We can hold this process of change with softness and with kindness.

So in our practice, watching all that arises pass away, developing the insight that comes from seeing this for ourselves—not from thinking about it. Thinking doesn't do it. It's from being with the process of change itself.

I still remember the first moment that I felt like somehow this truth pierced my consciousness. It was on retreat here, and I was reaching for a doorknob. It can happen at any moment—it doesn't have to be on the cushion. I was reaching for a doorknob, and as I touched it, I had this realization that that moment was gone. It was never going to come back. It was never going to be replayed. It would never be the same. I went into Joseph and told him about it, and he said, "And did you notice that for the next moment too?" I was like, no—the next moment I was thinking about that moment.

Letting go gives us a flexible heart and mind. Enlightenment could be described as the heart and mind that are totally flexible, stuck nowhere. Letting go feels good. It's like taking off a tight shoe. That's what we're doing in practice—we're taking off the tight shoes of our hearts and minds over and over again. It's a release of struggle, a release of contraction. It's freedom.

We meet this truth that all things change, that all that arises passes away. And the heart and mind slowly begin to learn that knowing this truth deeply brings the greatest kind of happiness—the happiness of peace, non-clinging, letting go.

Ajahn Chah said, "All that I have learned in the many years that I've been a monk, I can sum up in one sentence: All that arises passes away. This I know."

It's remarkable—this is essentially the same teaching as Suzuki Roshi. It seems that all these masters summed up practice in the same way. Everything changes. All that arises passes away.

The importance of understanding change, making peace with change, and thereby letting go is reflected in the Buddha's last words—his reported last words. His final teaching pointed to understanding anicca as a path to liberation. He said, "All conditioned things arise and pass away. Work out your liberation with diligence."

So you have your instructions.

All conditioned things arise and pass away. Work out your liberation with diligence.

CHAPTER 44

The Ethical Trainings as Skillful Means

Winnie Nazarko · 1h07

> *In this comprehensive dharma talk, Winnie Nazarko illuminates the practice of sīla—moral discipline, ethical training, and moral restraint—as an essential foundation of the Buddhist path. She contextualizes sīla within the Eightfold Path, encompassing sammā vācā (wise speech), sammā kammanta (wise action), and sammā ājīva (wise livelihood), while drawing connections to the five precepts and the gradual training described in the suttas.*
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> *Nazarko emphasizes that Buddhist ethics are fundamentally about skillful means—actions, choices, and views conducive to liberation—rather than obedience to divine commandments or fear of punishment. She explores how the Buddha's insight into paṭicca samuppāda (dependent origination) provides the framework for understanding why ethical conduct matters: our present choices create conditions for future arising, making it possible to "front-load" conditions supportive of awakening. When mindfulness is strong and continuous, sīla arises naturally; when the mind is clouded, the precepts serve as protective reminders, like rumble strips keeping us from veering off the road.*
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> *The talk thoughtfully addresses Western cultural conditioning around morality, distinguishing Buddhist pragmatism from monotheistic frameworks of sin and punishment. Nazarko examines the complex relationship between sīla and law, noting that laws sometimes embody, sometimes contradict, and sometimes have nothing to do with ethical conduct. She concludes with a powerful true story from the Cuban Missile Crisis about Soviet naval officer Vasili Arkhipov, whose moral restraint in refusing to authorize a nuclear torpedo launch quite literally saved the world—demonstrating how one person's commitment to harmlessness can have immeasurable consequences for all beings.*

So we started our investigation of sila this morning with a question in the hall, and it just so happened that the topic of the talk tonight will allow us to extend our investigation into this area of practice.

Let's start with the meaning of the term, the translation of the word sila. I came up with three different, slightly different iterations of what this meant, but they all seem pretty close together to me. It can be considered to be moral discipline, ethical training, or moral restraint.

In thinking about these Buddhist topics, I always like to think first about where it fits into the scheme as a whole, where it fits into the Buddha's own system of explanation. This is part of the Eightfold Path, and it is in particular step three, sama vaca, wise speech; sama kammanta, wise action, which is step four; and step five, which is sama ajiva, wise livelihood. It's also found in the five precepts, which of course we took today.

The precepts and these three steps on the Eightfold Path largely overlap with each other. The Eightfold Path doesn't explicitly address restraint from the use of intoxicants like the precepts do, and the Eightfold Path directly addresses wise livelihood, which the five precepts don't. But you can consider them to be largely co-extensive. The Buddha also references sila when he's talking about the gradual training, and he talks about the gradual training as starting with the taking of the precepts. So that's where it is on the map.

And then the question comes up: how do you understand this ethical conduct in sila? What's it all about? It's in the path. Yes, there are the precepts. And I think the key to it all is to realize that it's all about skillful means.

This phrase "skillful means" is very often used in talking about the Buddha Dharma, and it might be good to give a definition about what that actually is. You could say a general meaning is actions, choices, and views which are conducive to movement towards freedom and liberation. It's a functional way of looking at it—actions, choices, and views which are conducive to movement towards freedom and liberation. It's a definition that focuses on what works, and is pragmatic and not in and of itself moralistic. You can come to understand that the Buddhist path really isn't one of condemnation, but it's practical. So the inquiry is always: what's actually going on here? And given that, and given what the goal is, what's the best way to proceed in furtherance of the goal?

It's important to keep the pragmatism of this whole area in view, especially because of some of the conditioning that we as Westerners bring to this topic. When we as Westerners talk about ethical behavior, very often we bring to the conversation our own cultural overlay. There's a monotheistic view in particular that many of us have been taught, which involves reference to an all-powerful God who has informed us what he wants us to do, and we should do this, or it is sin. And if we sin, we are a sinner, and that means that we're a bad person. And if we're bad enough, we will be punished perhaps eternally for our transgressions. If we're obedient with God's will for us, we'll be rewarded perhaps forever.

Now, I know that's kind of a cartoon version of monotheism. Obviously, there are other ways to hold this way of looking. But I think very often for us, especially if we've been raised in these particular cultures where religion has been strict and literal, we do bring this lens to this topic. In its fundamentalist form, this can be described as instructions from above, absolute rules which are very specific, extensive, and often ritualistic, an emphasis on obedience or punishment, and a post-death assignment to eternal residence in heaven or hell.

But we've got a bit of an issue here with Buddhism because Buddhism doesn't rely on a deity. So then the question is: how does morality fit into this whole scheme? How does sila fit into this explanation of why sila should be practiced?

I think you need to look at the Buddha's primary insights, and you will come to understand how sila fits into this. If we looked at the life of the Buddha, we would say it describes his discovery of the pervasive nature of suffering, and then his own personal and heroic quest to find liberation from that suffering. Once he reached his own liberation and his own understanding, he had a real challenge: how am I going to put this into words? How am I going to explain this so that people can understand and put into practice what they need to do in order to attain freedom for themselves?

So he formulated his teaching basically in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, this being the framework describing the problem of suffering and how to find freedom from it. The Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths are a description of how things are, and given that, how to use the way reality works to become free.

There's a key point here: the conditioned nature of things. It's very critical to understand the significance of dependent origination as a key Buddhist insight. Everything happens in causal patterns. In the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha says, "When there is this, there is that."

With the arising of this, that arises. With the cessation of this, that ceases."

He directs us to look at the interrelationship of all things.

On the night of his awakening, the Buddha saw clearly the causes of suffering and how suffering arose in a conditioned way from ignorance, craving, and a wrong view of self. Once he understood how it came to be, he saw how it could be released, undone, deconstructed. He describes this process in the Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path explicates how to use the reality of causation to our advantage. Buddhist ethical views are part of the path of liberation—they're not just about being a good person. They constitute a path factor. They have to do with whether the mind is actually able to open in understanding.

Looking more closely at the Eightfold Path and the role of the sīla steps within it, we find two steps that come first. There is wise view, which encompasses the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path itself. Then there is wise intention. We really need to examine wise intention in order to arrive at a clear understanding of what the next three steps—the sīla steps—are really about.

Wise intention focuses on resolve or aspiration. It is the intention to exert our will in order to move toward an end of suffering. When we speak of wise intention, we are saying we want to move forward toward liberation and will use our energy accordingly. This is where we want to go. This is the direction I need to turn the energies of body and mind.

Intrinsic to this is the commitment to conduct ourselves in ways conducive to spiritual progress—in ways that loosen the bonds of ignorance, greed, and hatred, and that cultivate their opposites: non-delusion (better known as wisdom), generosity, renunciation, loving-kindness, and compassion (otherwise described as harmlessness).

The second section of the Eightfold Path is where we get into the heart of the sīla steps. Wise speech, wise action, and right livelihood provide a framework to avoid unskillful thoughts and actions that would obstruct progress on the path.

Again, the key idea is that reality is conditioned. It is lawful. The present moment is caused by conditions arising from the past and manifesting now. What we do now becomes causation for what will manifest in the future. Therefore, it is in our interest to make choices and create conditions that support our aspirations toward freedom.

We can front-load conditions supportive of our own awakening by exercising basic moral restraint. Sīla should be considered skillful means to support the arising of conditions conducive to liberation and to support the cessation of conditions that are not.

On this topic of sīla and what makes it skillful, there are some particular things worth saying. I have spoken of it as skillful means, as moving in the right direction, as functional. So how exactly does it work?

If you have the experience of mindfulness that is strong, pure, and continuous, there is an absence of greed, hatred, and delusion in the mind. That is one way to define mindfulness: when mindfulness is like that, those other things are not present. However, this is often not the state of the average worldling—perhaps you can confirm this just from watching your own mind.

With strong, pure, and continuous mindfulness, thinking in terms of sīla would probably be far less necessary because right conduct would be automatic. If the mind is clear, absent aversion and grasping, sīla is going to be very strong as well. But it is usually not like that—at least not for very long.

So what is sīla doing? It helps keep the car from running off the road. It functions like those rumble strips along the highway. When your tire starts to drift onto the shoulder or crosses the center line, you hear that bump-bump-bump, and it wakes you up before things go too far.

The sīla precepts perform this function. When the mind is clouded, they serve as important reminders. Sometimes they are the only thing we can remember when the kilesa states are churning intensely. "Oh yes, I guess I shouldn't do that. Oh yes—sīla, the precepts. I remember now."

Another meaningful aspect of sīla is that it is foundational to the entire path and necessary for the success of the other trainings.

A monk once asked the Buddha to give it to him short—give it to him short and sweet. "What do I really need to do?" And the Buddha said, "First establish yourself in the starting point of wholesome states, that is, in purified moral discipline and right view." So he's saying: understand context, the first step of the Eightfold Path, observe sila. Then when your moral discipline is purified and your view straight, you should practice the four foundations of mindfulness. Sila first is being suggested. Then practice meditation.

So sila gets you started on the path of development, and then further purification of mind takes place when you move into the meditative practices themselves. And this makes all kinds of sense when you think about it. Can you imagine—the time of the Buddha was a very warlike time, just as our own is—somebody coming for teachings, and the first thing you have to say to them is, "Tie up the stolen horse and leave your bloody sword outside." Their sitting is probably not going to go too well.

This also goes to the point of the practice of sila being a protector of the mind stream, because it prevents actions that lead to remorse and guilt and regret. And when the mind is free of those states, it's a lot easier for it to clear and settle. It becomes more workable, more pliant. There are fewer storms sweeping through, fewer memories of things that might have been done in the past, less judgment arising.

Another way that sila is skillful is that it's a protector for the self and for others. If you think about this, a community—no matter what kind of community it is, whether it's a sangha, a family, a workplace—an environment where sila is strong and practiced is a safe place to be. Actions aren't intentionally harmful, and the seeds of future turmoil are not sown. It's easier to have clarity and trust and peace emerge in that kind of environment because there's a baseline of decency.

I had a very interesting thing happen when I was working as the project director at the Forest Refuge, involved with the construction up the hill. I would work with the architects and the contractors, then go to these construction meetings with carpenters and all the different trades. This conversation started with the architect: "What kind of locks do you want on the rooms?" And I said, "Well, we don't really need locks on the rooms." Then we would have a conversation about locks on the rooms and why we didn't need them. When we got a contractor and he was looking through the architectural drawings and specs, he'd say, "I noticed you haven't specified what kind of locks you want on the doors in the rooms." I'd say, "Well, we don't need locks on the doors. We don't need locks on the rooms." We'd have that chat. Then when the subcontractors were there hanging the doors, they'd go to the project manager on site and say, "Eddie, where are the locks for the doors?" And we'd say, "We don't have locks for the doors." "Well, when are you going to get the locks for the doors?" "We don't need locks for the doors."

When you think about that, it's a very profound statement—that there can be places in the world where you don't need locks on the doors, and how different that is from most places.

Perhaps a final skillful aspect of sila is this: Bhikkhu Bodhi says, "At the karmic level, the observance of sila ensures harmony with the cosmic law of karma, hence favorable results in the course of future movement through the round of repeated birth and death." Or as the Buddha says, part of the streams of merit, streams of the wholesome, nourishment of happiness that are heavenly, ripening in happiness, conducive to happiness, that lead to whatever is wished for, loved, and agreeable to one's welfare and happiness. He's pointing to a karmic result from the observance of sila—that it has

long-ranging future implications when this is practiced. And of course, for some of us Westerners, that seems implausible. That's okay. Don't need to believe. But you may see—you may even have some of this ripening right now, to be here on this retreat.

So let's talk a little bit about the three cornerstones of sila, the three steps. I'm just going to touch these briefly because there's a great deal of detail possible with each one, and I think there's going to be a separate talk on right speech or wise speech. Each of these could easily be a separate talk in and of itself, but I'll give it to you briefly.

Right speech—interestingly enough, this comes first in the grouping. This is also reiterated in the precepts: abstaining from lying, divisive speech, abusive speech, idle chatter. It's interesting because these are phrased as "don't do this, don't do this, refrain from." But you could positively phrase it too. You could say: speak using words that are true, friendly and benevolent, pleasant and gentle, meaningful and useful.

The next factor is wise action or right action, which addresses how to live in daily life. Negatively phrased, it means abstaining from taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and taking intoxicants which lead to heedlessness. If you were to positively phrase that, you could say something like: knowing how deeply our lives entwine, I undertake the training to protect life, to take only what is freely given to me, to protect relationships and avoid sexual misconduct, to speak truthfully and kindly, and to protect the clarity of my mind through avoiding intoxicants. The Thich Nhat Hanh community works with these in a positive way—at least I've seen their affirmative statements of these trainings.

The last of these three factors is wise livelihood, which incorporates the idea of harmlessness towards other beings. It states you should not work or earn a living by doing things which cause harm to others. There's a direct echo here, and in all three of these factors, back to wise intention and what was talked about with that.

If you phrase it negatively, it's refraining from trading in arms and lethal weapons, intoxicants, poisons, killing animals, cheating, trafficking in human beings like slave trading and prostitution, and dishonest means of gaining wealth like scheming, persuading, hinting, and belittling. That seems to eliminate large portions of the economy.

If you were going to positively phrase it, you would say: work and earn a living in ways that express loving-kindness, compassion, respect, and support for living beings.

Just as an aside here, I wish to clarify that the Buddha didn't have a problem with wealth in and of itself. In fact, he would talk about righteous wealth righteously gained. So being successful, making money, is not a problem—unless it's done in a way that is damaging and harmful to others in the ways that have been talked about, or if you use your wealth in ways that are damaging and harmful to others or to yourself.

Now let's have a little side conversation here. We had a question this morning about law, legality, and sila. When we ended the sitting and went back into the staff dining room, we had a little flurry of conversation among ourselves about this whole topic. I decided this is worth talking about some more, because we've got our cultural overlay of religion as part of what we bring to this, but the other cultural overlay we bring is what is legal—what the law says about things.

I was thinking about this this afternoon, so I started by asking myself some questions on this topic. The first one was: do laws reflect or embody sila? And sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes laws are just very pragmatic things, like no right turn at this light, or you must file your income tax by April 15th—clearly not high sila content, more like regulation for society and how it needs to work as a complex cooperative endeavor. Sometimes laws definitely don't embody sila. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't but are just pragmatic, and sometimes they actually violate sila—the concepts represented in the teachings on sila.

Let me step back for a minute and talk about the fact that human beings have a natural moral sense. We seem to be born with it. I saw something really interesting: a study done using infants who were very young, I want to say around six months, preverbal. They would set up a little stage behind which somebody was operating two little sock puppets. They had this little ball, and the sock puppets would pass it back and forth between each other. The researchers would watch the reaction of the babies watching this. When they changed the experiment so that one of the sock puppets was essentially hogging the ball—would get it, keep it, and wouldn't give it to the other one—they measured the nonverbal reactions of the babies to the puppets and which ones they reached for. The babies didn't like the nasty ones. So there's some kind of very early moral sense that we have as humans that is operant.

Interestingly enough, there's some indication that certain bonding hormones we humans have as part of our physical setup have something to do with us feeling care, concern, and interest for others. But this is a tricky part of being human, apparently, because it seems to suggest that the same thing which causes us to bond with, care for, and be concerned about certain people—maybe members of our immediate family, our

own children, intimate partners, or people like us, people we have a lot in common with—that very same thing that causes us to form a caring "we" also has an edge to it. And when you're out, you're out.

This is part of our dilemma as human beings: how difficult it is to generalize these intentions of harmlessness towards everyone.

So in thinking about this issue of law and sila and natural morality, I asked myself: can the natural moral sense of right and wrong get bound up in delusion? And the answer is clearly yes. You could say fundamentalism is a form of delusion which often uses the language of morality. Moralistic language can be used in the service of power and control, overriding the well-being of others.

Some simple examples: in the United States, within my lifetime—and I'm not that old—the southern part of the country had laws, this was part of the law, that segregated public spaces by race. If you violated that law, you could and would be arrested and taken to jail for violating part of the criminal code. In some parts of the world, even now, there are laws forbidding the education of females or restricting their ability to be out in public without being covered. So yes, things can get bound up in delusion.

Then the next question arises: can it sometimes be an expression of the values of sīla, of moral restraint, to break a law? Yes. When you look at how segregation was undone in the South, it was largely through people breaking the law in a very deliberate, public, nonviolent fashion in order to highlight the injustice of what was being done. Another example would be demonstrations against the regime in Burma when they were illegal. It was illegal, but it was moral. It was in accord with sīla. It was right speech to say: there is corruption, there is oppression, there is cruelty and dishonesty here.

Now, some laws reflect a legitimate expression of morality and are completely congruent with sīla. Laws against child abuse would be an example. The law says you can't do this; sīla says that's unskillful action. One thing to point out here is that meeting the legal standard very often is kind of a low bar for behavior, isn't it? Yes, it's illegal to abuse your child, but I think most parents who have a level of development would like to do a lot better than just not abusing their kid.

There are other things that might be legal but might not necessarily line up with sīla. It's legal to drink alcohol, for instance, but restraint from intoxicants which cause heedlessness is one of the precepts. I'm going to sidestep the whole question of whether that

means you can never have a glass of wine with your turkey. Oh, you're not going to have turkey—okay, so we won't need to worry about that. You can give that question to whoever's doing the question and answer session tomorrow morning.

There's another piece of this: the language of sīla can also be corrupted and misused. You can see this sometimes in our own communities, in the form of what I would call a "sīla smackdown"—when the language of sīla is used to get someone to stop doing something that bothers you. An example of this has occurred in some communities where there has been sexual misconduct on the part of a teacher, and that's become publicly known, often raised by people who have been victimized. Some members of the community, or the community as a whole, has responded by saying, "Wrong speech, wrong speech, wrong speech. It's divisive, it's harsh, there's no compassion." But no—it's true. It's useful, really useful. It's really necessary. That's an example of how, when delusion is mixed in with the understanding of these things, it can go sideways. Even the language of morality can go sideways if the mind isn't clear.

But even with all this complication, the key thing to remember is the place of sīla in the path to liberation. We can, by our choice of actions, set in motion conditions which are conducive to our growth and awakening. By undertaking this training in sīla, we move toward a mind that's happy, open, free from remorse and anxiety, and easily concentrated.

To practice sīla well, we have to move beyond moralism and that kind of rule-bound automaticity. We need to use mindfulness, clear perception, clear comprehension, and a commitment to the growth of our own wisdom, compassion, and loving-kindness. There are many dilemmas, many gray areas. I've described the basic principles and some particular sub-parts of each of them, but the application of these principles in daily life requires intelligent engagement, not a teacher telling you what you should do in a specific case. This is more of an exploration than something formulaic. This process of applying these principles in daily life supports the development of our own grounded understanding as we deepen our ability to see causation and choose in a way that supports our deepest aspiration.

The Buddha himself often contemplated his complete harmlessness. Imagine having a mind so refined that one of the things that gave you the greatest joy was the thought that no being anywhere, in all the worlds, all the universes, had anything at all to fear from you. The practice of these precepts is spoken of as pristine, traditional, ancient gifts which give immeasurable beings freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression—

and which in turn give to the practitioner the same gifts of freedom from fear, hostility, and oppression. In a way, it's an act of generosity, an act of dāna, to train in sīla and to observe it.

I want to tell a particular story here about sīla.

And this comes from a documentary I watched recently that was put out by public television in the United States, called *The Man Who Saved the World*. The documentary was about something that happened fifty years ago between the Soviet Union and the United States. It involved a struggle over the presence of missiles that the Soviet Union had moved to Cuba—better known as ninety miles away from the shores of the United States.

To tell you a little bit about this, you'd have to know that at the time, the United States and the Soviet Union each had nuclear capacity to destroy each other twenty times over. Those of you who are older may remember what was going on during this period. The younger ones of you may have never heard about this or may just have some vague knowledge of it. But basically what happened was that it came down to one person on a submarine who had the decision about whether or not to let a nuclear-tipped missile be launched.

To understand this, you'd have to set the stage by grasping what it was like in the United States—and I think this is true in Western Europe too, to some extent. After the Second World War, the Western world and the Soviet Union became very polarized. East Germany was completely sealed off, under communist domination. All the Eastern European countries were under Soviet rule, very oppressive. Rebellions were put down by force. It was an era in the Soviet Union of gulags and concentration camps, work camps, people disappearing—everything very tightly controlled by the government—with the United States very much polarized against the Soviet Union, which had itself developed a nuclear weapon. The United States, of course, developed it first and used it twice in the Second World War. So we were enemies.

Growing up in this era, you would have to understand that. We practiced hiding under our desks at school in case the alarm sounded that indicated the warheads and bombs were coming. This was a routine drill in school. There's a movie out about it, a kind of funny movie about this period called *Duck and Cover*. You would practice going under your desk and wrap yourself up. So it was very realistic to think that this could happen at any time.

At the time this event was going on in Cuba, I was living on a military base in upstate New York, not too far from the Canadian border. On this Air Force base, there were B-52s with nuclear weapons, B-47s with nuclear weapons. And then built into the side of the Adirondack Mountains, there were Atlas missile silos drilled down into the mountain to be protected from direct strike. These also had nuclear warheads. There were bases here, and bases around the world.

At a certain point, close to the time of this episode, the United States put missiles into Turkey and Italy. The ones in Turkey could reach Moscow. The Soviets felt that was a great provocation. And when Cuba fell to the Communists, the Soviet Union took the opportunity to secretly move missiles into Cuba and set up a missile base there. They snuck them in, but the United States found out about it.

Once they found out, there was this reaction: What are they doing? They're bringing them really close. They're getting ready to do it. It's way too close. They could launch something that could hit us in half an hour. They could take out Washington. They could take out New York. They could take out all the major cities. They could get us before we could protect ourselves in any way.

The whole thing at this period in the world was held together by what was called the balance of terror, or mutually assured destruction. This is how the world was, not so long ago. The idea was: if you do that to us, you know that we can do that to you, so nobody would be nutty enough to do it if we both know we each could do it. This is what passed for stability in the world at the time.

So when the United States found out these missiles were in Cuba, they said, "We can't have this. This cannot be allowed." And thus began the process of trying to make the Soviets remove them from Cuba.

And first the Soviets denied they had them there, and there was a lot of this going back and forth at the UN, being non-responsive and all the rest of it.

I can remember what it was like living on the base when this was happening, as this crisis ratcheted up. First you'd have to understand that when we went to church on the base, there were pews that were reserved for men in flight suits who were on alert. This was true all the time. And at any moment during the service, a special light would suddenly start flashing, and these men would get up and run out of the building, get in their special truck, and drive to the flight line. They would climb into the cockpits of planes loaded with nuclear weapons, start the engines, and get ready to take off—and then it would turn out to be a drill. But they wouldn't know that at the time. This was routine life in the village.

As the crisis deepened, it got very quiet among the adults. The dinnertime conversations grew hushed as the level of preparedness ratcheted up day by day—the United States confronting the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union stonewalling. The Soviets were still sending more ships toward Cuba carrying more missiles.

President Kennedy was the president at the time, and he set up a national television address to tell everybody what was going on: there are missiles here, more missiles are coming, they're really close, and we can't allow this to happen. It's too dangerous. They would have the possibility to take us out—it would upset this balance of power, this deterrent. We have to block it. Then he said we're going to put a quarantine around Cuba. We're going to keep them from moving any missiles in. Any ships approaching Cuba, our Navy is going to stop them, board them, and inspect their cargo. If they have this kind of thing, they're not getting in.

For days, the public watched as the ships from the Soviet Union continued their path toward Cuba. The United States was ringing the island with Navy ships. Nobody was blinking.

My father started being gone longer during the day. Then it got to a point where he wasn't home at night. When I was in school—grade school—the other kids started to disappear. Some families were taking them out of school and sending them away, someplace they thought might be safer in case there was a nuclear strike on the base. The base was a huge target because it had nuclear weapons, and the epicenter of the base was five hundred yards from my house. So we knew what was going on.

The president actually moved the alert status during this period up to the closest level before launching nuclear war. There were planes in the air with bombs already moving toward Soviet targets. They would go so far and then come back or refuel—hovering, hovering. They were in the air so they couldn't all be destroyed by strikes.

And the national mood? It was fear. It was terror. Are we going to have a war? Are we going to have a nuclear war? Is this going to be it? And it really seemed that it could be.

In the early stages of this—which gets back to the point of the story—the Soviet Union launched four submarines from the Arctic, giving the commanders orders that they could launch nuclear torpedoes at their discretion if they felt it was necessary. There hadn't been nuclear torpedoes before, at least not for the Soviets. The way you would launch these torpedoes was that you needed two people, each of whom had half a key.

This is also the way nuclear missile silos worked for us. I know because one day after church, we went there for a tour. It's not something everybody does after church, but we did.

So these four subs were coming to reinforce the militarization of Cuba, and they had these orders: you can do this if you need to. At some point, the United States fleet, which had started patrolling the area very heavily, became aware that these subs were heading to Cuba.

The subs are coming. They have the torpedoes. They have no communication with Moscow—cut off from their home base. They are, however, picking up broadcasts from Miami.

The talk about war, the talk about quarantine, the talk about how nuclear weapons might be imminently launched—they're hearing all this from the U.S. side. They're hearing nothing from home.

And these ships, these older diesel vessels, were very poor containers for a long voyage. So they started to experience problems. For instance, heat in the vessel. They got to the point where the coolest place in the submarine was 110 degrees Fahrenheit. They would rotate guys in there for a brief period of time because it was cool—they would go in there, get cooled down to 110 degrees. One glass of water a day. They had no water. They were running out of food. Their batteries were running low. They had to remain submerged because otherwise they would be spotted. No communications from home.

So at a certain point, the U.S. Navy finds them. They spot the subs underneath, and they see them coming towards Cuba. The subs don't know that by this point the U.S. government and the Soviet government are talking. Some sane ones are talking to each other, realizing this is really bad. And they don't know that the order has been given not to sink the subs, but instead to force them to surface. Moscow knows this, but the subs don't know this. These guys on the sub don't know this. And the Americans don't know that the subs don't know it. So there's an information vacuum and void.

So the Americans locate the subs, and they start to try to make them surface. They start pounding them with sonar waves, hitting the sub, hitting the sub, hitting the sub. You think our construction noise is bad—it's like being in a metal tube with somebody using a really big sledgehammer on the side. So they start doing that. There's no response from the sub, even though they know they're going to have to surface at some point. And then the Americans start dropping depth charges, these drum-like things that sink and then explode. They weren't using the depth charges to try to sink it, but they were trying to force them to come up.

So at this point, they're down there. They're running out of options. They feel besieged. They feel like if they come up, they're going to get destroyed. And the commander of one of the subs says, "Load the special weapon." And they take the nuclear torpedo and put it in the tube to fire. And he takes his half of the key and puts it in there. And he says to his subordinate, "Put your key in." And on the documentary, at least how they portrayed it, the subordinate was like, "Put the key in?" But he did. He follows orders, puts the key in. And they prepare to launch.

And there's a pause in the action. Because the commander of the entire fleet of these submarines—he has the authority to override the commander of the vessel. And this individual who commanded the fleet was someone who had been on a nuclear submarine involved in a nuclear accident. In that accident, a number of the men on his crew had been exposed to such high levels of radiation that they had died. And he had been very moved by this, very affected by seeing them pass away in this manner. His wife describes him—and this is so Russian, the way she talks about him—she says he was kindhearted and calm. A real human. A real human.

And he says to the commander of the sub, "I do not give my permission." And the commander pushed back. And he said, "I am in charge of the fleet. I do not give my consent."

And it all turned right there. Right at that moment, on this one person, *sīla*, and his refusal to allow the launch. If this had been launched, the torpedo had the power of the bomb used in Hiroshima.

It would have destroyed the entire surrounding American fleet, and it would have been game on. None of you would be here. None of us would be.

So the commander of the fleet said, contact the Americans. They opened up communication with the American fleet, which told them, please surface. They were allowed to surface, replenish their air, restore their batteries, and they turned around and went back to the Soviet Union. Both sides stood down. The crisis broke.

When they went back home to the Soviet Union, they were told it would have been better for them if they had drowned rather than to surface. The man who had made this moral choice to preserve the world was not treated with respect and regard. But this was an extraordinary act of collection of mind, clarity of perception, moral restraint. And we all owe a great deal to him.

His name was Vasili Arkhipov. He wound up dying of a cancer caused by radiation exposure from the accident on the boat I described earlier.

This story points to our interrelationship and the tremendous effect one person can have when they choose to do or not to do. We practice sila in small things, in immediate things. But you can see that especially in our modern world, with the incredible multiplier effect we have with technology and the power we now possess, how important this very basic grounding in goodwill and moral restraint truly is.

So with that in mind: may you undertake the training to develop the many gifts of sila—the power of moral restraint, the directing of the mind towards a commitment to harmlessness, and towards cultivation of the well-being of all beings.

CHAPTER 45

Kamma

Greg Scharf · 52 min

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Greg Scharf addresses one of the most central yet frequently misunderstood teachings in Buddhism: the law of kamma. He begins by distinguishing the Buddha's nuanced understanding of kamma from popular Western misconceptions that reduce it to fatalism or a simplistic notion of cosmic punishment. Scharf emphasizes that kamma literally means "action" and that the Buddha declared intention (cetanā) to be the essence of kamma—it is the quality of our motivation, whether rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion or in generosity, kindness, and wisdom, that determines the karmic weight of any action.

The talk explores how conditionality operates lawfully, like seeds producing their corresponding plants, while remaining dynamic rather than predetermined. Scharf draws on the Buddha's advice to his son Rāhula about reflecting on actions before, during, and after performing them, and outlines the ten unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind to be avoided. He addresses the relationship between kamma and rebirth, using the metaphor of one candle lighting another to illustrate how conditioning flows without a fixed "thing" being transferred.

Practically, Scharf encourages practitioners to use mindfulness to uncover the often-mixed motivations behind their actions, recognizing that each moment offers a choice. He references the traditional reflection "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions" and shares the inspiring story of Aṅgulimāla to demonstrate that even the heaviest past actions can be transformed through present goodness. This teaching offers a profound framework for understanding suffering, happiness, and the path to liberation.

There's an understanding that really runs throughout the Buddha's teachings. It permeates the fabric of what the Buddha was talking about, something that he stressed over and over. And although it's a teaching, an understanding that's quite central in the discourses, in what the Buddha spoke about, it's often misunderstood. There's confusion, doubt that arises in regard to this teaching—confusion that can often lead to real suffering in people's lives.

This is the teaching on the law of karma, or kamma in Pali, karma in Sanskrit.

Some of the confusion and misunderstanding that surrounds this is at least in part related to the fact that this word has come into the modern lexicon, into the culture, in the last few decades. It's there a lot. It shows up, but it's shown up in a way that's used very casually, in ways that are not actually reflective of the depth of its meaning. There's an oversimplification, a superficial relationship to this word.

We hear it a lot. We hear references to good and bad karma, or "instant karma is going to get you"—song lyrics. We use the word ourselves. There are bumper stickers: "My karma just ran over your dogma." It gets used in these sometimes jocular or oversimplified ways. We hear references to what this teaching is about in phrases that don't use the word itself—things like "as you sow, so shall you reap," or "what goes around comes around." These expressions have some connection to this understanding, to this teaching, but they don't really get to the fullness of what it's about.

There's another aspect as well: the teachings on karma are very closely tied to, and certainly when the Buddha spoke about this, in a way inseparable from, teachings on rebirth, which are also often misunderstood. A lot of questions come up. Who is reborn, or what is reborn? Who is it that reaps the fruits of these actions? What's happening there? How is the fruit of past actions coming to bear in terms of rebirth? Is the suffering that I experience in my life the result of some past actions I may have done? Am I to blame? Was it my fault? Many questions arise around this.

There can sometimes be an almost blaming quality to the way we relate to this word, as though karma is somehow functioning like fate—some force emerging out of the past that we're responsible for in some way, and that there's nothing we can do about it. We hear this in the language. We'll say, "It's just my bad karma," or "It's so-and-so's bad karma coming into play." This fatalistic relationship to the word is actually a deep misunderstanding of it.

From there, it's not far to take the next step, which uses karma as a way of blaming, as though beings deserve their circumstances. "It's their own fault. They just deserve that." The attitude arises that they don't deserve compassion or care because they're just getting their just desserts. We have to be really careful not to use the teachings on karma as some kind of excuse for indifference.

The reflection on karma is very much tied to the reflections used for cultivating equanimity. And this quality of indifference, as Skye was speaking about in her last talk, points to this near enemy or near neighbor of equanimity, which is actually not the real thing at all. It's a kind of disconnected relationship. But real equanimity is all about connection, and in my mind is very closely related to the qualities of compassion—com-

passion that is not looking at causes of suffering to determine whether or not it should be expressed, but rather relating to suffering by touching it directly, with the wish that beings be free of suffering, the wish to alleviate it when and if possible.

A colleague of mine once referred to the teachings on karma as "the science of happiness," which I think is a very useful and beautiful way of holding this teaching—quite an apt description of what's really pointed to in the understanding of the unfolding of karma and how it actually functions in our lives. Because if we really understand it, then in a certain key way, it is a recipe for happiness. It is a science of happiness: human happiness here and now, you could say heavenly happiness, and in its deepest way, ultimately, the happiness of liberation.

In order to understand the teachings on karma—I'll use the two words interchangeably, karma and kamma—we need to look initially at what we mean when we speak about the conditioned nature of experience, of life. What is actually meant when we speak about conditionality, the conditioned nature of life, of experience?

And what do we mean when we say that in any given moment, experience is the product of causes and conditions coming together—that each moment is the result of these causes and conditions? We say this a lot. We use this kind of language.

What this points to in a very fundamental way is the manner in which each moment impacts and conditions subsequent moments of experience. There's an understanding that this is not a random thing, but that there's actually a lawful way this process unfolds—a lawfulness to how conditioning happens in our lives and experience. Things do not happen in some random way. What happens is not just the product of the luck of the draw, of random chance. There are natural laws that govern how things unfold in our lives.

A really good and often used illustration of how we might hold this is in terms of the laws of nature. We can see it very simply in terms of a seed. When we talk about karma in terms of planting seeds, that image is used frequently, and it's an apt one. We can think very simply: if we plant a certain kind of seed, we'll get a certain kind of plant. If we plant an acorn, we're going to get an oak tree, not a birch or a maple. If we put hollyhock seeds into the ground, we're going to get hollyhocks, not daisies or cosmos or some other kind of flower. There's a lawfulness to that. You put a seed in, and though you don't know exactly what's going to come, if it's a particular seed, it will bear that kind of fruit, that particular kind of plant.

In the teachings on karma, this same quality of lawfulness applies to the way our own actions yield results—they also unfold in a lawful way. There's the understanding that we can see this functioning within a single life, within our daily ongoing experience as we move through a day, through a lifetime. And this same lawfulness applies from one life to the next, through this process of birth, death, and rebirth. The quality of consciousness at the moment of death has a conditioning effect, an impact on what's called rebirth consciousness—the consciousness of the next birth that happens in that flow.

We can see it in terms of mind moments. This teaching regarding rebirth appears throughout the texts. It may or may not be meaningful to us, and there's no requirement that one adopt a belief in rebirth in order to practice and have the teachings unfold. That's not a requirement. I'm not asking that of you tonight. We can see this in terms of each moment being deaths and rebirths. But we might open to the possibility that it operates on a larger scale, a more vast ongoing scale. Certainly the suttas, all of the Buddhist teachings, are permeated with this understanding of a more expansive way of looking at things. Yet it's not a requirement that you adopt some sort of belief. You might suspend disbelief, perhaps.

Whether or not this is meaningful to us, we can see the process unfolding moment by moment. There's an image I find helpful—using one candle to light another candle, then moving on through a series of candles, each one lighting the next. For this illustration to work, imagine that as I light the next candle, the previous one goes out. If I take a candle and bring it over to light another, what's actually happening there?

We can see mind moments in our ongoing experience in the same way. It's not that I'm taking the flame off this candle and putting that flame onto the next one. That's not what happens. But conditions come together for a new flame to arise—the conditions of heat, a combustible material. We haven't taken the flame off, but there's that conditioning effect. The next flame arises out of those conditions, and so on. It's a lawful process.

When we ask questions about rebirth—who is reborn?—I think what's key is not to turn what is a process into a thing, into thingness. What we're pointing to here is this process, this flow, this conditioning that happens. There's no thing. In the same way that we don't take a flame off one candle and put it onto the next, there's no thing carried over in thingness. But there is this conditioning process that unfolds.

The understanding regarding rebirth, whether it's the new birth in each moment or over subsequent lifetimes, is that wholesome, skillful, beautiful actions in one life will tend to condition happy states in a subsequent life, in the future, in the next moment. With this idea of rebirth, however we hold it, we need to be a little careful not to use

the teachings of karma as a way to reflect backwards and say, "Oh, because of some past action, that's why things are the way they are now"—adopting that resigned or fatalistic attitude I spoke about earlier.

As though we could use the teaching to reflect back and point to some reason that things are the way they are now—some kind of "because of this, then this." But it's a far more complicated and dynamic process than simple cause and effect. As though, for example, if we have bad health in this moment, at this time, that it's reflecting some misdeed in a past life or earlier in this lifetime. This quality of "getting what one deserves," as though it's all some kind of predetermined thing that's just unfolding. Because as I was saying, it's a dynamic process. It's not mechanistic. It's not fatalistic. There's nothing that is fixed or predetermined in this system. It's much more alive than that. It's ongoing.

A key to understanding the teachings on karma, or kamma, is really found in the literal translation of that word. Many of you may know this, but the word kamma or karma means action. That's what it means—action. We have a shortened way of talking now. We speak of karma as what the term in Pali would actually be kamma vipaka—the fruits, the results of actions. But the word kamma means action. It's a doing of a thing. Actions of body, actions of speech, actions of mind. It's this active doing.

And if we look at all actions—bodily actions that we might do, actions of speech, actions in the mind—they all have their origin in the mind. Anything that exists as an action has its genesis in the mind and heart. That's the beginning. The Buddha spoke of this in the famous opening lines of the Dhammapada when he said, "Mind is the forerunner of all things." And on from there—the power, the importance of the mind in this process.

In Buddhist psychology, the teachings of the Abhidhamma offer a very detailed exploration of the mind-body process and how it functions on a very minute level. It's quite a dense teaching. But within this, there's a detailed examination of the mind, of mental processes. And there are a couple of things that are key for the purposes of this talk that I want to point to.

Within that understanding, there's a mental factor of consciousness, which has the function, the bare function, of knowing. It knows the object of attention. A simple way we might think of this: if I strike the bell, that sound arises. There's contact at the ear door. If the ear door is functioning, it meets there, comes together with that sensitivity. And hearing consciousness then—the knowing of that—arises. So that's this moment of contact, these things coming together, consciousness arising there.

The understanding in this teaching is that along with that moment, a whole host of other factors arise—some of which always arise, and some of which may or may not arise. For example, it's said that with every moment of contact, there's a feeling tone, a vedana. We're all familiar with this idea of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. That feeling tone is there, arising in that moment of contact. It may or may not be seen; it may be very subtle. And there are a host of other things that may or may not arise.

There's also a mental factor of intention that arises in the mind. Cetana is the Pali word. Sometimes "volition" is used for this term. This is the energy that gives rise to action. And there's an understanding in the teachings of karma that actions born of intention—this is what leads to the karmic process, to fruits. It's this quality of intention, of intentionality.

So this is key. The Buddha, in a kind of famous statement, said: "Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does"—meaning action—"intending, one acts by way of body, speech, or mind."

So that quality of intention arises with actions that we may do. We can see this in our ongoing experience at times, this quality—it's like an energetic gathering of an impulse before acting. Sometimes we can see this. It's quite subtle, but we can notice it before movements, for example. It's arising and passing, arising and passing all the time before any action that is taken.

is neutral in and of itself, but there are other qualities, other factors that can arise that color this. We can think of this in terms of what we might call the motivation that impacts or colors this quality of intention. Actions may be colored by desire or greed, by aversion or love or generosity, by confusion or wisdom—these can be operating and color the intention.

So this quality of motivation along with the intention is key to how karma functions. The karmic weight, you could say, or the power karmically of an action is not inherently found within the action itself, but is tied into this quality of intention and the motivation that comes together with it.

We could think of simple examples, like the activity of starting a fire. You could have the same activities of starting a fire, and in one case it could be a fire being used to cook food or keep warm. Or it could be an act of arson to burn down a building. The intention, the motivation behind these is very different. Or using a crowbar to pry open a door—it could be someone breaking and entering to commit a robbery, or it could be a

fireman trying to rescue someone trapped in a locked building, a door that needs to be broken open. The action might look the same if we just took that snapshot, but the motivation behind it is very different.

In terms of the understanding of karma, these motivations show up in the broadest way as the three unwholesome and conversely the three wholesome roots. We can have motives born of greed, hatred, or delusion, and all the different permutations of those, or motivations of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. You could phrase them in the positive as motivations of kindness, generosity, compassion, wisdom, clear seeing, clear understanding.

As we go through our days, we can look and see for ourselves. As we sit and walk and watch the mind and body closely, we start to understand which of these qualities are wholesome and lead to good results, and which lead to suffering in our lives.

The power of intention is not to be underestimated. It manifests so subtly and quickly that we miss it most of the time. We don't see it, so it seems very small and not a big deal. But the power there is really remarkable.

We go back to this image of seeds. We have these tiny seeds that can produce huge trees. The power of that is amazing to consider—this tiny little seed can produce a huge tree. And then that tree flowers and brings forth an abundance of different fruits just from this one tiny seed. The quality of intention in and of itself can seem like such a small thing, but it has this incredible potential, the same potentiality that a seed has.

We can look at intention as a seed in the mind, the seed of action, that can flower forth in many kinds of ways. Intentions with wholesome motivation tend to yield beneficial results, while motivations and actions born of unwholesome, unskillful motives will lead to suffering, stress, and difficulty. There's a lawfulness to that.

One of the beautiful things here is the quality of empowerment we have. We can choose which seeds we want to plant. It's not a random thing, and we're not condemned to follow only one course. We can alter the course of our lives by the seeds we choose to plant.

So then it's worth looking: how are we living? This may seem pretty clear—there's nothing really complicated in anything I've been saying or in this understanding. But how do we actually put this into practice? Do we look at our intentions and motivations before we act?

There's a well-known sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya where the Buddha is instructing his son Rahula, who when he grew up became a monk, one of the Buddha's disciples. This is an excerpt from a much longer teaching.

The Buddha asks, "What do you think, Rahula? What is a mirror for?" And Rahula answers, "For reflection, sir."

"In the same way, Rahula, bodily actions, verbal actions, and mental actions are to be done with repeated reflection. Whenever you want to do a bodily action, you should reflect on it: This bodily action I want to do, would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences and painful results? If on reflection you know that this would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences and results, then any bodily action of that sort is unfit for you to do."

But if on reflection you know that it would not cause affliction, would not cause painful results, that it would be skillful with pleasant consequences and pleasant results, then that is fit for you to do.

And then he goes on and recommends that Rahula reflect this way in terms of actions of speech and actions of mind. So this quality of reflecting before doing something, while doing it, and even afterwards—he talks about it in terms of actions of body, speech, and mind. Reflecting before the doing, in the process of doing: Is this leading to good things or not? And afterwards looking back: What happened there? Did that action lead to good results or not? Did it lead to affliction for myself or others? This kind of reflection that one can bring to bear.

Another way that the Buddha spoke about bringing attention to our actions is in terms of a teaching on what were called the ten unwholesome actions to be avoided. I'll mention these briefly—I'm not going to go into them in detail—but in this list of ten, there are three actions of body, four actions of speech, and three actions in the mind. And there's the reverse of them as well, the ten wholesome actions which one should do.

The three bodily actions to be avoided are killing—intentionally killing living beings—taking that which is not given, or stealing I could say in a short way, and then engaging in sexual misconduct or lack of care with sexual energy. The four actions of speech are lying or false speech, harsh or abusive speech, malicious speech that's used to undermine another or cause division, and useless speech—idle, gossiping, frivolous, use-

less speech. And then actions of mind to be avoided: covetousness, which is desire for what belongs to another person, coveting another person's things or experiences or whatever; ill will; and wrong view.

It's interesting that wrong view is listed here among these unskillful mental actions. Wrong view and right view—this is a big topic in the Buddhist teachings. But a key way that we might look at wrong view, or correspondingly right view in this case, is in terms of the understanding of the law of kamma. Wrong view would be the view that our actions do not have consequences, do not bear fruit, that it doesn't matter. This would be seen as wrong view. If one is holding this wrong view, then it leads to all kinds of heedlessness, of not being careful in what we do. These are actions based on a false or wrong view of reality. So that's why wrong view is listed there.

Refraining from these unwholesome actions then gives us the ten wholesome actions that one might cultivate. We could phrase them negatively as non-killing, non-stealing, or we could phrase them in positive terms—kindness and generosity and renunciation, for example, as opposed to covetousness.

In either case, we have these clear guidelines or frameworks for our behavior, for our actions that lead to wholesome, good, pleasant states. When we live very carefully, when we bring real mindfulness to this process, it can lead to what the Buddha called the bliss of blamelessness—a mind that is free of worry and remorse for actions we might have done that would cause harm. We have this blissful quality of blamelessness that one feels to be blameless. One has not acted in ways that are worthy of blame, that others might blame.

So even though it's said that only a Buddha can understand the broadness and scope of the unfolding of kamma in a life, we can see ways that this functions just in our daily life—simple ways that we can see this process of conditionality, of cause and effect, how this unfolds.

A common experience that happens on retreat is that for many people, at times, there can be a flood of memories of past actions. All kinds of things that come, sometimes memories of things that we had no idea were even in there. And sometimes these can be difficult to be with.

I know for myself, coming up a lot at times in my practice earlier on were memories of times when I had been incredibly cruel as a little boy to insects. Little boys are often pretty bad, behaving badly at times. And it was mixed, because I was also kind to them—I would rescue them, I wasn't afraid. I was the kid they would call to put them outside, and sometimes I would do that. But there were other times when I was incredibly

cruel. These memories coming back, all this worry in the mind about the repercussions of that, feelings of such regret and remorse for having done these terrible things to these living beings when I was young. Very strong feelings and the reverberations of that in the mind and heart.

We may also have memories of very beautiful, wholesome, wonderful acts that we've done that arise. And the result of that in the mind is a lot of joy and lightness and brightness and pleasant, happy mind states. So we see cause and effect in that way—the way the mind can be conditioned from those kinds of memories, the results of these past actions, the mind states that come, and the impact in our meditation.

We might also notice this present-moment unfolding of kamma in the way that others respond or relate to us depending on the climate of our inner world. If we're filled with love and warmth, the way people respond to us is very different than if the mind is filled with envy or jealousy or anger or fear. So we see cause and effect in that way.

With mindfulness practice, we can start to really see the motivations behind our actions. We can bring attention to this and start to see how actions and results are linked through conditionality. This opens up the possibility that we're not just running on automatic, but that we actually have a choice. It opens up the possibility for choosing whether or not we act, depending on the quality of the heart, the mind, the motivations present there.

It's not always easy to see. It can be very subtle. It happens very quickly sometimes. We're already halfway through an action before we maybe pause. But the possibility is there to see.

And sometimes our motivations clearly are mixed, aren't they? For example, maybe we're sitting here meditating in the hall, and it's getting late, and there are unpleasant feelings arising in the body and fatigue. There's the intention to move, the motivation to change postures or to go to bed. And there's wisdom in that—it's getting late, we're tired, we need rest. We need to rest the body, rest the mind.

But then we may also find at the same time the desire to keep sitting, the intention to keep sitting. And there can be some wisdom there also. Let me push the edge of this. Don't just immediately say, "Oh, it's time for bed" when the first feelings of tiredness come on. But these motivations could be mixed. Maybe we want to look good. We want to be a good yogi. We want to be able to tell someone how we sat for three hours late at night—something like that.

Or maybe we're moved to make an offering, a sincere desire to do something generous. It can be a very pure, beautiful quality of just wanting to give. But then there could be some feeling of wanting people to see that we're generous. Or maybe we're hoping to get something back, either praise or something in return. Or maybe there's some guilt, and we're hoping that by giving, we can have these guilty feelings go away, that it will alleviate that.

So motivations are often mixed. But with mindfulness, we can start to uncover them—the sometimes hidden or subtle aspects to the motivations behind our actions. It's like we see, okay, what's running the show right now? That's the way I like to think of it. What's running the show in my mind, in my heart? Is it greed? Is it some kind of aversion? Is it confusion? Is it wisdom? Is it clarity? Is it generosity? Is it kindness? We see what's running the show. We see what's present in that moment.

We can also look at this quality of karma, of cause and effect, in terms of what we think of as personality. What do we mean when we think of our own personality, or we speak of someone having a particular kind of personality? What do we mean by that?

Usually, if we really look at it, we see that it's a tendency to behave in certain ways. It's certain patterns of somewhat predictable behavior that we see, maybe in ourselves or in someone we know. And we tend to look at this as though somehow it's fixed—that we just have a personality. I have my personality, they have theirs. We tend to think of it as a fixed thing.

But actually, if we look carefully, it's a process of repeated kinds of actions in the body and in the mind, repeated mental qualities that get expressed and conditioned. They tend to wear a kind of groove, so they tend to happen again.

Every time we perform an action of body, speech, or mind, it's as though we're practicing that action, conditioning a tendency to do the same thing again. As the Buddha said, whatever one frequently thinks about or ponders on becomes an inclination in the mind.

If we act out of kindness or generosity, we're conditioning that tendency—we're practicing it. And the opposite is equally true. When we act out of anger or fear or selfishness, we're practicing that, conditioning the tendency to act in those ways. Personality gets built up through this process of conditioning.

This understanding opens up tremendous possibility—we have the capacity to condition the good, to practice wholesome things. If we think of karma in this way, as a science of happiness or a recipe for happiness, we see that it functions by giving us great

responsibility. This teaching places great responsibility in our hands for how our lives unfold. The choices we make have a powerful impact. We could say we create our own destiny in a way.

There's a very frequent reflection that the Buddha recommended, one to be done often, whether nun or monk, layman or laywoman. It's one of a number of reflections, and it's also the traditional reflection used in the practice of cultivating equanimity. Sky mentioned this the other night:

I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and live dependent on my actions. Whatever I may do, for good or for ill, to that I will fall heir.

This is a powerful reflection for us. We begin with our own internal world, looking to see what is happening in our own mind and heart—the intentions, the motivations that accompany those intentions—and then see how this shapes the course of a life.

I want to stress once more, as I come toward the end of this talk tonight, the dynamic quality of this process. It's not fixed. Nothing is predetermined. There's a very dynamic quality to how this unfolds.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama addresses this directly: "Some people misunderstand the concept of karma. They take the Buddha's doctrine of the law of causality to mean that all is predetermined and that there is nothing that the individual can do. This is a total misunderstanding. The very term karma or action is a term of active force, which indicates that future events are within your own hands. Since action is a phenomenon that is committed by a person, a living being, it is therefore within your own hands to decide whether or not you engage in any particular action."

There's this element of choice. We have to be careful not to oversimplify this process. Yes, the fruits of our actions come to bear in our lives, but there's also a whole range of things outside the realm of karma that figure into what happens—illness, the effects of food, climate and weather, accident. These are said to be outside the functioning, outside the realm of karma and its fruits. So it's not a closed, mechanistic system.

We can think of it in terms of a seed that might be planted, with all the factors that come into play: where it's planted, whether it's cared for, whether it's watered or fertilized, whether weeds are pulled away so it has room to grow. This holds true in our own lives in the same way. How we are in the present has a powerful impact on the fruiting, the unfolding of the fruits of past actions. Goodness in the present tends to draw out the

power of past wholesome and skillful deeds and bring those to bear. We could say it's a way of wrapping past unwholesome actions with goodness in the present, and this has a very powerful impact.

There's a beautiful story from the time of the Buddha that many of you have probably heard, about a monk who became a disciple of the Buddha named Angulimala. He was a serial killer. Actually, his given name was Ahimsa, which means "harmless"—that was his birth name. But then he received some terrible advice. He had many good qualities, and a jealous teacher, wanting to destroy him, gave him the instruction that he had to kill—I think it was either one hundred or one thousand beings—and wear their fingers in a garland. Angulimala means "garland of fingers."

So he was doing this. The Buddha, I believe, was going to be his last victim. The Buddha was walking through the area where Angulimala was living, and Angulimala chased after him but couldn't catch him. He called out, "Stop! Stop!"

Apparently the Buddha said, "I have stopped. It's you who need to stop."

And anyway, he was impressed by the Buddha, became a disciple, and became fully enlightened. According to this story, he became a fully enlightened follower of the Buddha. And it's said that after this time, whenever he went on alms round, people threw rotten fruit at him. He had to bear a lot of lingering bad feelings from the life he'd committed. The Buddha said he just had to bear this. But clearly, the Buddha didn't say to him, "Well, you just have to go spend a few eons in hell realms." He took him on as a disciple.

And it's interesting with Angulimala. I'm teaching the Metta chanting, the Karaniya Metta Sutta chant, which I've described as being one of these Paritta chants, chants of blessing and protection. Well, there's an Angulimala Paritta, which is a chant about Angulimala. Apparently, after his awakening when he was a monk, he was on alms round and came by a household where he knew the people. There was a young woman who was having a difficult labor in childbirth, and he was very moved by the suffering. He went back to the Buddha and said, "Is there something we can do?"

The Buddha said, "Yes, go back and tell them that you've never harmed a living being."

Angulimala said, "I can't say that. I'm a serial killer. I'm a bad dude."

And the Buddha said, "Go back and say that since you entered the holy life, you have never intentionally harmed a living being."

Angulimala said, "Yes, this is true. I can do this."

So he goes back to this household and says, "By the power of this truth—that since entering the holy life, I have not intentionally harmed a living being—by the power of this, sister, may you be eased in this childbirth." And it worked. So now that paritta is chanted in Buddhist countries as a protection for women in childbirth. That's an interesting legacy following on from the life he lived at that time.

There's a lot that comes into play in the unfolding of kamma. It's not "because of this, then this is going to happen." It's a very dynamic kind of process. And the power of the mind, the power of intention, of motivation in the mind is really significant and has far-reaching consequences in our lives. Within this whole understanding, we really can choose, to a great extent, what seeds we wish to plant. And this has a lawful impact on what will grow from that.

CHAPTER 46

Five Steps on the Eightfold Path

Pascal Auclair · 1h00

> *Pascal Auclair begins this teaching with the powerful story of Sāriputta and Moggallāna before they became the Buddha's chief disciples—two young men at a festival who simultaneously recognize the fleeting nature of all experience and ask whether there might be something beyond the arising and passing of conditioned phenomena. This moment of insight into impermanence becomes the ignition point for their spiritual journey toward the unconditioned.*
>
> *The talk examines the first five factors of the Noble Eightfold Path (ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga) in depth. Pascal explores wise view (sammā diṭṭhi) at two levels: the mundane understanding of kamma and its fruits, and the supramundane understanding of the Four Noble Truths (cattāri ariyasaccāni). He emphasizes how wrong views—particularly the subtle belief in inadequacy—drive our constant attempts to correct reality, which he identifies as the very nature of saṃsāra. The teaching on kamma focuses attention not on results but on the 'emission point'—our present intentions and actions where we actually have power.*
>
> *Pascal then addresses wise intention, wise speech (including a memorable teaching the Buddha gave to his son Rāhula about lying), wise action (the precepts against killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct), and wise livelihood. He expands the traditional understanding of livelihood beyond occupation to encompass our entire lifestyle—transportation, consumption, recreation—asking how all aspects of life can serve disentanglement and freedom. The talk acknowledges the genuine complexity and uncertainty we face in applying these teachings to modern life, inviting practitioners to hold these questions with patience rather than demanding immediate answers.*

There's a story that I heard one time that I like a lot. It's the story of Moggallana and Sariputta-to-be, before they became the two main disciples of the Buddha, when they were young fellows just having regular fun, before they got into the Dharma fun.

In that story—and I'm telling it as I recall it because I don't think I've read it lately—one day they're at a festival. It's a festival going on for several days where there are people dancing in costumes, music, things happening with elephants that are adorned and decorated. There's a lot of beauty and color and music and all kinds of things hap-

pening, and they're hanging out with their friends. They're having a good time. They're there for three days sitting in the made-up estrade—here's a little Pali for you—made-up seats for people to look at the festivities during a festival.

And they're sitting there, and there's this one moment that is pivotal. Maybe it's between two shows and the staff people from the festival are preparing the next presentation. They're both just hanging out silently, looking around the crowd—seeing all the people sitting and eating and chatting, the elephants moving about, the dancers preparing themselves. And they both at the same time have the same idea cross their mind, the same insight. They both think at the very same moment: one day this is not going to be anymore. One day the elephant won't be there, the seats and the people won't be there. All this will be gone. This fun that we're having is very fleeting. Could there be something that does not have this nature of appearing and disappearing? Something that would be worth getting to know, maybe. Something deeper than this pleasure that we're having, which is fleeting.

So they have the same hit on reality, and that is the ignition of their spiritual journey toward liberation, freedom, and a connection with something that is unconditional, that does not arise from a cause, that is not unreliable, unstable, fleeting, ephemeral.

In the story, they at some point turn to each other—a "did you think what I thought?" kind of situation. And it's very beautiful. They go for a while together and at some point they say, maybe we have more chance if we split up to find an answer. So they take this commitment that when they find an answer, when they find something of value in their search, they're going to look for each other to share the news. And they go on their way. The story goes that one of them hears about a man who is teaching, a teacher—the Buddha. And anyway, they become the two main disciples of the Buddha.

I like that moment of insight. Maybe you think it's a downer that they're having fun at a festival and they just have fun. Well, it happens to us too, no? It happens to us sometimes—even not as strong—but we're somewhere doing something and suddenly we see... I don't know if the right word is vain or ephemeral. It's going to last just for the time it lasts. It doesn't have depth.

When we get on a spiritual path, for most of them I think what's going to be the ignition is an experience of dissatisfaction, an experience of something lacking, or of there being more depth available, or a strong experience of suffering, the loss of something that was extremely meaningful, maybe. We all in here have our own story of this, but often, for many of us, what will bring us on the path is a meeting with something of the dukkha world.

Tonight I'd like to talk about the path. You know me by now—I like a number and a theme. Tonight it's going to be the... what number could it be? Eight. It's going to be the eight, and the theme is going to be fold path. I'm going to talk about the Eightfold Path. It's pretty dense, so we've got to keep it light.

There are a few books on the Noble Eightfold Path. One that is very beautiful is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, and you'll be able to purchase this at the end of your retreat. My talk tonight is based a lot on this book that I've read several times. There's another one from Bhante Gunaratana, *Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness*. I want to put the full range of emotions in the talk—the laughter, the drama, all of it.

When we engage on a spiritual quest, often we go around a little bit like shopping. There's this beautiful spiritual supermarket where you can do a little of this and a little of that. It can be very good for a while, because you make discoveries, things are revealed. You can avoid what doesn't feel so good and get a lot of good stuff going. It feels great. But that can only last for a time, I think.

Because a spiritual path, as we're seeing here now, is not like a video game. Although video games are pretty complex, they have a simplicity compared to the human heart and mind, the psyche and the body. You want to find a path that you'll be able to walk maybe for a lifetime, that has depth. So the question arises: how to choose a path?

There are four questions, or four requirements we could say, that one could use to choose a path. When you're shopping, you could put these in your list of things to check. When your friends are shopping for a path, this is good criteria for evaluation.

It's good if the path really is able to... That is the suspense part of the evening.

So, if the path really is able to name the problem well, completely—the full range of the problem of being in this human predicament that we find ourselves in—it can actually name the suffering in its entirety. You might start to recognize something as I'm going along here. That would be one of the first things.

The second thing you might want to check is if this system, we could call it, goes to the heart of why we're suffering, can really go to the cause, the source of the problem.

And then the third thing you could check is if it's actually going to get rid of the problem—really and completely. That it's not just a path that says, "Oh, you'll feel better. We're going to make you feel better on this path." No, that it's actually going to look at the real deep cause and be able to eradicate it completely. That would be the third criterion.

And the fourth criterion would be that it's actually doable. That it can be walked, realized—that it's doable.

So these could be the four criteria you have there. Sounds strangely like the Four Noble Truths. Very close to it.

And so, good. You found yourself in a good place, because apparently this is what this path is doing. It's really naming the suffering, the extent of the suffering. It's not saying the problem is the flat tire. It's also the flat tire, but it names everything.

I remember one time I went to see a show by an English company called Forced Entertainment. That was the name of the theater company. They were exploring entertainment and its edges—what is entertainment and what is not? The theater... I've been in that world for many years. Sometimes there are these things we do, research we do. The theater becomes a laboratory to investigate something.

In that play, they were looking at entertainment. One of the things I enjoyed is that the show lasted for three hours and more. It was kind of ongoing. That was one of the edges you would hit at some point—"I think I've been entertained now. I need something else."

In the show, one of the many things they did, one of the first things, is that a young woman came to the front of the stage and said, "I'm very happy you're here tonight. We're going to give you a really good show. We're going to entertain you, so just relax. Don't think about your problems at home. Please don't think about, for example—this is the worst place in the whole of Canada to park a car, this neighborhood, because they almost always get broken into. Don't think about this. And don't think about the traffic in the city and all the potholes."

She went on for a long time about transportation and all its difficulties. Then she went into the realm of disease and hospitals, and she kept going—"Do not think about work, the difficulties we sometimes have with employers, how we can't actually complain because it's so complex. Don't think about medical procedures tonight."

People actually started leaving at some point. They felt they didn't like that kind of entertainment. I was sitting there thinking, "They have to be Buddhists to name suffering so thoroughly!"

But after the show, reflecting on it, I realized they had named only the first kind of dukkha—dukkha-dukkha—that Annie spoke so well about.

They left—maybe I should have called them or told them there are two other categories: the dukkha of impermanence, those beautiful things that pass and the angst that we know it's going to pass or it could pass, and the other range of everything included—being in the body, being embodied, all the neutral stuff also.

Anyway, so this path really names everything that is suffering in it. And it goes to the very core of the clinging or desire, tanha. And then it says it's possible to actually release completely the clinging and the confusion of the mind and find complete release. And then there's the path that I'm about to start talking about.

The Four Noble Truths, you see, end with the Eightfold Path. And the Eightfold Path, we could say, both starts and ends with the Four Noble Truths. Because when you get on this path, you have an intuition that something is not quite right, and there must be another way. So that's kind of the beginning of the Four Noble Truths—there's something wrong with that way of living, there must be another way to be. So that's the start of it. The Four Noble Truths are right at the beginning of the path, and also at the end of the path is a complete understanding of the Four Noble Truths—a complete intuitive, penetrative, felt, deeply known understanding of all four aspects.

In his book, Bhikkhu Bodhi asks an interesting question. He says, what do you think is more important—the doctrine or the practice? The doctrine being the Four Noble Truths, or the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path? What is most important, the teaching or the discipline? He says, in a way it's a strange question, but just to put emphasis on what we're doing and what I'm talking about tonight, from his point of view probably the most important is actually the path, because the path reveals the teaching. And the path is what is going to make you liberated one day—feel, I want to say, aligned with the nature of things as they truly are. So the path is extremely important.

Personally, the beauty that I see on this path is that it is the means. It comes to me tonight as reconciliation with the world, and seeing through the world, and freedom in and from the world. It's the way to it, but it's also the expression of it. Tonight as I talk about all the different pieces of it, in my mind it's very clear that it's the way to free the mind and it's also an expression of a free mind.

This Eightfold Path—maybe I should name the eight aspects. I could use "right" or "wise" view. Maybe I will say wise. Wise view is the first one. Then wise intentions. Then wise speech. Wise action. Wise livelihood. Wise effort, wise mindfulness, wise concentration is the eighth one.

These can be presented as a wheel with eight spokes, and that's what we use on the path, we could say. Another way to think about it is a spiral. I like the spiral because every aspect that we bring in, that we practice with, that we become conscious of, that we engage with, is going to feed the revelation, maybe, of the others. So there's going to be a synergy that is going to help us ascend—that's the image we use—and also descend after, to be here and be of service, maybe, and be an agent of protection and freedom.

Another image that can be used is a rope with many strands, so that only one strand would break when there's tension, but the eight of them together make for a strong cord that can be of great use.

So, wise view. Wise view is—maybe I'll start with wrong view. If there is wise view, wise view is a clarity of vision, something that is aligned with reality. Wrong view is when you take something false to be true, when there's a confusion or mistaken understanding of how things work. So wrong view is very, very important. We want to highlight this, discover what is our wrong view. That's what we're doing here.

By the way, we're walking the path already. I'm just kind of naming it. Being here, doing this, these few weeks—several weeks actually—is really completely being on the Eightfold Path. It's beautiful.

So we're clarifying the view because the way we view the world—whether we're conscious of it or not—often remains unclear to us. We don't always know what our beliefs are. We just act from them. Wrong view will bring wrong intention, which will bring wrong actions, which will result in suffering. And often we're not aware of our wrong views. But when we sit here, suddenly we become more and more aware of them.

Some of this is fire practice. We sit in it and we see that something's wrong with the view because we're all worked up. We're sitting here, nothing is asked of us—just sit your butt on the cushion for a few minutes—and it gets incredibly complex and difficult and problematic. Clearly there's something that is not aligned here.

In the interviews today, or in the last few days, twice this came up in conversation: one of the wrong views that could be in action and unnoticed is the wrong view of inadequacy. Someone corrected me on how to say it—there was kind of a wave of inadequacy. A lot of my motivations in life, my moves, might be done from a feeling of being not enough, of being inadequate. And it's unnoticed, but it makes me make the choices I make, makes me do the things I do. It makes me strive forward, makes me dream of a different self, makes me do all kinds of strange things that are difficult for this being-

ness here. It makes things complex. It can be very important to actually recognize that ignorance is showing up as inadequacy—this sense that I'm not enough and there's a need for correction.

One teacher once told me that one word to describe samsara, the cycle of suffering that we're in, is *correcting*. Constantly trying to correct this reality. There's a little something missing from me, from the other one, from the situation. This correcting is the problem. Remove that and samsara, in a way, is gone.

So perhaps highlighting the feeling of inadequacy—and how it makes me want things to be a certain way or not be a certain way, how I don't want to be this one that is lacking—recognizing these wrong views, we're trying to correct here. We're really aiming at core beliefs that are unshaken by many other philosophies: the feeling of a separate self that needs to defend itself in the world, the difficulties around that separation. Or the belief in solidity, in reliability, in stability. The Buddha in one text says that when you see how shaky the world is, how unreliable it is, something switches. So this is the correcting of the view that might happen.

In terms of wise view, at this point in the evening you can choose between two wise views if you want. You'll have the option to choose the one you prefer. There's one that we could call the mundane right view—if you're interested in creating the conditions for a kind of worldly happiness, for being well, for the conditions to improve in your world. And there's another right view or wise view that we could decide to choose also, which is called—maybe we could call it superior or supramundane right view.

So listen to me before you choose. The mundane right view is related to karma. It's an understanding that—there's an English expression I read sometimes that I like a lot—the efficacy of action. How our actions have an efficacy. They bear result. There are consequences. And there are wholesome roots that will always produce wholesome results, and unwholesome roots that will always produce unwholesome results.

In this wise view of karma, the important thing to understand is that it's actually not personal choice—"I'll make my own unwholesome wholesome." In this practice, in this doctrine, it's very clear: when actions are rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion, invariably they will produce results that are difficult, stressful, full of suffering. Invariably. When actions are rooted in metta or non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion—wisdom and metta and renunciation or generosity—invariably they will lead to good results in the future.

What I like about this teaching on karma is that in our practice, all the attention is put on being here now. All the attention is put on the emission, if I can say it that way. Not so much on the result, but on the emission.

On our practice here, what we put a lot of attention on is not asking, "Why am I in the middle of this? What is the result of what? What did I do in the past that I find myself like this?" It's not this. What we look at is how what I'm doing right now is emitting result for the future.

So the Buddha says karma is action, and for me, action is intentions. In the regular culture, when you talk about karma, where do we point? We point to result. "This is their karma. This is their karma." In this practice here, we change the object. It's not the result—it's the emission. It's what I'm putting out right now. I'm really aware of what is happening here, what I'm cultivating, what I'm abandoning. This is where I put the real attention.

There's a practice of equanimity that I've done a lot and still do sometimes. In the same way that in metta we have the phrases, there's a phrase that I've repeated a lot for myself to reestablish some of the wrong view about this and reestablish the right view and right intention. We could say—as I've said many times, probably hundreds of times—my happiness doesn't depend on the circumstances of my life. It depends on my response. My happiness doesn't depend on the circumstances of my life. It depends on my response.

How I am right now with the circumstances is going to have a tremendous impact in the future. We know that. This is what we're doing here. We put a lot of attention there. We're not asking, "Why is this happening to me?" As it's one of the imponderables, the Buddha said don't try to figure this out. It will drive you crazy. You cannot know. Because there's not only the law of karma in action—there are several laws in action.

Why something is happening—a diagnosis, just to name this. You could say, "Oh, why do I have that thing happening to me? It's karma, it's karma." Not known, because there's biology in there, there's chemistry, genes. There are many, many laws that are at play, so it's really hard to find what caused what. Sometimes there's a clarity we might have, but the attention is not so much on the result, but on the emission. That's where we have power. It's in the now.

Which I find extremely beautiful. I take care of what's happening in this mind-body because I can feel the instant karma of benevolence in the mind. It's felt immediately, the liberating aspect of it. And the rest, I have no idea about how it's going to unfold. Just what I maybe know or believe is that there is a storing that is happening—a storing

of energy. When there's an intention of hatred, it's stored. It's being stored somewhere. And there's a potentiality; we say something is latent there. And when the conditions are right, it's going to ripen. It could be in this life, could be in another life. Who knows? But the emission is the point of power here. We take care of now.

So that's if, in the wise view, we're interested in a good future—either next week or next life, you choose. If we're interested in freedom from this cycle, complete freedom, not just good karma but passing through conditionality altogether, then the attention goes on the Four Noble Truths. Maybe one aspect that I'll name here is these five aggregates that I was talking about a few weeks ago.

The Buddha says in his description of dukkha—I should know the quote by heart at this point, but—birth is difficult, aging is difficult, death is difficult, being separated from what we want is difficult, being stuck with what we don't want is difficult. Then at the very end of this description, he says, "And the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha."

To understand that this experience of being alive now, of having aggregates, has been caused by a wanting to exist—this is not an easy thing to do. One will need a great deal of attention to clarify that, or even to see, to experience the wanting to be, the wanting to exist. It's a driving force that is extremely powerful. It's said to produce the next life at the moment of disintegration of the body. This core wanting is so strong that it will lash out for another body somewhere. It will be able to grab another one. It so wants to be. And so the culmination of Right View is a deep understanding of these truths.

That's number one. Number two, the second fold of the Eightfold Path, is intention itself. In a way, I've already talked about it, mixed in with what came before. If you remember, Joseph named this, and I did again after talking about the two piles: this kind of unwholesome intention, I abandon; this kind of wholesome intention, I feed. This is basically the understanding around intention—intention being the link between the way we understand the world and our actions. That's the middle link. The way we understand will make us want to do something in a certain way. So that's very important.

The third step is speech, wise speech. I'll talk about this more in two weeks—I'll do a whole talk on this before we go back to that aspect of practice being very alive. But there's one small thing I wanted to say: in wise speech, not lying is one of the aspects.

There's this little story that I really like. At some point the Buddha was with Rahula, his son. We don't know how old Rahula was then, but let's imagine he's eight or nine years old. When the Buddha was giving his teaching, often there would be an occasion

for it. Why would he speak about this instead of that? Because something would happen—a question, a conversation, a situation. So in this story, we can imagine that Rahula has told a lie. And now he's with his father.

His father takes a bowl—a cup. I think I was supposed to leave a little water in there. So now, with the power of your imagination, you'll imagine a little water in this cup. The Buddha says, "Look, Rahula, you see the little water in this cup? That's as much spiritual achievement as somebody who tells lies has—just these few little drops."

Then he goes like this. He says, "You saw how easy it was to remove the water from the cup? Somebody who tells a lie, they remove all the achievements they have gained by doing that."

Then he says, "You see what I do here?" He puts the cup upside down. "It's very easy to put the cup like this and nothing can come in. Somebody who tells a lie, that's what they do with their spiritual potential. They shut it off. It's not possible to make any progress on the path when you tell a lie."

I find this very powerful. He's a good teacher, no? It's not just drop the water—it's drop the water, see how empty it is, put the cup upside down. I can imagine being eight years old and witnessing this, being right in front of it, how it could impact the mind. Like, "Wow, I have to be very careful."

If you replace "spiritual achievement" with "freedom"—this is how much freedom somebody who tells a lie has. You see how any freedom gained is lost? You see how it's not possible for somebody who tells a lie to be free. Maybe that's a better way to tell the story.

Speech. Speech is an amazing thing.

It can give freedom, talking of freedom. When we hear wise teaching, it can liberate the mind. In the texts, you read this all the time. The Buddha is speaking, and at the end of the sutta, five hundred monks and nuns understood deeply, corrected their view completely, and were freed by words.

Actually, if you were to read all the suttas, you might come up with a percentage of maybe something in the nineties—ninety-seven percent perhaps—of the descriptions of awakening for beings happened during a discourse, through true speech. Maybe because the individual awakenings in the forest are not so well recorded as the discourses of the Buddha. But still, it's just to show how powerful a tool speech is.

It can also break lives and remove freedom—by telling a lie, by covering the truth. I'm a spiritual seeker, really into the truth. I want to know reality as it is. But suddenly, in my way of talking, I promote myself in a certain way that is not exactly true. I'm defending a certain image that I care about. It's interesting to watch that. I'll talk maybe more about this later.

The fourth step on the path is right action. They show these as steps, but as I was using the example of the wheel or the spiral, this all works together. We keep aware of this. This is all in action. I heard this beautiful talk that Temple Smith gave about right livelihood, and at some point he was saying, "We're on an eightfold path anyway." Maybe it would be a good idea, it would be wise—because you're speaking, you're having views, you're having intentions. It's all there. You don't have to do this; it's all happening. There's speaking, there's livelihood, there's putting effort into things. Is it wise? That is what we want to turn towards more and more—clarify what is wise and do it in this way. But I thought it was interesting that we're already on an eightfold path, and it's good to make it wise, as you're on one anyway.

Concerning right or wise action—and now, this week, last week, Winnie gave a talk on sīla, so I'm in this part of the path now: sīla, which has right speech, right action, and right livelihood. So this was already talked about by Winnie. Many of the things I'm discussing are aspects that were mentioned here and there.

The three very strong aspects of wise action are not killing or harming, not stealing, and being careful with our sexuality. Different frames here—it's celibacy in monastic life, it's not harming in lay life. Just there, it's interesting to see: okay, so the Buddha devised this Eightfold Path. Look at what he chose, the most powerful things in our lives—our views, our intentions, our speech, our actions, sexual energy. We know that these things are extremely powerful in our lives. So he makes them the Eightfold Path. He highlights these aspects that are extremely powerful.

Just to touch a little bit on the killing—it's something I read one time and this afternoon I was thinking, oh, maybe it would be a good idea to bring. I was reading that in terms of killing, there are many requirements for unwholesome karma to be activated. There has to be a being. There has to be the intention to kill. So if one of these conditions is not there, then it's not breaking the precept. There has to be a being. You have to know that the being is there. You have to have the intention to do it, or the plan. You have to actually do it, and then it has to work. So sometimes, if we feel like we've broken a precept, we may find out that actually we didn't know there was a being. That's an important thing, these five conditions.

Also, in how powerful the killing will be, the teaching says there are many things to look at in terms of degrees. The quality of the being itself is important in this teaching. The impact of killing an insect is not equal to killing a parent, according to this teaching. The why is also considered—whether it was to save one's life, or out of hatred. The how—whether it was premeditated or not. There are many nuances.

I know for me, eating meat—in the description of the precepts, I'm clean. I don't kill myself. It's very strange how I cannot resolve this thing, that every time I eat meat, there's something in my heart that feels it. I'm feeding that system.

I'm aware of it. I don't know how the teachings explain this. From the teachings' point of view, I'm completely clean, apparently—or anyway, the way they've been recorded and passed down, and the way I understand it or it's been explained to me. Yet I haven't found complete ease around it. To me, that's something to consider.

Another step. How's the energy? Maybe you don't know the time—I know it's 8:20, so there's only ten minutes left of your torture.

So, the last of this *sīla* group, these three factors that form around ethics, is Right Livelihood. For a long time, it was a little unexplored for me. I'd stop at the idea that wise livelihood was around the way I was earning money, or the way people were earning money, the way they made a livelihood. Now, with the help of some teachings—and especially a talk that Temple Smith gave some time ago—suddenly the whole aspect of lifestyle... I mean, it was already in my mind, but it's been made very much clearer now: livelihood we could perhaps replace with lifestyle. This means that if you're not working, for example, you're not on a seven-fold path—there's still an eightfold path. I think this also comes from Temple; I'd like to give back the credit for any laughter that comes out.

This is very beautiful, I think—how transportation, consumption, clothes, recreational activities bring the whole shebang in there. How all of this can be invited into the process of waking up, of finding freedom and offering freedom. How our whole life can be of service to disentanglement and freedom. And so, are we also waking up in our life to all these aspects, bringing attention to all these different dimensions?

There were a few things I wanted to read to you—subtleties that came up. There's a program called the DPP offered by Spirit Rock. DPP stands for Dedicated Practitioner Program. It's a program over two years, I think. It includes five retreats and monthly homework for dedicated practitioners who want to deepen their understanding of the Dharma. On one of the retreats, there was a discussion about Right Livelihood, and

some of the things I heard coming from the practitioners... On these retreats we exchange, we talk a lot about the practice. There's a similar program at BCBS also. But just the subtlety, the nuances of this.

I remember hearing somebody talking about—they were saying, "So what about working in a broken system?" They were talking about the health system in America. Maybe they were a nurse or something, and they were saying, "What's the right or wise livelihood in that? I am actually putting energy into something that is defective." Another person was saying, "What about investing money when I know—or I don't know—how the banks are using the money and what they're investing in, this whole system? What about this?" Somebody else was saying, "But what about the fact that I'm doing good work, that my livelihood is not detrimental in relationship to the teaching? I'm not in intoxicants, I'm not dealing in sexuality or weapons, I'm not dealing in the trade of human beings, I'm not working in deceitful ways—but my work is stressful. It's good service work, but it brings stress to me. What do I do with this? How does my work influence my mind states?"

And so there were these questions that came up, maybe offered by Temple. Questions we can bring: How is my—and here I would like to open it—how is my work, how is my fun time, my play time, how is my consumption impacting others, considering all of this? How is my—and again, you fill the gap here—work, free time, how is it impacting my heart-mind? And the last question was: How can I use my free time, my way of investing money if I have the chance to even do that, my work, my studies—how can I make it in a way that serves disentangling the mind-heart? That's the way I want to put it. I could have said, "How could it serve my practice?" but that might make it a little dry. How can it serve freedom for me and others?

These are questions that please do not think about while you're here on retreat. But these are important questions.

And one thing I just want to appreciate, if that's the right word, is the complexity of the world we live in. I hear this in the questions in the hall often. What do I do in a situation like this? What do I do with ending life? What do I do with a relationship? Do I end it or do I try to salvage it? This uncertainty.

I'm thinking of somebody who told me, "I can't do this work anymore, but I'm two years from retirement and I can't do it. But if I quit now, it's going to have a whole impact on my financial situation." So what's the wise thing to do here?

What I want to say is this is the realm we're in. This is a realm of complexity, a realm of uncertainty. We do not know what our choice will bring. Is it okay to be in a realm like this? Can we accept that? That's how I want to think about it. I don't know. I don't know what this decision I'm making will bring. Can that be okay also?

The timing is perfect because there's just the last three factors remaining, which are part of what we call samādhi, the mind training: effort, mindfulness, and concentration. We'll address these another time.

How could I finish this talk now? This is Subha, a nun from the time of the Buddha:

My attention is unshaken by joy or pain, praise or blame. I know there is no happiness in anything born from a cause, and I cling to nothing. I follow the Wellfarer and travel on the great eightfold way. The arrow is out. There is no obsession in my mind. Having gone in the empty house, I rejoice.

I talked a lot about technicalities tonight. This is a way to explain what we're actually doing intuitively. It's getting in the bones. It's getting in the heart. It's getting in the mind. For some of us, we'll never be able to explain it, but we'll feel it. We'll feel that something is more right, that there is more freedom, that there is a gaining of some ground—or groundlessness. We will feel it. That is definitely more important than the actual theory.

So let's sit just for a few seconds in silence.

CHAPTER 47

Working With Fear

Joseph Goldstein · 1h00

> *In this profound talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein examines fear as a powerful conditioned tendency that contracts and limits our experience, preventing us from opening fully to life. He frames the entire dharma path as one of opening—to bodily sensations, sense perceptions, emotions, memories, and ultimately to the truth of impermanence and change. Fear arises precisely at the edges of our comfort zones, and learning to work skillfully with it is essential for deepening practice.*
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> *Goldstein explores the many manifestations of fear: fear of physical pain and discomfort, fear of painful memories and emotions, fear of the shadow aspects of our personality, and the deeply conditioned fears of impermanence, loss, and death. He shares personal stories from his years of practice in India, including a transformative 17-hour bus ride where he discovered that allowing discomfort in rather than resisting it brought unexpected ease. Drawing on the Buddha's teaching that "whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away," he invites practitioners to imagine a mind without boundaries—a mind without fear.*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with fear through three components: recognition (perceiving the fear), mindfulness (loving acceptance, like being present with a frightened child), and wisdom (understanding fear as impermanent and not-self). Goldstein emphasizes that fear is "just a mind state"—an empty, conditioned arising that we mistakenly solidify through identification. He concludes with the Dalai Lama's pragmatic advice and a beautiful poem by Galway Kinnell about reteaching ourselves our own loveliness, suggesting that opening to fear with compassion can flower into genuine freedom and self-blessing.*

We can understand our Dharma practice as a path of opening. It is opening to our bodies, where we go from a sense of the solidity of the body to awareness of particular sensations, to the feeling of the body as a fluid energy field. We can understand our practice as an opening of our sense doors, a refinement of our perceptions. And you've probably noticed over these weeks we've become more aware of nuances of sight and sound and smell and taste. Our perceptions are getting more refined. We uncover a depth and a range of different emotions, both pleasant and unpleasant—feelings of love, of gratitude, of joy, of anger, of restlessness, of peace. We begin exploring in a deeper and more intimate way the range of our emotions. There's an opening of our minds through the release of memories and images. It's a common experience in prac-

tice, one I've had and I'm sure you've had also, where we can be sitting and memories come of things we haven't thought of in maybe twenty years, and all of a sudden it pops into the mind. So there's a real opening on that level also. There's an opening to silence and different levels of silence. Munindraji, my first teacher, once gave a three-hour talk on twenty-one kinds of silence. By the end of it, I was ready for some silence.

Our practice is not a reaching out for these experiences, but rather a settling back into the natural unfolding of this whole process, into the simple knowing of what's arising. As we do this, we understand with increasing clarity the essential emptiness and insubstantial nature of all arising phenomena. A phrase which encapsulates this, which Munindraji used often: it's just empty phenomena rolling on. Whatever it is in the body, in the mind, in the emotions and thoughts—it's just empty phenomena rolling on.

But in this process there's one very strongly conditioned tendency of mind, one that we very often identify with, that causes us to freeze this experience of the unfolding process. We freeze our experience in this flow of change. It's kind of like a deer being frozen in the headlights. The tendency, the conditioned tendency in mind that has this effect is the rather strongly conditioned mind state and emotion of fear.

So tonight I'd like to talk about fear—both how it is conditioned in the mind and how we can transform the experience of it into freedom.

As we're journeying on this path of opening, as I'm sure you've noticed, we come to some edges or boundaries. Everything within that frame we're comfortable with; we can accept it, we can be with it, it's familiar. But then we get to the edge or the boundary, whatever it may be. And it's at these edges that fears, whether large ones or small ones, begin to emerge. We begin to experience fear when we're at the edge of our comfort zone. It might be fear of pain. It might be fear of experiencing different emotions, different psychological states. It might be fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of death.

The problem is that all of these experiences, all of these edges, are actually part of life itself. They're part of our experience. So the fears that are arising are fears of what is true in our experience in those moments. And it's for this reason we need to learn how to work with fear, so that instead of contracting back into our comfort zone, we can actually relax at the boundary, relax at the edge, and open further. First we need to recognize what it is that we're afraid of, what limits us, and then to explore the possibilities of going beyond those limits.

When I imagine the mind of the Buddha—and at this point it is just an imagination—but when I think of it, I see that on our own path, we come to an edge, come to an edge, come to an edge. Imagine the mind of a Buddha without edges, without any boundaries at all. A mind without boundaries is a mind without fear. It's an inspiring way of holding what we're doing in the practice. We're coming to that place of freedom.

So first we need to look at what it is we're afraid of, and then to look at the nature of fear itself. What is its nature as a mind state, and how can we work with it?

What are some of the things that limit us? One of the most obvious, and one which we work with a lot, is the fear of physical pain or even physical discomfort. We are so conditioned to want to avoid unpleasant experience. This goes so deep. There's a natural inclination to go for the pleasant and to avoid the unpleasant. We can notice this in so many ways during the day—just noticing the small shifts of posture to ease some discomfort. There's a Dharma saying that movement masks dukkha. Our movement masks the truth of dukkha because we don't want to experience the discomfort of the pain, so we move to alleviate it. Throughout the day, just in the course of our daily activities, it would be interesting to see what motivates us as we engage in these activities.

Why not sit with the resolution that the Bodhisattva made under the Bodhi tree? "I'm not going to get up until I have attained full enlightenment." Imagine coming in here and thinking, "Okay, this is it." But what happens at a certain point? It just gets too uncomfortable, too painful. Okay, well that's fine—we can be mindful in any posture. So then we get up and walk, relieving that discomfort. Well, why not just walk? Go on walking until we're fully enlightened. At a certain point we get tired, so then we have to either sit or lie down. Why do we eat? To alleviate the discomfort of hunger. Why do we bathe? So much of what we do is a move to alleviate some kind of dukkha. This is what's motivating us throughout the day. It's not that these things are unwise to do, but we should see actually what's happening.

At some point I just got so fed up with this. I was in India in those years, practicing up in the mountains. I got this quite thick foam mattress and decided I was going to just lie down on my back—nothing crossed, body fully supported. "Okay, this is it. I'm going to get enlightened in this position. No discomfort, no dukkha, just supported on a bit of foam." Well, it didn't take that long before even in this position, just by not moving, the body started to hurt—the pressure and all the familiar sensations. I don't remember now how long I lay there; it wasn't all day. So we keep on moving to avoid the discomfort that's inherent. If we have a body, this is what's going to happen.

It's interesting to notice our fear of discomfort. When it arises, what's the response in the mind? We can often recognize that the fear is there in a sense of contraction—contraction in the body, where we tense a little bit in the face of it, and contraction in the mind. We don't want to be with it. So we often get into this place of enduring the discomfort or pain rather than opening to it. That's largely the function of fear.

This fear of anticipated pain is particularly revealing. We may be feeling some discomfort in the moment, but it's workable, it's okay. Yet our mind starts imagining, "Oh, it's okay now, but it's getting pretty bad." We start thinking, "What is this going to be like in half an hour? Or an hour? Or two hours?" We build up in our minds what the pain is going to become and then become afraid of that, and we take various actions. In the moment it's okay, but in our imagination it's not, and we're afraid of it.

I had a very striking experience of this. It goes back a lot of years to my time in India. In the summertime, the plains in Bodh Gaya get very hot—like 120 degrees. So most of us, when we could, went up to the mountains. One year some friends and I went up to Kashmir, which was then quite accessible. But to get from the plains up to the high mountains required a seventeen-hour Indian bus ride. For those of you who have been there, you know Indian buses—they're crowded, really crowded, and bumpy. The seat I had was a middle seat over the crankcase, with the engine fumes coming up. I got on this bus facing seventeen hours of this ride. I just couldn't imagine it. So I said, "Okay, I'm going to be with my breath. I'm just going to stay on my breath and keep all of this out." That was my strategy.

Well, it worked okay for an hour, an hour and a half, or two hours, but it was exhausting to keep my mind clenched in that way. At a certain point, there was actually a little mini satori where I realized this is the wrong strategy.

So I just relaxed. Instead of trying to keep all the discomfort out, what if I let it in? I relaxed that holding of the mind, just opened up, settled back, and it was very unpleasant—the fumes and the discomfort and all of it. But the ease of allowing it in made the unpleasantness fine. It really wasn't a problem. It was just what it was.

It was so interesting to me that it was the fear of anticipated pain or anticipated discomfort which had imprisoned me. As soon as I could let go and just relax into what was happening in the moment, even though it was unpleasant, it was totally fine.

We can also see how fear of discomfort or pain feeds our desires. This is really interesting. Again, this goes back to an early retreat. I was actually sitting with Mahasi Sayadaw in England, and every morning we'd come down for breakfast and it was the same breakfast every morning.

The first morning I came down and there was porridge, then two pieces of toast, some fruit, and tea. But when I was eating and finished, one piece of toast was enough. Second morning, same exact breakfast, go through the line, took my porridge, two pieces of toast, fruit, and tea. One piece of toast was enough. Third day, I come down, same breakfast, took my porridge, two pieces of toast.

I don't know how many days it took me—five days, six days—before I finally noticed: Joseph, you're not eating that second piece of toast. You don't want it. I noticed in my mind, just going through this line—and it's such a simple activity, just getting our breakfast—how the fear of possibly being hungry was feeding this just-in-case mind. I'll take the second piece of toast just in case I'm hungry. I could have just gotten up and gotten the second piece of toast after. But the fear was operative, even on this somewhat trivial level. It was interesting to see how it operates, how often our anticipated fear is just feeding our desire system.

So be watchful for the just-in-case mind, whether it's with food or anything else.

Working with physical pain and discomfort, as you know from practicing now for so many weeks, can be such a powerful part of our practice. Our minds don't wander very much when there's obvious pain or discomfort in the body—it's a very good object of concentration. And it brings us right to the edge of what we're comfortable with, what we can be with. That's where we want to be. When we're at that edge, can we recognize that? Can I settle? Relax? Can I open to this? Is this okay? It's in this way that our mind expands, our capacity to be with experience expands.

As we practice opening to these uncomfortable or painful sensations, we can have a very direct, intimate experience of their selfless, changing nature. We see so clearly that these sensations we're feeling are not subject to our will. Can you come in and sit down and simply decide: no pain? No. All these sensations are arising according to their own causes and conditions. When those causes are there, the particular sensations arise. Conditions change, sensations change.

This is one of the meanings of anatta, of selflessness. It means the ungovernableness of phenomena. Things are following their own laws. We see this very directly, very clearly, and it's a deepening of our understanding of selflessness.

Practicing opening to these unpleasant aspects of physical sensation is also a tremendous preparation for being ill and dying. In these situations, it might not be a question of simply shifting position and the discomfort going away. We may very well be in a situation, either when we're very sick or in the dying process, where discomfort at the

least, and maybe strong pain, is simply part of the process. How will we be with that? Will the mind have its conditioned reaction of fear and contraction? Or, through our practice now,

Through our training now, can we learn, at least to some extent, to relax behind it? It's okay. We can feel it and not be so caught up or identified with the fear. It will be a tremendous help for us.

Now in the discourses, the suttas, the Buddha often would be speaking with people who were either very ill or who were dying. And there's one phrase which he would often use in these conversations. He would say, "Even though there is affliction in the body, can the mind remain unafflicted?"

So that's something we should even consider as a possibility, because I think most people—the classic Buddhist term is "unenlightened worldlings"—just most people in the world, if the body is afflicted, assume the mind will be afflicted. But to see that that's not necessarily the case. We can be with this affliction of the body and the mind remain totally at peace.

There's one story of this. I may have read this in part one. It's one of my favorite examples of this possibility. It's so inspiring to me. It describes the dying days of Henry David Thoreau, the great American naturalist and writer. He died very young—he died at forty-four of tuberculosis, a very painful disease. Someone who knew him then, writing of Thoreau's life and these dying days, said, "Henry was never affected, never reached by his illness. Very often I heard him tell his visitors that he enjoyed existence as well as ever." And this is somebody dying of tuberculosis. He enjoyed existence as well as ever. He remarked, "There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health, the mind always conforming to the condition of the body."

I find that remarkable—that insight and that understanding that the nature of awareness can hold anything. The mind conforms, awareness conforms to the condition of the body. There was as much comfort in perfect disease as in perfect health. So can we even consider that possibility and begin to train in it? We can do it right here on retreat, even with less intense unpleasant sensation. But we hold that possibility.

As you know, with all of this, we need to start small. Maybe just for short periods of time as painful sensations come. Maybe not starting with the most painful, but we slowly expand our ability. This is the training of opening. And we begin to decondition the response of fear, which contracts us and pulls us back.

It is helpful in practicing this to learn to recognize different kinds of pain, because different kinds of pain will require or suggest different responses. Sometimes pain is a danger signal. If you have your hand in fire—oh, burning, burning, burning—"The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences." That's not wisdom. So we need to recognize when pain is a danger signal, when it's telling us something.

For example, if you're sitting and there's pain in your knee and you get up and it goes away, that's fine, no matter how intense it is. But if over the course of a day or over the course of several days you're sitting and it's just getting stronger and stronger and more intense, that may be saying something. That may be saying, okay, we're straining this too much. We need to sit in a different posture or change posture. So we want to be intelligent about this.

But often in our practice, the discomfort we feel is simply the opening to the accumulated tensions of our lives. Mostly we live in such a distracted way that we're not feeling what we're carrying around. We come to a retreat where there's not a lot of distraction, we settle in, and we feel the tension that we've been holding maybe for years. And one of the things that we see happening is that simply through the process of awareness, when we can be with these discomforts without fear, with openness, there's actually an unwinding. We're unwinding a lot of the tensions that have been accumulated.

You may not have noticed this yet, but a very common experience on retreats, especially in long retreats like this—it's the best de-wrinkling cream. I see it in my observation of others and I see it in myself when I'm on retreat. It's like the face just softens so much, and the tension that we hold in it becomes so noticeable. And that's just indicative of even the deeper tensions that we hold in the body.

The caution here is that it's very easy, as we begin to hold the feeling of discomfort in this useful frame of "this is an unwinding," for that understanding to become problematic. Holding it in that way really helps us relax behind it and allow it to happen, but we don't want to make that the aim of the practice, because then it just becomes greed. Watch for that "in order to" in the mind—"I'm with this *in order for* it to open." This is subtle, but it's a very seductive trap. We can understand that there is this unwinding and still just be settled back, letting it happen, rather than practicing in order for it to happen. This is something to watch for in the practice.

How we relate to physical pain really can show us how we relate to other unpleasant experiences in our lives. Do we contract? Do we pull back? Are we afraid of the unpleasantness? Or are we learning to open to it, to be with it? It's okay to feel it.

Fears might also arise in relation to certain memories or images arising in the mind. There might be specific events in the past that come up and we pull back from—they're really unpleasant. Sometimes there are archetypal images in the mind, like certain archetypal images of anger or hatred or intense emotions that are not even specific memories. These can be very frightening images sometimes, and we pull back.

But can we practice—whether with specific memories or these more archetypal images—can we practice seeing them for what they are? They're empty images in the moment. They have no power in themselves other than the power of our associations. But sometimes these associations run very deep, and there can be powerful emotions connected with these images or memories that arise. So we need to proceed slowly, especially when there are powerful associations. Opening to them gradually, slowly. If it feels overwhelming, just stay with it for a few minutes. Say, "Okay, can I be with this?" And then pull back, go to something more neutral—to sound, to the whole body. But if we can slowly learn to be with this material, it's tremendously healing.

When we first started teaching in this country—this goes back to the seventies and the Vietnam War was still going on—one friend of ours in California, where we were teaching up in the Redwoods, had been a medic in Vietnam and had experienced horrendous things in the war. When he came back, he said he was having nightmares every night, reliving in his dreams the horrors he had been through. He came to a two-week retreat. All of these images started coming up for him and were very present, very immediate. He had a pretty balanced mind and was able, gradually, to learn just to be with the images as they came. So they would come—and you can imagine the power and all the emotions associated with them—and he just was with them. He could open to them in a gradual way.

It was amazing. He said that after the two weeks, and then we saw him back in Berkeley, all the nightmares were gone. He had processed all of that with awareness, with mindfulness. That was a relatively short time to do it in. Sometimes the process is much longer. But it shows the healing power of awareness. If we can learn to do that in a way that's right for us, at our own speed, then it allows us to go beyond the fear of these images and these emotions. We just open to them and they actually purify—our minds get purified of them.

We sometimes have fear of feeling certain emotions even when they're not traumatic. They may just be part of the shadow side of our personality, of our minds. Feelings like unworthiness, or shame, or guilt, or failure, or even feelings of embarrassment—just these feelings that are unpleasant, that we don't like to look at. And so when they come, we just back off. We're afraid of feeling them.

Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychologist, had very apt words about this. He said, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular."

It's not popular. People generally don't like to open to these unpleasant, painful mind states—the ordinary, the mundane ones, not the traumatic ones, just the ordinary stuff of our lives. And so out of fear of opening, of feeling them, we block them off, but then we're fragmenting our lives. We're cutting ourselves off from what's a part of this whole process.

How much do we do as individuals and as a culture to avoid feeling lonely or sad or bored? Do you think ninety percent of our culture is about not feeling bored? It would be so much easier and less expensive to just be okay with that feeling, because they're all just feelings that come and go. We're afraid of feeling them because they're unpleasant, and so it drives us to all kinds of actions.

How much of our attachment and clinging comes from our fear of feeling loss, which is inevitable? And yet our fear of it drives us to cling and to be attached. How averse are we to taking risks because of a fear of failure? It's an unpleasant feeling. Nobody likes to feel failure. But it's also okay. It's just another passing feeling. And if we're afraid of that feeling, it keeps us from taking risks, various kinds in our lives.

All of this doesn't mean that our meditation is not progressing if we're not diving into all these unpleasant emotions. It's not that we have to be looking for some great emotional catharsis, but rather it's learning to see when we're at the edge, in terms of emotions, of our comfort zone, and seeing if we can relax and open to these feelings when they do arise.

So there's fear of pain, fear of certain memories and images that might come, and emotions associated with them, fear of more mundane unpleasant emotions—just the shadow side of our experience, the parts we don't like to look at. There are also deeply conditioned fears of impermanence, of change, of loss, and fear of death. Because of these fears we hold on, we cling to different aspects of this mind-body process. We create this sense, we create this concept of self in an effort to create some permanence, some stability. And so we don't recognize the moment-to-moment arising and dissolution of all experience—that whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Just that simple statement in the discourses. Sometimes the Buddha or other great teachers would just say that sentence and people would get enlightened. So I'll say it again: whatever has the nature to arise will also pass away.

Just think of the implications of that. Because what has the nature to arise? Absolutely everything in our experience. Everything in our experience has the nature to arise. It will also pass away. That is its nature. Can we open to that?

A lot of our practice is precisely about opening to the experience of this flow of change, to the momentariness of things, so we decondition the grasping and the clinging and the attachment. It's something to simply be aware of. As we're beginning to open to that, do we experience fear? Do we pull back? Are we trying to fix something? Or do we allow for the flow? Do we surrender into it?

Not opening deeply to the truth of change is often felt and experienced as the fear of death. This is common. Many people, when they think about dying, it calls up some deep fears. And in many circles, talking of death—I mean, can you imagine going out to dinner with your family after the retreat and saying, "Okay, folks, let's talk about your dying"? It would be a pretty awakened family. Usually people shy away from acknowledging this or talking about this.

And yet the Buddha suggested that we reflect on this daily, because it's such an obvious truth, such an obvious manifestation of change. It's not a mistake, and it's certainly not personal. One of the most striking statements contained within the law of dependent origination—when the Buddha was describing his own process, he was kind of working backwards. He saw that all beings would die, and he asked, "Well, what's the cause of death?" And then he worked back: the cause of death is birth.

And it's so obvious, but so overlooked. It's like we don't quite get that oh yes, if we're born, we're also going to die. And that this is just nature. It's not morbid, and it's not a problem, really—if we truly understand the process and the naturalness of this process.

But because fear can come up as we begin to see the truth of change, the truth that everything that arises will pass and whatever is born will die—if we get locked into the fear, then we pull back, we contract, we don't see it. And so we close off to the possibility of living in a free way.

This is again from Thoreau's death. During his long illness, I never heard a murmur escape him or the slightest wish expressed to remain with us. His perfect contentment was truly wonderful. None of his friends seemed to realize how very ill he was, so full of life and good cheer did he seem. One friend, as if by way of consolation, said to him, "Well, Mr. Thoreau, we must all go." Henry replied, "When I was a little boy, I learned that I must die"—which is quite extraordinary in itself—"so of course I am not disappointed now. Death is as near to you as it is to me."

Some of his more orthodox friends and relatives tried to prepare him for death, but with little satisfaction to themselves. When his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God, he answered, "I did not know we had ever quarreled, aunt." Quite an amazing understanding.

So we can come to that same place of understanding if we recognize the fear that may arise and then learn to work with it. When we work with the fear, we can settle back into the truth, the very obvious truth of change.

Sometimes our fear is of things not changing. We might become aware of certain unwholesome patterns or habits in ourselves, certain unwholesome behaviors or personality attributes, and we think they will always be there. "I'm just like this." The whole universe changes, but not this. And how often do we get caught up in that kind of attachment and delusion?

So we've talked of things that often condition fear to arise. It can be painful sensations in the body. It can be painful memories or emotions—either strongly traumatic ones or just more ordinary ones, but ones that are unpleasant. Fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of death.

So the question then is: fears are going to arise at the edges of what's comfortable for us. This is the practice, and we want to be at those edges. This is not a problem. This is precisely where we want to be, because that's where we can open and that's where we can learn to understand fear. We can look at the nature of fear itself.

The first step is to become aware of it. We want to become aware of the fear as it arises. But here it's important to distinguish some different components of what awareness means.

One component is recognition. We want to recognize, "Oh, fear is here." But recognition is not mindfulness. Recognition is actually the factor of perception. We recognize the emotion of fear, but we could be recognizing it with resistance. We could be recognizing it and not liking it. We could be recognizing it and pushing it away. So we know it's there, but we're not necessarily being mindful of it.

Mindfulness is another component of this awareness. Mindfulness means we're recognizing it and we're coming to a place of acceptance of it. It's unpleasant—fear is not a pleasant emotion. It's analogous to a painful sensation in the body. But just as with pain, we can learn to be with the unpleasantness of it. It's okay.

An image which might help guide the mind to this place of acceptance of the fear itself: imagine being with a frightened child. How would you be? You would probably be present. You would probably be caring.

You know, not feeding the fear, not telling the child, "Yeah, you really should be afraid." And if there's some wisdom, you also wouldn't be denying it—"Oh, you're not really feeling it"—which sometimes happens. You wouldn't be making demands on it, not condemning it. There would just be a loving acceptance, being with the child in a loving way, helping them to hold it. "It's okay, it's okay to feel this."

What's so interesting is that it's not hard to imagine us being that way with a child who is frightened. I think we can all imagine responding in that way. But for some reason, we have a very hard time responding to the fear when it arises in ourselves. Yet it's exactly the same attitude that's needed. So it's worth examining. As the fear arises and we recognize it, can we drop into that place of real mindful acceptance, that loving acceptance? "Okay, it's okay to feel this."

This is essential. But it's also interesting to note that we can be mindful and accepting without wisdom. So wisdom is the third component. Wisdom is the understanding that comes out of mindfulness, out of acceptance. It is the understanding that this fear, this emotion, this mind state is also impermanent, is also not self. In wisdom, we no longer identify with it.

These three aspects can be brought to bear when we're at the edges of what's comfortable and we see fear arising. We can recognize it, we can become mindful and accepting—really accepting that it's okay to feel it—and then understand it with wisdom. This becomes a powerful way of deconditioning the power of fear.

One way of working with these three aspects—recognition, loving acceptance, and wisdom—is to unpack the experience, because fear is not just one thing. We experience fear as particular sensations in the body. We experience it as thoughts in the mind, a certain feeling tone in the mind. Simply investigating each of its components helps us relate to it in a more skillful way.

When we experience and investigate the nature of fear itself, we begin to understand that it is another conditioned arising, an appearance in the mind. It's like a big cloud formation in the sky. Maybe the cloud is dark and threatening with all these manifestations, but it's still just an arising in the sky—conditions coming together, conditions changing, the cloud disappearing. Can we understand fear and all the other emotions arising in just the same way? It's just a mind state. That's all it is.

But what happens—very often with fear—is that we build a whole superstructure of self on top of this emotion, this arising appearance that arose due to conditions. We construct this skyscraper of self, identifying with the fear: "I'm afraid, this is my fear, I'm a fearful person." We're just solidifying the whole thing.

I've worked with fear a lot in my practice. It was my primary difficult emotion. There were times when it was so intense and primal that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. It was completely irrational, but that fearful energy was just so strong. Working with it for a long time, I started creating this whole self-image of being a fearful person: "This is going to take thirty years of therapy to unwind." Just going on and on, feeling more and more contracted in it.

One time I was teaching with Sharon Salzberg in Texas, and we were going for a walk after lunch. I was going on and on about my fear. She just turned to me and said, "Joseph, it's just a mind state." Something I had said to people a thousand times. But sometimes when you hear it at just the right moment... it was amazing, because in that instant—"It's just a mind state, that's all it is"—something shifted.

So we want to keep working with understanding the nature of fear, seeing how we identify with and solidify it, and then coming back when we can to see its empty, insubstantial nature.

The Dalai Lama had some very pragmatic advice. Somebody asked him, "How can we work with deep fears?" This is what he said: "If you have some fear of pain or suffering, you should examine whether there is anything you can do about it. If you can, there is no need to worry about it. If you cannot do anything, then there is also no need to worry."

Sometimes we shy away from our fears because of the feeling of vulnerability at those times. It's a very delicate time. But these moments when we're most open, most vulnerable, can also be the times of deepest connection to other people, to what's going on. I had a very powerful experience of this, going back to the seventies when we first started IMS.

At that time, some of us started sitting a couple of sesshins with Sasaki Roshi, who, like Sayadaw U Pandita, was a very fierce Zen master. The whole sesshin, as you might know in Zen, is set up just to heighten the pressure. He uses the koan method, so you've got these koans and you have to go see him four times a day. It's just building, building, building.

So I'm sitting this sesshin. I really didn't have any experience of Zen practice. I'd go in, do my bows, and give him the answer to my koan. Mostly he would just say, "Oh, very stupid." It was one variation or another of that for most of the week.

By the fifth day or so, I think he felt a little sorry for me, so he gave me an easier koan. He kind of backed me up—remedial Zen practice. The koan he gave me was: How do you manifest Buddha while chanting a sutra?

That seemed fairly obvious—just go in and chant a little bit of a sutra, since we were doing chanting every day together in the hall. But little did he know, I don't think he knew, that this triggered a deep, deep reaction in me going back to my third grade music teacher who said, "Joseph, just mouth the words." There was this deep-seated inhibition.

In that charged situation, where already there was just a lot of tension and pressure, I'm sitting in the hall just rehearsing these two lines of chant that I was going to do and manifest my Buddha nature. The bell rings. A lot of fear was coming up. I blast in, I do my bows, I start chanting—and I just totally screwed up. I got the chant all wrong, the melody was all wrong. I felt completely exposed, completely raw and naked. It was a terrible feeling of vulnerability.

He just looked at me and said, "Oh, very good."

It was amazing. It was an amazing moment. I can still feel an emotional response now, thirty years later. Because I was so open and so vulnerable, just that expression of mettā touched my heart so deeply—in a way that it would never have been touched if I weren't in that space.

So there's a great value, even though it's unpleasant and hard and difficult. We also want to appreciate the power of what's possible in that vulnerability. We can really see so many things and feel so many things and be connected in such deep ways in those moments.

When we come to these edges, to these boundaries, it's a place of practice. And it has such tremendous potential for us in our understanding.

I'd like to close with a poem by Galway Kinnell, a wonderful poet. The poem is called "Saint Francis and the Sow." This is just one stanza of it:

The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower, for everything flowers from within, of self-blessing. Though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness...

Just that line: *Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.*

We need to reteach ourselves.

To put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch it is lovely, until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing.

And so this is our practice. As we work with fear—learning to see what it is we're afraid of, to play at the edge, to open in that place of vulnerability, to see into the nature of fear itself, and to be okay with feeling it—we're retelling ourselves, we're reteaching ourselves loveliness, until it flowers from within, of self-blessing.

CHAPTER 48

Equanimity: Balanced Radiance of Mind

Winnie Nazarko · 1h05

In this comprehensive dharma talk, Winnie Nazarko illuminates the Buddhist understanding of equanimity (upekkhā), using the vivid metaphor of a master surfer maintaining balanced connection with ever-changing waves. She carefully distinguishes true equanimity from common misconceptions—it is neither suppression nor apathy, but rather a state of connected, accepting, balanced openness that preserves care and concern while releasing reactive patterns.

Drawing on Bhikkhu Bodhi's scholarship, Nazarko explains that upekkhā represents freedom from the eight worldly winds (gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and disrepute) without becoming indifferent to the well-being of others. She contextualizes equanimity within the Eightfold Path and as the fourth brahmavihārā, noting how it adds wisdom and stability to the practices of mettā, karuṇā, and muditā.

The talk offers four practical methods for cultivating equanimity: through vipassanā meditation (bringing equal attention to all arising phenomena), brahmavihārā practice with traditional phrases, jhāna practice (specifically the fourth material jhāna), and pāramī practice regarding the worldly winds. Nazarko describes how continuous mindful attention gradually decreases reactivity, leading toward what Bhante Gunaratana calls 'peace that passes understanding.' She concludes with a personal story demonstrating equanimity's practical benefits in challenging workplace situations.

Good evening to you all.

This morning when Joseph was taking questions and he closed out his answers with a description of equanimity and what it was—a really great compressed description of it—I had a good opportunity to watch my mind, because my talk tonight is on equanimity. I watched this little blip of irritation arise in the mind. He's talking about my topic. He's taking my talk. We went back into the teacher room afterwards, and Pascal says, "Joseph, you took Winnie's topic"—which he's always sensitive to. Either that or he's trying to stir something up.

After thinking about it for a while, I realized there's plenty to be said on this topic. Plenty to be said.

Let me start with this image of someone who's a master surfer. This being is in constant, balanced connection to the continually changing movement of waves and water. They're not rigid. They're very fluid in how they move, completely responsive to the wave on which they ride. Sometimes when this is really working, there's just a oneness to the whole experience. This to me is a good image for equanimity. It gives a bit of an understanding on a kinesthetic level of what's being talked about here.

The word equanimity in English refers to a state of connected, accepting, balanced openness, relaxed centered presence, clear non-resistant allowing, spacious stability.

If we're going to take this word equanimity and look for it in the Buddha Dharma, it basically comes up as two different words, which are closely related to each other. The first one, which you may be familiar with, is *upekkhā*, meaning balance of mind, non-reactivity, equipoise. Equipoise is one of my favorite words for this aspect of mind. Equipoise—equa, equal; poise implies a certain kind of uprightness, a certain kind of centeredness.

The other Pali term used to describe this state is a long word: *tatramajjhattatā*, meaning to stand in the middle, a kind of inner stability which is not thrown out of balance. Again, it points to centeredness.

This equanimity has many associations with it. When I define something, I always like to say what it isn't—something you might think it is because it seemingly is similar or close to the meaning of the word, but really is not within the boundaries of what's meant by *upekkhā*.

Equanimity is not suppression. Suppression is when there's an attempt to deal with an arising state or experience by stuffing it down, denying it, tightening around it. It's a form of fear or aversion, not wanting to let something in. One version of this that you might think is sort of like equanimity but really isn't: when the mind experiences something and it doesn't like it, or it's feeling overpowered by it, and the mind goes—this is often the thought too—"I'm not going to react. I'm not going to react. I'm not going to react."

Another thing that could get misunderstood or confused with equanimity is apathy or indifference. This is where we really don't connect with the experience but kind of withdraw from reality in a defeated or deluded manner. The kind of thought that often goes with this is, "I don't care. It doesn't matter. It's all right. It's all arising and passing away. It's okay. I don't mind. I see it's impermanence of all things." You see, there's a tone. Or sometimes it's more like the "hell with it" tone: "Yeah, well, it's all *dukkha* anyway, right?"

Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is a well-known Theravadan monk, a wonderful scholar and translator, offered some comments on this confusion of *upekkhā* or equanimity with indifference. He said there's often a mistaken inference from people who are not well-schooled in Buddhism, and particularly some of the early Western translators, the early connectors with Buddhist texts, where they translated *upekkhā* as "indifference." This would mean that when you're practicing *upekkhā*, you're practicing to be detached and unconcerned with other beings.

He says this is really an incorrect understanding, and that instead *upekkhā* is an evenness of mind, unshakable freedom of mind, a state of inner equipoise that cannot be upset by gain and loss, honor and dishonor, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. *Upekkhā* is freedom from all points of self-reference. It's indifferent only to the demands of the ego self and its craving for pleasure and position, not to the well-being of one's fellow human beings.

When you think about it, his interpretation makes perfect sense. He's saying we're not indifferent to others—or to ourselves either.

We're not indifferent to our own deep well-being. We simply don't indulge certain habits of mind that are deluded. But it's understandable that upekka does not in any way wipe out or blot out or eliminate care and concern. When you think about the Eightfold Path, the second step is wise intention, which includes renunciation, but it also includes the commitment to developing a mind of non-harming—meaning a mind that is filled with metta, or loving friendliness, and compassion, karuna. And the Eightfold Path is like a hologram. You have to read any part of it in light of the totality of it.

Another point that supports Bhikkhu Bodhi's saying upekka is not indifference to others is the position of equanimity in the development of the Brahma viharas. If you think of how you learn them, metta or loving friendliness is first, then compassion, then empathetic joy, and the last thing that's learned is equanimity. So the mind is oriented towards the first in particular. Other aspects of that mind of goodwill are developed and primed through the practice of compassion and the practice of empathetic joy. And then equanimity is added, bringing a kind of balance, a kind of stability, so that the mind does not get carried away with the desire to control things that can't be controlled, given the nature of how things are. In other words, it helps keep those practices from turning in the direction of codependency.

On this topic of what equanimity means, there's another thing that sometimes comes up for people, which is: well, if you get all equanimous and you don't have any preferences anymore, does that mean you just get kind of indifferent and passive? The mind of "oh, whatever happens, just let it happen. I'll just lose any motivation to make a choice, take a stand, exert initiative, make something happen, set a limit."

The answer is that no, that's not what it means. Shinzen Young actually has a brilliant way of discussing this point. He says equanimity involves non-interference with the flow of subjective sensation. Apathy implies indifference to the controllable outcome of objective events. Thus, although seemingly similar, equanimity and apathy are actually opposites. Equanimity frees up internal energy for responding to external situations. By definition, equanimity involves radical permission to feel and experience things as they are, and as such is the opposite of suppression. As far as external expression of feeling is concerned, internal equanimity gives one the freedom to externally express or not, depending on what is appropriate to the situation.

So what you lose is reactivity, not wisdom.

That's the clarification piece of the talk. So then we get the question: equanimity in relationship to what? The short answer is everything. Everything that arises and passes away, meaning all conditioned things.

Let's talk for a bit about why this is of value, trying to ground this into something practical and graspable by the mind. Why is equanimity of value?

We live in a world where we have limited ability to choose what we experience. Is this not true? Have you noticed this? One way to look at it is to say that the eight worldly winds are always blowing. Gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and ill repute move through our lives again and again. We can't select out the parts of these dualities that we prefer and have only that. Things are always changing. All experiences have the characteristic of anicca, or impermanence. Thus we're always being presented with loss and with new experience. These are all the result of causes and conditions over which we have limited control.

If we're going to go back to our surfer image, we would have to say the waves of experience come as they will, and that our happiness and well-being is aligned with learning how to surf these—not in trying to hold on to them or push them away in any way. Can you fight the ocean? Can you fight the ocean of samsara?

Consider: if we struggle against what's painful or unpleasant, we suffer from aversion to what we're experiencing. If we struggle to hold on to what's pleasant, we suffer from greed. But if we're free from the struggle of aversion to what's difficult, we don't

suffer, even though what we experience may be painful or unpleasant. Instead, the experience is known for what it is, and it passes through our awareness without destroying our peace of mind.

This is equanimity.

If we're free from the struggle to hold on to what we like, we're able to connect with and allow the pleasant without becoming unhappy when things change. The experience is known for what it is and passes through our awareness without destroying our peace of mind. This is equanimity.

When we're balanced, centered, and present, we experience the mind state of equanimity. In this state of balanced clarity, we have the maximal ability to act and choose in wise, skillful, and effectual ways which promote our well-being and the well-being of others.

So that sounds good. How do you do it? How do you learn? How do we learn to surf all those different waves that arise in the course of an hour, a day, a retreat, a lifetime—so many different possible ones?

There is a key to this: a mind that's busy noticing—which is another way of saying mindful—is more in touch with things as they happen, more in touch with reality. Non-distracted connection with the wave is key to learning how to surf.

Let's talk about that point more specifically and how it can be cultivated in insight meditation, better known as vipassana, which is the primary practice we're doing here.

The first experience with meditation can be something of a shock. It was shocking to me, anyway. One of the first things you have to come to terms with when learning this kind of meditation is that the instructions encourage you to accept unpleasant and difficult experiences as valid meditation objects. For many people—most people, perhaps—this is very counterintuitive, because you don't usually turn to meditation wanting more of what you've already got. The way of thinking is typically: I want more happiness, more peace, more well-being. I want some light, some love. That's where we want to go when we start—someplace like that.

So the instructions are given to open in a non-preferential way. But because they're so counterintuitive, we have a hard time truly grasping what's been said, and we forget it again and again. It's very common in practice for people having difficult or unpleasant experiences to think something is wrong—either they're doing something wrong, or the practice is wrong, or the instructions are wrong, or some combination. But that's

not necessarily the case. Equanimity is developed through a process that connects with, not rejects, any and all experience. We learn to connect with the waves of experience—the pleasant ones, the unpleasant ones, and the neutral ones—equally.

When I was writing this talk, an image came up representing how the mind tends to relate to things: being a kid on a swing on the playground. The swing set with its little seat, the two ropes or chains, swinging back and forth. The mind is very much like that, especially in its untrained state—constantly swinging between wanting things and not wanting things. That one looks good, that one looks bad. I like this, I don't like that. This is what's going on all the time.

Usually we don't see that we ourselves are propelling this swinging back and forth, that there's something about how we're relating to this movement of mind that we're missing. It's our way of being on the swing that's keeping the whole thing in motion. And it's a pretty wild ride.

Do you remember being a kid on the playground playing on the swings? Maybe somebody comes along to help, and then, as often happens with children, they start giving it a little twist, and you're spinning. Maybe you're kicking high and it's going wild. It gets bigger and bigger, a little scary, and then you want to stop but it's going too fast. You're dragging your feet trying to slow down, or maybe you bail out entirely. It can get really wild in there—really wild in the mind.

But as we practice, as we go along, we get a little better at centering on the swing. We get better at figuring out how to stay on it without holding the chains for dear life or worrying about falling off altogether. Now we're more just riding it as it's happening, not adding to what's happening.

And when we no longer add to what's happening, what occurs? It stops. At a certain point, that energy of reactivity wears out. And then it's just plumb center.

The practice of continuous application of the same kind of attention to all things arising and passing away gradually decreases reactivity in the mind.

We're saying there are a number of different ways to describe the field of practice, to speak to the point of what kind of thing we are noticing in this particular way. We describe it in different ways. We could say it's the four foundations of mindfulness and what arises within there. We could say it's the six sense doors, the five aggregates—everything that arises within these fields. These are all different ways of pointing the mind, different ways to connect to everything.

Have you noticed that? If you really look at the categories and you really pay attention to them, they translate everything. The breakdown gives you the different categories, but it means everything, all the time. So we're asking the mind to do the same thing in the same way regardless of preference, in relationship to what we directly experience—whether we like what we're experiencing or not.

You may notice if you go into interviews with the teachers and they'll say, "What's going on? Tell me about your practice. What's happening?" If you go into a large story about what happened two weeks ago, and then you're talking about what happened yesterday, and then you're talking about something you want to do when you leave, the teacher probably says something to you like, "What's happening now?" Which is cluing you to the fact that the orientation is to the immediate present in doing this practice. It's now-oriented. That's the place of practice.

So we maintain this view of continually knowing what is predominant as much as possible. We use other instructions—other techniques may be given, other instructions may be given—in order to maintain balance in the practice or to regain stability, to strategically regroup. But the main thing that's going on is as I've described. Basically, the instruction is to bring the same kind of attention, mindful investigation, to everything.

Now of course the mind isn't used to doing this because our practice has been the swing practice. It's not used to doing it and it doesn't really like the discipline of not wandering off. So things are stormy and uneven. You come in and you tell the teacher, "I had this storm come up and I was at the breath and then I got really angry and then I wasn't mindful of the breath and then I felt discouraged and then I felt disgusted and then I felt whatever it is."

So then the teacher is probably going to say to you something like, "Okay, could the mind be with the arising of that hindrance of anger?" Listens, listens. "No? Okay. Can the mind be with the rejection of the anger? No? Okay. Can the mind be with the sense of anguish that it can't be with the rejection of the anger? No?" And talking to you and working with you, we'll keep going until we get a yes—no matter how far out in terms of metacognition is necessary in order to restore some sort of mindfulness to this whole proliferation of difficulty around the experience.

So the basic instruction counsels the mind to regard and treat everything in the same way—know it mindfully, investigate all the arisings in the mind—the exception being strategic regrouping.

You'll notice this isn't a strategy of repressing reactivity. Usually the instruction is: turn the mind towards the hindrance. You have a hindrance, turn the mind towards the hindrance. Pay attention to the hindrance. Investigate the hindrance. So you don't need to sit and clamp down and tell yourself you're not going to react. When reacting is there, reacting can be known. That's good practice—to know reacting when reacting is present. And there's a gradual development of the capacity to do this, involving growth in calm and concentration. Gradually the mind learns to be awake and present more continually, regardless of what it's experiencing.

Take for an example the arising of a big emotional storm. When the mindfulness has some momentum with it and there's some concentration, and the investigation piece is taken to heart, the mind starts to be able to station itself in the present, station itself in the now, and notice: what is this storm? What is it? There's the arising of anger. There's a thought. That's unpleasant.

There's the image of a person. There is a body sense of unpleasantness. There are sensations in the body. There is heat. There is tightness. There is churning. There is a feeling of fire. There's the impulse to get up. There's the judgment of self. There's the unpleasantness of that experience.

It's like you've stationed the mind in the present and it's giving a play-by-play of what's right there on top, what's most predominant, and it just stays there. It just stays right there in the present, right with it. This is happening, this is happening, this is happening—getting stronger, getting stronger, getting weaker, getting weaker, getting tired, getting tired, getting sick of it, getting sick of it, getting pissed off, getting pissed off, getting mad at the teachers, mad at the teachers, wanting to go home, wanting to go home, sadness, sadness, crying, crying, tears, tears, warm, warm. Done. Over. Peace. Oh, relief. End of suffering. Whoa, what a ride.

So the mind starts to see that there are many different events and experiences happening. It starts to see more per period of time, I guess would be one way to put it. And as the mind gets more concentrated, it starts to see other things too. It starts to notice how the struggle for control creates suffering, and that letting go of the struggle for control ends suffering.

It also starts to notice the three characteristics. Everything is sort of the same. I mean, it's all different—it's different every moment—but it's kind of the same in certain key ways. It's all impermanent. Because it's impermanent, it's unstable and cannot be relied upon. It's dukkha. And it's not under my control. It's not self. Pleasant, unpleas-

ant, neutral. Big storms, periods of tranquility. Events that have a lot of "I" in them. Events that have no "I" in them. The three characteristics are there universally, and the mind starts to see it.

When the mind starts to see how suffering is created in the mind, it also begins to realize that poised non-resistance—knowing in that kind of way—is the way to go. Because that approach ends the struggle of fighting with things that can't be controlled. Then it becomes easier and easier for the mind to start treating things in an equal fashion. With that, preferences loosen and the hindrances abate, they weaken. Investigation and the rest of the seven factors of enlightenment strengthen, and it's easier to be with things as they are.

When the mind is able to just rest in knowing, things present themselves exactly the way they are. And because the mind can accept things as they present themselves, because they must be that way, it can see them more clearly. This is the process where equanimity perfects mindfulness.

We're not going to go too much more into the seven factors of enlightenment because that's a whole separate talk. But this general description of how equanimity is strengthened in the mind is something that you can see for yourself if you pay attention.

Bhante Gunaratana describes the process of developing equanimity through the practice of vipassanā like this: "Once you see that all the components of the body and mind in the past, present, and future are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless, something remarkable happens. Equanimity arises regarding all conditioned things. Your mind looks at everything with equanimity—wholesome, unwholesome, physical, verbal, mental, good, bad, or indifferent. It's all the same. It is beingness. It is simply reality."

Your viewpoint is imperturbable. You realize that all those wonderful thoughts and feelings are constantly changing on a very subtle level. Those terrible ones are constantly changing too. A very deep letting go can occur—the arising of peace that passes understanding.

And this state that he describes, peace that passes understanding, is a state that's known in many different spiritual traditions. If you think of equanimity developed to its furthest point, to the point of this peace that passes understanding—or high equanimity as it's called in our tradition—this is an experience where the mind is completely

present, completely open, clear, lacking in resistance of any type to what's experienced. And in lacking resistance, it is lacking in suffering. There's a kind of radiant quality in the mind, a deep stability.

I can remember having this state arise at one point when I was on retreat. And my subjective experience was, "Wow, I can't believe I was ever disturbed by things—they're really not a big deal." I told you about my martial background in the earlier talk. The image that came up in the mind to demonstrate this was a sense of being in an airplane flying above where any kind of gun or cannon could shoot it down. It was like you could see the flak exploding, but it wasn't even in range. It wasn't like it wasn't there. Things could happen. Things did happen. Things would arise in the mind. They would pass away in the mind. It was pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—it was all equally fine. And the mind was very lucid. So it's not a zoned-out kind of peace. It's a complete pliancy of mind. The mind, the knowing, and what is known are one thing with no friction.

So this is part of how this can go. The Buddha had a much deeper experience of this kind of state on the night of his enlightenment. If you remember some of the traditional versions of what happened there, he had taken the seat under the Bodhi tree with the resolve not to get up no matter what happened, no matter what he experienced. "Let my flesh and bones dry up before I get up from this seat, before I have attained this opening which I seek for the benefit and well-being of all." So he took his seat.

Part of what happened after he took his seat was he was assailed by the armies of Mara. This is how it was described—the armies of Mara. This is put in the form of what I, as a Westerner, presume to be an image or a fable, kind of like me being in the airplane above the flak guns.

His experience was that he's sitting under the tree and he has first the forces of aversion towards him in the form of fire being directed at him, arrows being shot, the sound of armies clanking their spears on their shields coming towards him, weapons of torture—all this. They're trying to create fear in his mind. He said, "I see you, Mara." And the arrows turned into flowers and fell harmlessly around him.

And then the second appearance of Mara was an appeal to his instinctual drives, shall we say. Seductive members of the preferred gender approaching him. "Gautama, aren't you awfully lonely under the Bodhi tree? You're such a good looking man." You know, the usual. But he saw it. So this was the appeal to desire, to wanting to connect in that kind of way with another human being, the satisfaction and pleasure of that. And he said, "I see you, Mara." And they disappeared.

And at this point, the challenge comes. Mara said to him, "Here you are sitting under the Bodhi tree. You say you're not going to get up till you attain what you have practiced for."

"Who do you think you are?" A familiar voice, perhaps.

And it is said he put his finger down, touched the earth as a witness, asked the earth to testify to his right to be in that seat. He asked the earth to witness the purity of his intention and the many lifetimes of practice to develop the perfections of mind that would allow his mind to open to the great understanding of the unconditioned—and how to teach it. And it is said that the earth shook in witness.

So this equanimity—we have these tests to our equanimity as part of this practice. It can be very seductive and alluring to believe that the arising of these kinds of experiences is a sign of something that it isn't. So do not be deceived.

That's about equanimity cultivated in insight practice, with the additional comment that in insight practice you can know this either as a primary experience, as a state—like I described my experience that one time when it was a highly developed state—or you could know it as a mental factor present in knowing something else.

What would that be like? If you have an experience of something pleasant arising in the mind and you see it as unpleasant, the mind is okay with it being unpleasant. Maybe you see it as unpleasant and there's even a reaction in the mind to it being unpleasant, but the mind is stable in seeing that and allowing it. In other words, it's not reacting to its own reactivity. It's seeing it, seeing the whole thing, able to hold the whole thing. That's an experience of equanimity in practice.

You've all had many experiences of this. How do you know when it's there? At least in part, because the mind has let go of resistance to what's happening. It's become a kind of "okay mind"—this is the way it is right now. Oh, this is aching. This is unpleasant. Oh, this is restlessness. This is unpleasant. Restlessness is like this.

In addition to the way of working with insight practice that inevitably develops equanimity—it inevitably develops equanimity if you continue—we can also cultivate equanimity through the practice of equanimity as a Brahma Vihara. I'm not going to say too much about this because we're going to get a chance to do the practice next week or the week after.

But as I said earlier, this is the fourth of the Brahma Viharas, and this brings in the wisdom element. You start by training the mind, or inviting the mind, to stability and calm, presence. Consider the value of stability and calm in the body and mind. Then,

after inviting that, you start offering phrases to beings in a selected order, starting with someone who's fairly neutral. Interestingly enough, that's where you would start with equanimity.

The felt sense of equanimity might be there, it might not be there when you start doing the practice. You set the intention, you invite it, you offer the phrases, you carry the image or the felt sense of the individual, you invite the arising of this. If it doesn't arise in a way where there's a felt sense, that's okay. That's not a problem. You're planting the seeds of intention for the future arisings of the state when the conditions are right for it to be there.

All of these Brahma Viharas, when you're working with them, are of course conditioned states—meaning they're impermanent and temporary, conditioned like everything else. And that's just fine.

These are relational practices. If you looked at what's happening with the Brahma Viharas on a neurological level, yes, you may be intending to invite and create this state. It's a very skillful invitation for this state to be present. When the state is present and the seeds for its future arising have been planted, you're setting the stage for more frequent, spontaneous arising of this state.

Neurons that fire together wire together. There is a biological thing happening here too. You're saying, "I'm going to run this circuit. I'm going to run this set of connections—turning the mind in this way, having this kind of thought, holding this kind of image with this kind of intention. Let's get this one going. This is a wholesome one. Let's get this one going for a while."

If you look at the equanimity phrases, a classic one is: "All beings are the heir to their karma. Their happiness or unhappiness is dependent on their actions and not on my wishes for them." And you can see right in how that's phrased the wisdom aspect of equanimity. It takes the big picture.

It understands impermanence. It understands conditionality. It's informed by an understanding of both the brightness and shadow of this conditioned realm.

Another way to phrase equanimity practice could be: *May I learn to see the arising and passing of all things with equanimity and balance. May I be open and balanced and peaceful.*

A third way to cultivate equanimity is through jhana practice. Jhanas are states of very deep concentration that can be trained in a number of different ways, but usually are entered into using the breath. This particular jhana I'm talking about is the fourth

material jhana, which has two elements to it: one is one-pointedness of mind, and the other is equanimity. Over time, if the mind develops a lot of concentration, it can actually learn to be absorbed into this state where the only experience is basically the experience of the state itself. That's kind of a specialty of meditation—developing concentration in order to be able to use it in insight practice, although these very concentrated states do have some interesting qualities in and of themselves.

The last way to train and practice this state of equanimity is parami practice. Equanimity is one of the paramis, or perfections of mind. Here we're practicing developing equanimity in regard to the eight worldly winds that I talked about earlier: praise and blame, gain and loss, honor and disrepute, pleasure and pain.

Let me tell a story here—a bit of a story on me.

I left retreat once after doing the three-month retreat. While on retreat I didn't have a job. When I came off retreat I still didn't have a job, but the difference was I didn't have any money either. Some of you may resonate with this. I didn't have a job for a number of months, and it was getting scary. Finally I got an interview and was hired as the executive director of a nonprofit organization. This organization had a lot of strengths, but it had its issues, as organizations often do. And it was housed in a typical nonprofit setting, I must say—those of you who work in this sector may appreciate this. The place used to be temporary housing for people working on government manufacturing during the Second World War. Then after that it was a tuberculosis hospital. Then a number of nonprofits moved into these buildings that looked like old, decrepit barracks.

This was my celestial abode.

I was the executive director. I had only been hired about two weeks. Part of the process of being hired involved going through an interview with the board of directors, and the board had its rocky areas. There was one woman in particular who was older than the others, probably in her mid-seventies at the time. She was very accomplished, very intelligent, had a PhD—really had been a pioneer in science during an era when there weren't a lot of women who did that, or were allowed to do that. She had been involved with this organization for years. She had really carried it, been the one responsible constant person, and she felt a tremendous sense of ownership. Different people would come on the board, some serious and some not, but she was very serious about this organization, which had a role in the community of feeding low-income people. She took it very seriously.

She was a bit of a curmudgeon. She had high standards. She wanted things to be right. One day she came to the door of the barrack-slash-TB-hospital in which we were residing, and somebody on staff who was a smoker had put a butt can out by the front door—you know what a butt can is? Kind of a tubular thing where you put cigarettes in.

Right by the front door. And it was nasty—I mean, it was *nasty*. She had seen that and was so upset by it. She came in, picked it up, walked down the hall to the receptionist's desk, and put it right on top.

The receptionist, a very mild woman who had experienced other interactions of this nature and who desired to preserve her job, was just horrified by this: "This damn thing shouldn't be out there!"—right on her desk.

Meanwhile, a committee meeting was going on in our one conference room, where a number of other board members—including some of the perhaps less serious and responsible ones—were gathered. They ran over time. They were in there goofing around. It was the only room that could be used, and she was there for another meeting. She stood waiting. She had a bad hip. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes—they're still in there, screwing around. She starts to feel really angry, really disrespected, and she starts letting loose with the verbal.

Well, I think we must have had sailors in that barrack at some point, because the language would have peeled the paint right off the walls. And some of it was directed at me. She was saying all of this in front of the receptionist, who by this time was totally freaked out. She came running down the hallway—I was in my office and could hear her feet—and said, "So-and-so is here, and she's really upset. She's *really* upset."

"Okay, I'll be down."

"No, she's *really* upset." Her eyes were big.

"Okay, okay." This was my second week on the job. I needed this job.

So I went down there, walking. I was close enough to retreat that I was still in the body. I could feel my feet touching the floor. Mindfully walking. I watched the arising of the knot in my stomach, because I could start to hear it now, and I could hear my name being mentioned. I think it was a failure of oversight with the conference room schedule or something like that.

I got down there and she was going off. She turned around, looked at me, and I said, "Oh, what's the matter?"

She gave me the whole thing, complete with swear words. And then she topped it off: "I'm too goddamn old to be doing this shit!"

I don't know where it came from, but somewhere from the time on the cushion, out of my mouth came—in this gentle tone—"Gee, that's funny. You don't talk like an old lady."

She looked at me, and I thought for a moment, *Oh, she's going to kill me.* And then she laughed. She laughed.

After that, it shifted. It became a different relationship—we became friends. She became a real ally of mine on the board. She would back me up, protect me. When she got mad, it wasn't at me, which made me happy. And when she died, I gave her eulogy.

So there you go—the benefits of equanimity.

My wish for you all, then, is that you may find in your time here that capacity of mind to open in a spacious and balanced way to what arises, without preference.

Learning to see and know the swings of mind, the reactions of mind, within a larger poised space of trust.

May the merit of our practice benefit all beings.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 49

Mindfulness of Body

Chas DiCapua · 1h00

> *In this dharma talk, Chas DiCapua examines the profound importance of body-centered practice within the Buddhist path, beginning with a candid reflection on our cultural inheritance that has systematically devalued embodied experience in favor of intellectual pursuits. Drawing from the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10), he illuminates why the Buddha placed mindfulness of body (kāyagatāsati) as the first of the four foundations of mindfulness, and shares the Buddha's striking simile of balancing a bowl of oil while followed by a swordsman—emphasizing the life-or-death importance of embodied awareness.*
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> *DiCapua systematically explores the three primary body contemplations: mindfulness of breathing, awareness of postures, and attention to changing postures. He explains how the breath naturally refines attention as it becomes subtler with concentration, and how noticing gross and subtle body movements throughout the day cultivates continuous mindfulness. The talk offers practical guidance on using vedanā (feeling-tone) in the body to directly observe the second noble truth—craving—as it manifests in our relationship to pleasant and unpleasant sensations.*
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> *The teaching extends beyond formal practice to explore how embodied awareness serves as an anchor in daily life and a refuge during difficult times. Quoting Ajahn Mun's instruction to "never let your attention leave the body" and Eckhart Tolle on using body awareness to stay present, DiCapua presents the body as our most reliable teacher—always truthful, always present, incapable of wandering into past or future. He concludes by reframing aging, illness, and death not as failures but as the body's final invitation to wisdom, echoing the Buddha's teaching that within this very body lies the origin, cessation, and path to the end of suffering.*

So tonight we have a little Dharma talk within a Dharma talk.

Maybe twenty minutes ago I was just finishing up a few things with the talk. Okay, let's print it. I'm walking down the hallway and I don't hear the printer. It's all jammed up, and then the printer in the front office isn't taking it either. It's not possible to print it. And the mind just went, "No." It was so great to see—just "no." But clearly, yes. So we have an old version here. We'll see how it goes.

The talk tonight is going to be on the body. And I want to pause there because I want to ask you: when you heard that, what was the response, the reaction? Would there have been a more favorable or excited reaction if I had said the talk tonight is comparing how equanimity as it manifests in the fourth jhāna compares to equanimity from seeing arising and passing?

I think it's important to understand the paradigm that we're in when we talk about the body as a meditation subject, to be clear about the world that we're living in and its relationship to the body. Not to go on a big soapbox treatise about history, but just an overview of where we're at and how we got here.

At some point later in the Roman Empire, the church came to prominence and power. At about that time, all things feminine were squashed and pathologized, ridiculed, persecuted. Since then, we've been living in a world increasingly dominated by patriarchy and by an increasing fascination with the intellect. They tend to go hand in hand, and there are ramifications of this.

Without thinking, just the very first hit—ready? It's going to be a physical movement. Point to heaven. Yes. This is one of the ramifications: spirituality became completely disembodied.

What institution has the largest endowment by far of any institution in the world? Harvard. The scientists and the intellects are our demigods. When the scientists say the food pyramid is like this and you should eat this way, we believe it wholeheartedly and do it. And when they change it, we believe it wholeheartedly and do that.

The outcome, the legacy of at least two thousand years of patriarchy and an increasing dominance of the intellect really has some strong ramifications. One being that we've become increasingly cut off from nature and from our bodies. I'm going to use these three perhaps interchangeably: the feminine, nature, and the body. They are all of the same ilk.

And of course, we are destroying nature—the big body, earth, that which is feminine. We're literally destroying it. You don't harm what you hold dear, unless there's some kind of intense pathological thing going on. But in general, you don't harm what you hold dear. And we're not holding nature dear. We're not holding the body, the big body, dear. It's been cut off. We're not connected to it. And what we're not connected to is what we can harm. Those two go hand in hand: disconnection and the ability to harm.

But to bring it back to something really practical, this is all the legacy of these past two thousand years.

I was talking with a friend on the phone about practice, about how to bring the practice more and more into daily life. Actually, no, it was about formal practice. I forget the exact details, but I mentioned, "Well, you might try being with the body with that."

And what he said was, "Yeah, I know. And when I do that, it really works well, it's good. But part of me thinks I'm missing something if I do that. Part of me thinks I need to do something else."

It was such a clear moment. It's not that the body can't be trusted, but it's not elevated enough. Even though when he connected with it, with that particular part of meditation, it really did what he was trying to do—he couldn't trust it. "Nah, it's just the body. There's got to be something better." It was such a clear moment of how stratified the intellect and the body were in his experience. Even though he knew it worked, he couldn't do it. He wouldn't allow himself to do it.

So that's just the paradigm we all live in. We all live in it. And regardless of whether you hear these words I've been saying and really resonate with them or not—even if you do resonate with them—we're still in this paradigm. We're still fish swimming in water, and it's just not possible not to be wet. We were brought up in it. Our views were formed by it. We are so much a part of it, and it absolutely impacts our view of body.

So I just wanted to start with that—some words on the body.

Now, some words from the Buddha on the body. This is a simile he gave to the monks about balancing a pot of oil on one's head:

"Suppose, monks, that a large crowd of people comes thronging together saying, 'The beauty queen! The beauty queen!' And suppose that beauty queen is highly accomplished in singing and dancing so that an even greater crowd comes through saying, 'The beauty queen is singing! The beauty queen is dancing!' Then a man comes along, desiring life and shrinking from death, desiring pleasure and abhorring pain. They say to him, 'Now look here, mister. You must take this bowl filled to the brim with oil and carry it on your head in between the great crowd and the beauty queen. A man with a raised sword will follow right behind you, and wherever you spill even a drop of oil, right there he will cut off your head.' Now what do you think, monks? Will that man, not paying attention to the bowl of oil, let himself get distracted outside?"

"No, Lord."

"I have given you this parable to convey a meaning. The meaning is this: the bowl filled to the brim with oil stands for mindfulness immersed in the body. Thus you should train yourselves: 'We will develop mindfulness immersed in the body. We will pursue it, hand it the reins, and take it as a basis, give it grounding, steady it, consolidate it, and undertake it well.' That is how you should train yourselves."

Very clear, direct words from the Buddha about the importance of practicing with the body.

The Buddha taught the four foundations of mindfulness in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. And these are the Buddha's words for the ending of suffering. Right from the beginning of the sutta:

"Bhikkhus, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nibbāna—namely, the four foundations of mindfulness."

So again, if you want to be free, this is how you do it. And the first of those four foundations is the body.

Let me talk a little bit about that first foundation, mindfulness of the body. There are six meditations in it. The first three have to do directly with apprehending the body; the other three are more contemplative. The first three are mindfulness of breath, mindfulness of postures, and mindfulness of changing postures. In the Chinese canon, the order is changed. Anālayo talks about this in the book *Satipaṭṭhāna*, if you've ever read it. The breath is first in the Pali Canon, and then postures and changing postures. I always thought that was a bit odd—the breath is more subtle than postures. Why would postures come after?

Analayo talks about how in the Chinese Canon the breath is third. It goes from postures to changing postures to breath, which seems to be a better progression as far as subtlety goes.

But in either case, if we want to discover the freedom that the Satipatthana points to, what the Buddha was saying by following the Satipatthana, it's of utmost importance that we begin with and establish an intimate relationship with the body.

I think Pascal may have given this quote before, but it's a good one. Ajahn Mun, Ajahn Chah's teacher, the grandfather of the Thai forest tradition, said: "In your exploration of the Dharma, never let your attention leave the body." This is a person considered completely enlightened, and that's what he had to say about exploring the Dharma. Never let your attention leave the body.

Now why would we have to establish an intimate relationship with our bodies? We have one, right? We have a body. Don't we already have an intimate relationship with it? Well, in a way yes, and in a way actually no.

The body, of course, is here all the time, so it's always there to be known. But for many, many reasons that I touched upon at the very beginning of the talk—ranging from the personal to the collective—we have exiled the body from awareness. That is the baseline. Before we practice, before we learn about mindfulness, before we've taken up particular body-centered practices like yoga or tai chi, pretty much the state of the human being is not to be aware of their bodies in any given moment, not to know that they have one directly. Of course, if you ask someone whether they have a body, they'd say yes. But I'm talking about that immediate knowing. We've become disembodied.

Reginald Ray, a meditation teacher more in the Tibetan tradition, says: "We are attempting to practice meditation and to follow a spiritual path in a disembodied state. And our practice is therefore doomed to failure." He's speaking to this importance of establishing an awareness that's embodied as the ground for practice.

One fun way to investigate this directly: when you have the wake-up moment and the bubble pops, and the mind-made or thought-made world is just vanishing but still kind of there, you can get a little peek at it. Notice how there was no awareness of body in that world. There were no physical sensations. There was no awareness that there was a body in that world. Check it out. It was completely a mind-made thing. And then notice: what is it like to come back into the body? What is it like to go from being disembodied to embodied? What is that experience?

You may be saying, "But I thought the heart and mind is what's most important. Aren't we here to free the heart and mind?" Yes, that's true. And as we walk this path, what we find is that there's no separating the body and the heart-mind. The more we practice, the more intimate we get with our experience, the more we see how connected they are.

The body is an excellent subject matter in which to study the heart and mind. Everything that goes on in the heart and mind is reflected in the body. It manifests in the body. It shows up somewhere in the body.

The body is also an excellent subject matter for meditation because it's very truthful. It's always going to tell us exactly what's going on. It won't deceive us. If you stub your toe, it doesn't feel nice—the body won't manufacture pleasant feelings. It will have unpleasant feelings. It's always truthful that way. The body cannot go into the past or the future. It doesn't have that ability. It's always here. It's always now. And if we're looking correctly, it's always truthfully registering what's happening.

Can't say that for the mind, right? The mind has incredible potential to be deceptive, hanging out in past and future all the time.

So I just want to talk a little bit now about these first three meditations of mindfulness of body.

This is the Buddha talking about the breath: "Mindfulness of in and out breathing, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit, of great benefit."

So we begin our meditation practice with mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the breath. Now remember, they're not different. The way we talk, we speak about them as different, like I just did in that sentence. But breath *is* body. It's just a subset of bodily sensations. Don't disembody your breath. It is body. It's just a particular set of this field of sensations that we call body—a particular set of sensations within that larger field that we can pick out, bring to the foreground, and pay attention to if we want. But it's still body.

And we start there because they're always present. The breath and the body are always, always present and here. No matter how far we go or for how long—have you noticed?—when we come back, there's the body, patiently waiting.

And what's great about the breath is that as we relax, remain still, and attend to the breath, the body becomes more calm. The breath becomes more calm and subtle. And therefore, it demands closer attention, because our object of meditation just got subtler. It's like when someone's talking and they start to whisper—you have to pay attention. And that's why the breath is an amazing meditation object. The better we get with it, the harder we have to try with it, in a way. It gets subtler. It demands a stiller, more refined attention.

I loved the first instructions. What were the first instructions? "There is a body." Before that, silent: don't forget, *there is a body*. And then from that place: there is a body that's breathing. Natural and present.

Now you might be asking, why is he talking about the breath? This is supposed to be a dharma talk on the body. Well, again, just to say: the breath *is* the body. Separating them does something that's not helpful. When you're with the breath, you are with your body.

So after breath comes postures—the four postures. You simply become aware of what posture you're in. That's what I love about breath and body. It is so uncomplicated. It's not rocket science. And the Buddha said mindfulness of the body will take you all the way to nibbāna.

That's why I asked that question: What did you feel when I said this talk is going to be about the body? Was there a slight, "Oh geez, are we going back to the basics? This isn't really going to get me where I want to go"? The Buddha said mindfulness of the body will lead to complete enlightenment.

So, postures. You simply become aware of what posture you're in. You're here in the hall sitting. Body sitting. What is that experience like? How does it feel to be in that posture? Not a thought, but a direct somatic experience of body sitting.

You're standing in the lunch line. "Oh, I'm standing. I'm in the standing posture." What is that experience like? Not the experience of all the rest of the stuff that's going on in the dining hall, but just standing. What is that experience like? What does the body feel like in this posture?

You're lying down in bed. One can know they're lying down. When you lie down in bed, are you aware you're in the lying posture? Aware that you're aware you're in the lying posture. "Oh, the body is lying down now." What does that feel like in the body? What is that experience like?

Walking, and you know you're walking. And then maybe you stop and stand, and now you're in a standing posture. That's what's great about retreat—you can just stop and stand somewhere anytime you want. You just stand there as long as you want, and no one's going to look at you funny. You have full reign to just stand there.

Here's a good one as far as postures go—one way to work with it: when you're doing your yogi job, notice if you are in the most advantageous posture you can be for doing whatever it is you're doing. Just check. Or could there be a subtle shift, a weight shift, a slight movement of the body that would take strain off the back or whatever? This can

be a really neat lens. You could try this just for maybe one day or part of a yogi job, where your awareness is: "Is my body in the most advantageous position to do this job?" What I find out is often it's not. There could be a little adjustment, a little shift that would make things a lot easier on the body.

So we start very simply by noticing what position the body's in and noticing that experience right then and there. Breath, and then postures, and then changing postures is the third meditation in mindfulness of body. We start with the grossest changes and then progressively notice subtler and subtler ones as mindfulness grows during the retreat.

I'm sure you've noticed this. You might have started by noticing going from sitting to standing in the hall, or vice versa, or in the dining room—those kind of things, getting in and out of bed. And then as the retreat goes on, you just naturally start to notice subtler movements, maybe not whole body movements—the hand reaching for the spigot on the tea urn, the hand reaching for the door to your room. And then mindfulness grows and even subtler body movements come into awareness. I'm sure you've noticed the subtle movements that you do when you're sitting that maybe you weren't aware of before—very slight, subtle movements of the head or shifting of the weight. Sitting in the dining hall and just moving a leg, slightly changing the way your legs are positioned under the table. These are all changing postures. And as mindfulness grows, we notice them on subtler and subtler levels.

A really interesting way to work with this changing posture is when you're sitting—to notice the movements, notice the changing of that posture. Again, even the most subtle ones. Not because you should never move. It's just a way to refine the awareness of the body as it moves.

Speaking of moving, this brings us to another kind of lens that we can look at the body through. And that's vedanā with the body. A great teacher. This is one of the places that the body really excels as teacher.

What about unpleasant body sensations? Pema Chödrön says that as a species, we should never underestimate our low tolerance for discomfort. So we're all included in that—we're all in the same species. We can see the truth of that, can't we? When unpleasant sensations come up when we're sitting,

Very, very easy to see the no. I don't want this. I want it to go away. Even with very minor unpleasant sensations, we can see, I don't want this. That second noble truth just rises to the surface so clearly. It's so easy to see. The body is such a great place to observe this.

And of course, this doesn't mean we never move. I'm not advocating that we sit still and sit through pain no matter what. But that laboratory of the still body shows us very clearly the habit pattern to move away, push away, try to keep away the unpleasant. And this is the core. This is the core of what we want to see in our practice that will free the mind.

And then pleasant body sensations. This is one that you can probably notice, or it's easy to notice. You're paying attention to the breath, and things are getting calm. The breath is slowing down. It's getting a little silky, a little pleasant. And all of a sudden, the in-breath gets just a little longer than it was. Let's just feel that for a millisecond longer if we can. Have you noticed? Check it out. When the breath gets pleasant, see if there's a tendency to want that experience or try to make that experience last a little bit longer. Or maybe it's with the out-breath too. Again, these are very direct, in-the-moment, tactile ways that we can learn about clinging.

Some other ways to use the body during formal practice: when mindfulness arises and awareness transitions from the mind-made world to present-time awareness, it's really helpful to consciously relax the body before you do anything else. No matter what you're doing—whether you're doing open awareness, working with the anchor, whatever—it can be helpful to just check in with the body and relax, for a couple of reasons. I've really found this helpful in my practice.

One is that, by definition, during the time awareness was in the mind-made world, there was identification. And whenever there's identification, there's going to be contraction. There's a contracting around the content of the mind. That's what happens. We're sitting there, things are going by, no problem, and then something occurs that manifests in the body. Somewhere there's going to be—remember I talked about the body always manifesting what happens in the mind? Well, while we're lost in thought, there's identification going on, and there will be contraction somewhere in the body, even if it's subtle. It could be like the eyes are slightly squinted, or the thumbs are pushing against one another a little bit, just some subtle thing. But we can release that. We can consciously relax the body and release that, which is a good thing to do—to have a very nice baseline of relaxation in the body.

But the other thing that happens whenever we relax our body—think about it. Do it right now. Just relax your body. Where did your attention just go? Into the body. Remember, it was disembodied during being lost in thought. Through the process of relaxing the body, it re-embodies the attention. It just naturally brings it into the body. And that's a great place to have the attention, regardless of whether you're working with an anchor or open awareness or doing metta. As Ajahn Mun said, that's where we want it.

And then lastly, there can be—especially when we're working with breath as anchor or trying to develop some samadhi, some steadiness in the mind using the breath—a way that the wake-up moment can happen and, if we're not aware of it, there can be a little bit of aversion to that. It can get very subtle: I shouldn't be thinking, or I did it wrong. And based on that, it's like, well, that over there was wrong, but the breath is what's right and that's what I should be doing. So we kind of jump on the breath because that's better. And of course, going to the object with that attitude and with that energy, you're going to bounce right off it. And then thinking, and then it's like ping-ponging. Have you noticed when that ping-pong match starts?

So wake up, and then the wonderful way to short-circuit that ping pong match is the moment you take to relax. It keeps you from diving back onto the object. It's like, "Oh, no, wait—I don't have to rush so much." Just a moment of ease. And then into the body, and you don't have to jump on the breath because you're in the body already, and there it is.

So that's the third reason for relaxing the body at the wake-up moment: it can short-circuit the ping pong match.

And of course, if you want to be really embodied, being with the breath in the chest or abdomen will be a more embodied experience than at the nostrils. I'm not saying you shouldn't be with the breath at the nostrils—just that it will tend to be a more embodied experience if you're feeling it lower down, in the chest or the abdomen.

The last thing to remind you about using the body during formal practice is when there are those protracted or looping thoughts, stories that are replaying, or strong emotions. One way to actually be with that experience without pushing it away but without getting lost in it—a kind of middle path—is to find that experience in the body and ground the attention in how it's manifesting physically.

Now, using the body during the non-formal sitting and walking times. Sometimes it can be fun to pick little things and make it like a game to try to be mindful of them. You might say, "I'm going to try to be really aware every time I go up or down those two steps from the coat room to the walking room. I'm just going to be present." Or you might say, "I'm going to notice what foot I cross the threshold to the Dharma Hall with—is it my left foot or my right foot?" You can use any number of things, how the body is simply moving throughout the day. Pick little things and make it your intention to be present when they're happening, because they're always happening. Slowly, we can have our day peppered with these automatic moments of mindfulness once we've worked with them for a while.

And I know it's been said many, many times, but just as a general way to work with the body during the non-sitting and non-walking times, ask yourself the question many times during the day: What would it be like to relax my body a little more right now? Could I just be more at ease? Could I just drop into the body in a more relaxed way—not jamming it in there, but just inviting that? Could it be more relaxed right now, more at ease?

Thich Nhat Hanh has a quote that really speaks to this feeling, this way of being in the body and doing things: "Drink your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the whole earth revolves—slowly, evenly, without rushing toward the future. Live the actual moment. Only this moment is life."

And the body is such a great vehicle to connect to that. We can feel it. We can have a somatic experience of what Thich Nhat Hanh is talking about. It's not an intellectual experience—we can feel it. We can feel that level of being embodied and being in the moment.

And as you know, I'm sure you've all had these experiences—usually they don't happen during formal practice. You're just standing in the lunch line and you take a step forward, completely right there with it, not trying to be, just relaxed and taking this step. And how fresh and wonderful life is at that moment, the complete contentment that can arise from being embodied in that way.

Just a couple of words about meditating with the body or being with the body outside of retreat practice. A quick story: one time, some number of years ago, I was in a very difficult place in my life. Really hard circumstances coming together, things about myself being shown to me that were hard to face, not feeling good about myself—just very turbulent and difficult. I just kind of naturally said—and I had never done this before—"I'm going to go on a retreat in the mountains for a month." Something took me there. I went out and was by myself in the mountains, in the forest for a month.

It was incredibly healing. I didn't know it was healing at the time; I was just doing a retreat. But it was a really good thing. I tell that story to say that

When we feel isolated, cut off from life, alone, disconnected—and we will all go through this at times—the body can be a great place where we find solace. When we're connected to the body, we're connected. You're not disconnected. You're with life as it is right here, right now, manifesting in the body.

Now of course, this body is not ours. It's not me or my or mine. But instead of that being something disconnecting and lonely, something to fight against, it's actually a good thing. Because this body is connected to all of life. You've heard the famous simile:

the breath you're breathing has the exhale of every human being that's ever lived in it. Our bodies have the same atoms as the sun and the stars in the universe. It's that connected.

When we connect to the body in this way, intuitively and deeply, we might get a sense of what D.H. Lawrence said when he wrote: "I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth, my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. There is nothing of me that is alone and absolute."

So yes, the body is not me, not mine. And one way that we can know or understand that is through this sensing, this feeling, this relating to the body that is connected with everything that ever was.

Another way of working with the body outside of retreat is to let it be your anchor. We have an anchor in formal practice—we start with it, we return to it. Let your body be your anchor for awareness during your daily life. What could be a better anchor than that?

As Eckhart Tolle writes: "As much as possible in everyday life, use awareness of the body to create space. Whenever you inhabit your body in this way, it serves as an anchor for staying present in the now."

We can build on that. We can notice our body throughout the day and have the intention to notice whether there are any places of holding or tension, and let those go. We'll benefit from that. When we're walking, we can know we're walking.

Often at the end of a retreat, students ask me how they can bring their practice into their life, how they can be aware during the day. The first thing I always say is: just remember you have a body. Let that be the foundation for how you are in the world.

This is an equation that I know you know, but it's good to remember: when you're aware of your body, that equals being present. Those two are never separated. You're never aware of your body and not present. You can be aware of your body and go off into thought the next moment about the body or whatever and not be present. But in the moment of connecting with your body, you're present. That's a for sure equation.

Lastly, as a way to deepen connection with the body, put the small body in the big body—meaning, go out in nature. Being in nature is simply a very good place for most human beings to be.

For some people, nature doesn't feel like a safe place, for different reasons. It could be someone grew up in the city all their life and nature feels like the unknown. Or it could be more concrete. For people of color, nature cannot always be a safe place because of the atrocities that happened there—the lynchings and all that followed. The legacy of that is devastating and can make nature carry that weight for some people. So for different reasons, nature isn't always a great place for everyone.

But for most people, it's a really helpful place to be—from being a reminder of the interconnectedness of things, to being a wonderful place of solace when things are difficult, to being an environment where, if we feel safe, there's a sense that we can really deeply rest.

This is by Shabkar, a Tibetan yogi: "In wild places where no one lives are pleasant caves in which to dwell and practice. In wild places where no one lives, one's consoling friends will be wild animals and birds."

In wild places where no one lives, one's nourishment will be wild roots and berries. In wild places where no one lives is the market where samsara is traded for nirvana. In wild places where no one lives are the conditions favorable for realization. In the wild places where no one lives is natural beauty delightful to behold. There is no possible way to express the many virtues of staying in remote and lonely places far removed from human habitation. Therefore, heir of the victorious ones, go to a secluded place and practice.

When we go into nature, our bodies are connected with the larger body. Our senses, the sense doors, are very naturally being contacted. For some reason, it's just a very conducive place for wisdom to arise. It's a great place to practice the Dharma.

Albert Einstein wrote, "Look deeply into nature and then you will understand everything better." Looking deeply into nature is looking deeply into our bodies, and vice versa. They're the same. And when we look, we see. This is vipassana. And what do we see when we look closely at anything? That things are constantly changing.

One time, I was out in the woods just standing there, seeing what would show up—not animal-wise, but experience-wise. Just being there for whatever happens. It was wintertime, and you know how you can hear the gusts of wind coming, that sound? I heard that, and then I saw it passing through the trees as they swayed. Then it passed through, and the trees stopped swaying. And it was like, "Well, okay. Thank you for that." How clear. How clear could cause and effect be? How clear could change be? It was just manifesting right there. Ah, here it is.

The Buddha said, "In this fathom-long body, I declare, is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world." He's saying that the noble truths can be apprehended in the body. The body as teacher.

You may have heard the quip that health is merely the slowest possible rate at which to die. Old age, sickness, and death are the three things we can count on most in this life. And they were, of course, three of the four heavenly messengers that woke the Buddha up to his quest for enlightenment. Think about that. What woke the Bodhisattva up to his desire to be enlightened? It wasn't the intellect. It was the body. It was seeing, with his body, with his eyes—seeing a sick person, an old person, and a corpse. The body was the heavenly messenger that woke the Bodhisattva up.

When we get sick, how do we respond? Is there a sense that something is wrong, or can we recognize this as a natural and inevitable thing that happens to the body? Of course we know that intellectually, but what's actually happening in the moment? What actually happens when the copier doesn't work? We want to look. What's our relationship to the body getting sick?

When we notice the gray hairs, aching bodies, declining physical abilities—do we try not to notice them, try to mask them or pretend they're not happening in some way? Or can we see it as a teaching into the nature of the body, which is its impermanence? Can we see the body as ultimately out of control and therefore not ourselves?

Think about it. Do you decide, "I think I'll get Lyme disease now"? "I think I'll start losing my sight now"? When the eyes start to decline, I remember when I first noticed I was having problems seeing. It was so interesting. It was like, "Wow, I really can't see."

This really works. That was the feeling. I must say, there wasn't a no to that one. It was very interesting. Like, wow, aging really works. I never thought I would not be able to see. And then one day I realized, this is really blurry. Now the font has gone from 12 to 14.

So if we can cultivate wisdom through the body in these ways, old age, sickness, and death don't have to be such a bummer. They can bring us to deep understanding.

I was thinking about it. It's kind of like the body is our safety net—our wisdom safety net. If we go through life not learning anything, not developing any wisdom and compassion, just completely bumbling along, and if we're lucky enough to live long enough, guess what's going to happen? Old age, sickness, and death. It's like the body saying, "Hey, here's your last chance. I'm going to give you one last chance to wake up to how it is." It's really our good friend that way.

I'll end with that thought—that ultimately the body can be seen as such a good friend that even if we don't find a way to cultivate wisdom and compassion along the way, it gives us one last chance.

So let's feel our bodies for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 50

A Few More Steps On The Eightfold Path (Part 2)

Pascal Auclair · 1h04

> *In this continuation of his exploration of the Noble Eightfold Path (ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga), Pascal Auclair weaves together personal retreat experiences, theatrical art, and classical Buddhist teachings to illuminate how wisdom practice unfolds. He shares pivotal moments of insight into anicca (impermanence) — from encountering a bus on the IMS loop to witnessing a unique snow event in the forest — demonstrating how direct experience corrects our distorted views and naturally gives rise to renunciation and compassion.*
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> *The talk explores the samādhi section of the path: right effort (sammā vāyāma), right mindfulness (sammā sati), and right concentration (sammā samādhi). Pascal discusses the four great endeavors of effort, the protective qualities of hiri and ottappa (moral shame and fear of wrongdoing), and offers practical approaches like 'ABC' (Acknowledge, Blamelessness, Change) for working with unwholesome states. He recounts the profound Bāhiya Sutta teaching: 'In the seen, just the seen; in the heard, just the heard.'*
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> *Central to the teaching is distinguishing sammāsati (wise mindfulness) from ordinary attention — the mindfulness of a Dhamma practitioner differs from that of a surgeon or climber because it's oriented toward liberation. Pascal emphasizes freshness of awareness ('we've never been here now before'), the sixfold division of vedanā (feeling tone) into worldly and spiritual categories, and how pleasant states like pīti and the bliss of blamelessness are 'onward-leading' when met with wisdom. The talk concludes with a humorous personal story about falling off the meditation cushion, reminding us we can always begin again.*

Tonight I want to continue talking about the Eightfold Path. If you can recall anything of what happened last week—it seems like a very long time ago, maybe. So many mind moments since.

A lot of what we're doing here is correcting the view, the understanding that we have about life. We go from a very distorted view of how things work, or a slightly distorted view, to more of a wise view of how things are. And we do this here, in the context of this retreat and this tradition, largely by looking at the three characteristics.

As you know, some things are green, some are blue. Some things are far, others are close. Some things are gross, others subtle. Some things I like, some things I don't like. Some things are thought, some things are seen or heard. Every phenomenon has specif-

ic characteristics to it. But all have in common these three characteristics that we keep naming again and again. Our practice is very much to highlight these three characteristics.

Somebody came for an interview today and said, "Everything is the same." And in my mind I thought, "Oh, they're seeing the three characteristics." Because they're not going to tell me some things are green and some are blue, some things are far and others near—rather, all things have this amazing nature to flee. In the end, the conversation went in another beautiful direction, but that was what I got from the first sentence: everything, in a way, is the same in the light of these three characteristics.

We want to highlight this here and there over the course of the weeks or months that we're practicing. We want to have a direct experience of this.

One way for me—one time that I know something switched in my mind about my understanding of one of these characteristics, of *anicca*, of the fleeting nature of experience—was when I was walking around the loop in winter. I was coming back towards this building, and I had been very mindful, very much in the body. At that point I was feeling the legs, the movement of the legs and feet. There was not much space in the street because of all the snow, so I was walking in the street. Suddenly there came this huge yellow bus, coming down the hill at full speed.

I was walking along thinking, "I'm not sure there's space for me and the bus." But I was feeling my legs. Actually, I was not thinking so much—I was just feeling my legs, hearing the sound, and the visual getting bigger and bigger, the sound stronger and stronger. And the fear—suddenly there was fear in the chest area, in the face. There was a lot of fear. The bus was coming, and it went by just like that, really close. You know how sensitive we get on retreat.

The bus went by. And just after it passed, there had been the experience of fear—a very upper body experience, a lot of heat. And then suddenly I felt my feet again walking. I realized, "Wow, in that moment, in those few seconds, there was no bottom part of the body from the point of view of experience." I don't know—somebody from the outside might have said, "Yeah, the legs were still there." But the three characteristics are interested in phenomena from the point of view of experience, not from whether the legs were really there or not. Because suffering happens from the point of view of experience. It doesn't happen from, "Oh, you shouldn't be worried about this, it's going to be okay." No—suffering is in here. Maybe from another point of view there's a different perspective, but from the point of view of experience, there was the fleeting nature of legs in that case. The legs just reappeared, and suddenly I understood.

Sometimes the insight is inferential. This means we don't have to see it everywhere. We see it well enough, deeply enough, immediately and directly enough in one aspect, clearly enough—and my word "inferential" means I see how that is true for other experiences that are not the same. I remember that moment being a correction of what I was doing here. Of course, you know, the lectern is actually not going anywhere. It's impermanent in the sense that there was once a tree and somebody made something out of it—but this is in a way conceptual. What we're doing here is looking from the point of experience. I repeat this.

So then I was like, oh, okay, so I don't have to think about the lectern that one day is going to become something else or be put in the garbage or is going to break. I can just look at it, and maybe become aware that seeing is passing—that when I see it, I have to see it again and see it again. The seeing is not once and done. There's a flow in it. If my mind is quiet enough, I can start to see how everything is fleeting, even things that are not moving, that are not going away.

This was a place where there was a correction of the view for me. Things were impermanent from an experiential point of view. Another way to say it, perhaps—and I understood something I had read earlier, I think from Ledi Sayadaw somewhere—was saying that when the meditator sees somebody arriving at the back of the hall, this is an object, and if they think that a few seconds later what sits there is the same object, they're deluded. It's a whole other experience. So too, what is experiencing this here has changed.

Can you imagine how much calm it takes to see this, how things are changing? You can say, no, it's the same person that was there and here, but the experience of seeing there and the experience of seeing here is very different. Or the experience of thinking about this person afterward. If I'm a little deluded, I'll think, oh, the person who entered, sat there, and that I'm thinking of right now—it's one permanent thing. Well, it's not. One is an image in the mind, another one is an experience here in time, and another one was an experience there in time. So that's how minute we get with the impermanence of things.

I'll name just another one here. For me, a correction that happened was in the woods in the back there. It was also in winter. I walked in the woods just behind the dining hall on the other side next to the annex. I step a few feet in, and the forest, the trees are very beautiful there, the way there's space in between each. There was a unique event that happened right there that I recognized as being unique. There was just the right amount of light, snow, sun, wind—there was this movement of snow going in all directions. I don't know what the wind was doing, but it was not going in one direction. It

was kind of going in all kinds of directions, and with the light hitting the trees and creating shadows and light, and the snow appearing and disappearing in the shade and in the light—there was this amazing thing happening. And there were kind of swirls, I think, of snow. A few swirls.

And I was like, wow. There was really a connection with this event. This event was an experience of beauty for me, from this point of view of pure beauty. And it lasted for a few seconds. And there was a correction of view for me in the sense that this was about the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. In terms of visual, that's about as far as it will go in this lifetime. I'm using thoughts now, but while I was there, it was like, this is absolutely unique—a nature thing. And in the seeing of this, I said, wow, even this doesn't completely do it. It doesn't completely provide. I could not have imagined this much beauty. It was there, given completely. And it could not swallow me, or me swallow it. There was just an event happening and then it passed.

It was fleeting, and the samsaric nature of it was that—I don't know, it felt like there couldn't be a merging, there couldn't be a disappearing in it. There could just be seeing amazing beauty and being touched by it. And something in my view of beauty got corrected—that it could provide, that if I could find the one beautiful thing and keep it, then my life problem would be solved. That got corrected.

These are very personal insights, by the way. But it says that when the view gets corrected towards more wise understanding of the nature of things, then naturally what will arise in oneself will be renunciation—a letting go of false expectation, as I would word it tonight—a deep letting go that is known as actually very beautiful. It is a beautiful mind state.

And so it says that for oneself, this is what will arise: renunciation. And for all beings, self included, the arising of kindness and compassion will be released.

What I find extraordinary on this path is that when there is the correction of the view, of the understanding of the world, it leads to the heart being freed. It doesn't lead to "Okay, so nothing's going to provide, it's all fleeting." It doesn't lead to cynicism. It leads to release, to a heart being unhindered, we could say, and being able to meet the world fully with care.

So in my own words, perhaps, I was just talking about the first two steps of the Eightfold Path—right view and right intention—how right view will lead to wise intentions of renunciation, of caring, of compassion and kindness.

Now I'll open a parenthesis. I don't know how long it's going to be, but it seemed important, so I will. I'm not in charge.

This last summer, there was again this amazing theater festival that I think I mentioned to you, one that we have in Montreal where they bring the best plays that can be moved to Montreal for us to see. This summer there was one play called—I'm going to translate the title from French, which was originally in Italian because it was an Italian play—the title would be something like "On the Concept of the Face of the Son of God."

You have to imagine this huge stage, the biggest theater in town, enormous in length and height. Romeo Castellucci, the director, is one of the most interesting thinkers in the theater world globally. He had studied at some point at the Beaux Arts, in art school. Going through his materials many years later, he found this painting of the face of Christ that for him represented pure beauty—he had never seen anything more beautiful than this painting. He thought, "What could I do with this? I want to do a play with this. I want to do something about this."

What he came up with was this: "This is the most beautiful thing. Where could I bring beauty from the most ugly thing and put them together?" Shit is ugly. Everything about shitting is ugly.

And so the play that he made—which was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen in its commentary, in its teaching—placed this great, huge picture of Christ taking up all the space. We can have all kinds of different relationships with Christ, of course, because of history and what happened, but you could just think of a human being that has clearly, when you look at this human being, the only thing you can see is compassion. There's this kind of ease, spaciousness, a loving, compassionate look in the eyes of this being. So that takes the whole of this space.

And the play—you see the inside of an apartment that is white, very designed, you know, white sofa, white table, everything white, very sleek. There's an old man sitting and trembling a little, sitting on the sofa, and his son, probably in his fifties, preparing to go to work. You understand that it's the son just because of the age, and you have a sense that this is what's happening. The old man is sitting in the sofa with nightclothes, pajamas or something like this.

Just as the son leaves—you can understand it's the morning, he's going to work, the cell phone, the tie—the father goes, "Ah, ah, ah, ah." And the son looks and there's shit everywhere on the sofa. Even in the play, they offer you the smell. It comes with a sulfuric, bad smell.

And nothing else is happening. It's just the son removing his sport jacket and starting to clean the father and saying, "It's fine, it's fine, it's okay." And the father is crying, "Oh my God, oh my God." He's cleaning the father, and just as he goes back to work, because he's kind of cleaned the mess—"Ah, ah." And the second time. The whole play is just this happening over and over again.

What you start to understand at some point is that the beauty is... First, you have always Christ looking at you as an audience. You're looking at the scene, but you have this compassionate being looking the whole time. This message is so powerful that it's not about the situation. It's about the quality of the mind. And the son goes in and out of loving the father and being compassionate, to being exasperated and confused—and the love between two human beings.

To me, that was an amazing teaching on what beauty truly is, what real aesthetic is. I had heard that before, that perhaps aesthetic is something of the mind, some beauty of the mind that is the deepest kind of beauty. In that play from Castellucci, where there were very few words and a lot of shit, I couldn't believe how much beauty was brought forth—in the smell, in the visual.

To me there's a link between this event and this play, the situation and the play, and the way we're invited to live our life, or what we're doing here on retreat. How can we bring forward the most beautiful quality of the mind in the midst of whatever shit everyone finds themselves in the middle of? Because surely there is some of that happening as you're here—the confusion of the mind, too many people, whatever it is.

Anyway, so that's a free-flow parenthesis offered to you.

You'll do what you want with it. It felt like something—I don't know why I wanted to bring it here. I think because there's something raw about it. And we sit here in the rawness of our nature, and how we find balance, equilibrium, and beauty in the shadow side of the soul, if I can say so.

One thing I want to tie into tonight's talk is a teaching about... I want to say this is a path where there can be a lot of beauty and joy. I think I started by putting the shit out there to say that even in that, there can be amazing beauty and joy and connection and grace.

So the first two parts of the path are right understanding and right intentions. And then the three next that we talked about some last week were wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. They're part of the section of the path called sīla, ethics. And this is another place of joy, because it says that this practice of right speech, wise action, and wise livelihood can bring this feeling of what we call the bliss of blamelessness—which

feels good. Knowing that through my action I'm actually protecting, not hurting, is something that feels good, very important on the path. There are many aspects of the path that are made to feel good so that we can actually walk it.

So this is one of them. The work on ethics is good for this psychology, to be sitting with blamelessness. It feels good in this psychology. It feels good in the community—this work on ethics that we're doing and this commitment. It's good for the community, small community, global community. It's also good for the karma, for the good fortune of the future, it says. That being harmless now is going to create a lot of joy for the future. Not just now, but in the future.

So personal, community or social, future-oriented happiness, and also spiritual happiness, because this is the ground on which we sit, we could say. If the ethics is not clean, it's very hard to learn meditation because the mind is agitated, spending a lot of time justifying itself, explaining, avoiding. So maybe that's as much as I'll say about that.

And of course, there's this beautiful line that I read one time in a book from a Burmese monk. He was saying, "I have hurt other people. How could I not have in this life? It's not possible not to. But I practiced dhamma. And that makes me feel good. I'm reorienting my heart-mind." And that is enough for him, that he knows he's doing this. Spending the amount of time that we're doing here, there's a lot of correction on that level happening.

So first I talked a little bit about the paññā, the wisdom section of wise understanding and wise intention. Now just a few words on sīla—wise speech, action, and livelihood. And now I'm going to spend the rest of the time talking about right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration as part of this samādhi section, the development of the mind, if you will.

There's one place where the Buddha says, and I think Winnie read that earlier in the retreat: to abstain from all evil, to cultivate the good, and to purify the mind. This is the teaching of the Buddhas. To abstain from all evil relates to the sīla section, the ethical section. To cultivate the good relates to the samādhi section, what I'm going to talk about now. And to purify the mind relates to the wisdom aspect—the purifying of view and intentions.

So right effort—Winnie talked about this a whole evening, and she was speaking about the four endeavors: the effort to abandon the unwholesome, the effort to avoid it from arising, the effort to make arise the good, the wholesome, and the effort to cultivate it, maintain it. I'll say just a few words, little thoughts I had about this to add here.

There are two qualities that I wanted to mention that are very important on the path. You might have heard about them: hiri and ottappa. As I was saying earlier, on the path there are many qualities of mind that we will experience that are pleasant, that are beautiful. These two are beautiful, but not pleasant. They translate as shame of wrongdoing and fear of wrongdoing. They're known to be the two guardians of the world.

How it works is this: at the thought of doing something that might be hurtful, there might be two emotions that I feel, and it's good to recognize them and value them when they're there. There might be the idea of seeing myself do this and the personal shame of doing it. You know when you shrink from something—"I could take this, nobody would know, and it's all fine"—and there's a kind of heat that can come with it? If I did that, how I would feel after.

So that's the shame aspect. And the fear is related more to the external—how it would impact others, how they might judge me if they saw me, or the difficulties that could arise.

I think these two are very important in our practice to recognize because sometimes we bypass them. Maybe some of us will say, "Oh, but that doesn't count," because first, it doesn't feel good. But when these arise, it might be something to actually value, to say, "Oh, look at this. This is an indication, an inner indication—careful here, let's bring mindfulness to the motivation or intention." That can be a good way to actually abandon something that has a life in how greed can be driven. Suddenly this emotion comes in and it can help us readjust. Not to fear or despise these emotions, but to learn to recognize—oh, this is actually good. Not pleasant, but good.

Another thing that came to mind for me about abandoning unwholesome states—I think we've talked here about RAIN, the acronym: Recognition, Allowing, bringing Interest, and Non-identification. There's another one that I use sometimes. It's very different. It's ABC.

It came to me one day while I was listening to a talk from Ayya Khema, a wonderful teacher. She was talking about when there's something unwholesome going on in the mind, and we've explored it a lot, we pretty much know it—that it's totally okay to actually acknowledge that it's there, be blameless, and then change. I was like, "Oh, ABC!" Acknowledge that it's there. Blamelessness—no one is guilty of this, but it's not wholesome. And then Change, switch.

Actually, that's something I use a lot in my practice to actually abandon. I don't need to experience all the states of mind. And some I can't abandon—they have their own life, of course. But there's a way where I can go in a direction. The mind can pick up something, and it could go in a direction, and there's a point of option there. Sylvia Boorstein has another way to put it. She has two lines: "Don't pick this up. Don't pick this up." And "Put this down. Put this down." If it's too late for the "don't pick it up," then it's "Put this down. Put this down, honey. Trouble."

We can do this with ourselves. Say, "Thank you, but no thank you. I know clearly that this is not helpful." It might be self-judgment, judging of others, going towards fantasy.

Then there's avoiding the arising of unwholesome. I want to name again sense restraint. To me, it shows in the same way. I remember thinking, "If I look, I'm going to see. If I look up, I'm going to see who's walking there, then I'm going to have opinions about..." And so to keep it extremely simple.

To me, the most profound expression of sense restraint is this teaching that the Buddha gave to Bahiya. I don't know if you know the Bahiya Sutta. The most profound teaching—probably makes it into the ten best profound teachings—but to me it talks about sense restraint. That's what I hear in there.

The story of Bahiya was that he thought he was awake, and somebody very generous told him his four noble truths—somebody told him generously that he actually was not awake. Told him the truth. Bahiya really wanted to be awake, and he was told where he could find a great teacher, so he went to see the Buddha. He walked for a great distance to get to the Buddha. When he got to where the Buddha was, the Buddha was just about to go on alms round and would never give teaching on that occasion.

Bahiya said, "Please give me a teaching."

The Buddha replied, "No, I'm going on alms round. Come after, and I'll teach you."

But Bahiya persisted, "No, please, please, you have to give me something. I walked all this length to see you. I want to hear something, even something very small, from you now."

And the Buddha said a second time, "No, I can't give you a teaching now. It's not the appropriate time."

And Bahiya said, "We have no idea what's going to happen. You cannot not give me a teaching now. Anything can happen in the next few moments. So you have to."

Because it was asked the third time, the Buddha said, "Okay, I'll give you a teaching."

I'm going to read you just what he said, and that solved the problem for Bahiya:

"Then, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized—then, Bahiya, there is no you in terms of that. When there is no you in terms of that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

Should I add something after the Buddha? It's a strange situation to want to talk after the Buddha. The profound beauty lies in the simplicity of this. In my wording: in the hearing, just the hearing. This is so simple. In the feeling, just the feeling. Abandoning everything else, and how it becomes extremely simple and natural to be here.

So in the effort: abandon the unwholesome, avoid the arising of the unwholesome, cultivate the wholesome, and maintain the wholesome.

Maybe I'll switch now to the seventh step on the Eightfold Path—mindfulness. We've talked a lot about this, but there are a few things I wanted to say.

One thing you might want to do, if you have a pen and paper when you go back to your room tonight or tomorrow morning, is to write a definition of mindfulness for yourself. Maybe later, at your next interview, you could read it to your teacher as a base for clarification. This is something I've seen done with students a number of times, and it's been extremely powerful for people—to write their definition of mindfulness and then enter into conversation about it. Just do this and see what mindfulness is for you, then talk with your teacher about it. It's a little thing to do.

Here's a question for you to reflect on for just a few seconds: What is the difference in the mindfulness of these four cases? Mindfulness of a thief robbing a house. Mindfulness of a surgeon performing surgery. Mindfulness of a climber climbing El Capitan at Yosemite. And mindfulness of a practitioner at the three-month retreat at IMS in 2012. What are the differences in mindfulness among these four? Is it the same thing, or different?

I'll let you think about it for a moment.

Although we cannot know exactly what's happening with each one of them—I'm giving very little information, I'm not telling you if the climber is a Dharma practitioner or if the surgeon is, I'm not saying much, just throwing clichés out there—but still, as part of the Eightfold Path, it's not just mindfulness. It's wise mindfulness. Wise or right understanding, right speech or wise speech. It's this word in Pali: *samma*. *Sammādiṭṭhi*—wise view. *Sammāsati*—wise mindfulness.

My understanding, quickly, would be that the difference between the practitioner on retreat and the three others—if they're climbing for the joy of climbing, or doing surgery with the intention of saving and improving a life but with attention focused on the technicality of what they're doing, or the thief being led by greed—the difference is that in the mindfulness we're practicing here, there's the *sammā*, the wise. The way we're applying mindfulness is in terms of clarifying life, reducing suffering, and liberating the mind. The endeavor—maybe that's the word—is what is called noble because it can free the mind for oneself. The mindfulness exists in that context.

Why do I bring this? Because at this point in the retreat, I would want us to know this while we're being mindful. So when I'm making my bed in the morning, it's not so much that I'm mindful making my bed. That's one level of being attentive. But what is the quality of mind that is making the bed? Is it a rushing-forward quality, or is there investigation there? What are the qualities present?

There might be different things arising, but in terms of Dhamma, I want to be aware of what is liberating, what is entangling. If I'm in an entangling mind state, I want to be aware of it. So it's not so much that I made my bed mindfully, but that the Dhamma was there, within it. I don't know if I'm explaining this right.

Or perhaps there's a sense that "I" am making the bed. Or there's a sense of "Oh, no—the hand is moving." Just being aware of this, there's a sense of self. For me, that would be Dhamma happening, wise mindfulness. "Oh yes, there's really a sense that I'm doing this"—or not. There are several ways to talk about making the bed. There's an added value here. We know why we're doing this: to free the mind.

I'll read you a poem from Paul Reps. I think this speaks to mindfulness, to wise mindfulness.

It's called "Grass Blade Experiencing":

This is the law.
No sames.
No same leaves, pebbles, person, places, times, faces, grasses.
Whoever disobeys the law gets bored.

When I first started approaching this practice, I had a teacher who was, I think I told you, disguised as a drama teacher. The one thing he repeated the most over the years, the thing that had the strongest impact on me, was when we were in class—before doing a scene or after doing a scene—he would just stop for a second. I studied with him for many years, so I would see him regularly in class. I was in that room a lot, like us here. And he would say very often, he would just say, "Hey, we've never been here now before. We've never been here now before. It's the first time we're here now."

Because there would be a way the mind would just become habituated, used to being there. "I know, I know that class." And he would say, "No, we have never been here now before. This is a completely new experience. Don't become general or superficial about this, or used to this. This is completely new."

I heard him say that so many times, and that's one of the most valuable things I've ever heard. To me, it points to this practice of mindfulness. It's not "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm mindful of walking, yeah, yeah, yeah." No. I've never been here now before in this body. I've never felt fear now before. I've never anything now before. This is completely new. Assuming that I know this is complete delusion, from my point of view.

"I've never been here now before." This teaching also highlights impermanence—how things are constantly passing away, and how our looking must be fresh all the time to be real, to be in sync with reality.

Christopher Titmus, another teacher here, would speak about reestablishing memory. He would say that when you look in an ordinary way, you see a plant—"Plant. Oh yeah, I know that kind of plant." But he would invite us to reestablish memory, to have a new version, a recent version of that plant. See it anew.

I'm mixing different teachings here, but for me there's a connection. Eugene Cash, a teacher I really loved, used to sit every year with his daughter—she's perhaps in her twenties now—and they would sit on the sofa next to each other. He would say to her, "I am not your father." Not in a soap opera kind of way. And she would say to him, "I am not your daughter." Just to cut through the habituated way of seeing the other. When you hear that—"I am not your daughter"—then you have to look again. So who's there then?

To me, this is the mindfulness we're practicing. I've never been in this body now before. I cannot say, "Oh yeah, this body. I know this body. I know how it feels. This is how it feels." No. This is a completely new experience. This is very central to this practice. It's the only way into insight. We're not going to get insight by being superficially there—"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm kind of there."

As you know, *sammā sati*, wise mindfulness, is often equated with the four foundations. The body as a field of awareness includes posture, breath, and the activities of the body. There are also the elements—other ways to investigate the body, but these are the main approaches we use here. The second foundation is *vedanā*, the feeling tone.

We've talked about this extensively, but I want to add something tonight. You know about the threefold division: pleasant, neutral, unpleasant. But there's also an extremely important sixfold division. You take the same pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant, but divide each into two categories. Classically this is described in particular terms, but I'll offer my version: liberating or entangling. Worldly or spiritual are two other ways to express this.

It's important to begin distinguishing between the two. There are pleasant feelings that are onward-leading, liberating on the path. And there are some that are entangling. The entangling ones arise when there's pleasantness and clinging comes with it, without mindfulness. But there's a whole category of spiritual pleasantness—qualities of mind that the Buddha said we don't need to fear, don't need to avoid, because they're onward-leading.

This includes the joy of renunciation, the joy of insight—the *vipassanā* joy when we realize, "Oh my God, *anicca*! I just felt it!" When our experience matches what we've been hearing again and again, and suddenly we experience it directly for ourselves.

The spiritually pleasant includes the bliss of blamelessness I mentioned earlier. There are so many such experiences. Mostly the path is made of pleasant feeling tones when the right qualities are present—contentment, seclusion, when the hindrances subside. When desire, aversion, agitation, sloth and torpor, and doubt are gone, that experience of being secluded from these mind states is extremely pleasant.

Pīti, the ecstasy or joy or enthusiasm—some kind of curious energy, an involvement and engagement in the practice. These are good to recognize on the path when they're there. And the highest one being the release, the great understanding.

Within this division of pleasant, neutral, and unpleasant, there is a neutral one that we could surely place in the spiritual category: upekkhā, the equanimity we talked about. This evenness of mind. The mind is so balanced that it has a quality of neutrality to it. And so that is a neutrality that is onward leading.

To name also an example of the unpleasant that is onward leading would be hiri and ottappa—these two qualities of moral shame and moral dread. Not pleasant, but onward leading. Or sometimes when there's a discovery, like having some kind of insight about a pattern, an unhelpful pattern—it's not good news. One sits there thinking, "Oh

my God, again this thing is so active." It's not pleasant, but it's honest. It sees clearly. It may be unpleasant, but one can recognize: okay, it's unpleasant, but onward leading because it can be seen clearly. It's better that it's seen than hidden and doing its thing.

In this way, we can start to recognize this. What I would also include is when something is pleasant at the sense door and could lead to the tendency of clinging—wanting more, wanting to keep—but it's met with sammāsati, with great mindfulness, and this leads to a beautiful release, allowing the pleasant to be there without clinging. Then we can put it in the category of liberating. When we meet the unpleasant, the neutral, and the pleasant with mindfulness, and it doesn't lead to the usual tendency, then this is onward going. One can recognize this and appreciate it, if that speaks to you.

Perhaps just to finish, I'll tell you a little story, simply because it happened in this hall. One time I was sitting during a retreat, in roughly that seat there. I had wanted to do the three-month retreat, and they told me I had to have sat a retreat here before. So I asked what the next one was and signed up. I found myself on that retreat.

I was sitting there and the sammāsati was not strong, to say the least. Actually, some of you might remember if you came here a long time ago—there used to be a red carpeted stage that extended a little bit in front like this. I was in the front row. The teacher was giving a talk, not unlike this one, and it was going on and on, way past the one hour. I was sitting there and the sound started to seem really, really loud—the volume seemed excessive. I was thinking, "This is way too loud. It's actually going to pierce my ear. I have to do something about this. Will they stop? They're not stopping. I can't believe this. This has been going way too long. This is dangerous for my health. I have to remove myself from this room now."

But I was in the front row, in the middle. And I kept thinking while the teacher continued offering the Dharma. At some point I thought, "I have to save my life." And so I stood up. I had no presence—I was not in the first foundation of mindfulness, not in body awareness, nor in hindrance awareness. There was not much going on at any level.

So I just stood up to leave, but I had not noticed that my legs had become completely numb. I had just enough energy to raise my body. The next thing that happened was that I fell flat on the floor with my chin on the first red step. It made a tremendous bang. The teacher very generously asked, "Oh, what's going on?" And to add insult to injury, I called out, "It's too loud! It's too loud!"

Really, really, to cover the noise in the room—of which there was none. And I was lying there. Actually, at that point I think I was crawling out in this direction. And the teacher said, "Is it too loud?" Very much concerned for the yogis. And all the yogis went like this, shaking their heads. And by that time I was on all fours and left the room.

So I was not, as I was crawling there, on the Eightfold Path. I was on the Deluded Path.

And so it is said that to meet life, the best strategy to meet life is through sammā sati. Right attention is the best way to avoid the unwholesome and the maturation of the unwholesome.

And you know, we fall, and we stand up again, and we start from fresh. That's the beauty of it—that we can always start from fresh and find wisdom in any of the phenomena of life at some point down the road.

So maybe we'll just finish with a little moment of silence.

May we all find great ease of mind and spaciousness of mind. May we be able also to offer this to others.

Thank you for listening.

CHAPTER 51

The End of Dukkha

Joseph Goldstein · 1h01

> *In this profound talk from the 2012 Three-Month Retreat at IMS, Joseph Goldstein illuminates the Third Noble Truth: the cessation of dukkha. Drawing from the Buddha's first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), he examines the Buddha's declaration that freedom comes through "the remainderless fading away, cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, and letting go of craving."*
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> *Rather than viewing the end of craving as a distant goal, Goldstein offers a transformative reframe: we can practice the Third Noble Truth in each moment. He introduces the instruction from Dzogchen master Tulku Urgyen to recognize the nature of mind "for short moments, many times," making liberation accessible through momentary experiences of nonclinging. The talk weaves together teachings from multiple Buddhist traditions—Tibetan master Patrül Rinpoche's advice to "let go of everything," the Thai Forest tradition's description of nibbāna as "the mind released," and Ajahn Mahā Boowa's account of realizing that even radiant awareness can be "the ultimate counterfeit."*
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> *Goldstein describes the path of insight in detail: how awareness of the three characteristics (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness) deconditions craving; how equanimity matures until the mind no longer reaches for anything; and how we can cut through identification with awareness itself by looking for the mind and finding nothing. He shares the famous dialogue between Bodhidharma and Huìkě, suggesting we can use the recognition "already pacified" as a practical tool. The talk offers both the inspiring vision of complete freedom and the pragmatic measure of our progress: are the defilements getting weaker?*

Over these past weeks we've been discussing different aspects of the most fundamental core of the Buddhist teachings, namely the Four Noble Truths. The first of them being the Truth of Dukkha, which is often translated as suffering, but really in a more comprehensive way means the understanding of the inherently unsatisfying nature of impermanent conditioned phenomena. The second noble truth is the cause of suffering—different kinds of craving. Tonight I'd like to speak about the third noble truth, which is the cessation or the end of dukkha.

The Buddha speaks to this very directly, in the very first discourse he gave after his enlightenment. He said, "And this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: that is the remainderless fading away, cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, and

letting go of craving." Fading away, cessation, renunciation, relinquishment, letting go of craving. The message is clear—a very clear and unambiguous statement about what frees the mind.

But can we even imagine a mind that is free of craving? Can we even imagine that possibility? We might resonate more easily with that famous prayer of St. Augustine where he said, "Dear Lord, make me chaste, but not yet." I think that's probably more the realm in which we operate.

A few years ago I was doing a self-retreat, and in one sitting, a few lines from the enlightenment verse of the Buddha—what he is said to have declared right after his awakening under the Bodhi tree—came to my mind. He said, "Realized is the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving." Again, it's a very clear statement of what constitutes freedom for us.

But in sitting on retreat and reflecting on these words, I started to understand them in a new and somewhat different way. Rather than understanding the end of craving as some far-off distant goal in practice—something that was even a little hard to imagine, someday maybe we'll be at the end of craving—or even as some special meditative state, I began to understand the possibility of practicing the end of craving in each moment. This is actually our practice now, in each moment. We can be practicing the third noble truth.

When we explore this for ourselves in our own experience, we can see how craving, when it is present in the mind, obscures the natural ease, the natural openness of mind. And how in moments when the mind is free of wanting, free of desire, free of craving, we really get a taste of happiness and peace.

As a simple experiment, the next time the mind is filled with some kind of wanting, some kind of craving, some kind of desire, pay attention to what that feels like. And then—and this is the beauty and the gift of a retreat, where we have the opportunity and the invitation to see these desires arise in the mind and not act on them, simply to be aware of them—we're able to explore in a very direct way the feeling of the mind filled with desire. And then we're aware, we're mindful, and at a certain point the desire goes away. What does that feel like? We can see for ourselves, even if it's just for a few moments, the freedom that comes from the end of craving.

For myself, every time I can not act on a desire that's in the mind and be mindful of the process, it always feels to me like I've been let out of the grip of something when the desire goes away. Even if there was some pleasure associated with the desire, there's still a much greater taste of freedom in the mind free of craving, free of wanting.

But this is not something that we should just accept as a blind belief or as some Buddhist dogma. The Buddha is always suggesting that we look for ourselves, see for ourselves. These Four Noble Truths—we have to make them our own, because it's in that that they have transformative value.

Tulku Urgyen, who was one of the great Dzogchen masters of the last century, spoke frequently about practicing the recognition of the nature of mind. This again is using Dzogchen language. Nature of mind means that empty aware nature, the empty knowing nature free of any clinging. His instruction was: practice the recognition of this nature of mind for short moments, many times.

That's a very useful instruction, because very often we may hear of the possibility of freedom or the end of craving, and somehow we internalize that as thinking it will be some state we'll get and hold onto and have. But for most of us, the practice is really for short moments, many times. This is something we can do. And so this can become the framework for understanding our own practice of the end of craving. We can practice that for short moments, many times, throughout the day.

As you know, there are many different descriptions and methods and vocabularies and even metaphysical descriptions among the various Buddhist traditions regarding the nature of freedom. At times, if one is reading or becoming familiar with or studying in different traditions, it can be a little confusing because the methods and vocabularies are often dissimilar. But underneath all the differences, there is one understanding among all the Buddhist traditions of what it is that frees the mind. In the Pali texts, the phrase that is used very often is liberation through non-clinging.

That's a very direct statement: liberation through non-clinging.

Not only is this phrase found very often in the Pali texts, it's found very often in Zen teachings and in Tibetan teachings as well. There was a very famous Tibetan Rinpoche named Patrul Rinpoche who lived in the 19th century as a very poor wandering monk in eastern Tibet. He was called the enlightened vagabond, but he was renowned for the depth of his realization, of his awakening, and he was very much loved by the ordinary people in Tibet. He had some useful words about this teaching of non-clinging. In this teaching, he called it "Advice from Me to Myself":

Listen up, old bad karma patrol, you dweller in distraction. For ages now, you've been beguiled, entranced, and fooled by appearances. Are you aware of that? Are you? Right this very instant when you're under the spell of mistaken perception, you've got to watch out. Don't let yourself get carried away by this fake and empty life. Your mind is spinning around about carrying a lot of useless projects. It's a waste. Give it up. Thinking about the

hundred plans you want to accomplish with never enough time to finish them just weighs down your mind. You're completely distracted by all these projects which never come to an end, but keep spreading out more like ripples in water. Don't be a fool. For once, just sit tight. Even though you don't know how to practice, just let go of everything. That's what I really want to say. If you let go of everything, everything, everything, that's the real point.

It's the same teaching. Liberation through non-clinging. Let go of everything.

What does "let go of everything" mean? It doesn't mean that everything stops happening. It means we're not holding on. We're not grasping. The world goes on. We don't disappear. But our relationship to the world can be completely transformed.

So the question for us then is how we can actually experience in practice and in our lives this non-craving, non-clinging—at first on a momentary level, then for short moments, and then in the end, really as the unshakeable freedom of mind.

We can practice non-craving and non-clinging in a variety of ways, and different Buddhist traditions highlight one way or another through different methods. We can decondition, relinquish, and abandon craving through an increasingly refined awareness of the three characteristics, which is a lot of vipassana practice. We're being mindful, coming face to face with what's arising in the moment, and through that coming face to face, the wisdom arises which sees that whatever is appearing is also disappearing. We see the impermanent, changing, unsatisfying, selfless nature. This becomes clearer and clearer as we pay attention. We begin to see the impersonal, selfless nature of this whole unfolding process. We see so clearly, and with increasing clarity, that nothing lasts long enough to be called self, that whatever is arising is also passing away. And it's all happening very quickly.

These three characteristics, which describe or characterize every experience we have—it's not that they're about some experiences and not about others—everything that arises will pass away, is unsatisfying, is selfless. The Buddha called these three characteristics the drawbacks or the downside of conditioned experience. This is really the understanding of dukkha. This is the downside: that things don't last and therefore are not satisfying and they're not in our control.

But happily for us, there is an upside to the downside. It's precisely because phenomena are impermanent and unsatisfying that we are motivated to awaken to a greater peace, a greater happiness. The Buddha pointed to this very directly. He said, "If there were no drawbacks or dangers in the world, beings would not become disenchanted with the world. But because there are these drawbacks in the world, beings become disenchanted by it."

So it's precisely because we all have both intuited and, to some extent, deeply experienced these drawbacks that we have become somewhat disenchanted with the world.

But it's also interesting to watch our reactions to this teaching and understanding. How do we relate when we hear words like danger, drawbacks, downside? Do these words sound gloomy? Do they evoke fear? Or in seeing things more completely, in understanding this aspect of how things are, do they bring a sense of greater openness and greater relief?

It's very helpful to understand the word disenchantment, because the Buddha often speaks of this quality of mind as the precursor, the forerunner to awakening. When he goes through the list of things leading to awakening, disenchantment often arises just before a final opening. So what does disenchantment mean? It really means waking up from the spell of enchantment. This is the story in so many fairy tales—the wicked witch puts somebody under a spell, and then the beautiful prince or princess comes and gives the frog a kiss, and they wake up from the spell of enchantment. That's what disenchantment means. It's waking up from the dreamlike spell of our ignorance.

I had an interesting experience of this on a retreat several years ago. Are you familiar with the experience you might have when you wake up in the morning, when you first wake up? There's that moment of awakening, and then sometimes maybe there's a fragment of a thought which captures our attention, and we just fall back into the dream state for a few minutes. And maybe again we wake up—this could happen once or twice until we're fully awake. We awaken, then fall back into the dream, then awaken again.

I was noticing this happening. Then, as I was doing walking meditation, I began to notice that thin layer of background thoughts that are often in the mind, even as we're being mindful. Feeling the sensation of the movement, feeling the step, but it's as if there's this ticker tape, very light, almost like whispers in the mind—just these very light background thoughts going through, hardly noticed. Perhaps thoughts, images, fragments of stories passing through the mind. Although they are hardly noticed, and although they may be very light, they really are the ongoing creation of the world we inhabit.

It became very interesting to notice that I'm walking and tuning in more carefully to these background thoughts, and most of them were self-referential in one way or another. A wanting, or a memory, or a planning—there was some sense of self in most of them. Likes, dislikes. What was striking to me as I was doing the walking meditation, just noticing all this, was how similar this experience of getting pulled into these background thoughts was to the experience of falling back into the dream in the morning. It

was really the same thing happening. I realized that through the course of the day, we are simply dreaming ourselves into existence in our getting lost unknowingly in the background thoughts of our minds.

This became a very useful mantra for me. Throughout the day, I would remind myself: dreaming myself into existence. It was really powerful because I could see so clearly how the sense of self was being created when I wasn't aware of these thoughts arising. And it inspired much greater energy to stay awake, not to fall into the dream.

Awareness of the impermanent, selfless nature of thought is such a powerful part of our practice, and I know you're aware of this—you've been practicing this now for many weeks. When we're unaware of thoughts as they arise in the mind, or we are identified with them, they have tremendous power. They are just like little dictators in the mind. Thoughts arise: go here, go there, do this, do that, say this, get married, get divorced. Yet when we're aware of a thought as being just a thought, that's all it is—a thought arising and passing away in the open sky of the mind. There's hardly anything there. When we can see this, we're no longer enslaved by the thoughts that are arising. We begin to see that the only power thoughts have is the power we give them. And we give them power when we're not aware that they're there, when we've fallen back into the dream.

Something I've recommended over these weeks, and this is just a reminder: occasionally, it's very interesting and helpful just to sit, and it's almost as if we're sitting waiting for thoughts to happen. That becomes the object of our mindfulness, our attention. But it's not so much trying to recognize the content of the thought—it's settling back, being aware as the thought arises, holding the question: what is a thought? We're really looking at the nature of thought itself, not at the content. And we begin to see very directly how empty and insubstantial it is. This is tremendously freeing, and it helps us to stay awake.

In one discourse, Ananda, who was the Buddha's cousin and his attendant for many years, and a great devotional type, was recounting all the marvelous qualities of the Buddha. You can just imagine the many, many marvelous qualities, and Ananda was recounting them with great devotion. Then the Buddha added one to the list. He said to Ananda, "This too should be remembered as one of the marvelous qualities: that the Tathagata"—which is how he referred to himself—"is aware of thoughts as they arise, abide, and pass away."

That's something. The Buddha was seeing this as one of the marvelous qualities of the Tathagata. And we can share in that marvelous quality. That's pretty good—simply by being aware of thoughts as they arise, abide, and pass away.

This is so much more profound than we realize, because in our lives, as I've mentioned, we are really living in a dream. It's only when we awaken to thoughts arising, abiding, and passing away that we begin to live in wakefulness. This is a practice you have all been doing, and we can all continue to do. It might be good to give it a little more emphasis, because it is a powerful deconditioning of craving. A deep investigation and mindfulness of the truth of the experience of change—really reflecting on that and seeing it in the moment—is a powerful deconditioning of craving. It's one of the ways we come to the end of craving, even for short moments. But short moments many times.

I think I mentioned this perhaps in part one: the recollection of impermanence can help us unhook from where we're caught in the mind. I was just remembering the very early days of my practice in India. I hadn't done much meditation at all, and I faced a lot of the very common problems—couldn't concentrate, the body hurt, all of the hindrances. I remember in those days being caught up in some mind drama or other and thinking to myself, "Joseph, in six months from now, you are not going to even remember what's going on now." I just extrapolated over time: not only six months, but five months, four months, three weeks, two weeks. Of course, these days it's about ten minutes. But that's not a meditative attainment.

If we can remember that whatever is arising—we may be going through what feels like the most intense drama, and we get so caught up in it, and it feels so real—but if we can remember and recollect in one way or another that it's just part of the passing show, that in a day or a week or two weeks or six months this condition will have changed countless times, when we can remember that, it's amazing how it allows the mind to let go of that identification, that grasping. We come back to a place of peace.

As we see more clearly the changing nature of phenomena—in one way, this is the major thrust of Vipassana practice—we're really refining our perception of change. We've talked about it in so many ways. We can be aware of an in-breath becoming an out-breath, but we can also be aware of the microscopic sensations within an in-breath or within a step. As we drop into the moment, our perception of change becomes more subtle, more refined.

As this happens and we really drop into seeing the rapid rise and passing away of phenomena, at times it can be exhilarating. It's as if we break through the sense of solidity and drop into the realm of energetic phenomena that's constantly changing, quickly changing, arising and passing away. It can get so dramatic, with everything seen on this momentary, microscopic level, that it often feels to yogis that no one else has ever experienced it quite like we have, because it's just so dramatic.

But this has a good name in the texts. It's called pseudo-nirvana, because we think, "Oh, this is it." And it is a powerful insight. But at this place, we need to proceed to the next step on the path, which again has a very apt name: discerning what is the path and what isn't the path. It's easy to get caught up in the excitement, even in the very wholesome states of mind that are arising at that time, because the mindfulness is strong, the concentration is strong, the rapture is strong. But at that particular place, until we discern what is the path and what is not the path, all those wholesome factors are actually called corruptions of insight, because we mistake them for being the ultimate peace instead of seeing them as just steps along the way.

With dedication to the practice, and sometimes with appropriate guidance at this point, we do discern what is the path and not the path. We just keep being mindful. And at a certain time, we begin to see everything dissolving and decaying and disappearing. This gets to be a difficult time in practice. It's very hard to land on an object because it's all disappearing. We get very uneasy. There's often a lot of despair here, or fear. We think that our practice is totally shot.

It's actually a deepening of the whole process, but we're not seeing it that way, not feeling it that way. But again, if we're just continuous in our practice, sincere in our practice, we just stay mindful of this state. Oh, there's fear, there's dismay, there's discouragement, whatever it is. We're not finding any stability in anything. It's not a happy time, but we can be mindful of that too.

And in time, with perseverance in the practice, we go through various other aspects of the path until the mind comes to a place of genuine and deep equanimity. At this place, the practice is just going on very smoothly. It's going on all by itself. It really doesn't require any effort at all. And in this place of equanimity, craving is greatly weakened because the mind is just not reaching out for anything. Equanimity means impartiality. Equanimity is likened to space because space can hold anything. Space doesn't care what arises within it. Space is impartial. The mind of equanimity is impartial. Things are pleasant, things are unpleasant, things are neutral—it's all equal.

One of the interesting things that happens at this time in practice, because of this profound equanimity, is that pleasant feelings begin to turn, become less predominant, and what becomes more predominant is neutral feeling. We're just feeling this great neutrality about what's arising. But what's interesting about this is we begin to feel neutral as more pleasing than pleasant. Before that, and mostly in our ordinary lives, we go for the pleasant because it's a strong hit of what we like. But as the mind gets

more refined and less reactive, we begin to experience neutral feeling as a more refined pleasure. Still, this is not the goal, but it's an interesting shift of perspective that takes place.

It's said that this experience of equanimity, when it's well developed, when it's really mature in our practice, is a foretaste of the fully enlightened mind. It's said that this is the kind of mind state that arahants, fully enlightened beings, abide in.

This is from Ajahn Jamnian, one of the great Thai meditation masters. He's visited mostly on the West Coast, taught at Spirit Rock a lot. Quite an amazing being. He said, "At some point the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content and all is seen as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own, a perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing."

So we've really come to a place of rest. Perhaps, I don't know how you related to the guided meditation this morning, but it was pointing to that place of equanimity of mind in which everything is arising and passing and there's no movement toward or away from anything.

Sometimes in our practice, especially at this stage of equanimity, all objects may disappear and all that's left is knowing. All that's left is awareness. But a lot of care is needed here because there can be a subtle attachment to this state itself, an identification with awareness. It becomes very easy to make a home of awareness and then to have a sense of self settle right into it. We realize all these other objects are just coming and going, they're not self, but I'm the one who's aware of it all. So this is a very subtle place of practice.

Andrew Olendzki, the senior scholar at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, has an amazingly creative mind and is a really great teacher. He had a wonderful line about awareness consciousness. He said, "Consciousness is not a thing that exists, but an event that occurs." I'm not exactly sure what he meant, but in reading it, something just opened up. It's not a thing that exists. It's an event that occurs. And so it helps to free the mind from identification with it.

The question for all of us as our practice goes on and deepens is: how do we cut the identification with knowing, with consciousness? Even as we begin to see the selfless nature, the changing nature of all other phenomena, how do we cut through this identification with knowing? Free ourselves from the idea of a knower, an observer?

Different traditions use different methods to cut through this identification. In this Burmese Vipassana tradition, the great teacher Mahasi Sayadaw spoke very directly to this. He said, "At times the number of different objects may shrink to one or two, or all may even disappear. However, at this time, the knowing consciousness is still present in this very clear, open space of the sky. There remains only one very clear blissful consciousness, which is very clear beyond comparison and very blissful. Yogis tend to delight in this clear blissful consciousness."

This is known as lust for the Dhamma. At this time, it simply has to be noticed: knowing, knowing, knowing. We actually become mindful of the knowing itself, noting it as a way of cutting through identification with it. This is one very powerful and traditional method of breaking that sense of self in the awareness.

In some Tibetan and Zen traditions, they cut through the identification with knowing using a different technique—one we've mentioned at different times during this retreat. In this approach, it's suggested that we look for the mind itself. Can we see it? Can we taste it? Can we touch it?

As a little experiment in this moment: can you find what's knowing the sound? We're all hearing it, but can we find what's knowing it? When we look—and sound is a particularly easy way to make this experiment—there's nothing to find, and yet the knowing is happening. During the day, especially when there might be many sounds and you're simply aware of them, you can explore this: Can you find what's knowing the sound?

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche used to say that the not finding is what is to be found—the recognition that it can't be found, that there is nothing to find. When we play with looking at the nature of mind itself, the nature of awareness itself, and recognize its unfindability, that becomes another way of cutting through identification with it.

There's a very famous Zen dialogue that illustrates this point. As most of you know, Bodhidharma is credited with bringing Buddhism from India to China. He was quite a fierce old Zen master. It's said he lived in a cave for seven or nine years, facing a wall. At some point during that time, a very ardent, sincere seeker named Huike came to him for teachings. Huike was suffering greatly, but Bodhidharma simply ignored him. It was winter, there was a blizzard, three feet of snow outside, and Huike just sat waiting for Bodhidharma to come out. In the dramatic telling of many Zen stories, it's said that Huike finally cut off his arm to demonstrate his sincerity, and then Bodhidharma emerged. Whether that's actually what happened, who knows.

But imagine the scene: here's this man in tremendous suffering, wanting desperately to understand, wanting to be free. Huike says, "My mind is distressed. Please pacify it with your teaching." Bodhidharma responds, "Present me your mind and I will pacify it." Huike says, "I've searched for my mind, but I can't find it"—which is exactly what we can do in our own practice: search for the mind and not find it. And then Bodhidharma declares, "There, I've pacified it."

This is a remarkable moment—to see that in the not finding, in the unfindability of the mind, it's already pacified. We can apply this many times a day. I've done this in my own practice, not only in formal retreat but in my life in the world. At those times when I feel the mind caught up in some kind of suffering or distress—it doesn't have to be anything dramatic, just caught up in one way or another, perhaps a little anxiety or worry—when this dialogue comes to mind, all I need to say to myself is "already pacified." It's shorthand for the whole exchange: look for the mind, can't find it, and in the recognition of its unfindability, the mind is already pacified. There's nothing more to do.

This is simply another method, another way. In any of these approaches, as equanimity matures, we reach a place where all the factors of awakening come into balance. At this time there's no craving, no yearning—not even for the next breath or the next moment of experience. The mind is genuinely already pacified.

So at a certain point in this place of equanimity, the flow of consciousness conditioned by changing objects—that consciousness which is arising dependent on changing objects—suddenly stops. And the mind opens to what the Buddha called nibbana, or the unconditioned, the unborn. In Pali, these moments are referred to as magapala, or path moments, fruition moments. These are called supermundane consciousness because they take nibbana as their object.

The path moment happens just once for each of the stages of enlightenment. This path moment, a single moment, has the power to uproot certain defilements from the mind, to permanently uproot them, and to weaken the remaining defilements. These are powerful moments. It's because of this function of these path moments that the Buddha described nibbana in this way: "And what, bhikkhus, is the unconditioned? The destruction of lust, the destruction of hatred, the destruction of delusion. This is what is called the unconditioned."

I like this because it is such a pragmatic expression of awakening. There could be all kinds of descriptions of different experiences, but this gets to the heart of it—the uprooting of greed, of hatred, and delusion. This becomes a very pragmatic assessment, not only of different meditative experiences, but of our entire path.

Many of you are seduced by arising thoughts of practice assessment. I call them the practice assessment tapes. If you can manifest the wonderful quality of the Buddha and simply see them arise, abide, and pass away, there's no problem. But if by chance you happen to get caught by these practice assessment tapes, the best assessment is really to look in one's practice, in one's life. Are the defilements getting weaker? Are they getting stronger? Not whether we're more aware of them, because hopefully we are, but really as we watch—and this will be very interesting as you go back into your life in a week or so—to truly see: has the mind weakened these elements, these defilements that cause suffering, or not? That's the measure of our practice.

When the Buddha speaks of the end of dukkha, he's not simply talking about being in a good mood. The freedom of nibbana, the weakening and destruction of the defilements, is not dependent on conditions being a certain way. If we can be at peace only when conditions are appealing to us, that's not freedom. Freedom means being able to be at peace with whatever the arising conditions are. And of course, this is what you've been practicing all of these weeks. Whatever is arising—it's pleasant, it's unpleasant, it's neutral—can the mind be at peace?

This comes through a gradual shift of understanding, this end of craving. For some very few people, it may come in just a moment's great enlightenment. For most of us, it's a gradual weakening of the defilements culminating in the uprooting of craving.

It's not surprising that different Buddhist traditions describe the unconditioned, describe nibbana, in different ways. In some traditions it's described as the cessation of consciousness, going beyond even awareness. The Thai forest tradition describes it differently. Ajahn Maha Boowa, one of the great Thai forest masters, speaks of it as the mind released. In this teaching, when the kilesas disappear through mindfulness and wisdom, then what remains, as he describes it, is simple awareness, utterly pure awareness. This awareness has no reference point, no center, it can't be located, it's unsupported, unconditioned, unconstructed—what he calls the ultimate ease.

But in both of these descriptions of nibbana—the cessation of consciousness, the ultimate ease—a lot of care is needed. Because when we're talking about the most subtle aspect of the Buddha's teachings, it's very easy to mistake certain states for others. We can mistake certain gaps of consciousness for being nibbana, for being magapala. But in the teachings, there are five different causes for gaps in consciousness. We can be sitting and going along and all of a sudden there's just this gap. "Oh, enlightened!" Well, maybe. But it can also come, as it's taught, that this gap in consciousness has come from an excess of calm, an excess of rapture, an excess of sloth, an excess of concentration.

When the mind is out of balance, we can experience a gap, or it can be a genuine moment of realization, of magapala, of opening to the unconditioned. But a lot of discernment is needed here. We really need to take care.

Likewise, in the other description of nibbana—the ultimate ease, the unconditioned awareness—it's very easy to mistake refined states of meditation for genuine freedom. One of the greatest descriptions of this is from Ajahn Maha Boowa describing his own enlightenment experience. It's very powerful because very few of these Asian monks

will speak so specifically about their own experience. So this is quite rare.

He said: "Once when I went to practice, the problem of unawareness or ignorance had me bewildered for quite some time. At that stage, the mind was so radiant that I came to marvel at its radiance. Everything of every sort which could make me marvel seemed to have gathered there in the mind, to the point where I began to marvel at myself. Why is it that my mind is so marvelous? Looking at the body, I couldn't see it at all. It was all space, empty. The mind was radiant in full force."

Just imagine. This radiance is the ultimate counterfeit, and at that moment it's the most conspicuous point. You hardly want to touch it at all because you love it and cherish it more than anything else. In the entire body, there is nothing more outstanding than this radiance, which is why you are amazed at it, love it, cherish it, dawdle over it, want nothing to touch it. But it's the enemy king—unawareness.

But luckily, as soon as he began to marvel at himself, to the point of exclaiming deludedly in the heart without being conscious of it, "Why has my mind come so far?"—at that moment, a statement of Dhamma spontaneously arose. This he hadn't anticipated. It suddenly appeared as if someone were speaking in the heart, although there was no one there speaking. It simply appeared as a statement: "If there is a point or a center of the knower anywhere, that is an agent of rebirth."

This is powerful—where he had reached this amazing place of radiance and openness, and then realized it was the ultimate counterfeit, the ultimate ignorance. The real freedom wasn't even there; it required cutting through any identification at all, even with that exquisite radiance. "If there is a point or a center of the knower anywhere, that is an agent of rebirth."

So in our practice, there is this whole vast path of understanding. As our practice of mindfulness and wisdom continues, we gradually weaken the defilements, weaken the power of craving, deconstruct the sense of self, until we can say in the end, as the Buddha did: "Realized is the unconditioned. Achieved is the end of craving."

However each of our practices unfolds—and it unfolds differently for each one of us—as we develop all the factors of awakening and deepen our understanding of the Four Noble Truths, our minds increasingly incline to the highest peace. Our minds incline to the end of craving.

I'd like to close with a few lines from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which sum up beautifully this third noble truth of the Buddha's teaching:

"A condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything. And all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."

CHAPTER 52

Seeing Our Goodness

Winnie Nazarko · 57 min

In this Thanksgiving evening talk, Winnie Nazarko addresses a crucial yet often neglected aspect of practice: recognizing and cultivating wholesome states of mind. Drawing from the four great endeavors (sammappadhāna), she focuses on the third and fourth efforts—arousing unarisen wholesome states and maintaining those already present. The talk explores why practitioners tend to overlook their goodness, examining both biological factors (our evolutionary negativity bias) and cultural conditioning that shapes self-view around external measures of worth rather than qualities of heart and mind.

Nazarko offers a comprehensive overview of wholesome states including mindfulness, the brahmavihāras (mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā), dāna, gratitude, the seven factors of enlightenment (bojjhaṅga), and the pāramīs. She presents the Buddhist personality types—greed (lobha), aversion (dosa), and delusion (moha)—and reveals how each, through practice, ripens into corresponding strengths: generosity and loving-kindness, wisdom, and equanimity respectively.

Practical methods for developing wholesome states are offered: brahmavihāra practice, reflection on one's wholesome qualities and actions, gratitude practice, maintaining sīla, and deliberately inclining attention toward noting beneficial states during meditation. The talk concludes with Ajahn Brahm's teaching story about the brick wall, illustrating how we fixate on our 'two bad bricks' while remaining blind to the hundreds of perfect ones—a powerful metaphor for transforming how we see ourselves.

Good evening to you all.

This is Thanksgiving evening, and the topic of the talk tonight is recognizing the good, recognizing the wholesome states which arise in the mind.

If you remember a while back, we talked about the four great endeavors. The first two of them have to do with unwholesome states: keeping unwholesome states from arising and abandoning them if they do arise. But the third and fourth of the great endeavors have to do with working in the field of wholesome states—supporting their arising, and maintaining and increasing them when they are present.

This is a very interesting area of practice, because for a number of reasons we seem to have a very hard time recognizing these and giving them equal valence or equal import in our practice. We very often seem to just skip over them, to not recognize them, to not acknowledge them, in some ways to not even value them. We seem to orient towards the hindrances, towards noticing what's problematic in the mind stream.

I always like to start by defining terms. To define the wholesome states, we would say that they are states that have their roots in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion—which is another way of saying generosity or renunciation, loving-kindness, and wisdom. These states are considered to be wholesome because they are for our benefit and well-being and for the benefit and well-being of others in this relative realm. But they're also significant because they lead us in the direction of liberation, of ultimate release of the mind. So they have not only relative and practical benefit, but they're a sign, a pointing to, a trail of beauty if you wish, towards the ultimate freedom, which is the pointing of the whole Buddhist teachings.

So let's give some examples of what these are.

Mindfulness, of course, is one of them. Mindfulness always arises in conjunction with wholesome states, all wholesome states. So in order for these others to be wholesome, you should understand that it's assumed mindfulness is their companion, is part of the experience.

In addition to mindfulness, there are the states that are practiced in doing the Brahma Viharas: metta, which is friendliness; karuna, compassion; mudita, empathetic joy; and upekkha, equanimity. These are also wholesome states.

Dana, or generosity, is another. The state of generosity could be the doing of a generous deed, but it could also be a thought of generosity, or the state of mind that regards things in a generous way.

Gratitude is a wholesome state. Wise attention is a wholesome state.

The seven factors of enlightenment, which we haven't talked about so much in these talks, are also very much a part of this. The seven factors of enlightenment include mindfulness—it's kind of the kickoff—and then investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. You may be noticing at this point in the list there's a certain kind of repetition going on. Some of these are turning up in more than one of these lists.

Insight into the three characteristics is a state of wisdom and is a wholesome state.

The four bases of power: the aspiration for liberation, virya which is a kind of courageous effort, clear mind, and investigation.

The five spiritual faculties, also known as the five spiritual powers when they've ripened and strengthened: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom.

The paramis are the perfections of mind: generosity; morality, better known as sila; renunciation; wisdom; effort; truthfulness—a very interesting one. You could say in a way this whole practice is a practice of the truth, the truth of what is directly known. Then resolve; loving-kindness, metta again; patience; equanimity again.

The five controlling faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom.

Two that Pascal talked about the other night: moral restraint due to self-respect —"I'm not going to do that because I don't want to be that way"—and moral restraint due to respect for others—"I'm not going to do that because that's not right to do to someone."

So that's a list of them, and you get a sense of what the range is. They can come up in a number of different combinations. You can have a number of these states arising as mental factors at the same time, giving the experience a different flavor.

For instance, you could have an experience of generosity arise in the mind along with the experience of metta being present, a feeling of care and concern, and then accompanying that, the impulse to do something, to give something, to offer something. Or you could have the experience of resolve and truthfulness be present while sila, the impulse towards right speech, is there, giving you the power to say the truth, to stand in an upright place of integrity and say what must be said.

So many beautiful combinations are possible with these unique mandalas. But we don't see them so often. I want to focus a good part of the talk on that fact—that we don't see them, or we discount them.

These states are easily overlooked, and the question is why. One reason is that they're often quite familiar to us because we have many of these states every day. Their relative prevalence may actually cause them to become somewhat invisible to us.

There is so much everyday goodness that we take for granted in others and also in ourselves.

I was driving through one of the small towns around here this week. As I drove down the road, there was a sign—handmade, hand-painted, colorful, looking like it was made on a piece of poster board or foam core. It was mounted on a telephone pole, and it caught my eye. As I drove back by, I noticed it said something like, "Thanks to all the people who helped our son."

I had a few seconds of puzzlement. Right out on the side of the road—it didn't seem apropos of anything. And then I realized I was driving by the gates of a cemetery. Suddenly I had an intuition about why that sign might be there. Someone's son had passed away. There was a funeral. People who were part of their friendship system, part of the community that supported them, had been part of that funeral. And the family put that sign there so it would be seen when people came for the burial.

Everyday kindness. People don't even think about it—of course you would extend yourself to a family you knew facing that kind of situation. It's no big deal. We usually don't experience these states as problematic either, and we tend to be oriented toward problems. This is another reason for their relatively low profile. They're not necessarily dramatic or riveting—not the way, for instance, a good hindrance storm is. There is nothing like the arising of all the *kilesas* simultaneously in a strong and prolonged manner to catch the attention of the mind. Those are vivid. Sometimes these wholesome states aren't so vivid.

And sometimes the mind has to be at a certain level of subtlety to even recognize them, at least in part because often these states are primarily mental. They might not have the vivid expression in the body that a good old state of rage might have, or a strong bout with craving where you can hardly keep yourself on the cushion for the thought of what you'd like to do as soon as the sitting is over.

Another reason we often overlook these states is that we may recognize on some level that we do have these experiences, but we hold a kind of "yes, but" attitude toward them. We might not want to be inflated—egoically inflated—by the experience of these states, or to be seen as bragging. Very often we're aware of our imperfections, and we approach our mindstream in a very binary way. If it's not ninety percent pure, it doesn't count. The good things don't count. The wholesome states don't really count because other things arise too as part of our knowing. So we wouldn't want to be tooting our horn, as the idiom goes in American culture. We do a lot of it, but theoretically you're not supposed to.

There's also some suggestion that there might be a biological basis underpinning this relatively low profile for the wholesome states. If we're going to ask the question—is there a biological basis toward the arising of unwholesome states and toward noticing unwholesome states rather than wholesome ones—we would have to say, probably.

There's a researcher named Rick Hanson who wrote a very interesting book called *Buddha's Brain*. He also does some Buddhist teaching on the West Coast. What he has to say about the nature of the brain and how it often functions is very much on point here.

He writes: "Imagine our mammalian ancestors dodging dinosaurs in a worldwide Jurassic Park seventy million years ago, constantly looking over their shoulders, alert to the slightest crackle of brush, ready to freeze or bolt or attack depending on the situation. The quick and the dead. If they failed to duck a stick which looked a little bit like a predator, they'd probably be killed. The ones that lived to pass on their genes paid a lot of attention to negative experiences."

So he's talking about our progenitors. This is our ancestral tree—the nervous ones.

He continues: "Your brain has a built-in negativity bias that primes you for avoidance. This makes you suffer in a variety of ways. For starters, it generates an unpleasant background of anxiety, which for some people can be quite intense. Anxiety also makes it harder to bring attention inward for self-awareness or contemplative practice, since the brain keeps scanning to make sure there's no problem. The negativity bias fosters or intensifies other unpleasant emotions such as anger, sorrow, depression, guilt, and shame. It highlights past losses and failures. It downplays present abilities and exaggerates future obstacles. Consequently, the mind continually tends to render unfair verdicts about a person's character, conduct, and possibilities."

So there's a reason that suffering catches our attention. There seems to be something inborn, given our biological setup and the heritage we have as mammals of the surviving, quick, and nervous tribe. That's part of it.

But I think there's a whole other dimension to this, which is the role of social conditioning in forming self-view—in forming it in a way that's negative.

The majority culture has a very big role in shaping how we view ourselves and how we judge ourselves. I realize not everyone here is from a Western culture, but Western culture is the one I know best, so I'll speak about that, particularly as it manifests in the United States. I think it could fairly be described as hyper-competitive and hyper-individualistic, with the self being seen as a closed system—a standalone, isolated being set off against and graded against all others.

We've said earlier that fixed self-view, in the Buddhist understanding, is problematic. All fixed self-view has within it delusion, but some self-views are more deluded than others. The description I just gave of how Western culture shapes the mind is an example of a particular kind of distortion that is very problematic.

If you consider our egoic identity, it's really a construct of conditioned views and beliefs which we draw from the larger culture. We also draw it from our individual families and from life experiences, but to speak for a moment about the larger culture: if we looked at what it emphasizes in values and markets, it would be something like power, youth, attractiveness, wealth, success, popularity, and fulfillment in sense pleasures. Our self-identity, our egoic view, is assembled growing up in the matrix of this particular value system. And if you don't believe me, when you leave, turn on television for a while, or go online and see what the dangling shiny carrots are that are being used to sell things.

If the egoic self-identity is formed within this matrix, it tends to adopt these beliefs and preferences very often in a way that is unseen, unconscious. We're constantly being fed this—often in the community, often by the media, in school, in many different kinds of environments.

There's a new field now called neuromarketing. Has anyone heard of this? Different versions of sales pitches are presented to test subjects, and their brain activity and physical responses are examined so that the people researching these products can determine which approach really rings that chime and makes you feel that you have to have it, or you have to do it, or you have to be it. This is a very interesting infiltration into our formerly private and somewhat secluded minds.

We all have many ideas, feelings, thoughts, wishes, hopes, expectations, aspirations, longings, aversions, repulsions, comparisons, standards—conscious and unconscious—that are deeply conditioned. If we can see them as they are, without adding identification and a narrative around them, that narrative having a great big "I" in the middle, it's not really a problem. But very often we don't see them and we don't recognize their source. We just feel the discontent with how we are, without understanding that it's a conditioned response.

When we don't see these things, don't understand them to be conditioned and to be coming, at least in their initial genesis, from sources outside of ourselves, we're very easily taken in. These things become the measuring stick by which we determine whether or not we're okay, whether we deserve love, respect, and compassion. And really, who can ever measure up to what's being sold as necessary?

It was very revelatory when it became more public knowledge that pictures of models used in magazines and online are all altered—digitally changed to improve upon the appearance of individuals who probably already represent the zenith of the cultural ideal of physical beauty. Even that isn't good enough. They have to be fixed up, further improved upon. And yet these are the standards against which we tend to make decisions about whether or not we're okay. That's just a blatant example.

These conditioned views can really make us prone to see our real or imagined deficiencies rather than our goodness and good qualities. If you consider what I said I thought the cultural values were, you might notice there was nothing in what I listed that had anything to do with wholesome qualities of mind at all. It's not even on the measuring stick, is it? What did I say? Power, youth, attractiveness, wealth, success, popularity, happiness, and satisfaction found in and limited to sense pleasures. That's a long way from the Brahma Viharas, isn't it?

So it's no wonder we don't see the wholesome qualities. The mind is not turned toward looking there.

One of the names of a younger Western sangha—and I think there might be some people from this sangha here—is Against the Stream. Dharma practice is, in a number of senses, against the stream.

So then the question becomes: how do you practice with wholesome states? Let's say we see that trying to conform to these cultural norms is nuts and has no lasting value, only a lot of suffering. We see that's not the way. As Saint Matthew would say, do not store up your treasures here on earth, but seek what is lasting. If we were going to cultivate unarisen wholesome states, how could we do it?

What would we do? Brahma-Vihara practice. This is a very powerful method. One fruit of the Brahma-Vihara practice is a foundational, reliable loyalty and goodwill towards the self and towards other beings—an instinctual, reflexive, reliable loyalty to the self and to others. That would be a very important baseline to have in relationship to any kind of self-view. If there's a basic, stable respect and care for the self, kindness is available in practice periods of difficulty and in life experiences of difficulty. There's a kind of reliability to the mind, a kind of sense that the mind on a very deep level is an ally and an asset, and won't turn on you when it gets tough. And it does get very tough in the course of a life from time to time.

So let's talk about something that is related to this Brahma-Vihara practice, as well as insight practice—but the Brahma-Vihara practice in particular—which has to do with the ripening of the three Buddhist personality types. There's been some mention of this

in the talks, a little bit here and there. You didn't have a full-blown talk on this, did you? On the Buddhist personality types? I know that I've talked about this in interviews with a number of people, but I'll put this out for general consideration because it's useful. It helps to objectify our understanding of what particular kind of condition, what pattern of suffering we have. It's not that it's who we are—it's what our mind tends to do, what our mind tends to notice, and how our mind tends to react to vedanā in particular.

All three of the unwholesome roots of suffering—greed, aversion, and delusion—are present in us until the mind is fully liberated. There's some expression of this, there's some experience of this, and there's some identification with this. We all have all three—greed, aversion, and delusion—but we do tend to specialize. There tends to be one which is dominant. And some of the people I've worked with who have known about this from previous teachings or experience, when we've talked about it, I'll say, "Do you know which of the Buddhist personality types you are?" "Oh, yeah, totally greed. Greed all the way." "Yeah, I'm aversive. I'm really aversive." "I'm not sure. I thought I might be, but then I thought, no... but how many of them are there again? Maybe deluded. I might be deluded."

But to go through them in sequence and to talk about how they can be transformed, let's start with a basic description. We'll begin with the greed or lobha types. The conditioning for these beings, where this is the dominant conditioning—and this is not like your fixed or essential nature or anything, this is conditioning—they tend to crave what's pleasant. They orient towards what they believe will provide gratification and satisfaction, and they try to get it and keep it. They're always looking for more or better, nicer. This is the suffering of thirsting, or taṇhā—that craving, that burning to get. When it's burning, it becomes clear that this is a state of suffering. At lower levels of experiencing greed or craving, it's not necessarily that clear to the mind that there's suffering going on, especially if the mind still thinks it might get it. The fantasy is alive and very interesting.

The second type is the aversive type, which tends to notice what's unpleasant and/or threatening. This is the dosa type. The conditioned response here is to keep an eye out for what's wrong with what they're experiencing, and then they try to flee it or attack it. There's the aversive type that wants to run away, and then there's the aversive type that wants to do something about it. This is the suffering of not wanting something, not wanting things, bracing against what's happening.

Then the deluded types, moha, don't necessarily notice either pleasant or unpleasant unless it's strong, nor do they notice neutral. There was a talk on delusion one of the Saturdays, wasn't there? Which pretty much spells it out—given by, interestingly enough, quite a brilliant being.

So it makes clear that this has nothing to do with intelligence. Often deluded types are lost, unsure what's going on. And if they do know what the immediate experience is, they don't know what to make of it. This is the suffering of delusion.

As I said, we all have all three of these tendencies. It's just that one of them tends to be in the foreground.

So that's the bad news. But the good news is that each of these types, with bhavana—with mental development and the spiritual growth and insight that comes with it—manifests certain gifts. Spiritual practice is a bit like applying compost to a rose plant. It causes the rose part to grow, but not the thorns. The thorny part tends to wither, and then some of the strengths within the type start to manifest. The tendencies of mind are still there, but they're repurposed, if you want to put it that way, in an interesting way.

The being that has a tendency toward greed develops in the direction of generosity and loving-kindness. Why would that be? Because this mind is already oriented toward seeing what's of value, what's beautiful. When the mind isn't sticky any longer, when the craving aspect of this tendency is ameliorated, it becomes prone to share what it appreciates, taking happiness in the pleasantness of sharing with others and seeing their goodness. So it ripens in the direction of metta.

The aversive mind ripens in the direction of wisdom. Why? Because it tends to see what could be changed to improve the functioning of things, how things could work together or might work together. It tends to see causation. When the mind isn't reactively running away or striking out, it's clear and able to identify skillful action.

The deluded mind develops in the direction of equanimity. Why? Because it's not reactive to either pleasant or unpleasant. It's not driven toward or away from things by vedana. When it becomes clear, it's able to see pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral without bias or preference—just things, just the way they are, with balance, which is a definition of equanimity.

This kind of ripening of the hidden potentials of the mind is an indicator of spiritual growth. It's the product of spiritual practice.

So that's all about the brahmaviharas and their role in cultivating and supporting the development of these wholesome states of mind.

Another thing that can be done to bring these states forward and develop them is to reflect on our wholesome qualities and actions. I consider this kind of like pump priming. When you're trying to get water out of a pump, sometimes you have to work the handle for a while before anything comes out of the nozzle.

Reflection on wholesome qualities and deeds—this is really hard, very often, for people to do. When I ask people to tell me what their wholesome qualities are, they frequently can't come up with anything. You're here on a silent meditation retreat for three months or six weeks, and you can't squeak something out? Maybe there might be something related to goodness present for somebody who would come to do something like this for three months or six weeks—maybe just one or two little things?

Goodness can often be a shadow side for us. This is very interesting. Often we think that our shadow side has to do with deep secrets of bad things we're keeping down and suppressing because they're too threatening. But there's this whole other kind of not seeing, not recognizing, that has to do with what's wholesome and good.

This is actually a commonly given practice in some traditional settings. I remember Joseph telling a story about how he was practicing in Asia, I think with Sayadaw U Pandita. At one point Sayadaw said to him, "You should go and reflect on your sila." His first reaction was, "My sila? I need to reflect on my sila?" And then he realized what was really being said: reflect on your upstanding moral nature. Sayadaw didn't say "and you have one"—he took it for granted.

It's very interesting how that falls on the ear, isn't it? "Go to your room and think about what you did."

The Buddha says, "Whatever one frequently thinks upon and ponders upon, that will be the inclination of the mind." It's very useful to become aware of our wholesome experiences, states, qualities, and deeds for this reason—because it increases them. When wholesome qualities become conscious, they increase, they're supported, they're strengthened.

Another practice is gratitude practice.

Annie gave a beautiful reflection on gratitude this morning, and this is another practice that's very skillful. The Buddha says that gratitude is the primary sign of a person of integrity—an interesting statement. A person of integrity, meaning someone who is truthful and is able to recognize and acknowledge what has been given, what has been received from others.

Gratitude practice is skillful because it turns the mind towards an awareness of what is already present and available that is good and useful. The mind becomes able to identify some gifts, some riches that are present, some assets that are there, even if there are problems. This helps to move the mind out of that feeling of scarcity and recognize that there is grace here, and there is beauty. Generosity towards self and towards others becomes possible because the heart and mind are no longer compressed by a feeling of lack.

If you wanted to do one practice as a daily practice to take home, gratitude practice—keeping a gratitude journal—can be quite transformative. It orients the mind towards noticing, recognizing, and acknowledging what there is to be grateful for.

Other practices related to developing and cultivating wholesome states of mind include maintaining sila, the basic practice of the ethical trainings. There's the practice of dana, the practice of generosity, of giving, of offering. There's the practice of the paramis, the perfections of mind. And in all of this, of course, mindfulness has this most amazing ecological effect, because the presence of mindfulness has the effect of weakening unwholesome states while supporting the arising, strengthening the occurrence, and increasing the frequency of wholesome ones. That's one of the reasons mindfulness is spoken of as a safeguard, a great protector of mind.

So the last of the great endeavors: maintaining wholesome states already arisen. How can you do that? You can incline the mind towards noting the presence of wholesome states. You could do it within this context, for instance, by taking a sitting—or a number of sittings, or a day, or a week—and basically inclining the mind at the beginning of the sitting to notice and to note the presence of wholesome states. Just in the way you could start a sitting by saying, "I'm going to note the arising or the passing away of phenomena," or "I'm going to notice the presence of not-self"—in that same way you can take a resolve or incline the mind to notice the presence of wholesome states.

Another thing you can do is to reflect on these states as beneficial and significant. Their arising is a good thing, a very wholesome thing, even when there aren't fireworks present. When we cultivate what's in our interest, we enter into a kind of virtuous spiral where the seeds are being planted for these kinds of states to arise more and more frequently, more of them, in stronger and stronger forms. If we recognize them, name them, note them, mindfulness will increase their occurrence.

You can notice their vedana, which is often pleasant, sometimes neutral. We can allow whatever sensations are there to be present and to be known. These sensations that accompany wholesome states are often pleasant, if subtle. A wholesome pleasant is

nothing to run away from. You can even invite them to remain. It only becomes unskillful if you're grasping and clinging and clawing, trying to get them to stay. They, of course, are impermanent like anything else you can experience, and at a certain point that state will dissolve. But if mindfulness is present, it could very well be followed by another wholesome state. And the more mindfulness is present, the more likely that is going to be the case.

In thinking of the practice horizon long-term, it's important to know that over time the mix of mind states we experience changes. There are more and more wholesome states and fewer unwholesome ones. The wholesome states last longer and are deeper. The unwholesome ones move through more quickly. And that's the way the practice develops and works with the existing ecology of the mind.

So just to close tonight with a little bedtime story for you—or nearly bedtime story. This is by Ajahn Brahm:

"After we purchased the land for our monastery in 1983, we were broke. We were in debt. There were no buildings on the land, not even a shed. Those first few weeks we slept not on beds but on old doors we'd bought cheaply from the salvage yard. We raised them on bricks at each corner to lift them off the ground. There were no mattresses, of course—we were forest monks. The abbot had the best door, the flat one. My door was ribbed with a sizable hole in the center where the doorknob would have been. I joked that now I wouldn't need to get out of bed to go to the toilet. The cold truth was, however, that the wind would come up through that hole."

I didn't sleep much those nights.

We were poor monks who needed buildings. We couldn't afford to employ a builder—the materials were expensive enough. So I had to learn how to build: how to prepare foundations, lay concrete and bricks, erect the roof, put in the plumbing, the whole lot. I'd been a theoretical physicist and high school teacher in lay life, not used to working with my hands.

After a few years, I became quite skilled at building, even calling my crew the BBC—the Buddhist Building Company. But when I started, it was very difficult. It may look easy to lay a brick: a dollop of mortar underneath, a little tap here, a little tap there. But when I began laying bricks, I'd tap one corner down to make it level and the other corner would go up. So I'd tap that corner down and the brick would move out of line. After I'd nudge it back into line, the first corner would be too high again. You try it.

Being a monk, I had patience and as much time as I needed. I made sure every single brick was perfect, no matter how long it took. Eventually, I completed my first brick wall and stood back to admire it. It was only then that I noticed—oh no—I'd missed two bricks. All the other bricks were nicely in line, but these two were inclined at an angle. They looked terrible. They spoiled the whole wall. They ruined it.

By then the cement mortar was too hard for the bricks to be taken out. So I asked the abbot if I could knock the wall down and start over again—I did have time on my hands. Or even better, perhaps blow it up. I'd made a mess of it and I was very embarrassed. The abbot said no, the wall had to stay.

When I showed our first visitors around our fledgling monastery, I always tried to avoid taking them past my brick wall. I hated anyone seeing it. Then one day, some three or four months after I'd finished it, I was walking with a visitor and he saw the wall.

"That's a nice wall," he casually remarked.

"Sir," I replied in surprise, "have you left your glasses in your car? Are you visually impaired? Can't you see those two bad bricks which spoil the whole wall?"

What he said next changed my whole view of that wall, of myself, and of many other aspects of life. He said, "Yes, I can see those two bad bricks. But I can see the nine hundred and ninety-eight good bricks as well."

I was stunned. For the first time in over three months, I could see the other bricks in that wall apart from the two mistakes. Above, below, to the left and to the right of the bad bricks were good bricks—perfect bricks. Moreover, the perfect bricks were many, many more than the two bad bricks. Before, my eyes would focus exclusively on my two mistakes. I was blind to everything else. That was why I couldn't bear looking at that wall, or having others see it, and it was why I wanted to destroy it.

Now I could see that the good bricks far outnumbered the flawed ones. The wall didn't look so bad after all. It was, as the visitor had said, a nice brick wall. It's still there now, twenty years later, but I've forgotten exactly where those bad bricks are. I literally cannot see those mistakes anymore.

How many of us become depressed, or even contemplate suicide, because all we can see in ourselves are two bad bricks? In truth, there are many, many more good bricks—perfect bricks—above, below, to the left and to the right of the faults. But at times we

just can't see them. Instead, every time we look, our eyes focus exclusively on the mistakes. The mistakes are all we see, they're all we think there are, and so we want to destroy them. And sometimes, sadly, we do destroy a very nice wall.

We've all got our two bad bricks. But the perfect bricks in each one of us are much, much more than the mistakes. Once we see this, things aren't so bad.

So my wish for you all is that you become conscious of the many aspects and experiences of goodness that arise within you, and which are part of you—and that you not be deceived by the voice of Māra.

CHAPTER 53

Finding Joy and Happiness Through Renunciation

Chas DiCapua · 48 min

> *In this talk from the three-month retreat at IMS, Chas DiCapua addresses a fundamental question in Buddhist practice: why does the heart often resist renunciation when it promises the very happiness we seek? Drawing from the Aṅguttara Nikāya's sutta "Contrary to Popular Opinion," he explains the Buddha's insight that our hearts don't leap up at renunciation because we haven't truly seen the drawbacks of sense pleasures nor experienced the rewards of letting go.*
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> *DiCapua introduces the Pāli term nibbidā (disenchantment) and uses the traditional teaching of the dog and the bone to illustrate that the problem isn't with sense objects themselves, but with our mistaken belief that they can provide lasting happiness. He emphasizes that liberation comes through clear seeing rather than willpower, quoting Ajahn Chah: "If you let go a little bit, you'll have a little bit of happiness. If you let go completely, you'll have complete happiness."*
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> *The talk offers practical guidance for working with renunciation in daily life across five areas: speech, food, entertainment, sleep, and material possessions. DiCapua presents a gentle three-week template for approaching any habitual behavior—pausing to ask "what's happening?" while feeling into body, heart, and mind. This gradual approach reduces rebellion and provides crucial information about our underlying motivations. Throughout, he stresses self-compassion, reminding practitioners that wisdom itself does the letting go when we see clearly.*

Part of me doesn't want to talk. It's so quiet in here. It would be nice to just sit with you for an hour. It's really so nice in this hall. I know oftentimes the teachers will say that, but coming in from engaging in the world and walking into this hall is just fabulous. So thank you for that.

The title of the talk tonight is Finding Joy and Happiness Through Renunciation.

All sentient life wants to be happy. It's a built-in thing—deeply happy. And we can feel, we can notice and experience, that our current way of connecting with life isn't exactly fulfilling that desire for happiness fully. There is a gap. Is the problem that we

want to be happy? No, of course not. So then what is the problem? Why is there that gap, and how can it be solved? These two questions—what is the problem and how can it be solved—are really what gets answered by the teachings of the Buddha.

There is one sutta where the Buddha and Ananda are together in a forest. I'm paraphrasing here. The Buddha says to Ananda, "Are there many or few leaves in this huge forest that you're in?" Ananda says, "There are many, Lord." And the Buddha says something like, "That's what I know"—that's the vastness of the Buddha's omniscient knowledge. Then he bends down and picks up a handful of leaves and says, "Ananda, are there many or few leaves here?" Ananda says, "Few, Lord." The Buddha says, "This is what I teach"—compared to all the leaves in the forest or all his knowledge. And he said it is this that he teaches because it has to do with suffering and its end. If it doesn't have to do with that, he doesn't teach it. So really the teachings are about what is the problem and how can it be solved.

Of course, the teachings are summed up in the Four Noble Truths. They spell out what the problem is, what causes it, how it can be solved, and that it can be solved. The problem isn't that we want to be happy. It's how we're going about trying to fulfill that wanting to be happy.

The second noble truth says that the reason we have dissatisfaction with our lives is due to craving. Craving for sense pleasures, which includes thoughts—pleasant thoughts. Craving for becoming: "I'll be happy when this comes to be." Craving for not becoming: "I'll be happy when this stops coming to be."

An important part in finding this happiness that all sentient life wants, that we want so deeply, lies in understanding—not intellectually, but from our own experience—how this craving manifests in our own heart and mind. Actually really seeing that, studying that, investigating it. This is the purification stage of the practice that I spoke about in the talk some weeks ago, when we're actually seeing the mechanisms of craving and how it arises. We can then use that understanding to develop skillful means to let that craving come and let it go.

Really, much of this practice is about letting go. I'm not sure if I mentioned this in another talk, but I heard one teacher say that the yogi who sits down to meditate for the first time and the yogi who is one mind moment away from enlightenment are doing the same practice of letting go, just on different levels of subtlety.

So what is it exactly that we're letting go of? The mistaken belief that we are a separate self and that our happiness lies outside our own heart and mind. It's the mistaken belief, or you could say the wrong view, that we can find lasting happiness through in-

dulging in sense pleasures. This is the description of samsara—continually trying to get lasting happiness from sense pleasures. The way to end this problem, the way to end the cycle of samsara, is to let go of that craving. The freedom is found through non-clinging.

For the remainder of the talk, I'm going to concentrate on this process of letting go, or renunciation. If it's craving that keeps us from our true happiness, why do we do it so much? Why don't we just renounce, be done with it, and be happy? We want to be happy. We know what we have to do. Why don't we just renounce and be happy?

In the Anguttara Nikaya, in the nines, the Buddha answers this question for us. The title of the sutta is "Contrary to Popular Opinion."

The venerable Ananda, together with Tapusa the householder, went to see the Blessed One, and on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One, "Tapusa the householder here has said to me, 'Venerable Ananda, Sir, we are householders who indulge in sensuality, delight in sensuality, enjoy sensuality, rejoice in sensuality. For us, indulging, delighting, enjoying, rejoicing in sensuality, renunciation seems like a sheer drop off.'"

Sometimes I'm sure we can appreciate that.

"'Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline, the hearts of the very young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace.'"

So right here is where this doctrine and discipline is contrary to the great mass of people—this issue of renunciation.

"So it is, Ananda, so it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisattva, thought, 'Renunciation is good, seclusion is good,' but my heart did not leap up at renunciation, did not grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace. The thought occurred to me, 'What is the cause, the reason why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace?' Then the thought occurred to me, 'I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that theme. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation. I haven't familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace.' And then the thought occurred to me, 'If, having seen the drawback of sensual pleasures, I were to pursue that theme, and if, having understood the reward of renunciation, I would familiarize myself with it, there is the possibility that my heart would leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace.'"

There's a Pali term that embodies the wisdom in this sutta, and it is nibbida. It breaks down into the prefix "without" and the root verb "to find." So it means "without finding" or "not finding."

There's a story from the Buddha's time that shows this teaching quite clearly. It's about the dog and the bone. There's a dog that's hungry, and it's trotting around looking for something to eat. It sees a bone, goes over, and picks it up. This bone, by the way, is a very bleached-out bone. It's been there a long, long time. There's no meat on it, no blood on it, nothing. It's just white. But the dog picks it up, chews on it a little bit, and then spits it out on the ground. There was nothing there for it.

The important thing to understand with this story, and really with the teaching of renunciation in general, is that the problem isn't with the bone. There's nothing wrong with it. It's just being a bone. It's not doing anything wrong. It's what it is. It's just that it won't satisfy the dog's hunger for meat or for food. It's not possible for it, being what it is.

Being what sense pleasures are, just being what they are by their very nature, it's not possible for them to satisfy—this is the analogy—our desire for happiness. The problem isn't with the sense objects. It's just that, like the bone and the dog, they can't provide us with the happiness that we're after. And the reason they can't is because the pleasure associated with them doesn't last.

Remember, we're talking about pleasure—pleasant, unpleasant—and deep happiness. Those two are not the same thing. Suzuki Roshi said, "True renunciation is not giving up the things of the world, but in knowing that they go away."

The reason we can't find lasting happiness in sense objects is because they don't last. They're changing constantly. There's also the subtle or not-so-subtle agitation that's bound up in the acquisition, the going after sense pleasures. It's not a calm state.

The happiness that we long for isn't the temporary happiness of sense pleasures, nor is it the agitated excitement bound up with the thinking about them and the trying to acquire them. It's the ease of having let go.

As Ajahn Chah said, "If you let go a little bit, you'll have a little bit of happiness. You let go a lot, you'll have a lot of happiness."

If you let go completely, you'll have complete happiness, and your troubles with the world will be over. So that's pretty clear.

It's not possible for sense pleasures to give us what we want. And when we see that—or when we begin to see that, because it's not just an on-or-off switch, it's a process—as we begin to see that, we begin to invest less of our happiness in them. This is the key: to start to loosen our grip on the belief, the wrong view, that we can actually find happiness in them.

This also explains why we can have such an adversarial relationship with renunciation. Don't we have difficulty giving up the things that we get so much pleasure from? As the Buddha said, when we don't see the drawbacks of the sense pleasures themselves and the grasping for them, why would we want to give them up? If we don't see the drawbacks and they give us so much pleasure, why would we want to give them up? Where would that intention to give them up come from?

Also, if there's a sense that we have to give something up, often we'll rebel. We don't like to be told what to do by other people or ourselves. We can mistake renunciation to mean giving up the sense pleasure itself, but what it really means is giving up the suffering that's bound up in wanting them when we're not mindful of that.

Why don't we see this? Because we haven't seen the suffering bound up in our attachment to them. We haven't, as the Buddha said, seen clearly into the drawbacks of sense pleasures.

Now, if the problem isn't with the sense pleasure—the bone or whatever—but with the attachment to them, does that mean that we can eat all the ice cream we want and not suffer? I can't say. We can't really say. Only we ourselves know when we're becoming attached, when we're placing our hope for happiness where it's not to be found. Only we can know that.

But this knowing—and this is what you've been doing for six weeks or three months—this knowing takes practice and time. It's why we're developing mindfulness, so we can see this process clearly.

I didn't own a TV for many, many years, maybe like twenty-five years. Partially, or mostly, because I knew that I would probably get into the habit of watching it when I really didn't want to. I just kind of knew—best not to have one. But now I do have one. At some point I felt like I could do this, I could have this and not go overboard with it. Also, I got one because there is this kind of subtle sense of identification with a person who doesn't own a TV at Krypton. That's not what we're here to do—change one identification for another.

So even though what we're really giving up is the view that sense pleasures can fulfill us, at times it can be helpful to actually renounce the sense pleasure itself. Again, only we can know where that line is—when we can work with something and have some sense of balance in our life with it, and when it's not possible, and it would be best just to remove that from our life somehow.

Now, what's great about all of this is that we don't necessarily have to use willpower to let it go. Using exclusively willpower is a form of aversion that pits mind against mind. It's not exactly the way we want to practice. If we're just using willpower, there can be a violence with that. And in the end, if it's only willpower and not wisdom, it's probably not going to work.

In fact, we actually don't have to struggle to try to let go or give up anything. What a relief. Think about that—not struggling. Think of all the ways we struggle with ourselves: I should do this, I shouldn't do that. The critical voice, the critical mind. It can be so prevalent.

But we need to do something, right? We need to do something a little different than we have been, because what we've been doing has gotten us where we are right now. And that's not cutting it. That's not doing it for us. It's not bringing us the happiness that we so want, or we wouldn't be here.

So yes, we don't just use willpower, but we do need to do something. And that something is to see clearly from our own experience how the suffering is bound up, how it's inherent in seeking happiness in sense pleasures.

It's not like you engage in seeking and then suffering comes afterwards. The suffering is bound up in the seeking itself. As we're seeking, it's already there. So we simply want to look deeply and see this more and more clearly as it's happening. This is our practice of vipassana meditation—to see clearly. And that's where we need to focus our efforts.

Yes, the Buddha's last words were "Strive on. All conditioned things are impermanent. Strive on with diligence." He didn't say, "Well, just lay back and take it easy." He really was saying there's a lot to do here. But where do we put that energy? Where is it directed? We want to direct it towards mindfulness and clear seeing, not merely towards manipulating outer circumstances. "I don't own a TV, therefore I must be free"—that doesn't mean anything. It just means you don't own a TV. But we can mistake it. We can put our energies into manipulating outer circumstances, which for a time might be helpful, but it's in the clear seeing that we want to invest our efforts.

It's the seeing that's going to liberate us, not the struggling. If it were only a matter of willpower and struggle, if it were just that and we simply needed to do it enough, well, we could apply the strength of our will, or if we happen to have a good work ethic, we could apply that and—voilà—we would be free. But when we undertake the Dharma path, we enter a realm where the intellect and willpower play only a minor role. It's much more about seeing things as they are and being mindful.

So not seeing the drawbacks of sense pleasures is one reason why the heart does not leap up at renunciation. Now this isn't in the sutta, but I've seen this in my own practice: another reason why at least my heart hasn't leapt up is not experiencing—or not noticing—the pleasure of abiding happily in the present moment. Again, it's all about noticing. We have plenty of moments when craving isn't present, or at least isn't grossly present, and we're simply abiding here and now without a lot of wanting or not wanting. There's a way we can fail to notice the subtle pleasantness of that mind state. There's a way we can miss the subtle joy and happiness in awareness itself, in simply being aware.

I know you've had countless moments of this on retreat. You're not doing anything special—just some movement of the body, lifting an arm, reaching for a cup—and the awareness is there, and it's a peak moment. There's no place you'd rather be. There's nothing else you'd rather be doing. The lack of wanting and not wanting is known, and it's a beautiful moment.

When we don't realize that abiding in awareness in the present moment is really our true home, we tend to look elsewhere for our happiness. That's why The Wizard of Oz is a great Dharma movie. It really is. Dorothy didn't see it. She had to go away, couldn't find it, came back. Ah, it's right here.

The last reason the heart doesn't leap up at the thought of renunciation is that perhaps it hasn't known the joy of a steady, secluded mind—you could use the word concentration. It makes sense: "Well, nothing here. I'll look somewhere else. Nothing pleasant, nothing happy here. Let me go look someplace else for it." But when a person does realize where their happiness lies, where their home really is, they would rush home, like Dorothy did, and never want to leave.

It's like a person coming home from a long and arduous journey. There's this wonderful little section in one of the Upanishads that speaks to this sense. It says: "Like an eagle folding its wings after a long flight and gliding down to its nest." That's the sense of letting go—done struggling, fold the wings, glide down to the nest. And what's there is really a beautiful, easeful state of mind.

This is a quote by Sri Ramakrishna: "O longing mind, dwell within the depth of your own pure nature. Do not seek your home elsewhere. Your naked awareness alone, O mind, is the inexhaustible abundance for which you long so desperately." He's talking about where to find that happiness that we all want.

I'm going to talk some now about practicing renunciation, working with renunciation in our daily life. Renunciation isn't exactly a central theme in our society. The advertising industry is based on having people feel that they don't have enough, that they need more. The insurance industry is based on things being okay now, but they might not be in the next moment—you better do something about that. Saving money for retirement is a huge industry, and on and on. Not that anything is inherently not dharmic. Are you a bad yogi if you put money away for retirement? No, that's not the point. These are just examples of the culture we live in. It's not a renunciation culture.

So in working with renunciation in our daily life, there's a two-pronged approach. First is to feel the suffering of craving itself, as I was talking about before, and also how things change and can't be held onto even once you've got them—the suffering involved in trying to hold on. The second is consciously limiting or completely severing ties to a certain sense pleasure that we know we have a strong attachment to. That can be a skillful means at times as well.

Here on retreat, due to this form that you've all committed yourself to quite beautifully, you've been renouncing many things. You've been living like quasi-nuns and monks in a way. You've renounced entertainment. There's a lot of renunciation that goes around food here—you're not in control over what you eat. What's served that day is what's served, and to some degree when you eat. Of course, renouncing speech. For many people, renouncing indulging in sleeping or oversleeping. And of course, you've renounced the acquisition of material things as you've been here. These are really big areas in our life.

So let's look at how renunciation with each of these areas might look, and then I'll offer a template—a really helpful template, I think—for how to work with any type of renunciation in daily life.

Starting with speech, perhaps one of the most difficult arenas in our life to be mindful of. It happens so quick, and because it happens so quick, it can be hard to be mindful of. What I've found—and I'm going to do it right now consciously—is that if you can remember when you're speaking to be aware, really conscious of your body and the touch points, everything just slows down ten percent. It can give that little bit of extra time to maybe notice what your intention for speaking is, or a little bit extra time just to

decide or make a choice of words that would be most kind or skillful. Really helpful. But of course we have to remember to do it. The body's right here though, so when you're ready, it's always right there for you, ready to be known.

Another helpful way to renounce speech that we actually don't want to be doing is to start to notice the intention for speaking. Sometimes that can come afterwards, right? Speech happens fast. So sometimes we can notice the intention before, sometimes right during we can catch it, or sometimes it's not until afterwards. Why did I say that? Oh, I was actually trying to look good, or have someone have a certain view of me, or whatever. Or my intention was actually to be kind, maybe. Remember that this is the high bar—speech. So be gentle with yourself when you consciously bring your attention to this part of your life and work with renouncing unwholesome speech. It's a difficult area.

I'm going to mention food briefly because it's going to be the example I use with the template. I don't mean sitting down for a meal—I imagine you won't want to be renouncing meals in daily life—but more like just the eating to eat kind of thing. A really good question, if you can catch it: What's happening right now? Just ask yourself that question. This may have been mentioned around mindfulness of eating, but you don't have to stop there.

In your daily life, and this is so helpful, it's so easy and simple: put the fork down. Put the spoon down. Put the sandwich down. It makes all the difference in the world. I notice if the fork stays in my hand, I'm chewing, and the next bite is coming up before I've even swallowed. It's like the mind gets on this track—it doesn't even want the sense pleasure to stop for one second. It just keeps a constant stream going. So simply putting the utensil down or putting the sandwich down really breaks that cycle. And you can just chew, be present with what's happening.

Entertainment is another area. Again, the impulse arises: "Oh, let's go do this," or "Let's go to a movie." What's happening right now? Just to notice. It doesn't mean not to go, but it can be really helpful to check in with that. And then another thing that can be helpful is to make a habit of noticing the state of your mind and heart after you've engaged with whatever particular entertainment you've engaged with. How does that feel? Do you like feeling the way you do at that moment? And again, you might—I'm not saying you won't. But often we forget to look afterwards.

In the sutta where the Buddha was talking to his son, he said to check before, during, and after you do something to see if it was unwholesome, if it brought suffering to yourself or others. We can often remember to think beforehand, but I know for me, I often forget to check afterwards. Well, what was the effect of that? What was the effect of watching that movie?

Sleep is a very interesting thing. Have you ever just reflected on how much we sleep? A third of our life if we sleep eight hours. We go into this room, get onto this piece of furniture for eight hours every day. It's amazing. It's a lot of our life. And our birth as humans is precious. Having found the Dharma on top of that is even more precious. And our lives are racing by—just racing by. Our death is racing towards us from wherever it is, whether it's tomorrow, ten years from now, whatever. It's just racing towards us.

And so, in light of that, does it make sense to roll over and go back to sleep? It puts things in perspective—that teaching of asking ourselves, in light of what we're trying to do here, in light of what's important to us: what's important now? So the alarm goes off or you wake up and you have that choice. You can get up or you can roll over. What makes sense in light of this?

And then also, just to remember—and sometimes we can forget this—overindulging in sleep is a form of sloth and torpor. It's a hindrance to our practice, and it's something to be let go of. We want to let go of the hindrances, not feed them.

Material things. You can ask yourself this question: How many things do I need to be happy? And you can ask that with different emphasis. *How many* things do I need to be happy? How many things do I *need* to be happy? Depending on how you're feeling. And of course, the answer is none.

You don't need anything to be happy. So you can ask it literally like that, or you can ask it with a different emphasis: "How *many* things do I need to be happy?" I found that really helpful.

Also, something helpful I found in renunciation with material things is to really notice that moment—I don't know, I would call it disappointment—but the fading, when the joy fades. When you've wanted something and you bought it or gotten it, and there's that moment, or moments, or for some period of time there's pleasure, there's some kind of happiness, and then it goes. That is a great moment to notice. Really tune into that and what's left afterwards.

And then finally, with material things: if you happen to have debt due to buying material things that you didn't really need—sometimes we have debt just because we have to, there's not enough cash flow and we need to pay bills—but if you have debt due to buying things that aren't really needed, notice the weight and the burden of that debt. Notice the results of acquiring material things, too many of them, that aren't really needed. What is the result of that? Well, one of the results, like I mentioned, is when the joy fades in the mind, but the other result is in the checkbook. And we can notice that, tune into that, see the cause and effect.

Lastly, as a skillful means—or as a template to approach renunciation in these areas, or really anything in your life, but especially food, entertainment, and the acquisition of material things—here's a template that can be helpful. I'm going to use food as an example because I like food, so it's something I work with.

It's 10 PM, and you notice you're on your way to the fridge for the third time that night. The first thing you do is to stop and stand or sit down and ask yourself the question: What's happening? Just stand or sit there. You don't even necessarily need to look for an answer. Just stand or sit quietly. Ask the question and feel into your body. What is the experience of the body right at that moment? What is the experience of the heart and the mind right at that moment? Take a couple minutes, two to five minutes, to do that.

And then—and this is going to progress—get up or continue walking to the fridge and get what you were going to get. So in this first part, you don't stop yourself. You pause, you notice, and then you keep doing it. Then after you're done, stand or sit again and notice how you feel in the body and the heart and the mind. Not to judge in any way, but just to notice. And you do that for a week. So for the first week, you pause, but you keep going. You follow through with the impulse. But you also look afterwards as well.

The following week, do the same thing. Stop, ask the question: What's happening? Feel into the body. Look at the heart and mind. And then for this week, as you're doing that, see if you still want to go to the fridge or not. After you've done that for two to five minutes, just check in. Do I still want to go? Yeah? Okay, then go. Or if something's changed and you don't want to go, then you don't. You just sit down and feel how that feels in the body and the heart and the mind. How did it feel for that impulse to change, to fade and go away? And you do that for one week.

Then the next time you notice you want to go to the fridge at night, simply ask yourself what's going on. This is the third week now. Stand or sit down and be with that experience, just as before. But now, you have the intention not to get up and go to the

fridge—just using this example—even if you feel you still want to. Notice that experience in the body, in the mind, whatever it is. If it's "I don't want to anymore" or "I still want to," just notice and be with that experience until the intention to do something else arises.

I just used food as an example, but you could do this with anything. You could use this template with anything. The important part is to go gradually. Really important.

Because this gradual approach will reduce the possibility of rebellion in the mind that can happen. And even more importantly, it provides a lot of information—really helpful information—about how we are actually feeling in the heart and mind when these impulses are arising, what's actually going on. We can learn and see. Mostly it goes unnoticed or unseen. And it is this information that will really help us get to the root of the issue, not just "I'm not eating after six anymore." Again, that's a good intention, but I think we want to be skillful in how we approach it. Because with that approach alone, there may not be as much learning. Of course, there's going to be some—whenever you say you're not going to do something, you feel what it feels like to want to do it. But with this gradual approach, we can glean more information from it.

It's really important to go slow, not push. Be patient. And above all in these areas, be kind with ourselves.

This is Nisargadatta: "All you need is already within you. Only you must approach yourself with reverence and love. Self-condemnation and self-distrust are grievous errors. All I plead with you is this: make love for yourself perfect."

So we don't want to push too hard or get goal-oriented or project-oriented with this. We're doing all of this so that we can see and understand. It is the seeing and the understanding that lets go. It's said that you don't let go—wisdom lets go. All of this is so that we can see clearly. And as the wisdom builds, the letting go happens. And as Ajahn Chah said, the more we let go, the freer we are, the happier we are.

May your hearts leap up at the thought of renunciation.

CHAPTER 54

Speech - Wise And Not So Wise

Pascal Auclair · 1h02

> *As the three-month retreat prepares to transition from noble silence back into verbal communication, Pascal Auclair offers an intimate and honest exploration of speech as a field of practice. Drawing from his own experiences with sarcasm and the challenges of unwise speech patterns, he examines the four classical categories of unwholesome speech: false speech (lying), divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter.*
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> *Auclair illuminates how speech reveals our deepest intentions and views, tracing the connection between our understanding of reality, the intentions that arise from it, and the words we ultimately speak. He shares traditional Buddhist stories, including the tale of King Ajātasattu's conquest through divisive speech and the Buddha's teaching about an elephant corrupted by harsh speech, to illustrate how profoundly our words can affect ourselves and others. The talk also addresses subtler patterns like all-or-nothing thinking, mind-reading, and 'should' statements that distort our communication.*
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> *Practically, the teaching emphasizes that wise speech is not merely for social harmony but is itself a tool for awakening. Auclair introduces Gregory Kramer's Insight Dialogue instructions—pause, relax, open, trust emergence, listen deeply, speak the truth—as guidelines for bringing meditative awareness into conversation. The talk concludes with Thich Nhất Hạnh's commitment to loving speech and deep listening, offering retreatants a framework for re-engaging with the spoken word as genuine dharma practice.*

I remember for many years at the end of retreats, at the closing circle or the closing ritual or whatever closing moment was there, I would cry so much. I would usually go out and hide in the woods somewhere, in some parking lot or some place, and just cry and cry. The thought was always pretty much the same: do not release me yet. Do not let me loose in the world.

There was a recognition that there was still so much confusion and so many patterns in this being that could be harmful for oneself and for others. I really felt—I think there was some discernment in there—a recognition that the job was really not done.

After a few years of practice, I would end the retreat and be okay with the fact that it was time to go home. And even nowadays, I definitely have confidence, but there's another quality present: I'm curious. I want to go see how, as the expression says, the rubber will meet the road—the Eightfold Path in action.

I remember one long retreat here particularly. There were, as there will be in the next few days, little groups happening around different things. You might have seen them—practice in Asia, or the over-35 group, things like this. I was in a circle group. There was a first statement made by the host of the group, the person leading it, and then it was followed by Pascal uttering this completely sarcastic joke.

This was not at the beginning of practice. This was well into the practice. And I just remember sitting there thinking, wow, this is so unuseful. This is so off the mark. This is so off what I've been trying to do for the last weeks. But at that point, there was recognition: yes, this is harmful, and this is probably going to happen again. So it's better to be present with it, be engaged with it, and do what's appropriate to do.

After the meeting, I went to see the person and said, "Oh, that was sarcastic and probably not right." The person responded, "Oh, no, no, I thought it was funny."

But I don't know if you can see the difference. In one version, I would have hated myself. In this new version, there was simply recognition: I actually really want to release that kind of pattern. Not helpful. And it has momentum. I have to be realistic. I've trained that for years—to be intelligent and sharp and destroy an idea with a few words. That's not how I want to live anymore. Yet conditioning, being as it is, it's going to take time to unwind this. I have to be responsible.

So tonight I want to talk about speech, because I want to include more in the field of our practice. We've practiced being aware of body, being aware of breath, being aware of sensations, being aware of emotions, being aware of perceptions, feeling tone. We've tried in our practice to include all experiences.

Tonight I want to talk about speech a little bit more because that's the field that's going to get bigger starting tomorrow. It's not like we haven't been speaking—we've been babbling the whole time, inwardly certainly, many of us, a lot of the time. But tomorrow there will be the encounter with the other, and that field of practice of being in relationship and exchanging ideas a bit. We'll do this very progressively. But that's the new kind of phenomenon that we will welcome in a big way, in a bigger way, certainly.

I think it's a beautiful field to play in. There can be a lot revealed about—well, certainly about our views, the way we see the world and our beliefs when we speak. It's being revealed.

You might notice after the periods of talking tomorrow that sometimes when we go back to silence, the effect, the power of speech—something you'll have said maybe will resonate, echo, reverberate. "Cannot believe I said that. That was so big self." Or "Cannot believe I heard that." We are impacted by speech, the one we utter and what we receive.

But also deeply touched by it. Having a conversation with somebody and something is offered of personal experience, or something will be said, and you'll sit back in the silence and it will come: wow, how beautiful was this thing that this person said in the group or in the conversation, in the dining hall.

It is said that for animals, action is very central in their life.

We can consider this: for human beings, speech is where a lot of the beauty can reside—a lot of the opening, sustaining, supporting, freeing oneself and others. And yet a lot of damage can be created through speech as well. I'll include in this the written form, which is very prevalent and active these days: texting, emailing, and all the speech that we receive and offer through that medium.

Bhante Gunaratana says that he considers the computer the equivalent of the ax in the old days. What he says about the ax is that in the old days, you could do a lot with an ax, including very, very refined work. It was not just to chop trees, but also to make wood very even and soft. You would use the ax to do this. And he says computers do the same thing. You can create beauty with it, but you can also break with communication on that level.

Another image of the ax came again today. I was reading and ran into this from the text. It says, "Every person who is born is born with an ax in their mouth. A fool who uses abusive language cuts themselves and others with that ax."

So speech has the power to liberate. We just have to think of this retreat and how the words were used here, and how you might recall hearing something that really opened your mind—the power of speech in this way.

I'm not sure, we'll see how it goes, but it might be that my talk is naming a lot of the wrong, unwise, unbeneficial speech. The idea, perhaps, is that if we want to cultivate a really beautiful field and grow whatever we want in it that would be sustaining for our community and for ourselves, we might have to first remove all the rocks and stumps and roots that are in the ground that are keeping us from growing and harvesting beautiful vegetables and fruits.

One thing I like about speech is that it reveals. Speech, like any action, comes from intention. So when we speak, it can reveal our intentions. It can also reveal externally—in talking with somebody, we can do a beautiful exploration of the Dhamma, of what's happening for the other person, through speech. And intention comes from view, from the understanding that we have of the world.

A definition that I read about wrong view—I've been talking about this a lot—was that view is described as a decision that consciously or unconsciously we make about what is real. This is a view. And wrong view or unwise view is what takes what is unreal for real. It deviates from the real and confirms instead what is false.

I see these three being very much related: the views we have, wise or unwise—or you could think about it as liberating or entangling—the intention that comes out of this, and then the speech that is uttered.

The four classic kinds of speech that I'll be talking about tonight, you might know them: false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle speech—empty speech.

All these four kinds of speech, it says, are led or rooted in one of the three poisons. When there is this kind of speech happening, there is something about gain. I want to gain something by using that speech—either something material for myself or somebody close to me, or I want to gain some status or admiration, wanting to promote myself in a certain way. If it's not led by greed and gain of something, then it's led by hatred. There's either a wanting to break, to bring down, or this aspect that we don't like to talk about so much: cruelty. The way I understand it is the pleasure derived from the suffering of somebody else.

We don't like to think about this so much because it's very ugly. It's one of the ugliest things, in my mind—having pleasure for the suffering of somebody else. Disliking it so much, I didn't think this was possible in this being. And then one time on retreat—this is not about speech, but I think it can say something—I was moving slowly, going towards outside in the foyer there. Just as I came to open the door, I saw that outside, because of the little window on the side—you must have noticed this over the weeks—somebody was coming to enter. They were not seeing me, but I was seeing them. And what I saw myself doing was not opening the door so they could get in. I knew they would reach for the door, and I just went like this, and they just went like this.

Nothing happened. Nobody was hurt. But I was pleased. And I saw that. And I thought, why would one being do this? What kind of crazy confusion would lead to this?

That was a very small move, but it was cruel. And for me, at that moment when I saw that, I was afraid. I got afraid and I thought, wow, I really want to see this if it happens again—anything of that nature—because I don't want to cultivate this.

This has to be seen, although it might create some cognitive dissonance. We think, "I don't like that, I don't want to see myself like that, I don't want to describe myself like that." But it's of great importance that it is seen and recognized. For it to be abandoned, that's the only way. Cruelty—just to bring it into the field of things that can be recognized. And hopefully not in you, just in me then, you know. But maybe not.

So just a few words on false speech, or lying, and on the societal level. It's so important that we can trust each other. That's a really great need that we have. And when there are lies going around, it can really break the social fabric. It's good to see this movement on a big scale. Often we can see this in the political realm—how much there can be telling of lies, and the effect it has on us, on our society. We think, "I don't want to go vote anymore because it's all BS anyway." How disruptive it can be on a big scale.

Then on a more personal, relational level—I won't talk about everything about it, but just a few little bits here and there. One effect of lying that I've seen in people a few times now is how it can remove in somebody else their access to their intuition. They'll feel that something is going on. And when they ask questions, if they're told, "No, everything is fine, everything is normal," then it starts to undermine their trust in themselves, their capacity to read what is happening.

This I find very sad—that a person, when suddenly the truth is revealed, will say, "I knew this was going on. I knew it, and I blamed myself and I distrusted myself."

For me, I want to reflect on this because this is something I would so not want to take from somebody: their capacity to read a situation, to intuit, without information, to be able to feel. I find this worth stopping and thinking about—the effect of a lie in this way. And it can be a long, deep lie, I could say, but it could also be just a little something that is not recognized and should be.

We come here and we're interested in the nature of reality. We want to see things as they are. It's very interesting to watch how the mind often actually does not want to see things or talk about things as they are—will correct a little bit, hide a little bit.

It's very telling that the Buddha-to-be—and most of you must know this—lifetimes before he was to be a Buddha, well, all the lifetimes before being a Buddha, from the moment he decided that he would one day be a Buddha, a first one to reveal the teachings, to discover the teachings... and it took apparently lifetimes and lifetimes. In that story, it says that he never lied because he was committed to truth.

Sometimes it's interesting when I look at what I said in a conversation and I ask myself, "Am I actually interested in truth, or am I interested in something else—looking good, or what?" It can be a good question we can bring as spiritual seekers, seekers of truth. It demands a certain integrity that is of a pretty high level. You can check it out for yourself around this.

The thing that the teachings say about lying is that when we lie, a lie doesn't come alone. Often it takes another one to cover for the first. And so we build an architecture of lies to sustain the first one. This is stressful in and of itself. But also we find ourselves at some point in a cage of lies.

This is so not unlike the cage we are in right now, the one we come to retreat to examine and dismantle—this mental cage of lies, of wrong understanding, of wrong conceptualizing of what is what. We could say that these false perceptions are mirage-like, that we want to clean our perception of these lies, and yet we're stuck.

And we felt it, I think I can say safely, all of us, in these last weeks—how painful it is to be caught in confusion, not truth, not rightly comprehending what is happening. And so we can appreciate maybe the entangling nature of a lie.

This is a beautiful thing to take on, to just examine. And you know, for some of us it's not going to resonate because there's already cleanliness in there. But I would bet that for many of us, to a certain degree, at a certain level of subtlety, there is some richness to explore.

So maybe just a quote here:

Herein, someone avoids false speech and abstains from it. He speaks the truth, is devoted to truth, reliable, worthy of confidence, not a deceiver of people. Being at a meeting or amongst people or in the midst of her relatives or in society or in the king's court, when called upon and asked as a witness to tell what she knows, she answers: if she knows nothing, "I know nothing." If she knows, she answers, "I know." If he's seen something, he answers, "I've seen something." If he hasn't seen something, he answers, "I've seen nothing."

Thus, she never knowingly speaks a lie, either for the sake of her own advantage or for the sake of another person's advantage or for the sake of any advantage whatsoever.

A small note here: in lying, there is an intention to deceive. If there is not the intention to deceive, even though what is said might not be true, then this is something else. We are not in the realm of breaking an ethical precept because the intention was not there.

The second aspect is divisive or slanderous speech. When we engage in this, usually there is an intention—to destroy, to divide people. Or sometimes, in a very twisted way, it becomes a means to either promote oneself or to get closer to others, to create connection. This is a twisted dynamic that I have seen so many times in groups.

And by the way, another small thing—I think you might have gotten this by now, but for me, this is a particular kind of talk to give because I feel a lot of heat when I work on this, as I have been doing in the last few days. I have a lot of work to do here. I sit there thinking, "Oh, yeah, yeah." It is very humbling to actually revisit this teaching and work with it again. And probably many of us will feel this too. I hope so—it feels good to think that I am not alone in this realm. And that might be confirmed in the next few hours. But yes, I think it was important to name that.

So, this twisted way to find affection by putting somebody down. And again, there is this beauty—I keep coming back to this word. I have to start using other words, but I use the word "beauty" a lot when I talk about the Dharma these days. To actually see this pattern in action brings heat. It is difficult. But to actually recognize it, or even afterwards to say, "Really, this is what happened"—to be clear about this, to acknowledge that this was not helpful speech—this is important.

So perhaps a story here about divisive speech, just to release some of the tension that could be there.

There was the king Ajātasattu—a king who was known to often walk the wrong path. He was one of the devotees, one of the main supporters of Devadatta, who was the archetypal enemy cousin of the Buddha, the one who wanted the Buddha to fail with his sangha. At some point, this king was talking to the Buddha, telling him about his desire and his plan to destroy a confederacy that included the Licchavi people. The Licchavi were known to be very powerful, very harmonious. They had a good community going, we could say. And the king wanted their territory. He was telling the Buddha about this plan.

The Buddha said, "As long as they live in harmony and they are unified, it will not be possible to destroy them and take over the land. It is not a possibility for you."

So the king had this really sick idea. He thought, "If I divide them, then there will be chaos, and I will come in and be able to conquer. I will follow what the Buddha said, but in the opposite direction."

And so he sent his prime minister into a meeting where many clansmen were gathered together, including the Licchavi. The prime minister, in the meeting with everybody there, did this very simple thing that the king had asked him to do. He went

to one of the Licchavi and whispered in his ear, "There is rice in a paddy seed." Everyone knows there is rice in a paddy seed. "Did you know? There is rice in a paddy seed." It is that kind of obvious statement, like saying the sky is blue.

Now, there was another Licchavi who saw this—that the prime minister of the king had murmured something in this man's ear. And he asked him, "What did he say to you earlier when he leaned in like that?"

The man replied, "Oh, he told me that there was rice in the paddy seeds."

And the other one thought, "That is certainly not what he said to him. We all know this. In an important meeting like this, that explanation is too lame. It does not make sense." And he told another person of the clan, "Did you see when they were talking together?"

I saw it. I was wondering why the prime minister was talking to this man, and I asked him what he was saying.

"What was he saying?"

"Well, he was saying that there was rice in the paddy seed."

"No, no, no—that's probably a spy. That's probably what's happening. They're fermenting something."

And so this whole thing started. There was disruption, and it created a big chaos, fighting over this and that. When the king came in with his armies, the Licchavis were so disorganized that he could easily take over the capital city and the whole land.

So this whole story starts with divisive speech—a very simple little sentence. "The sky is blue." But the intention behind it was clearly to divide, and it worked really well.

"He avoids slanderous speech and abstains from it. What he has heard here, he does not repeat there, so as to cause dissension there. And what she has heard there, she does not repeat here, so as to cause dissension here. Thus, he unites those that are divided, and those that are united, she encourages. Concord gladdens her. He delights and rejoices in concord, and it is concord that he and she spread by their words."

I'm doing a little adaptation there—having my own personal fun.

So, harsh speech. There was one monk who was a—hold on, how do you say that in English?—he was a foodie in the time of the Buddha. He really delighted in good curries and papadum and samosas and the good stuff. And he was always on the lookout for which monk was invited where for which meal, and where he could get a good, delightful meal going.

Now, Devadatta, the enemy cousin of the Buddha, had a little group of unwholesome monks. They were often invited to houses where people would make great meals for them. So this monk was hanging out with them a lot—not because of the company, really, but because of the food.

The Buddha wanted to help him understand that it was very dangerous to hang out with people who had harsh speech and slanderous speech. And so he told this monk of one of his prior lives.

He said, "I don't know if you remember—you probably don't. It's not an easy thing to do, to remember your past lives—but in a prior life, long, long time ago, you actually were a beautiful, powerful elephant that belonged to a king. You were known to be very noble and faithful, a soft-hearted elephant that the king loved very, very much.

"What happened in that life of yours as an elephant is that at some point, a group of burglars started to meet every night to plot their bad deeds right by your stable where you lived. They would spend the night devising plans to hurt people and steal things. They were getting drunk and using abusive, harsh speech.

"What happened to you over time is that you became conditioned by that kind of attitude and speech. You became a very dangerous elephant and couldn't work with anybody. Every time somebody new was hired to take care of you, you would kill them.

"The king was devastated. He didn't know what was going on with his elephant. At some point, he asked one of his wise attendants to investigate."

The Buddha said, "I was the attendant of that king, in a former life, and he asked me to go find out what was going on. So I went at night, and I discovered the burglars meeting just by your stable. I could see how it was influencing you.

"I went back to the king and told him what was happening—that we should get rid of these men and instead bring wise people to discuss wise matters near you every evening. In this way, you were able to regain your sanity and your noble heart as an elephant.

"So this happened to you once when you were an elephant. Be careful with your obsession with food, because that might lead you into trouble a second time."

So that was the Buddha's story about harsh and slanderous speech.

There is a quote I want to read you here. This one is about receiving harsh speech—not uttering it and being influenced by it, but the reactivity that we can have.

So this is the Buddha again. He says, "When others address you, their speech may be timely or untimely..."

When others address you, their speech may be true or false. When others address you, their speech may be gentle or harsh. When they address you, their speech may be connected with good or with harm. When others address you, their speech may be spoken with loving kindness or in inner hate. Herein, you should train thus: our minds will be unaffected, and we will utter no evil words. We will abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving kindness, without inner hate. We shall abide pervading that person with a mind imbued with loving kindness. And starting with that person, we shall abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving kindness—abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility or ill will. That's how you should train yourself, bhikkhus.

I love the first part where the Buddha is simply so straightforward. When people talk to you, sometimes it will be the right timing, sometimes it won't. When people talk to you, sometimes they will want to hurt you, sometimes not. When people talk to you, sometimes their speech will be beneficial, sometimes not.

To me, when I talk about making the field of our practice bigger, this is partly what I mean. Is it okay that I'll be with people who will talk to me when it's not time to talk to me, who will want to hurt me when they speak? Can I engage fully in samsara, in a way? Can I totally be there for it and use this as practice? Can I remember sati—mindfulness—but also remember my values of respect? Here's a beautiful challenge.

I think Pema Chödrön somewhere was saying, you know these people who confront us or make our life miserable? She describes it like somebody who knocks on the door. You open the door, and the person passes right by you. They go straight into the basement of your house without asking anything, and they make a lot of noise, and then they come out holding something, and they say, "Is this yours?" Showing you the most ugly thing you have hidden in your house.

And what do these people get, these people who do that for you? Your friends won't do that for you. Unless you have a really good teacher, but often it's the enemy who will do that for you, who will show you your reactivity hidden. What do they get? They get misery. They get hated. They get nothing. All the praise goes to the Buddha and to your teacher. That's who gets the praise. These people do tremendous things for you. They reveal your stuff, but they won't get anything. At least, can you offer them compassion?

So that's harsh speech. And the last one is empty speech, or idle speech, or empty chatter. This is another one that we can become more aware of.

Would you be interested, curious to hear the list of the kinds of speech to be avoided by contemplatives? Any contemplatives around?

Here's the list. Whereas some priests and contemplatives living off food given in faith—so here we're talking about monks and nuns, but it's interesting to consider—some of them are addicted to talking about lowly topics such as these. I think there are thirty of them; I didn't count again.

Talking about kings, robbers, ministers of state, armies, alarms and battles, food and drink, clothing, furniture, garlands and scents, relatives, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, countryside, people, heroes, gossip of the street, gossip of the well, tales of the dead, tales of diversity—meaning philosophical discussions about the past and the future—the creation of the world and the sea, and talk of whether things exist or not. The contemplative abstains from talking about lowly topics such as these. This, too, is part of virtue.

Interesting, no?

The list gets very short.

I'll continue with a few more of these because they're quite interesting. "Whereas some priests and contemplatives living off food given in faith are addicted to debates such as these: 'You don't understand this doctrine and discipline? I'm the one who understands this doctrine and discipline. How could you understand this doctrine and discipline? You're practicing wrongly. I'm practicing rightly. I'm being consistent. You're not. What should be said first, you said last. What should be said last, you said first. What you took so long to think out has been refuted. Your doctrine has been overthrown. You're talking rubbish. You're defeated. Go try and salvage your doctrine. Extricate yourself if you can.' He or she abstains from debates such as these. This too is part of virtue."

You have to adapt this to see if you're engaging in this kind of thing about your own doctrine and practice. It's interesting.

So perhaps we should consider what we ought to talk about. Are you interested in that one? "Why should you not do this? Such talk, monks, is not related to the goal, is not fundamental to the holy life, does not conduce to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, tranquility, higher knowledge, enlightenment, or nibbāna. When you have discussions, monks and nuns, contemplatives, you should discuss suffering. Period. You should discuss suffering, the arising of suffering, its cessation, and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering. Why is that? Because such talk is related to the goal. It conduces to disenchantment, to nibbāna. This is the task you must accomplish."

What I appreciate about this teaching is that it's saying wise speech is not just for community harmony—which alone would be amazing—not just for interrelational harmony, not just for personal well-being, not just for personal well-being in the future, but it is actually a tool to wake up. A very powerful tool to wake up.

Let me name a few other patterns that we might notice with our speech. These patterns relate to the way we speak, but also to our intentions, and again, to the way we understand life and how it can become entangled. I want to be careful with that word, but we need very strong words here too.

All-or-nothing talk. "You're always late." I want to get specific about how we use speech in this way. "You're never like this." "I'm so stupid." The nuances disappear entirely. There are many patterns of speech that tend to exaggerate in this manner, and it's not onward leading. We can do this habitually without seeing it, and we have to bring attention to this.

Presenting somebody as completely compassionate—they're completely compassionate—or as having no compassion whatsoever. This way we sometimes talk about people being good or bad, wonderful or terrible. And magnifying also: "I will never get over this."

There's a friend I was having a conversation with, and I found myself saying—I don't know how it came to be—"I love this person so much, I want to be with them always." And I reflected, "Oh, so you love them a lot right now. And the feeling you have now makes you project into the future." But anicca—can you make a statement that is true, that acknowledges you feel very strongly right now about this person, without the exaggeration?

Part of this exaggeration, this all-or-nothing quality, includes selective memory and the way we use speech in this manner.

We'll remember just the bad things of that weekend, that person, or ourselves. Here we are very strong on this, many of us—self-hatred, using selective recall. We use our mind, but also our speech. When we speak, we can notice what we're saying to correct the vision. Or correcting the vision and then speaking accordingly—whichever way it goes, to be attentive to these patterns of speech.

Another pattern is a kind of mind reading, where because you feel something, it becomes truth and is presented as that. This is about speech. "They wanted to harm me." The vision there contains a mistake. It might be true, but it might not be. And so the description using speech is not accurate. It's not "I felt defended" or "I felt fear"—it's a claim about another's intentions. The way we use speech can distort stories for ourselves and others.

Another pattern is the "should" statements. "They should be like that." "It should not have happened." Suddenly the beautiful practice we do here—of really considering how things come together, that they're conditional—is abandoned. The conditions were such that this is what happened. Not "it should not have happened." It should have happened, because it did. So we stop and start with this: "Oh, this is what happened. This is what was said. This is what was understood. This is what was misleadingly understood—or misunderstood, rather." And then we work with the conditions.

In our habitual way of speaking, we'll just kick the wisdom out. The wisdom of causality will be kicked out. The wisdom of selflessness, too, in the way we use "I." Is the "I" that I'm using conventional, or is it magnificently attached, totally identified? We can see this.

Think of the power of speech. Think of the inner speech of the last weeks. Was it truthful, factual, or could there have been here and there a little exaggeration? Was it kind or harsh, the language, the inner language? Was it divisive or more harmonizing? Just the inner speech. Was it always beneficial, timely, useful, or was it sometimes idle and empty?

Just asking the question. It's amazing—when you look at the tons of words that were said, piles of words in this mind, how much of it was useful, beneficial, timely, kind. Wow. Reality check.

So perhaps take a moment. I'll ask you a few questions for reflection. You can close your eyes if you wish.

Of these unwise speech patterns I named—harsh speech, untrue speech, idle speech, gossip, divisive speech—which one is your more habitual pattern, if there is any, that you've seen here on retreat or in your life?

It might be important to reflect on the gratification aspect of these patterns. For example, what's good about putting somebody down? What feels good? How does it feel good, if it does for you? What would it feel like to always protect someone else's reputation?

What feels good about putting myself down, if that's a pattern of mine? What would it be like to always bring great respect for this being, in my inner speech or outer speech?

What feels good about presenting myself in my best angle, or embellishing a bit? What feels good about harsh speech? How would it feel to abandon that?

A few different questions here. How do you think this retreat could influence your use of speech? What has changed in you that could positively affect how you communicate?

And how do you feel about giving speech more space in your life again, starting tomorrow? How do you feel about that?

Is there something you fear about this? How do you think you could possibly create trouble for yourself and others in the next few days around speech? What kind of mistakes do you think you could make? And lastly, what could help you in bringing healthy speech into your practice in the next few days?

Thank you for your reflection.

So just in conclusion, being aware of the body can be a great way to support speaking and listening. Being aware of mind states, of intentions—this is very central. All the tools we've been exploring, all the ways we've been cultivating mindfulness, are welcome in speaking and listening. Attention to the body, attention to the breath, attention to mind states, intentions, feeling tones. *This is unpleasant. It's very unpleasant.* So that I don't speak to avoid that, run away from that, deny that—but rather it can be included in the feeling tone that I feel.

I'll finish with six little instructions from Gregory Kramer, who teaches Insight Dialogue—a beautiful practice that you might want to research or read about or experience in retreats where you learn to do a Dhamma practice while dialoguing. I could talk about it the whole evening probably, but I'm just going to offer them to inspire you.

The six instructions are: pause, relax, open, trust emergence, listen deeply, speak the truth.

Pause—to come back to the body, to bring mindfulness. Relax—to bring ease, receptivity. Open—perhaps to bring inclusion, opening to the other, to the field, to the space of being with somebody else. Trust emergence—acknowledging the unknown, the creative process, that things can emerge, that I don't have to know everything. Listen deeply and speak the truth—the courage that is in there, the honesty.

So: pause, relax, open, trust emergence, listen deeply, speak the truth.

We'll talk more about speech again tomorrow. Perhaps we can stay here in silence for a few moments.

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering.
—Thich Nhat Hanh

Thank you.

CHAPTER 55

Returning to the Marketplace

Winnie Nazarko · 1h03

> *In this closing talk of the three-month retreat, Winnie Nazarko addresses the crucial question of how to integrate intensive meditation practice into ordinary life. She challenges the common misconception that retreat practice is the 'real deal' while daily life is somehow lesser, pointing out that the Buddha taught the full range of people—kings, merchants, families, and monastics alike—and never considered lay practice inferior to monastic life.*
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> *Nazarko emphasizes that while the retreat environment has been rarefied and quasi-monastic, all the essential fields of practice remain available outside these walls: the Eightfold Path, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna), dāna (generosity), sīla (ethical conduct), the brahmavihāras, and the pāramīs. She encourages practitioners to clarify their values, identify which aspects of the path resonate most deeply, and design a customized practice that fits their actual life circumstances rather than trying to recreate retreat conditions at home.*
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> *The talk offers practical advice for the transition period: staying grounded in the body, using brahmavihāra practice while traveling, being mindful of sensitivity cycles, and approaching loved ones with care and gratitude. Nazarko addresses the challenge of reconnecting with family and friends who may be on a 'different wavelength,' suggesting that demonstrating love and normalcy matters more than explaining the ineffable depths of one's experience. She concludes with the reminder that lay practice, while different from retreat practice, offers its own profound opportunities for awakening through relationship, community, and engagement with the world.*

Like old times.

This is the last Dharma talk of the retreat. It's sort of remarkable to think that three months ago, or six weeks ago, you came here to these very special conditions. Who would have guessed that something so interminable could go by so quickly? But here you are, getting ready to go home.

This has been a very different environment from the one most of you are used to. Perhaps not so much for Sister Jewel, but certainly the lay people here. When you think about what it's been like to be here, you can see how unusual the environment is, how rarefied in a kind of way.

When we come on retreat, there are some very interesting features of the environment. First of all, you're out in the middle of nowhere. And you're in silence. Except for the hammers and the bulldozers, all you hear are natural sounds—not a lot of speaking except at the talks, in the chanting, and in your interviews. You've been pretty much in silence, at least externally. No eye contact, keeping your sense doors guarded and your energy in. Vegetarian meals—that's been a great part. There's something childlike about having somebody make food for you every day. No sex. You may have noticed that. I won't go there. Simple rooms. Perhaps you've been doing the eight precepts: no eating after the midday meal, no scented products, no TV, no radio, no internet—at least supposedly—little or no contact with friends and family.

In fact, when you describe it all out loud like that, it sounds a little bit like you've been monastics, or quasi-monastic in any case. And some of you even have gone so far as to adopt the haircuts of monastics.

So you've been here doing this intensive meditation practice in this environment that's been designed specifically to support this purpose. There have been a lot of teachings and a lot of teachers, and very soon it's going to end.

Usually at this point, the thought may come up in your mind: How do I take this home? At least this is the case for many of you. For some of you, the thought might come up: How can I get out of here as soon as possible and never come back? But for many of you, there's a desire to take it—or have it take you—with you.

Sometimes this "taking it" or "with you" can get mixed up with somehow taking this whole retreat thing along: the whole ethos of it, the whole conditions of it, the whole orientation to silence and seclusion and meditative silence that we've had here. You might think that what you've been doing here is the real deal—this is the real thing, this is the real practice, just like we've been doing it here. And you might think that's true to the exclusion of what is often called real life, the life outside these walls. You might think this real deal is the only way to practice, the only way to get benefit.

But you'd be wrong about that.

The Buddha is very clear about this point. He had a much broader, more inclusive understanding and view of what he was doing and how his teachings were to be understood.

Bhikkhu Bodhi says, when he's talking in his book *In the Buddha's Words*: "The function of a Buddha is to discover, realize, and proclaim the Dharma in its full range and depth, and this involves a comprehensive understanding of the varied applications of the Dhamma in all its multiple dimensions. The Buddha not only penetrates to the

unconditioned state of perfect bliss that lies beyond samsara, outside the pale of birth, aging, and death. He not only proclaims that path to full enlightenment and final liberation, but he also illumines the many ways the Dhamma applies to the complex conditions of human life for people still immersed in the world."

If you take a look at the Buddha, his mind had great power. One of the hallmarks of being a Buddha is a mastery of the full range of skillful means. His own awakening occurred as the result of very close observation, of learning by direct experience and direct clear seeing what led to what—deep insight into causation that led in the direction of liberation. He saw very deeply into the causes of greed, hatred, and delusion.

He saw so deeply into their causation that he understood how it was possible to reverse engineer the whole process. And because his seeing was so complete and so deep, he could communicate this path to liberation to all kinds of people.

He taught the full range of people in his time, giving the teachings in many different iterations, each appropriate and complete for the group or individual he was addressing. He taught monks and nuns of course, but also kings, courtesans, widows, children, businessmen, husbands and wives, warriors, mothers, Brahmins and members of the lowest social classes. Every kind of being there was, he taught. And he taught them in the manner that was appropriate to the totality of their conditions and in a way that was responsive to their specific inquiries.

In other words, he accepted them at the starting point of their inquiry. However they framed the question, he would respond to what they were asking. Sometimes he responded in a way that showed them it was the wrong question and that they needed to start elsewhere, but he would always respond to them where they started from.

Part of why he was so customized in how he worked with people was that he wasn't an indoctrinator. He wasn't interested in giving a big rap and having people accept it as a matter of belief because he was the Buddha or claimed to be the Buddha and they should take it at his word. He was more interested in finding the inquiry within them, the spark of investigation, and fanning the flames, getting that going for them. Awakening wisdom was what was required from his perspective, not blind faith in him or anything that he said.

He didn't think everybody should be a monk or a nun. It's not possible. Most of us are not set up for that to be a viable, lifelong path. He didn't think it was possible for everyone to be a monk or a nun, nor did he think it was necessary. In fact, if you really think about this, if everyone had become a renunciate, the path probably would have died out because it's very dependent on the support of lay people. The entire teaching

structure, the ability for there to be teachers to offer the teachings, is completely dependent on lay support. And if there hadn't been the support of wealthy and not-so-wealthy lay people, it's very likely that the teachings never would have carried through time, especially when you consider that monastic communities by their nature are not self-replicating. The source of monastic practitioners is lay family life. That's where they come from. They arise out of families and then make that choice in their life. So the whole monastic structure that has largely been responsible for carrying the teachings is replenished anew from the ranks of the lay community.

I want to talk about some common misunderstandings of Buddhist practice among Westerners. When we come across the teachings, we always add things to them. And of course what we have to draw on is our own personal history and understanding and also the cultural matrix in which we've grown up and exist. For most Western people, at least for those who come from families which are not Asian, which are not part of the traditional practitioner groups, we can easily get the wrong idea. We can easily think that it's all about meditation and being quiet. We could even get the idea that sense pleasure is off limits and that joy is somehow suspect.

The Buddha does talk a lot about suffering. He talks about suffering, talks about suffering, talks about suffering. But he's describing the problem when he's talking about suffering. He's not prescribing suffering as what you're supposed to do.

If we're introduced to Buddhism through meditation, which we often are, we can get the idea—especially through silent retreat—that the retreat model is the way we should attempt to live our lives as laypeople. That in some sort of way we should try to transport this setup, or some variety of this setup, into what we're going to be doing next. But there's a problem with that, which is that generally speaking in our lives as laypeople, the whole scene is very much different. It's greatly at variance with how it's been here. We would essentially be trying to live as quasi-monastics in a culture that doesn't understand or support that.

Now this is not to knock people who have a real bent for renunciation, lay people who have a real renunciate kind of mind and orientation. There are people like that. I know a number of them who basically are not monastics, but what works for them and what feels right to them and where they really thrive is in living in a way that's as close to this kind of environment as they can set up for themselves. I'm not denigrating that in any kind of way. But for most of us, it doesn't really work. And if we think that the only way is the kind of way that we've been here, then there's a false binary that's set up. We can wind up making a problem out of something that really doesn't need to be

that way, creating a kind of dualism based on an idea that we got somewhere about the right way we need to do it or the only way that we can practice. It's very understandable why we could get confused in this kind of way.

If you look at how the Buddhist teachings have been carried, it has largely been through the monastic community. And it's very likely that over time, many of the teachings directed to lay people were not necessarily preserved because they didn't pertain to monastic life. When you look for teachings that pertain specifically to lay people, you find them scattered around in various places. They're not in a unified body of teachings.

The other part of it is that you're not necessarily going to encounter many teachings specifically oriented toward lay people when you're on retreat, because when you're on retreat in this kind of setting, you're somewhat like monks and nuns. You're being given teachings that have a more renunciate flavor to them—the teachings that come with deep meditation practice, the ones that seem most pertinent to that context.

But if we're not monastics, and we're not going to be monastics when we leave here, then the question arises: How can we use the life that we actually have to wake up? Can we practice with the life that we have, without rejecting it?

So here's the question: How can we practice after we let go of the special circumstances here? We're letting go of the special circumstances, but consider what remains. All the fields of practice in the Eightfold Path remain. The Dharma itself remains operating and visible in everything, if we can see it. Skillful and unskillful attitudes and actions remain. Karma remains. The three characteristics of all conditioned things remain to be seen. The four foundations of mindfulness remain to be practiced. Dana remains to be cultivated and offered. The precepts remain to be trained. The paramis remain to be developed. The brahmaviharas remain to be practiced. And mindfulness remains—possibly. Concentration remains—possibly, depending on how we choose.

So the raw materials for practice are still there. The whole field of practice is still open. But it's different when you leave, because now things are in motion, more obviously in motion. Things are more open, broader. If you consider retreat practice as being deep but kind of narrow, specialized in a certain way, lay practice is broader, more interactive, and it has a much more visible social dimension. That means other people—you in relationship to other people, you as a member of a community or a family or a culture, a sangha.

Lay practice is different, but it's not inferior. It's the out-breath. There's all the learning and understanding that's been gained here, and going back out is the exhale into the world, where there's the opportunity to actually apply what's been learned on the cushion, to integrate the understanding that's been gained with activity. This marketplace kind of practice will really test your understanding and commitment to the whole path.

So even though the field of practice is different, the practices and teachings can be integrated into lay life. There are other teachings of the Buddha, not usually offered in this setting, which are directly pertinent.

For instance, did you know that the Buddha taught that relative happiness is a good and worthy thing? Part of his teachings to lay people included how to attain relative happiness, as well as prosperity and a good marriage. The Buddha didn't say that kind of happiness is the highest happiness of human beings. He saw its limitations, which are the same limitations that all conditioned things have. But he saw it as a positive, nothing to be denigrated.

If you look at the main teachings of dana, or generosity; sila, the moral trainings in restraint; and the brahmaviharas, you can see that these are all directly applicable. In many Asian American Buddhist communities, those are among the primary practices—the brahmavihara attitudes, the offering of generosity, the practice of the precepts. Meditation is not necessarily a big part of how those communities practice. These are three very important teachings directly applicable to lay life.

But there are other specific teachings that could also be of interest and use to you, and it would be good for you to check them out. There's a relatively new book that pulls them all together in one place, organizes them by topic, and has an accessible commentary. It's called *The Buddha's Teachings on Prosperity*—an interesting topic. He thought it was okay. The author is a Sri Lankan monk, Bhikkhu Basnagoda Rahula, published by Wisdom Publications. It's even got some love advice in it, for those of you who are looking in that direction.

So let's talk a little more about this daily life practice—how to do it, how to consider it, how to design your customized daily life practice. In thinking about this, you might want to start with an examination or reflection on your life priorities. What are your life priorities, and why?

How does this whole Dharma thing fit into that? And how important is this kind of learning and development to you? How does it fit with your other life priorities and responsibilities? So there's an initial clarification there, a values clarification right at the beginning.

Then the second question is, once you've figured out or have a felt sense for where this is in your scheme of values, in your hierarchy of what's important to you—the second question is, which practices of the Eightfold Path will you emphasize? Because there's a range of them. And how will you practice them? What do you imagine, at least initially, to be the course of your bhavana, your emotional, mental, spiritual development? Knowing yourself, where do you want to focus? You can focus broadly, you can focus specifically, but is it conscious?

I know a number of you, as part of the process of having final interviews, have noticed that there may have been suggestions from teachers about particular things. For instance, "I think this style of practice might be something you'd want to check out," or "You might want to look into this," or "Check out this book. This teacher might be a good person for you." So you probably have had some teacher input.

But the other part of it, of course, is what's the inner voice? What's the interest? What resonates for you? What do you intuit might be a path to some things that seem to be core to your personal inquiry? Where is it alive for you? What part of the practice, what part of the teachings?

To what level are you interested in practicing? There are probably three different levels for anything you're looking at. The first one is hearing it—whether that means reading it in a book or listening to a Dharma talk, hearing the teaching. The second level is knowing it, being able to mentally organize it enough to state it back in a somewhat coherent way, if only to yourself, forming an internal understanding of it initially. And then the third level is penetrating it in some way—penetrating this teaching or this practice, assimilating it, making it a deeply absorbed understanding or training that actually changes who you are and how you are from the inside out. Transformational practice and insight.

Now there's an important point here related to practice and practices. You may have noticed in the course of being on retreat particular areas of psychological or emotional pain. Maybe it's trauma-related. Maybe it's things related to your personal history—something that has repeatedly come up for you in a very painful, difficult, often unworkable way on retreat.

It's important to know that even though Dharma practice and Dharma teachings are a universal medicine, meaning they will help whatever ails you, they're not necessarily the best medicine or the most direct way of addressing particularly lodged forms of emotional pain. So if something has come up for you on this retreat of that type, and you haven't done some sort of process that might involve psychological investigation or psychotherapy, that kind of investigation within those modalities, you should really consider it.

Because while Dharma practice is good for every being and is a tonic for us on many different levels, it's not necessarily the best thing for every single kind of pain that a human being can have. Sometimes we come to Dharma practice carrying certain kinds of emotional wounds that can benefit from the practice, but could also benefit more directly from other approaches. And these paths are not in conflict. I would say almost everybody I know who teaches has done at least some investigation of their stuff, if you want to put it that way, using these other methods as well.

So to tie out this section: once you've found what practices of the Eightfold Path you wish to emphasize, once you've figured out where it fits into your life and at what level you want to practice it, then it's just a question of figuring out what resources are available to help support you in that particular inquiry. And probably in the daily life session you received today and in your visits to the welcome room and the cornucopia of books and publications there, you've found out a lot already.

Then there's the sangha or community piece. Who are you going to practice with? You could find such a group, such a place, or if you're a self-starter, you could organize something for yourself and invite like-minded people in.

The role of community is very important, because if you think about it, you might not have anything else in common with somebody, but if you have this in common with them, you have a lot in common compared to the more typical individual you might run across. This is a bit of an off-the-beaten-path interest you have here, at the depth you have it. So sangha is very important—to find a community of kindred souls. We don't have souls, but you know what I mean.

So there are all the books, articles, and publications. The talks and teachings online—Dharma Seed, Access to Insight, and all of that. And then the retreats and teachers. You can put together your own strategy. Figure out what you're interested in, how it fits into your life priorities, what depth you want to pursue it. Figure out the resources, put it together, make your plan.

Now onto our final topic: the marketplace talk. This is about making the transition either back to where you came from, if you're going home, or making the transition on to something else, which you perhaps don't even know yet. But in any case, you'll be leaving here.

The first point is that you're closing out what's happened here in a sense. You're physically going to be leaving the premises, hopefully with all of your meditation equipment and socks and coats and things. Watch and see if the mind wants to hold on here—the "keep it" mind arising. For some of you, I'm sure there's the "get the heck out, get on with it" mind, but notice the "hold on to it" mind, whether that's trying to hold on to states here or trying to hold on to the environment or trying to hold on to the people. See if the holding on mind is there. Because if the holding on mind is present and it's not seen and it's strong, you're not going to be able as easily to open to the actual truth of what's happening as you move into the world.

You're going to be going through a process of reviewing the retreat and what happened here. And it takes quite a while for it to really work through your system. It's a very deep thing to do. And you'll probably find that you form some very vivid memories during the time you've been here. I know for myself, I came here in 1987 for the first three-month retreat, and I stayed in the annex. Even today, whenever I walk over that bridge—you know, where they keep the linens—I smell the linen closet and it's very vivid, very vivid, the memories of being here on that retreat. And it's likely that you'll have that kind of experience too. The experience that you had here is going to keep on working after you've left. There's a long digestive and assimilation process that goes with doing this kind of practice at the level and for the length of time you've been here. It's going to keep working on you.

Some advice while traveling. Driving is fortunately a habit, and this is one case where you can let your habit do the driving. Just let it do the driving. If it gets confusing, just stop, pull over, stop. But it probably won't. It's interesting to see how automated that function is. It can be useful to stay in the body. Feel the feet. Feel the weight of the body, the solidity of the body, the heaviness of the body. Watch the sense doors because it's going to be loud out there.

If you're going to be doing the airport exit, there are quiet places in the airport and you can find them. Sometimes you can find a gate that's empty, no planes are using it. Or many airports have those meditation or contemplation rooms somewhere, usually in some out-of-the-way place. But it's a good place if you've got a few hours—to go and sit and hang out, be quiet.

Brahma-vihara practice while you're traveling can be really helpful. I can remember once getting off a retreat here and getting on an airplane to fly back to the West Coast. As I was walking down the aisle, I realized that of course I was the dreaded middle passenger. But the two guys on either side of me were really big guys, and I'm not small. I thought, oh, let's see, I'm going to be in the air for several hours and I'm going to be sitting between these two guys I don't know. They're kind of overflowing the seats, and I'm going to be touching them the whole time, and I won't be able to... And then I remembered: ah, metta practice. Metta practice. It really helps. It removes that need to try to escape from human contact very often. So highly recommended with plane travel.

So returning to the marketplace itself. This is really where mindfulness and equanimity practice is so important. There can be a kind of shock sometimes when you return because of the sensory nature of the outside world. It's really been quiet here. When you go back out, everything's on again. People are talking everywhere, there's all kinds of sounds, there's electronica of all types. And initially it can be a little bit of—whoa—and not necessarily in a pleasant way.

That sensitivity wears off, you'll be glad to know. In the meantime, just try to keep yourself grounded. Stay in the body. Find opportunity for some quiet and some seclusion. Practice the Brahma-Viharas. You can sometimes go through sensitivity cycles when you come out of practice, where the mind will be steady and stable and then there could be an uprising of "whoa, it's a lot going on here," and then it'll settle back down. I'm not saying this because it's everybody's experience, or that it's a problematic experience necessarily, or that you should be having this experience. I'm just saying this in case you do have something like this—you don't need to worry about it. It's normal. You might also notice some differences in the way that you see the world or understand the world, a new view, so to speak.

One question that comes up is: to habit or not to habit? If you look at all the habits that you had before you came here, that you haven't been doing while you're here, you're going to go back out where you can choose to pick those habits up again. You're in a rather unique position to be able to perhaps selectively choose which ones you really want to do again. And sometimes you might notice that there's a compulsivity to pick up certain of them—that they're strong habits, and when you're in an environment where you can't do them, you don't, but if you're in an environment where you can, you really, really want to. That can be valuable information too.

When you come out of retreat, the mind has been collected and very often there's a certain amount of concentration. Part of what that means is that concentration can really power whatever habit you pick up. So choose wisely with that.

For some of you, you might be going from retreat into a very undefined or uncertain period of prolonged transition—not quite sure where you're going to be going or what you're going to be doing, what the next step is, the next move is. If that's the case for you, consider it bardo practice. You know what bardo is? It's the Tibetan Buddhist teaching on the time, space, experience after the end of one life and before the beginning of another. This liminal period of time where one thing has ended but the next major thing hasn't yet started can be a really fruitful place, but it can be a very uncomfortable place too because of the uncertainty involved. It would be important in that case to do what you can to stay grounded and to think about what's available to you in terms of support. Or if you don't have support, to think about what you could do in order to get some.

Now, some special teachings if you're returning home and connecting or reconnecting with other specific beings. This is advice—my personal view based on my personal experiences.

It's very likely, given what you've been doing here, you're going to be on quite a different wavelength from the people back home. The question is: can you be with that, with openness and acceptance, recognizing that you're just on different channels for a while? Or does the mind have to make that into a problem?

Part of what you may notice too is that other people who have been living a very different life than the one you've been living here for the last three months or six weeks aren't necessarily going to be present for you in the way that you are able to be present for them, at least initially. In other words, part of what you're going to be seeing or noticing is the way that we human beings usually walk around in a semi-trance state, very lost in a lot of thinking and distraction. You're going to see that in the people around you—which of course is all of our habitual state, except when we've been doing this kind of thing intensively or for a long time. The question is: can there be some compassion there in that seeing?

As far as loved ones and reconnecting with loved ones, whether that's close members of your family or intimate partners, my experience of this is they want to know two things. They want to know: do you still love them, and are you okay?

I can remember when I came off my first three-month retreat here. I had told my parents I was going to be coming to the East Coast and doing this silent retreat where I wouldn't be writing or calling and they couldn't write or call me for three months, and that seemed odd. It is odd, compared to most people's familiar ways of being. And they used to have these retreats so that they ended closer to Christmas.

So I decided when the retreat ended, instead of going right back to the West Coast, I'd go to my folks' house and spend Christmas there. I took a train from Worcester and got off in Albany. Meeting me at the train station were my mother, my father, my sister, and my brother. I'm walking down off the train, and they're all looking at me like... I could tell they'd been talking.

And they said, "We were thinking we'd go out for pizza and beer. What do you think?"

I knew it was a test. So even though I didn't necessarily want pizza and beer right then—because I was relatively cleaned out at that point—I knew it was a yes. "Yeah, let's go get pizza and beer."

They want to know, do you love them, and are you okay?

So if you're going home to somebody in particular, some set of somebodies in particular, gratitude is very appropriate for those who have held that space for you—whether or not they've handled everything the way you would have. It's a lot for someone to handle the home stuff when you disappear for a length of time and aren't available.

Along with that, I would also give the advice: if you can, don't be too precious. You know what I mean? Take the space that you need—I'm not saying don't do that. Find a way to balance your energy. Practice equanimity. Try to be somewhat normal. It'll be appreciated, it really will. Because if you're not relatively normal, then it stirs up all the questions about whether you're okay.

The last thing is talking about the retreat. This is a very interesting one—what to say about the retreat. The first point is there's a certain ineffability about this kind of experience. It can't really be put into words, can it? You can talk about parts of it. You can talk about specific sittings or insights that arose, or what you saw some guy do, or what the teacher said, or what the lunch was like. But the heart of it, the essence of it, the core of it is really hard to put into words—especially since it's still working in you.

If somebody asks you, "How was it?" they are probably asking you a social question. And you should just say, "Good." And they'll say, "Oh," and then you'll talk about what they want to talk about. It's usually a social question. They usually don't want to hear too much more than that.

Now, there are exceptions to this, and they will make themselves known. These are the people who really want to know. There will be something about how they ask you, or they'll ask you more than once. Those are the kind of people where, if you feel com-

fortable, it would be appropriate to go have a cup of coffee or tea with them in some quiet place, because they really do want to know. There's something they find very interesting about what you did, what you've experienced.

Because there are two kinds of people in relationship to this kind of thing, it seems to me: the ones that think it's really kind of nuts, and the ones that think it's really interesting. And there are more of the first than the second.

There's another danger about saying too much about the retreat out of enthusiasm and desire to share. At least in our culture here in the States, people will be very likely to think that you're proselytizing. Do you know what I mean? That you're telling them this in order to cause them to change their views or be converted to this particular religious or worldview. They'll just think that, and you'll be able to tell by the look on their face when they say, "Oh yeah, we all have our own path." Then you'll know you've gone too far.

There's the other possibility too, which may arise at future family holiday occasions: someone who wishes to hear about your experience in order to deconstruct it for you, or to debate you.

Most families have at least one of these types. So with that one, I just wouldn't bite. Because what would the point be—to defend or attempt to defend this ineffable experience that you've had, one that you can't even put into words? I would just let that one go by. Maybe that would be a case where you could use the phrase, "Everyone has their own path."

It's also wise to avoid giving dharma talks to your partners, even if you've got a really good one.

There's one other thing in relationship to family groupings. Often, if you've done something outside the boundaries of your individual family experience or their faith traditions, it brings up fear for them. Fear about who you're turning into. You used to be one of us. You're in the lineage of—I'll take an example, my mother's family, Irish Catholics. They've been Catholics since St. Patrick told a convincing story about a shamrock. I mean, it goes way back.

When you change or move outside the family tradition, it causes people to be afraid that you're rejecting them, rejecting connection with them, becoming a kind of mystery. I've found it very useful to try to signal, if this is the case for you, that I still love them. I'm still the same person. I'm not any weirder than I used to be. Reassure them in that

kind of way—being the same familiar member of the family who remembers birthdays and isn't trying to convert them or push anything on them or make them be different than they are. It goes a long way.

I had a very interesting experience a couple of years ago where I took my mother on a weekend trip up to Burlington, Vermont. My mother was, I think, eighty-seven at the time. We stayed in this hotel on the shores of Lake Champlain with a panoramic view out across the lake and the water. We were sharing a bedroom, and I got up in the morning and did my sitting. My mother went over to a chair and got out her novena book. She read her novena and I did my sitting, and we did parallel play—or pray, as the case may be. It was a really beautiful thing.

It can be very useful to take the long view over time with these things. If people are important to you and worth having a relationship with, put the practice into effect by being open and caring and non-judgmental in your relationship with them. There's actually modeling of wise intention in relationship to the people who are closest to us, accepting them for who they are.

So those are my words of wisdom for you on your way out into the marketplace. The return.

May you all go wisely and safely, going back to the lives that you left or onward to your new life yet to be opened. May you bring with you the fruits of the practice and live to see the ripening of the work that you've done here. May all your deepest aspirations be fulfilled in this very life.

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