Right Attitude

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:17

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

The second stage of the path has various translations: right attitude, right thought, right intention. Sometimes I've seen it translated as right aspiration. It's an interesting one to me because it has so many different levels of application, from looking at what right intention and right attitude mean in one single noting moment, just in the arising of one moment of noting, all the way to its broad applications in our everyday life. I find it, especially in relating to our broader life, a very powerful aid, a message in how we relate to our experience. A message that meditation and our life aren't separate. That it's the same—the way the mind relates in one noting moment and the way it relates in some confusing situation in our life. It's the same inclinations, the same mind. And so working with right attitude on these different levels I find very helpful.

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

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

And then we come to right attitude, right intention. And that's considered, in this very narrow sense, to be

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

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

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

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

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

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

As this develops through meeting situations with a willingness to learn and grow, that sense of clarity, that commitment to really being in our life, to using it, that understanding—it starts to shine through in your being. It starts to shine through just in the way that you relate to life, the way you relate to little situations. It doesn't matter whether it's a subtle experience happening in your sitting that no one else even knows about, or a really frantic experience at work, or an unexpected and painful interaction with another yogi.

They're no different. It's the same mind. And we have the possibility of using any situation that arises as manure—to learn, to grow. Or conversely, there's always the possibility that we'll drown in our reactions.

Without working with our attitude, with our intentions in this way, it's true that difficult situations easily drag us down. The reactions of greed and hatred and delusion in the mind are so strong that they just take over. We identify with them—with anger at the person who wrote us a nasty note, with anger at ourselves for being angry, with anger at ourselves because we wrote a nasty note. It just goes on and on. We spend all our energy then in resistance or in denial, trying to rework the memory so it comes out better and it's not so uncomfortable to think about.

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

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

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

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

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

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

hatred especially on the level of intention, how it manifests in our experience as thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I noticed this when I was in India this year. After I'd been there a while, I realized I was really happy. On the surface things were nice, but everything is a real hassle there. You can't do very much in a day. You can go to the post office and sit, you can go to the chai shop a couple of times, and it takes up the whole day. Even taking a bath takes quite a lot of time. I realized actually that at first it's a kind of enforced simplicity—I didn't really have a choice. It wasn't like I had gone with a sense of renunciation. But the

simplicity, the renunciation that was happening of itself, led to a great sense of contentment, of appreciation of what was happening. And there being not so many things to want, the mind just wasn't wanting very much. Of course also, what it did want were things it could get, so I wasn't caught up in longing in some ways.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Renunciation is a turning away from this desire for gratification, and it's very powerful. It's true that it can

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

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

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

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

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

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

Working with renunciation helps us sort through the maze of things that we desire. It helps us know

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So that's what I mean by habit. The inclinations of our mind are really strong, and they surface whenever we're not paying attention. Working with renunciation gives us more of a chance to see these inclinations when they arise. Because, for example, take the food one—if you're not eating, they can't be satisfied, and

there's nothing to think about whether it's satisfying. So you can see the inclinations arising.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive," she said in a recent interview. "If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger. Forgiving is a way of

reaching out from a bad past and heading to a more positive future."

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

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

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

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

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

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

This leads into the third right intention, which is intentions of non-harming, intentions of compassion—as opposed to the second, which is intentions of metta. Partly the way that our intention of non-harming can be developed is through—and again, it always comes back to this—our own experience of suffering. It's actually another reason that helps me incline my mind towards openness when I'm in a difficult or suffering situation.

The Dalai Lama, when I was out there, said that for the development of compassion—and he's like Mr. Compassion, if anybody is—it's necessary to have deep seeing into the pervasive suffering nature of existence and to feel the unbearableness of it. Now this surprised me a lot because he wasn't kidding. He said otherwise compassion is somewhat hypocritical. So we can begin by contemplating how all beings

wish to be free from suffering and yet they still suffer. This is a very powerful contemplation. And it deepens through our own experience of suffering and how unbearable that can be sometimes. This gives rise to intentions of non-harming, to intentions of compassion.

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

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

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

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

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

I want to read this one thing from Thich Nhat Hanh about that. I love the way he says things because it's so simple and down to earth. He's talking about wildlife shows on TV, where you'll often see tigers chasing things and snakes eating things. He says: "We long for the well-being of the frog and the antelope, but rarely do we consider that the tiger and the snake must also eat in order to live. We humans eat chickens, pigs, shrimp, fish, and cows. Yet because it is painful to watch, we will take the side of the prey and hope it

will escape. In these situations as meditators, we must remain very clear. We cannot take either side because we exist in both."

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

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

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

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

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