The Facts of Life

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 50:13

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

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

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

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

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

So the conundrum is that in our deep drive to be happy—and in some ways it's our birthright—we keep doing the things that promote our confusion. Because on some deep level, most of us don't really understand the nature of freedom, the nature of happiness. So we set our sights on some imagined freedom. What else can we do until we know what it is? But we keep looking in the wrong direction. We

keep looking for, as I was, some kind of steady mental state of bliss. I'd float on the clouds and I wouldn't have unpleasant experience for the rest of my life.

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is a poem from a Tibetan teaching:

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

That's what's so hard for us to do—simply to rest at ease in whatever happens. Here, now, in this moment,

in your sittings, in your walking, that knee pain, resting at ease in whatever happens. The restlessness, the self-criticism, resting at ease in whatever happens. Why is that so hard for us? Maybe it's not hard for you, but why is it hard to trust that? To trust that when there's the simplicity of complete presence and total intimacy, something other than this constant manipulating and fearing and clinging can reveal itself—really what Trungpa called our basic goodness. It's never gone anywhere. We're not here to create it or change ourselves.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the last retreat I was teaching, a man said on the second day—such a lovely insight. He said he'd been going through the usual second day of being caught in the hindrances, those strong emotional states of mind that can really cloud our perception, one of them being aversion. I don't know if any of you have recognized that in the last day or two. But aversion that just colors everything. And he was just feeling aversive to everything that was coming up in his experience—the people that walked by, the feelings that he had. He was labeling all these things as bad. This is unpleasant. I don't like it. Therefore, it's bad. It's wrong. It must be gotten rid of, out of existence.

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

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

I know many years ago, when I first heard this First Noble Truth, when I first started practice, I was only about nineteen, and I didn't have a particularly suffering childhood—just the normal confusion. There

was nothing horribly wrong in my life. And I had bought into the suburban, American suburban, unspoken culture that really everything's happy, happy. You just keep the unpleasant things behind closed doors and pretend they don't happen. And you come out, and you go to college, and you get a job, and your life just gets happier and happier. I couldn't understand why that wasn't happening yet. In fact, why did I feel so unhappy and confused, and I couldn't really point to any big reason?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it's hard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A man had a massive stroke and woke up after some weeks of coma with what's called locked-in syndrome—completely paralyzed, but completely awake. The mind is intact, and in his case, the only

thing he could move was his left eyelid. By moving his left eyelid, he dictated this whole book to someone who would go through the alphabet, and when it would get to the letter he meant, he would blink his eyelid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That brings us to the second truth: that the root of our suffering, of our confusion, is this very clinging. The clinging only arises because of our confusion in the first place. When we really, just for a moment—and we all experience these moments—when the heart is free from clinging, in that moment you're just resting at ease in what's here. A cup of tea. Looking at the pond outside. Sitting here and feeling your knee pain,

but just at ease. There is no clinging. There is no pushing away. That's an intimation of real freedom from suffering. That's the direction that our mind and heart deepen into when we understand things the way they are.

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

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

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

So when you're saying, "I'm tired, I want to go to bed," and it's just kind of seeing the body's tired, wanting to go to bed—we might say desire or "I want," but that's not clinging. It's just a neutral desire. But when you're sitting here at two o'clock, and your body's heavy, and you say, "I've got to get to bed, and I don't care, nothing is going to stop me, I've got to get to bed or I'm going to die"—that's the thirst. That's craving. And that is what blinds us. That's what keeps us looking away from the fact that we're already essentially complete.

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

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

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

Notice when you're walking and things are just relatively peaceful. Nothing much going on, but you're present. And the thought comes: *I'd really like a cup of tea.* Now, that thought could just come and go. It's

just a thought. It could be the same as, *Oh my, isn't that a nice bird?* It doesn't have to be desire. And you just keep going, peaceful.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's just as it is. From that place we can act with intelligence, we can act appropriately. It doesn't mean we

turn into some kind of blob, unable to distinguish right from wrong or what's appropriate. Rather, we act from compassion and intelligence rather than from fear and desire.

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

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

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.