What's The Breath Got To Do With Freedom?

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:08

So we come to the evening of the first day. Generally, especially if it's your first retreat, this is a really peppy time. You're probably feeling so glad you chose to spend a week like this, filled with energy and enthusiasm. It's usually a great audience to give a talk to on the first night.

So it falls to my lot to try to explain what we're doing here—at least one explanation. Really, every night we try to explain in one way or another what we're doing here. And this retreat is wonderful because while there are a lot of old, familiar yogi faces, there are also quite a few people who are new to this form of retreat, this form of practice. And that's wonderful, really wonderful.

I'm not really joking when I say we want to try the first nights to explain what we're doing, because the first days can be—they don't have to be, but they can be—quite difficult at times, or just kind of plodding at best. And not having done it before, you can have no personal experience, no what we call verified faith of knowing that it's worthwhile. So that's one of the things we try to speak to: basically keep you here long enough until you have some verified faith, and then you're happy to be here on your own. One of my teachers called it the velvet-gloved iron fist of the Dhamma. So tonight will be the velvet glove.

What I want to talk about is how the simplicity of what we've been doing so far today—just feeling the sensations of the breathing, feeling the sensations in your walking, in your body as you move through the day, repeatedly coming out of whatever blissful or suffering train of thought may be going on to come back to the simplicity of yet another sensation of breathing—how does this contribute to the development of wisdom and compassion? How does this open us to freedom? You may well ask. And what do we mean by freedom anyway? Which is actually a vaster question.

This is a quotation from a Burmese teacher, Sayadaw U Janaka, that I was sitting with last year. He opened a retreat with this quotation, and I really like it because I feel like it encapsulates the heart of our practice. He says: We practice Vipassana in order to live in happiness, to be free from suffering. And our suffering arises due to our suffering mental states. Our suffering mental states arise due to our belief in—the word in Pali is *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—it means personality view. Our belief in our personality view is what gives rise to our suffering mental states.

By personality view, we basically mean defining or relating to any experience as being me or mine—defining our view of ourselves as a separate personality through experience. And our belief in personality view, in *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, arises because of our wrong understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience.

That's the key line I want to come in on: a wrong understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience. That's the level our Vipassana practice is coming in on, is working on. Our mistaken understanding of the nature of our moment-to-moment mental and physical experience is really a mistaken perception—a perception, basically, that any experience is me or mine. But I'll talk more about that.

The resultant misinterpretation we give to experience, because we perceive it incorrectly, is at the root of all of our confusion, our suffering, our ill will, our greed—all the suffering that the path of the Buddha, the path of meditation, offers us freedom from. It comes about through our wrong understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience.

So that's actually vast. But what our practice of moment-to-moment awareness is working on is to help us learn to perceive and understand our mental and physical experience accurately. That's all. Like Joseph said last night, it's really simple, but it's not easy.

There are many ways that we misunderstand the nature of mental and physical experience. I just want to mention two tonight. I don't want to get too technical.

The first is that we confuse our ideas, our concepts, our assumptions, our reactions about experience with the experience itself. What ends up happening is that we actually don't have a clue what's really going on. And that is really how we spend most of our lives, and we wonder why things don't work. Why do I feel out of sync? It's because—duh—I don't even know what's really happening here.

Just a simple example, very simple. Say there's a loud sound in the meditation hall. I'm making this up; this isn't anything I've noticed happening. Say there's a loud sound, somebody's rustling or making some repeated loud sound in the hall. It's bugging the heck out of you. The perception is the loud sound. What is that person doing?

Who let them in here? Don't they vet people for appropriate meditation hall behavior before they allow them in such a crowded retreat? I can't bear it. That sound is bad. That person is wrong. It's disturbing my practice. Basically, it's a bad, wrong sound. And that would be what our experience is—that sound is messing up my meditation practice, right? Or you get down on yourself for not being compassionate. But whatever it is, we think that's the experience.

The experience is sound vibration. It's pleasant or unpleasant. There are some thoughts arising. There are some emotions arising. We string it all together in this package, and we think that's what it is. We don't even know that we could just be with hearing, vibration, unpleasant, space.

Or that bird call just there—that's a more pleasant sound. That could also just be vibration, hearing, pleasant. But often, and this doesn't seem insidious or bad, it's a subtle way that we still confuse our ideas with reality. We think, "Oh, the chickadees in the morning, I just love that. Spring is coming, the beauty of nature, the chickadees." And what we think is our experience is, "I'm hearing a chickadee singing, sitting

on the branch of a tree."

But what are you really experiencing here? In the hall, there's a sound, vibration. There may be a mental image in your mind, a picture of a chickadee. It's not the chickadee itself, is it? The chickadee's not sitting here in the hall in your hand. There's a sound, there's a vibration, there might be a pleasant feeling, a happy feeling, some thoughts, some mental images. You see what I mean?

I'm picking very simple examples. Another: your breathing. The breath is really tight. It's very shallow. You can hardly feel it down past your throat. And this is clear proof of what an uptight, repressed person you are. So each breath becomes another vast field of suffering, another proof of your essential worthlessness, your essential no-goodness—of how even this, such a simple task as feeling your breath, you of course can't do right. And that would be what you'd say is happening.

Instead of, "Oh, tightness." That's it. Tightness. Finished. Just tightness, you know? All the rest of that is extra made-up story. And mostly that's where we live—in the extra made-up story.

That's sakkāya-diṭṭhi. "My breath is tight. I'm repressed. I can't do it right. Why do they pick the breath anyway? In this other retreat I did, we did sweeping—it was a lot better. Don't they know what they're doing?" And on and on. But what's happening? Tightness.

The sakāya diṭṭhi—do you get a glimpse of how much suffering can be mixed up in that? And how when we simply feel tightness, it's gone?

Of course, part of our trip is that on some level we don't want it gone. "Yeah, I'm uptight, but at least it's me. Don't take my uptightness away from me. I want to be uptight and repressed. It's better than being nothing." We don't say that, of course, but there's a place of holding on.

So that's one way we misunderstand experience. We tend to not even know what's happening because we confuse our reactions, our assumptions, our simple ideas and images with the bare sense experience itself.

And then there's the common theme—with most but not all of us—of how does it relate to me? How does it affect me? What does this experience say about guess who? There's only one person: me, me, me. Even how nice the chickadee sounds often has something to do with me. "I really like how nice the chickadee sounds. It makes me feel so happy to be here in the springtime." The chickadee comes back to me, me, me—which is, of course, extra.

These are just the most basic ways we misunderstand the nature of mental and physical experience: an overlay of ideas and assumptions, and making it all either me or referring to me. And it creates a huge amount of struggle and suffering in our lives.

Part of what happens in a retreat is that because we pare away so many distractions, we get to see this up close, raw. That's part of why retreat is often so uncomfortable—not always, but at times—because we're running right up against that pattern, and there's nowhere to go to get away from it. So we're saying come

back to that miserable tight breath and see if you can just feel tightness.

That's what our practice is doing. The moment-to-moment attention, coming back to feel the sensations of breath, coming back to feel the sensations of walking, pulling out of those trains of thought—it's cultivating many things, but three of the most basic deserve mention.

First, there's the discipline of coming back. Today we're returning to the same experience over and over, which we'll do for the first day or so before expanding out. This discipline of just coming back to sensations of breath, just coming back to sensations of walking, whenever you notice your thinking—this is the beginning of the cultivation of samādhi, of concentration. Concentration basically means not that your mind never moves, but that there's a unification, a coming together of all the mental energy at one point in one moment.

You may have noticed the opposite today, which is why we might appreciate this coming together. Has anybody noticed the tendency of the mind to go anywhere at any moment, maybe five different places at once? Have you noticed how exhausting it is? You wonder why we're so tired when we first come to a retreat. Is anybody tired today? Of course. And that's normal. If you're new, that's really normal.

Part of the tiredness is simply because our lives are so busy. We stop, and the mind thinks "okay, check out." But part of it is we start to see how truly fatiguing the distractibility and nervous energy and restless quality of our minds in daily life really is when we sit here and start looking at what the mind is doing.

The slightest little thing can make it go off for ten or fifteen minutes. You're just feeling your nice breath. Somebody walks by, and boom—you're on a train of association back to the third grade, into your job next week, the vacation you're going to take in 2005, just because somebody walked by and you caught the tail end of a blue jacket. It takes nothing to make the mind go off like that.

This is exhausting, actually, because the mind doesn't just go—we're reacting. We like it. We don't like it. We get caught up in an angry dialogue with the hotel person at this hotel we're going to stay at in Mexico in 2005, and we're all upset. Then we come back, and nothing ever happened, but we're completely upset about it. This is how we live our lives. It's no wonder we're not happy all the time.

I'm digressing here—which is itself an example of lack of samādhi. The samādhi, the unification of mind, the discipline of coming back, coming back, coming back gently without judgment but with persistence, begins to allow the mind to settle into more of a steadiness. And then the energy that's spent running all over the place becomes available for seeing clearly, for presence, for awareness, for peace, for stillness. It's actually lovely.

But the mind doesn't want to do it because it's in the habit of running all over the place, like a little kid. So the coming back, the discipline, is in the service of this steadiness, this unification, this greater peace—but also a greater observing power, seeing what's actually happening mentally and physically, more accurately, more clearly. It helps us start to cut through the barrage of assumptions, interpretations, and

overlay.

And that brings us to mindfulness—which is distinct from concentration, the coming back over and over. Mindfulness is the quality of bare attention, of simply connecting your attention with what's happening and knowing it simply as it is, without confusing it with all the overlay.

So for example, with that tight breath, rather than "Oh, it's tight, I don't like it, it should be better"—just: "Oh, tightness." That's mindfulness. Just knowing what's what, bare attention without the extra.

A third quality is also being cultivated, and it's actually an aspect of mindfulness. In meeting each moment of attention, of awareness—whether it's sensations of breath or walking or a moment of sleepiness, it doesn't matter what—what allows for that bare attention, that clear seeing, is the attitude of metta, really, which we could translate as friendliness. Or patience. Or acceptance. Not the acceptance of resignation: "This is as good as it gets, so I'll try and be here." The acceptance of: "This is how it is in this moment. Let me be wholeheartedly, non-judgmentally present, just as it is." Tightness feels like this. Sound, hearing, is like this. Stepping feels like this. That quality of friendliness, of non-judging patience, is really what allows mindfulness to sink deeply into our experience moment to moment.

And so each moment that you're just noticing you're thinking or feeling the breath or sensations—each of these in itself seems so small. That's when you go, "What am I doing here? What good is this?" But each moment of that is cultivating these three things: steadiness, mindfulness, friendliness, patience, clear seeing. Each moment is counteracting at the same time the deeply ingrained habits of assessing, judging, misinterpreting.

And this we don't notice. We just notice we're feeling another sense of pressure in the breath. We don't also notice, "Oh, in this moment I am not interpreting. In this moment I am not misperceiving." We just go, "Oh, another rising, another falling, another lifting, another placing." But that's cutting through these habits that keep us in wrong understanding, that keep us suffering.

And in that moment of simple mindfulness, you'll notice it afterwards, you're not referring every experience back to me, me, me. You just feel: "Oh, just lifting. It's kind of tight." That's all. When you do refer it back to me, it's not really mindfulness anymore. It's like, "Oh no, the lifting's tight—no, no, I'm so tired." But just lifting. Simple. Lifting, space, silence.

That's really a powerful moment because it's cutting through all the misinterpretation, the misperception, the sakkāya-diṭṭhi. We're not confusing our concepts for reality in that moment. That's powerful.

And moment after moment after moment—the continuity through the day—that's why it's so important. If you just do that once for a moment in the sitting and then go out and play tennis the rest of the day without paying attention, it doesn't quite have the same power. That's why, as Steve said, we sit, we walk, we sit, we walk, we eat—and then we tell you to pay attention when you're eating, and when you're taking a shower—because it's cutting through those habits. We've spent our lifetime building up the habit of

misperceiving, of referring everything back to what does it mean about me. So it takes some effort to cut through.

But the actuality is really stronger than our bad habits. We do need to learn to trust the seeing itself.

And this is the other thing that I think is happening—well, I know it's happening—in our continuity of willingness to be mindful, willingness to come back. Continuity doesn't mean that every moment of the day you're precisely, pristinely mindful. We know that. Sometimes when we say continuity, people think that's what it means, and they'll come in an interview and say, "I'm not continuous." We'll ask why, and they'll say, "Well, I had these few moments where I spaced out." No one thinks that every single moment of the day your mind doesn't wander. Continuity just means a willingness, when you notice you're off in la-la land, to come back and feel your body, whatever you're doing.

So the other thing that's happening with this—and I want to point it out because I also think we don't consciously notice it, at least not at first—is that we're beginning to shift our habit of evaluating ourselves, our life, others. Our habit of deriving meaning and worth for ourselves from experience.

Don't you mostly evaluate, even here, whether your meditation is going well or not, by how often you feel the breath or how good your walking is or how present you are or whether it was a pleasant sitting or whether you're filled with anger or whether you're feeling more happy? We tend to evaluate ourselves, take all of our meaning, our self-affirmation from what particular experiences we're going through. And then we tend to set our practice on a path of trying to achieve certain experiences and get rid of others.

But what mindfulness is subtly doing is undercutting that whole habit, that whole way of assessing our lives. It's saying, basically, on some level, what's happening isn't what's important. Where the value is being placed is on the awareness itself. So when we're saying, feel the sensations of breath, it's not so you'll have better sensations of breath. It's not like you're doing better if that tightness changes to a long, slow, smooth, deep breath. One might be more pleasant than the other, but you know what? Who cares? Awareness doesn't care. But what happens is, whatever kind of breath it is, the awareness is the point of awakening. Awareness is really the gateway to peace, the gateway to freedom. And what we are doing through our practice is more and more bringing in the conditions that allow us to notice the awareness itself.

Awareness is really the mystery. It's the most amazing—it's not a thing, but it's the most amazing aspect of our life. It's really what our practice is all about. So beginning and continuing and increasing our—first even our noticing—awareness, developing a confidence in awareness, really a love of awareness, so that what becomes the key in our whole practice isn't what's happening, but awareness of what's happening. That's actually so much easier to do than to try to make your inner or outer experience look or feel a certain way.

I know that's not going to stop anybody from trying to do that. And we all do. We keep finding more and

more subtle ways. I'm here to tell you. You keep finding more and more subtle ways to try and manipulate your experience to match some ideal in your mind of what freedom is. And pretty much always it's going to be pleasant, no?

It's actually quite a useful exercise for you to contemplate, when I'm done talking, to contemplate for a short amount of time what assumptions or ideas you're carrying as to what freedom means to you, or what liberation means to you. Because of course we'll have ideas about that. We don't just come to practice with no ideas, no aspiration, no goals. We're not built like that. "Oh, what the heck, I've got nothing better to do." We come here with some yearning, some aspiration, and that's great. But it's helpful to know what it is.

Because until we're really trusting in the reality of awareness, in the potential of awareness to bring us to freedom, until we're really trusting that on a stronger and stronger basis, we're trying to manipulate our experience to meet our ideas of what either freedom is or what happiness is or just what feels good or comfortable, at the last lick.

But freedom—what do we mean by freedom? The other day, Steve mentioned that at the Forest Refuge there was an open house. But the few days before that, at the end of our month- or two-month-long teacher retreat, we had this blessing ceremony. Bhante Gunaratana was there, who's been a monk for about sixty years from Sri Lanka. He's a very inspiring guy, very sweet, down to earth. Quite a few monks and nuns were present. At one point he said—and it was very funny—you know, he's talking about how we have to take care of our bodies. And he said, "The Buddha was enlightened, but his body wasn't enlightened. It was his mind and heart that was enlightened. The body keeps on doing its thing."

So if you think awakening means you stop having body things—dukkha, you know—and you're going to feel good from now on, well, think again. And also, the Buddha's awakening didn't fix all the suffering and injustice and violence in the world. Enlightenment doesn't mean everything is hunky-dory, inside or outside.

So the freedom the Buddha is talking about—it's something other. It's something different. And it hinges on awareness itself.

But I know, and I'm pretty confident, that each of you has had one or two mental reactions throughout the day, right? One or two mental states have arisen for most people.

Notice how much—not all, but how much—of what might arise in these days in your mind, how much of the habit of our mind, which will lead to actions of body... First notice that: how habits of mind lead to actions of body. How much of it is in struggle or reaction to just what is in this moment? Whether what is is a personal, physical, or mental experience, or whether what is is external.

Say if you're really tired or sleepy—how much sense of struggle might there be with it? How much struggle with wanting a different room, or wanting different clothes, or wishing there were no black flies,

or having a better seat, or thinking you should have come another week? Or when things are really good, the sense of struggle of wanting to keep it, or the fear of losing it, or how to get it back again, or how to hold on to it. "What did I do to get this good sitting, and how can I make it be exactly like this the next time?"

Just noticing that. And how in all of this, the focus of our attention, of our reaction, of our identification, of our sense of self—the focus is all on the experience that's happening. The sleepiness, the unpleasant pillow that's too hard, the unpleasant breath, the sense of restlessness, not liking the food or loving the food and wanting more, feeling too crowded, whatever. How much of our focus is on what's happening?

I'm sure we're telling you to pay attention to what's happening. It's good to pay attention to what's happening. But notice how we tend not to notice the awareness of what's happening. And they're both always right there together, aren't they? If you know what's happening, there's awareness. There's no way there's not. The awareness is always accessible, and you don't actually have to do anything to create it.

You heard that clap, right? You didn't have to think ahead of time, "I have to prepare myself to be aware in case she claps." It's just there. We tend to just focus on, "Why did she do that? That was kind of sharp. That didn't feel good. That kind of jarred my heart energy." Blah, blah, blah. Just awareness. Just awareness. It's always accessible. It's always available to us.

When we are present with full-hearted presence—that's what the collectedness of our mental energy is about—knowing what's happening. So we're using, of course, in our practice, experience to bring in our attention, to collect our mental energy. So we're consciously saying, "Pay attention to breathing, pay attention to walking, pay attention to your body, pay attention to your mental states." But it's not to make better experience. It's to allow us to notice with more and more confidence the awareness itself.

So that rather than looking for a refuge, looking for a home, looking for ease in having better experience, we can actually turn around and begin to feel that the awareness itself can be our refuge, can be our home. That the confidence, the place of safety, and actually the opening, the doorway into freedom, to ease, to compassion, to a different relationship altogether to life—isn't in fixing our experience. It's in trusting in the awareness itself.

Usually we're so blinded by our reactions to experience that we don't have time to notice awareness. I mean, it's like not even ephemeral. It's nothing, right? There's nothing you can see. Experience is so much more juicy.

But what's so great about beginning to trust, beginning to find a refuge in awareness, is that it really then doesn't matter what's happening. The refuge is always available. You don't have to wait till you're a better person. In some cases, personally, that could be a long time. Just how you are right now, awareness is available. With your lousy, crummy, tight breath, you can be aware of it. You don't have to wait till you have some wonderful yogic breath. With all your thoughts, with your incredible sleepiness—guess what?

You can be aware of sleepiness.

Sally, I think, mentioned Ajahn Sumedho last night, the American man who's been a monk in the Thai tradition for many years.

He has a wonderful way of using very simple language that I have found personally very helpful in making that subtle shift in my experience—from being entranced or reactive to whatever's going on, to just falling into the awareness.

It works by saying, "Oh, anger—I don't like it. Oh, anger is like this." Or "Sleepiness—I can't bear it, another sitting, I'm so sleepy, it's so tight, I should stand up, why should I just..." Go: "Oh, sleepiness is like this."

It doesn't change the sleepiness, and that's not the point. But it shifts the whole dynamic to where the juice is—the freedom, the awakeness, the aliveness really is in the awareness. "Oh, sleepiness is like this." Then we forget, we're back in reaction. "Oh yeah, reaction is like this."

No matter what's going on, taking refuge in awareness is really this capacity to simply meet it, meet whatever's happening, with total presence and trust. The trust not that the thing itself is going to change or get better, but that awareness can meet and hold anything. Like instead of becoming the sleepiness, or instead of becoming the reaction to the sleepiness, it's as if we're the space and silence within which it happens. This is a metaphor—it's not actually like that—but it's more like that. So rather than getting so caught up in reactivity, it's like, "Oh yeah, sleepiness is like this. Hating myself is like this. Being completely spaced out, not even being able to find one breath in thirty-five minutes, is like this."

There's actually nothing in our experience that we can't be aware of, except unconsciousness, when we're awake.

And so what begins to happen is this: we come to our practice with an aspiration, some goal, a sense of what freedom or compassion or more happiness means to us. And this is important—or we wouldn't be here. Aspiration, a sense of inspiration, is very important. It's a way of collecting our dispersed energy, giving us confidence, giving us the energy and willingness to act, directing our energy in a specific direction. It helps us do things we might not do on our own, like get through a meditation retreat. That's hard to do. It is a hard thing. Without some aspiration, some goal, we wouldn't do it.

But because of our habits of defining and assessing ourselves by experience—it's really, for many of us, the only way we know how to evaluate—the aspiration can get subtly subverted. That's why I said to look at what your idea is of your aspiration of freedom. Because then the aspiration—"Yes, I want to practice, I want to wake up"—can shift from a useful motivation to clinging to an idea, an image of what should happen.

And so it becomes, rather than a useful, onward-leading motivation, a form of striving, a source of frustration. It means, "I came here for freedom. It means my practice should be good. It means I should be

able to follow ten breaths in a row." And when I can't, I get lost in frustration, I get lost in comparing.

Thus what starts as a noble and useful aspiration turns to clinging, to failure, to self-judgment. And the motivation has shifted from a useful wanting to awaken, wanting to live with more compassion—whatever yours is, I'm not trying to put words in your heart—to clinging, to wanting, to comparing, to frustration. And then we wonder: Why is it so tight? Why am I suffering so much? This practice isn't working.

But what begins to shift, even by itself, simply through these three things I said—coming back with steadiness, with mindfulness, and with that friendly patience that simply accepts this moment as it is—is that we find our motivation of trying to make it be a certain way, that clinging, begins to dissolve. And our practice moves from trying to make experience confirm us—coming here to be a good meditator so I can go home and tell people what kind of far-out concentration experiences I had—to a love of awareness itself.

And this changes everything.

I've seen this happen in my practice over the years. Not every moment, God knows. But in the times when it doesn't matter what's happening, when there's simply the ability to be aware, to be present, to take refuge in that awareness—it actually becomes a kind of devotion almost. It's really a sense of reverence for awareness itself. And whatever the awareness is embracing, it becomes a reverence for life, however life is expressing itself in this moment, and the awareness with it.

So this sense of taking refuge in awareness actually manifests through a kind of friendliness or compassion for life, because nothing needs to be rejected, nothing needs to be shut out. It doesn't mean we don't act or respond or try to help if there's something wrong or suffering, but it's not out of a motive of hating or resenting or pushing away.

So really, we begin to see that our practice here requires enormous effort, yes. It requires an enormous commitment and perseverance, persistence to keep coming back, to keep coming back all day, all night, moment after moment. But when the motivation is not to make it better, not to get something to confirm me, but simply love of being present in this moment—all that sense of striving and frustration falls away, and enormous energy, courageous presence, effort becomes possible. Because you're not pushing to make it different. It's just to wholeheartedly be here.

There are many times in my practice, in my life, where I'll be going through some difficult phase, some difficult mental state, some reaction to something happening in my life. And when I finally go, "Oh, what's happening now? Sorrow, anger, reaction"—and I'm really aware of it—there's such a sense of... it's strange. It's like a happiness. A happiness to be fully present. To be falling into the refuge of awareness rather than battling with experience.

And it lets that experience be fully felt, fully experienced, without adding all this extra stuff on top of it. I

can respond much more appropriately than when I'm just in knee-jerk reactivity.

So our motivation shifts from wanting something to just appreciation, or love of awareness itself. And that takes us deeper and deeper into the meditation practice, into the possibility of being here more fully for our life, no matter what's going on.

There's a passage soon after the Buddha was enlightened in the suttas where one of the higher beings came down and was trying to convince him to teach. One line he said that I really like: "The doors of the deathless are open for those who hear, for those who see." You could say they're somewhere else, but they're right here. Awareness is our door to the deathless. Awareness is always accessible. We just need to learn not to be so entranced with our reactions and interpretations, not so entranced with sense experience that we can't notice the awareness of it. That's all.

And it's just this subtle shift. "Oh, hearing is like this. Walking is like this. Mmm, nice tasting pasta. Enjoyment is like this." Just remembering that subtle shift is very, very powerful. The point that includes, as Ajahn Sumedho speaks of awareness—the point that includes.

What helps us develop a recognition and trust in this awareness is the quality of bare attention I was talking about with mindfulness—learning how to see just what's happening without all the hoopla we add to it. That's simply this quality of willingness to look directly. Normally, our interpretations and assumptions and preconceived notions so color experience that we just can't see clearly.

There's a Zen story I really like. In ancient Japan, a vicious, powerful samurai warrior came to a Zen master. This is a common theme in Zen stories. He was utterly uncouth, brandishing his sword, and he kept calling the Zen master a pig. "You're a pig, and all of these monks here are pigs, and you know what I do with pigs like you—I just run my sword through them." On and on he went.

The Zen master simply bowed and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

This brought the samurai up short, because even as well as he thought of himself, he didn't think of himself as a Buddha. He said, "I, a Buddha?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

Yes, it's like that. Until we learn how to meet moment after moment with bare attention, we don't know if we're a pig seeing a pig or a Buddha seeing a Buddha. We don't have a clue. We have to learn how to look. And that's this quality of just meeting one moment of experience freshly, without preconceptions.

Let me tell you another story, this one about Yo-Yo Ma. He's becoming one of my heroes—the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. I think he's a wonderful being. He travels to many different cultures musically, bringing them together, appreciating different musical traditions. It's beautiful what he does.

Once I was in Germany and I was watching a documentary about him on television. Friends were

translating because I don't speak German. This was a few years ago. In this documentary, he was flying into somewhere in Central Africa. This was prearranged. He came in a helicopter to a small tribe of bush people. They showed him getting out of his helicopter with his million-dollar cello. Maybe he had a second-string cello, but I'm sure it was worth quite a lot. He was going to meet the senior members of the tribe—I think it was mostly men—the head storyteller, the head musician, who carried a lot of the tradition of that tribe musically.

What I remember of this documentary is them getting together. He was meeting with this chief musician and they were playing for each other. Here he was with his million-dollar cello. And the head musician had a stringed instrument that was basically a drum made from an oil can, with a long pole and a string attached. The man would plunk on that string—I think it was only one string—and sing. You could hear it and think, well, it sort of sounds like what it looked like, a plunk on a string in an oil can.

But Yo-Yo Ma was listening with completely fresh ears. He just said, "Wow, that's really great, the way you play that and sing." Then he said, "Let's trade instruments." He gives the man his cello, and he takes the oil drum string thing. And he's saying, "I can't play this nearly as well as you can. Show me how to." He's trying to learn how to play it with complete freshness, with this kind of interest, this kind of wonder, no overlay of "I have this great classical Western European music background." It was just, "Wow, you really can do this well, much better than I can, and it's beautiful."

I love that. That's stayed with me for years, and I take that as a quality of mindfulness—that ability to meet each sensation of breath with that freshness, each sensation of lifting your foot with that freshness. It's the only thing happening in this moment. It can't be different this moment than how it is. Can we be here for it?

When we're able to be here for it with that quality of totality of non-judging presence, that's when awareness reveals itself. That's when there's that doorway to open into awareness and take it as our refuge rather than reacting to experience. We can relax into what's happening rather than struggling with it. And that's the doorway to the deathless.

Over time, the continuity of this willingness to meet each moment fresh—without getting lost in our reactions, and when we do, meeting the reaction fresh, "Oh, reactivity is like this," without needing it to go anywhere—the continuity through the day matters. The labeling, if you use it, is simply a way of helping us come into experience. It's not a way to encapsulate it, to say, "This is like this, and I know it already. Lifting—I know it." Labeling isn't meant to do that. It's to bring our attention into the experience. "Oh, pressure feels like this."

This non-interfering yet total presence through the days begins to give space for the actual nature of our mental and physical experience to reveal itself. Not how we think it is, not how we say it is, but just beginning to see what's really happening. And I'm going to tell you things, but don't believe me. Keep meeting moment after moment as freshly as you can.

This changing, insubstantial nature of all of our mental and physical experience—it will begin to reveal itself. It can't help but. Just see if you have any physical experience that lasts very long, any mental experience that lasts very long, that really has much substantiality past the moment. Working with steadiness through the day, you'll see things coming and going, coming and going. Nothing we can really say is totally reliable in the world of sense experience or mind experience.

When that begins to reveal itself—not because we want to see it, but because we stop wanting to see anything other than just what's here—it reveals itself because that's what's happening. That's not depressing. What actually happens when we see that everything is changing?

There isn't any substance I can grab for my own happiness, for my own sense of self. The heart and mind gradually stop looking to this changing, insubstantial world of sense experience. They stop looking there for lasting happiness because they just get it—it's not possible.

And when we stop looking, we stop putting our trust in this constantly changing world of sense experience. Basically, that's where we go for refuge. We go to some physical comfort. We go to some nice mental state. We go to trying to arrange experience in a way that affirms us or makes us feel good. That's what we look to for refuge. And it may work, but not for long. Even if it works for a year—though I doubt anything works for more than a few moments—that's where we go for refuge, and then it falls apart.

When the mind sees that enough, it stops going there for refuge. It just settles into knowing: falling apart is like this. And surprise—when we stop looking where refuge can never be found, we might discover that there's a peace, a silence, a happiness, a freedom that's always been here, always been accessible. We're just too involved with our reactions to notice it.

And so this simple moment-after-moment practice is really opening us to a much more profound possibility for peace in our lives. A kind of happiness that isn't the personal "I'm so great" happiness. A kind of happiness of non-struggle and total wakefulness that is always accessible to us when we can turn around and notice it.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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