Mindfulness Has No Preferences

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 50:47

So, a little bit as I mentioned this morning, or alluded to, it's kind of interesting, or mystifying, or frustrating, depending on your particular mood on a particular day. But I find that most of us have a really clear, sincere intention to live as good a life as we can. To cultivate the wholesome, to cultivate the good, to be good to others, to be happy in our lives, not to cause harm. And still—maybe I'm the only one, but I don't think so—we find ourselves saying and doing things that cause ourselves suffering, cause other people suffering, that aren't really at all how we think we want to live. How does it keep happening?

This relates to the whole path, but I just want to come in from a particular angle tonight, starting with a sutta, a part of a sutta from the Dīgha Nikāya, about when Sakka, king of the gods, comes down to the Buddha. Now, king of the gods means he's living in one of these heavenly realms that really has quite a lot of pleasant experience and also goodness, not just total sensual pleasure. But he comes down and says to the Buddha, in the middle of the sutta, "What is it, dear sir, that even when we are delighting in the wholesome—and what is the fetter, what is the bond?—that we think, 'May we live free from hostility, free from violence, free from ill will,' we really want to live in a wholesome, good way. What is it that we still find ourselves living in hostility, living with ill will, living with confusion, violence, rivalry—all of that—even when we're trying to delight in the wholesome and do our best?"

Now, this is Sakka, king of the gods, so we could cut ourselves some slack.

The Buddha, of course, gives a complex answer that I'll just speak about a little part of tonight. But he says the bonds, what we're fettered by—the first answer he gives is envy and covetousness. That's our first problem: holding on to things, not being generous, trying to protect for ourselves. And that is caused by holding to preferences, by holding on to our choices for what is dear and not dear, which is a more specific translation. Since when dear and not dear exist in our minds and we hold on to that, we hold on to preferences. This, of course, is fed by desire. Desire is fed by thinking about it. Thinking is fed by the endless papañca, the proliferation of thought.

So that's what I want to talk about tonight: this point of having and holding to preferences. Just one of the many ways we do that. Do we even see that as a problem, as part of the root source of our suffering? That we maybe don't see it as a problem might be part of the problem.

Holding to preferences. Often when one reads this, or we talk about it, it comes up in many people's minds: "Of course we have preferences. We're not just dead slabs of meat. We know what's pleasant and unpleasant. We make choices in our life. The Buddha made choices in his life. We have to vote. We have to make choices when we go through the food line. We have a preference. We know the difference between

rice and beans, the difference between cooked and uncooked oatmeal," and so on. The mind can get quite wigged out going through all that.

Remember, it's not the having; it's the holding to them.

Realizing that having and holding to preferences really arises from each of us, from our deep yearning for happiness, for peace. The Buddha said it, the Dalai Lama says it in lovely ways: we all experience an innate inner desire for happiness and to overcome suffering. That's normal. That's not an unwholesome, bad thing—that we have a yearning, a real yearning for happiness, to overcome suffering. That's what gets us on a path. We wouldn't be here if we just said, "I have no preferences and I don't care. I suffer, I don't suffer, what's the difference? I cause suffering, I don't, what's the difference?" Of course we make some choices. That's what gets us on a path.

But then it's seeing that we don't actually—at least when we begin the path, and this keeps refining as we go along—really understand what happiness is. We want happiness. But the only way, at least in the world at large, as the Buddha uses the phrase "untaught worldling"—he uses that phrase a lot...

For some reason, worldling—puthujjana—trips me up. But that's us, unless someone here is an arahat. We're untaught worldlings, puthujjanas. There's one phrase—I think John might remember—that describes them as simply mad. They're just mad. We just don't understand things in a way that brings us peace and happiness. And in trying to achieve happiness and overcome suffering in our untaught ways, our unenlightened ways—and I don't mean the big Enlightenment, I just mean unenlightened in understanding the way things are—we keep spinning and spinning, trying to be happy by doing what we think will make us happy. But that actually just keeps us in more suffering, because we're so confused we don't know what happiness is.

A few years ago, a friend sent me an article—I think it was actually from the Wall Street Journal—an interview with a man who was a professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard, at least at that time. Together with several other scholars, including a Nobel laureate in economics and another scholar at Princeton, they had been doing years and years of study on the psychology of happiness and how we as humans predict what will make us happy.

Now, the name of this article is "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." So that's going to give you a clue where it goes. I just noticed in the last year that this man, Daniel Gilbert, has a book out—which I assume, though I haven't read it, comes from this work he's been doing. The book is called *Stumbling on Happiness*. Basically, the gist of the article is that we don't have a clue what makes us happy, and we don't understand this. Now, this is just scientific study—it's not Buddhist-based at all, as you'll see.

Their study examined how we as humans predict what will make us happy, how we feel from the choices we make, whether our predictions are accurate, and how we feel afterwards. Gilbert says this is so important because almost all of our actions—the decision to buy jewelry, to have children, to get a new

job, to come do a meditation retreat (that's not in the article)—are based on our internal predictions of the emotional consequences of these events. Or, as we would say in Buddhist terms, we're looking for pleasant feeling. We make our choices, as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, ninety-five percent of them based on pleasant feeling—getting and having more pleasant feeling.

That's not what they say in the article, but Gilbert goes on to explain that we make our decisions, our choices, based on thinking that this paycheck, this car, this piece of jewelry, having kids, whatever, is going to make me happy for the long term. And he asks: Do we even know? If we don't know what makes us happy now, how will we know what makes us happy in the future?

It's interesting because he says we basically "miswant," as he calls it. We don't really understand. We think something is going to be pleasant, and we think it's going to make us happy for much longer than it does. Conversely, something we think is going to be really unpleasant, we think is going to make us unhappy for much longer than it does. And he says we make the wrong choices in that way.

For example, if you were asked: Would you rather have a broken leg or a bad knee? Most people think, well, I'd rather have a bad knee because a broken leg would be really a lot of suffering. But actually, the broken leg heals much quicker. The bad knee is like ongoing, niggling suffering for years. Or consider: would you rather have a bad breakup of a relationship or a tense marriage? People say, well, no, I'd rather have the tense marriage. But that's going to drag out suffering, suffering, suffering for years. You have the intense breakup, and things aren't as bad for as long as you think they're going to be—and they're not as good for as long as you think they're going to be. But we never seem to get that.

He says, basically, we just don't understand. We don't have a clue what makes us happy, and we keep overestimating and making the wrong choices.

That's scientific evidence for what are basically the habits of mind I want to talk about tonight—the very basic ones. We tend to react to all experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, the whole range of mental experience, any physical sensation. If it's pleasant, we don't notice that, but we like it. We move toward it. We want it. If it's unpleasant, we tend not to notice that, but we judge it as really bad, wrong, shouldn't be happening—we move away. If it's neutral, we just kind of space out or get bored or look for something more intense. These are really strong habits of mind that we mostly don't notice. And then we make our choices through the veil of those habits. We look through it like green-colored glasses or something.

So when we're making choices—in our life and in our retreat and in our sitting—that's coming from this sincere yearning for happiness.

Just have a look. How many of our choices, how much of our perhaps not very clear idea of what happiness and freedom would be like—how much of it is pleasant? How many of us, when we think about when we finally finish this arduous practice and we're enlightened, imagine we're happy? And what does happy mean? Does your back still hurt? Are you still forgetting things all the time? Has that really

unpleasant coworker who's always in your face suddenly stopped doing that? Has the whole world suddenly, magically started to work the way we wanted it to work?

I know we don't say that, but really, looking at it—we don't awaken into a different world. The world doesn't change. And people, with all their ideas and opinions—well, look around. It doesn't change.

Even the Buddha. And this is how ingrained this sense of assessing things by pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral can be. It was only a few years ago I suddenly realized: look at the Buddha's life *after* he became the Buddha, not even before—after. In terms of his life, it doesn't look like it was a piece of cake.

Sure, he had preferences. He made choices. He chose to live as an ascetic monastic—that's a choice. He made plenty of choices. He chose how to teach. He chose which things to talk about. He chose how to set out the rules and how the monastic life would be lived. He chose who his attendants would be. He made lots of choices. We're not saying there's this gray sameness where you don't have opinions and you don't make choices. It's the *holding* to them, thinking that choice is going to make me happy—that's the difference.

And so when the Buddha lived his life, he walked around India barefoot with a begging bowl for forty-five years. If you read the suttas—not that I've read all of them—but it's interesting to see that he had the same kinds of external beautiful experiences and problems that still exist. He couldn't fix the world. His clan's people on his mother's and father's side went to war with each other over water rights. He could come and mediate and stop the war sooner, but that was really all. A lot of the kings who would come to be his disciples—one king was a disciple, and his son killed him to take over the kingdom. The Buddha couldn't prevent that kind of thing.

And if you read about a lot of the people who come and talk to him, it's just like one big annoyance. If you weren't really equanimous, all these people coming and challenging him and not believing him, the different monks getting into squabbles with each other. There's even one sutta where two sets of monks are squabbling so much the Buddha goes to try and calm it down, and they basically say to him, "Oh, go away, we'll take care of it ourselves." They didn't even listen to him. The Buddha! People are people.

So he had all kinds of what we would call dukkha, stuff that's difficult. His back hurt. He got headaches. His main disciples died before he did, so he experienced that loss. It's just life. And yet he was the liberated one, the peaceful one, heart and mind free from suffering.

So clearly, if we believe that—and if we didn't, probably no one would be here—clearly the freedom, the happiness the Buddha's talking about is not about having external things, including external people, acting in the ways that we want. And we know that on some level. On some level. I don't know if we really know that. Because where do external things stop and internal things begin? And frankly, is it any different internally?

We're just talking about the six sense experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and

mentality—thoughts and emotions. So whether the object is someone coming and talking to you and complaining about the other bhikkhus and whining and challenging you, or whether the object is the mind as you're sitting on the pillow being reactive—same difference. It's just unpleasant experience arising.

What's the suffering in the unpleasant experience? What are we talking about when we say not having preferences, not holding to preferences? Is it in the external life, but more in the internal life—not holding to preferences that things should be this way and not that way?

Not holding to the preference that I should have a really concentrated mind as compared to a mind that's scattered all over the place. Not holding to the preference that my back shouldn't hurt, and because my back is hurting, something's wrong. Not holding to the preference that I should feel this open, loving, open-hearted experience, and because it's not—it's closed down, it's tight—I must be meditating wrong.

But that's really not very easy for us to even wrap our minds around, never mind actually trusting it. This practice is not about getting things the way we want them. It's not about getting your meditation technique all together and perfect so that you sit down and it just flows every time. Because sooner or later something will happen and it won't flow, I promise you—unless you die. Sometime that will happen. Then something else will flow.

Meditation is sort of designed to bring up, to take us into every corner where there's holding to preference and we don't even recognize it. These habits of mind—judging pleasant as good, right; unpleasant as bad, wrong. The natural recoiling from the unpleasant. The natural holding, identifying, going towards the pleasant. And just the delusion around the neutral.

These, of course, are the three basic torments of mind, the three basic *kilesa* in Pali, the afflictions of mind: greed, hatred, delusion—*lobha*, *dosa*, *moha*. They're the big three. They're like the root from which all of our mental confusion and suffering grows.

In terms of exploring out of genuine interest how these habits are created and acted upon in any particular moment of experience—because this is something that arises and passes in every moment—working with noticing these habits in response to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience is really fascinating. It's a great way in to explore. It's ubiquitous in that with every moment of sense contact, the mind experiences it, feels it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

So *vedanā*, this translation of "feeling tone," is really a process of feeling. We're not going to notice it every moment—don't even try. But in many moments it is noticeable. And noticing how quickly, it's really fascinating, how quickly the mind moves. We know the mind moves incredibly fast from, say, experiencing pleasant to way down the road into a whole complex construction.

Chökyi Nyima, a wonderful Tibetan Rinpoche—he's the brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Mingyur Rinpoche, four brothers—he talks about this. Just watch the fickleness of the mind, the unreliable nature

of the mind, how easily it is influenced just by a pleasant or unpleasant sight or thought into an immediate mood. And then that mood immediately takes us into a whole world of construction, of creation.

I've been noticing this myself. It's really so much fun if you just approach it as exploring, as seeing how the mind works—how in this contact with pleasant and unpleasant the mind moves so fast. Just watch the construction come up. Watch how if we don't see it, we act on it, we believe it.

I was driving somewhere a couple of weeks ago—maybe it was a couple of months ago because I've been in Europe—but anyway, I was driving somewhere. Just calm, no traffic, nothing going on. I was turning from one road to another, and I was fairly quiet. I didn't have the radio on. My mind was pretty calm.

And I noticed, just as I was turning, that it was on a fast road. The car behind me was just a little too close. That's all. I turned. The car was a little too close, but it didn't turn—it kept going. And I noticed, just in that moment: the car's too close, it felt unpleasant, an immediate little aversion came up. That's not right. They shouldn't be so close. It was so subtle.

And I thought, whoa, what if I had been in busy traffic? That little aversion would come up—they're too close—and then I'd turn onto another road where I didn't really have to react to anything. But if you do that, and there's that little bit of aversion, and then another car cuts in, and there's a little more aversion, pretty soon you've got road rage in no time.

We don't really see how it builds until the poor last person who cuts in front of us bears the full weight of our accumulated frustration. But it starts that quickly—just "too close," then "it shouldn't be like that," then "I don't like it."

Or with pleasant. I was sitting, I think this morning, and just some image came up. You know how that is—just some memory, some image. It may not even have a thought attached that carries any meaning; it doesn't have to. Just some image came up, and I didn't notice "pleasant." I just noticed it felt nice. And right away: "Oh, that's nice." Then my mind brought up another, more pleasant image. "Oh, that's nice." And then it starts. In just two seconds, you're into a total pleasant fantasy, whatever way—it doesn't even matter what it is. Food, sex, vacation, having a nice sitting, whatever. The mind's just concocting things: pleasant, pleasant, pleasant—and poof, down the road you go.

Luckily, we're sitting on the cushion. That's what's so good about it—you hopefully won't act on it. Although here, because the bell doesn't ring on a fixed schedule, you might get up and just go get some oatmeal with hot water. But in our daily life, we can really act on these impulses. Not that the acting is bad in itself. It's the delusion—the acting while thinking this is going to make me happy. And we really think it. We don't even know we think it, over and over and over. "If only that car wasn't so close to me, everything would be okay." That's so deeply ingrained.

And so when we come to meditation—not just a retreat, but the way we relate to meditation itself, the technique, the sitting, the walking, the watching our mind—it's the same mind. Even though we come to

the path of awakening really to see through how we suffer, at least when we start, we're starting with the same mind and we haven't even begun to see through it. Everyone here is past this initial stage; I know I'm saying things we all already know. But for me anyway, I keep falling into the trap, more and more subtly, where I'll see: "Oh, I was doing this for pleasant again. I was evaluating by pleasant and unpleasant again."

Just notice: we come to practice meditation and technique, and even if it's just being open to everything, it's a particular mindset, a particular learned activity. We're going to bring the same habits of mind to that activity that we bring to anything else, at least in the beginning—because that's all we know, and we don't even know that we know it. We don't even know what the habits of our mind are until we turn around and look and get really familiar with them.

So for many people, we come and we're practicing with really great sincerity, commitment, strong viriya energy. But so often that energy—whatever way we're putting it out, whether to feel the breath or to hold the form of sitting and walking or to work through sleepiness—however sincere we are, we don't notice how often we're putting forth that effort to get some reward.

Just check it out. "Reward" might not be the word we use. We're looking for results. How often are the results you're looking for pleasant? How often are the results even static? I mean, if you're looking for a particular experience, we all know everything's impermanent—but somehow not *this* experience, not the one I'm putting out all my energy to attain.

That's what it's all about. How often is the experience or the state we're seeking—and sometimes we're not even clear what it is until we look—somehow going to confirm me, a sense of me? I'm going to feel better.

So sometimes the state we're looking for, or why we think we're practicing, isn't actually pleasant. Sometimes people are really quite happy, they feel better and confirmed, when they start having some kind of emotional meltdown. They think, "Well, at least something's happening." I teach a lot of large retreats, and often someone will start really crying in the hall. That person usually feels embarrassed, feels like something's going wrong with their practice because they're crying when they should be calm and blissed out and concentrated. Meanwhile, the people sitting around them come to me and say, "What's the matter with me? I saw there was a person crying. They're really getting into their stuff, stuff's really happening, and I'm just sitting here noticing my breath and whatever comes. I'd much rather have some big, unpleasant knot of emotion to be working through."

So even though that's going for unpleasant, the sense of confirming me, of getting somewhere, is actually pleasant. Don't think about this a lot, but just notice how ingrained—how deeply ingrained—these habits are of assessing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

I talk about this often. I've been looking at it for years and years. On some level, obviously not deep enough, but on some level I really absolutely know this: happiness has nothing to do with pleasant,

unpleasant, or neutral. Dukkha, unreliability, includes all of it—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. But when the mind isn't calm, when I'm tired, when I'm getting caught on something—struggle, struggle, struggle—somehow when I just let go and see underneath, ah, it's slipped in again. This unpleasant experience is not supposed to be happening.

So I just want to drop in that thought for those of you here. If by chance, as you're here in these days of silence, something you don't like should happen to come up—in your mind, in your heart, in your body, somewhere in these days—notice what the attitude is in the mind that's paying attention.

We tend to get so involved in what's happening. "Oh, my heart is closed like a rock." "Oh, my back is killing me." "Oh, I'm having beautiful free flow of sensations." We get so involved, and we can be mindful. You could name very precisely what's happening and how it's happening. But we forget, or we neglect, or we're so familiar with these habits of mind that we often don't even notice we're looking through them, actually feeding the habits by how we're relating to the object. And it feels like we're being really mindful.

So with painful, "my heart's closed" emotion, the mind is saying, "You're no good, you're no good." And we can see that, we can name it—this is all what's happening. But we forget to notice, and when we turn around and notice, it's not so subtle. Oh, I can name everything that's happening, but you know what? I really hate it. And it's a sign that my practice is going nowhere. That attitude, that really not-so-subtle reaction, is not even noticed sometimes. Or when it is noticed, it's not with mindfulness. We totally believe it. We just totally believe it to the point that we can't let our awareness open and sink into: this is just what's happening.

And even when I say it, I can just imagine when we're in it and someone comes into an interview and we say it—you can see them: "Yeah, uh-huh, right, this is just what's happening, right, uh-huh." We suffer, we be with it, sometimes for a minute, sometimes for hours, sometimes, God knows, for days.

And if we're really fortunate, at some point we notice this reaction in the mind and recognize: oh, hating it feels like this. That's all. We move back and accept the hating it too. That's just another emotional arising. Hating it feels like this.

In that moment—that's Ajahn Sumedho's terminology—oh, it's like this. It's a great way to be really present and not feed the sense of "it's me." Oh, hating it feels like this. Wanting it different feels like this. In that moment, it's moved out of blindly acting from the habit, and the awareness is just noticing it. Oh, wanting it different feels like this. That's all. Awareness, again as Ajahn Sumedho says, is the point that includes.

It includes anything, everything. In the big picture, really the great secret of meditation practice is that awareness doesn't care. It doesn't care one bit what's happening. Anything that's happening—any of the six sense objects—when it arises, that's the chance to recognize it with awareness. That's the chance for awareness to become more familiar, more recognized. So any object is a doorway to awareness.

We tend to get so focused on the object that we don't turn around and notice what's coloring the mind that's paying attention. When we see it as wanting, when we see that it's aversion, when we see that we simply don't know—that's all. That's all we have to do.

Awareness doesn't care, but what strengthens the wisdom, what strengthens the awareness, is the steadiness—not steadiness of the object, but that willingness to show up. To just meet the wanting, to meet the pain, to meet the closed heart, to meet the hearing, to meet the sensation, to meet the smelling, to meet the thinking, to meet the not liking, to meet the judging. It really doesn't matter what it is.

In terms of technique, in vipassanā—not in samatha, which is really about cultivating a one-pointed awareness that shuts other things out and goes deep into one thing—but in vipassanā, which is what I'm speaking about now, the steadiness of awareness is the point. All the techniques of vipassanā are to help collect and balance the attention enough just to notice what's happening. What's happening happens by itself.

So whether we start with feeling the breath, or we start with feeling just what's happening in the body, or if the mind feels more at rest we can simply sit or walk and notice what's happening by itself—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing, emotions, thoughts. And that also includes the reactions in the mind. That's another layer: wanting, preference, not liking, judging. It's all just happening.

The whole direction of vipassanā is to more and more trust the awareness. Less and less get all involved and entranced by whatever object it is and our reactions to it. What does it mean about me? Not much. Just steadiness, moment after moment after moment. The awareness strengthens, the samādhi of mind strengthens, and the wisdom, the understanding, also strengthens—pretty much by itself.

It takes some practice and some trust, right? Because, from what I said before, we want some confirmation. It's hard to trust unless we get some nice lights, if we get some big insight, if we get a sense of concentration. I know from experience, then my self-judgment can let down and I'll think, "Oh, the practice is going well, I'm concentrated, it's flowing, things are nice." And then it does flow better because the wanting, the preference, the self-judging isn't being fed. But we could learn not to feed the wanting, the preference, the self-judgment even when it isn't going nicely. Because it isn't about going nicely. It's just about awareness showing up for anything that's happening.

Joseph likes to say that our practice is simply coming back into natural wakefulness whenever we get distracted. What I mean by distracted—really the only thing I would call distracted is being completely lost and absorbed in thought with no awareness that that's what's going on. There's consciousness, certainly. Unless you're asleep or in a coma, there's consciousness. But you know how it is. You can be really in a thought. You can come out and go, "Oh, I was thinking." And you could say what the thought was about. So there was definitely consciousness. But awareness is the knowing that thinking is happening at the same time. Do you get a sense of the difference?

You know how if you drive, those times when you're driving and you suddenly realize you haven't seen anything for two miles? That's scary to me when that happens. How did I get here? The last thing I knew, I was way back there. Clearly, consciousness has been going on. The appropriate decisions, thank goodness, have been made. But there wasn't any awareness happening. It can be like that here.

We're really lost in that. That's what I would call distracted. But as soon as we're aware—oh, thinking is happening, hearing is happening, wanting is happening—we're no longer distracted.

So distractedness is not about thinking. Thinking is just as valid an object of awareness as anything else. Distractedness is not about the mind being away from the breath. Distractedness only means when there is no conscious awareness of what's happening. And the second we're aware—oh, I was thinking—again, we're here. There's nowhere else to go. We're here. Awareness is here.

So it's learning to trust that steadiness. Put out less forcing and more sense of trust of whatever's happening. And when we find we're trying to manipulate and change the object and fix what's happening, step back a minute. Just check what's going on in the mind and heart. Oh, I don't like it like this. Okay, not liking feels like this. I know the way I say it makes it sound very simplistic and easy and clear, and I know very well it's not always like that. But it's actually a lot more simple than we can trust somehow.

Someone just said to me at the retreat I was teaching last week—they were practicing and they came in and said, "Is it just that it's really this simple and I just can't believe it?" And it was true where they were coming from. The awareness was quite strong. Not every minute—we space out. But noticing a lot. The mind was getting less reactive. There wasn't so much wanting and aversion. They were really just noticing. And the more it's like that, the less there is to do. And that's what they were saying: I don't trust this. I should do something. I should make something happen. This way, there's a lot less me.

A lot less doing. When there's no me, there's also less feeling of being confirmed, so we're kind of on different territory. That's great—when you feel like you're in unfamiliar territory, that's fantastic. Because what's familiar territory? Wanting, aversion, and delusion. That's what's familiar territory. We know to push away what we don't like and try to make things the way we want them and space out if it's new. That's what's familiar territory. So when we're feeling all familiar and it's in control, watch out. Check out what's going on in the mind that's paying attention. When we feel like, "I don't know what's happening"—that's great. Then there's interest, not to make a difference, but just to see what's in the mind right now. You don't have to ask those words, but just that turning around, having a look. Oh, yeah.

So back to the fickleness of vedana—how pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral changes so much. I want to go back to this article because he's talking about what I was just saying, what the Buddha talked about a lot, really. He's saying that we don't realize, when we want something pleasant, a pleasurable event, and we make a choice for it—we don't realize how quickly we will adapt to a pleasurable event and make it the backdrop of our lives. So when that happens to us, that pleasurable event becomes ordinary. And then through becoming ordinary, we lose our pleasure from it. And we don't recognize that this is happening.

And so we go out and look for something else to give us pleasure because that first one lost. Do you notice? Can you relate to that?

And he says we keep moving on to the next thing or event, almost certainly make another error of prediction—not predicting that it will become ordinary—and then another, ad infinitum. Perfect description of samsara.

So really seeing this, seeing how the habit of our life, the way we know to do things, is to move from pleasurable event to pleasurable event, each time thinking it's going to make us happy. I don't think I can overemphasize from my own experience how deeply ingrained this is.

I'd say almost every real conflict that comes up in meditation has something about this at the root. We're looking for something to make us happy.

This brings us to the Buddha's teaching in the Sutta of the Two Darts, where he describes the difference between an enlightened person and an ordinary worldling. When an ordinary person is hit with a dart—a painful physical feeling—then on top of that they beat their breasts, they cry, they lament, they moan. They basically shoot another arrow at themselves. But an enlightened person, when hit with the first arrow—nothing. Just space. They don't create any commotion around it, no mental suffering.

But the next piece, I think, is what's even more interesting. Under the impact of that painful feeling, an ordinary worldling resists and resents it. And then, in one who resists and resents, the underlying tendency of resistance comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit. On top of that, an untaught worldling doesn't know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense happiness. It's the only way out an ordinary person knows. So then they go and look for sense happiness, and the habit of lusting for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind.

Can you relate? We're feeling upset. We go to the refrigerator. We make a phone call. We go out to the movies. We take a hot bath. None of these things are evil. But it's that sense of, "This is unpleasant. Let me go for something pleasant." That becomes the habit of mind.

And what the Buddha says—to me this is so poignant, really sad—is that an untaught worldling doesn't know of any other escape from painful feeling except to go and get something pleasant. That's samsara.

This is what the habits of mind create, and certainly the culture feeds it. Our world is built on this—going for pleasant holds everything together. Dividing the world into pleasant and unpleasant, good and bad—that's where we're comfortable. That's where we take refuge. That's all we know how to do. Clinging is our refuge.

It's so poignant to me, but it also makes me feel so grateful that we have a path, that we know there's another alternative, there's another meaning to happiness than just the enjoyment of pleasant feelings. Without knowing that, it is just an endless cycle.

I want to read one last thing from this article. At the end, the interviewer is talking to Gilbert, and Gilbert is laughing. He says, "I should have learned more lessons personally from my research than I really have." He's laughing as he says, "I'm getting married in the spring, and that's because this woman is going to make me happy forever, and I know it." He finds it funny not because it's untrue, but because nothing could be more true—this is how he really feels. He says, "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations, that belief that there's good and there's bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the other. I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense." This man spent years doing this research.

So I just drop that in. Not to judge ourselves, but just to look. When we're suffering, how are we relating to the mind, to the practice, to whatever particular object is happening? We're relating to the object. Look back at the mind. Is there aversion to unpleasant? Are we trying to change it? Are we trying to hold on? Are we judging ourselves? Is it all about the object? Is it all about what it means about me? Or can we just step into the awareness that really doesn't care, but can meet whatever's arising at any moment?

That's really mindfulness. That's really what our practice is about. And this retreat is a microcosm of our life—the same mind, perhaps a little more subtle experience, but it's the same way that it works.

She talks about how we go through our life trying to protect ourselves from unpleasant experience, from painful experience. We do, right? We think this is kindness to ourself. But of course, we can't do it. And she says—it's a great line—when we realize we don't have to, we can relax. We can open to the beautiful, to the difficult, to all of life. Then we realize we don't have to spend our life going around tensed up like we're sitting in the dentist's chair our whole life.

It's really a releasing into. The Buddha didn't wake up into another life, but into this life—more open, more present to whatever's arising in this life, just as it is. Because we're not holding to preferences, preferences based on inaccurate understanding of what peace and happiness really is.

So then, even in moments—in a moment when the mind isn't caught in wanting, in aversion, in delusion—it's just here with whatever. Notice those moments, whether you call them peaceful or happy or calm, or you don't really call them anything. It's just, as a friend of mine says, a place of no problem. It's just the is-ness of things. Notice those more. Come to appreciate, to trust, to recognize this purity of awareness, of mind, that's always available when we're not lost in the preferences, the reactivity, and not looking through it. Just notice that.

As the Tibetans say, it's like resting at ease in whatever arises. Just this. Just this.

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