Viriya - Patience and Courage

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:29

So what I wanted to speak about tonight really came up in my mind after talking to people over the last few days. It's a very common theme, but one that I feel I've certainly never gotten right—which is exactly the point, we don't—and that is viriya, the quality of viriya.

As you probably know, it's often translated as energy or effort, but I just want to talk about some different translations and different ways we can understand and work with this quality in our moment-to-moment experience in our practice.

Working with and understanding viriya is based in a sense of knowing for oneself why one is practicing, why one is on the spiritual path. Not in a broad way, but really: what's the point? In terms of the way I'm talking tonight, I'm using the Buddha's description of a free mind or a liberated heart and mind as being a mind-heart, a consciousness that is purified of clinging, that is free from greed or wanting, from dosa—aversion, hatred, fear—and free from identification, from confusion. That's like an expression of why we practice, both in the long term but also moment to moment. So that gives rise to the motivation. And you'll see why I want to start by saying that.

Viriya, energy, is essential—of course, essential—to keep us moment to moment waking up on our path. And as I'm sure most of you know, it's one of the qualities that apparently the Buddha referenced most frequently. So it's really important for us to understand this accurately, and I really feel like mostly we don't understand it accurately.

The most common translation is effort, right? Viriya is effort, courageous, heroic effort. But when the word "effort" goes through your mind, just notice what kind of connotations come with it. There's no right or wrong, and it may be different for different people, but just notice. I know for me, effort has the quality of doing, of trying, of achieving, of getting somewhere other than here. It's not actually the best description. It carries too much baggage, at least in English.

Other descriptions or definitions include a quality of mental energy. Another description is this quality of attention, of presence, of not shrinking back. Just a courage in the sense of a willingness to simply be here. Not this kind of "I don't want to be with this"—that actually leads to both aversion and sloth and torpor. It's a not shrinking back, a courage, just a willingness no matter what it is.

And patience, perseverance—much more useful in terms of how we can understand and work with this in our practice to think of viriya as patience and perseverance rather than thinking of it as effort. But thinking altogether about it isn't that helpful. I'm more talking about it in order to help us bring our

attention into our experience and recognize viriya: when it's wise, when it's not.

And that's what's interesting about this quality of viriya. This is a mental factor, a quality in the mind. On its own, it's what's called ethically variable. It's not necessarily wholesome. It's not necessarily unwholesome. It depends on what other factors come together with the viriya in the mind, in the citta at that moment, what's kind of motivating it.

When we don't realize it's ethically variable, how many times in practice are we putting out tremendous effort? We just think the more I put out, the better it is, because it's good no matter what. But that's not true. So tremendous viriya—energy, not shrinking back, willingness to show up (that's kind of the way I think about it, a kind of courage, just the willingness to show up)—it can be put out with an amazing amount of steadiness, of effort, using deliberately the word effort. But it is not necessarily wholesome. It really depends what goes with it. It can be for all variety of motivations.

I was watching the US Open tennis the other day, watching the two guys in the finals. Incredible viriya—very, very beyond anything I could even imagine just to get through the match, never mind their whole lives, how much they work. And watching the two guys play is really an example of all these qualities I mentioned: not shrinking back, showing up. Each point is new. You don't hold on to the past.

You're really there. You're fully present. Enormous effort.

Is it wholesome? I don't really know. I don't know what their motivation was. It could have varied from moment to moment. But it could be total greed. It could be completely about "me." It could have been to win the two and a half million dollars. Or it could have been aversion. It could be a lot of different things.

Someone could put out—like we see in these caper movies—tremendous virya, steadiness to commit the perfect crime. Clearly, you couldn't really say that motivation was a wholesome factor, right? That's not wise virya.

So if we think of it as just the energy put out to achieve a result, we're going down the wrong track.

Take it to meditation, since that's hopefully what we're all doing here. How much virya, steadfastness, patience, and persistence—or downright effort—is the mind putting out to make something different happen? Is that wise virya? Or how about sitting through enormous pain, absolutely vowing, "I will not move"? Classically, from the outside, that person's really got some virya. They've really got some resolution—that steadfastness, that willingness to do what we decide.

But you don't know that. It's what is it paired with? It's quite possible to sit like a rock through enormous pain and internally every moment of that is fed by aversion, if not downright hatred. "I will not move no matter what. I will not move." And we're looking at it as willpower, a sense of me, me, me—being the perfect yogi, proving something.

If we don't notice what's motivating, what qualities, what mental factors are coming together with that

energy, that effort—and it is effort, that virya—we think we're really practicing on the road to freedom, and all we're doing is feeding sense of self, or feeding aversion, or feeding desire.

You get a sense of how really key it is to both get familiar—more and more familiar—with how we can play with this factor of virya, but even more to keep checking in the mind what's coming together with it, what's feeding it. Because that's really the whole point: to see that willpower is not the same as resolution. Willpower is not the same thing as virya. Willpower is really driven by a strong sense of self.

Resolution is different from virya. It's one of the paramis, one of the wholesome qualities of mind and heart that we can develop in our practice, in our life. It is said that the Buddha, before he became the Buddha in all his lifetimes as the Bodhisattva, was cultivating these ten different qualities, which I won't go into because that's a whole talk.

But resolution is that quality of clarity and firmness, you could say. The classic example is that night after all his six years of strenuous work, the Buddha-to-be sat down under the Bodhi tree and said, "I will not get up until I become awakened. Let my bones and sinews dry up. I will not get up."

There are two things I'd like to point out about that. One, that resolution is not desire or aversion. It's not willpower—"I'm so great, I won't get up." It really comes from wisdom.

The second piece of wisdom about resolution is that it's based in reality. I always like to think he knew which night to sit down under that tree and say, "Okay, I'm not going to get up." He didn't do it for the six years prior. He was ready then.

So you could sit here and make a resolution: "I will not get up until I become a Sammasambuddha, a perfectly enlightened Buddha." Now, I don't know where any of your minds are at. That might be a resolution from wisdom. It might be unwise effort based on desire or self-identification. How do you know? You're the only one who can know. We keep remembering to check back: what qualities of mind are in the mind that's paying attention?

It's putting out the effort. This isn't a big thinking thing. It's just remembering to check back.

Viriya as a path factor—the wise viriya that we use in our practice—needs to come together with wisdom. And that's something that for years I didn't quite think of. Not that I didn't understand it, I just didn't consider it. You think, you know, it's not going well enough, try harder. We're not getting what we want to happen, so push more, do it more, be more steady. But if we don't check back and see what's fueling that effort with wisdom, with paññā, with understanding, then we can really get ourselves all knotted up and not quite understand why. Because we think, well, I'm doing the best I can. And very sincerely, we are doing the best we can. But we're forgetting to look and see what's fueling this "best we can." Is it wisdom, or at least a mind that is not being motivated by wanting, by aversion, by self-interested confusion? And it's not really that hard to tell. This is not some big mystery. It's just that we're so familiar with these states that we can forget to check.

So, for example, this is the way U Tejaniya describes it. Check the mind that's paying attention. This isn't so hard. As you're practicing—whether you're being with the breath or walking or drinking your tea, whatever—as you're paying attention to what's going on, in the back of the mind there, are you wanting something to happen? Are you expecting something to happen that isn't happening now? And that can be very subtle, but check and see. Are you trying to create something? Trying to get your practice to look a certain way? Wanting some experience? Or even ever so subtly trying to nudge things in a certain direction? That's greed, just flat-out greed. It doesn't matter how subtle or how gross it is. And that's not a judgment. It's like, great, see the greed. In the moment of seeing it, the mind isn't feeding it. Ah, that's greed. Right then, you know, it moves back into wise attention, into wise mindfulness.

Okay, are you trying to make something stop happening? Or ever so subtly judging, "This isn't supposed to be here"? Or practicing harder, more steadily, but because you're dissatisfied with how things are going? It isn't quite the way it was on that last retreat, so I better amp it up a little bit. Or I better do something to get rid of this so that it can get back to where it was before, or what I read about, or what I heard about. That's aversion, ill will, anger, hatred. That's all. Just notice it.

And on the third level—delusion—it shows up in different ways. One is that we don't know what's going on. You don't even know where you are. That's kind of obvious delusion. On another level, it's like you're trying to figure it out. You don't know what to do, but you really feel that you should do something. And you're kind of going through the catalog of all the skillful means, trying to figure out what to do to make it right. Just settle down. Notice what's happening right now.

So how does right energy, right viriya, feel when we're working with it, when we're connecting with it? Of course there's a wide range. How can it show up?

It's not forcing. It's not pushing. It's not aiming towards another goal. It's not trying to manipulate in any way whatsoever. And manipulating can be very subtle. But it's just—and this is in vipassanā now, for example, though it works the same way in samatha, in one-pointedness, just with different objects.

In Vipassana, for example, all the six sense objects are naturally arising. Whether you're using the breath as a beginning point—that's physical, that's the body—or you're using sound, that's hearing. Using the whole body is also physical. But all six sense objects—seeing, smelling, tasting, the body, hearing, and of course the mind with thinking and the whole range of what goes on there—they're just naturally occurring. That's just nature. We're not here to make something different occur. We're not here to have a better object. That's just what's happening. The only job of viriya is to be present, aware, to know what's already happening by itself.

So consciousness—the moment where the sense door and the sense object come together, and there's just the bare knowing of it, of the sound as hearing, of the smell as smelling—that's going on every moment, as long as we're conscious. As long as we're not in a coma—and who knows what's happening when you're in a coma—but that's going on every moment. That's happening by itself. Awareness and energy, awareness

is the knowing that that's happening.

We can be conscious without awareness, right? Like those times when you're driving and suddenly you wake up and realize you don't know where you were for the last two miles, but somehow you're still on the road and you followed the stop signs and everything. Did that ever happen to anybody? It's a little spooky. That's consciousness without awareness.

When you're lost in thought here, as opposed to being aware of thought, and you suddenly wake up and go, "Oh, I was gone for ten minutes"—but you could actually say what you were thinking about. Sometimes, and I'm not advocating this, people then amuse themselves by going back, tracing it all back. That's another ten minutes gone, right? But you trace back everything you thought about. So there was consciousness, but there wasn't the awareness, that purity of awareness that knows: this is what's happening now.

So that's awareness. With wisdom means it doesn't have greed, hatred, or delusion in it. And the viriya, the courage, the energy, is that willingness to just meet it moment after moment after moment—not to push into change and not to shrink back because it's not what we like, but just whatever's arising, awareness notices it, and viriya is right there with the awareness. They come together, meeting it, meeting it, meeting it. Receptive in terms of just receiving what's happening, not in there trying to fix it and change it.

That's why working with hearing at times is a lovely way to just sit and be with hearing for a while. It's nice with the insects. Several people have mentioned that because it keeps going. It gives you time to really just drop into this quality of real presence, but it's quite receptive. You're really there, aware and knowing, but that manipulating, that trying to fix or do isn't part of it. So playing with hearing, for some people, gives a real sense of that receptiveness. Receptive but also courageous—that willingness just to show up, not to shrink back, no matter what it is.

So they go together, and this is the delicate dance of appropriate viriya. We tend to easily keep falling one way or the other, even with the best intentions. Receptive, receptive, there's absolutely nothing to do, it's all happening by itself—and there's the receptiveness, but there's not quite the connecting, not quite the showing up. The energy kind of falls out the floor.

That also happens when one is working with concentration in terms of calming the mind, being very steady, always coming back to one particular deliberately chosen object like the sensation of breath at the nose or metta meditation. Because the mind gets calmer and calmer and calmer, often the energy falls out, the viriya falls out. It's just really calm and kind of going on by itself, and that quality of not shrinking back, of showing up, starts to just fall away. So at that time there's receptivity, there's calmness, but there's not enough of the connecting energy, the courageous aspect. And so we need to notice that.

And for us—well, for me, maybe not for you—what can be so difficult is how to cultivate, bring in that

courageous connecting energy without doing it from wanting or aversion. It's so easy, isn't it? We've spaced out a little and go, "Oh no, I'm spaced out! Get back to the breath. Connect, connect. Aim and sustain. What does it feel like, you know?" And, "Oh, now how come I don't feel more balanced? How come—" It's like, oh, duh. So we need to keep checking.

It's very tricky—how to let wisdom do the work, not wanting do the work, not pushing or striving do the work. And this is not our habit. It's not, for most of us, the habit of our mind. We let wanting, aversion, pushing, expectation, self-whipping—whatever it is—do the work, and we confuse that with virya.

So that's on the one side: too receptive. And the other, of course, is this trying, trying, doing, doing, and "my practice isn't clear enough, it isn't good enough." So I need to, for example, try to see the breath more clearly. It's too dull. Has anyone ever had that sense? These sensations aren't clear enough. If I try to see them a little more, aim and sustain, aim and sustain, get things clearer. Or I'm getting lost in thought and I will not do that anymore. No more thinking. This is what our mind does. And then we say, "Oh, well, she said don't do this. Okay, no more, no more, no more thinking. I won't do that anymore. I'm just going to be receptive, and everything will balance out."

It's a trip. As long as we're caught in trying to figure it out that way, it's an endless spinning cycle.

When you notice it's getting into this—out of balance, what do I do? How do I fix it? Is it too receptive? Is it too strong?—back up. Open up the field of attention, by which I mean don't try to narrow down so precisely on "how does it feel" with the object. Open up. Feel the body, the mind, and just notice. "Oh, I really want this to get better." Oh, duh—wanting. And you don't have to fix it. You don't have to change it. You just have to notice it.

That's what's so amazing with awareness and wisdom. When the wisdom sees enough of what's going on, the wisdom actually understands and makes the changes. It doesn't have to come from pushing. This takes trust. It takes trust. But I am sure—really sure—that all of you have had this experience over and over in different ways. Not just about virya, but about many things. When we're willing and able to just meet what's arising with awareness, with balanced energy, not shrinking back, with this awareness that isn't colored by wanting, by aversion, we see clearly. The wisdom arises out of the steadiness, the continuity of seeing, the continuity of awareness.

So that's really how working with virya, how the virya strengthens and deepens and then supports the deepening of wisdom and all the other factors—not through pushing harder to see more clearly, but through this gentle, steady connectedness, moment after moment after moment. It's the continuity of awareness, the continuity, the perseverant aspect of virya, the patient aspect that is really the key.

And in some way, all of you who practice a lot, we know that. But in another way, we can easily get sucked into: How good was my sitting? How was my walking? The time in between, I'm sort of, you know, halfway paying attention, whatever. But that just moment-to-moment noticing what's going on in the

mind, without a huge effort—so it's not exhausting—it's quite possible then to keep just noticing, moment after moment after moment, all day.

That's the resolution. Not that I will do it no matter what, but that willingness to say, "You know, just when I notice I don't know what's happening, I'm willing to come back." And as soon as you recognize you don't know what's happening, you are back. That's the thing.

There's not a place to go back to. It's here.

So that's the aspect—the steadiness, the steadiness of noticing—that strengthens the whole practice. That's really what develops the steadiness of viriya. And it's from that steadiness of viriya and clarity of seeing, moment after moment after moment, that samādhi really builds. The whole seeing, the whole steadiness of awareness, gathers a momentum that doesn't come from your willpower. It doesn't come from greed or dissatisfaction. It comes from how one moment of mindfulness is the proximate cause for the next moment of mindfulness to arise. One moment of viriya—just this receptive, connected, courageous attention—is the proximate cause for the next one to arise.

So at first we have to remember: oh yeah, right, just what's happening now. That's the extent of it, that level of effort. What's happening now? You feel your body as you sit there. It's not hugely effortful. You feel your crossed arms. You notice tiredness in the mind. You don't have to do anything about any of it. You just notice it. Oh, that's not so hard. I could do that the next moment. I could do that the next moment.

And slowly or quickly—or however long, in relation to what is slow or quick anyway—a momentum starts to build. The first day or two on retreat, you're just dragging yourself along, trying to find your body when you're sitting here. A week in, two weeks in, yes, stuff's still happening. It's not all the way you want it. Probably never will be. But it's getting easier. The remembering to know what I'm doing starts to happen more and more by itself. The sense of huge swings of exhaustion and pushing too hard, the up and down—that starts to even out a bit. And that's happening by itself. Also the sense of trying to push and see more clearly—that doesn't work. But the steadiness, the continuity, the moment-to-moment awareness and viriya connectedness starts showing up by itself.

And I know you've all seen this: the awareness starts to notice more. Things start to get clearer. We start to notice, without even looking for it, more subtlety of what's going on in the mind, what's going on in the body, really seeing suffering and what's creating it.

Because that's really the point. What fuels our viriya, our willingness to show up moment after moment, isn't right viriya wanting something to happen, but the quality of interest—investigation. What's going on? How does the mind work? How is suffering created in this moment? How does it come to an end in this moment? What's happening right now? With the intention just to understand out of interest. Not to judge, not to fix, not to make something different happen—just to notice and see how it works.

And that's when intensive practice gets to be fun, because we're not having to fight with what's

happening. We're just willing to be there and see: what's the mind doing right now? I'm feeling all locked up and pushed and stressed. Instead of running down a list and judging ourselves, we just turn around and look at the mind. Ah, dissatisfaction. The breath ought to be more steady. Look at that. Look at how much suffering is coming from that. And there's nothing else you need to do. Just noticing that.

This is from Nisargadatta. It's kind of an intense way of saying it, but I like it. He says: "You people want to become supermen overnight." You know, we're all like that. "Stay without ambition, without the least desire, vulnerable, unprotected, uncertain, completely open to and welcoming life as it happens, without the selfish conviction that all must yield you pleasure or profit, material or so-called spiritual."

That to me is a good description of awareness with right viriya.

Really present, open, without desire or the conviction that this is to somehow yield me profit. I'm not saying that's easy, but that's the sense. That's the sense of how we practice. Virya isn't here to say, "This is good, this is bad, and the more we're aware, the better everything gets." It doesn't work that way. It just totally doesn't work that way.

From that sense, I want to move into the courage, a little more about the courage of not shrinking back. Because often what shows up—especially on intensive retreats, though in our life too—are difficult experiences. And these difficult experiences rarely, sometimes but rarely, fit into most people's conceptions or preconceived notions about what's good practice, why I'm here, what awareness and effort and energy are about, how I'm supposed to purify the mind. All of that.

What shows up as a function of retreat are the habits of our mind that cause suffering. That's part of it. If that didn't show up, the retreat wouldn't be working. If that didn't show up, we wouldn't have a chance to explore, to understand, to meet these habits with awareness and virya rather than just being run by them as we are in our normal life.

But usually, when these strong habits show up, we meet them—at first at least—with the same habits of mind that we meet them with in daily life. We don't recognize that this is a chance for us to step out of our unconscious patterns of feeding these afflictive emotions. And that's usually how they show up, as afflictive emotions.

Patrul Rinpoche, the Tibetan teacher, was also talking about the paramis, and he went into some detail about the parami of patience. One of the lines he used is that we need to cultivate patience to bear hardship for the Dhamma. I'm thinking of this patience as virya—that courageous willingness to show up, not to shrink back or shy away or push back or hide from whatever arises.

As Ajahn Chah says, there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and there's suffering that leads to the end of suffering. It's all about the attitude of mind, of attention—how we meet that suffering in any particular moment. And so this balanced virya, virya that's fed by wisdom, is so key in meeting and working with this stuff.

I really want to talk about these habits of mind because in the last couple of days it's been coming up for quite a number of people. No big surprise. But somehow we are surprised. It's always amazing. No matter how much we've practiced or looked at our minds, it can still be a surprise when we're settling into the retreat, or we've been here for some time, and suddenly—pow! It's like the pond settles down for a few days and then boom, all this stuff starts coming up to the surface. One of my teachers used to say that in the light of awareness, all of the snakes come up out of their holes.

That's not a problem. That's not something wrong. It is a great place to practice with cultivating and recognizing the attitude of mind we meet these difficulties with—what's right virya, what's right awareness.

In some ways these habits show up as really obvious afflictive emotions, right? Intense desire, strong fear, habits we know we carry from our life of great resistance or self-judging, contempt, blame. All the stuff we have—past trauma, self-distrust, a lot of anger, a lot of sadness and grief, sorrow, guilt. You name it. All of our normal stuff. This at least we notice is happening. We may think it's a mistake, but it's hard not to notice that these things are coming up.

But these same habits of mind can also show up in ways that are not really subtle, but more hidden. They can show up in the way that we're relating to our practice. And this is often where we don't notice them and get really caught in wrong effort.

For example, these big habits I mentioned—judging, comparing with past retreats, wanting things to be different, a real underlying sense of resistance, anger at whatever's going on, real sorrow over how one's behaved in the past. On one level, there's a whole personal story, a personal history. The emotions feel very much about me. On another level, if we just get a little bigger and notice what energy in the mind is fueling these, it really will break down to desire, aversion or fear, confusion, delusion. It's all about me, in the big picture.

I'm not saying we should just wipe out and not pay attention to the emotions. Not at all—I'll get into that in a minute. But for me, it's been very helpful to get bigger and notice. I'm all involved in my resistance—why, back to the past, it's been like this—not noticing. As I get into exploring it, the story, it's about me, I see how it starts and where it goes, it feels like good mindfulness. But if I check back into the mind that's paying attention...

There can be, for example, in my own personal case, really strong motivation in that description of craving, of clinging. I'm really wanting to see what it's all about, and I'm wanting to figure it out so that I don't have to deal with it anymore. So craving fed by aversion. And if I don't look back at the attitude in the mind and notice that craving, then what I'm taking for wise mindfulness and wise energy—looking and seeing and naming and noting—is actually only feeding craving.

Do you get a sense of that? When you turn around and look, it's not so subtle, but we get so engrossed in

exploring and looking at the object that we forget to turn around and see: Is this effort, is this virya, is this mindfulness being fueled by wisdom? By interest? Or by wanting or aversion? You don't have to ask that constantly, but just keep checking, just keep checking, just keep checking. And that's all you have to do. You don't have to fix it. I really found this to make a profound difference in the way that I'm able to just be with what's happening in a much freer and clearer way, moment after moment after moment. And as I said, wisdom starts to do the work, not pushing.

For example, I wasn't even trying to work with anger. I was walking, just taking a walk. I wasn't on retreat. And I started thinking about politics and different political figures and the war in Iraq and all kinds of stuff, and getting really angry. I was watching it happen, feeling the anger, and of course the sense of justification—appropriate, it's appropriate to be angry—which of course just keeps the anger going. So I was really noticing that and feeling it and very present, mindful in the way of being able to notice and say everything that was happening, but not really noticing what was feeding it.

And then at one point, just paying attention, paying attention, I turned around and noticed: Oh, this is just anger feeding anger. That wasn't with any judgment. That was just noticing. And in that moment of seeing, the wisdom did its own work. In that moment of seeing, there arose: Oh, I don't want to add more anger to the world. It just stopped. My opinion didn't stop. The sense that things should change didn't stop. But that anger fueling itself—as soon as the mindfulness just saw, "Oh, this is just anger fueling itself," with wisdom, the wisdom just said, "Don't need this anymore." And it stopped. Doesn't mean it doesn't come back. But you get a sense of how the wisdom does the work.

It's very different from: "This is anger, feeding more anger. I don't want to do this anymore. It's really bad. And I'm a bad person because I'm feeding the anger. So I'm not going to be angry anymore. Stop it. Loving kindness. May you be peaceful. May you be happy." And it's just spinning, spinning, spinning.

I'm not saying every time that awareness with balanced energy sees something unwholesome, it just naturally poofs away—would that it were so. But it starts to happen more and more. And you also get a sense of what balanced virya is.

These habits can be strong emotions like that, but they can also show up in how we're relating to practice in the way I talked about before. There can be a huge amount of judging that what's happening isn't right, that it could be better. A huge amount of remembering and wanting from some other time. And in terms of focused, one-pointed practice—coming back to the breath, coming back to metta—how often is that bringing the mind back done with wanting? How often?

I talked to someone who spent two months practicing a very strict shamatha, one-pointed meditation style—just come back to here, come back to here with the breath. And this person told me later, after it was over, "Wow, I'm looking now and I see I spent that whole time practicing with craving, not noticing that every time I was coming back to the breath, it was from craving." So you might get somewhat focused, but it's not balanced samadhi. It's from craving. And that's what's being fed in the mind.

So that's why I said at the beginning, when we talk about the understanding that fuels our practice, that fuels our virya—if it's the understanding that it's purifying the heart and mind—

Purifying from craving, from aversion, from confusion. Then we know it doesn't matter what's happening. You can get to some really exalted state of heart and mind, but if you've been feeding craving that whole time, what good is it?

Or you're going through the day here and you're noticing the mind, noticing what's happening, and there's that courageous showing up. You're having no great experiences. You're just sitting and walking and drinking your tea and going out for a walk. But you're really noticing. The momentum of noticing is growing. The getting caught and reactive, the pushing and trying to make something happen, is lessening. That's where the purification is really starting to happen. That's where the strength of wisdom and awareness, mindfulness and virya, are all coming together.

So we look back at what's going on in the mind, less focused on evaluating ourselves by object. But I do want to return to the fact that in terms of bigger emotional experiences—like the snakes coming out of the hole—sometimes that's going to happen on retreat, and it really isn't a problem. In fact, often it's kind of a normal, useful circumstance.

I haven't read this for years, but Ram Dass has a great line. He says that as your mind further purifies, as your heart further purifies, the impurities—the greed, the confusion, the difficult emotions—will seem grosser and larger. So you need to understand that it's not that you're getting more caught in the negativity, in the illusion. It's just that you're seeing it more clearly. You're feeling it more vividly. It's really important to see this and think, "Wow, that's interesting. Let me understand how suffering is created"—not thinking, "Oh God, I'm really falling apart. It's getting worse and worse." We're seeing it more clearly.

So the fact that these difficult patterns arise—that's just the effect of our past karma, the past habits of our mind, the way we're used to relating in our life. No blame; that's just what's happening. How it's met in this present moment of awareness—that's the place, that's the moment where we can see what's being fed and what's being starved, which is a way the Buddha talked about often.

So when a really difficult emotion, say grief, comes up, and it's met with, "Oh no, grief again. What's the matter with me? I've got to figure it out. I thought I worked through this. I've been to therapy for ten years"—that's feeding aversion. That's feeding resistance. That's pushing it away. That's shrinking back. That's not virya. But when it's met with, "Oh, grief. It's like this"—that willingness just to be there—that's wisdom. That's virya with wisdom.

So I want to offer some guidance for those of you who I sense would find it helpful to have a little bit of technique, if you're not used to meeting difficult emotions as part of the practice—not as something to jump over and get back to practice, not as something to get rid of so that purifying means they never

come, but as the next arising object.

First is just recognition. Michelle McDonald made up this little acronym, RAIN—R-A-I-N—which if it helps, use it. When a difficult emotion comes, or a happy one too—though we don't usually struggle with those; we get attached to them and don't even know they're there—recognition is helpful. "Oh, guilt. It's like this." "Happiness." "Desire. It's like this." "Self-exaltation. It's like this." Whatever it is, that's all recognizing. The name can help, but the name is to bring us into the experience, not to note distantly, "Oh, guilt is like this. That's nice. Guilt, guilt, guilt."

Let me go back to the breath. Like guilt. Recognize, and the A is for allowing, accepting. Just letting it be, being in non-contention. Oh, guilt feels like this. Accepting, allowing it to be, to live its life.

It's really like the weather. Emotions feel so much like the weather to me. You're just sitting here, minding your own business, and suddenly—whoom—a huge wave of sadness comes in. And you're like, what? I'm just practicing here. Sadness, heaviness. And then we get into all our reactions. But sadness comes in just like the fog, just like the rain. Recognize, allow it.

The I is for investigating or just noticing how it is. I don't mean thinking about it—what does it mean to me? That's not investigation. Just recognizing, feeling how it is. Guilt feels like this. There may be physical sensations. There may be a coloring in the mind. There may be thoughts coming and going with it—all kind of like the package that we call guilt.

We're allowing it, investigating it, not to make it go away. Simply with viriya, to be present without flinching from what's happening. Receptive, allowing, connected. Oh yes, guilt is like this.

And the N is for: it's just nature. Sometimes I'm feeling guilty. Sometimes you're feeling guilty. This is the nature of guilt. Your particular personal story—everybody's guilt has a particular personal story. That's the nature of guilt. Yours isn't any better or worse or more personal than anybody else's.

So to me, there's the cloud, the rain, the fog, the sun, the happiness. It comes. We recognize, allow, investigate. It's just nature. It goes. And that's how the wisdom comes. You don't have to tear it apart to see impermanence. If you just stay, moment after moment, steady, connected, you'll notice: it wasn't here before, and now it's here. You'll notice: it's really here, and now it's gone. And I promise, it will come and it will go. Everything will come and it will go. We don't have to try and see that, figure it out. Just be here, meet it, steady, and that understanding shows up by itself.

So that's really the quality of awareness, viriya, and wisdom. It can sometimes be with very subtle experience, but it's just as valid with the huge difficult emotions that are coming up. Either one, it doesn't matter.

Just notice when you're involved in some kind of reactivity, some kind of trying to change, and the feelings of dissatisfaction with yourself, with the emotion, with how your practice is going. Back up a little

bit. Open up a little bit. Just notice what's in the mind that's paying attention. Just notice what's in the mind that's paying attention. And when you notice that, you're already connected again.

Ah, this is wanting.

In that moment, we've stepped out of our normal habits of reacting with aversion or self-justification to these big patterns, and we're shifting the karma. Instead of feeding the aversion, feeding the self-identification, we're feeding wisdom, feeding awareness, feeding virya. And that's really huge. Maybe not in each little moment, but as the momentum builds, as the wholesomeness builds, this is really how the mind purifies itself.

I want to end with a quotation from Pema Chödrön. She's so pithy—I love how she says things:

"We think if we just meditated enough or jogged enough or ate perfect food, everything would be perfect. But from the point of view of someone who is awake, that's death. Seeking security or perfection, rejoicing and feeling confirmed and whole, self-contained and comfortable is some kind of death. It doesn't have any fresh air. There's no room for something to come in. We're killing the moment by controlling our experience.

From an awakened perspective, trying to tie up all the loose ends and finally get it together is death because it involves rejecting a lot of your basic experience. There's something aggressive about that approach to life—trying to flatten out all the rough spots and imperfections into a nice, smooth ride.

We want to be perfect, but we just keep seeing our imperfections, and there's no room to get away from that, no exit, nowhere to run. That is when this sword turns into a flower. We stick with what we see, we feel what we feel, and from that, we naturally begin to connect with our own wisdom mind."

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