The Roots of Self-Judgment

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:26

So tonight I wanted to talk about the habit of self-judgment, which of course takes us into aversion, which means we also need to talk about the first noble truth.

I want to start by talking about how aversion can be experienced in a moment in our practice—just very simple, moment-to-moment, experientially. The function of how a moment of aversion works isn't going to be news to anybody here, I know that.

I'm using "aversion" to translate the Pali word *dosa*, which covers a whole range: aversion, ill will, irritation, fear—all the kinds of retreating and pulling back in the face of the unpleasant. I'm using aversion as a cover-all for those different mental states.

Very simply, when we can meet a moment of aversion arising in any of its forms in our mind, in or out of practice, this is what we can see happening. Basically, it's said that the habit of aversion, anger, irritation, or fear arises in the mind when sense contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, mental contact like thoughts, moods, emotions—has the feeling experience, the *vedana*, of being unpleasant. Although sometimes when it's neutral, some people actually experience a little aversion too.

The thing that's really fascinating to me, and that you can get really interested in and explore, is that whatever form the aversion is taking in your experience in a particular moment, it's a pulling back that's arising in response to some sense contact that's happening right now. Always right now, in this moment. Any sound, a sight, a smell, a thought—it's unpleasant, and without awareness, or even sometimes with awareness when the unpleasantness is strong, the way aversion works is that the attention, the connectedness, just pulls back. It's like your finger touches a hot stove—without even thinking, you flinch back, you pull back.

In moment-to-moment mindfulness, what I notice is that when there's an unpleasant sound that I don't like, the attention disconnects and pulls away just in that flash of a second. That's the momentary experience of aversion, of pulling back. It could be just a little unpleasant sound, and there's just a slight aversion. Or it could be huge fear coming up—fear about a sensation that projects into the future. We get caught in all this story. But the fear is just arising in response to one of the six sense contacts happening right now.

Even if you have a memory or enormous grief or guilt or fear or sorrow—if you're really caught in a lot of aversion or fear about some past really intense memory that comes up—we can easily get lost in the story, in the past, and it feels huge. The thing we can always know is it's only arising in response to an

experience that's happening right now. Huge guilt isn't being triggered by ten years ago; it's being triggered by something arising in this moment. It's a memory, maybe, but the memory is a thought happening now. It's a sensation that reminds us of our past, but that sensation is happening now. The reminding, the thought, is happening now.

I emphasize this because I've found it so enormously helpful when the fear or the sorrow seems like it's really getting out of control—that I've got to do something, it's so much, it's huge, my life, what am I going to do, the future. Wait—what's actually happening right now? Sometimes we can get there, sometimes we can't. Sometimes fear is all we can do, and that's great. At least the fear is happening now.

I'm starting out this way because I wanted to give us a sense that whether it's a very tiny pulling back of aversion or something really huge, it's all that immediate withdrawing of attention, that disconnect from one of the six sense contacts. It's unpleasant, happening now.

How it goes from just a little to huge is that in that flinching back, that pulling back, there's a space that says, "Delusion, please come in right here." When there's not connectedness, when the attention isn't just connected—"Ah, unpleasant memory, I hate it," but seeing it—okay, that's clear seeing. It's unpleasant. We hate it. Hating feels like this. The memory is this. This is what's happening now. No problem. You might not like it, but no problem.

But when the attention flinches back, pulls back, in that moment awareness can't have wisdom in it. It can't see or recognize clearly what's happening. And in that space, which doesn't have to be very big or long—huge, huge. One thought leads to another, to an association, to a memory, none of which we're quite noticing.

The fear has us down the road for the next ten years. And it's just feeding on itself, getting really huge. And the more this fear—fear is like retreating aversion. Anger is forward going. It all retreats. And then anger is like lashing out. Fear is pulling away more. They're both aversion.

But in the sense of this gap, this space, you could say, the habits of the mind—which is what they call *papa ñca*—it just kind of runs wild. "But if this happens, then that could happen. And what about that last time? And this reminds me of when I was in the third grade and how my father used to treat me." And this really—you're back there. It's huge. And then the aversion just feeds, the thoughts feed on themselves. We're further and further removed, so to speak.

I mean, we didn't really go anywhere, right? We understand that. It's always right here. But in terms of recognizing accurately what's happening, we're further and further removed from being able to just meet this moment with mindfulness. We're getting caught in the aversion spinning itself, in the fear spinning itself.

You know what I mean? It's like Sayadaw U Pandita says—it's like a cow. You know how the cow chews its cud and then it swallows it down and then it regurgitates it up again and chews on it and chews on it and

chews on it? Well, when you're caught in an aversion state, it's like that. It calms down. Then a thought: "Yeah, but what about..." And it comes back up and we jump on the train and go, go, go.

So delusion—I mean, aversion really comes from an essential delusion, which I'll get into in a minute. But then when mindfulness doesn't recognize the aversion, the source of the aversion, or can't come in and say "what's happening right now" because of the disconnect, it just kind of feeds delusion. And delusion gets further and further along because we can't recognize or discern accurately. Then the *papañca*, the thoughts just filling up our mind and the world, get further and further afield. And the delusion increases—delusion in the sense of just not recognizing accurately what's happening.

So the essential delusion with greed, with aversion—of course, but here we're talking about aversion—it's kind of the misunderstanding, or maybe the unconscious thought, the pulling back, that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience. The loud, unpleasant sound—like our whole body flinches back and tightens up, as if that helps anything, but somehow as if we're trying to hold ourselves separate. Or: "This shouldn't even be happening." Or: "I should be able to do something to stop this from happening. Clearly, it's a mistake." Or complete, total denial that it's even happening at all. "This isn't happening, and there's no—by the way—aversion in my mind either. We're just going along happy, happy."

All of these are different aspects of the delusion.

Self-judging—how that feeds in here, I mean, it's obvious. Self-judging is a form of aversion. Negativity. Pulling back. Judging. Not liking what's happening, based on these other delusions, and then turning it against ourselves.

So an unpleasant experience arises. And then there might be a thought: "This shouldn't be happening," or "I'm no good." That's already the delusion coming in. Say you're with the breath. Suddenly you're lost in thought. You recognize it. And there's an unpleasant feeling—you don't even see that. Then there's the thought, "This shouldn't be happening." We're pulled back already from the unpleasant feeling. And instead of just noticing—oh, lost in thought, unpleasant feeling—it's: "This shouldn't be happening. What did they say? Let me remember. Let me read this book. And maybe I should listen to that talk."

And let me try and get back. And the mind is just pumping itself with more thoughts and reactions. What's happening now?

So this self-judging just keeps going—it's the way that papañca, that proliferating way of thinking, spreads out. And it takes the particular story: I'm wrong, I'm bad, this shouldn't be happening.

But the main source, in my opinion, of the delusion altogether that gets us lost in the aversion—that the aversion even arises as a habit—the habit is based in not really deeply understanding, in ourselves, all the Four Noble Truths, but particularly the First Noble Truth of Dukkha. So I want to talk a little bit about that.

As you know, when the Buddha talked about the Four Noble Truths, he said the first truth, dukkha, is to be understood. Not to be transcended, not to be changed, but to be understood. And personally, I find in my whole life of practice—of course, many, many understandings, many aspects of reality—we just keep cycling through, seeing new levels of it, new subtleties, new understandings. And with this First Noble Truth of Dukkha, that continues to be the case for me. And each time I reconnect or understand or open to how it is a little more, the experience is one of lightness, of more freedom, of happiness.

So just to again remind us what this noble truth is, in my current understanding: the word dukkha is often translated, and I don't think so accurately, as "suffering." This is where people who don't really know much about Buddhism get the rap that Buddhism means life is suffering—First Noble Truth, right?

Now, I don't know how it is for you, but for me—and I know I'm not alone—the word *suffering*, I can hardly think that word without some subtle feeling coming along with it of a slight aversion, a slight negativity. And dukkha, actually the truth of dukkha, is not about engendering or having anything to do with aversion, or judgment, or even necessarily anything unpleasant.

So dukkha, just the word—this is from the book by Anālayo about the four foundations, one of his little footnotes—he says there are two different ways in Pali the word dukkha could be broken down. Both come to a similar meaning. The *du* part means difficulty. In the first way of breaking it down, the second part would be *kha*. And one meaning of that is like the hole in the wheel, like in the old carts—the hole where the axle would go through. So that's *kha*. It means the axle hole is difficult; it doesn't fit properly. And so from that, he comes to define dukkha as meaning disharmony, friction. Like every time the wheel's turning, it doesn't really work right. It rubs, it rubs. I can relate to that as dukkha.

The other meaning—again, the *du* is difficulty or badness, and instead of *kha*, they take it from the root *ṭh ā*, which means standing. So it means standing with difficulty, an uneasiness, an uncomfortableness. And so in that way, maybe one closer word that we often use rather than suffering is *unsatisfactoriness*—the basic unsatisfactoriness that runs through our lives. Unsatisfactory doesn't mean, of course, always unpleasant or painful. It's not just suffering.

As you know, the Buddha talks about dukkha as being birth, old age, disease, and death; being separated from what we love; being together with what we don't love; the five aggregates of clinging. But there are other ways he talks about it too.

Sometimes he breaks it into three levels. One level being dukkha-dukkha, or actual pain—actual physical, emotional pain. That's definitely unpleasant. The second is vipariṇāma-dukkha, which is the dukkha, the unsatisfactoriness, of constant change—pleasant to unpleasant to neutral, and the constant change. That's the being separated from what we love, being brought together with what we don't love, just the fact that everything is unreliable. It doesn't mean everything's unpleasant or suffering in the terms of how we think of suffering. And in fact, it includes the pleasant, the beautiful.

This is interesting if we want to really understand the First Noble Truth of Dukkha—that it doesn't just mean the stuff we don't like. There's one sutta where the Buddha was talking, and Sāriputta was there. And Sāriputta, in hearing the Buddha talking about this, became completely enlightened. He was already partly there. The Buddha was talking about vedanā, feeling tone. And he said it in this one line: "Whatever is felt, whatever is felt is included within dukkha." So not just the unpleasant. Whatever is felt is included within dukkha.

So dukkha means unsatisfactory, unreliable, because always changing. And then there's the third type, sankhara dukkha, which I like the way Bhikkhu Bodhi described it as perpetual incompleteness. Insubstantiality. Sankhara being formation—stuff's always coming together and going apart, coming together and going apart.

Now, within this understanding, it doesn't mean every moment is suffering. It's all dukkha, yes, but it doesn't mean, "Oh, that's beautiful, but it's just going to go to hell with it. Life is dukkha." That's aversion. The First Noble Truth is not aversion. That's the Second Truth—the cause of our suffering, aversion and clinging. The First is just kind of, "Hey, this is how things are."

If dukkha is to be understood, the Buddha's not saying understand this so you can be even more miserable than you already are. He didn't come saying, "I'm here to increase your suffering. Read this and weep." He's really saying that understanding dukkha brings freedom. It brings peace of heart.

And I know for me this is true, and I know for many people I've talked to, that one of the things that first lit me up when I began practicing and hearing Buddhist teachings—and it wasn't until after I'd practiced some that I started to even get the teachings—but hearing about dukkha was like this huge relief. Because growing up in a kind of middle-class American white culture, you're always pretending everything's okay, basically. You go out and do things and it's all this struggle, and you're trying to have a nice time.

I remember this story. I went with a friend to a sauna somewhere half an hour from here. We were tired. We didn't want to go. We get in the car. We drive. It's freezing out. We're driving in the ice. We're stressed. We get in the sauna, separate saunas. Ah, fine, you know, for a couple minutes. Then you start sweating. Then you're hot. Then you're too hot. Then you go out and take a shower. It's too cold. Then you go back in, and it's nice for a second. Then it's too hot. Then you come out. You stink. You wash. You get in the car, drive back in the rain. And you go, "Wow, that was great!"

You know, that's how half my life was lived. Everything's great! But how come so much of it wasn't great? And if you say that to someone, they respond, "What's the matter with you? You're just a downer. It's wonderful. You're so lucky."

So understanding dukkha is just this: there are beautiful things, there are wonderful things—they're going to change. There's difficult stuff—it's going to change. It's always coming together and going apart, coming together and going apart. Understanding all of that comes just from seeing how it is—not sitting and

thinking and making a list, but bringing in our awareness, meeting the moment-to-moment experience, like I described with that sauna.

If I'm just present with all of that, I'll notice, "Oh, it's pleasant. Now it's not." But it's no problem. I'm not needing it to be pleasant to be okay. I'm not going to the sauna to increase my moments of pleasantness, and if it's not pleasant, something's wrong, so we deny it. When we see how it actually is, clinging doesn't have to come. Aversion doesn't come.

That's just how dukkha is. It's to be understood.

The Buddha often used this way of talking about exploring—seeing the gratification, seeing the danger, and seeing the escape in different aspects of experience. He talks about this in terms of the world, and I want to read this short passage because I think it's important to realize that in terms of dukkha, the first noble truth, it includes gratification. It includes beauty. It includes appreciating nature. I'm adding that interpretation, but the point is that this isn't about trying to deny the pleasant or the lovely and just seeing, "No, it's all bad, it all stinks." It's not that. It's seeing the gratification, understanding it, and then understanding the limits of it, the danger of it, and the escape.

He's talking about when he was still a bodhisatta, and it occurred to him: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? What is the escape from the world? Then it occurred to him: whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification. And that's true—it is a gratification. That the world is impermanent, bound up with dukkha, subject to change—this is the danger in the world. The removal, the abandoning of desire and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world.

I think that's really important. He's not denying joy, pleasure, or beauty. Just understanding it's only just so much. It's going to change. When there's no desire and lust to hold on to that joy, that beauty, it's not a problem anymore. That's the escape. It doesn't mean we have to kill beauty or kill joy. But it means understanding.

Understanding these different levels of dukkha—and I don't just mean on the intellectual level—this is, in my case, why it keeps going deeper and deeper. Because of course it's in our own experience, and then when we look out in the world, just at the level of suffering, it's huge. At the level of the constant coming together and going apart, the insubstantiality, nowhere we can take a firm stand and hold on to it—in the material world, in our thoughts, in our views, in how things feel, in your meditation practice, God knows. Seeing that, really when we understand that cellularly, and we all have moments of that in practice, that's when the aversion, that's when the clinging, lets go, is seen through, or doesn't even arise.

In my experience, the basic delusion that aversion, fear, and the sense of self that comes with them arises from is on deep, habitual levels—not totally getting, understanding, accepting the fact of these aspects of dukkha. That guess what? There's no way we can hold ourselves separate from the unpleasant. There's no

way. It just gets better and better and better. Back and forth, up and down, in and out, together, apart, endlessly, endlessly. That's the sankhara dukkha—endlessly. So that's the level of delusion, the big picture.

Now I'm going to come back to the moment-to-moment picture again in our practice. I'll keep going back and forth.

In the moment, something unpleasant comes up. What feeds it? What keeps the aversion going? Aversion comes—what are some of the things that keep it going? Where do we move from just noticing an unpleasant sound, aversion arising like this, and that's the next object, no problem? I'm not saying it shouldn't happen. It's no problem. But what's the difference between that and—you all know what I mean—running around here, even if you're going slow, but running around like a nut filled with aversion and fear? What can I do? How can I fix it?

There are a few things. I'm just throwing out different things to notice. One thing the Buddha said—one of the things that feeds aversion, feeds ill will actually—is unwise attention to the unpleasant or repugnant aspect of an experience. For example, you're angry at someone. Someone here did something really inconsiderate and stupid, and they're a jerk. Every time you see them, every time they walk by, you're just sitting there. You can't not look at them.

You look at them, and every time you look at them, it gets you more angry. How can they just walk around like that when they acted like that? The more you look, the angrier you get.

Thich Nhat Hanh uses a wonderful example for this. If you have a tooth that's just a little bit rough, a little hole in the tooth, notice how you can't keep your tongue away from that little rough spot. The rest of your teeth are fine. You don't notice the rest of your teeth. But with that little rough spot, you're at it all day, and it just bugs you more and more and more. This is unwise attention to the unpleasant or repugnant aspect of an experience—not quite noticing what we're doing each time. It feeds another moment of aversion. And the first aversion maybe didn't completely go away. You know how the thought's gone, but we still feel a little tightness in the body. We think, "Oh, well, that's gone. Okay." Then we go back. And each time it's stronger and stronger, feeding on itself.

That's one way. Another way is getting really lost in the thoughts about, say, somebody who did something wrong. We're angry. It's unpleasant. We're judging them. We feel ill will. And we can get quite caught up in thinking, "But it's true. They did do a wrong thing." The same with fear: "But it's true. This might happen. It makes sense to be afraid of it." None of those are really noticing what's exactly happening, right? We get lost in the story. It's true. The fear is right.

And fear, particularly, is a very self-justifying emotion when we're not totally mindful of the fear itself. If you're sitting, like several people have said, sitting and really pretty quiet, and something happens—the breath changes, or some experience happens that's different from what we've experienced before—it's almost built in that fear comes shooting up right then. And if we're not right there with the fear, the mind

almost thinks, "Well, because fear's here, that's proof that there's something wrong." The fear proves it. It's self-justifying.

Anger can be the same way. "But they did do something wrong, and my anger is justified because of that thing." It just becomes an endless loop until we bring the mindfulness: fear is like this, anger is like this. It's got nothing to do with what that person did. Nothing to do with what that person did. Everything to do with the mind reacting to unpleasant without mindfulness and wisdom and then getting lost in thoughts about it.

The third way that really feeds aversion is what I mentioned before: basic outright denial. Either that unpleasant isn't even happening—which we're actually amazingly adept at doing—or that there's any aversion at all.

A friend was telling me he was sitting the three-month retreat last year. This is somebody who has sat—I don't know how many three-month retreats. We're not talking about a neophyte here. And it's something we're all quite capable of doing. He was sitting in a sitting well into the retreat, and he said, "I felt really pretty mindful and present. I was just noticing, noting what happened, noticing the sensations in the body. And I thought, no, a little aversion came up and I really noticed that. And then I went back. It was just all gone." He got up and was walking to the—it was lunchtime, walking to lunch.

He thought he was being totally mindful. Got in the lunch line and was just overwhelmed with ill will and negativity towards the people, the food, everything. He was completely knocked back. He said, "Oh my gosh, there was this aversion going on in the background the whole time since that first little moment of aversion in the sitting. I just completely overlooked it. Completely."

So there's aversion happening, and you're just noting lifting, moving, placing, rising, falling, touching. And then as soon as it lets up a little bit, it's like you're shooting out: "I can't believe these stupid..." Oh my goodness. A little bit of aversion here. We're really good at that—or coding it all in wanting. Something unpleasant comes up and the mind just moves into wanting right away. We get sidetracked into the wanting. Or outright denial.

I have a friend in Switzerland. She used to cook at the retreat center in the mountains where I teach every year. In the mountains, the weather can change really rapidly. It can be beautifully clear in the morning, not a cloud in the sky. Suddenly at lunchtime a few clouds will come over, and by one o'clock you're having a huge thunderstorm. She came from a flat area of Switzerland where it wasn't like that.

She was telling me this: after three years in the mountains, she loved to lie in the sun in the garden when she wasn't cooking. She'd be lying in the sun, pristine blue sky, and suddenly a cloud would come, rain clouds would gather. And she'd just lie there saying, "No, this isn't happening. It's not going to turn into anything. It isn't happening."

That might sound silly, but check it out. Just check it out.

Resistance. Just that subtle tensing up, holding ourselves away from—no, this isn't happening. We know it's happening. It's not quite total denial, but we're holding ourselves away.

Often all of these are based on a view that we have, based on thought, based on our not really opening to, not really understanding and allowing the truth of dukkha, the radical nature of dukkha. Somewhere there's the view: this isn't supposed to be happening. This shouldn't be happening. If my practice—if I were doing my practice correctly—my mind wouldn't wander more today than it did yesterday. And I'm counting! If I were doing my practice correctly, I would be done with sleepiness by now. Not supposed to be happening.

So this unpleasant thing—we kind of tighten up, hold away, look at it out of the corner of our eye. This is disconnect. But we kid ourselves. "I'm waiting for this to go away, for the real thing to start happening." And the real thing is always a little bit better.

This is where self-judgment really gets a foothold and can start taking over. It's a view—really a wrong view—that operates to the level that we're not, in any particular moment, letting in, accepting, seeing and understanding dukkha. Whatever form of change, of unpleasantness or suffering, of just the insubstantiality, the perpetual incompleteness—when we're not quite recognizing, "Oh yeah, this is how it is."

I don't know if you've noticed, but the mind has a tendency to set up a view, which we don't even recognize as a view. Often it's not even in clear words. But it's essentially: this is how things are, this is what's supposed to happen. In our whole lives we do it, but really, really big time in meditation practice. This is what's supposed to happen in a sitting. This is what's supposed to happen in a walking. This is the direction my practice is supposed to move. This is what it's done before, and that's the right thing.

What's happening now isn't the right thing. It's the wrong thing. And somehow I've got to take it and move it and twist it and get it to the right thing, which is getting better and better and moving in the right direction and generally more and more pleasant. It sounds so silly when I say it, doesn't it?

With self-judgment, something arises that's unpleasant. It could just be a jagged breath. It could be a thought that's unpleasant, and we don't notice it's unpleasant. It moves into, "Oh, I'm thinking too much." But really, that was delusion coming because we didn't notice it was just an unpleasant thought.

With self-judgment, we start to notice the unpleasant, and then the view, the thought comes: "This isn't right. I can't do this," or "I always..." or whatever way your mind says it. And it solidifies into a view. "It's supposed to be like this. I can't do it. It's like that." And then that self-judgment, which is just a form of aversion, while it's in the mind, colors all our perceptions. It slants what we notice. When you're really in the lens of self-judgment, I know how it feels. I can recognize it now. It has a feeling. The thoughts, which are usually not too subtle, even though we're quite able to miss them, we think.

"You're doing it wrong." Is that self-judgment? "No, no, that's just... I'm trying to have some skillful means

here. Tighten up. Do it right. Get rid of that thought. This isn't self-judgment. That's just, you know, I've heard the teacher say that, and that's how you practice." It's not—when we really see it.

So learning to recognize the thoughts and how it feels, and then knowing: once that lens of self-judgment is feeding, it sees everything that happens through that lens. It almost only lets in—this is what wrong view does. It solidifies the mind. It almost only lets in perceptions that go along with the view we're holding. The view being, "I'm a stupid jerk and I can't practice. After all these years, I'm wasting my time." Any perception that doesn't match that is discarded, if it's even noticed.

So next time—if ever this happens to you again—notice how you think, "Well, aniccā means everything's coming and going." Yeah, right, everything's coming and going, but better things should be coming and worse things should be going. And it's not happening like that. I'm not trying hard enough. Things are coming and going, but they should be getting more subtle, and they're not because I'm not trying hard enough. It'll just twist everything.

I can recognize now—in life too, it's not just on retreat, God knows—I can recognize just how self-judging feels, sometimes before I even recognize the thoughts. And I know in that space I cannot trust any assessment or any skillful means thought that comes up. I just know that. And then it's fine. Oh, that's what's happening—self-judgment. I know I can't trust what it perceives, and I don't need to. I just notice those thoughts coming and going, coming and going.

But when we don't, the view of self-judgment just covers everything and solidifies and feeds, doesn't it, our aversion to everything that's happening. Nothing's right because we're not right. And the stronger that gets, the more difficult it is for mindfulness with wisdom to meet what's happening, to just experience directly—because we're more and more going to have to fix it, because I'm so bad, instead of, "Oh, self-judgment is like this." Just meeting what's happening.

As Ajahn Sumedho says—I think maybe I've used this before, I love it—he talks about this. He's actually defining mettā, but it's a great definition for mindfulness with difficulty as well. He says it doesn't necessarily mean liking anything at all, but witnessing the unpleasant in yourself

in another, in a situation, without creating anything around it. It's just, oh, unpleasant. It's like this.

Or another way Sumedho talks about awareness being the point that includes. So finding a way, instead of pushing away that unpleasant—whether it's so-called external or internal, whether it's about a sound or whether it's about the judgment of yourself—just finding a way to include that in awareness, rather than staying lost in this fighting, trying to hold ourselves separate, trying to judge what's happening as wrong or bad.

I'll read you a poem. It's funny—I think it's funny. It's an example of how to switch from holding something as bad to including it. From Billy Collins: "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House."

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking. He is barking the same high rhythmic bark that he barks every time they leave the house. They must switch him on on their way out. The neighbor's dog will not stop barking. I close all the windows in the house and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast, but I can still hear him muffled under the music, barking, barking, barking. And now I can see him sitting in the orchestra, his head raised confidently as if Beethoven had included a part for barking dog. When the record finally ends, he is still barking, sitting there in the oboe section, barking, his eyes fixed on the conductor who is entreating him with his baton while the other musicians listen in respectful silence to the famous barking dog solo, that endless coda that first established Beethoven as an innovative genius.

It's interesting, in a way, that we have this almost instinctive reflex of denying—now I'm using suffering deliberately, that dukkha dukkha part of dukkha—of denying suffering, as if it shouldn't be. And as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, it's one of the things, along with joy might I add, along with friendliness, but suffering, difficulty, pain, sorrow is one of the things that unites us all. It's one of the common things we all share as living beings, as human beings.

And in terms of self-judgment, I find it kind of sad and weird that when we experience something difficult, sorrowful, painful, unsatisfactory, we turn against ourselves and feel more alienated and separate and judgmental and bad, instead of actually—when we meet it with compassion—it takes us through to a commonality, to our union with all beings.

Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about how some Thai abbots start their talks to people—you know, the local people come on the weekends—they would start with, "Dear brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." It just brings us all here together, you know? It can be met in such a different way, not with denial.

Again, Sumedho says to understand dukkha—and I mean all of it, not just suffering—means that we accept it rather than just trying to get rid of it or trying to deny it or trying to blame somebody else for it, which is kind of all the ways that our mind tends to act. And so when we're in those modes, when we don't accept, even on very subtle levels, that painful, difficult stuff's going to happen, that no matter how beautiful our practice is going—beautiful meaning we like it, or it matches some idea we have—it's going to change. And that change is just a law of nature.

The levels to which we don't accept that on some deep level, and turn it against ourselves, means when in our own experience, in our own life, something painful or difficult or unsatisfactory or changing happens, we can't accept it. Can't accept it outwardly in the world, can't accept it inwardly in ourselves.

So really this opening to understanding dukkha is both so-called external and internal. Sometimes it's about bearing witness, really being present with kindness, with mindfulness, with wisdom for our own sorrows, pains, unsatisfactoriness, confusion, constant change, beauty. Sometimes we can't do it so-called with ourselves, but we can bear witness or be present for the sorrows, the pain, the change, the confusion in the external world—or vice versa.

In myself, I've always found it—I don't know why, it's just how my mind works—very inspiring to read about or know about people who have been present in the world, present or part of or witnesses to some of the enormous, endless suffering states, aspects of history that go on. There are endless examples, whether it's a poet, or someone who's involved like Dr. Martin Luther King or Aung San Suu Kyi, or whether it's a writer like Alexander Solzhenitsyn writing about the gulags in Russia, whether it's someone—like I have several friends with HIV—and just seeing how they're able to be present. I mean, through all the ups and downs, not always like, "Oh, isn't..."—I don't mean being present when everything's wonderful, but being able to keep showing up with mindfulness, with courage, to their fear, to their lack of fear, to whatever it is that's happening. Friends who've worked in hospice, people in my family.

So it can be on the vast field of history. It can be just friends that we know. It can be ourselves. But whenever I read about or meet or hear about someone who's been able to just bear witness without becoming embittered—you know, without having to turn to violence, without having to just shut down—I'm always really inspired. Inspired in a way that kind of opens me up to a sense of the possibility of connectedness, of compassion externally, also internally.

And it's always amazing to me to see, again in the big picture or just one-on-one, how rare it is and how really meaningful it is for someone when they're in a lot of pain and you or a friend is able to just be there with them. Often there's nothing we can do. But to still be there, not with ten million suggestions of how to get rid of it. I mean, if you know something that can help, yeah, great.

But often we don't. I know there was a time when I had a chronic illness that no one knew what to do about. It was really interesting. You can just feel the different degrees of ability people have just to be there. I mean, I know a lot of people, and everyone had an idea what to do, which if you've had a disease, it can drive you nuts. And you can feel the difference when people are coming with, "Wow, that's really hard," and they can just be there with you. There's not an aversion, not a needing to fix to make it go away. And then how other people, really well-meaning, would say, "Try this, try this, try that, try that." And the energy is just, "I can't bear this. It's too much." Well-meaning. But that sense of how powerful it is to just be able to be present in the midst of change, in the midst of the unknown, in the midst of dukkha dukkha. In the midst of joy, without needing to fix, without needing to get lost in aversion and fear.

And we're not ever always going to be able to do that. But just beginning to touch it. And for yourself. That's really what we can do here on retreat. Inside, it works the same outside. It's not selfish. This is really where we start.

So I find for myself, on or off retreat doesn't matter, but when I'm finding that I'm really getting caught in self-judging, a lot of self-judging, or just feeling disconnected, which then leads to self-judging—something's just off and I don't know what, and I'm trying to figure it out, and I'm doing all the things, and let me do my practice, and it just gets more and more intense, exaggerated,

magnified—pretty much every time I can remember, when I finally just stopped, whether I'm on retreat or off, sit down, stand, whatever, and just feel myself, my mind, my body, what's happening now? Not to fix it or understand, just wait, what's going on now? I almost always found that there was something—the disconnection, the judgment, all of that—was a reaction to something obviously difficult or unpleasant happening in my mind, in my body, my emotions, that I just unconsciously didn't even want to be with. And I don't have to fix it or understand it or anything. Oh, that's what's happening.

For example, loneliness. Oh, loneliness. It's like this. And it doesn't mean it's la-di-da. It might be very intense, moving in and feeling it. I know my mindfulness and wisdom has hit what's happening because instead of all this kind of fog of self-judgment and confusion and thoughts and trying to figure it out and reading texts and trying to remember, which is exhausting and it's like a big miasma of what's happening, when I hit the sorrow, or the fear, or the longing, it's like, "Oh, loneliness. It's like this." Just—ah—relief. Oh, this is what's happening. It's just dukkha. It's just life. It's okay. That's just what it is. I don't have to make anything around it, as Sumedho says.

It's not a sign of my intrinsic failure to be a spiritual person because I'm angry. It's not a sign that my practice is going to hell because I'm having all these thoughts, whereas my last retreat it wasn't like that. It's not a sign of anything. All of that is just making up the story of me from some unpleasant experience, or a pleasant one that went away.

So I really find it true, the opening into what's unpleasant. Oh, it's this. The connection's there again. The whole story of self-judgment doesn't have any grounding in anything. It can still be there. It doesn't matter. It's just a habit of mine. But it's not really grounded in anything. That moment of real—the potential of liberation, just for that moment. Liberation not from the unpleasant experience.

Liberation isn't from having things fall apart. Liberation isn't from having things we don't like happen. It may not even be liberation from the thoughts of self-judgment, but it's liberation from *believing* the self-judgment, liberation from the delusion—and now I'm using the word suffering deliberately—the suffering of thinking, "This is not how it's supposed to be, and it's my fault. I should be able to make this better, and I'm a failure, or I'm weak, or I'm embarrassed because I can't." Oh, it's just how it is in this moment. That's dukkha. And there can be peace, ease, in the midst.

Don't go for the biggest, most painful story you have. But just in the midst of the unpleasant sound, of the headache, of the sleepiness, of the sitting where the mind is just going off and back, off and back—not even to intelligent thoughts, but totally stupid ones, and unpleasant—in the midst of that: "Oh, it's just dukkha." The insubstantial, always coming together and falling apart nature of reality. That's how it is. What's the problem? What's the problem?

Just one last thing I want to say about self-judging, something that's helped me a lot, is seeing how one of the things that can really lead to buying into self-judgment and getting caught in it is the tendency of our minds towards a kind of idealization. This view again—wrong view—a sense that things should be perfect

or ideal. I don't know if you notice this. We do it with people, with teachers, with meditation technique, with how we should feel, with all kinds of things. And not realizing—again, it's not getting dukkha—how can anything be perfect and stay perfect? That completely obviates impermanence, dukkha, and anatta, that everything's in constant flux.

But this sense of idealizing—and I also notice in my mind—the thinking mind has a tendency toward "it's good or it's bad," "it's this or it's that." Very linear and clear and discrete. And the thinking mind, which is very limited, doesn't know what to do with things that don't fit into these nice categories.

I'll give you two examples. When I first went to Thailand to be a nun, I was staying in a temple with a very famous, well-known Thai abbot—one of the most famous in Thailand. I'd just been there a day, and I hadn't become a nun yet. We were just sleeping on the floor of the little hut, and I had long hair. When I woke up in the morning, a stream of ants had somehow moved into a new pathway through my hair. So I woke up with ants in my hair and all over, and I had just gotten to Thailand. I was freaking out. I hadn't adjusted to the climate, to the bugs. So I went running to the Ajahn, who was this very famous, very well-respected teacher—"What do I do?" you know, because of the precepts and all. And he just had his assistant, who was also a monk, hand me a can of Raid, right there. Raid is an insect killer. I was just like, "What?" It did not compute. I'm here in Thailand with all the precepts, and they said, "Here, go spray the Raid." What do I do with that?

Another time, I noticed this same sense of "you're either all good or you're all bad." When I was a kid, about eleven or twelve, I used to read these books by a man who was a medical doctor and had set up clinics in Laos and Vietnam in the fifties. He's writing about himself and all the work he did. I was very inspired by this guy. Then when I became an adult, I heard that he was also a CIA agent. So in my mind: doctor working in Laos, great; CIA agent, bad, totally bad. Can't compute the two together. You're all good or you're all bad.

I was saying this in a talk once, and a friend came up afterward, an older man. He said, "I used to work in the government, and I knew a lot of CIA agents. They're not all bad people. You can't just think of CIA agents as bad people. Some of them are very sincere, wonderful people."

And my mind just goes blank. We do that with ourselves, with our meditation practice. Just notice when you're getting into self-judgment and comparing and aversion—see if there's some view, some thought. It might not even be as clear as a thought, something we're holding onto without even realizing it, comparing ourselves to, and it's not matching. And just that not matching is the unpleasant experience in that moment that's feeding all the self-judging. So these are just some ways of looking at this and not getting so caught.

I'll end with another possibility, from a friend in Burma. We were on a retreat taught by Sayadaw U Kena, who teaches in the Mahasi method of noting, noting, noting every moment. He'd been giving a talk saying, you know, with noting—for example, anger—if anger arises, note it three times, and then it'll go away, and

then you come back to whatever's arising next.

This was a retreat of mostly Westerners. At the end, the teacher left, and one of the people there said, "But I noted three times, and the anger doesn't go away. What am I doing wrong? It's supposed to go away." The whole self-judgment arising.

Later, you know, the teacher clarified: of course it doesn't always go away. You just keep noticing whatever is present. As long as it's there, it's there. No problem. That's what I'm saying. Thinking it should go away, and the self-judgment—that's the problem.

My friend, a Burmese man who had been translating for a while, said afterward, "That was so interesting. I never heard something like that."

I said, "Because for us, it doesn't go away in three notings either. But I never heard that you can just note and that it's not a problem."

He said, "Oh, really?"

I asked, "So when it doesn't go away in three notings, what do you do?"

He said, "Oh, we just say, 'Oh well, never mind.' And that's it. No problem. No self-judgment. No big angst. No 'Oh my God.' Just, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

So I leave you with that. Next time practice doesn't go the way you ideally think it should: Oh well, never mind. What's happening now?

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