First Noble Truth and Self-Judgment

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:30

What I want to talk about tonight is the subject of aversion—self-judgment really, as a subset of aversion. And that means actually starting by talking about the first noble truth. So as you see, it's a serious topic.

Self-judging is not everybody, but many, many people really suffer a great deal from it in our culture. As I said, self-judging is just a form of aversion, and aversion is one of the habitual responses to unpleasant feeling tone, unpleasant experience. And it's all based in delusion.

Perhaps you've heard the very famous quotation from the Dalai Lama to a Westerner talking about their self-judgment. He's saying, you know, you're just wrong. You're wrong. It's basically wrong, first, because we're believing there's a self—but that's a whole other talk. It's wrong because aversion, as a response to difficulty, as a response to the unpleasant, is based in delusion. And the very movement of aversion in a moment in our mind increases and feeds delusion.

When we respond by pulling back, it keeps us from being able to recognize accurately what's going on. In that gap of disconnect, that's when there's rife space for papañca to flow—papañca based on aversion. And we just get further and further from what's really going on. So aversion is based in delusion, it feeds delusion, and it just keeps us more and more confused. Self-judgment is just taking that and turning it back on ourselves. So that's kind of the overview.

To start by talking about the first noble truth, the truth of dukkha: I personally find it fascinating, really quite profound. It's a whole lifetime's worth of exploration at least, and really quite subtle and freeing. As the Buddha talked about, the first noble truth, dukkha, is to be understood—not to be changed, not to be gotten rid of, not to be avoided, but to be understood. And so really, on one level, the source of a great deal of our confusion and suffering in life—and I'm not going to translate dukkha as suffering, I'm using suffering more specifically—is in not understanding the way things are. Dukkha is the way things are.

I'm sure you're all familiar with dukkha and the various translations. One of the most common and easiest being suffering, but not such a helpful one really. The kind of shorthand for Buddhism is "life is suffering," right? That's the first noble truth. Now, at least for native English speakers—I don't know what the connotations would be if English isn't your native language—but for native English speakers, if you hear "life is suffering," what kind of mood, what kind of connotations come from that? It's not really inspiring, is it? It doesn't really feel onward leading.

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, when we think of the first noble truth that way, it's almost impossible for a sense of aversion not to come along with it. "Life is suffering"—there's already that tinge of aversion. But

the first noble truth is not meant to be something that brings out aversion. When we understand it, it actually frees us from aversion, confusion, and greed. We understand it.

In his book on the Satipaṭṭhāna, Bhikkhu Anālayo—it's really a great book if you haven't read it, he just brings in so many different angles, so many different sources—talks about the Pali etymology, possible readings and interpretations of the word dukkha. One of them is that the "du" part means difficulty, and the "kha" part could be standing for the hole of an axle. In an ox cart, there's a wheel and a hole in the wheel, and the axle, that pole, goes through it. Based on that interpretation, dukkha means the hole just doesn't really fit the axle. It kind of grinds around with difficulty. It just doesn't really work so well. That I can relate to more as dukkha, as an expression of our life.

Another interpretation: "du" again means difficulty, and "kha" could come from another root, "sta," which would mean standing. So in this case, dukkha would mean standing with difficulty, or standing badly.

Again, uneasiness, uncomfortableness. And I find personally this much more to the point than suffering.

So as Bhikkhu Bodhi then goes on to say, he describes dukkha as "the basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives." That's not saying everything's horrible. It's not saying everything's negative. Just saying there's a kind of basic unsatisfactoriness that runs through our lives.

Part of what opens up in our practice, on and off retreat, is that willingness of the mindful attention, the receptive awareness that stops trying to block that perception, that stops trying to fix that perception. I think of my mother, who has difficulty—always has had—being with unhappiness, with difficulty, with things not working. She's afraid of it, pushes it down. And so for some reason, one time I was trying to explain to her what dukkha meant, which I don't know why we were even in that conversation, but I was trying to explain and she goes, "I'm not suffering. I don't have uneasiness running through my life. Everything's great."

So that level. And then when someone's holding that, it's like, "Don't tell me. Basic unsatisfactoriness running through my life? Did I come here to hear that? I don't think so. I came here to be more at ease, more loving, more happy."

That's why, when it comes to self-judgment, when your practice isn't going the way you think it should, when it's opening up to sometimes a basic niggling uneasiness, sometimes much more obvious, we think something's wrong. Something's wrong when it's more difficult and unpleasant. That's our basic not understanding of the first noble truth.

So then, as the Buddha talked about the three aspects—I don't want to go into them in detail, but just to give some flavors of what we mean—there's dukkha dukkha, which is really what you would call basic suffering: pain, old age, disease, death. No one gets out without it. Basic suffering. Sickness. Not being together with what is loved. Having to be together with what is not loved. Not getting what you want. These are the definitions in the suttas—dukkha dukkha.

Another aspect is that of change. No matter how wonderful or how difficult something is, it's constantly changing. Basically there's an unreliability and insecurity in that nothing can be held to or relied on for lasting satisfaction—or lasting suffering, for that matter. Nothing can be relied on for lasting anything. And when we're not completely at ease with that, it definitely gives this little undercurrent of... it's just not quite... I just want to be settled. It's just not quite easy.

And the third is called sankhara dukkha, which one way is described as a kind of perpetual incompleteness or insubstantiality. There are different ways of describing it. One way is just the ongoing nature of everything. You have to get up and drag yourself out of bed and go pee, and then you have to wash, and then you have to dress, and then you have to eat, and then you have to go pee, and then you have to wash—and it just goes on and on and on. Well, finally, why do we love to go to bed at night if you can sleep? Thank God. It's over. It's over. That's why Joseph used to say that sleep is the worldling's nirvana. Just check out.

So I'm joking. But that doesn't have to be accompanied with aversion, what I just described. The way I said it definitely had a tinge. But it doesn't have to be accompanied with aversion.

And this is what's so interesting: we still tend to think of all of this as insecurity, difficult, unpleasant, nothing can be relied on. But that's not so. The beautiful is included within dukkha, within the first noble truth. It's just that it can't be relied on because there's change.

In fact, there's one sutta where Sariputta, the Buddha's chief disciple, and the Buddha are talking. The Buddha is quizzing Sariputta on aspects of his enlightenment, his awakening. At one point, the Buddha rephrases something Sariputta said. He rephrases it this way: "Another way of saying that, Sariputta, is that whatever is felt"—felt being vedana: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—"whatever is felt is included within dukkha." Is included within this first noble truth.

So the first noble truth isn't about everything being grim and unpleasant. It's about there's pleasant, there's unpleasant, there's neutral in constant, ongoing, unending succession. And it can't be relied on. It's insubstantial. And that is dukkha. So you see why to just have a sense of aversion right away isn't really accurate.

But this is not always so easy for us to understand. The Buddha talked about, again in relationship to this, as with many other things as well—he talks about three aspects of experience in relationship to how we can come to understand this, that all feeling is included within dukkha, in relationship to many other aspects of our experience.

And he talks about it as really seeing and understanding for ourselves the gratification, the danger, and the escape in these things.

The Buddha said—and this is the Buddha talking—he said, "Before my enlightenment, when I was still a bodhisatta, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in this world? What is the danger in this world?

And what is the escape from this?" And he said, "Then it occurred to me: whatever pleasure and joy there is in this world, this is the gratification."

This is very, very important for us to see. Because if we don't really let it in—sure, there is gratification, there is pleasure and joy—if we're trying to just pretend it's all neutral, pretend we think it's all empty, nothing is giving me pleasure, then we're not recognizing accurately. And as long as we're not recognizing accurately, we're not going to be able to see the danger and see the escape. We stay lost.

So sure, there's gratification, there's pleasant, there's joy, there's love, there's beauty—all of this. That the world is impermanent, bound up with suffering, subject to change—this is the danger in the world. This insecurity, this unreliability. And the abandoning of craving and lust for the world—this is the escape from the world.

Do you hear? He said the abandoning of craving and lust is the escape from the world. Not hating the world. Not trying to avoid seeing that there's beauty. Not trying to avoid being with the unpleasant. Just seeing. Abandoning the craving and lust is the escape.

So this is really how we need to look—to see accurately our experience and to allow wisdom to arise that does free our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering.

I had to lay that foundation, but now I want to go and particularly talk about aversion in terms of aversion arising in relationship to unpleasant. But as you see, the first noble truth of dukkha isn't only about aversion. What the Buddha is saying is there's pleasant, there's unpleasant, there's neutral. And that's just how it is.

There's nothing wrong or bad about unpleasant experience. Physical and mental experience arises. It's going to happen. It doesn't mean that there's something deeply, deeply wrong with you when you have pain, when you're sick, when things don't happen the way you want them to, when you can't control your experience. It means, hey, welcome to the human race.

But that's not really—when we're not looking carefully—that's not the way the habit of our mind and heart responds.

So just to begin to explore on a very simple moment-to-moment basis, and then we can spread it out. In a moment, we've talked about this: the six sense doors, the sense consciousness—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thoughts, emotions—experience arises with pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. The mind feels it that way.

And just as when there's pleasant, the habit of the mind when there's not mindfulness just leans into it—a little bit of craving, hardening into grasping, hardening into becoming, wanting more—so with aversion, similarly, based on delusion. I mean, I'm saying these words, it's not in the moment, but the delusion is like, "This shouldn't be happening." And somehow by pushing it away, I can either keep myself separate

from it, not feel it, or just continue on with the pretense that it's not happening at all.

But in the moment, the mental reflex to something unpleasant—just take an unpleasant sound, let's not take anything too really deeply complicated—the momentary reflex in the mind is just to pull back a little bit. Very mild. If there's mindfulness and you notice it—unpleasant sound, pulls back—then the attention can go right to the unpleasant, back to the sound, and that was just a little blip. It doesn't go anywhere. You just see that.

But say there's that pulling back, and there's not much mindfulness. You don't really know it. In that moment, there's like a little gap. What comes into that little gap? What could it be? "Oh, that sound—that shouldn't be happening. Why is that so loud? That's really going through my whole body." And what was just a little moment of pulling back can just blossom into aversion immediately, really quickly. Unseen, it just kind of cycles on itself. It just feeds on and on and on.

So we have millions of examples of that, but I want to stay on the momentary aspect for a moment. What's interesting, of course, is that we don't always notice on this level. It takes a certain calmness of mind at the moment. And it's also helpful if the sense impingement isn't something that hugely triggers our personality patterns.

But whenever we recognize that we're in some form of aversion—fear, anger, disappointment, rejection, frustration—it started in the moment with an unpleasant sense experience that's occurring now. For example, the content of fear may be about all these horrible things that might happen in the future. But what triggered that aversion playing itself out into papañca? What triggers that moment of aversion that goes into fear is something unpleasant arising now. It may be a memory of a past difficult thing, and then "what if that happens in the future?" It could be a little twinge in your spine—you can't even call it pain, you can barely call it sensation, but it's just mildly, barely unpleasant. Even intense fear or intense grief over memories of something that happened to you starts by the memory occurring now, a mental experience happening now.

I'm emphasizing this because it has been enormously helpful in terms of giving me a way to trust bringing my mindfulness into the present moment experience. Sure, sometimes it's overwhelming, and we'll get to that. But before it's overwhelming, or when it's just kind of, "Oh, what's all this aversion? What's going on?"—sometimes I'll just sit there a minute, widen my attention, and ask, "What's going on right now?" And I'll see, "Oh, my stomach feels a little unpleasant." Or I'll sit there and suddenly notice, "Oh, I just had this really unpleasant memory. It kind of floated through and I didn't really notice it."

Seeing the cause and effect really breaks down the sense of solidity, the sense of taking it so personally, and the sense of inevitability and unworkability about the aversion. It's just a habit of mind in response to unpleasant. And when we have that courage and that willingness of mindfulness to know, "Okay, unpleasant is like this"—I mean, it's built into us from most of our whole experience: unpleasant, get the heck out of here. So it can be scary. That's why we have to really cultivate the mindfulness. It's not our

natural tendency, for most of us anyway. Unpleasant arises and awareness just flows into reactivity without a bubble of space.

But sometimes it happens, doesn't it? And isn't that so peaceful? You can't even tell if it's unpleasant after a while. There's no aversion. And you think—well, you can think all kinds of things, you can think anything. But there's a sense of, "Wow, this is possible. It's another way of being." That's the moment of understanding the first noble truth. Unpleasant is like this. Pleasant is like this. Neutral is like this.

So when the mindfulness comes back and meets the experience, the sense contact, there is again a possibility of wisdom—just knowing it for what it is. "Oh, unpleasant sound." When the mindfulness doesn't meet it, or we don't even recognize it, then delusion and confusion come in with the thoughts: "That sound in the hall, I can't believe it, how could they bring it?" And it just spins and spins, and the confusion, the not knowing what's happening, gets stronger and stronger and stronger—until we're relating with great fear, great self-hatred or aversion to something that basically we've completely made up. It isn't even happening. There was just some moment of unpleasant.

A simple example: someone told me years ago, they were sitting in this hall—a different setup some years ago—and their concentration was good and deep, they were really present. They kept hearing this noise, some kind of steady little noise, the kind that just drives you crazy in the meditation hall. Because why? First, it's a little unpleasant. And second, it shouldn't be happening, right? So we don't just notice "unpleasant sound" and the tightness in the body, which is also unpleasant. Maybe there's not noticing that, but there's a thought.

This shouldn't be happening. And that moment of papañca isn't seen as a moment of papañca—it's taken as an accurate description of experience, isn't it? "This shouldn't be happening. This is messing up my concentration. I need to do something." And we're absolutely believing each of these thoughts.

So the trick is, how soon do we notice what's happening? Three thoughts, we're doing well. Sally was talking about yogi mind last night—three days and we haven't noticed.

Anyway, this person said this went on and on, sitting after sitting, and they couldn't escape it. They were going crazy. Then finally they had a sitting where the sound was still happening, but they just noticed it. The mind didn't get reactive. They just kept being with their breath, their body, whatever was happening. And they thought, "Oh, wow. It's really true what Ajahn Chah says: the sound doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound." It's just happening. The only thing disturbing my meditation was my attachment to the thoughts.

Really noticing this gives us the inspiration, the trust, to simply try and meet what's happening in this moment.

Self-judgment arises when there's a moment or longer of unpleasantness, of difficulty, and the way the papañca goes, the way the thoughts unfold, is that as aversion grows into anger or hatred, the story turns

around and comes back on ourselves.

Now, for each one of us who experiences some form of worthlessness or self-judgment or "I'm not good enough"—we each, in terms of our personality and personal history, will have a particular story, particular events in our past, usually starting from a very young age, that could explain the particular flavor of our self-hatred or worthlessness. And certainly, that can be very useful to know.

Sometimes, as you begin to be able to just touch the feeling—and self-hatred feels awful too—you notice: "Oh, okay, unpleasantness feels like this." If we can drop the story and just feel it, we come into being present, bearing witness, showing up for ourselves, for our own experience. That's the expression of mindfulness, the expression of kindness, the expression of mettā. Mindfulness and kindness—mettā and compassion—are really the two tools that bring us out of this habit and into the present moment.

So as we're exploring this here in retreat and in our life, if you're not already familiar—and many of us are—with your particular story and the particular thought patterns that arise in response to unpleasant experience, getting to know that can be very helpful. Sometimes people then choose to explore it further—the storyline, the past history—through therapy, examining how it shows up in thoughts and reactions to situations now. I've found that very helpful.

And then, in terms of the freedom of understanding how the mind works in awareness, at some point I know the story already. I really don't need to keep rehashing it. So when I'm sitting or in daily life, it doesn't matter. I start to notice that I'm also very familiar with what self-judging or self-hatred feels like. There's a tone in my body—and it's not a pleasant tone. Then there's a certain quality that the thoughts begin to take.

It really isn't so subtle once we start tuning in. It's not like it sneaks up on us. It's like, "Hmm, you really could have done that a little better, couldn't you?" Or, "I think that person really doesn't like me." Or I just feel like I'm creeping around, even if I'm alone in the house. You just notice that.

I don't need to sit down and go, "Well, that's because when my mother... and then... and then..." I don't need to know that. I know that already. That's enough. Right now, I know what it feels like. It feels like this. It's simply unpleasant physical and mental experience.

It feels like this. Met with mindfulness. Met with compassion.

There's nothing to fix. There's nothing you need to change because it isn't you. It isn't me. It's just thoughts and unpleasant feelings and sensations. It's just a mental state, as we say.

That's not a put down. When I'm suddenly caught in something difficult in my life and I recognize, "Oh, this is just a mental state"—that's like a huge freedom. Because I know, even though it feels so gripping... Isn't that one of the things about difficult and unpleasant mental states? Even though we know better, it feels like this is how it's going to be forever. This is it. All that other stuff came and went, but this one is

different. Four more weeks? I don't think so. This is the root of who I am.

And once you recognize, "Oh, this is a mental state"—because somehow just being able to have awareness big enough to name that—actually, the awareness, the attention, the energy relaxes into the experience of the mental state. When I recognize it like that, without resistance, without so much identification, without making it a problem. "Oh, primal terror feels like this."

Serious. When I get to primal terror, I'm really happy, because all that craziness my mind has been doing since I was two to avoid feeling it—I don't need to do that anymore. "Oh, primal terror is like this." It's a huge relief.

Because who told us we would only have pleasant mental states? Did you think that the more you sat, you'd only have pleasant ones? Pleasant states are important. Wholesome states are important. The arahat maybe only has wholesome mental states. But until we're arahats, if we hate every unwholesome mental state, if we take it as proof of what we always knew—that we're useless and a failure—well, it just keeps on spinning, doesn't it? It just keeps on spinning.

So—oh my, I have so much more to say. What is it then that, once aversion comes in—whether it's fear or anger or self-judgment—what feeds it? I've said how mindfulness and just meeting it as it is helps it to drop, but what feeds it?

One thing Sally talked about last night was wise attention. There's also unwise attention. The Buddha said—and I find this very helpful—unwise attention to the repugnance of an unpleasant object. Repugnance means it's repellent to us, the aspect of the unpleasant experience that just feels yucky. Unwise attention to that is what feeds aversion and really keeps it spinning.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu always gives a very concrete example. If you're really angry with somebody—they've just done something and you're really angry—if you keep looking at them, what does that do to the anger? What effect does that have?

Dosa is the word in Pali for all the different qualities of aversion. I actually want to use dosa because there's frustration and anger and fear and resistance, but dosa covers all of it. I like to use dosa because it takes me out of the minuteness of the story.

So I'm looking at the person, and they did this to me, and the anger is getting bigger. And then dosa in the mind distorts perception. Have you noticed that? Have you noticed that if you're really angry with someone, the more you look at them, they kind of start to look uglier? It does that, you know.

Or if something is uncomfortable—there's some food and you're really feeling sick, you feel nauseated—does the food in front of you look attractive? Does it look good? Maybe. But if you've ever had food poisoning from something you ate, you know what happens. You just know. You can't go near that food for fifteen years. Does it look attractive?

Does it become distorted? And then it just keeps going. We just keep looking at it, looking at it, looking at it.

You know how if you have a little broken tooth—it doesn't even hurt, but it's just rough? Can you keep your tongue away from that? Your other teeth are fine. Do you even notice them? Of course not.

And then it's unpleasant, and then we get more unpleasant, and it just spins and spins and spins. Then you're on edge, so the next unpleasant thing that enters your line of perception—some poor person happens to walk a little too close—and the mind goes, *ugh!* What did they do? Nothing. But aversion feeds on itself.

And if you're inclined towards self-judgment, then it turns back on yourself. "What's the matter with me? I shouldn't have done that. I shouldn't have had that aversion to that person. I'm so bad." And we don't see—that's just *dosa* in the mind again. So I might be analyzing, "Oh, aversion to them, but no, aversion to me. No, I really shouldn't be like this. This is because when I was a child..." And it just keeps it going.

But if we can simply note, "Oh, *dosa* in the mind feels like this"—it takes the personality out of it. It takes a lot of the identification out of it. The attention is able to really be there. "Oh, *dosa* in the mind is like this, is like this." The *papañca* doesn't have to take off so much.

So one way aversion is fed is through this unwise attention to the unpleasant aspect of an experience that we don't like, and we just can't leave it alone. Another way is just outright denying—consciously anyway—that this unpleasant or difficult thing is happening, externally or internally.

I have a friend in Switzerland where I teach. She used to be a cook at the meditation center there. It's in the mountains, and the weather changes very quickly. You get up in the morning and it's a beautiful blue sky. By noon, clouds are coming over the mountains, and by afternoon, it's raining. She came from a flat part of Switzerland—there are flat parts in Switzerland—and she loves lying out in the sun in the summer. So she'd be lying in the garden, and then the clouds would start coming, and it's getting all dark. And she'd just say, "No, this isn't happening."

We do that when we have the idea we should be perfect. We should be loving. We shouldn't feel angry. "No, I don't feel angry." Has anyone ever done that? "Oh no, I'm not feeling aversion to this. This pain in my back—I'm just equanimous with this." We're walking, we're bored, people are just a little too close. "Well, I'm just equanimous with this. This is just a little, you know..."

And we fool ourselves until suddenly it breaks out somewhere. "I seem a little over-aversive to this little thing. What could have been going on?"

So outright denial—and we don't notice it until suddenly it shoots up really strongly.

Or another pattern is just some little subtle background unpleasantness. It could be just a mood of very subtle tiredness, or discontent, very subtle—we hardly notice it. But it's going on.

And it can slowly, not noticing what's happening, the aversion feeds on itself each time.

For instance, in my mind and body, when I'm really tired—and at night I'm almost always really tired—my body is uncomfortable. It hurts a little. And I would get aversive. I didn't really learn this until the last few years, but thank God I finally learned it. At night, I used to get a little cranky once in a while. And if I was doing something with my family, I was much more likely to get cranky. Even now we have teacher meetings and I always say, you know, we should have them in the afternoon. It's really a lot better for everybody because I just get cranky and impatient.

But I notice it much more now. And I see that what it comes from is the uncomfortable, unpleasant feeling in my body and my not bringing awareness to it. So the mind tries to move away from the unpleasant, and in that comes aversion, and then it just shoots out at whatever other unpleasant experience arises. When I just recognize—oh, body feels like this, unpleasant, painful—well, it's really fine. It's really fine. And I don't feel that uncomfortableness, that negativity in myself that I used to feel when I got really tired. If I just remember to notice.

Another form is resistance. Just that sense. And resistance can really fool us. Resistance can come with a really good story about why we shouldn't do something. Take walking meditation, for example. "I'm just feeling so tired right now, and I really think it wouldn't be helpful to walk." Or, "I just feel heavy, and I think sitting is better. Sitting is calmer. Walking is more gross. I don't think I should do the walking."

Resistance can just be a habit. Once you recognize it's a mental state—oh, resistance feels like this—it doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything. You stand there, feel resistance, and start walking. Resistance is gone. Just a mental state. But when we don't notice it, again, because there's not the connection, there's that delusion. We're not with what's actually happening. And the one aversive thought leads to the next aversive thought, and the next thought, and the whole thing spins and becomes really solid.

So all of these forms of delusion that increase through aversion, through the not connecting—this is really how aversion increases. And when it's self-hatred, this is how we get lost in it: by not knowing what's happening.

These habits are very, very deep—these habits of assessing our life, assessing our experience by virtue of how much is pleasant and how much is unpleasant. And somewhere deep down there, when it's unpleasant, it's so familiar to evaluate it as being wrong, as being bad. And that really our life, our journey, is one of having more and more pleasant, more and more good things. If that's how we think, then whenever unpleasant comes, the Buddha described it so well in that sutta, the Two Darts, which I want to read a little more than usual of, because he describes the whole thing.

He says, what an unenlightened worldling—puthujjana, it's easier to say—what they do when they are shot with an arrow. There's a bodily unpleasant feeling. That happens to everyone. An uninstructed

worldling, what they do on being shot with an arrow: he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Thus he experiences two kinds of unpleasant feelings, a bodily one and a mental one.

You get the drift. Self-hatred is exactly that. Self-judgment is exactly that. Something unpleasant happens, and we turn around and stab ourselves. It really is—sometimes it feels like I'm stabbing myself in the heart. You're so bad. You're so wrong. This shouldn't be happening. Just complete second dart.

Then he goes on: having been touched by that painful feeling, he resists it and resents it.

So say you're feeling angry. Say you've had good concentration, whatever that means to you, and it's gone. Say you had a really calm day sitting, and now you can't string two breaths together, and you really hate it. That's unpleasant feeling. We resist it, we resent it.

And then in one who so resists and resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance, just a habit of resistance, comes to underlie the mind. It becomes a habit. Self-hatred is just that habit. Something unpleasant happens, and it's all my fault.

Then under the impact of that painful feeling of that resistance, one proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? As I said this the other night, an untaught worldling knows of no other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

So something's unpleasant. You're blaming yourself. You're loathing yourself. You're sure you've done wrong. So what do you do? You run into the refrigerator at midnight when you think no one will be there and eat a handful of figs. Just something pleasant. But we know where that goes, don't we? Because then your stomach hurts. Or then you have the feeling, "Ah, I was trying to take eight precepts, and now I ate three." And then we go back to it's unpleasant, and you beat and you beat. And then you know no other way out except the enjoyment of sensual happiness, so you go and read something. And then you go, "Oh, I read," and you beat and you beat.

You get it? This is the weariness with saṃsāra.

But this is broken if we simply have the courage and the willingness to look. You don't have to fix it, but just to have that steadiness of mindfulness, that kindness to just come in and notice what is happening.

If the pain, if the difficulty is unacceptable, we often get a sense like an idealization of how it's supposed to be. We do this in ourselves. We do it in the world. We definitely do it in meditation practice—this sense of not really getting that painful stuff happens. Even though we get it on the intellectual level, on the deep cellular level, when you start beating yourself up, going into hatred because—I don't know—it can be something so simple as your foot hurts, or you ate too much, or craving had the audacity to arise in your mind even after you've been so concentrated. Or, "I really saw through that pattern. I really saw through it. I understood it. Finished, right? That one's not coming back again." And it comes back. Of course it

comes back. What do you think?

So we get into this sense of idealization, and that's another place that feeds selective perception. We only see what we think it should be. And that keeps feeding that running and resisting the unpleasant and going for the pleasant.

The selective perception is really a fascinating thing. Sally talked a little bit about it the other night, this idealization. And notice, sometimes it's helpful to actually bring into your mind in words what views you're holding of what the ideal you should be like. "I should never..." If you really say it, hopefully you can realize how ridiculous it is. Because when we have these idealizations, they're really up there.

I should never be angry again. I'm a practicing Buddhist. I only feel metta toward other people. I don't feel angry. If I feel angry, it's because I'm bad, I'm wrong, so I shouldn't feel it. And of course, that itself is dosa in the mind.

An example I use often: on a retreat I was teaching with a friend in California years ago, there were about fifty people, and many of them were brand new yogis. It was their first retreat—a five-day retreat. So we were giving all the instructions about how to sit: you can sit on a bench, on a zafu, on a chair. It's about the posture. We explained everything.

About the fifth day, a middle-aged woman came to me in the interview and said, "I have been in nothing but excruciating pain at every single sitting. I just can't sit cross-legged. I've never done it in my life. I'm a fifty-year-old woman, but sitting cross-legged, all I'm doing is filled with hatred, anger, and aversion, fighting the pain. It's unbearable." This had gone on for five days.

Then she said, either that morning or the night before, "I looked up and noticed for the first time—I noticed, oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe it's okay to meditate sitting in a chair."

It wasn't even the sense, which we all have, of knowing we can use a chair but refusing to really do it because we know deep down that the real stuff happens on the cushion. I know. You all go through that. I went through it myself, until you have to give up and accept reality as it is. But this wasn't even on that level. This was on the level of her not having consciously noticed that I was sitting in a chair. I'm sitting up there talking the whole day.

The selective perception was so strong—this is how it's supposed to be—that we don't even let reality in. It's a fascinating thing.

This is why the steadiness, the continuity of mindfulness, is essential. Not that you can force it, but the willingness to be continuous matters. The selective perception comes in when we click on and click off. We pay attention when we like something, or when we don't like it. We pay attention at certain times and then don't notice when that isn't going on. She would notice whenever she saw people sitting cross-legged. She wouldn't notice me or the other people in chairs. She would notice how painful it was, but the thought

would never come into her conscious head to try another way, even though we were saying it. It sounds incredible when I describe it, but this is what we all do.

Self-hatred is a function of this idealization, this sense of perfection. Your practice is never good enough. What's it supposed to be like? "I'm not with the breath enough." What would enough be? "I'm not concentrated enough." The Buddha said one of the four things that drive people mad to think about is the power of a concentrated mind. You're never going to be concentrated enough if your idealization is simply more, more.

This is when the dosa actually distorts what we perceive. We don't perceive accurately, and then our decisions aren't accurate. This is the Buddha: "Brahman, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

So not to hate ourselves, but just to notice when there's dosa in the mind, when it's taking the form of self-judgment. If you don't remember anything else I say tonight, remember this: when there's self-judgment in the mind and you're caught in it,

You can't believe any thought you have. No thought you have can you believe. Because it's all distorted by dosa. And so when you're trying from a place of self-hatred to make your practice better, what are you using for an assessing tool? It's unreliable.

At that point, though, you don't need to do anything except notice: oh, dosa is like this. Dosa in the mind is like this. This is the amazing tool of awareness just receiving what's happening, of mindfulness just meeting experience.

A couple of quick ways. Mindfulness and compassion are really our allies here. They work together. Sometimes mindfulness is enough. Sometimes we need to consciously bring in the kindness, the compassion. So sometimes when you realize you're caught in judging and aversion, it's mild enough that you can consciously bring in mindfulness to ask: what's the sense contact that's triggering this right now? And really come in there.

One time I was in Burma on retreat and had to sit in my kuti, my little hut. And they decided, as they always do, to start a construction project just across the street—not even as far away as the first row of chairs there. That meant from 7:30 in the morning till 5:30 in the afternoon, they were doing some kind of electric sanding, solid. It was really that grating noise. And then they came in with another one on a different frequency and a different sound, and they would go in tandem.

And I saw right then—it starts. The whole thing starts. But I saw so clearly: I have no choice here. I either surrender into, die into the unpleasantness of this sound, or it's going to be a bad scene. And so, knowing that, knowing we can—this is where we say awareness can be with anything—it was like, just relax. And then I'd take a breath, and the other one would start up. Okay. And I could really see: if I just let the

attention—and it wasn't heavy—just be with it, relax into it. But as soon as I'd let the attention move away: I can't believe it, it's all over. So you just come back. And you can watch that.

Sometimes that's quite possible. That's with continuity and a light but very committed touch with the awareness. Sometimes it's more about looking at the mental state, being with the unpleasantness. For example, Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks a lot about sitting with a strong pain. Sometimes we'll say just be with the pain, notice how it breaks up. And sometimes, if the mind's calm enough and the samādhi's strong enough, it really does—boom, just go into the sensation. It breaks up and there's no even sense of unpleasantness, no problem. There's no aversion.

But you can't always do that. There has to be the right combination of factors, as you know. You all know you can't always do that. So other times you try it, but it's just not happening. And what is happening in the mind? Then it's much more useful: don't pay so much attention to the physical pain. Actually bring your sati, your mindfulness and compassion, to the aversion in the mind—to the tightness in the mind, the aversion in the mind, the self-hatred, whatever form it's taking. And that's the next arising object of awareness. It's not bad or wrong. We can be mindful of aversion. We can bring compassionate attention to the feeling of self-hatred.

That doesn't make it feel good. That's idealization. Self-hatred is always going to feel like self-hatred—that's its nature. But the aversion to it can actually fall away.

There's a sense that this is actually how the habit begins to change with the two darts. The difficult, unpleasant pain or mental state is there, and the habit is to say, "Oh, this is horrible. I should fix it." And that's just increasing dosa. That's dosa feeding dosa in the mind. "Oh, self-hatred. It feels awful. I hate myself."

But when we can meet it with awareness—"It's like this"—that moment of mindfulness, of compassionate awareness, is actually what's creating new karma. That's the moment of new karma. And that's not dosa. That's mindfulness. That's compassion. That's wholesomeness. That's actually what begins to change the pattern.

So it's not bad that this difficult stuff comes up. It really isn't. How we can meet it in this moment is all there is. It's the whole place of practice. Can we meet it? Sometimes we can with mindfulness, with compassion. Sometimes we can't.

This is Ajahn Sumedho: "If you're being very idealistic and you hate someone, then you think, 'I shouldn't hate anyone. Buddhists should have metta for all living beings. I should love everybody. I'm a good Buddhist, so I should like everybody.' And all that comes from impractical idealism. That's not wisdom. So instead, try having metta for the aversion you feel, for the pettiness of the mind, for the jealousy, the envy. Metta means peacefully coexisting in the moment with these experiences, not creating more problems, not making it difficult or creating problems out of the difficulties that arise in life within our minds and in our

bodies." Metta as peaceful coexistence.

Sometimes the energy of the self-hatred, the anger, is really big. And so the mindfulness has to be also really big and almost very gross. It's not always nice and tidy—"anger is like this" and "self-hatred is like this." Sometimes the anger is just spewing, but you can still meet it with mindfulness.

I have invented what I call stomping meditation. One time I was so angry at something someone had said or done outside of the retreat. I went out and I was really with the anger, but I couldn't sit—the energy was so strong. So I was away from people and I was really just stomping up and down, up and down, back and forth, but feeling the body, feeling the energy of the anger just churning in my stomach, and seeing how that just fed the thoughts. And if I went into the story, how much that increased the physical experience of the anger. I learned so much about how anger and papañca fuel one another. And it was not at all a pretty, subtle meditation. I was really out there making sounds and stomping. But that's okay. Mindfulness can also be big. Compassion can take many forms.

I've noticed in myself, in and out of retreat, that the times when I feel most disconnected, alienated, confused—when I can't figure out what's going on, and that may go on for however long it goes on—it's when I finally notice, when I just sit down and ask, "What's happening?" I always see that that sense of alienation, separation, confusion is arising because there's something happening right now in my experience that I'm basically trying to avoid, deny, repress.

And as soon as I recognized, "Oh, it's this primal terror, this unpleasant memory, the pain in my body, the scleroderma coming back," whatever it might be—or the sense of, "I can't believe I did that stupid thing"—as soon as I could say, "Oh, shame feels like this," in that moment, the connection, the sense of wholeness, the sense of aliveness is back again.

In trying to hold ourselves separate, we're shutting ourselves off to so much of life—our own life and the life of all beings around us. By actually finding that courage, that willingness to open into the unpleasant as well as the pleasant, as well as the neither, we're really opening into all the beauty and vibrancy and compassionate connection and love that's available in life.

When Joseph talked about viriya the other night, he spoke about it in terms of courage. I think he mentioned Martin Luther King—the courage, the energy to keep showing up. In the midst of so much suffering, in the midst of such powerful forces of opposition, how does one do it? Yes, there's viriya, there's courage, but I also want to offer that the sense of real compassion and the ability to be with difficulty comes from the deep wisdom that knows difficulty, fear, pain, loss, and violence are part of life. It doesn't mean we like it or we want it. We really can do what we can to change that, but not out of avoidance.

The ability to really be present, be steadfast, to bear witness in the midst of the most horrific experiences—our own, others', the world's—to me, those are the people I find most inspiring, whom I

respect and admire the most. And it starts with ourselves. Can you bear witness? Can you accompany yourself in your own difficulties, in the self-judging, in the idealization, in the trying to be perfect? Can you simply say, "No, this is what it is now. I can be with this just as it is"?

Why? It's not just for ourselves. There's no way it's just for ourselves. Joko Beck asks, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and unpleasantness? Why? Because as the Dalai Lama says, why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it's the only place we can know love.

Whatever's happening in this present moment, when you can accompany yourself with compassion, with mindfulness, through the fear, the self-hatred, the unpleasantness, the beauty, the change—then you can be there for somebody else, your friends, your family, whatever situation you might find yourself in, joining the truly inspiring people in this world.

So we're not doing this just for ourselves. We're doing it for everybody. And for me, that really gives a greater sense of aspiration and a little more courage. When I'm really fed up with being with this junk in my mind just for myself, the sense that it isn't just for me—it's for all beings—gives me more energy to be there, more courage to be there, more compassion to show up.

May we all discover love in this present moment.

Thank you.

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