Four Noble Truths

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:45

Listening to the questions this morning and our instructions and in the interviews over the days, I hear a lot of questions, a lot of sense that we've been giving different instructions, different techniques that various of you are doing—all of which is fine. And there's a lot of wondering or doubt about how to do it right, or which technique is best, or you hear instructions for a technique you're not doing and then you want to know how to do your technique but with those instructions. It can get a little confusing, but it's all good.

Tonight I just want to remind us all—nothing new, but remind us all—of the larger context, the reason for any or all of our methods and techniques of practice, why the Buddha taught and why we're doing it. Just to remind us of the bigger picture.

Remembering the Buddha, one of his famous statements is: "I teach one thing and one thing only—dukkha and the end of dukkha." Or as it's sometimes translated: suffering and the end of suffering. Or other descriptions of it: liberation of mind, liberation of heart through non-clinging, recognition of natural great peace, learning to see through our limiting and limited views and ideas about ourselves, about our world, about what is possible, about what happiness and suffering actually are.

This is vast. It's also accessible immediately in this moment, here and now. It's the context, hopefully the ground, the motivation which in some form is—hopefully, I'm saying, because I don't know for you—inspiring all of our practices, all of the techniques and methods, all of our journeys along our individual paths.

To get in touch for yourself, in whatever language, in whatever form works for you, with your sincere motivation and the depth and vastness of it, the breadth of it, is really helpful and essential at times. Especially when we find ourselves getting caught up in niggling thoughts about how it's not going right, or how do I do this, or is this the right way? We get so focused on what we're doing that it's helpful to just reconnect for yourself with the depth, the profundity, or the simplicity—whatever word you want to use—of your motivation. Touch it. At the beginning of a sitting, the beginning of a day, the beginning of a walking—our sincere motivation, the essential energy that keeps us going here, that helps us put one foot in front of the other, that helps us come back and be here for this next moment of greed, for this next breath, for this next unpleasant sound, whatever it is, for this next moment of bliss.

This is essential. It supports our energy and our steadiness—really getting in touch with your motivation over and over, honoring it.

And yet motivation, or wise attitude you could say, is not enough to really start us and keep us going on our path. It needs to be joined with, supported by, wise discernment, wisdom, wise understanding. Or you could even say in a very simple way: just starting with the right information.

As both Sally and Howie talked about in their talks, there's this question of what happiness is. Actually, it's said that part of what motivated the Buddha to start teaching was seeing with his all-seeing mind the fact that most people have wrong information about what happiness is. You could get a sense of that from Sally and Howie's talks—that we all want to be happy, but with our limited understanding, with wrong information actually about what constitutes true ease, peace, freedom, happiness. Happiness is a tricky word. Without that right information about what's possible, about what's really so, just how things are—without that right information, we end up looking for happiness in the wrong places. We end up floating in that deck chair over L.A., one way or another.

Such a great story, because I could really see myself doing that—maybe not that particular thing, but some version of it. That's a metaphor for what we do without the right information. We keep on feeding confusion.

As the Buddha said, his teaching, the path of awakening, runs against the stream of culture. I won't say modern culture—he said it back then. It runs against the stream of culture as to what happiness is, what suffering is, what peace is possible. And not just external culture; it runs against the stream of the habits of our heart and mind—as if we're separate from our culture, but I don't think so. What is our culture but us? The habits of our mind are also, when we just let them run without paying attention, against the stream of the Buddha's teachings.

So we really need to begin and keep referring to what you'd call right information. What did the Buddha say we need to know to begin our path, to stay on our path, to support our awakening?

This really basic context for all of our particular forms of practice or methods, what we need to know, the right information that leads our motivation into discerning awareness, into wise view, into the freedom that comes from wisdom—is what he called the Four Noble Truths. I want to speak a little bit about each of them.

The first truth, which in Pali is dukkha. I want to talk a little about that word and what this truth is. The first truth of dukkha is often translated into English as suffering. I really don't find that broad enough or helpful. I'm pointing this out so that we can see in our own hearts and minds the ideas and connotations that come up when you hear the word suffering. If you're used to translating dukkha as suffering, it'll be the same.

Dukkha—first of all, this truth of dukkha, as the Buddha said, is to be understood. It's really like a broad description of the human condition. That's just what it is. And he doesn't say this truth of dukkha is to be changed, gotten rid of, hated, or overcome. It's to be understood. It's basically: "Hey, folks, this is the way it

is. Learn to be with it, and you'll be free."

Keep fighting it, and we're floating over L.A. again.

Dukkha—as perhaps many of you have read in Analayo's book on the Satipatthana Sutta. He seems to be a really interesting translator of Pali as well. He describes two possible definitions of the word dukkha based on different derivations. One of them—and I'm not going to go too deeply into etymology—would have *du* meaning difficulty and *kha* meaning something like the hole that an axle goes through in an ox cart. So basically the hole and the axle rod don't fit properly. Dukkha is like disharmony, friction, that kind of rub. It's just always kind of rubbing, not going smoothly. That's one derivation.

The other is standing with difficulty, standing uneasily, uncomfortably. So again, dukkha would mean standing badly, so to speak. It's a kind of uneasiness, a dis-ease, being uncomfortable. That's very different from horrible dukkha suffering.

Let me share what the Buddha gave as what comes under dukkha: unreliability, insecurity, that kind of rub. First is *dukkha dukkha*—that there's basic unpleasant experience. And that's usually what we think of as dukkha. I find myself using dukkha as a shorthand for unpleasant, for suffering, actual suffering. Like I step on a thorn, my foot really hurts, and I'll say, "Oh, dukkha." We always use that as a shorthand in this meditation scene. And it's really not helpful because it keeps reinforcing a limited understanding of what dukkha means. So if something's really going badly—ah, dukkha.

That's the first definition: basic unpleasant experience. Being born is pain. Sickness, old age, disease, death, being separated from what we love, being put together with what we don't love. Again, the basic human condition. But all of those we can really relate to—yes, that's the friction, that's not going well, that's standing badly, that's suffering. We wouldn't have a problem calling that suffering. It's part of life.

The second aspect is that everything is in constant change. But this includes all pleasant experience as well as all neutral experience. So the first noble truth is not just about things we don't like. It's that all experience, all the six sense doors, all that we experience arises due to conditions. The conditions change, and it goes away. But within that, there's plenty of really pleasant and lovely experience. It's also dukkha.

Remember Howie last night talking about sukha dukkha? That's what he means. But we mostly don't think of it that way. In our shorthand, which is inaccurate, when something really nice is happening and everything is going well, we don't say, "Oh, that's dukkha." We say, "Oh, no, finally! Finally the universe came together, the stars are in alignment," or "I finally got it, I'm a good meditator, I finally overcame, now the breath is right, now it's how it's supposed to be." Now *that's* dukkha. Because it isn't going to stay like that very long.

So it's to be understood—the change, the unreliability. All feelings, the Buddha said. There's one sutta where he said all feeling—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—is dukkha. It's all unreliable. It's all subject to change. It's all insecure. And that's not saying it's bad. It's just a broad statement of the human condition.

In fact, something to really be aware of: if we find, just in paying attention to our own experience and the way we relate, that when we come in contact with some aspect of this first noble truth of dukkha—the unpleasant, the pleasant, the neutral, the change—do we automatically associate it with some form of aversion? With some form of unpleasantness? Can we even contemplate the first noble truth in a really open, accepting, "oh, that's just how it is" wise way? How easy is it for our mind to slip into the habit of some kind of aversion to it?

I don't know—that's just a reflection, a contemplation to tune into for yourself, because that's a misunderstanding. We can have, and we often do have, reactions ranging from mild aversion to deep despair, to fear, to resistance, to outright, flat, total denial of many aspects of dukkha. And it's a really very profound and subtle truth. It just really touches everything.

I find in all the years of practice, first hearing about the truth of dukkha was actually really liberating. It cheered me up. It was like, "Oh, that's why."

Like when Sally was talking about going on vacation and it's supposed to be so wonderful. And we just ignore all the stuff that isn't. We come back and think, "Oh, that was great. That was wonderful." Like it's supposed to be. We're almost talking ourselves into it. And somewhere in the back, I kind of think, "You know, I'm acting out." This is when I was quite young, but I couldn't have put the words to it. It was as if I was trying to conform to what I thought everybody else was happy about. But really, internally, my experience wasn't "everything's so wonderful, everything's so happy."

I remember when I was younger, when I really kind of got this, I went with a friend—when I was working at IMS—we went to have a workout and a sauna. It was in the middle of winter. So we had to get in the car, really snowy, icy, freezing, drive for half an hour to the health club. Then we go in and we had to separate—he was a man—and it was really cold in that locker room. My body, I hate the cold, so it was really uncomfortable. Went swimming, which was freezing. I was tensed up and I don't like exercise anyway. Got out of that, got into the sauna, thank God I could relax for a few minutes. Then you start to sweat, then it gets all wet and you're sweaty and hot and smelly, and then you get a headache. So you get out and get in a cold shower. I hate cold showers, so I'm in the cold shower, I hate that. But then I can get back in the sauna, it's nice again for five minutes, then stinky, sweaty, headache—I gotta get out, take another shower, get dressed and leave. We both got together like, "Wow, that was so good." We get back in the car and go. That's the story I was telling myself.

That's really more the axle not fitting in the hole. It's always grinding. What's the problem? Things are supposed to be nice. So hearing about dukkha, it was a relief on some level.

But of course, we have to keep discovering over and over that the habit of aversion and just flat-out denial really can be so strong. I read this in a newspaper a few years ago, an article from a small town in Spain:

The mayor of this southern city has banned death. He feels the local cemetery is too crowded for a soul to

get decent rest. So the 4,000 residents of this village in Granada province have to remain alive while municipal officials shop for land to house a new graveyard. The mayor issued an edict last week ordering people, quote, "to take utmost care of their health so they do not die until town hall takes the necessary steps to acquire land suitable for our deceased to rest in glory."

I'd call that denial of the basic facts of life and that they're out of our control.

I could go on and on. I'm just giving little highlights about dukkha. It is to be understood. And we understand it, as Ajahn Chah says, just by meeting it right where it arises. Not by this denial in my mind—like me going to the health club. It's unpleasant and there's just this kind of denial. You see it and just kind of gloss over it. You know it's there, but you don't really open into it. You don't really let it in. And then it didn't really happen. You kind of tough it out. It's gone. Okay, now it's the good part.

Ajahn Chah says, wherever it hurts, wherever there's friction, right there we must investigate. Take that thorn out of your foot. Just pull it out.

Wherever your mind gets stuck, you notice it. And as you look into it, you will understand it. You'll see it. You'll experience it as it is. Wherever suffering arises, look into it. Look right into the present moment. Look at your own mind and body. When suffering arises, not so much asking, but just looking—why is there suffering? Look right now. When happiness arises, look at what is the cause of that happiness. Look right there. Wherever these things arise, be aware. Both happiness and suffering arise from clinging.

I read that on purpose because often the happiness, the sukha dukkha—clinging is what causes the suffering of it. That's the second noble truth. The cause of our suffering, the cause of our anguish, the cause of our difficulty is not just the facts of life. It's often given as tanha, the Pali word for craving, intense thirst, wanting.

I'm going to broaden it here, saying that in terms of our practice, in terms of exploring our minds and the dis-ease and unreliability and confusion in the moment, the real cause of our anguish is not only the craving, the holding on to the pleasant, but also the reactions of aversion, the pushing away of the unpleasant. And there's a third reaction of mind—relating to any sense experience, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mental experience, relating to any experience as me, as mine, as all about me. Greed, hatred, delusion. That in the mind, in any particular moment, is the cause of our anguish: the clinging, the aversion, the meaning.

So when Ajahn Chah says, look right there when happiness arises, he's talking about worldly happiness in that way. Clinging is the cause of the suffering around it. Because yes, there's plenty of pleasant experience, of happy experience—that's sukha dukkha. And we don't want to hate it. That's just aversion. Just as we don't want to hold away and gloss over the difficult, the unpleasant, the times that it's rough and not working, we also and equally don't want to say, well, it's going well now, and then do one of two things.

We either don't pay attention anymore—it's going well, it's equanimous, I've got it, I stop in some way, I coast. That's the habit in my mind. Okay, it's fine. And then real suffering, real suffering, wakes me up again. I don't want to hear that the pleasant, the equanimous, when everything's going well, is sukha dukkha. Did you want to hear that? You want to hear that when things are going well and your breath is nice and it's all even, that that's also dukkha? Is that what you came here for? Probably not. And so the habit of my mind is to stop really looking then sometimes.

But another habit that happens with many people, especially on retreat, is to really notice the difficult, what you're doing wrong, the suffering, and actually almost not stop looking with the pleasant, but discount the wholesome, the beautiful. So a moment of real peace arises in your mind and you think, well, that was just a one-off. Or you're really struggling with something and suddenly there's a real insight into it, and you think, well, that was nice, but now that insight's gone and I'm back in dukkha. That doesn't count. Or you're having a good time, many people when it's going kind of calm and it seems to be going well and you're really interested—you come into interviews and there's that little voice in the background: but I'm not really learning, I'm not really getting to the nub of things, I'm not really doing it. It should be suffering. It should be hard. There's a way we don't trust.

Both of those habits miss the mark. And really, Ajahn Chah says, meet it right where it is. Look. Look at the suffering. Look at the happiness. Really meet it as it is with awareness that's filled with interest, not with assumption, not with meaning. Just see right there. That's how we come to understand dukkha.

But anyway, back to the cause of our anguish, our suffering, which is to be abandoned, the Buddha says—this is really exploring these habits of wanting, of clinging, of pushing away, and of me-ing, my-ing, making everything all about me. And each of those is a talk in itself, right? So I'm just going to briefly mention them.

Because as I said, there is worldly happiness. And looking at it and seeing the insecurity in it is freeing. That's not about getting depressed. That's about freeing us to really appreciate and be more fully present in the worldly happiness without looking to it to give us something it can never give.

Ajahn Chah again: "Worldly accomplishments, happiness on whatever level, still leave you in the realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be comes about in dependence on external things. That's not the happiness of freedom—the happiness that does not depend on anything external."

So what is it we depend on? We depend on possessions. We depend on pleasure, on reputation, on praise, on wealth. We lean on all these things, like leaning on a rotting old tree trunk. And then as we lean on it for too long, it breaks and falls, and we fall with it. Such is worldly happiness. I love that image—just sitting here so happy, leaning on the trunk, and just clunk. And it's like that when it changes.

But remember, I said dukkha doesn't mean aversion or dislike of it. So when we hear this, notice if your mind goes, "Well, there's no point in leaning on any of these things, so forget them all. They're no good."

Does it go to a kind of judgment or negativity? Hopefully it doesn't, but if it does, just notice that, because that's just aversion, that's just rejection.

Really understanding the truth of dukkha is simply, "Oh, this is how it is." This wonderful praise, this accomplishment, this lovely, concentrated, peaceful, equanimous meditation is just what it is. Just so much. If I don't lean on it to be anything more, we really fully open into it, completely. No part left out, no resistance, no me too related to, no separation. Very different from, "Oh, this is nice, but it's going to pass, so never mind. Forget it."

So opening into the truth of dukkha is actually very freeing.

What's wrong with clinging? What's wrong with aversion? We're not saying they're bad. They obstruct peace. They obstruct recognizing the possibility in this moment of peace of mind and heart, of ease, of clear seeing. Same with me-ing and my-ing. With clinging, it's like, "I want this, I want that." It just takes you, takes you, takes you. It pulls you around by the nose.

My brother has a hound dog. It's a lovely dog, a really nice dog, but he's bred for hunting, this breed. And this dog is literally led by the nose. It's painful to watch him. He comes in the house and he just sniffs any new person, any new smell, anything that comes in the house that's in my luggage that has anything to do with food or dirty clothes or anything that's had any smell of a human or a living being—he cannot stay away from it. They have to lock all the garbage up, all the doors closed. The dog just cannot stay away from it. He's literally led by his nose to the exclusion of anything else that's going on.

And it looks like real suffering. It really feels to me like the essence of craving—this and this. I mean, he's getting nothing from any of it, but just can't stop. It's painful to watch until it drives you crazy. And it's like that with us.

We were taking a walk, walking uphill, and I noticed I get tired walking uphill. Well, one does, and I do. So I was just walking uphill, and my energy was kind of going. Then I noticed a thought came into my mind: "Oh, soon we'll be at a flat point." And craving came up.

I was just watching the mind, watching the craving that arose. And I saw how we can confuse craving for happiness. Because in that moment of craving, it was kind of energizing. "Yeah, I'll get to the flat point!" It almost felt good—better than being tired. And I thought, "That's really interesting. That's how we get led by it."

If I hadn't been watching closely, there was nothing wrong. I just kept walking uphill. It didn't change anything. That craving came and went. I didn't get to the flat point any quicker. And when I got there, it lasted a second. Then it wasn't flat anymore, and we had to go up again. Big deal.

But I saw how the craving itself brought a kind of energy that, if I wasn't really aware, if I wasn't noticing, knowing the craving as it arose, I would have mistaken for a kind of pleasure. The Buddha says in the

suttas, when he talks about *taṇhā* as the cause of suffering, he says it is "craving which comes together with delight." So often we mistake the craving for happiness. And that keeps us spinning in it.

Don't believe me. Just explore and see. As I say, there are whole talks about this.

Aversion—the resistance, the not liking what's happening, wanting it to be different, pushing it away. We shrink back. We disconnect. And again, our world, our view, our sense of things becomes really limited.

Do you notice how with that unpleasant experience, it's like you're married to it? It's unpleasant and we're resistant to it, but somehow that resistance keeps us just there with it, like it fills up the whole world. There's one unpleasant feeling in your body. There are many neutral and pleasant feelings in your body too, but what is your attention constantly drawn to? You have many, many thoughts, but that one thought about "My practice was so much better last year, what am I doing wrong?"—that thought gets grabbed hold of and it fills up the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, if you have one rough tooth—a little hole in your tooth and all your other teeth are fine—can you keep your tongue away from that little rough tooth? You just worry it to death. The mind, in resistance to what it doesn't like, gets really caught in it. And again, it limits completely. It's a maker of measurement, a maker of limitation.

Both of these, of course, are all about who? Me, me, me. It all starts from me. It all ends with me. It all goes around me. Any of the six sense experiences, in the moment of knowing them, can almost immediately be brought back to me when that's what's coloring the attention.

Have you noticed that? You're sitting here very quietly and someone goes out and closes the door. It's got nothing really to do with you. But if you notice that—how likely is it that the mind goes: "What are they doing? And how does it affect me?"

Or, "Oh, they're leaving, but I'm sitting here, so calm and still. I didn't leave, you know?" Someone's walking slow, and you think, "Oh, I should be, or I shouldn't be, or they're doing that, and I'm doing the new way—I'm walking fast." Or someone asks about concentration, and you immediately have to compare yourself. Good, bad, neutral—it doesn't matter.

But how much more freeing is it when there's just a sight, a sound, somebody asks a question, and it's just what it is? Space. The mind makes nothing around it. Very freeing.

Notice how quickly, though, the reference is back to me. And notice how entranced we are by all of these reactions. This is really the place that our practice is hopefully helping us learn to see through. Because we're so entranced by our reactions of liking and disliking and assessment and describing—what does it mean about me, my practice, my life, my past, my future, all of that. We're so entranced by the object of the experience and our reaction to it that that's what causes and keeps us spinning in suffering and confusion.

This is the information the Buddha is trying to give us—to see through, to recognize that this is not really the essence of what's happening, and this is not the way to real peace. Intellectually, probably we all know this, or we wouldn't be here. And the intellectual knowing does us some good. It does. Hopefully, at least it gets us to look. At least it gets us to say, "Something isn't working. Let me try."

But the habits are so strong. I mean, they're just so ingrained. This is why the Buddha talked about our practice going against the stream—because they just feel right. Doesn't it feel right when things are pleasant and things are happening the way you want them to happen? Doesn't it just feel so right that that's how it's supposed to be, that that's good? It just feels like that.

And it just creeps in that it's about me—that I'm practicing, I'm putting out effort, I'm getting concentrated, or I'm not concentrated, or I, I, I. Of course it's all about me. When I'm sitting here, who's the center of everything? Me. Who's thinking these thoughts? Me. Who's meditating? Me. It's just so familiar that we don't even recognize it's happening half the time, never mind looking to see through it.

Bankei said, "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things, with experience, and then your primary being reveals itself in its true form." What does he mean—our primary being reveals itself in its true form? What's he pointing to?

What I want to say is: the Third Noble Truth. That there's a liberation, an ending of suffering, of confusion, an ending of our anguish—namely, liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. This is not talking about a specific constructed state that we work hard enough to manage to create, get there, and stay. It's not an external state, not an internal state.

But moment to moment—there's only this moment—moment to moment, this can be touched, kind of tasted. Given an intimation of the freedom, the spaciousness, the happiness—it's a tricky word to use—whatever: peace, liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging. Not through the state, but in a moment, when the consciousness, the awareness, the mind-heart—same word—is in that moment free from being colored by desire, greed, hatred, aversion, fear, me, me, me.

When these things aren't coloring and we're not lost in them, sunk into them, when we're not identifying with those, when in that moment the awareness, the consciousness, the mind is released from clinging, from aversion, from entrancement really—our entrancement with our reactions and our self-storying. They can even still be there, but the entrancement is released, the attachment is released. That's when there's a possibility to recognize the purity of our true nature, our primary being.

This famous, very well-known teaching from the Buddha: "Luminous is this mind"—remember, the word for mind is the same as the word for heart—"Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This, unlearned people do not really understand, and so do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This, the noble follower of the way really does understand, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

You get a sense of how both are true, depending on the orientation, the energy, the interest in a moment.

When we don't understand the attachments that visit the mind in any particular moment, awareness, consciousness—if we're not dead, you know, in a coma—is always happening. Always. There's a moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. It's happening every moment. And in that moment of consciousness, there's awareness knowing that it's happening. Sometimes we don't know, there's not conscious awareness. Sometimes there is.

That awareness comes together with various mental qualities, such as the big three we've been talking about: greed, hatred, aversion, or fear, delusion, confusion, me, me, me. So when the Buddha talks about "colored by the attachments that visit it," it means in that moment of awareness, when one of those qualities is in the mind, if we don't understand that actually the mind, the heart, is luminous, unstained, free of those attachments—when we understand that it's free from those attachments, then there's really cultivation. When we don't understand it, that's when we're just sunk in our reactions, thinking that's all it is, that's all life is about. Pleasant, get more pleasant. Unpleasant, get away from it. Arrange, manipulate so that you can get as much pleasant as possible before you die. And don't think too much about you're going to die because that's not a happy thought.

We don't know any other way. That is such a deep, poignant sadness. That's what motivated the Buddha to teach. When that's all there is, then there's no cultivation of the mind.

But what all of our practices come out of, and what I know you all know—we've all touched it many times—is in that moment when there's the bright, luminous, pure quality of just awareness. And it isn't colored by wanting, by aversion, by confusion or delusion. It's just awareness and whatever object is arising. And it doesn't matter what the object is. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, mental activity, pleasant mental activity like bliss, really unpleasant mental activity like "I'm the stupidest jerk who ever lived." It doesn't matter. There's the awareness. Ah, awareness and object.

And what happens in the mental cultivation is that we change the direction of our interest, the direction of recognition. We change, in a way, foreground and background. We change what's important. So our focus becomes less and less on manipulating all the experience or assessing it in terms of what it means about me or trying to have different experience. And I'm not just talking about meditation—our whole life. Less and less is the energy going into the experience, and less and less is the focus on our reaction to experience. And more and more, the interest, the focus, the love really, the sense of fulfillment is on just recognizing awareness itself. Awareness of anything. We go into the anything, then turn around and just be interested in the knowing of the anything.

And that's really what we're doing. Just the quality of simplicity of wakefulness. Awake, alert, kind of intelligent. Just what it is. It's so simple.

As I said, we've all had many moments like that. Sometimes they're just kind of neutral moments. It might

feel peaceful. It's just a kind of moment when you're... It's funny, we talk about mindfulness as remembering yourself, but these moments are sort of like a moment where you forget yourself. I'm not talking about some big, you know, blowing apart, anattā, unity, no sense of self experience. I'm just talking about a simple moment where you're not relating every damn thing that happens back to me. God, it's so exhausting. You're just walking down the hill. And there's seeing and hearing. You can be really, really focused or not. It's not about being really concentrated. It's not about being really blissed out and incredibly precise. It doesn't matter.

That's more about the object. But just those moments of simple—whatever you want to call it—being, presence, wakefulness. And as I say, it might be with just walking. It might be with seeing or drinking a cup of tea. It can be with feeling pain. It can be with feeling sadness. It can be with feeling fear. It can be with a thought. It can be with nothing special, because the object doesn't matter.

Awareness doesn't care. And it cares, you know, about everything and nothing, right? It doesn't care in the sense that some objects make awareness better and some things make it worse. That's what the Buddha is saying. Awareness, the mind, is free from the attachments that visit it, or unstained by the attachments that visit it.

So you've been sitting all day really lost in wanting, wanting, wanting, and then suddenly there's a moment of just, "Oh, wanting is like this." Now, in that moment, it's like a Tai Chi move, right? Wanting—but instead of being so engrossed in it, in our ideas and its media—"Oh, it's like this." That's the awareness. The shift from absorption into the object and our reactions to "Oh, wanting's like this."

Now, is that awareness somehow impaired because so many preceding moments we were lost in wanting? Did that somehow stain or sully or take something away from this moment when the awareness emerged? No. How can it? It can't. I mean, explore for yourself, but awareness isn't a thing. It's always accessible, and no experience or object makes it better or worse. It's not so much a thing of thought, but play with it.

I've been finding this is so freeing. It takes away so much sense of, you know, "My practice, my life, my mind—whatever—is in the pits. I can't do it. I'm getting nowhere. I've got so far to go to be able to get anywhere." It's like, "I need another three weeks just to have a moment of pure awareness"—instead of "Oh, self-judgment's like this." That's it right there.

And then we go, "Oh no, I've got to hold on to it. No, no, no, it's going." Oh, wanting's like this. "Oh my God, I get it!"—and it goes—"and it's so hard." Oh, complaining's like this. And it's like, "Oh, okay. Nothing is a problem." I mean, it's a problem, but being a problem isn't a problem. You know what I mean?

It all has its own flavor. All the experiences, the mind, the reactions, the senses—they all still have their own quality. Nothing is really changing. But what this third contemplation offers us is the cultivation of the mind. The cultivation is knowing that there's this other possibility for how we relate to our life, for how we relate to moment-to-moment experience as it comes and goes. And that's what basically life

is—experience, experience, experience, experience. We can't really stop it. Good, bad, indifferent, me, you, whatever.

"Oh, it's like this. It's like this." Sleepiness is like this. "I really hate sitting here" is like this. "I can't do it right" is like this. Bliss is like this. "I love myself" is like this. That incredibly obnoxious noise is like this. Aversion, desire, self-interest—once the

Once the focus, the interest—none of these words exactly capture it. They're all a little too solid, a little too much doing, a little too limited. But once the interest, the love, has really moved from entrancement with objects and experience and me to simply recognizing awareness and what's coloring the awareness at this moment, then things just stop being such a problem.

And that's our cultivation—knowing that this is a possibility, a potential, not fifteen years from now, but right now. This moment, this moment, this moment, no matter what's happening. Vastly freeing.

When I realized that all of life, all of practice, is just moment to moment to moment, it made everything so much more workable for me. Whether I'm talking about recognizing awareness, cultivating more purity of mind, some kind of samādhi-focused meditation, or building up more energy to walk up hills—whatever it is. When I'm looking with my mind, with thought, into the future and some ideal of how it should be at some point, it's really demoralizing. And it's also not accurate, because who knows?

But when we realize there's only this moment, and no matter how completely pathetic our practice or our life or our reaction feels in this moment—in this moment, "Oh, pathetic feels like this"—it's so accessible. Accessible to anybody. It doesn't take a huge buildup of anything, but it takes that willingness to look, to really be here for whatever this moment is.

For me to be in the moment and say, "Oh, self-hatred feels like this"—for that to really be true, I mean, I can say it, but for that to really be the experience, it has to be a completeness of presence with self-hatred. It's not an idea: "Oh, self-hatred is like this." That's back to denial of the first noble truth. "Oh yes, I know, there's just self-hatred and awareness of it, and I'll just be in the awareness. Self-hatred is like this." That doesn't really have the taste of freedom—explore for yourself. It has the taste of delusion, which can be hard to recognize, and we can fool ourselves that it's freedom for a while.

"Oh yes, self-hatred is arising and I'm aware of it. I'm not really caught in it. Self-hatred and awareness, self-hatred and awareness." You'll notice over time there's more disconnection, more distance, more not touching, less and less fulfilling. Until you can't pretend anymore. Something always breaks through. "Oh God, I really hate myself. Oh, I really am useless. Oh, I feel the pain of it." Oh, pain is like this. Land in it.

As soon as I land in it—without resistance, without aversion, without desire—oh, it's like this.

Upandita Sayadaw said to me once, I guess when something difficult was going on—I don't remember exactly what—but he said, "You don't have to be afraid of anything." And that was so supportive to me,

because I knew what he was saying. You don't have to be afraid of experiencing anything. The beautiful—don't be afraid of opening into it because you'll get attached. Attachment—don't be afraid to notice it. Aversion, the difficult—don't be afraid.

In that moment of really opening into it without the coloring in awareness of wanting, of aversion, of being—in that moment, the purity of awareness itself is accessible again. The freedom, the uplift, the peace of that.

So the purpose of all our practices, all the various techniques—the ultimate purpose is not to create some lasting state of a harder mind. It's not to create a better or more pleasing object or experience. Short term it might seem like that, and that's where our old habits come back and we get caught. But it's not about having deeper breathing, less pain, always equanimous, always blissful, always peaceful, always concentrated.

All of the practice in our tradition is really to help us see through, understand, and abandon our habits, our fascination with experience, with our assessments, with liking and disliking and me, me, me. With thinking that we can manipulate and control and get everything the way we want it. To see through and abandon those relentless habits of mind that are in themselves the cause of our confusion, our suffering, our alienation.

And we don't try to create awareness or make it pure. We do less and less. Simply get more in the habit of noticing our habits of getting so entranced by experience and our reactions to it. Just notice that's happening. And turn it around, getting more interested in looking at: Is there anything coloring the mind that's paying attention? Getting more interested in the awareness itself.

And really, that gets more and more happiness-producing, more fulfilling. We get less caring what's happening—in some way that's not a kind of disconnected, flat "Ah, who cares, it's all the same, we're just aware of it all, it doesn't matter." That's not it.

It's more like, "Oh, it should be like—no, it's just how it is."

And there's awareness of it. That purity of awareness shines through by itself. When we're not so entranced with our attention, trying to reorganize what's going on, we can just notice the awareness. It's happening. You wouldn't know what was going on if it wasn't happening. Get more interested in it.

Any experience can be—and is, I think Howie said something like this—really can be like the doorway that brings us back home to awareness. One teacher I had once talked about a two-year-old and a rattle. The two-year-old is completely distracted, running around: "I want a cookie! I want a cookie!" And you shake the rattle, and oh yeah, they come back. Well, any experience can be like the rattle that keys us back into awareness, so that we don't have to hate anything. Anything can wake us up in the moment. Sound, sight, smell, taste, emotion, thought—it doesn't matter. Dislike of the thought? Oh, it's like this. And then we're with the awareness again.

So really, all experience can become a gift. There's nothing we need to fight away. There's nothing we need to really get in a struggle with. And then if we are in a struggle, the struggle itself can be the rattle that keys us back into awareness. It's really wonderful, and that's the sense of what our practices are about.

There are lots of techniques, as I said. Without this background understanding, all the techniques are just to help us see the suffering, the futility, the folly really, of these ways of relating—of greed, of hatred, of delusion in mind. Recognize them, see how they work. Not with judging, just really see how they work. And then see if we can get more interested, really start to love awareness itself.

From that background, that context, any of the methods we use—whether it's shamatha, really trying to get very finely concentrated on the breath; whether it's doing metta, which is a kind of one-pointed meditation but also cultivating that feeling; whether it's feeling your breath as the anchor in the body or here at the nose; whether it's not having any kind of anchor but just noticing whatever's coming and going; using the whole body breath—there are many more than that. All of those, when coming from the path, are just to help us steady the attention enough to notice awareness. Awareness of this, awareness of this, awareness of this. It's fine.

But when we're not aware, when we get so sucked into the object again—and we do, because the habits are so strong—when we're doing meditation, back to what I started with in the beginning, we can all of us so easily get focused on whatever we're doing. Am I doing it right? How can I get it better? Often we get sucked into trying to have our meditation take us to some particular experience. And usually it's pleasant, right? Let's face it—how many of you are trying to get your practice to take you to an unpleasant experience? Probably not too many. Or to repeat one.

And then, to do that, we put in a lot of effort—trying, trying, trying—in order to get a particular experience. Forgetting, getting so focused on the object of how it's happening that we forget to turn around and look at what is visiting the mind. The mind is luminous, and it's colored by the attachments that visit it.

So you can really work very, very hard and get very focused on the breath right here and push and push and get to some kind of great experience—and everything's breaking apart and everything's buzzing, whatever it is. And that's a true experience. And you can completely miss the fact that craving was driving you.

Craving doesn't have to be driving us. One can also be just very present, very present, doing the technique, checking back, keeping checking back. What's the attitude in the mind? Just being here, simple patience. Fine. That's fine.

But what's more important? Getting to some great experience driven by craving? What have you practiced in that time? Basically, what's been fed? Craving.

And when, with the craving and the pushing, you finally get that experience—oh, I feel really so sorry. Because then we think, "I'm validated. I got this experience." So that validates that way of doing it. And that's how we all get caught in striving. Everyone—we all do. And we keep on doing it until we strive so hard and the experience doesn't come anymore. And then we're cast into the pit of despair.

So here, all our practices are useful, but keep turning around and notice the attitude in the mind. That's what we mean. Awareness is always available. Notice when it's colored by wanting, by aversion, by meaning. Notice when it's not. Get really interested in the awareness itself, and then all experience, any particular method or technique, is valid, is valuable, is supportive—helping us cultivate deeper and deeper trust in the luminous quality, the luminous aspect of heart and mind.

And it's really true for all of us. Yes, even you. And even in your most pit of worthlessness, uselessness, bad practice—it's still available. Because ultimately, nothing can stain or damage awareness.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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