What If... Shifting the Paradigm

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:30

You've all seemed really settled, and it's been remarkably quiet and still in the hall, which is unusual for the first day of a retreat. Not that we expect it to stay that way—it doesn't need to stay that way. But I'm just commenting and appreciating all of your sincere commitment in being here. I know sometimes the first day can be a little long, and sometimes by the first evening you can be a little tired. That's okay. It's just normal.

I want to talk a little tonight about meditation practice. The Buddha famously said—I'm sure you will have heard this—"I teach suffering and its end." I used to wonder, well, why does he have to teach suffering? That part seems obvious. The ending, of course, we do want. We sign up for that.

But really, the angle I want to explore tonight is the sense that what he was talking about, and what our whole spiritual path is about, isn't about getting to somewhere else where suffering is not—changing our circumstances, getting to a different world, basically. That doesn't happen. If you look at the Buddha's life, even after he was awakened, he couldn't stop wars. He couldn't stop death. He couldn't stop his kinsmen from fighting. He couldn't even stop one of his cousins, a monk who was jealous, from trying to kill him. His awakening didn't stop all the rotten stuff that goes on in the world.

Teaching suffering and its end is about shifting the paradigm of how we understand ourselves in the world, so that we recognize what suffering actually is, how it's created, and how it comes to an end. Perhaps it's a different kind of suffering and a different idea of freedom than we might have assumed from our normal context.

The Buddha said over and over that suffering and its end arises and ceases in our mind, in this mind and body, nowhere else. So our practice of understanding, of freeing the heart, isn't specifically about reorganizing structures in the world. Although when we think and speak and act from clarity, from compassion, then the way we interact and engage will have the effect of changing structures. We won't be feeding the normal paradigm.

There are two famous stanzas: "All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. Just as the wheel of the ox cart follows the hoof print of the animal that draws it, so suffering will surely follow when we speak or act impulsively from an impure state of mind. All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. As surely as our shadow never leaves us, so well-being will follow when we speak or act with a pure state of mind."

Mind is the forerunner of all things. This is really a powerful possible realigning of the way we may

consciously or unconsciously think we understand ourselves in the world, and what brings us happiness and what brings us suffering. Our meditation practice here is the work of the mind.

These words "pure" and "impure"—they're not usually a big hit in our culture, to talk about having a pure mind or an impure mind. Our habit is to jump on these words, just like "good" or "bad" or "good" or "evil," with a kind of judgment, a criticalness, a self-judgment. If we think "I have an impure mind," already there's something a little disgusting, a little recoil. Or if "I have a pure mind," it has some quality of—I don't know—Ivory Soap, 99 and 44/100 percent pure or something. Although I used to wonder as a kid, pure what?

I want to redefine what he's talking about when he speaks of acting with an impure mind or heart. Take away negativity or judgment and bring in, in listening to this, just the quality of interest. Oh, what does that mean, pure and impure? How does that function to cause suffering or happiness? That quality of interest without judging is the seed of awakening, is the seed of our whole practice.

When he talks about speaking and acting with an impure mind, it's very straightforward. It's when our thoughts, our speech, our actions, our states of mind are motivated by greed; by its reverse, negativity, which could be hatred, fear, aversion—that whole range; or by confusion, delusion, basic denial—just getting everything all wrong. We're acting as if it's this way, but it's really that way.

Or the deepest level of delusion, confusion, is thinking that it's all about me. That's all it means. And it's not like we're bad if we're doing that—it's just a habit of all our minds. But it's not always present.

So what if our whole meditation practice is really about cultivating, recognizing, coming to trust, almost taking refuge in—as we talked about the refuges last night—this so-called pure heart-mind? Which is simply a moment of awareness, of consciousness, of wakefulness, when our awareness, our consciousness, the heart and mind is not colored by one of these difficult states. That's all. That's all.

So what if the real thrust of our meditation practice is not to create some kind of pure state of mind, but rather to actually recognize that this is the baseline—the more natural, normal state of heart and mind? Innate purity, goodness. What if we could learn to recognize and trust that, and also learn to see how greed, hatred, self-judgment, and confusion arise based on misperception, based on misrecognition of experience, and then telling ourselves stories or having views of what life is about that don't match the way things actually are?

So what if the real truth, and our more natural self—not self, okay, that's the bad word in Buddhism—but our more natural sense of being is actually the pure heart and mind, the mind that's free of craving, of clinging, of aversion, of self-judgment? And so in some way, what if our work in practice isn't to create some other amazing world and get rid of all this gunk, but rather to recognize—along with recognizing the suffering, "I teach suffering and its end"—all the moments, because experience is only moments, all the moments when this pure mind and heart is manifesting, is recognizable, when we can learn to trust it, to

feel it?

I'm pointing out that it's little moments, little moments that we tend to overlook so easily because they get hidden by the intensity of something pleasant or the intensity of how unhappy we feel—or just intensity, period. Those little moments when you're just having a cup of tea and there's nothing special, but there's a sense of peace or contentment or ease. Or you can pick a word. It could be happiness. It doesn't have to be happiness. It doesn't have to be joy. It could be joy. It could be peace. It could be calm. It could be just a simple sense of is-ness. It's like this. In that moment, you're not analyzing it. There's no leaning into the future or connecting to the past. There's no big story about, "This is the most amazing cup of tea I've ever had." Then it's not like that anymore, right?

Or you're just taking a step in the walking meditation. Maybe the last step you were bored out of your mind. Maybe the next step you're saying, "Get me out of here." But this step is just a step. There's just space, nothing created around it.

Notice those moments. We all experience many of them in a day. Natural peace and ease of the heart and mind.

And then the habits—the habits, which we tend to take more for granted, think they're the baseline—is to jump in. "Oh, natural peace and ease of mind and body. Now I've got it. How can I keep it? How can I have this step again? How can I have this tea again?" Or, "Oh, now it's gone. Oh, I blew it. That was just a fluke." And of course, this one—which one do you trust? I mean, bottom line, which one do we really think is me?

The Buddha also said that his teachings go against the stream of society, like swimming upstream against the natural current—even in his time. So same here. In some ways, any kind of profound awakening path, not just Buddha's teaching, tends to run against a society of consumerism, a society of greed, a society of having and doing and being and comparing and achieving.

And I'm sure most of you know, coming on a retreat—maybe your family and friends have gotten used to it if you've done it a lot—but the first time, it's rare that the people we know go, "Great!" unless they've been doing it and they're the ones dragging you. But if your friends and family haven't been, and you say, "I'm going on a week of silence"—"What?" I was telling someone, a friend's mother, last year, and she goes, "Silence? You mean like... you don't watch TV in the evening?"

You really don't talk the whole time? It simply does not compute.

So in that way, retreat practice obviously runs against the culture. And that's just the retreat form itself. But on a more subtle, yet actually much more profound level, our path of exploration, of interest, of awakening, is helping us step outside or move upstream against the habits of our own mind and heart, our own assumptions. Not even our conscious ways of thinking, but the assumptions themselves—how we perceive ourselves in the world.

This is part of what made the Buddha so brilliant: he understood that how we perceive something leads to how we think about it. How we think about it constructs the views we have of the world and what makes sense. And often we don't even realize we have those views. We just think that's how it is.

So our awareness practice, our mindfulness practice—instead of just running along with the stream of our views, the way it's set up with the sitting, the walking, just noticing what's happening every moment—gives us a structure to simply not be carried away by the views. It's almost like you step to the side and look: How's the mind working right now? What's causing discontent? What's causing dissatisfaction? What does this experience of non-dissatisfaction, non-clinging feel like?

I actually love this sense of just recognizing how perceptions and explanations define our worldview while we don't realize how we're carried along. I'll give you a recent example that I found amusing.

I was in Burma in January with some friends. We were doing different things—offering food and supplies to different villages in different places. This was organized from a monastery, very traditional Burmese Buddhist worldview. Two of the friends I was with were European and American women who are nuns over there.

So we took a lot of pictures. One of the formal ways generosity is offered is when someone's offering and there's a receiving. It's a very formal, happy occasion, and there's always a photo. We have like a million photos.

One of my friends who's been a nun there for seventeen years, a European woman, was putting some photos from her camera onto the computer. On some of the photos—on different people's skirts or in certain situations—there were these perfectly round, bright, shiny circles. They looked like circles of light all over.

She looks at them, and really being immersed in the classical Buddhist worldview, which talks about different realms of existence and what we might call angels—*devas* is the word in the Pali language, beings living in more ethereal, happy realms—she right away goes, "These are devas. These are the manifestation of devas." Which I would never have thought.

Then my other friend, who's also a nun there but is a scientist—she has a PhD, she's a biologist with a very scientific mind—she immediately goes, "That is some moisture that has gotten caught in the lens and is having this effect. That's what it is." Boom.

I thought that was great. I mean, who knows? I don't know. I thought, well, it'll be interesting when we see from another camera.

When I got home and put some photos from my camera on my computer—different camera, different computer, similar pictures of the same time and place but different pictures—mine also had bright circles, the same type, but not exactly in the same places.

Who knows? Maybe it's devas.

The point isn't whether it is or it isn't. What I love about that is the quality of the open mind and heart: Well, what if? Who knows? When we know how things are—boom—the mind and heart snap shut. When we don't know, but we're interested, we're present without bringing along assumptions. That's when the quality of interest and wakefulness and the steadiness of being present with that quality of openness—who knows, but what's here now?—that's when the truth can reveal itself, over and over.

I love those moments. Who knows? Let the mind open.

So in terms of the deep-rooted habits that the Buddha talks about—this greed, this hatred, this confusion—again, looking at what if we shift the paradigm of what we assume. I won't even say believe, because for most of us it's beyond belief. We don't even know that this is how it is.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, an American man who's been a Theravada Buddhist monk for many years, is one of perhaps the two foremost translators presently alive now of the Pali language Buddhist texts into English. He says this: "Remember that the Buddhist teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes. After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

Does that sound at all familiar to anybody? You might think, well, what's wrong with a desire to enjoy pleasure? Given a choice, what's wrong with wanting to avoid pain? And then to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around ourselves—we might fudge on that one a little bit. We might be able to say, yeah, maybe that's not so good. But look, just watch your thoughts over the days. With honesty, without judgment, how much of it is me at the center and everything going on? It's all about me.

So without jumping into right or wrong, Bhikkhu Bodhi is saying these are our assumptions, our attitudes. Then he goes on: "When one's personal experience of dissatisfaction, of suffering, becomes vivid enough"—I like that, vivid enough, meaning you can't ignore it anymore—"it may induce one to become disenchanted by these habits and then to begin to place our trust in the way the Buddha talks about reality as guidelines for liberation."

But until we actually even just begin to get a glimmer that maybe these responses, these reactions to life, maybe these strategies aren't working—first of all, we have to even recognize that's a strategy that's going on, that that's not just the obvious and only way to act. As long as we really deeply, beyond belief, but know that happiness rests on getting as much pleasant experience as possible, then that's going to be what rules our life. And as long as we deeply believe that the way to end unhappiness is to be separated from anything that's unpleasant—which we know is impossible, but that doesn't stop us from trying. As long as we somehow believe that suffering means being together with that which we don't like, and the ending of suffering means that doesn't have to happen anymore. As long as our idea of freedom and liberation is floating on white clouds and everything's pleasant and rose-scented in the air, if you like rose scent, then

that's going to be the underlying worldview that guides not only our choices and decisions, but our attitudes in our mind. It's going to guide how we do our meditation practice. It's going to guide everything.

And until we learn how to not hate it—that's just the same thing, right? Not tell yourself you're stupid, because that's just the same thing—until we learn how to step outside, step back and just have a look: Is this working or not? Is this present or not? A pleasant experience comes, I start wanting it—does that work or not for happiness? With interest, not with judging. Until we start to look that way, we're never going to be able to see what's really bringing ease and peace. We'll never even be able to recognize ease and peace.

Because another thing about these little moments of ease and peace—for many of us, when we're not quite present with them, they're just kind of boring. Calm. "I came for some juice! I mean, enlightenment, satori—it's supposed to be this big shakti kind of hit, not just smelling my tea. Give me a break. Not lift my foot, put it down. Yeah, that sounds really nice, but I want some juice. I want to be enlightened. It should confirm what a spiritual person I am. Not just this simple, nothing-special moment of non-clinging."

So learning to recognize that. But as long as we're still caught in not seeing that, the mind's idea of happiness is pleasure, intensity. And we're not going to recognize another possibility.

And it was just about nonviolence as a political way of relating in different periods in history. But the most interesting part that I want to bring up here was really in the introduction, part the Dalai Lama and part the writer.

Just the word itself—nonviolence—similar to *ahimsa* in the Sanskrit or Hindi. *Himsa* is the same as violence. So nonviolence is really just a negation of the word violence. The book was about how nonviolence can be a profound and engaged, really radical way of relating—very alive. But the word "nonviolence" doesn't convey that. It just conveys a kind of abnegation of violence. So when we hear "nonviolence," what our mind goes to is violence. Violence is kind of like the real thing, and nonviolence is when this real thing happens not to be there.

How powerful words are. How they reflect the way our mind works. And so he gives another example. He said, what if, in English, there was no word for war? The only word for war was "non-peace." You see what I mean? It really, really changes things. We don't even understand the levels of assumptions we're making in the way that we experience ourselves in the world. So if peace is the norm, war is the aberrant experience. It still happens—it's not saying it doesn't happen.

Turning this inward, the idea of nonviolence not as just a negation of violence, but as an active, proactive way of being. What if, in our experience, when we talk about suffering, when we talk about greed, hatred, our discontent, our dissatisfaction, our self-judgment—what if that's not the bottom line? What if that's the aberrant way of being? What if the natural peace and ease, whether it's non-clinging or calm, the simple isness of things without needing to believe all the stories and ramifications—they come, they're thoughts,

they're fine—but what if this natural peace and ease is actually the real thing? And the habits of chasing after the pleasant, getting really engaged in pushing away the unpleasant, and all the confusion and delusion around "it's about me"—what if these are mistaken habits based on misperceiving our experience, misrecognizing things over and over and over?

That's a question I posit, and that's kind of a question that's behind our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice. If we start and we just practice thinking, "I'm going to sit, I'm going to be with the breath, I'm going to get to the breath, I'm going to hold on to the breath, I'm going to get more and more breaths so I can do better and better, and then I'm going to get to the state of concentration or the state of no-self, and I'm going to understand"—because it's like this, it's already snapped shut, right? We already know it's the moisture on the lens. We already know what's happiness, what's suffering. I've got to get from suffering to happiness, and this is how I do it.

What if we don't know? What if we bring that quality of really tender, wakeful interest to just this moment of mind and body and see how it opens up, what happens? And this moment, and this moment. When we feel that there's suffering, instead of going, "Oh no, bad, I've got to do this, what did they say?"—what does it feel like right now? What's the suffering? When it feels easeful, what is this like? What's happening in the mind and body right now?

So our path is really to rediscover, to look in another way—both by recognizing the habits, the reactions, how they arise, how they strengthen, how they work, and also recognizing and seeing if we can just allow our conscious thinking mind to let in the moments when these habits aren't present. Not that they're in the background, buried somewhere deep inside and you just don't notice them right now and it feels kind of good but you're fooling yourself and they'll come back. No. They're not present. Sometimes this is true. You need to really look and notice that.

So our meditation really is not about what's happening. It really isn't. It's about the quality of the heart and mind that's meeting whatever's happening right now. That's really the difference. Our tendency so much, in terms of self-confirmation, in terms of achievement, just in terms of doing—we only know how to do stuff by me doing it, right? I do this and X happens.

That's just what we know. And so the habits of going after the pleasant and really judging pleasant as good—I'm not saying pleasant is bad. I'm also not saying it's good. It just is pleasant, that's all. Unpleasant doesn't have to be bad or good. Just unpleasant.

Can we even open to the possibility that we're sitting here and your back's really hurting and your mind's all over the place and you're feeling grumpy, and it's just what it is? Just fine. That even then, without creating anything around it, it's just this. Grumpy mind is like this. Really, it's possible. It's still grumpy mind—don't get me wrong. It's not "grumpy mind is like this" with the angels singing. Grumpy mind is grumpy mind. But it doesn't have to go into all the elaboration: "I've got to get rid of it." Then you've magnified it a hundred times.

Grumpy mind is like this. That's shifting the paradigm. That's stepping out of the habit. Just noticing, oh, look what happens. Grumpy mind is like this. It can be with unpleasant. And that's not the source of the suffering. The relationship of hating, of fearing, of trying to change, of violence—really violence to ourselves—is the source of suffering.

So nonviolence, as you're saying, is not like a passive negation of "okay, whatever." That's not nonviolence. That's passive giving up. But nonviolence is really that quality of, "Oh, this is what's happening." You don't hate it. You don't hold onto it. But you're really present for it.

And this is a trick for us because so many of us are so used to relating to the object—whether it's a material object or the experience that's happening—as the source of pleasure or suffering. Somebody's making a noise. Somebody's making us feel good. "You're making me angry," that kind of thing. We're so used to that, that we have to retrain ourselves. That's really what the discipline of meditation is about: retraining ourselves to get more interested in what's going on in the mind that's observing—the pure heart, the impure heart.

Ajahn Chah, who was a great Thai monk and meditation teacher, said in one of his books: "When I was a young monk just starting to practice, I would sit in meditation and sounds would disturb me. I thought to myself, what can I do to make my mind peaceful? So I took some beeswax and stuffed my ears with it till I couldn't hear anything at all. All that remained was a humming sound. I thought that would be peaceful, but no. All that thinking and confusion didn't arise in the ears after all. It arose at the mind. That's the place to search for peace."

So that's what we're really learning. Not this external thing or that external thing. Search in the mind. Search for suffering. Search for the end of suffering. And the only way we can search is when there's that quality of open interest without knowing already what we're going to find. If we know what we're going to find, the search is dead. There's no space for wisdom to arise.

One of my Burmese teachers, whom I just saw when I was there, had what you might call his teaching theme at the moment. He asked me, "What's the difference between someone who practices awareness and someone who doesn't?" I said, "I don't know, what?" He said a practitioner meets every experience, every object, everything that's happening with interest as a chance to learn. And a non-practitioner responds or reacts to every situation or object with either greed or aversion or confusion. Sometimes we're one and sometimes we're the other. It's not about trying to be perfect.

But I know it's really true for myself that even when the most difficult situations are going on—and I just want to point out again, meditation practice or spiritual life doesn't fix the world. It doesn't stop people we love from getting sick and dying. It doesn't stop relationships from breaking up. It clearly doesn't stop war. It doesn't make everything turn out okay in that kind of way.

But it really does mean that even in the most difficult circumstances, when I notice in my mind that I'm

really caught, fighting, struggling, I look and I see there's fear, there's aversion, there's a sense that this shouldn't be happening. Or on a deeper level, there's this feeling that I ought to be able to make it better—especially if it's somebody else you're trying to help. I ought to be able to make it better. As if we're in control. We were just talking about this today in different situations of working with family members or people in prison. We see people struggling, and we think we ought to be able to help. And if difficult things happen or they fall back into old habits, somehow we weren't good enough. Talk about me being the center of everything!

But anyway, what I see when there's suffering is that. But in that same difficult situation, when I meet it with "Oh, what's going on now?"—I might actually feel more tenderness in my heart. I might feel the other person's pain in a closer, more intimate way. It's more a quality of compassion, really, rather than this urgent feeling of "I've got to fix it so I don't feel it." The sense of suffering, of something wrong, the sense of dissonance is gone. There's just the sense of what's happening now. What can we see in this, what can we learn in this—for ourselves and for how to be of more benefit to others as well. But that's not coming out of "me-ness"; it's coming out of an openness to learn. It's really a vastly different way of meeting experience, meeting our life. That's really active nonviolence.

Speaking of nonviolence, they say Gandhi invented a word for his whole nonviolent way of political protest against the English: satyagraha. It never really caught on. We all remember Gandhi and what he did, but his word didn't really catch on. Satya means truth, and they say the basic translation of satyagraha is "truth force" or "holding to the truth." That really is the quality of nonviolence as well—the quality of interest and wakefulness that mindfulness practices. It's truth force, holding to the truth. Not that we know the truth, but that willingness to have that non-judging interest and to be totally honest about whatever's arising. Not to make me look good, or to prove that I'm useless, or to somehow hope that we're getting somewhere. Not "Oh my god, this again. I can't believe how much crap." Not "No, this isn't really happening."

Have you ever noticed? My mind does that. I love to look at denial. Something will come up—I noticed this, I think, last week. I was angry a little bit. Not huge anger; you can't pretend that. Well, maybe you can, but it's harder to pretend it's not happening. I was a little angry at someone. I noticed anger in my mind because I'm used to really watching my mind. But then: "I'm not really angry." And the mind wanted to believe that. "No, it's really fine. I'm not angry." And just go on. It's as if that's a habit. As if we can pretend we're not angry, or we're not jealous, or we're not lonely, or we're not really wanting this thing to happen.

Do you ever sit in meditation, if you've been meditating much before, and it's calm? You're being with the breath, for example, or changing experience, whatever. And it's going well, whatever we're calling well at the time.

And the mind has a little thought. And I keep going. No, I'm not thinking that. Oh no, I don't want this. I'm

really just accepting that it comes and goes. Have you ever noticed that? I mean, we can't kid ourselves, of course, because if the clinging is there when the thing goes, you know the clinging is there, because you suffer. It really doesn't work. But it's such a trip to see how we do this.

So this year, I made a kind of resolution. I just want to really, really open to total honesty in my mind. Whatever's arising, just see it. That's the path of freedom. Whatever it is—oh, that's what it is. It's okay. It's really much more okay than "Oh no, that's not happening," and then you get into the whole dance. Oh, that's despair. Feels like this. Okay. And you know, it really is okay. That shift of paradigm.

So this is really what our practice is. Bankei, who was a seventeenth-century Japanese Zen master, said, "If you don't set yourself into confrontation with things, into confrontation with experience, then your primary being reveals itself in its true form."

When we talk about meditation as being the work of the mind, or purifying the mind, or recognizing the pure mind, sometimes we can recognize those moments of purity. Often, though, we're recognizing and exploring how the confusion is triggered and takes root—how wanting or aversion or "it's all about me" springs up in relationship to a particular experience, and how thoughts feed it and strengthen it. This is fascinating. It's great to explore. It's really interesting.

But what it's based on is the description of mind or heart itself. This is Andrew Olendzki's description—he's the executive director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, and he's a Pali scholar. I like the way he puts things. He said, in Buddhism, very simple definition: the mind is not a subject. The mind is not some solid-state object that's sitting here like a lump, staying the same while things come and go within it. It feels like that, doesn't it? We're watching, and the breath comes and goes, and wanting comes and goes. But it's not. It's not something. It's not a subject that has objects as content. Rather, the mind is the activity or the process of cognizing a flow of events.

The mind is an activity. The cognizant—just that moment of knowing. There's hearing, right? The mind is just that moment of knowing hearing. And all the mental states, the qualities that come along in that moment of knowing hearing—it's an activity. It's arising and passing in every moment. It's alive. It's constantly moving.

That is maybe unsettling to our ideas of wanting stability. But that's what makes a moment of freedom possible. That's what means we can be completely caught in some stupid wanting this or disliking that or whatever, and the next moment—ah, it's just this. It's always just that close, because the mind is a constant activity.

So the way it works is this: in a moment like that, the moment of cognizing arises—there's hearing—and whatever other qualities, mental states, factors are going on at the same time color that recognition, color that perception, and lead to how we think and act.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "When the sense organs encounter an object"—like ear and that

sound, that's hearing—"the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness." From then on, as your mind reacts to that object, reacts to that sound, for example, it's influenced by all the accumulated habits and past experiences. The whole process is entirely subjective.

So when your mind is full of anger, the world seems to be a hell realm. Have you noticed that? You can be in the most wonderful situation you've been waiting for for weeks, but you're filled with anger—you can't enjoy it. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, and whatever you do is coming from a place of non-greed, non-hatred, you experience everything as naturally pure.

Don't jump on yes or no, but see if you can just hold openness to explore that.

Or as Ajahn Chah says in his very practical, down-to-earth way—he was holding up a vase and he said, "Look at this vase, look at this cup. You think it's beautiful or it's ugly or whatever you think, but it is indifferent. It's you who are making yourself crazy. The vase is just the vase."

That's the quality of just a moment of arising mind colored by experience. That's why a sound can be neutral one moment, beautiful or nostalgic the next, and then drive you crazy and feel so unpleasant another moment. Different mind moments, different experience. It's a different mind.

This is what we're really learning to explore moment to moment in our practice here. We're talking about using the sensations of breath, or of body, or of hearing as a way to collect our attention—just to be able to have all the activity going on in any one mind moment calm down enough so that we even have the sense that we can actually notice there's a mind moment and that there are different qualities in that mind moment. Mostly we're just so engaged in the habits of hating and wanting, desiring and aversion.

But it's not that the breath or the body or hearing are somehow better objects. They're just tools to help calm the mind down. Then you notice each breath. The sensation of each breath is different if you're being with the breath. And the way the mind is being with the breath is different. And so the quality of noticing—when it's peaceful, notice the peacefulness in the mind, the mind that's being with the sensations of the breath and isn't wanting, isn't aversive.

Notice how when it starts to feel that little bit of "oh, it's getting better," and that little bit of leaning in—we often don't remember to turn around and look at what's happening in the mind. "Yeah, this is it. Now let me get closer. Let me get closer." And we don't recognize that wanting, that greed.

Greed is very seductive. It's like holding out a promise that if I follow this greed and get this thing, it's going to do it for me. And we get the thing or we don't get the thing. If we don't get the thing, we think, "That's why I'm not happy." We don't recognize the greed is the seducer. If we do get the thing, we're happy for a little while—and it's a lot littler of a while than we care to acknowledge. But then we didn't also see that the greed was the seducer. We believe what it's telling us. It's almost like the greed just finds another thing to want.

When greed's in the mind, it really colors our perception. The thing desired or the experience desired looks so much more wonderful, lovely, doesn't it? When you have a crush on somebody, don't they just look amazing—how they dress and how they walk? If you get them, then you find out that wasn't true. If you don't get them, eventually the crush dies and you look at them and think, "What was I thinking? What was that all about?" That was craving in the mind.

Aversion, hatred, fear—the same kind of seduction. You're sitting here, and someone's making a noise in the hall, and you're saying, "If they could only stop it, if they would only stop, my sitting would be better." And that's so believable, so believable. "Only if I could fix it all. Everything would be okay."

So our practice is to turn around and feel: "Oh, hatred in the mind feels like this. Wanting in the mind feels like this. 'I'm the most important thing in the universe'"—unfortunately, it doesn't usually come through that clearly—"feels like this."

But the mind that's noticing isn't judging any of these things. It's just interested. How does wanting work in the mind? How does it feel when it's present?

How is it when it's absent? Where's the suffering? How is aversion and hatred in the mind? How is self-judging in the mind? Oh, self-judging is like this. Sleepiness is like this.

That's how Ajahn Sumedho talks about it. It's like this. So that every moment—feeling of breath is like this, hearing is like this, hating being here is like this, wanting to go to sleep is like this.

And over the steadiness of this practice, we gradually, or less than gradually, begin to realize that our refuge isn't in what's happening. The refuge is in the awareness—that moment of interested, non-judging awareness itself. That's always available to us when we're not running away from experience or trying to hold on to experience. We learn to rest at ease in whatever arises.

It's the way Krishnamurti describes it: When you look totally, you give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself, just in a moment, just one moment—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You attend with complete self-abandonment, and then there's no room for fear, no contradiction, and therefore no conflict. Just this in a moment is the end of fear, the end of desire, the end of conflict. This complete self-abandonment in interested, kind, full attention. Just for a moment. Don't stretch it into the past, into the future, think you can't do it over time. Just right now. Pain in the back, boredom, tingling, hearing, breathing. We get lost in a story—fine, thinking. It's never further than this. It's always, always right here.

And so what develops is what Ajahn Sumedho calls a real confidence in this natural, interested, non-judging awareness. He calls it intuitive awareness, to distinguish it from thinking about things. But it's a natural confidence that develops. Just like I was saying—I'll be in the middle of some difficult situation and I'm struggling. And it's like, oh, what's happening? Despair. That's a movement, a shift of paradigm, from me and fixing it and wanting it pleasant to, oh, awareness. Awareness can hold anything. Awareness

is always available. It's like this. That's the movement from suffering to the end of suffering.

Our job, in a way, is to recognize that, to trust it, and really learn to know it for ourselves. Don't believe anything I say—that won't do you any good anyway. And maybe I'm wrong. Look and see for yourself in any moment, in every moment. It doesn't matter what your experience is. It's always available.

I want to end with a little poem. To me, it gives the feeling of how this sense of isness and peace is available in any moment. It's by Mary Oliver, called "Snow Geese":

Oh, to love what is lovely and will not last. What a task to ask of anything or anyone. Yet it is ours, not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

One fall day, I heard above me and above the sting of the wind, a sound I did not know, and my look shot upward. It was a flock of snow geese, winging it faster than the ones we usually see, and being the color of snow, catching the sun, so they were in part at least golden.

I held my breath, as we do sometimes to stop time, when something wonderful has touched us, as with a match, which is lit and bright, but does not hurt in the common way, but delightfully, as if delight were the most serious thing you ever felt.

The geese flew on. I have never seen them again. Maybe I will, someday, somewhere. Maybe I won't. It doesn't matter. What matters is that when I saw them, I saw them as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

So that's our task—seeing through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

There's about thirty-five minutes or so for walking, and then at nine, the last sitting, which will be short. At that sitting, we'll also have some short chanting together—a loving-kindness chant in the Pali language, which is a lovely language for chanting. We'll have chanting sheets you can read along with. You don't have to chant if you'd prefer not to; you can simply listen. But it's a nice, energizing way to end the evening. And loving-kindness is never a bad thing to put into our minds and hearts. So I urge you to come.

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