Anything Can Happen: Faith & Confidence in Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:17

Tonight, today, it's all over the news—the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. It's been all over the news and all over Europe. They're celebrating it. And I remember, and this actually touches me deeply. I don't know why. I was never even at the Berlin Wall. But I remember the time when that happened. Twenty years ago, we were in the middle of teaching a three-month retreat, so I remember it really clearly. And the sense of it being so unexpected, so unknown, how it just kind of happened all of a sudden and actually by chance, as we find out now.

So in honor of that, I want to talk tonight about the reality that anything can happen. I want to talk about faith and confidence in the mystery of unknowing. Because we don't know.

It turns out, I just read this now, that the night they took away the restrictions and people started just going across, it hadn't been planned at all. The East German government hadn't planned it. There had been a lot of demonstrations for days, and the government was shaky, and the leader had been taken out. But a spokesman for the government was speaking on the radio, and they heard it in East and West Berlin. He said, without realizing that it wasn't true and he didn't have the authorization, that the travel restrictions were going to be lifted on East Berlin and West Berlin people going across the wall—that you could go across. When the interviewer asked when, he said immediately. It turned out he didn't have the authority to say that at all. But everybody heard him on the radio, and that was it. They just all ran to the wall and started going back and forth, and that was it. That was the end of it. So you never know. You never know. It's just so amazing.

That's what I want to talk about. *Saddhā*, the word in Pali that we translate as faith or confidence—it is, in the Abhidhamma manual of mental states, the first of the beautiful mental factors in the list of all the beautiful mental factors. We tend to think of faith in the normal English way of speaking, of having faith or confidence in something particular—in a person, in a belief system, or in knowing something is true, some kind of stable, static thing or understanding that we can rely on and have faith in. And of course, that's not the meaning of faith at all.

Saddhā is, as all mental factors are, active, changing, arising and passing in a moment. It has the characteristic of placing faith, or one of the translations I like—I don't know how accurate it is—of placing one's heart upon. It's really this active quality. It manifests as confidence, as resolution, as the energy to do, as Sayadaw U Pandita likes to say, as non-fogginess, to set forth as one might set forth to cross a flood.

These are all things I'm reading from the manual of Abhidhamma.

So it has this energy, this brightness. It has the function of—now I'm talking for myself—uplifting and brightening the heart and mind. That's really the quality of faith. It's easy for us to think of it as an intellectual investment in something to give us stability and safety. And it does give us stability and safety, but not in something. That's the way I want to look at it tonight: the sense of a quality of confidence, but not in a deluded way.

This is where we come into how the Buddha often spoke about practicing his teachings as if to swim against the flow of the stream of society and culture, or against the flow of the stream of our own so-called personality, habit patterns, ways that we think. And this is where it gets really interesting, where really anything can happen, where we don't know.

How we perceive and think about things—sort of what I talked a little about last week, about insight being a shift in how we perceive an experience, and that shifts how we think about it. But how we think about the world and ourselves, how we perceive, is so often taken for granted. We're so used to it that we don't even notice those inverted perceptions I talked about, where we perceive what is in constant flux and change as being stable and solid. And that's just so normal—normal because habitual—that we don't even think about it. We don't even recognize what the ideas are, the views, the constructions, the explanations that are sort of in the back of our mind, the way Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about. What are the ideas working in the back of the mind that are actually guiding the way we experience and describe our life, ourselves, and our practice?

We all generally operate in the world with a sort of accepted understanding of things: that things change, but only later; that of course there is a self; that if we can get more pleasant things, we'll be happy; that I have a certain personality—whatever our beliefs are. And awareness practice, our awakening practice of just exploring what's happening, what's arising and passing in this moment, is very much a stepping outside of our comfortable—comfortable because familiar, maybe not even pleasant, but familiar—stepping outside of our comfortable views and explanations and understandings of the world.

And not stepping into another one that we're creating. Years ago, I was with Poonjaji in India for quite some time, and he used to always say, "Pick up your foot and don't put it down again." I used to think, what the heck is he talking about? He meant pick up your foot out of one construction and don't put it down in another. Can we just have confidence in that mystery of not knowing—that alive, awake, vibrant, fragile moment?

So just to give an example of how the way we're used to thinking, the ideas in the background that we don't even know we have, how they color our perceptions, let me tell you a little story.

I was in Burma last winter with several friends. We were traveling to two or three different nunneries and monasteries and offering some food, some dāna, to villagers who were still suffering from the cyclone

of the year before. And as you do in these situations in Burma, you take a lot of photos. There's always a lot of photos of giving and receiving—it was a whole big thing. So when we got back to the monastery where we were staying, two of the friends, both Western women who were nuns, one of them put her photos from her camera on her computer.

This woman had been a nun for many, many years in Burma. So even though Western, she had absorbed Burma's very faith-based culture. And by faith, I mean faith in the teachings of the Buddha, in the cosmology as it's described in the suttas—different realms of celestial beings and human beings and suffering beings. That was really working in the background for her.

So she put her photos on the computer. There were a lot of them. But several of them, more than one, quite a few, in the same kind of locations, had these really perfectly round, brilliant spots that look like spots of light on some of us, right on some of our bodies. And I just kind of said, "Oh, that's interesting." And this woman said, "Oh, those are devas." Not like maybe or I think—that's what it is. She went and showed the Sayadaw.

Then our other friend, also a nun, but with a scientific background, a very scientific mind—immediately she said, "That's a little kind of moisture that collects on the lens and it's just refracting the light."

And I thought, well, who knows? I don't know either one. It will be interesting.

So I got home here and put my pictures from a different camera in. And in the same scene, but the pictures were different, these same kind of spots of light appeared in different ways. And I thought, hmm, who knows?

First, I just love that space: Who knows? And notice how our mind likes to come down somewhere.

Then I told this story at IMS last month, and it got to be quite fun because it engendered a whole kind of—not exactly debate, but different experiences. One guy who works over there immediately said, "Oh, there was another photo this summer from a Vipassana teacher meeting in England." And of many photos, this one photo was sent around on email of three people, three of the teachers who were kind of directing that day. One of them was Ajahn Sumedho. And on him, there was this exact same round, bright spot. The people sending the email around asked, "Well, what could this be?" I just didn't go there. I just left it alone. But later, he said, "Oh, that often happens in photos of him."

So I mentioned that, and then this friend who works over at IMS said, "That's ridiculous. That's not devas. You just have to look in that photo—you can see there's a glass of water, and the light's refracting off that water. That's what it is."

I said, "Okay."

Then Kathleen, who works here, said, "I've got to show you my photo of all the devas in this grove at Sayadaw U Tejaniya's." And she brings me a photo of what looks like the Jeta Grove or something—all

these trees, and it's kind of dark, and there's all these monks and people, and there's these spots of light all over the place.

And then, just to top it off—I know I'm going on, but I'm enjoying it—just as it happens, the scientific-minded friend happened to be visiting for a few days recently.

And she told me, "I don't know, I may be coming around to the deva view." Because she had just been in Tiruvannamalai, which is Ramana Maharshi's ashram. She was there on the August full moon, when a few Indian pilgrims come to walk around the mountain. A few—like two and a half million. I'm not exaggerating. Two and a half million people walking around that mountain. She said it's completely solid, wall-to-wall people around the whole mountain the entire night. It's a trip. India is so much fun. That's just a few people showing up in India.

So they did that, they walked around the mountain. And then she said, "I just went out and took some photos. There were no lights. There was nothing you could say was refraction." And when she looked at the photos, they were all over the place—these orbs everywhere.

So who knows? And I love that. Can we just rest in that space? That vibrant, open, connected space that doesn't have to land in explanation and knowing. It doesn't have to shut any doors. There might be one explanation that's accurate, but that's not really what's important. It's that quality of awakened, connected interest that doesn't need to limit the experience by knowing what things are.

This is really the opening into confidence and faith—not faith in some explanation, but the confidence and trust to be able, at times, or willing, to open into that vibrant place of unknowing. Which means to be able or willing to be just totally here, to place one's heart upon reality as it's manifesting in this moment, without ever knowing what's next, or without needing to have a whole explanation about it.

As Ajahn Sumedho says—and I'll be quoting from him quite a bit from this one article, if I can find it... I put it somewhere special so I could find it again. Here it is.

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is simply about knowing these things fully, that they are what they are at this moment."

It's radical, but just at this moment, things are as they are. Awareness is just putting one's whole being, really—energy, whatever you want to say here—without needing to evaluate, to judge, to self-reference, to understand.

So it's really helpful and interesting in our practice, as we keep noticing moment after moment what's happening, to recognize the ideas, the views, the self-judgments, the expectations, the assumptions that are working in the background, so to speak. I think this is why Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts so much emphasis on the right attitude or having the right information. What I'm saying here is: let's just notice what information we're believing, what information we're using to drive the bus, where we're trying to

take it as if we even know. Because that's going to skew our perception. It's going to skew what we're trying to make happen. It's going to warp things if we're not aware.

We can be aware of the views—that's fine. Of course we have views and opinions and explanations. That's not a problem when we just know it. But when we don't recognize them and take them for the truth, that's when we're running up against the brick wall.

So this is actually a kind of skillful attention with thought. When you feel that you're struggling, when you feel you're in confusion, when your practice doesn't seem to be going well, or you're feeling like you're failing, or you're feeling discouraged—you might just stop and actually look, for a bit, at the content of the thoughts that are feeding that mental state. The thoughts that are convincing you, that are giving you such good evidence that you're basically a loser, that you're doing it all wrong, that it's hopeless.

Instead of just saying, "No, bad, I know that's not true," sometimes say, "I know it's not true, but let's see actually what it is that's not true. What am I believing here?" Just for a short time, that kind of skillful investigation of thought can be quite interesting.

Sumedho gives the example of something like: we believe "I'm someone who grasps and has a lot of desires, a lot of aversion, a lot of self-judgment, and so I have to practice in order to get rid of these things. I have to practice in order to stop grasping. I'm somebody who has to do something to become enlightened in the future."

You could probably agree with that, right? Just notice what we might be thinking, without needing to construct a new belief in its place.

It's all here right now. Just watch the mind that does that—the sense that somehow reality is somewhere else, freedom is somewhere else. We have to do something to get there, or we have to get rid of ourselves to see it, or whatever the heck we have going on back there. Just notice it.

It's also interesting to me looking at how language both can show us our limiting views and ideas, and can also reinforce those limiting views if we're not really aware of it. I've used this example before, but I read a book about nonviolence sometime, and the interesting part that stuck with me was the author talking about the use of the word "nonviolence"—or in Sanskrit, *ahimsa*—and how in that word "nonviolence," the operative word is *violence*. The "non" is like a negation of this thing, violence. So in "nonviolence," the main thing your mind goes to is violence.

He gives the example: What if the only word for war were "non-peace"? Doesn't it just shift things? "Oh, there's non-peace happening in Zimbabwe now." And you get a sense—maybe it doesn't do it for you, but for me there's this sense of—what if the norm is really other than what we've been assuming? And we don't even know what we've been assuming. It's where the attention gets drawn. In nonviolence, the attention gets drawn to violence. In non-peace, the attention gets drawn to peace.

So in this possibility of having confidence in the unknowing, in the not needing to land, just hold the possibility that rather than "I'm someone who has to get rid of the *kilesas*, the defilements, in order to reach nirvana"—and it would seem to be true from our experience that greed and hatred and delusion and the hindrances, that's the norm. Of course we have to struggle to get rid of them. And we may not buy into nirvana being somewhere else—we may believe that pure mind and heart, the nature of mind, is here. But really, we think, I can't experience it very much. I know it's here, but I'm still hopeless and can't get there. Even if it's here, I know it's here—I still can't get here. I'm somewhere else, whatever.

But just what if we could imagine shifting the paradigm? Just imagine that really the natural peace and ease of mind and body is the norm, is the truer, more real experience. What if we're just so not in the habit of noticing that we absolutely don't notice? Not that there's something else to do, but that we could actually learn to shift our refuge, to shift where we really have confidence.

And of course we can't do this by willpower. I'm just saying this as a what if, okay? What if? Don't land in any "this is how it is." But just what if our path is not to get rid of anything—not even to get rid of our so-called false sense of self—is not to change our personality, but simply to discover, rediscover, a shift of refuge, a shift of interest, a shift of what we really place our confidence, our heart on. A shift from fighting with or having faith in all the difficult aspects, the so-called me, me, me, to just actually recognizing and trusting natural peace and ease.

No big explosive experience am I talking about. Just what Ajahn Buddhadasa calls—and it's a little playful—he calls it "Nibbana for everyone." Ajahn Buddhadasa was one of the most famous forest monks in Thailand in the last century. He died in the nineties. I spent some time there when I was a nun, spent some time with him. He liked to be a little bit poking, a little provocative for Thailand. And so in one article he's talking about how *nibbana* in Thai means "cool." He's saying that nibbana, or freedom, liberation, the liberation of non-clinging—he said it's the coolness that results from the extinction of the defilements. Defilements are greed, hatred, and confusion, right? Greed, hatred, delusion.

And so he says, where there's this extinction of the defilements, there's what may be called nirvana, whose meaning is cool. And then he goes on to say that of course, if you look at greed, hatred, delusion, they're mental factors. They are compounded—the *sankharas*, compounded things. And so they come into being through conditions and pass away through conditions. In other words, they're just as impermanent as everything else.

And impermanence, remember, doesn't mean that things come into being and last a long, long time—your whole life—and then go away when you die. No. Impermanence means arising and passing in every moment. To the mind that wants permanence, that's shockingly scary. But to the mind that's simply present—wow, this moment's arising and passing.

It's like someone was telling me they had looked at one of those slow-motion time-lapse videos of a flower growing and blooming, and how you can see from nothing the stem comes up and it's slowly growing, and

there's the leaf and the flower, and then it's decaying. There's never one moment that's static, and there's never one moment you can say "now that's the leaf" or "that's the flower." Each moment is a death and a birth, a death and a birth. That's impermanence. And opening into that is always a mystery, because no matter what we think we know, we never know what's going to happen.

No one knew the Berlin Wall was going to come down that night. No one knows what's going to happen in the next moment. Every time we sit down or walk, you never know what's going to happen the next second in your mind, do you? We like to think we do, for good or for bad. We like to think we know. We hate it when we find out we have no control. But if we could just say, "Yeah, I don't have to have control. It's just exhausting trying to control this anyway." We just dance in the flower, growing and dying.

So he says the defilements are rising and passing like anything. And since the defilements, when the conditions aren't present, become extinct—although this extinction is temporary, maybe even momentary—in other words, the coolness takes place temporarily, he says this phenomenon has the real sense of nibbana, even though it's not the lasting one. A real sense of coolness. And I like that—just, it's cool.

He says the fever of the defilements—anyone can see that if the defilements (and I know that's not such a great word, but think of greed, hatred, and delusion, confusion, me-ing about everything)—anyone can see that if they were with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand it? He says under such conditions, living beings would either die or become insane. And he's not exaggerating.

So let us consider well, he says, these periodical moments of coolness—what he calls nirvana for everyone—these moments of what I would call purity of heart and mind, citta that's free in any moment of greed, hatred, and delusion. These moments happen many, many times in a day. He says we survive because of the nourishment of these moments of coolness, of nibbana. This is the nourishment that keeps beings alive in terms of the mental realm. We couldn't stand it otherwise.

So just notice when we have periods—mentally—of feeling relaxed, refreshed, cool. No matter what's happening. It's not about what's happening. It's just that quality of coolness, non-burning from greed, hatred, and self-delusion in the mind. Perhaps that's much more natural than we give it credit for. We're just so interested in all the stuff that we don't really stop to notice. It's not whoop-dee-doo enough. It's not great enough. It doesn't, for one thing, in any way reaffirm me. And that, in some ways, might be the biggest habit we've got going at all.

So let's say our practice, then, can become re-recognizing, rediscovering, and learning to have faith, to place confidence in these simple moments of coolness—in the awareness that allows the recognition of these moments of coolness—no matter what's happening in the mind or the body. It doesn't matter. And as well, a lot of our so-called practice also becomes, with this awareness, as Ajahn Sumedho mentions, not judging, not making up value judgments, noticing the assumptions, the stories, the ways that we get sidetracked and confused again when we don't notice or trust at all the natural ease and peace of body

and mind—and get reabsorbed, re-caught up again in sense experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking and emotions, making up a big story of me about any of it.

This is also, in a way, a doing. It's a way of looking. As I said in an interview the other day, it just came into my mind—Master Sheng Yen, who was a wonderful Taiwanese Chan master who just died this January, really a wonderful man. He said one time that our meditation practice is an illusion, but it's an illusion that we use to replace our other illusions. So it's not to say that sitting and looking and watching the thoughts and emotions is something fixed—that's also just something happening. It comes and goes and changes, nothing to hold to. But that illusion replaces our other illusions. It's like the Buddha said: his teachings are the raft across the stream. When you get across the stream, you don't need to keep carrying the raft on your back.

But we use it. We know how to use it. So our practice can become that—rather than a thing in itself to succeed at, or a thing in itself to achieve the result of getting rid of ourselves or anything. Just awareness.

Ajahn Sumedho—I've done a few retreats with him, and I've found his way of talking, just very simple but quite profound, has been very helpful to me. One time he was meeting with a few Spirit Rock teachers, and he was talking about things he'd noticed in teaching Westerners. He was speaking about how strong our belief is—Western educated people in particular—because I suppose he did a lot of his practice under Ajahn Chah in Thailand. He speaks Thai. He taught Thai people for many years.

But he says that we—well, all of us—we create ourselves, our sense of ourselves, with our thoughts, over and over and over. We're creating who we think we are. And we can't create a peaceful self. You can take that as a challenge. See if with our thoughts we can create a peaceful self.

What he says, and it certainly seems to be true in my limited experience with myself and people I've talked to, is that for us, the thoughts and stories about our personalities are so central, so strong in the way we view ourselves, in the way we construct our background assumptions about life, that everything becomes so personal. Such a sense of me is just succeeding or failing—everything's about me.

Ajahn Sumedho said that in his experience, he sees the biggest hindrance for Westerners in terms of awakening, in terms of trusting their insights, is self-doubt—self-doubt in their own insights and liberation. I would say self-doubt into these moments of coolness. The fact that this is even true—I can't say how many people I've talked to who say, "Well, I had this experience ten years ago or yesterday, but now everything's back. The personality's strong. I really doubt it. I'm the same jerky person I was. That couldn't have been true."

He thinks that Westerners doubt this because our personalities are so strong and believable. We give so much emphasis and so much belief to our personalities, our thoughts, our ideas about ourselves, that we get so caught back into them. That's actually where we put our confidence—in our personality. We may hate it, but when the chips are down, what do you really believe? What's the voice you're really believing?

There's just peace, just isness, just the rain falling and the crickets and the tea and your back hurts—and it's just this, and there's no reference point, and there's no me. And then "I" come rushing back, and my back hurts, and why can't I be with it? I could before, and now I can't. Which do we believe? "That was a nice moment. It was an aberration. This is now—back to what I know." This is where we're comfortable. And we are comfortable. It's like putting on an old cloak, and it stinks, and it has holes in it. We don't like it, but it's just so comfortable. And at least I'm here in it.

It's really interesting how to just trust in that not knowing. To even see it's possible not to take our personalities so seriously.

An example—I don't know if it works for you, but to me it illustrates different ways of holding. Gen was in Burma helping to teach a retreat with Sayadaw U Lakkhana. He teaches in a strict Mahasi style where you're noting every moment of experience. This was a retreat for Westerners, but the man translating was a Burmese friend. Sayadaw was saying that when fear arises, or when anger arises, you just note it: "Fear, fear, fear." And in three notes, it'll go away. And the translator was just translating. Later, when the Sayadaw wasn't around, the other teacher and I would do questions and answers. One of the participants raised his hand. He said, "It doesn't go away when I note three times."

And we said, of course it doesn't. It doesn't always go away when you note three times. The approach we would give here is that you just explore.

So then Ulamang said to me later, privately, "Oh, I was so interested to hear what that man asked, and what you said—that it's not how Sayadaw says, and it doesn't go away. And it was very helpful what you said."

And I said, "Well, what about you?"

He said, "Oh, it doesn't go away for us in three notes either."

I said, "Well, what do you do?"

He said, "Oh, we just say, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

I thought, well, that's refreshing. We laugh, but that's like—it couldn't appeal to us. The teacher said this is how it's supposed to work, and I do it, and it doesn't work. Oh well, never mind. Not so likely for us, because we're so caught up in getting at our personality. It's just really interesting.

But not holding to the assumption, not being caught back into our personality, doesn't mean denying it or hiding it or not believing in or not seeing those thoughts. It just means being aware.

This is Ajahn Sumedho again. He's talking about non-grasping. And he says, you know, it can just be another statement that we grasp and hold on to—non-grasping, liberation. And how often do people say, "Oh, I'm letting go of this, I'm letting go of that." I'm highly suspicious, I have to say—and in my own mind

too—of the phrase "letting go." If I'm letting go, forget about it. I'm not letting go. I'm throwing it away because I don't want it. That's different. Just letting be with awareness. It's going to go by itself, whatever we do.

So anyway, he says there's the catch-22. No matter how hard you try to make sense out of non-grasping—"I should not grasp"—you end up in total confusion because of the limitations of language and conception. You have to go beyond language and perception, and the only way to go beyond thinking and emotional habit is through awareness of them. The way to go beyond them is into them with awareness—through awareness of thought, through awareness of emotion, through awareness of the body, without value judgment. Without making a "me" out of it.

The island that you cannot go beyond, which is being used as a metaphor for Nibbāna, is the metaphor for this state of being awake and aware, as opposed to the concept of becoming awake and aware. So saddhā—faith, confidence—is really the confidence, just in a moment, to be awake and aware, no matter what's arising in this moment. It just doesn't matter.

We use these thoughts about ourselves, these stories, our personalities—and they seem so fixed, so solid. As Sogyal Rinpoche said one time, we've created a cage for ourselves out of our emotions and our sense of personality. And here we sit, day in and day out. Doesn't it feel like that sometimes? Just sitting in this cage of emotions and personality.

But the thing is, it can feel like we're sitting here only because we're not noticing how thought is recreating it over and over, and this is the assumption that we're taking to be true: "I have to get out of this cage." And as Ajahn Sumedho says, the way beyond is simply awareness in. This emotion is just like this. This thought is just like this.

And another assumption—and this you all know, but I just want to point to it again—is that really, when you break it down, maybe not to the absolute bottom line, but when we start really looking, when I start looking at the thoughts and storyline of my personality and my past... but really it's all happening right now. When I look at the personality patterns that catch me—meaning I'm suffering or reacting or not liking or wanting or whatever—no matter how complex the story may become, when I notice how it begins in a moment, I'll say almost always (just because I'm leery of ever saying always), it comes down to the movement of lobha, greed, in the mind, or of dosa, which is some form of aversion or fear in the mind, and some form of confusion. There's always confusion when there's greed or dosa in the mind, although there can be confusion without greed or dosa—confusion in the sense of delusion.

And so often that simply starts up from an experience of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality that isn't noticed. And that is so simple and basic that it almost feels too simple, embarrassing even. There's no way my whole complex suffering personality could just be reactions of thought to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Excuse me, but I don't want to break down the whole human experience to just that—surely there's much more than that. Okay, so that's a thought. That's a concept. Never mind. Just explore and see. It's fascinating.

So you all know this, but we can just start noticing again how I'm in some whole story about me and feeling good—I had this wonderful interaction with this person, and blah, blah, blah. And I tune in, and there's just a memory of a conversation, and this pleasant feeling comes up with it. That's it, folks. Pleasant feeling coming up. Yes, me. It fulfills me. It reaffirms me. It's all about me.

Unpleasant, just the same. Of course, it can be something as obvious as a physical pain, a thought that comes up, a memory that has an unpleasant connotation, an unpleasant feeling with it. Something even so subtle we hardly notice it. And from that, into a whole world.

I'm not at all meaning to belittle or dismiss our really deep and profound traumas and personality habits and memories. Sometimes they come up too strong to notice at their inception. You can't say, when you're having huge post-traumatic stress, "Oh, it started from an unpleasant. Let me just notice the unpleasant." The energy of the emotion has gotten way too strong by then. So often we can't notice on this level.

But on a retreat, when you're here for a long time, there will be times you can notice on this level. And then it's really interesting.

I've seen for myself certain habits that brought up a lot of fear and suffering over my life. And now when they start to come, when I start to feel that primal terror, I can say, "Oh, I recognize it." Whereas before I'd go into the stories about the past, or what do I do about it, or what's wrong with me, or I've practiced all these years and this is still coming, and my practice is no good and I need to do some other kind. Now it's just, "Oh, primal terror. I can feel it. It's unpleasant. It feels like I'm going to die." That's it. That's all. It's a feeling. It's an emotion. Vedanā. It comes and goes, and I know that. I know that. That's all that's happening.

And when we don't see that—which is a lot of the time—then it goes into the stories and something about me. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or really neutral, it somehow morphs into, "What does it say about me?"

And that sense of me is just so reaffirming. Often—maybe not often, but sometimes—when there is that sense of just the coolness, just the is-ness of things, or in a particular experience that's maybe been really difficult but there's a strong sense of me, a strong personality pattern, and I suddenly see, "Oh, it's just this, just unpleasant fear feeling"—it can feel so odd, so unfamiliar, that we're kind of at sea. We don't know what to do. And we're not so comfortable.

This is, again: can we be at ease in that not knowing?

Part of how our sense of self reconnects, comes back so strongly, why we buy back into the personality so

completely, is because we're in the uncertainty of, "But if I'm not this fearful person, who the heck am I?" We may not even say that, but that's the feeling. So back again. Better this loser than... nothing? And we go off into that fear of the unknown.

So this entrancement with our thoughts, with the stories, with sense of self—it's so deep that "good" means it's pleasant. It's so back there, so embedded in the stuff that's working in the background, that if it's painful, scary, unpleasant, it's wrong, it's bad. No way freedom can be here with this scary, unpleasant experience. If it's pleasant? Well, then I'm really on the way. The more pleasant it is, the closer I am.

And neutral? We just don't notice.

But the other aspect of neutrality is making it all about me, this sense of self. And so this cycling, this needing to land somewhere over and over and over—this is really samsara. It's the creation of a sense of self in every moment. It's not some solid, steady-state thing.

And when we start to have the faith to shift the refuge—to shift the refuge from the seeming comfort of the patterns to the willingness to simply say, "Okay, I don't know what's happening now," to just surrender into this moment—it takes faith. It takes confidence. It takes a willingness to trust.

Two things I want to read. One from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking." If only we could believe that. "It is the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

In this way, he's talking about understanding not as a piece of conceptual knowledge, but as that confidence, that trust. And as he says, the long process of conscious awareness—just meaning the surrendering of conscious awareness into just now, over and over and over, with no goal, with no "so that," with no conscious awareness *in order to* understand. That's already too much. Just dying into this moment. And it takes trust. It takes learning to trust.

Tsoknyi Rinpoche again: "The principle of an awareness that you can't get beyond—it's very simple, very direct, and you cannot conceive it. You have to trust it. You have to trust the simple ability that we all have to be fully present and fully awake, and begin to recognize the grasping and the ideas we've taken on about ourselves, about the world around us, about our thoughts and perceptions and feelings. We have to trust. There's no way we can think our way into it or do our way into it or remember our way into it."

Every moment is a moment requiring active trust, surrender, opening to this moment. This is really what we call confidence in awareness.

And it's hard because of our discomfort with not knowing, because of how deeply habituated we are to what seems like a need for self-affirmation. We want to know that we're doing it right and getting somewhere. "I'm just being aware every moment, but I'm not getting more concentrated. I'm not having

huge insights. I'm just being aware as I'm fluffing around all day." It's really hard to trust. I'm not saying you should just fluff around all day, but... you can if you want, as long as you're aware. You can fluff around all day and watch your mind. That's okay.

Because through the long process of conscious awareness, reality is already real. It reveals itself. We don't have to figure it out.

It's hard because of the unreliability, the untrustworthiness of everything we take to be self. This is from Mae Chee Kaew, a nun in Thailand from the last century, supposedly an arahant—I mean, who knows? No one knows. You can't know. "Everything that makes a person unique changes continually and eventually disintegrates. Each personality is constantly ceasing to be what it was and becoming something new."

Notice that it doesn't cease and become nothing. It's ceasing and becoming something new constantly. "Those factors one tends to conceive of as self are impermanent and fleeting. Everything about bodily form and the mind's thoughts and feelings is without intrinsic stability and bound to dissolve. For that reason, clinging to body and mind is a major source of pain and suffering."

And when we're just trusting in that, there's that freedom, that wakefulness of this present moment awareness. But when there's the clinging, that's scary, that's uncomfortable. Everything we conceive as me is in constant change and flux, and we're not used to hanging out in that not knowing. The habit is to look for something. And what we tend to look for is to go back to the assumptions, looking for stability, looking for what feels comfortable.

Even Ajahn Sumedho, again in this conversation with the teachers, gave an example that really touched me.

I don't know if I can convey it accurately, because he's always talking about absolute trust and confidence in this awareness, no matter what. When he uses language like "fear is like this, pain is like this, sense of self is like this"—that phrase "is like this" really means awareness receiving. And there's nothing that arises that cannot be received in awareness. Nothing. It's radical.

So he's always talking about this. And for how long has he been doing this? Thirty years? Thirty-five years? He described one period at his monastery, Amaravati, some years ago. He's the head abbot of the whole community. It was an extremely difficult time interpersonally with the monks and the nuns. There was all kinds of difficult stuff going on, and they were having meetings. It was one of those horrible organizational dukkha kind of times. And he said it went on and on.

Being the head abbot, he was of course the focus of a lot of the blame and criticism and judgment. He said it was really, really hard for him. Because, he says, like most people, "I really want to be appreciated. I want to be loved and respected. I don't want people hating me and blaming me and pointing the finger." And he said it really started to get very difficult for him. It went on for some time.

And then suddenly, he realized it was this faith. He said, "I just made a resolution, a very clear resolution. I absolutely determined—I made a determination to trust awareness and not my personality."

I just love that. So strong. Because trusting his personality was getting sucked into "oh no, this is too hard, I can't do it." An absolute determination to trust awareness. And that doesn't change the dynamics of what's happening interpersonally. But it completely changes where he put his refuge, the whole experience—the fact that freedom really is available here and now.

That's that quality of saddhā. To me, faith is kind of like love. It's a sense of putting my heart onto the present moment. The way it feels to me, it's like living in the heart of life instead of a little bit removed, trying to reorganize it the way I want or figure it out. Just die into this moment just like it is. No reservations, not needing to understand. Byron Katie calls that loving what is.

So I'll just end with this, one last quotation from Ajahn Sumedho:

"As one begins to realize or recognize non-grasping as the way, emotionally one can feel quite frightened by this. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart. And this can be frightening. But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions and simply allow things that arise to cease—the emotional reactions to appear and disappear according to their nature—then we find our stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being. Being awake. Being aware."

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