Putting Your Trust in Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:10

Maybe it's too soon for you to have started asking yourself this in any serious way, but it's a reasonable question that comes up, consciously or not, for most people at some point: What do I want out of this retreat? What do I expect to get from this retreat?

Put that way, it sounds rather bald and greedy. But I think if we let ourselves honestly begin to notice what ideas are working in the back of our mind, at some point we might notice that question arising. What am I going to get out of this? Why am I here? Cut underneath all the high-sounding stuff that we say and get right to the deep chase—not in any kind of critical way.

As you know, and I'm sure many of you have heard, the Buddha described his teachings and the path of awakening as moving against the stream, going upstream against society. And of course, that's rather obvious just in this form. Coming to an intensive retreat for a month is certainly a little bit counter to the external norms of society. In that way alone, it can be rather difficult, rather challenging. And as I'm sure you all know, the form of the retreat itself—the simplicity, the sitting, the walking, the silence, the commitment to really show up for whatever's arising in our mind and body, like it or not—that can be really challenging. There are many moments when a retreat is rather uncomfortable, to say the least. It's partly because it goes against our normal external habits.

But I think even more deeply, when the Buddha talks about this practice, this path of awakening going against the stream, more important than the external stream of society—that's almost secondary. The stream that our practice of mindful attention, of loving presence without discriminating what we like and don't like, goes against is the stream of our deep-set habits of heart and mind, and in many cases our deeply held views and beliefs. These are the ones we don't know we're holding because it's just the way things are.

When I was talking about getting down to the nitty-gritty of what we really want out of this, on that level the answer will come from what we really deeply hold and believe to be true, without even knowing it. Not what we wish, not some view in our intellectual head, but where we take refuge, where we really have confidence, what we trust.

One of the reasons we begin a retreat with taking the three refuges in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—sure, it's a tradition—but it's also a way of reminding each of us in our own particular way. For me, it gets deeper and deeper. It's a way of reminding me that this whole path is about learning to shift where I have confidence. The beginning and end of the path is wise understanding, right view—what we really know to be true, accurate perception of ourselves and the world around us.

As the Buddha describes so clearly, we perceive ourselves to be a solid, separate, eternal being. What we perceive leads to how we think about the world, which leads to the beliefs we hold, what we trust. And those beliefs then form the ideas and perceptions that we carry forward into the world.

This path of practice, of awakening, is at times uncomfortable because it's really taking us into a direct, face-to-face examination of what we've believed to be the truth about ourselves and the world. And we discover on a cellular, moment-to-moment level—it just ain't so. This is not an intellectual pursuit. This is really a moment-to-moment lived experience.

Mostly, the views we've taken for granted feel safe because we've taken them for granted. Our practice is really a stepping outside of our comfortable—although it doesn't work, it's still comfortable—definition, description, idea of ourselves and the world. Stepping outside of that view and opening up not to another view, but to not knowing. Opening up to "what if." Opening up to the willingness to be actively engaged and really present without needing to make a conclusion about every experience, without needing every experience to reaffirm me: "This is about me. This will make me better. This will whatever."

Awareness practice is stepping outside of our comfort zone—not only on the physical level. That's the easiest part, although that's the one we might consciously fight. That's the easiest part. But the deep-held beliefs.

I'll give you an example. Not about practice, but about how our views of the world color how we understand what's happening. Can we just have the potential of not being so sure? It's a great place, this open, interested place of not knowing. It's alive. It's connected. Knowing—"Oh, that's what that's about"—wham, it all slams shut.

So, this example: I used this last fall at IMS and it sparked a whole discussion with all the staff people because it got interesting. Last year I was in Burma in January, and several of us were with a Sayadaw. We had raised some money and we were going down to a village in the Delta, a couple of villages, offering dānas of food. These are very formal occasions where food is piled up, you stand in a row, people come, you pass it out, and photos are always taken. It's a very joyous occasion, but there are tons of photos. So we got back to the monastery where we were staying, and one of our friends—she's a Swiss woman who's a nun, she's been a nun there for seventeen or eighteen years...

She speaks Burmese. She's really not part of the culture, but quite immersed in it. And you should know that in Burma, it's a largely Buddhist country, and so the culture really accepts the suttas and the way the Buddha described the world as the way it is, including all the different realms of existence, for example. That's just accepted.

So she was putting her photos on the computer, and quite a number of them had on our skirts in different places, when we were standing, these bright, perfectly round circles of light. Immediately she said, "Oh look, these are the Devas." Devas are celestial beings. She was absolutely sure—these are the Devas. And

she's telling the Sayadaw, "Oh look at the Devas," and he was laughing.

Then another friend who was also with us, also a nun there, but her background is as a scientist—she's been a scientist for a very long time. Immediately she said, "Those aren't Devas. That's condensation on the lens of the camera. That's what it is. You can tell." And she was sure. The other one was sure. I thought, well, who knows? I would never have thought Devas to begin with, but I don't know about condensation on the lens either.

So we thought, okay, whatever. I'll look at my pictures when I get home on my computer. Different camera, different computer, different photos, but the same situations. And not as many, but some of the photos did have those perfectly round circles. I thought, well, that's interesting. Who knows, right? Could I just stay with the "who knows"?

And so when I talked about this in the fall, the staff all got going. Immediately one guy who's the IT person, the computer guy, very certain, says, "Look at that. There's no way. It's obviously condensation." And then we saw another photo taken that summer of a teacher meeting we had at Gaia House in England. There's one photo of three of the teachers sitting there, but one particular one, who's a monk, has this exact same round, bright thing right on his chest. And when he was asked about it, he said, "Oh, often pictures of me have that."

So we showed Eric the skeptic this photo. He goes, "Well, you can see right there, there's a glass of water, and that's exactly what it is—it's just water reflecting." He was so sure. And then all these people started coming to me with different photographs from different places with these really wild images. Someone brought me a photo of a forest grove in Burma with people sitting there at dusk, and these round, particular lights were all over up in the top. I swear, I just thought, this has to be like Anāthapiṇḍika in the Jeta Grove after he died. That's the first thing that came to mind. It just really looked like that.

And then my friend, the scientist nun—this winter she came, not sheepishly exactly, but she came with a photo she had taken in August in Tiruvannamalai, which is Ramana Maharshi's ashram in southern India. She spent a month there. And one night, the full moon night—as you know, it's a done thing, you take a perambulation around that mountain, the holy mountain Arunachala, which takes a few hours. On the full moon night in recent years, it's become a big thing for Indian disciples to do; they didn't used to. So they went out that night, and it was packed. In India, a few people coming to walk around the mountain means two and a half million people. Two and a half million people show up to walk around this mountain on the full moon. Complete solid people, she said, the whole way around—having a party, talking on their cell phones, people selling things. She said it was a great atmosphere.

So she went out and took pictures. There were all these lights everywhere, and there weren't street lights. She showed me the picture. It is filled with these bright, perfect, like Deva lights. Who knows? And she said to me, "Okay, who knows. I'm putting down the moisture-on-the-lens theory. I really don't know."

So I'm just telling this to give a sense of how the beliefs that we automatically assume, that we don't even question—scientific or the different realms of existence—that we use to describe our world, those are going to be how we describe experience. Maybe that's correct, maybe it's not.

It certainly can be useful. I'm not saying we go around not knowing what anything is. But can we, rather than having to land on an answer, be willing to cultivate, to recognize, to become familiar and comfortable with this active, engaged, open energy of heart and mind, of really being present? But who knows? Yeah, it looks like moisture on the lens, but who knows?

This is really what we're talking about when we speak of the quality of mindfulness, the quality of awareness that we're cultivating, hopefully, in this retreat. This is what we're cultivating. We're not here to find an answer to your question. The answer is going to shut everything down. We have more answers than we need. We're here to cultivate that open connectedness that doesn't even need to go around the question. Just this. Just this. Without needing to reference past or future and lines of experience. Just this. Really present. And who knows?

It's an active, awake quality of energy, of heart, of mind, of attention. It's not stressful. It's not exhausting. It's engaging. It's enlivening. And it's not something that wears us out, just meeting moment-to-moment experience that way. It doesn't frustrate us. It doesn't make a day of mindful presence seem endless and tormenting. Because it's just now. What's going to arise in the next moment? Who knows? You think it's going to be a certain kind of feeling of your breath? Well, who knows? But the more we think we know what we want, the more we'll get locked in struggle.

But this isn't, for most of us, the natural habit of mind. Again, my scientist friend—I think she wouldn't mind if I said this, we talked about it—she's a botanist. We used to go walking, and as we're walking wherever, she's naming every tree and every bird. It used to drive me nuts, you know? And then as we talked about it, we realized it's not that she was showing off or something, but that was her way of controlling the world. Knowing what's going on. You name it and you know it and you can reference it. And everything's kind of safe and secure. Not knowing—there's not such a place to put your handholds.

That doesn't mean we're not going to have the questions: What do I want from this retreat? Or what is it that's going to bring me happiness and peace? Or what is happiness and peace? Nothing unusual or wrong with having those questions. It's when we think we have to get an answer that's going to stay the same without changing that we get lost.

So what do I want from this retreat? The Dalai Lama says that the purpose of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace. Nothing weird or wrong about wishing for happiness or peace. I mean, if we didn't, for sure we wouldn't be doing this—unless you're really just masochistic. I guess that's always an option.

We are all equal in wishing to be happy and to overcome our suffering. And I believe we all share the

right to fulfill this aspiration. It's a sincere, appropriate motivation. As the Buddha said, one of the things that unites us all as human beings is our deep wish for happiness, for peace. That's normal. Nothing wrong with that. But where it runs into trouble is where it meets our unseen, unexamined assumptions about ourselves, about life, about what happiness is.

When we don't stop and really look—what's actually bringing peace and happiness in a moment? What's actually contributing to confusion and suffering in a moment?—we miss what's right in front of us. To see it clearly, we have to learn how to look free from our assumptions. Otherwise we're looking through a veil. We already think we know what makes us happy, and through that veil we keep trying to do the very thing without seeing that it isn't working. We all know this, but it's so subtle.

So what do I expect from this retreat? Asking yourself that question honestly and seeing what surfaces—do it quietly. You don't have to be embarrassed about it, because really, when I do this and let the real thoughts come up, my dhamma mind that could tell you everything about right understanding is ashamed. I just want pleasant feeling, by God. I just want to feel good. I want to float on clouds. I want to feel compassionate. I want the pain in my back to go away. I want to really impress everyone.

Just be really honest with yourself—not to shame yourself, not to be judgmental, but to see what ideas are working in the back of your mind. Once we see them, we're not driven by them or fooled by them anymore. When we don't see them, when we don't recognize them, that's the lens through which we're evaluating our experience. That's the lens that drives striving. That's the lens that feeds disappointment. We're only disappointed when we're not getting what we expect, right? Which is always a good sign when you're disappointed, because then you can stop and say, "Okay, great, there's some expectation here that isn't being met. What is it?" Bring it up into the light. We don't have to be afraid of this stuff.

So looking to see: what are we placing our faith in? What are we placing our heart on? What are we consciously or unconsciously looking to in order to bring us happiness? I find myself over and over and over—even though I know better, and on many levels I know better, and sometimes I completely know better—but then the next moment or the next year, I discover how often my attention or my sense of what will make me happy is outward directed. Or it comes to a certain state of mind or heart. That's what I'm going for. And when that state of peace or that state of happiness or just the state of not being in pain—we'll take that, just the state of the back pain going away, that's good enough, you could call that a mini-nibbāna—that would be good enough. Some state. Knowing all the while that every conditioned state dissolves, and really quickly.

But there's still that view in the back of the mind that this external or internal state, or this object, or this situation, or this particular experience will change me forever. Experience is a big one. Do you find yourself waiting for some particular experience? If you have a cessation of experience, then you're finished, right? So just let that cessation experience come, and you can quit all this sitting and walking. You can quit experiencing greed and hatred. You've read about it. It'll come. It's all over, right?

It's impossible. Any experience that comes, goes. And when it's here, it's here. This seems so obviously stupid, but when it's gone, it's really gone. A level of insight is present when it's here, and when it's gone, it's gone. It's not something we can make into a chart—"I had this level of insight"—and walk around with it like a diploma. But that doesn't do any good. It's just another thing we're holding on to.

The suffering is the holding in the mind in this moment—right now, in this moment. And as long as we're subtly or not so subtly looking outward to things, to experience, to people, to states, to anything that comes and goes, we're lost in saṃsāra. That is saṃsāra. We're spinning in saṃsāra.

As long as we think we can get something and hold on to it, as long as we think there's a view—and I spent twenty years at least deep in thinking, "I'm practicing to understand the truth of things." But on some level, I thought, once I get some understanding... I never really thought it so obviously as "I could write it down, this is the truth of things, and then all my suffering would be over." But some sense of, once I understand the truth of things—and that was the energy behind it—once I understand the truth of things, it'll all be okay. It'll explain everything. It'll explain samsara and why I keep suffering and why I keep going back into these same old habits that I've seen ten million times.

Has that happened to anybody? Yeah, once or twice, right? And you think, "I really saw deeply through this." And you did, in that moment. But the moment doesn't last. And isn't it easy to feel completely discouraged after that? "I really saw it. So how come I'm turning around and doing it again?" And it's even worse because not only am I doing it again, I know I'm doing it again. I know that I've seen through it. So it's twice as painful because I can add judgment for my stupidity on top of doing it anyway. And I can't stop.

We have unreal expectations.

This practice isn't about getting rid of one view to take up another view—not even the Buddha's view. You know this, that he said even his own teachings are to be used as a raft to get across the river. It's useful, it's helpful. When you get across the river, you don't take the raft and carry it on your shoulders for the rest of your life. So all views are useful, are helpful. And even anything I'm saying now is intellectual information. If it's helpful, great. If it's not, let it go. But nothing is anything that we can hold on to and say, "This is the truth."

So this practice isn't about putting down one view in order to take up another view. It's about learning to recognize, to shift our trust from views and explanations and experience and steady state moments and sense of self—to change our trust to that willingness to just surrender wholeheartedly in one moment into the not-knowing presence of awareness, of mindfulness. Just awareness of what's happening now. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, emotions. That's the basic range that we experience over and over and over. But "over and over" is already a concept, because there's only just right now. Seeing happening now. Feeling happening now. Thinking happening now. Pain happening now.

Our way of talking, our way of trying to teach meditation, our way of trying to teach anything, carries a sense of "me doing." So we talk about me being mindful of sensation. It's language. We have to use language. And the view we have is me doing things. But really what happens is sensation arises, awareness arises, just like that. Hearing arises, the knowing of it arises, just like that. We're not doing anything. We say we're showing up to be present for it, inclining the mind in that way, but what we're really cultivating is that open not-knowing, that willingness to just meet with open-hearted attention whatever happens to be arising in this minute—and notice it's going away, the next, the next, the next.

We are so trained to look for things leading in a certain direction, for experience to confirm "me." Now my breaths are getting better. Now my sensations are getting more subtle. Now my thoughts are getting louder and more gross. So one is bad and one is good, these judgments. But it's not about what's happening. What we're really cultivating is that moment-to-moment quality of open, curious, loving—you could say—attention. Really loving the awareness itself. And any object, any experience that's arising is the gateway to help us recognize awareness itself.

So really, we don't believe this because of our deep views.

It doesn't matter what's happening. And in those moments when we actually know this—when we truly know it doesn't matter—there's such a relief.

When practice is a burden, when you're slumping through the day thinking, "Oh my God, three and a half more hours until I can go to bed without hating myself"—those are tough days. But look at why you're slumping. It's probably unpleasant. We rarely slump along like that when the experiences are all pleasant and the mental states are lovely and our body doesn't hurt. Then it's like, "Yes! I'm one step away from bodhisattva-hood."

But when your body hurts, when you're feeling moody, when you're wishing you had taken that vacation instead of coming here, when you thought you were doing good but then it all crashed—and that person next to you, that person who you thought wasn't doing any good, is suddenly really doing good. You thought you were the inspiring one, but now you're the person really struggling. And then you think, "Okay, I'm out of here."

That's when you're slumping along. Because you're looking at experience as a confirmation of self—of good or bad, of getting somewhere.

But in those moments when there's just that open loving of awareness, of mindfulness, of just being present for its own sake, you're not slumping along because it doesn't matter. The day's long, the day's short—it doesn't matter. Your back hurts or it doesn't. Sure, you have a preference. I'm not saying you don't have a preference for your back not to hurt. But it doesn't really matter.

And this is a whole different angle from the way we're trained, the way we're so deeply ingrained to take all experiences and ask, "What does it mean about me?" Really deep-set habits.

I read a book called *Nonviolence* a while ago. One really interesting thing the author said stuck with me. He was talking about the word "nonviolence" and saying how in English, the main word is "violence." So the concept "nonviolence" is just a negation of violence. When you hear that, violence is kind of like the norm, and nonviolence is seen as something aberrant—something weak or passive. In Hindi it's the same: ahimsa. The same thing—*a*, negation of *himsa*.

But he said—and this is what struck me, just thinking about how language can reflect our views, but also shift them—he said, "Just think: what if the only word for war were 'non-peace'?" So whenever we're talking about a war, we're saying, "Oh, there's non-peace happening in Zimbabwe right now. There's non-peace starting to occur in Afghanistan." It would make a subtle shift in how we experience things, how we think about things.

So one way of thinking about our mindfulness practice—about learning to have confidence in awareness rather than in things, in objects, in experience—is a shift like this.

What if—as Ajahn Amaro talks about—the natural peace and ease of mind and body that is natural peace and ease, what if this natural peace and ease of heart and mind, what if non-clinging of heart and mind, is not some obscure state that we need to create over many years, if not lifetimes, of intense struggle? What if non-clinging heart and mind, natural peace and ease, is actually more normal than the norm—but we're just not used to recognizing it?

What if the fear, the clinging, the aversion, the spinning all the world around the idea of me, me, me—what if all the frustration, the internal suffering and sense of separation that seem to create us, to encompass us, to be the cage we have to break out of, that seem to hold us back from freedom—what if these are actually the aberration? But we just keep giving our attention, our energy, our trust, our refuge to the wrong place.

Think about it. When you're really down and out in moments of intensity, you don't have time to think through what's the proper Dharma perspective. You're off center, not really balanced, and something difficult happens. Where does the mind go in that moment for refuge?

It can be different places; I'm not saying there's only one. When I'm really balanced and something difficult happens, sometimes there's just a sense of, "Ah, that too." And then I think, "Wow, that's nice. I can see that." But there are times when I'm really unbalanced or tired or stressed, traveling and about to miss my connection at the airport, and somebody's in my way. That's a real test for me, I have to say. Somebody does something slow, and aversion just shoots out.

Okay—that was the refuge in the moment. That was the trust: if I can be pushy enough, I'll get on that plane.

Which, by the way, doesn't work. But just to see for ourselves.

And what if our path isn't so much the moment to moment effort where we've got to chip away the clinging, chip away the aversion, make a little mark on the blackboard each time we've chipped something away, try to hold on to some state, try to create some experience of peace? What if our path is much more about rediscovering the natural peace and ease? Learning how to re-recognize it, to have more confidence in it, to trust it more, no matter what's happening.

This is really something. When we're looking at practice from this angle, it has a whole different feeling. It really becomes fun. It really becomes quite delightful because there's nothing going on that we need to fight away. We wake up and we're filled with rage. Okay. Rage is like this. You can actually meet rage with interested awareness.

And that's the key—interested awareness. Rage is like this. When we meet rage with "oh my god, I'm so horrible," when we meet rage with rage, we're buying into it again, aren't we?

So all of you have, I know, many times in any day—on retreat we have more chance to notice—but many times in any day when the mind is not filled with greed, when the mind is not filled with aversion or self-hatred or judgment or fear, when the mind is not running that endless story of "what about me." Okay, maybe there aren't many, many moments, but there are some when the mind isn't running that story. And those moments we often tend not to notice because we're more tuned into "what about me," good or bad. "What about me" is often a story of how bad I am, how useless I am, but it's still all about me.

Just notice those simple moments where—what is it the Third Zen Patriarch said?—where nothing is missing, nothing is lacking, and nothing is in excess. And we're not relating anything back to me. Just this. The "just so" moments.

And it doesn't matter what's happening. In the middle of a sitting, there's just a moment of just breathing. And then later we go, "Oh, there was a moment. It was just the breath. The breath was just breathing itself. Oh my God—" Okay, that's not it anymore. But the moment when there's just breathing. Or hearing. Just hearing. Or thinking, but it's really just thinking. Or having a cup of tea and there's just heat. Or hearing a bird. Or feeling the fog. Or just standing.

But there's awake. You're awake. This isn't a moment when you're asleep or in a coma—that's not what I'm talking about. There's wakefulness, there's presence, but it's not filled with greed or aversion or any particular me-story. It's just this.

Notice those moments. You don't have to put a word on them. Any word is already too much. They're not huge—the neon lights don't go off, everything isn't suddenly different. And that's why we often don't notice them. We want the one big experience to be done with it all. And that's just more wanting. That's coming from the same place of me wanting something big to change me so I'll be different—I'll still be me, but different and better. Can't think it through that way.

The little moments of nothing special, but that exquisite presence. There's no me hanging around right

then. Nothing to want, nothing missing.

Your back hurts or it doesn't hurt. It doesn't really matter in that moment. Your knee hurts, you're cold, there's a loud noise, or you wish it was bedtime. It doesn't really matter. Just little moments. Notice them.

We really need to give these moments the attention, the energy, the sense of re-recognizing, so that we can learn to shift where we have confidence, to shift where we put our trust—as I say, when the chips are down. That's a big part of our practice here.

And the other part, of course, is what we spend a lot of time caught up in: recognizing the habits, the reactions from the belief systems that seem to hide from us this natural peace and ease. You know what the habits are, right? The deep belief that if something is pleasant, it's good. That's so deep. It's good, it's right, it's the way it's supposed to be. If something is unpleasant—an unpleasant sensation in the body, an unpleasant sound, an unpleasant thought about yourself, an unpleasant perception, you think someone's looking at you cross-eyed because you did something wrong—you feel bad. Unpleasant equals bad or wrong. Something wrong with me.

The pleasant is to be gotten more of. The unpleasant is to be gotten rid of. And the neutral we don't even notice, to be overlooked.

But even more, in the sense of the delusion, is that relating it all back to me. It's pleasant, it's good, because it fuels my feeling good about myself. It's good for me. The unpleasant is bad or wrong only in relation to some sense of me that has the deep-set idea that peace and happiness is associated with pleasant feeling.

I'm not saying we aren't going to prefer pleasant feeling to unpleasant feeling. But really look deeply: how much of our life choices are posited on "this will get me more pleasant feeling"? How much of the way I even practice? I keep finding it over and over. I think I'm just being open and present. And then somewhere there's a little sense of struggle. I look, and ever so subtly, I've started to try and steer things in the direction of pleasant. *Oh, that's the way it's supposed to go.*

Do you ever have doubt about your practice when you're feeling good, when the experiences are smooth and pleasant and lights are going off? You come into the interview and we say, "You're just caught up in the defilements of insight." You don't want to hear that. You think, *They don't know what they're talking about.*

When you're caught and you're really seeing greed arising in a moment with every sense impression and you come in and say, "Oh my God, I'm hopeless. I'm just seeing craving in every moment"—and we say, "That's great. You're really seeing the truth of things. This is freeing to the heart and mind." You say, "Freeing? I don't think so. This isn't what I signed up for. I didn't come here to see greed and aversion arising in every moment. I came here to be peaceful, to feel good, to get into the jhānas, which keep greed and aversion away." And if we could stay in the jhānas from now until we die, that would be very nice. But we can't. And then greed and aversion come back.

So our job here is, from the confidence in that not-knowing, that open, loving quality of awareness that can just be with whatever—the confidence that that's accessible no matter what the experience is—this gives us the faith, the energy, the confidence to then meet even aversion, even clinging, even our self-judgment with this open-hearted mindfulness. Even our deepest demons. And yes, we have to work with them in different ways—I'm not saying you just dive in and go for it. But even our deepest demons, we can meet with mindfulness. They can be part of our gateway to freedom.

There's nothing, as one of my Burmese teachers said, there's nothing you need to be afraid of because there's nothing that mindfulness can't be with. There's nothing awareness can't be aware of. Nothing.

When we place our trust more and more in awareness through our own experience, you start to know that. You start to have confidence in that. And that freedom of mind, of heart from clinging, just begins to naturally, more and more, show itself.

We get a sense for what that means. It's not a state—it's a moment-to-moment activity. There's no state to reach. But as we trust that moment-to-moment activity, this loving, open, non-judging quality of mindfulness, the more we trust it, we come to see that even when we feel deeply spinning in some story, deeply spinning in some reactivity, somewhere we increasingly know: just like that, just like that. This whole spinning mess—oh, it's like this, as Ajahn Sumedho says.

We're aware of it. Not that it goes away, but that we shift our confidence from "this is who I am and I have to do something to get rid of this and this is unbearable, I can't stand it another moment" to simply: oh, it's like this. The unbearable nature of pain is like this.

It's still the unbearable nature of pain, don't get me wrong. But the shift of interest, the shift of trust has moved from the me experiencing unbearable pain who has to get out of it at any cost, to awareness of the unbearable nature of pain. It's like this. We really learn to love awareness—to trust it, to have confidence, to know that this is accessible. Awareness is truly the doorway to freedom of heart and mind, to freedom from suffering, to freedom from causing suffering for others.

So that's really the work of our meditation: to rediscover in many, many moments, over and over and over, the natural peace and ease of mind and body when the mind and heart isn't colored by wanting, when it isn't colored by hating, when it isn't colored by me-ing. And there are many such moments in our days. From that place of trusting and confidence, we can then explore the many moments when we feel really caught in reactivity, in fear, in wanting, in "it's all about me"—when it just feels so solid. It doesn't even feel solid; we just know this is how it is.

Sometimes it's only an intellectual remembering. "Oh yes, I remember I was able to be aware of aversion." We can't quite bring it in; it's just intellectual. But sometimes just remembering that can really help.

On a retreat I was just teaching last week in Burma, a young woman came who was going through a huge difficulty in her life—a major ending of a relationship, with all the external suffering and confusion and

questioning herself that brings. You can imagine coming on retreat in that state. She was filled with aversion, she said. Aversion everywhere she turned. It was becoming unbearable. She was on the floor of her kuti, her little cottage, just sobbing.

And then suddenly—she'd been practicing a while, other retreats—suddenly she said, "Oh, right. This is just aversion." It sounds silly, perhaps, but she said it was just aversion. It was like she was in this well of aversion, but it just didn't stick anymore. It wasn't a problem. None of the situation changed. She saw all the aversion. She didn't push it away. She just recognized: "Oh, right. This is aversion in the mind." Awareness of aversion—aversion is like this.

In that moment, we're trusting in mindfulness. We're trusting in awareness again. It's not always possible. Sometimes we're too caught in the story, too caught in belief in the aversion. It's too strong. Or the energy of greed is stronger than the energy of awareness. Sure, plenty of times. That's what we're practicing for. But it's never lost. It's never hopeless. It's never further away than that.

And this is what we learn to trust for ourselves. Me telling you doesn't make any difference. But learning to really know that for yourself—that's everything.

The times when, like that young woman, when suddenly she said, "Oh, it's just aversion. Everywhere I look, but it's just aversion." And she was free. She felt so happy in that moment. And she was filled with aversion. That's not an aberration. That's possible. It happens for all of us sometimes, and it really fuels our trust.

So we recognize and strengthen confidence in the natural purity of heart and mind by recognizing those moments when the heart and mind is pure, and by recognizing what it's like when the heart and mind is colored by *kilesa*, by these distortions. They're suffering always, but it's not rocket science. One of my teachers makes it very simple to notice in our minds. We get all twisted up, but he said: In our practice here, if you're wanting something to happen, that's greed. It's not so hard to tell. You're trying to stop something from happening, or you want something different to happen—that's aversion, that's hatred or fear. Do you not have a clue what's happening? Well, that's delusion. But the other aspect of delusion is: are you relating everything that's happening as being me or mine? That's delusion. My knee, my aversion. Somebody's making a sound halfway across the room and it's bothering *me*. Just notice that.

So it's not rocket science. You're wanting something to happen—greed. You want something to stop happening, you want something different—aversion, hatred, or fear. You don't know what's happening, or it's all me or mine—delusion.

The trick is recognizing those. This isn't a judgment. I'm happy when I see aversion or *dosa*. I say *dosa* now because it's the Pali word that covers aversion, hatred, fear—all of it—and it makes it really impersonal. So I might be being really subtle, and I'm noting and noticing all these things, and suddenly I realize: oh, I'm trying to push that away. Oh, that's *dosa* in the mind. In that moment, the mind isn't colored by *dosa*

anymore. It's become aware. Oh, *dosa* is like this. The trust has gone into the mindfulness.

Oh, wanting feels like this. We don't have to be afraid of wanting. We don't have to be afraid of pushing away, of aversion. We don't have to be afraid of delusion—that's just adding *dosa* on top of delusion. All we have to do is trust awareness enough that we can recognize.

And when awareness is being fed, when we're loving awareness in that moment, we're not loving the greed. We're not loving the aversion. When we're buying into it—"It is aversion and I am so bad"—that's feeding the aversion. "I am greedy, but that would really solve everything if I could only get it. This will be the last one." That's feeding the greed. "Oh, this will be the last one," and you're watching. Yeah, just watch. Is that the last one? Go ahead and eat that.

Does that end all greed? Funny, it didn't seem to do the job.

That's awareness. Always available, always accessible, and not so difficult.

One of my teachers asks: What's the difference between someone who practices mindfulness and someone who doesn't? He says a practitioner regards every object, every experience that arises with interest, as a chance to learn. A non-practitioner reacts with greed, hatred, and confusion.

From this perspective, every experience that comes is a chance to learn. We're not here to try to have better and better experiences. Every moment is an opening into awareness, and every moment of awareness is a potential gateway to freedom in that moment. And there's only this moment. The past moment is over, the future isn't here—there's only this moment.

Liberation arises, the purity of heart and mind arises, not from what's happening, but in how we meet this moment. So even the most ugly, fearful, painful experience, met with interest, met without fear—that's a moment of cultivating non-clinging. The most beautiful, sublime, subtle experience, met with "Wow, now I'm really getting somewhere"—that's cultivating greed. Recognizing "Oh, that's greed" is cultivating awareness again.

It's just like that. We're never more lost than this. And there's nothing we need to be afraid of. Nothing.

Byron Katie has a great line: "Loving what is." I like to think of awareness as being like that—our mindfulness practice. Just loving what is. And only when the heart and mind is clear in that way can we recognize accurately what is. It's the accurate recognition of what's really going on in our mind and body moment to moment that ultimately frees us from our wrong ideas, our inaccurate perceptions. As long as we perceive wrongly, we're going to keep building the world in an inaccurate way. We can only perceive accurately in those moments when the citta, the mind, the heart, is not looking through confusion.

So recognize this. Trust in it. Have confidence in all those little moments of just this, just this. And no matter how much you seem caught in fear or confusion, know that just recognizing that is already a moment of potential freedom, of feeding the heart and mind of non-clinging, no matter what's happening.

Every moment here is the moment that can free our hearts and minds. There's no other moment. There's only this moment.

I'll end with something from Ajahn Sumedho:

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is about knowing these things fully, that they are what they are at this moment. What I found very helpful was learning to be aware of conditions without judging them. In this way, the resultant karma of past actions and speech as it arises in the present is fully recognized without compounding it, without making it into a problem. It is what it is. What arises ceases. As we recognize that and allow things to cease according to their nature, the realization of cessation gives us an increasing amount of faith in the practice of non-attachment and letting go."

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