Yathā Bhūta: Things As They Are

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:18

So now we're about a week into this retreat, however long you're going to be here. And a week is enough time to find out that maybe what you thought was going to happen isn't happening—to find that everybody's practice is starting to develop in your own particular way. People start going into different areas, and that's exactly as it should be happening. But it's also a time when some people are just going along, while others, without realizing it, can find themselves struggling in some subtle way with "this isn't really what I thought it would be like. I don't know how I thought it would be, but not exactly like this."

What I want to talk about tonight actually feels like the same talk over and over. But that's okay. There's a phrase in Pali that appears often in the suttas: *yathā bhūta*, which means "things as they are, reality as it is." *Yathā bhūta.*

One of the deep, high insights—an insight, an understanding that's the ground for liberation—is in Pali *yat hā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*. You see that a lot in the suttas, and it's generally translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are." So this seeing things as they are, reality as it is, *yathā bhūta*, is really the core, the essence, the seed of our whole practice. It's basically what we're yammering on about all the time: seeing things as they are, *yathā bhūta.*

This knowledge and vision—just in a moment, when there's a real kind of opening, let's call that insight, that *ñāṇa*, that wisdom of knowledge of things as they are—it leads to liberation. Because when the perception, when the mind, when the heart is truly perceiving things—self, others, sense experience, whatever arises in a moment—as it truly is, seeing it as it truly is in that moment, the wisdom of that releases the mind and heart from clinging, from aversion, from the sense of "me." Those reactions, those responses to life are based on our ongoing misperception and misunderstanding of things as they really are.

So that's what's so simple but also magical about the Buddha's understanding and about our practice. We say it over and over: we're not here to create some other reality or to get out of this one. We're here to actually find out what this reality actually is. I just love that phrase, *yathā bhūta*.

And what allows for our accurate seeing of things as they are in a moment? Mindfulness, of course—clear perception. And what allows for clear perception, for mindfulness, is the quality of acceptance, in just one moment. To see how reality is in this moment, it's necessary to be fully present with total acceptance of things as they are in this moment.

I want to elaborate on that a bit—on *yathā bhūta*, on what hides things as they are, and how mindfulness

can help with that. Acceptance of things as they are, with mindfulness, with clear connectedness, opens the mind and heart to the liberation, the freedom of non-clinging. And that allows for—not passivity, this acceptance is not about passivity—it allows for a clear, compassionate, appropriate response, because we're actually responding to what's actually going on rather than our ideas and constructions and delusions about things.

But don't believe me.

When we talk about the roots of our suffering, our confusion—when they're spoken of as the *kilesas,* the qualities, the factors in the heart and mind in a moment of greed, of hatred or aversion or fear, of ignorance, confusion, delusion—we say these are the seeds of suffering. On one level, at times, that's obvious. Usually it's more obvious with aversion and hatred and fear than with the others. It's obvious that in themselves, we don't like them too much and that they seem to be causing us suffering.

But that's not really the most subtle, most pervasive way these things cause us suffering. They contribute to, they're the causes of our confusion, of our delusion, because when greed, hatred, and confusion are in the consciousness, coloring our heart and mind, coloring our perception, we cannot perceive or recognize accurately. When greed or hatred or fear or ignorance or confusion or the "me" story is clouding us—when we don't recognize that it's present in the mind and it's clouding, coloring our perception—we can't see accurately. There's no way.

And so what we respond to isn't what's happening at all. It just keeps self-perpetuating, like a rolling snowball. We get further and further from what's really going on and wonder why our actions, with the best will in the world, just don't seem to achieve what we want.

What I want to talk about mostly here is the first two noble truths. I think it's really interesting, and the more I've practiced, the more I've come to really appreciate that when the Buddha decided to describe to the world, to people, what we need to know to actually recognize things as they are—what we need to know to free the heart and mind from anguish, from confusion—the first thing he picked, his first truth, is this truth called *dukkha*.

I want to talk about that, because I think it's profound. If it was as obvious as it seems to be, why would the Buddha need to lay it out and say that this truth needs to be understood? That's the action he recommends for the first noble truth of *dukkha*: the truth of *dukkha* is to be understood. Not to be avoided, not to be transcended—it's to be understood.

I want to talk a little about my understanding, my limited understanding, and the things I've read that help give a sense of the naturalness of this truth of *dukkha* and how understanding it contributes to recognizing accurately, and how that contributes to ease, freedom, peace of mind, peace of heart—a heart and mind of non-clinging.

So, to be understood: *dukkha*. We all know this word, and it's generally translated in shorthand as

"suffering." Often when we hear the first noble truth from non-Buddhists in particular, they say, "Well, Buddhists say life is suffering. What a down thing. I'm not really interested in that." And then so-called Buddhists also say life is suffering.

The first noble truth is dukkha, often translated as suffering. But this is far too narrow an understanding for the depth of the first noble truth.

Dukkha is a word that can be used in different ways. One is dukkha as pain—dukkha-dukkha. When the first noble truth is written out, one aspect of dukkha is simply this: flat-out unpleasant pain. In the suttas, when the vedana—the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling tones that Andrea talked about today—the unpleasant physical one is named dukkha. So the word is often used to mean plain unpleasantness, suffering.

But in terms of the first noble truth, understanding dukkha as mere unpleasantness is far too limited. When we think of it that way—which I often do too, using the word dukkha specifically to relate to unpleasantness—we speak of "dukkha times" in retreat. We don't mean the times you're lost in rapture, do we? We mean the times when it's just *ugh*. But that's not the first noble truth.

You're good, just laughing about dukkha. That helps. It lightens things up. Don't put it in a little hole.

One of my teachers pointed out that when we think of dukkha as suffering, as soon as we contemplate the first noble truth, isn't there a tinge of aversion? You think "first noble truth," and then "dukkha, suffering"—you don't go, "Wow, how freeing is this!" And that's not helpful. The Buddha's not saying, "Let's get down with aversion. That's what I'm all about." I don't think so. As soon as we're into *ugh, first noble truth*, we're not getting it. We're not broadening our view.

What I have to say may not exactly lead you into bliss. But just to get a sense: the understanding of the first noble truth has nothing to do with aversion. It has everything to do with freeing our heart and mind from confusion.

The derivation of the word dukkha is illuminating. If any of you have read Analayo's book on the Satipatthana—which I think is a great book because he pulls together so many different strands with really good scholarship, and if you read the footnotes, they take you in all different directions, and he's fairly balanced about bringing in different opinions—just a little plug for that. When he describes the etymology of dukkha, I love what he says. One etymology suggests disharmony, friction. He gives the derivation of *duh* as difficulty, and *kha* as the axle hole in the round wooden wheel of an ox cart—which they still use in Burma. It's this big round wooden wheel with a hole through which the wooden axle goes. If it's not properly fitting in its hole—and mostly it's not, these aren't exactly highly streamlined machines—there's friction, some rubbing every time the wheel turns. That's dukkha: this kind of friction.

Another derivation he offers is "standing badly"—uncomfortable, uneasiness. That's really more the sense of dukkha. Not that it's good or bad, but simply calling us to notice accurately in our lives that so much of

the time there's this sense of things not quite fitting.

It's not that everything is awful suffering all the time, but there is that—and that's part of it. The dukkha-dukkha part acknowledges: yes, there's pain. Birth is pain. There's old age, sickness, and death. None of us gets out alive, right? That's part of it. Not all of it, but part of it.

Yet even that, obvious as it seems—someone was just saying today, and we all do it—well, it's obvious, but my mind goes, "Okay, to other people." It's obvious I'm going to get sick and die, but not now. Really notice this. I noticed it in my own mind recently. I don't know, it wasn't anything serious. Nothing horrible was happening. But I was lying down somewhere, and things got really fuzzy, like my blood pressure dropped or something, and I almost fainted. I could see my mind going, "Oh—"

Well, I wonder if this is the thing. You know, who knows? I wonder if this is the thing that's like dying or that's really starting something. And that was a moment of just open curiosity—well, I wonder. Immediately followed by, no, not now. Not me. Not going to happen now. And it wasn't, you know. But just to see how the mind does that. Yeah, sure, we know, but...

And that's the obvious part, the most obvious part of the first noble truth of dukkha.

I'll get to say what we do with that as I go on, but there's that. There's another aspect, the secondary aspect of dukkha as a noble truth. Of course, there's pleasant experience. There's beautiful experience. Dukkha isn't just about unpleasant vedana. It's about the fact that there's pleasant feeling, there's neutral feeling, there's unpleasant feeling, and they're all constantly changing. That dukkha part is that there's nothing that we can, or anyone can, rely upon, hold to—really, for more than a fraction of a minute—for any kind of lasting happiness or suffering. So it's this unreliability of things that he's calling dukkha.

Remember, that doesn't mean aversion. The aversion comes in the second noble truth—why we suffer from this. But the fact is, there's one place where the Buddha says, in terms of feeling tone—some conversation I think he was having with Sariputta about Sariputta's awakening—he says, "All feeling..." Let me say exactly: "Whatever is felt"—and by felt he's talking about vedana, feeling, this sense of pleasantness, unpleasantness, neutrality, which is a mental experience, experience of the mind—"whatever is felt is included within dukkha." Not because it means it's all unpleasant, but because whatever is felt, whatever arises due to condition, ceases. And he's calling that the first truth of dukkha because we can't hold to it for any stability, for any lasting peace, sense of self, or pleasure, or reliability. Just nothing's reliable.

When we understand that—in those moments, you know, and we all have moments. I keep saying moments because everything's moments. If you're waiting for the lasting understanding that you never have to look again, we tend to discount... First, that's never going to happen because nothing's lasting, but we then discount it because, as I said last week, it's just moments. So in a moment, when you're really seeing, "Oh, that's nothing I can hold to"—you will have moments of that—in that moment, craving and

clinging doesn't arise, or if it's there, it just goes away because it doesn't make sense. It just doesn't make sense. You don't have to talk yourself out of it. It just doesn't make sense because yathabhuta jnanadasana—when we're seeing things the way they are, just the reality of things—clinging doesn't make sense. It's not some huge renunciation. It's a moment of opening to how things are, of tenderness, connectedness to life as it is. No need to push away what's difficult. No need to hold on to what's pleasant to try and confirm a sense of me.

But as is everything, those moments are also fleeting. And then here we are again, and ah, no, it's so hard.

So pleasant is also included within dukkha. And that's to be understood. That's not to be hated. This is just to see how it is.

The Buddha, saying to really understand this, says, "Before my enlightenment, oh monks, while I was still a bodhisatta, it occurred to me: What is the gratification in the world? What is the danger in the world? And what is the escape from the world? And then it occurred to me: Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world, this is the gratification in the world."

He's not saying we hate pleasure and joy, open to dukkha and never smile again. He's not saying that. He's saying the pleasure and joy there is in the world, the pleasant vedana, this is the gratification. That the world is impermanent, bound up with dissatisfaction, and subject to change—this is the danger in the world. The abandoning of desire and lust for the world—by the world, he's just meaning any of the sixth sense experiences—the abandoning of desire and lust for the world, this is the escape from the world. He's using "world" in that way.

We may hear "escape from the world" as somehow zooming off to some other realm, as if you don't have to live in this world. That is not the Buddha's awakening. What he's talking about is: what's the danger? There is gratification. We enjoy it. We appreciate it. But we just, as Eckhart Tolle says, appreciate the beautiful. We just don't look to it to give us something that it cannot provide, which is some sense of lasting anything—happiness, pleasure, sense of self. A moment of pleasure, a moment of love, a moment of ease, a moment of unpleasantness. We don't look to any of it to be more than just what it is in that moment. It is to be understood.

In this understanding, we start to see—just from this *yathā bhūta*—it opens us into seeing that the second noble truth, which is often said to state that the cause of suffering is *taṇhā*, thirst, craving, really needs to be expanded. Because there's no craving without ignorance, without not seeing clearly, without delusion. Really, that's the aspect of ignorance, of delusion. It doesn't mean we're stupid jerks. It means we don't recognize accurately. We perceive wrongly, and on that wrong perception, we have thoughts and emotions and reactions, and we create a whole world in two-tenths of a second based on one perception, and then start suffering from it.

So the cause of our anguish is all these reactions of heart and mind—the clinging to the pleasant, the fear,

the aversion, the pushing away of the unpleasant *vedanā* or experiences we rate as unpleasant. And both of these are fueled, only arise, when there's ignorance, confusion, delusion in the mind. We'll talk more about that.

Now, these reactions seem natural. I mean, it seems instinctive, doesn't it? If there's an unpleasant sensation, or if there's a hot flame and you stick your finger in and it hurts, you pull your finger back. We're not saying you don't do that. That's normal. That's obvious. That's what our mind does with unpleasant—it pulls back and goes, "Oh no, that shouldn't be happening." That just seems normal. Of course bad things shouldn't be happening.

When something is pleasant, we like it. Here in your sittings, in your walkings, when the body's at ease, you think, "Yeah, right, that's how it should be." Relax. Now I'm relaxed. That's right. That's correct. That's how it's supposed to be. Then the pain comes in the back. That's incorrect. That's wrong. And this just seems normal. That's how we live our life. You see why the first noble truth is so profound.

The delusion part—one aspect is we just don't know what the heck's going on. But that's actually the most obvious type of delusion. That one we wake up from eventually, one hopes. The more subtle delusion is the misperception, the not seeing, and that fueling the sense that it's really all about me. Because if we're reacting with greed to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, that's only because it's me here. I'm not really reacting with such aversion if you get stuck with a fork. That's all, "Gee, I'm really sorry, that must hurt." But if it's me, it's like, "Oh my God, this is unbearable."

Actually, that's why—just moving from that into compassion—compassion is actually an expression of the non-deluded heart and mind. Because compassion is: she's stuck with the fork, and I feel it. It doesn't mean empathetically that I physically feel it, but there's that sense of it's not worse because it's happening to me than because it's happening to her. There's just this sense of, "Oh, this pain, this suffering is suffering." The heart's open to it, whatever the source, because there's not that delineation, that separation of, "Well, I'm sorry for you, but let's keep things straight—it's all about me."

You were laughing because it does seem normal that unpleasant stuff is wrong, and that's where our mind goes about it. We blame ourselves. We blame the world. We think we've got to get it. Really, really deep down, enlightenment at some level is about things should get more pleasant.

Enlightenment is not about thinking, "All this back pain I'm having, these traumatic memories that are coming up, these unpleasant feelings—they're in the way of my practice. They must go away so that I can see what's really going on, which is subtle and refined and concentrated and hopefully blissful." No. *Yathā bhūta*—things as they are, now, in this moment.

I was going to read this later, but it seems to be coming up now. This is actually from Adyashanti, and I really like it. He's saying "abiding," but I'm using "acceptance," which is clear mindfulness meeting what's happening just as it is:

"Accepting means letting everything be as it already is, no matter what it is. If you're feeling good, let that be as it is. If you're feeling bad, let that be as it is. No matter what your emotional, physical, or mental state, let it be as it is, not wishing for it to be otherwise."

And I'll add: if you're wishing for it to be otherwise, notice that and let it be as it is.

If you want it to be different from what it is, that's not acceptance. You're picking and choosing and trying to control your experience—which of course we all do because it's so deeply ingrained, so natural. That's why we don't understand the first noble truth, why we think unpleasant is the problem, why we imagine awakening is somehow going to rid us of this problem.

Recognizing and understanding the truth of dukkha leads us to being able to see how these habits of reactivity—of aversion, of grasping and clinging, of delusion, of making it all about me—feed the confusion, the dissatisfaction, the pain. Because everything we're doing to try and fix the pain, to try and feel happy, is predicated on not recognizing things as they are.

Something that really helped me—and it was pretty far into my practice when this happened—was realizing that I would think I was just being with what is, being with what is. I really believed I understood. And then I'd find that little niggling seed back there: "Oh no, I'm going for it. It should be pleasant. This bad thing shouldn't be happening. This unpleasant thing shouldn't be happening. It's wrong, it's bad, it's my fault, or it's your fault, or it's the weather's fault, or it's somebody's fault—because it's not supposed to be happening." Or, "I'm a failure." That's the other way we turn it back on ourselves, right? You're doing good when it's pleasant. When it's unpleasant, you're a failure. You can't do this practice. It isn't working. All of those things.

What helped me—and this is not profound, it's more of a "duh" moment, as in dukkha, but a "duh" experience—was looking at the Buddha's life after he was enlightened. Fully enlightened. The fully enlightened one, freed from anguish, freed from suffering. No more greed, hatred, or delusion arising in his heart, in his mind. That's one of the ways a freed mind and heart is described, and I have to say, that does sound pretty nice, doesn't it? No more reactivity to experience. Without greed, hatred, or delusion—just pure being with things as they are. Wakeful, but not resisting.

But looking at his life after enlightenment, it wasn't... if you try to just imagine living the life he was living, it doesn't sound like a birthday party. Unless you hate birthday parties. He spent forty-five years after he was awakened walking around India barefoot, teaching, eating one meal a day, going begging for his food, forming a sangha of monks, a sangha of nuns. And if you read the suttas, if you read the Vinaya, people were the same then as now. You listen to the politics, you listen to what's going on in the EU when they meet, you listen to any kind of group of people meeting and trying to come to decisions. Take it to meditation centers—I've got news for you, it's the same thing.

You read how all the rules in the Vinaya came about. The monks are always going, "Oh, he's doing this,

she's doing that." And the Buddha said, "Okay, I have to make a rule. You don't do this, you don't do that." Trying to keep the peace. Trying not to have the lay people lose their faith.

Anyway, looking at his life: he had the choice when he fully awakened. He could, at will, spend all of his time in deepest samādhi, in complete bliss of peace. Or he could put his mind into nibbāna, into cessation, and just hang out there. And you'll see suttas where he said, "I've just come from a calm day's abiding, from a pleasant day's abiding."

He could have spent his whole life doing that, but he didn't. Motivated by compassion, by a sense of seeing the unnecessary suffering of beings, he chose otherwise. But his life was not one of comfort. It was not one of ease. It was not one of pleasant vedana, particularly at all.

He could have chosen any way to live. He chose the life of a renunciate. He was willing to be a teacher, which had both all the joys and the beauty of sharing the Dhamma and the Sangha difficulties. And just being in India with all of these wanderers coming around, haggling with him all the time. There's lots of suttas like that. He gives his teaching, and they shake their heads and go away. Rivalries. His cousin Devadatta tried to kill him and take over the Sangha. There were sorrowful things where some of his clan's people got involved in a war over water rights and many of them were killed, and he had to go help pacify that. His most beloved, favorite disciples died shortly before he did. And they're just saying he was aware. I mean, he wasn't prostrate with grief, but he was aware of their being gone. And he said, "Look, I see the Sangha is empty, empty of Sariputta and Moggallana." You get that sense of loss.

In other words, he awoke into this life, not into some rarefied Deva realm. He was in a body. He died of food poisoning. He had headaches. He would have to go lie down. He was living a life in a body like we are now. Yet he was free of suffering. He was not free of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral vedana. He was not free of the fact that everything changes. He was free of seeing things inaccurately and needing for things to be different in order to be at ease. He was really awakened fully into this world, fully engaged in this world with people, with beings. And he didn't just stay with people, but with beings in all realms, of all walks of life.

And so when I looked at that, I thought, whoa, this awakening isn't about escaping from life, and it isn't about getting rid of my body pains, my personality. We'd like to, maybe, but here it is. It's about understanding—understanding where the suffering really is and where the freedom is. And it's right here. The freedom's here and the suffering's here, because there's only here. But the freedom is in that recognizing accurately, yatha bhuta, the reality of what's happening in mind and body in this moment.

So I want to talk a bit about how greed, hatred, and confusion distort the perception—just a little bit—how they cause our suffering and increase it and perpetuate it, because they're so familiar. They're so familiar. And then our familiar reaction—like when we see clinging or grasping, for example, or we see aversion—and then we have the intellectual understanding, "Oh, this is the cause of suffering." It's so ingrained that what's our usual reaction to that? Aversion. "Oh, there's aversion. I shouldn't be having

aversion." This is just a natural, ingrained response. Clinging. "Oh my God, all I'm seeing is clinging. It's hopeless. I'm hopeless. I'll never be happy." Aversion to the clinging.

And when we come in and we say, you know what? That's great. Seeing clinging arising in every moment, that's fantastic, because that's the way to freedom when you really see it. I'm happy when I see clinging in my mind, because when I see it, it's not coloring the show. When I don't see it, that's a whole other story.

When I recognize aversion, I'm glad to recognize it. I'm not saying I'm glad it's there. I'm not saying, "Oh great, welcome aversion, let's kiss it, we love it." I'm not saying that. But I'm glad to recognize it.

It's just nature. Clinging is just nature. It's just the way our minds are habituated. Delusion is just nature. You're not some special person more filled with clinging than anybody else here. Nobody gets points for being the most clinging person, or the most aversive person, or the most deluded person. We all have all of it. We take turns being the most, being the least. It's just nature manifesting and changing all the time. Don't take it so personally.

Clinging comes up, and we make a whole big story about it. Me, me, me. And then we're suffering. But clinging comes—oh, clinging is like this. Okay, I don't like it too much. Oh, aversion is like this. Wow, it's all about me. Me is like this.

I'm serious. I know it's not always that easy. But notice the place that you stop—the place that the moment-to-moment noticing stops. Because that's the place where we've landed. And it's not always a pleasant place; sometimes it's an unpleasant place. But that's where we've landed and started to really get into the story of me, whatever it is. But again, recognizing is just that Tai Chi move. Oh, story of me is like this. And then it all starts flowing again.

So how do these habits obscure? I'm just going to give some simple examples, obvious ones, starting with clinging, with craving, which is, as Andrea said this morning, the habit of mind that follows unpleasant when there's not awareness, when there's not attention. But we don't have to be afraid of it. We just watch to see how the mind works. Yathābhūta—how the mind works, both with delusion and with clear seeing.

One thing with clinging: when, say, there's craving for an object—a good kind of food, or for lunch, or you saw someone put their spare pillow back there and you noticed it, and the whole sitting you were just clinging, thinking, "How can I get out of here first and get to that pillow before someone else does?" That's clinging. Simple. The suffering of that is relatively obvious, isn't it?

But not always. Clinging is sometimes hard to separate—the attachment from the object we're clinging to. Especially for people where clinging really comes a lot with pleasant objects, and you can go and get the pleasant object. When you get the pleasant object, the clinging goes away, you have the pleasant object, and you feel peace. And you think, "Well, what was the big problem with that?"

In fact, someone at the last retreat I was teaching was asking this. He was saying, "Well, if I move and then

it doesn't hurt, that's fine. So what's the problem with clinging? I think I want to not hurt, I move, it doesn't hurt. Are you saying you just never do anything?" Of course we're not saying that. But it's learning to tease out the difference between clinging and the object clung to—that's what makes the difference.

The Tibetans have a great phrase for this: a kind of clinging puts feathers on the object.

It kind of brightens it up. You want something and it just looks so great, so wonderful. You can't see clearly. And then the clinging narrows our field of perception. It narrows our mind. It narrows our heart. You can almost feel it like that.

In fact, the Buddha said that clinging and aversion are makers of measurement in the mind, in the heart. And you can really feel that. How does it feel when you're just doing a walking meditation, you're just walking and very present, and the lunch bell rings? Is there a change in the mind, in the walking? Just notice that.

It doesn't have anything to do with whether the thing wanted is bad or good. We're not saying there's anything wrong with clinging to lunch. You need lunch. Everyone needs to eat. What's the problem? Don't get into that rationality thing. Notice the effect when there's clinging in the mind. It's got nothing to do with any kind of value judgment of the thing clung to. The thing clung to could be a piece of pizza or the idea of enlightenment. It's nothing about what's clung to. It's that quality of clinging, craving in itself. It's a particular factor of mind that narrows.

I'll give you an example. A few years ago I was teaching a retreat in Yucca Valley, which is in the desert in Southern California. I really love it—it's a wonderful desert with Joshua trees and animals. Everyone loves walking out in that desert. And one of the thrills, the things that people love if they're walking, is to get to see one of the big tortoises. There are a few out there, but they're shy and they hide and you don't necessarily get to see them.

This one year I was out walking, and I just loved being in that desert. At that time, just walking, present, whatever's there—there wasn't a sense of measurement. There wasn't a sense of me or other, just being. And then it popped into my mind, "Oh, maybe I'll see a tortoise." That was just a thought, but it turned into craving. "I want to see a tortoise." And my walk changed. It's like the scope narrowed. I got tense. I'm looking for a tortoise. I'm walking a little and I'm looking. And my mind is going, "Not tortoise, not tortoise, not tortoise." You're just looking for the thing. That's what clinging does. That's what clinging does.

Notice that it's a maker of measurement. Often we can get the thing clung to, and that hides the fact of the suffering of clinging. It's the suffering of measurement. It's the suffering of making difference. And then we go on to create whole worlds. I don't have to describe how we create whole worlds out of clinging, out of wanting.

So here, when we notice clinging, we don't talk ourselves out of it. We turn around, look back at the wanting mind itself. Experience it. See if what I'm saying resonates with your experience. Do you feel that

sense of tightness, that sense of narrowness? Hang with it. Instead of going to get what you want—we get what we want and we feel happy. Why? Because the clinging went away. That's why we feel happy. The Buddha's brilliant insight is that we could be happy without getting what we want, simply by noticing when clinging arises. "Oh, clinging's like this."

This is how clinging is experienced in the mind and the body, *yathā bhūta*. Clinging is like this. It's simply a mental experience, with some physical expressions perhaps. I often feel a physical tightness. And it's just another arising experience—nothing to hate or fear. Clinging is like this. It will go away because everything does. And then just notice: peace, until the next clinging arises.

Aversion is much the same, only it manifests more as either a lashing out, a pushing away, or a pulling away. But it's the same kind of experience in how it distorts our perception and our judgment.

It's interesting because with aversion—*dosa*, usually translated as hatred—it's about some unpleasant sight, sound, smell, taste, mental experience, or touch that's happening now, because there's only now. Even a memory of something horrible in the past is a memory arising now. You can experience the unpleasantness of it, and aversion springs up: "This shouldn't be happening." That reaction really comes from not understanding the first noble truth. This unpleasant thing shouldn't be happening, and there's some way I can either stop it or get out of here and not have to deal with it—or blame somebody, or fix the world, or zone out completely, or take a pill.

I'm not saying we don't take pills when we're in pain. I'm not saying that. But notice how aversion completely distorts our judgment because we're so fearful of the unpleasant. We're so aversive to the unpleasant that it's almost like we're afraid to even go there. And we can do all kinds of crazy things not to feel it, or to fix it, or to make it go away.

Aversion can actually distort our visual perception. If you're really angry with somebody—really angry and caught in it—and you keep looking at them, how do they look? Do they look nice? Do you think, "Oh, I really like their hair today"? No. Your mind goes to everything that's wrong with them, things you never knew were wrong with them. When the mind is in aversion, it seeks out the unpleasant, and it just riles itself up. It spins in it.

It's like when you have a little jagged tooth, a small piece that's broken off. It doesn't even hurt. Can your tongue leave that little jagged piece alone? All your other teeth are fine. Is your tongue noticing your other teeth? No. But this little jagged tooth—you're ready to go mad after a day. Why? Just a little unpleasant experience that we fixate on.

The Buddha said, "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will"—and that's how it feels when we're caught; it doesn't mean forever, but even in a moment we're obsessed, oppressed by ill will—"and when one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is. One doesn't see one's own good or the good of others or the good

of both."

I would say the same for craving. When we're obsessed with craving, when we're obsessed with ill will, we can't see things as they really are. And when we need to act, we can't see what's good for ourselves, what's good for others, or what's good for both.

So acceptance—this quality of mindfulness that simply meets what's happening, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, not for any result but just to see what's happening now—that quality of acceptance is not passive. It's what allows for clear seeing, the clear vision of things as they are. And that allows for appropriate response, clear decision.

The Buddha lived a very active life. He made clear decisions about how to live, not passive at all. But those decisions can be based more on reality.

A simple example: a friend of mine who lives in Massachusetts was invited by a very close friend to come teach a weekend in Washington, D.C. It was an eight-hour drive, and she really didn't want to do it. She was already busy, already stressed. Cramming in this weekend would push her over an edge. It wasn't something that would save all beings—she genuinely didn't want to do it.

But this friend was a dear friend. And so whenever my friend would think of saying no, it felt so unpleasant. She felt so bad at having to decline that the very thought of it—she was aversive to that thought. She didn't even want to go near that unpleasant feeling. So in order to avoid having to face it, she came extremely close to agreeing to go do this thing that would have really put her over the edge. Just to avoid one unpleasant feeling of saying no to her friend, she would have gone into a whole stressful weekend and subsequent probably illness. It's crazy. We can't see clearly.

Thankfully, she caught herself. She said, "Oh, that's what I'm doing. I can just call my friend and with all the love in my heart say, this is the truth of my situation. I can't do it right now." And of course, her friend was totally fine with that. It was all a manufactured story.

But we can't see clearly when our mind is obsessed with wanting, when our mind is obsessed with not wanting. And both of them, of course, lead to the mind being obsessed with: it's all about me. Me, me, me. This is where the thoughts and the whole creation of a world just springs out—from a reaction of holding onto pleasant or pushing away unpleasant.

Again, don't believe me. See if you notice.

Since we're all here in this room together, going through all different kinds of experiences, a very common example is when someone else in the room is making a noise. Our story is they shouldn't be making that noise, or it's ruining my concentration. That's the story. Or somebody's moving, or they come in late, or they leave early, or somebody gets ahead of you in the lunch line. It doesn't take much to find something.

And to see how, in the beginning when it first happens—there's a sound, it's unpleasant—there's an

immediate story about it, isn't there? They shouldn't be doing that, or they're doing it because of this or that, or this is the effect it's having on me. Should I move? Should I not? I shouldn't move because then they'll know. Or I shouldn't move because I should be a better yogi than this. A whole world is created, isn't it?

And even if you try not to do it, you have a whole idea of who that other person is, their life story, how completely insensitive they are, how they shouldn't have been allowed on this retreat. And I mean, no one here has said this, but I've been in retreats with people whose minds go to throttling the other person, hitting them over the head. It gets out there. Thank God you're in silence.

When the hindrances take over and you're talking—oh my God.

So that's the whole world. And when we're not recognizing what's actually happening—there's just a perception of a sound, it's unpleasant, and then how that relates to me, I don't like it, and then thoughts start—that's what's happening.

At some point, maybe the thoughts change. Maybe the mind quiets down, and the same sound comes again, and this time it doesn't register as unpleasant. It registers as neutral. Oh. And then all those thoughts don't come that time.

It's just hearing. Neutral. Another thought arises, kind of like, "Well, what now?" And then the mind generally makes up another story, which is just as plausible to us. But what it means is, "Oh, I see—I made that up, but now it's not that way. Ah, this person's really not how I thought, and I'm actually much wiser than I thought." And so it goes. And maybe we notice that, and maybe we don't. If we do notice it, fine, great, because *yathabhuta*—that's what the mind does. Mindfulness can simply notice that. We don't have to stop it. That's aversion. That's what the mind does. "But I don't think it should do that. It should do—" No. *Yathabhuta*. How does the mind work? When there's pleasant and we don't recognize, it goes into wanting. It makes up all these stories.

Joseph likes to say we're making it all up. And he's not exaggerating. Watch that. But with humor, just say, "Wow. Make it up." And sometimes do it on purpose. Notice you're wanting something, and just with real awareness, watch the story the mind creates. But watch it. And then take your attention right back to the sense door. Say it was a smell at lunch and it got hunger going. Just go right back into smelling, smelling. Notice if it's pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That's not in your control. It just arises. But that can change from moment to moment.

Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral is not inherent in the object. It's a felt experience in the mind. Something that I, in this moment, experience as pleasant, someone else might experience as neutral or unpleasant. Something I experience as pleasant now, I might experience as unpleasant or neutral at another time. There's nothing steady-state here.

So when you've got a whole story going and you notice it, just come back. If there's some experience

arising again—a smell, a sound, a sight—come right back into seeing, right at the eye door. Smelling, right at the nose door. Notice if there's pleasant, unpleasant, neutrality, and then see if any story comes. How does that affect me? That's how the story starts. And see where that goes with awareness, just watching it. The more we watch it, the less energy it has.

It's amusing. Sometimes the stories are useful, but we know we don't have to believe them all. And in the middle of one, you go, "Wow, that's really quite a story. And I really believe it too." And then you just feel, ugh, you know—aversion. And that's just what's happening right now. Aversion. You don't have to fight it away. It's really fascinating.

So the escape—the escape from unpleasant, the escape from the aversion, from the clinging to delusion—is simply this quality of mindfulness. Acceptance. Bare mindfulness means mindfulness of just what's happening, not of our concept about what's happening.

That is so key, and that's what we're pointing to so much in the interviews. When we say, "What's happening?" you say, "Oh, well, you know, the breath is like fire, and it's swirling." Yeah, well, what does it feel like? "Well, you know, it's like this, and the air, and the pressure." Yeah, but what's the sensation? "You know, pressure." I mean, it's kind of deflating, isn't it? But that's *yathabhuta*.

Oh, yes. Pressure. And if you look, it may be deflating, but it's also quite peaceful. We're addicted at times to our endless stories, even though that's where the suffering is. Who would I be without my incredibly obnoxious personality? But that's just fear. It won't go away—I really won't. But that sense of "oh, it's just this, just this," free of concept, is liberating.

It's about noticing just what is, not our concept of what is. And this is very tricky. For example, there's a burning feeling—"there's a pain in my knee." And that might be said not with aversion, but simply, "Oh, there's a pain in my knee." But that's already concept. If you recognize "a pain in my knee," my knee is an idea. It's a useful idea—I'm not saying it's wrong—but are you actually experiencing "my knee"? What is that? What you're experiencing is a particular sensation. Maybe it's burning. Maybe it's tingling. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Just that one sensation.

As soon as we go to "my knee," measurement has come in. It's a knee belonging to me. And if you look—if you're really with the sensation—for it to be "my knee," there's a reference back to some sense of "me," some looking outside that bare experience to something else. Comparison: *my* knee. And immediately it goes to "how will I make it through the sitting?" It goes right into the future. "My knee" goes right to the whole story of my health, my whole life, the skiing accident I had twenty-five years ago. "How am I going to make it through the rest of this month? I have to go to the managers. What about the hospital?" That far away from the bare sensation of burning—that far away from "my knee," right?

Burning. It's just burning. I mean, it's *just* burning. That's peace. It's still burning, but it's peace. There's just not all these constructions.

So that's really what we're talking about with this sense of bare mindfulness—mindfulness that accepts what is, just meets whatever's happening without resistance, without pushing away, without holding on, without picking and choosing, without making a meaning for it.

Sharon Salzberg likes to say that to pay attention is to love. This mindfulness, this accepting quality of mindfulness, is really what Byron Katie means when she speaks of loving what is. Whatever is arising in this moment *is* what is. Loving what is doesn't mean "Oh God, loving really isn't about me"—loving is this quality of accepting, open, connected attention. Just being here with what is. And that allows for reality to reveal itself. It's just nature, how it is in this moment. It allows for the clear seeing—the *yathābhūta-ñāṇad assana*—this mindfulness beneath the concept, allowing whatever is arising in this moment to reveal itself. Loving what is.

And it's really only when this clear seeing in a moment is present

A moment of allowing whatever's arising to simply be as it is—really embraced in the energy and the light of clear awareness, kind awareness, truly loving what is. It's only then that real compassion and real love become possible.

Without that clear seeing, we can go through the motions. But real compassion, real love, a genuine opening into life in a whole other way—this is only possible when we're seeing things as they really are, with this quality of active, engaged, accepting presence. Not passive at all.

Just like that sense of burning I mentioned rather than "my knee." In that burning, it's simply what it is. Not referring back to me, there's no problem. There's no making of self and other. This clear seeing opens us to a really different relationship to life, to others.

Like the Buddha—he opened into life. His awakening was full engagement with life, but not from a self-centered perspective. And we all experience that in moments when we feel real compassion, real love. We all do. It's not some esoteric thing. We all know this, we all experience it. And if your mind is going, "Well, not me"—no, no, no, no. See that that's just a story in that moment.

When we're not engaging from this self-centered place, other people and the world are no longer about somehow gratifying us. It's not about needing other people to be any particular way to make us okay. It's not about needing anything from anybody else. But it's not like, "Oh, I don't need you." It's not that. We don't need, but we can be there.

So much energy goes into this construction—the delusion, the aversion, the clinging, the sense of trying to make things okay for ourselves, the sense of trying to fight away the unpleasant, the stories. And the story here turns into a story against yourself because you don't want to have the stories and you don't want to be doing this, so then you just pile aversion on top of that: "I shouldn't be doing this." Same thing.

So much energy goes into that. So sometimes when you have an insight—a moment, some moments of just

seeing *yathā bhūta*, as it is, nothing special—so much energy is released, is available. And that energy is available for appropriate response, for compassion, for generosity, for kindness, for acting in the way that's appropriate, that isn't about serving me.

We don't get there by thinking about it. But it's not so far away—for a moment. And we're not going to live there all the time. But we all know it in moments.

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