# Meeting Dosa with Mindfulness and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:51

Tonight I want to talk about exploring dosa with wisdom. Dosa, as I'm sure you know, is the Pali word often translated as "hatred"—one of the three unwholesome roots. But let's use dosa here to encompass all the many states of mind, mental states, and emotions that come from either pushing away the unpleasant from an angry side, or fleeing from the unpleasant through fear. So it ranges all the way from hatred to mild irritation to grumpiness to resistance—the whole show.

I deliberately use the word dosa rather than "aversion" or any other specific term, partly because it's broader, but partly because it helps me have fewer unhelpful associations. It allows me to look at it as simply a habit of heart and mind that the Buddha talked about extensively—something we can explore as habit, rather than identifying with it and either blaming ourselves, hating ourselves, or totally buying into it. But it's definitely a frequent visitor in many of our experiences of heart and mind. In all its different forms, we can relate.

When Guy spoke about the second noble truth, tanha—that thirst, that craving—he described its two sides: the greed for the pleasant and the pulling away from the unpleasant. Dosa encompasses all the different ways of pulling away. It's a deeply conditioned reaction of mind to unpleasant sense experience at any of the six sense doors—to just leap away almost immediately.

In some way, it's sad, because dosa really arises from our not fully understanding the First Noble Truth. The First Noble Truth includes the dukkha of regular unpleasant, painful experiences; the dukkha of pleasant things changing; and the constant, ongoing insubstantiality and unreliability of all experience. As the Buddha said, each of the truths has an action that goes with it. The First Noble Truth is to be understood—not to be hated, not to somehow be avoided, but to be understood. And this understanding doesn't mean we then live in a quagmire of the unpleasant more than before. Rather, it frees our heart and mind. It frees us from the suffering of living in disharmony, in contention with so many moments of life.

The real suffering of dosa is obvious on a superficial level—it's unpleasant. So-called aversive types, those for whom dosa may be the first thing that arises (though we all have all of it, don't get me wrong), sometimes say, "I want to be a greedy type because that seems more pleasant." But being a dosa type myself, I'd say greedy types are just more lost in their delusion. They think it's pleasant, but they're just lost in craving and acquisition. The dosa types, at least we know we're suffering. We may not know why. We may blame somebody else. But we really don't miss it—except when we do. And that's what's really amazing.

The tragedy of not understanding the First Noble Truth, the real tragedy of the power of this reactive dosa to unpleasant experience, is that it solidifies our sense of separation. It keeps us lost in this unreal world of me and you, other, good and bad—the whole thing.

One Zen teacher—I forget who—said that dosa, this reaction of fear, anger, or aversion, is rooted in perhaps an unspoken belief in our mind that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant, unwanted, or painful experience that's happening right now. And that's really the heart of it: somehow I don't have to be with this. The fact that it's here means there's something really wrong.

So much wasted energy in our lives goes toward trying to hold ourselves separate, trying to deny this moment of reality as it is. It's impossible, because this is how it is—and we get into so much confusion and suffering trying. We can't shut down selectively. If I can hold myself separate from this, if I can somehow shut down and not feel, not know, do something else not to feel it, then everything will be okay. But as Pema Chödrön says, we end up spending our lives tensed up, trying to hold ourselves away from unpleasant experience. She says it's like we walk around our lives tensed up as if we were sitting in the dentist's chair. I love that image. They tell you to relax—they haven't even started yet. Just the sound of the drill, even hearing it in the waiting room.

So I want to share some examples from my experience of working with dosa in different ways—a nuts and bolts kind of talk. And then hopefully you'll have ten million of your own.

This is an invitation to bring sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, to any moment that we recognize some aspect of dosa as the quality present in the mind and heart. It is simply another arising, conditioned experience.

It doesn't have to be something we hate or fear or are afraid to look at, or something we so identify with. It's simply another arising conditioned experience.

As far as I can tell, the most immediate moment-to-moment mechanism for its arising in a moment of experience is what we've talked about before in that sutta called "The Dart," where the Buddha was so clear. That mechanism whereby an unawakened worldling—that's probably most of us—when an unpleasant feeling arises in the body, they get all upset in the mind. You shoot yourself with a second dart. But then the Buddha says that the habit of resistance to unpleasant feeling tone comes to underlie the mind, the heart.

This to me is the salient point. When unpleasant feeling tone arises, the habit is so conditioned from how many mind moments in our life. When you remember that there's something like seventeen million mind moments in the blink of an eye—who knows, who counted those, I don't know—but it's a lot. In every mind moment there's contact. How many of those involve unpleasant feeling tone, and how many involve that knee-jerk reaction of bouncing away? It's so habituated that, as the Buddha said, it becomes to underlie the mind. And then the only response we know, the only way to get out of that, is to crave for the

pleasant. That's how the wanting comes to underlie the mind. It starts so quickly.

As we've seen from having the wonderful opportunity to be so quiet, to really turn our attention on our hearts and minds, to see how the mind works, many of you are seeing this at times. But we also see how quick and subtle feeling tone is. In daily life, how often would we notice it? I don't think I ever would have noticed it in my whole life if I hadn't read about it from the Buddha. I don't know how he sat down and figured this stuff out. It's amazing.

Mostly we don't go, "Oh, there's the habit of resistance to unpleasant that underlies the mind. I see the attention jumping away from this unpleasant sense contact. And now I see the papañca that fuels aversion starting." But sometimes we can see that. Mostly, we don't.

As Tsoknyi Rinpoche's brother says, notice how easily the mind, the heart, is influenced simply by a pleasant or unpleasant sight, sound, thought. So quickly into an immediate mood. That's the thing—it goes boom, just like that, from unpleasant into an immediate mood. And that's often the first place our awareness can pick it up. But sometimes we can really notice the process where it begins, and that to me is really interesting, because it doesn't have to then flare into such a huge, overwhelming state of heart and mind.

So this is an invitation to explore this with interest. As U Tejaniya says, just see how does dosa do its job? It's just doing what it does. What is its job and how does it do it? This takes it out of the realm of the personal. Just really seeing such a cause and effect relationship. Like, "Oh wow, look at that."

When we can, at times—of course there are times we're identified—but at times when we can bring our interest in and just be watching it, really, and this is from personal experience, sometimes you can just bring in and see what's actually happening. It's still unpleasant, but the whole story that of course gets fed from "me, me, me" can dissipate, can stop being so real, and we can just see what's going on. That's my invitation tonight.

So, just some different ways to invite us to explore. Remembering that when we talk about mind or heart, a moment of citta, consciousness with whatever mental factors—as Guy talked about last night with the five aggregates—arising moment to moment. Each moment of arising consciousness with mental factors is a new moment, which is the only way that makes any of this workable. It also means when we're talking about what's arising, it's what's happening right now. There's only ever this moment.

Starting from that, I want to talk about bringing satipañña to the sense doors. Ajahn Buddhadasa used to talk about satipañña at the sense doors a lot—just being right at the point of sense contact with mindfulness and wisdom, with the wisdom of not adding extra liking or disliking or association. Just what's happening right now.

This has helped me so much, and it helps me in daily life too, when I remember that the resistance to unpleasant and all the emotions that come are arising from that habit of jumping away from unpleasant

sense contact, feeling tone right now. That's the thing to really look at. Whatever's fueling the resistance, the aversion, the dosa in whatever way is coming up—it's beginning from some sense contact that's happening right now.

It's easier to see if it's a sound that triggers unpleasant feeling, or a sensation in the body, or a smell, or a taste. But quite frequently the sense contact is going to be mental—a thought, a mood, an emotion. And even so, recognize it's happening now.

Take fear, for instance. When fear comes up, there are all the thoughts about the future, and the fear is saying all these things that are going to happen. We can get really lost in that world. But the fear arises to begin with from some sense contact that's arising in this moment.

Maybe a memory came up. The memory came up with really painful, unpleasant feelings—moods, not feeling tone, but feelings. Really unpleasant, really scary, and boom, you know, it jumps really quickly away into fear. And then the fear is saying, "Oh, this is going to happen and that's going to happen."

Fear also has this quality. One of the jobs of fear, I think—this is me saying this, I haven't read this in the Abhidhamma—one of the jobs of fear is saying, "Because I'm here, because fear is here, I wouldn't be here if something really, really bad wasn't about to happen. Because I'm here, you should believe me." And yes, in the fight or flight response when we need to protect ourselves, sometimes that's true. But when it's this spinning, spinning, spinning, and we're lost in the story, in the future, in the past, sometimes just take a moment to see: what's the sense contact happening now? It's a thought, an unpleasant thought, and a mood. It's happening in this moment. We can explore that.

Sorrow, guilt, fury, regret—they're all different flavors of dosa. And as they bounce away, they pull away from the original sense contact and into all the stories. Often you can't think your way back into it. But you can land in—say it's way deep in guilt. You know this story, but at some point it's like, what's happening right now? You hear how we're always saying when there's strong emotion, see if you can just feel what's happening in your body, or notice what the mental miasma of it feels like rather than the story? That's because that's what's happening now. The thoughts are happening now too; the content of the thoughts is not.

When we land on what's happening now, often—for me—the physical associated sensations that come with a strong dose of emotion are extremely unpleasant. So you touch it, bring the awareness in, just touch that unpleasant, and then the resistance habit gets doubly strong, right, and bounces back into the story again. But come back. Come back. This is where mindfulness wisdom can help us move in the opposite direction from the habit of just running for your life when there's unpleasant experience. It's like, come back. Okay. Just feel this. Guilt feels like this. Oh, that's awful. Okay. It's awful. Guilt feels like this. "No, no, this and this and I did that." No, no, no. And we'll spin in it for half an hour. I think that's actually more awful than just coming back and feeling, "Oh, guilt feels like this."

We can't always do it. But just recognizing that the dosa mood arises from some unpleasant sense contact now—and noticing then what the attention does. It's like a knee-jerk reaction; it pulls away. Just that "go away from it," whether it goes to the pleasant or just gets lost.

In that moment-to-moment experience, in that gap where the awareness, the attention, is not connecting with just what is—say it's an unpleasant sound, let's keep it simple. And it's like, "Oh, I don't like that. Why is that person making that sound?" In that gap where mindfulness isn't just connected, all the papañca fueled by dosa comes flowing in. Can you notice that? You've seen this happen. This is not rocket science so far.

It happens because the attention just kind of went away, and there's not sati right now, there's not mindfulness right there. Because it jumped away with a little bit of resistance, boom, then that dosa is subtly flavoring the perception, subtly flavoring the thought, and it just starts spinning more and more. The papañca is fueled by the dosa. And then the more it goes, when there's dosa flavoring the mind, flavoring the perception, we can't recognize what's going on accurately. The new perceptions and the new papañca all start to have this flavor of just something wrong.

Have you noticed—people say they're sitting in the dining room and they think they're fine, and suddenly they recognize that every person who walked by, some horrible negative judgment came up. Or maybe that's only me. And after a while they go, "Huh. Maybe there's dosa in the mind." What's surprising is how long it can take. First, it's just, "They look slumpy."

Their socks aren't matching. I can't believe how much noise they're making taking the fork out of the thing. And after a while, they go, "Hmm, seems like I'm being a little bit picky here. A little bit aversion going on."

So what we're really doing here is learning not to always just give the focus to the object, but really getting interested in the quality of the mind that's aware.

When this cycle of aversion fueling the papañca and then flavoring perception comes on, it can really get on a roll. And it's a lot of suffering. I'm sure many of you know that, because we either judge ourselves, or the aversion itself is suffering, or we really believe it and then wonder what's wrong with everybody else. But dosa is a very unpleasant experience because it's so separating. We know we're not really quite landing somehow, but we don't know how.

The Buddha said that once arisen, ill will or dosa actually strengthens through unwise attention to the unpleasant—or it's actually translated as the repugnant aspect of something. You know the example Thich Nhat Hanh always gives: if you have one tooth that's a little bit rough and all the rest of your teeth are fine, where does your tongue go? Again and again and again. You're not feeling all your other teeth all the time, are you? But you're just sitting there. It just has to go there. It just has to feel that roughness. It's not a big thing, but it's a habit of mind.

And so we've often said, if you're really annoyed at someone, you keep looking at that person, and it just kind of spikes the annoyance. But do we want to look at that person? For whatever reason—I mean, it's not helpful, but we do that. And then it solidifies whatever the view, the explanation: they're bad, or I'm bad, or it shouldn't be happening, or whatever. And that flavoring, that distortion of the ongoing perceptions grows and grows and grows.

Dosa in the mind as it's growing can distort even sense contact that might have been kind of neutral at another time. I remember one retreat—I don't remember the story, it doesn't really matter—but definitely there was dosa in the mind, had been for some time. And it got to where just a sound would come and I would hear it as unbearable. I remember the radiators used to make a lot of little pinging noises in here. It's gotten a lot quieter. And it would ping and I'd literally hear it like an explosion. So unpleasant.

And then I remember one time, I had been on staff here, and I found myself—don't do this—running around down in the basement in the furnace room, saying that there's got to be something wrong with these heaters, that they're making this kind of noise. Like I know something about heaters. So I'm running around. There's these giant heaters. I'm going, "This can't be right. This can't be." The dosa was just distorting everything.

It leads to action. As the Buddha says, we can't see clearly our own good, or the good of another, or the good of both, when the mind, the heart is obsessed with ill will, with dosa. The least we can start to do is just recognize. It's like I'm running around there before I can recognize—oh yeah, maybe it's just aversion completely distorting the perception of the sense contact. I don't even remember if I recognized that. I think I just gave up because I didn't know what to do to fix the furnace. And I did know better than to write a note to the maintenance. So you too, when you're running around like that, just know better than to write a note to the maintenance, because it would have been embarrassing.

It distorts. We can't see clearly. We can't recognize accurately. It distorts our judgment as to what to do. And it's such a habit to really interpret the unpleasant as wrong or bad. It's so ingrained to avoid it, to do whatever we can to avoid it, that sometimes—not realizing and not having clear recognition of what would be for my good or another's—we can make all kinds of crazy decisions in order to try and avoid a projected unpleasant feeling.

For example, a friend told me quite some years ago about her own experience with this. She had a very busy life and did some Dharma teaching on weekends. A very close friend of hers, very dear to her, requested that she come to another city—quite some hours' drive from here—to teach a weekend.

But my friend who told me this story, it came at a time when she was completely busy. To even fit in the time to go to that city, drive down there, and do the teaching would have stressed her out. It was almost crazy to even think she could fit it in. She could maybe just barely do it, but it would have been crazy.

But when she thought about telling her friend no, the fear arose of how unpleasant that would be. Her

friend would be hurt. But it wasn't even really that her friend would be hurt—it was more how she would feel at thinking that her friend was hurt, that she'd let her down.

So it took her weeks to actually get real and say, "This is impossible. I love you, but I can't do it." The friend, of course, was fine. It was all projection. But when she saw how close she came to doing that—creating a whole lot more unpleasant experience than just the saying no—she realized we can't tell clearly. That deep ingrained sense that unpleasant is bad, and so we should be able to avoid it, that drive to hold ourselves separate from uncomfortable and unwanted situations—it distorts everything.

So that's one aspect. Meeting whatever place mindfulness notices the dosa arising, whether it's right at the sense contact or way off into fear or fury—this is the middle way, the Buddha's middle way, bringing mindfulness and wisdom right to the point of recognition.

Our two most common habitual responses when we recognize or experience unpleasant dosa emotions are either more dosa towards ourselves, or avoidance. We get really aversive to ourselves, thinking, "What's wrong with me?" A lot of self-judgment arises, a lot of stories about all the aversive things in the past. Or we think, "This shouldn't be here," and we avoid, deny, repress the whole thing.

So often people are having some experience of dosa—maybe not huge—but the self-judging mind comes in around it. And then they say, "Well, it's all these multiple layers of dosa," and you get lost in each story. There's this thing going on, and then there's the self-judging, and "Why am I self-judging?" And you see it's from your history. "Oh, my history, but I shouldn't be thinking of my history. I'm really self-judging, and that's also bad." And we're lost in all the little stories.

Just get big and notice—that's just dosa flavoring all the thoughts. You don't have to land on and believe the self-judging any more than you have to believe that the maintenance guys don't know how to take care of the furnace. That's just dosa fueling thought. It's just that the self-judging one's a little closer to home.

So that's one way—the dosa way of dealing with dosa. Hate it, blame yourself, blame others.

The other way is that sometimes we really embrace it, as if our anger or fear is a really important, real emotion that can lead to action. That's kind of like the greed way of really going for it. Sometimes anger, even fear—fear doesn't feel good, but they're energizing. They bring up a lot of energy, especially if we've been repressing fear or anger and all that energy has been stultified. So sometimes when it comes up, there can really be a lot of energy.

The misperception we can make is to think that energy is only available through the dosa or the greed, as if it couldn't come another way.

I've more than once had people say to me, really sincerely, deep in practice, "You know, if I give up greed and dosa"—as if we could just give it up, that would be nice—"if I give up greed and dosa, then what am I going to do? Just sit in my room the rest of my life? How am I going to do anything?"

I always find that so sad—that the only motivations for action are greed and dosa, that you can't imagine something other.

The Dalai Lama was once asked about why there seems to be such a lack of compassion in human society.

And he said, perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as emotional states, fueling and reinforcing them.

So this isn't the Dalai Lama now, this is me. But when we're really hating, when we're caught in fear and anger, we're giving dosa all the power, not really seeing what it is.

The Dalai Lama again: if we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement—and by reinforcement, I simply mean what James was saying the other night, that wise attention and mindfulness to the wholesome is reinforcing it—if we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

And not only compassion. We can act from wisdom. We can act from determination. We can act from caring. We can act from generosity. There are all kinds of wholesome motivations that we can act from.

So again, it's just conditioned. And dosa is such a strong force at times that it does take us over. We don't know how to move out of it. And so it's like, "Wow, this is so real. This is what we know." It's hard to trust the other. It's hard to see that being able to step aside from the dosa and move from wisdom, move from connection, can sometimes have a really strong effect.

There's this story I heard on the radio about something called "non-complementary behavior." But I take it as acting not from fear and aversion, not from dosa, when that would be the normal way to act.

Two families, somewhere in the States—it sounded like a suburb because they were outside, kind of in the backyard of their house but away from the house, having an evening dinner together at picnic tables, enjoying a nice meal and wine. There were some woods around, some forest.

Suddenly into the middle of that, a man came with a gun out of nowhere. They didn't know where he came from. He held the gun on these people and said, "Give me your money or I'll shoot."

Of course—panic, fear, aversion, the whole thing. But first they said, "Well, we don't have any money. We're out here in the middle of nowhere. We don't have any money."

He was getting really angry. "I don't care. Give me your money."

The first response from someone was kind of angry: "What would your mother say if she saw you here?"

That didn't work. He said, "I don't have a mother."

So they were getting scared. But then suddenly one person just had this sense—probably didn't think it

through—but could move away from the hatred and the fear and just looked at this guy and said, "Would you like a glass of wine?"

He said, "Oh, okay."

So he took the glass of wine and sat down at the table with them. I don't know what they were feeling, but they're drinking the wine with him, they start chatting back and forth. They're chatting for a while. And at one point, the man says, "Well, I see I've come to the wrong place."

So he gets up and wants hugs. Then he says, "Okay, I'm leaving."

They offer him a glass of wine. He leaves with his glass of wine. They run like hell into the house and lock the door. I mean, they weren't idiots. They ran like hell into the house and locked the door.

But then later, when they went out, he had very, very carefully placed his empty wine glass outside the door and gone away.

You wouldn't think that would work. But sometimes it does. Not always, of course, but just to know—sometimes it does.

So, sati-pañña: meeting with simple awareness as it's showing up now.

As Sharon says, opening to the truth of things as they are is what frees our mind from fear and selfishness. However things are.

So now I'll give a couple of examples from my own experience, and you can find your own different ways of bringing sati, bringing mindfulness wisdom, at whichever point you might notice the unpleasant or the aversion.

The first example is easiest in a way—when the sense contact that's unpleasant is really obvious, but it's not something you can fix, and it keeps on going. It's really driving you nuts. You can be seeing the aversion, but you're really spinning in it. When you're actually able to say, "Let me try to just bring mindfulness wisdom right to the point of contact, just with the hearing, and see what happens"—try and watch that whole cause and effect chain that the Buddha described.

A simple example: practicing in Burma. I have ten million stories of practicing in Burma. In terms of noise, it's a great place for stories.

The first time I was ever practicing there in my little hut—I had to sit in my hut because in the meditation hall there were no chairs in those years, and I can't sit cross-legged anymore—so I had to sit in my hut, which was okay, but that's part of the story. I couldn't go back to the hall. And across the little road, not even as far as the back of this wall, there was construction. That goes without saying. If you're in a meditation center in Burma, there will be construction.

Just across the way, they decided partway into my several-weeks retreat that they were sanding long, long strips of wood with an electric sander. Do you know what an electric sander sounds like? Do you know how noisy? From 7:30 in the morning until 5:30 in the afternoon. Really loud, really close. Sometimes they'd take a little break, but you didn't know when, so you couldn't count on it.

You go through all the things—"I'm just an equanimist"—but underneath, if we don't notice the pulling away, because that's what it is, the pulling away, not wanting to be there with that, then the resistance grows and the aversion grows. You don't quite notice it, you think you're present, until suddenly you're going bonkers.

Then after a few days, they brought in a second sander that was in a different key. So they'd both be going all day.

And finally—it's usually "finally" because we try everything else—you realize the only thing to do is totally surrender into the point of contact. Hearing is like this. Just totally surrender. No attention pulling away even a little bit. Hearing is like this, unpleasant. And then it's just what it is.

Like the thing I quoted from Ajahn Sumedho: "I can't bear this another moment"—and then I found that I could. Something like that, which isn't really hurting you—I wasn't in danger, there was nothing I could do other than go out and yell at the workers, there was nowhere else I could go—you just die into this sound, that point of sense contact and unpleasant, and see the whole thing. In those moments, it's really quite okay. The whole sense of story and struggle is gone.

Sure, there's a later moment when the mind is tired, you forget, and the habit of jumping away from unpleasant comes up again. But then mindfulness recognizes how much more complicated that makes everything, and it's actually easier just to come back and be. Okay, that's unpleasant. Sounds like that.

We were once in another place in Burma—never mind, I'll never finish if I tell that story. I could give you so many examples from my life; you don't need them all.

So that's one approach: you can go right to the point of sense contact.

Of course, a lot of times we can't do that. Sometimes what we miss isn't a huge storm going on, but something's just off a little bit. Often what we don't recognize is a more subtle, pervasive background mood. I think I might have mentioned this in instructions the other day—we don't quite pick it up, but somehow everything seems a little off. You go out to look at that beautiful moonlight last night—I don't know if you saw it, it was incredible.

If you're in the right mind state, that moonlight is incredible. If you're not? "Ah, the moon. What is it?" When we're attuned, there's so much joy. "Let me have some tea." But then, "Ah, the tea." And you go, "What's going on?" It all started with just a background mood. So then the question becomes, well, what's triggering it? What was the sense contact? This can actually be quite fun to explore.

A friend told me he was on retreat here and had a day exactly like that—this subtle, off, little background dose of something he couldn't identify. Finally he thought, "Let me just sit here and bring full attention. What's happening now? Quit trying to figure it out, just be with what's happening now." He brought his attention into his body and mind and realized—the sweatshirt he had on was a little bit tight. When he moved in a certain way it pulled, and it was unpleasant. He hadn't noticed. That's all it takes sometimes. It doesn't have to be the horrible things of the world. If things are a little tight and you don't notice it's unpleasant, the mind leaps away and dosa comes flying in.

Really interesting to see. It takes the personal out. You don't then need to go, "How stupid am I?" You just go, "Wow, look at that. Cause and effect." Dosa is doing its job. But mindfulness can do its job and come in to say, "Oh, that's what's happening." And then wisdom does its job, which is to say, "Okay, tight movement feels like this." And all the other stuff doesn't have to go on.

Or with a thought, like the thought "I'm no good, I can't do this." You kind of know it's there but kind of not. It's so familiar that we are believing it and not recognizing that the thought itself is perceived with unpleasant feeling tone. We don't quite know it—we just think, "Yeah, it's unpleasant, but it's unpleasant because I'm so bad, I am bad, and that's unpleasant." We don't recognize that the arising thought itself is actually the sense contact leading to the mind jumping away, feeling the aversion.

So again, noticing the state in the mind. Noticing sometimes the idea in the background, the view—"I just can't do it right," "It shouldn't be like this." A number of people have mentioned to me noticing some little idea in the mind: "It could just be a little bit better than this. This just isn't quite good enough." And when they look at the idea, they wonder, "What isn't quite good enough? I don't even know. I'm just walking in the forest and present, but somehow it's not quite good enough."

When we can notice that idea in the background, we recognize, "Oh right, this is coming with unpleasant vedana." Just see it. That's all.

And then, of course, there are times when this subtlety is not within the realm of mindfulness or recognition, and we simply find ourselves in a huge storm of fear or anger or disappointment—whatever form of dosa it is. Still, at whatever level mindfulness can come to meet it, let it meet it as it is. Not the story, but really letting awareness come in and be with that energy—the energy of that difficult feeling. Say it's anger. Say it's fear.

The alternative is that we totally embrace it, which means we go off into the story and just keep feeding it. That's not what I'm talking about.

But it's also not saying anger shouldn't be here, fear shouldn't be here—push it away and let me just feel my foot pressing on the ground. That's impossible because it's just too strong. But we can bring the awareness in to notice the quality in the mind that's being aware. It isn't subtle, but we can really learn how to bring mindfulness in a big way.

So maybe sitting when the energy's too strong and you keep getting lost in the story—go out and walk, walk really fast. Not so much analyzing, but feeling that roiling energy, for lack of a better word. Just feeling that mental state, that aversion, that dosa, just swirling, swirling. But mindfulness is there with it in the big picture.

In fact, sometimes I call it stomping meditation. You go out and you're just walking, walking—anger, anger, anger. So it's not tidy. It's not all neatly noting "anger, anger, unpleasant sensation, negative thought." It's messier than that. But it's still mindfulness when you're not just going, "Yeah, and they did that, and by God, I'm going to get them." Instead, you're feeling: anger feels like this. Let it rip. It's not going to do anything if you really don't have to be afraid of it. We start to actually see the nature even of this strong anger—the wisdom of being with whatever's occurring, even with the unpleasant. At some point, with steady mindfulness, wisdom comes in and we start to see things as they really are, even a huge, strong mental state.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He's saying "I" is just a thought—we've been through that, now you all have that covered. "Thoughts and feelings, thoughts and emotions have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When a thought, a mood of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is that anger actually holding a weapon? Can it burn things like a fire? Can it crush things like a rock? Carry them away like a violent river? No. Anger, like any other thought or mood or feeling, has no true self-existence, not even a definite location. It is just like wind roaring in empty space."

I love that. Let it roar in the empty space of mindfulness and wisdom.

So instead of allowing these wild thoughts to enslave us, we realize their essential emptiness. "When you see through this energy of hatred within, you will discover there is not one single enemy left outside. Otherwise, even if you could overpower everyone in the whole world, your hatred would only grow stronger. Indulging it will never make it subside. Examine the nature of hatred"—or any of the dosa states—"you will find that it is no more than a thought and a feeling. And when wisdom sees it as it is, it can dissolve like a cloud in the sky."

I know it's not that easy, but sometimes that happens. The only way this clear seeing of wisdom can come about is through the steadiness of just simple presence with what's occurring, with the difficult, with the unpleasant. It's the opposite of what our deep habits are. But this is the avenue not only into understanding with wisdom the nature of difficult emotions, but also what opens us to understanding the nature of reality in all the different ways.

The jewel in the heart of the understanding of the First Noble Truth, in the heart of the ability to just be with the difficult, to bear witness, is the movement, the natural expression of bearing witness into compassion, into love, into generosity, into recognizing the insubstantial nature—which doesn't mean a cold emptiness. It's more that sense of non-separation, the connectedness of all of us. What I mentioned in

my earlier talk that Archbishop Tutu calls Ubuntu: we're all connected.

I have so much more to share, but let me say two things quickly.

First, of course, sometimes when it's a real storm of fear, guilt, or anger, even what I just said to do—stomp, let the wind roar in empty space—even touching it, the storm is just so much stronger than the energy of mindfulness at that time. That's not a failure. Just recognizing that you open for a moment into the really difficult and you feel it's overwhelming, completely identified again. Even though intellectually we have the tools, at that point the mindfulness just isn't the equal of the strength of the dosa.

So we recognize—and we've talked about this a lot—when by bringing attention to the difficult, the dosa just grows and grows, then that's when we skillfully shift our awareness to something more neutral or something pleasant. So that we don't drown in the difficult situation.

I have another friend who used to do retreats years ago, and she had a lot of really difficult emotion and trauma that would come up. She said she really learned something from her grown sons. They would tell her about going to the ocean in Hawaii or somewhere with big waves. She would go out in the waves, and when a big wave would start coming, she'd always turn her back to it and run. And of course, that just knocks you over.

Her sons would always say, "Ma, no, you've got to dive into the wave, not turn around and run." But she'd always turn around and run and get whacked. And she said just once she was able to simply dive into the wave.

So it's sort of like that. We're diving into the wave. But sometimes all we can do is put a toe in. Just put a toe in. And then boom, it's whacking us. So turn your attention to something neutral.

Really, we're taking care of the awareness. We're taking care to re-recognize, to refresh the awareness so it can come back into being able to be present without all the distortions of the flavoring. So it's really important, as Tejaniya says, to take care of the awareness, to adjust your attitude first, to see when it's really too strong like that.

So it's not about forcing yourself to go into it and drown. But again, it's mindfulness wisdom to see, to recognize that the awareness isn't strong enough right now. So shift to something neutral or even pleasant. It can be helpful when I find there's just this total, total flavoring of aversion, but big time. And it seems little, but it can really help to consciously open up awareness and just see what other sense contacts are arising now that are neutral or even pleasant. They don't have to be as important as the big one that's fueling the dosa, but it really helps.

Thich Nhat Hanh would say—and when I first read this I thought, "But that's ridiculous"—but now I know what he meant. During the Vietnam War, he worked with young social workers who would engage with both sides, with people in the villages, with people that were suffering, so much suffering in the middle of

a war. And of course they'd get overwhelmed. We get overwhelmed with the suffering, with the difficulty in ourselves and in the world. No one's saying we don't.

And he would say, "I would tell the young social workers to go at night out into the field and smell the fresh smells of the herbs and the flowers." And I thought, they're in the middle of a war, and he's saying go into the field and smell the fresh herbs at night? What is—I mean, but that's it. That's an intellectual resistance. What he's doing is just this, just what Tejaniya says: taking the attention that's glommed into the dosa-filled state and doesn't know how to get out, and shifting it to something neutral, to something pleasant, not as a running away, but to refresh the awareness, to come back to wisdom, to come back to balance.

So just little things. And try—I don't know, I have a very critical mind in that way. I just say, "Oh, that's stupid. Okay, I'm really suffering when I think about the suffering in the world. I should go out and look at the beautiful moon." And then my mind goes, "Yeah, you can look at the moon. You have the right to look at the moon. You're lucky you can look at the moon. What about everything else?" That's just dosa again.

Just connect. Just allow the mindfulness, the quality of the citta, to refresh itself. Because really what we're doing is moving from our obsessive relationship to each object that arises, not using each object to give us a sense of self or good or bad or self-justification. Just the objects, whatever they are—they serve the function of opening us into the quality of mindfulness and awareness again. So this is really more of what we're doing. And then when the awareness is balanced, we can come back and be, perhaps, with the difficult experience.

I've found in my own life that often the times when I've been feeling disconnected—not lost in aversion, not noticing that, but just feeling disconnected, either isolated or kind of off. It could be in daily life or on retreat. And I stop and look over time, and I often see that there's some difficult emotion, either that's present that I'm trying not to see, or there's a thought that it might be coming and I don't want to feel it. Just something the mind doesn't want to feel. And in trying to not feel that, there arises this sense of being alienated and disconnected from everything, because we can't shut down selectively.

I remember once someone in my family was suffering a lot. Nothing I could do about it. And just thinking about it was so painful. The sadness and the sense of helplessness. Helplessness is a really unpleasant feeling to feel. It was so painful that I'd kind of pull back—"Oh no, let's not go there." Not consciously, but just a little bit pulling back. So then you pull back from everything. And when I could see, "Oh right, that's what's happening"—wow. Really feeling helpless is like this.

It feels crummy. Being helpless doesn't suddenly transform into feeling good—don't get me wrong. It still feels crummy. But that steady willingness to just bear witness with mindfulness, with wisdom, to your own personal experience or to what's happening in the world—that steadiness of being present—at some point it does open. Out of the alienation, you find again the sense of connectedness with life, the tenderness of life, the beauty of life, the sense of appreciation also of the good.

We can't do that with an act of will. And it's amazing how that comes, at times. Then we forget again. But with the willingness or the ability just for moments to be present, to bear witness with the difficulty, something shifts.

Let me share one more story about this. It's kind of a simple story—not about huge suffering in the world—but about how we can work with these teachings on retreat.

Some years ago—actually, a long time ago, many years ago—I started to have some symptoms that turned out to be an autoimmune disease. At that time, it was quite painful. And once they figured out what it was, that didn't help, because there was nothing they could do about it. These conditions can go in all different directions, as you know.

The way my mind related to it at the beginning—and this is common—first there was denial. "This isn't happening. What can we do?" Then just trying not to feel. Then self-blame: "This is my fault. What did I do wrong? I was in the wrong place. If I were really a good spiritual person, I would be able to have the right thoughts and not get sick." Have you ever had that thought? "If I could really figure it out..." I mean, Louise Hay—she's got a lot to answer for.

But then at one point I thought, "Hmm, Ramana Maharshi died of cancer." He had something going on with understanding things, you know. So, hello—everybody gets sick. Everybody gets sick and dies.

But anyways, this whole self-blame thing. And then the fear, the aversion. "If I can't walk very well now, I'll never be able to walk. I'll never be able to do this. What's it going to be like in the future?" All the fear and negativity mushrooming. And then everybody coming and saying, "Try this, try that. How are you going to live your life? What should you do?" There was a lot of suffering and a lot of confusion because, you know, with the ten million things to try, what should I do?

Cold is really hard for me. People said, "Well, you should leave here and go live in Arizona, and you should not eat any more gluten, of course. And you should give up caffeine and sugar, and that's going to fix you." I actually tried that. It did not improve my mood, and it did not improve my physical experience either.

So I was trying all these things. But at one point—at one point—I recognized that present moment mindfulness was such a refuge. The present moment of just landing in the body, being really present. Then you'd feel there were lots of moments of pain or stiffness or unpleasantness that weren't killer. But the not being with it led into all this future thinking and blame and confusion about what to do—no way to see clearly.

Present moment mindfulness. Oh, whatever's going to happen in the future, who knows? It's like this now. And from that, I learned so much. The mind would start off into the future. I'd be trying to clean the bathtub and could hardly bend over to do it. What's happening now? It's like this. It's unpleasant, okay.

So freeing.

And out of that, really this genuine sense of compassion arose—not "I decided I should be compassionate." That has never worked for me. But just being with it, this sense of compassion for the body, which didn't really feel like "me"—just taking care of it instead of hating it. That seems obvious. And then from that place of being really present, the attention kind of cleared, and I was able to make decisions about what to do—not based on fear, not based on wild hopes. You try things. I tried the diet. I could see it didn't make me happy, plus it didn't work. So I stopped doing that diet. Go to Arizona and hide in the corner? I don't think so.

Maybe I'll go with my friends to India. That's what I did. They were with me. They helped me up and down into the tuk-tuks. And I went back to drinking a lot of chai and eating chapatis, and I was really happy. I didn't get worse.

You can make decisions not based on fear or aversion when you're being clearly present with what is. I could see if something made it worse. You could take care. I could see if it didn't matter. You could take care. But just the ability to be present with the unpleasant—it frees our heart and mind from all this unnecessary suffering and confusion of separation.

There was one line from Mingyur Rinpoche. He speaks of a peace that is not dependent on the presence or absence of any pleasant or unpleasant feeling. Peace is dependent on just our total presence of mindfulness wisdom in this moment. Whatever this moment is, it's the moment that reveals the truth.

As Dogen said, if you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?

Thank you for your kind and patient attention.

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