Things As They Have Come to Be

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:21

The best way I could introduce what I want to talk about tonight—which is simply mindfulness—is to share in a simple way what to me is at the very heart of our practice, and why I spend my life trying to share and teach this.

There's something about the Buddhist teachings that, despite the tons of teachings and all the lists and suttas and the Vinaya, when you get to the very heart of it, what the Buddha is teaching is so simple and elegant. He's teaching about understanding how our mind works.

You may have noticed that meditation is essentially the work of the mind. Our body comes along, it's useful, it helps us. But the seed of suffering and confusion arises in the mind stream, in the mind or the heart, here, now, in this moment. And the understanding that leads to peace—to recognizing the natural peace and ease of the mind and body as it is, to freedom from suffering and confusion—also arises here. The seed and the experience of it arises in this mind, in this heart stream, in this particular moment. They're not both happening at the same time, mind you. But it's always now, in this moment, in this mind, in this heart.

The heart of our practice, the heart of this work of the mind, the key catalyst you could say, is this attitude of mindfulness that we have been talking about and will continue to talk about. Mindfulness or awareness: simply, with full presence, knowing what's happening just as it's happening. That's all it is. It doesn't seem like much. We actually try to add too much extra to it. It doesn't seem like much, yet it's the seed of transforming our suffering to wisdom, to freedom. In itself, it's the catalyst for transformation.

The question may arise: what exactly is transformed? And this, again, is where we come to what I find so elegant about the way the Buddha taught.

The deliverance from suffering, from confusion, the experience of freedom—what we're trying to share in our understanding of that here is not about taking on another set of beliefs or another faith. For sure, there's wisdom, there's knowledge, there's information that we're sharing that you take in that's helpful. But freedom isn't about buying into the information and having another set of stuff that you believe and can say and can write.

Everything we say is trying to be helpful—not that you have to believe us, but to support your gathering interest to turn your attention around and look at what's going on in your mind, in your heart, right now. To really begin to get a sense of how interesting that is, how exciting that is. When you're not trying to make a certain thing happen, but you just want to see how it works, the whole world is our playground for

exploration. Anything that comes up in your mind can be the object of mindfulness. No exceptions.

So the freedom of the Buddha isn't about adopting a set of beliefs. And it's also—and this sometimes is harder to get in meditation, because meditation is a weird activity—we come here, we sit down, we say watch your breath, and it feels different from our life. So we think something different should happen. When you sit and your mind does its same old, same old stuff, you think there must be something wrong, that you're doing it wrong.

But actually, we've set up this very elaborate support so you can sit and walk and, as Jack said, spend two more hours with your own tedious thoughts. We've got nine days not to end them, but to really start to recognize how they work. Because they were there before, they're here now, and they'll come up again later.

The meditation looks like we're trying to create a new experience, a different world, that freedom has got to be something other than this. This can't be it, right? This mind, this body sitting here sweating all day—is this freedom?

Guess what, folks? Freedom isn't about changing the externals. And it's also not that we're going to get to and create a really wonderful mind state that's going to last. Wonderful mind states will come and they'll go. Horrible ones will come. And you may not believe it, but they'll go.

Really boring, calm ones will come. You may notice them, you may not, and they'll go.

And the freedom the Buddha's talking about is not about awakening into some other world. And this is the part that I love, that's so elegant. In the way he describes it, the beginning of the path, what gets us going, is some kind of right view. It's called right understanding, but I like the translation of right view. It gives the sense of recognizing accurately. And the end of the path is right view.

What is it that allows for the wisdom that arises in our mind that frees us from suffering? It's not being somewhere else. It's recognizing accurately the way things have come to be in this moment and this moment. The Buddha's not saying we have to change things. He's saying we don't have a clue what's really going on. And that's our problem. And we don't know that we don't have a clue. That's our bigger problem.

The fact that you're all here, that's the beginning or well into the middle of the path. Right view is the first beginning of "wait, there's something else going on." Because how I respond doesn't really seem to meet the situation. Everything I do is for my own happiness, and somehow I didn't get there yet for very long.

There are lots of different names for different kinds of insights that come and go in different models. You don't need to know them right now. But one of them, the Pali word is *yathābhūta ñāṇadassana*, which is usually translated as knowledge and vision of things as they are. This is a very profound level of understanding, just on the edge of freedom.

I've been told on good authority from a couple of different friends who are much more Pali scholars than

I, that the word *yathābhūta*, often translated as "things as they are," has a more accurate translation in terms of the grammar: "things as they have come to be."

It's great, isn't it? Because what it gives is that sense of movement, the sense of cause and effect and conditionality, and there is no steady state. Things as they have come to be in this moment—and the accurate recognition of that is what opens our hearts and minds to peace, to freedom. That's what's so cool. We don't have to create something else, and you don't have to change your personality. Good luck anyway. But it's about learning: how come we don't see things the way they are? *Yathābhūta*—how come we don't, and how can we? Guess what? Mindfulness.

But "things as they have come to be" is such a living phrase. It really takes one into the experience that we don't recognize. Because one of the ways of understanding things as they have come to be is recognizing that each of our experiences in this moment is the effect of innumerable causes and conditions, isn't it?

In fact, if you start thinking—okay, you can think for ten seconds while I talk, I know you're doing that anyway—but if you start to think about what are some of the causes and conditions that allowed you to be here? You might think: you could get time off work, you had enough money, you're healthy enough, your spouse let you go. But if you keep going, where can you stop? Where can you stop? Everything runs into everything. You go back to the food and the farmers who grow the food and the trucks that transport it and the people who drill the oil and back to the dinosaurs, because otherwise there wouldn't be oil. And it goes, and everything is completely connected. You can't pull anything out and say it's separate.

Things as they have come to be in this moment cannot be otherwise. And this next moment they will be otherwise, because things as they have come to be, the conditions are always changing. Even as we're talking, the words I'm saying are different, the sensations in your body may have changed, a different thought is there, a different mood is there. You hear me, you don't, you're somewhere else. The energy in the room—every moment it's changing. Things as they have come to be now and now and now.

And so the ability, the willingness to be so present for that without trying to fix it, even just to recognize that's what's happening—because do we really recognize that most of the time? Recognizing it in terms of right view is different from thinking, "Oh yeah, that's how it is." I mean, I can say that.

We can say it. We can think it. That may not be how I'm perceiving in the moment.

But that's the elegance of the Buddha's teaching. We awaken into this world more fully, into how things are. And what makes that possible? It's this quality. It's not the only thing, but it's our big avenue in, our big key in—this quality of mindful awareness. This quality of seeing, just being present with fullness of attention for whatever's arising.

And this, of course, is what makes it wise mindfulness, what makes it mindfulness at all. In that moment, there's not a clinging to make it stay. There's not an aversion trying to push it away, or fear. And there's not the sense that whatever's going on is only happening because it's all about me. Or at least we know

when that's happening. Or we don't know it's happening—that's delusion.

There's a statement from the Buddha. He said, "This Dhamma is visible here and now." He's talking about the truth, the way things are. But to what extent is it visible here and now? To the extent that greed, hatred or aversion or fear, and delusion or confusion are not present in the citta. Citta is a word that encompasses mind and heart.

So to the extent that these are absent—and in a moment, not that you have to somehow experience a mind and heart that never again feels greed, never again feels aversion, never again feels delusion. That's said to be the mind and heart of a completely awakened being. But as has been said before, it's moments. So any moment that there's real presence with this clarity of mind that isn't colored or distorted—and I'll talk more about how that works, the distortions of greed, of hatred, of delusion—in that moment, there's the potential to just recognize accurately what's happening. Whatever it is that's happening, no big whoop.

And the steadiness of this mindfulness—this is really the key—is the continuity. Not that every single moment you're aware, of course not. But the sense of willingness to just come back, be here, be here, be here. At first, you have to consciously remember all the time, right? But those of you who've done retreats before and have incorporated this in your life know, I hope, that the mindfulness begins to get its own inertia. Inertia meaning a body in motion keeps going in motion.

Just like anger, for example, has its own inertia. Have you noticed? If you're really angry and not aware of it, you keep thinking about the person you're angry at and what they did. What happens to the anger? The more you think about that stupid jerk and what they did to me. Or you just look at them. Someone here bugs the heck out of you. You don't even know them, and they're sitting way on the other side of the room. You know nothing about them, but you just look at them when you're angry. In fact, you're calm, and you're scared of calm, so you look at them so you can get angry. Something could happen, right? It gets its own inertia. Then whatever next poor sucker walks into your line of vision—then you go to the group interview, then you think about that unfinished business you had with your partner, and you know, "I'm going to write that letter right now. I'm going to clean this up." It just gets its own momentum.

Well, luckily, the wisdom factors also get their own momentum, and that's what we're cultivating here. The mindfulness, just the sense of willingness to be present, starts to remember itself. And that's why there's sitting, and that's why there's walking, and that's why there's noticing what you're doing when you're eating and when you're taking a shower and when you're doing your work meditation. Because it begins to get its own momentum. And when the mindfulness is there, if we notice greed or hatred or delusion, fine. That's the next arising object of mindfulness.

When seen clearly, it's no problem. It might not be pleasant, but as the Buddha said, we're not awakening into a different world. So perhaps you've noticed that not everything is pleasant in your world. Does anyone have a life where every moment is pleasant? No one would be here if they had that.

Is there somewhere in the back of your mind—and I've had this for years, it keeps slipping back in—the unacknowledged, unspoken idea that actually freedom means everything unpleasant goes away? That no more unpleasant thoughts will arise? That your family is going to start acting right? That you're not going to get fired from your job? That the weather will cooperate? That people will start behaving the way we think they ought to? I can tell you the answer to that. It's a big no way.

If you look at the Buddha, who we often look to for inspiration, for looking at how it is—when he awoke, his awakening is often described as this sense of interconnectedness, the dependence, the cause and effect. What I was saying: things as they have come to be, this constant movement and interconnection, really getting that that's all there is. But then how did he spend his life? He still had a body with headaches and backaches and got sick. He spent his life walking barefoot around India in the heat, begging for food, living in the woods. There were definitely some unpleasant physical sensations going on with that, one meal a day. His clan's people got into wars over water rights and killed each other. His different monks would get into battles—not physical, but verbal. "No, this is what the Buddha said." "No, that's the right way." There's one sutta where he comes and tries to mediate, and they basically say, "Go away. It's okay, we can take care of it." This is the Buddha. They say, "No, no, no. We don't need your help. We can take care of it." He goes away and says, "Foolish, misguided men." He had to deal with organizational problems, people not getting along. There were tons of people who came to challenge him, basically trying to show him up. It's not my idea of a pleasant life, if I was thinking of one. But a peaceful one? So clear.

The world he awoke into—he was more present, moving out of compassion for the welfare of all beings. The freedom is all about this: when we understand through accurate recognition, our whole relationship changes. We respond, don't we? We don't react—we respond from how we perceive a situation to be.

Have you ever had a time when someone has done something that either really hurt you or made you angry, or you think they're so insensitive, so selfish? You get all worked up in whatever way. And then later, either you really tune into them or you find out another piece of information, and you discover that the story you made up about why they did what they did was completely and totally wrong. Totally wrong. And I want to point out, this happens a lot more often than we might know. When you know the reason, you go, "Oh, they were in so much pain at that time. They couldn't help it. They couldn't even see past themselves. They didn't even know they hurt me. There was so much pain." And that whole anger just shifts to compassion, which is the natural expression of wisdom, of clear seeing. Yes, you were still hurt. But when we understand, it just becomes part of the bigger picture, and there's a natural compassion. It's a simple example, but you get a sense of what I mean.

How we respond is based on how we understand. How we understand is based on how we're really present, what we can perceive. So this is really, really powerful. *Yathābhūta*—things as they have come to be.

The heart of our mindfulness practice isn't about trying to get to a certain place. What are all the

instructions, all the techniques—not only the ones we've given here, but all the different instructions and techniques just within the so-called Vipassana tradition, which isn't really an accurate label, but within the Theravada Buddhist tradition? Many forms of meditation coming from different angles. But the heart of all of it is to give us the interest, the willingness, the courage, and the capacity to be fully present with this moment however it's manifesting—not to make a different moment.

As soon as we're going for a different moment, there's no way to recognize *yathābhūta* in this moment, because we've already jumped over it, dismissed it, disliked it. "No, I want something different. Something different's better." Well, what's actually here? "I don't know, but something different's better."

Just to say a bit about the instructions we've been giving here: when talking about feeling the sensations of breath to help collect and steady the mind, there are forms of meditation that would completely focus on one experience—say, for example, sensations of breath. Whenever there's thinking or hearing or whatever, you might notice what it is, you might not even notice what it is, but you come right back and very gently just keep surrendering moment after moment only into that experience. This is called either samatha meditation or absorption, one-pointedness, and it can develop a very strong power of mind. Other things happen along the way, not so pleasant. And that concentrated mind can then be used to investigate what's happening. But that's a long road.

Vipassana meditation—so-called insight meditation—is more accented on the wisdom side. What we're doing here is Vipassana. So when we're talking about feeling the sensations of breath, being with the breath as something arises—really, that's only the beginning. The breath is a tool. And it doesn't even have to be sensations of breath. It could be sensations in the body. It could be hearing. It really doesn't matter.

In terms of mindfulness—and if you really can believe this, it saves so much suffering—mindfulness awareness can be aware of anything. In terms of cultivating the steadiness, the purity of mindfulness, it absolutely does not matter what the object of mindfulness is. Mindfulness doesn't care.

Being mindful of breath when the mind is filled with greed—that actually isn't mindfulness. That's cultivating greed. "I want to feel the breath. I want to feel the breath." If we turn around and notice, "Oh, that's wanting"—that's mindfulness. Wanting is like this. And the mindfulness of it is just seeing how it is.

If you're coming to be with the breath and you feel clutching, clutching, and then you notice the clutching—it stays or it goes. That's not our job. Mindfulness's job is not to change it. It's just to see: what's the nature of wanting in this moment, and this moment? In that steadiness of seeing clearly, that's what allows wisdom to arise.

Wisdom comes. We don't have to make wisdom. This is a huge relief, because actually we can't. All we can make up is what we already know. Mostly we sit here and make up something we think should be happening, and it doesn't happen, and then we think it's wrong because that's what should be happening. We get all twisted in a knot.

All you have to do is notice, "Oh, this is fear in the mind." That's all. Doesn't feel like enough, does it? "I didn't come here just to get all twisted up and notice, 'Fear in the mind.'" Fear is like this. This is how fear behaves. This is the nature of fear.

But what we're doing is cultivating awareness—awareness of fear. That awareness is just as good as awareness of bliss, or awareness of the sensation of breath, or awareness of a step, or awareness of calm, or awareness of joy, or awareness of mettā. Awareness doesn't care. And so we can learn to bring awareness and interest to anything. And when there's interest, there's usually not fear or aversion or clinging.

How does that work? That's interesting.

But it's hard to trust this. Hard to trust this.

So we're cultivating. We've been using the sensations of breath in the instructions just as a tool to help the mind get a little bit steady, so we even have a clue what's going on at the other sense doors. If we were to say, "Come in, notice whatever's arising—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, emotions—just notice without distortion of greed or hatred or confusion. Just notice it. Stay steady. Go." Five hours later: Am I thinking? Am I aware? Is there a difference between thinking and what's happening?

So we get a little bit steady. But then we open up. If you're sitting with the breath and hearing comes and you note "hearing," then really be with the hearing. That's what's happening now. Notice the hearing. Notice how effortless the awareness of hearing is. Did you notice that? Hearing comes. You don't have to plan: "In a minute that bird's going to make a sound, I better be ready." No.

You're sitting and a burning pain arises in your knee. Now, if it happened yesterday, you might be thinking, "That burning pain is going to arise and I better be ready." But that's not the burning pain, is it? That's fear, which you didn't plan on. Oh, this is fear. That's what's happening now.

Same with the breath. The sensations of breath arise in their own time, and mindfulness can be with it. So whatever's happening—sensation, emotion, thought—it arises, mindfulness meets it, notices.

But when we're really lost, kind of lost, don't know what's happening, everything's just too shaky or confused, then we have our friend: the sensations of breath or body or hearing, to help recollect that quality of receptive clarity, clear undistorted mindfulness. Because that's really our friend. That's really what we're learning to recognize and trust and really get.

It's so simple and so accessible that we're looking for something too big.

So right now, however you're sitting, can you feel your hands? Yes? No? Yes? Yeah. Wasn't very difficult, was it? Did it take much effort? As soon as I said "feel your hands," you could feel it, right? Just feel some sensations. That's mindfulness. That is mindfulness.

It doesn't have to always be incredibly focused and precise. Sometimes it is. But sometimes, when you're really trying to feel the breath, to feel the sensations, to feel the foot, to hold on—that's not mindfulness. That's a certain kind of extraness, I would say, in the mind. Wanting, striving, pushing.

Notice it. Ah, pushing feels like this. That's mindfulness again.

It's hard to trust. We want a little more oomph. But this is really where we begin to see that steadiness is more accessible when you don't feel like everything has to be so incredibly focused and precise and clear. We can't keep that up. You can do it for a while, and then you're exhausted, or you get a headache, or you just say, "Well, to heck with this. I'm taking a couple hours off." And then I'm coming back.

Notice your mind going, "To heck with this. I'm taking a couple hours off." That's mindfulness. You notice that. "I've had it with this." It feels like this. It's not so hard. It gets really interesting.

So it's not unattainable or esoteric—recognizing things as they have come to be, learning how our mind works, really beginning to trust. In a moment, we can see, when we're learning how our mind works, how the source of suffering comes up, how it fades, how the sense of peace comes up with wisdom, how it fades. They're just like the back and forth of the hand, this close. Suffering, suffering. "I don't want this. I don't like it like this." Oh, not liking is like that. It still doesn't feel good—it doesn't start feeling good. But it's a shift from being caught in the distortion to the awareness of it. And that awareness is what we're cultivating.

So even awareness of, say, aversion—if we recognize, "Oh, aversion feels like this"—in that moment what's being cultivated is a pure consciousness, pure mind that's not filled with aversion. You see? So it's always just that close.

I think it was this fall during our three-month retreat, Joseph was welcoming people, and he said something that kind of stuck with me. I hope it's useful. First he was saying, you know, this is a great privilege that we all have, to be together, to have this time and space to actually explore how our minds work. And sometimes it can seem—you know, I'm talking about these little subtle movements of mind—it can seem rather esoteric. I know a lot of people, some people even today said, people outside don't really understand what we're doing. The classical dismissal of meditation is staring at your navel, that it's a waste of time, that you should get out and do something.

So let me say: yes, whatever our situations in life are—and I'm not saying everyone's in a great situation—but compared to the vastness of the world, that we have this time and this space and enough health to be here, and most of all, the interest, the courage to really look at, to keep meeting what's happening in the mind—we are really privileged.

But I'm not saying this to invoke guilt. Someone went right to guilt when they heard that. We're privileged, but I'm not saying it for that reason. I'm saying it in a much more positive way. We can really feel a sense of appreciation, of gratitude for the opportunity and for your interest and your courage, because this is an

uplifting quality. Yes, it is an incredible privilege. That's a wholesome state to appreciate. It can uplift the mind and heart, give us a little energy, a little willingness. It is a privilege. Don't take that to beat yourself up. But when you're thinking, "Oh, my mind—I came to look at this junk"—yes, actually, yes. And it's a privilege. And here I am.

We don't have to deal with what so many others face. I've spent a fair amount of time in Burma in the last few years, and that's a beautiful and very messed up, incredibly suffering country. And the sense of privilege—I think in some ways there's so many people who are so poor that they can barely get enough to eat, or not even, plus the horrific oppressiveness of the government.

And even within that, Burma is a country filled with meditation centers and meditation teachers. It's ingrained in the culture. To stay in a meditation center is completely on generous donations—there's no charge. So technically, anyone could go.

I was there with a group of friends, and at one point some people had sent us money to offer to villagers to help rebuild the most decrepit houses. When I say decrepit, we're talking beyond decrepit. I can't even explain—bamboo mat walls. Four ladies were living in a house with only two walls, completely open in a compound with many other families, so they had absolutely no privacy. The floor was just bamboo rods with about this much space between them. That's it. That's their house. Incredibly neat and tidy. That was one of the ones we rebuilt.

In doing this, one of our friends speaks fluent Burmese, so we'd get a sense of the people's life situations, which of course weren't good. In one family, the father had died—he'd been an alcoholic. The sixteen-year-old had to quit school in her last year, which is really hard to even get to. It gets more expensive as you go. She quit to work in a sewing factory. The mother was frying little foods to help support the other three kids.

Then there was another family with an old granny sitting smoking her stogie cigar, and four little kids, none of whom went to school even though there was a free school within walking distance—which we told them about. The mother was out working heavy labor.

I bring them up because similar circumstances produced such different responses. In the first family, there was so much light, so much mettā, so much generosity. The older girl who had to quit school was dying to go back, but with total love was supporting her family. As soon as we could offer some money to fix their house, they insisted we come over for breakfast so the lady could cook her things for us. And they sit and watch you eat—that's the way it works—with the monk who was helping us.

This monk was so happy to help. He said, "I usually can't give things to people—as a monk you receive. But I can go." And he organized the work. He ordered all the supplies and had them bill us. He spent the whole day there making sure it was all built right. And he was so happy. That was great.

So we were with the monk, and this family was so filled with light, so beautiful, coming to the meditation

center. The other family with the old granny—just completely beaten down by life. Even when we mentioned the school, you could see... Some people have the conditions that allow them to really use what's available. We all do, at some level. Some people don't. Similar circumstances, such different responses.

So really, I mean it—appreciate your courage. Or maybe it's naïveté if you've never done a retreat before. But if you stay to the end, it will turn into courage. Appreciate your interest. Not every moment will feel inspired. You'll feel beaten down at times.

But you're here. You're looking. It's a whole other way of being. Really, call on that uplift. Sometimes we need it.

And in speaking to the sense that we're looking at these subtle movements while there's so much difficulty in the world—it can seem rather esoteric. But I had another experience this summer that somehow re-deepened my commitment to what I see as the absolute necessity of understanding that when we recognize things as they are, it's the only way we have a chance to act with greater and greater compassion and wisdom—for ourselves, for the world. It just really deepened in me: yes, this is the way to live. This is worth spending my life doing.

I was in Munich for a month, and one day I had time to take the little suburban train out to Dachau—one of the concentration camp museums. I'd never been to one before. I went by myself, which was great. And of course I've read a lot. But this is not just about Germany and World War II. This is about our human nature—that's the point I'm trying to make.

I thought it was really well set up. It's in a nice country area. Two or three of the buildings are still standing, and they've made museums in them with very well-explained placards throughout. In the back, there are just the foundations where all the other buildings and dormitories were. To me it seemed huge. I don't know—somehow I was amazed at how vast it was. When I went back to the German friends I was staying with, they said, "Oh no, that's one of the little ones."

But this experience actually inspired in me a greater depth of appreciation for this practice, this understanding of what we're doing. The way it was set up, many of the rooms had big placards, each one describing a different aspect of life in the camp—how people were transported there, some of the things that happened, all the different groups of people who were interned. The Roma, Jewish people, gay people, people from Hungary, people from Italy. It just went on and on, all kinds of ethnic groups, things I didn't know about. Other placards described scientific experiments, or the people who lived in the village, or prisoners in the camp—some acted really nobly, some not so nobly.

But each placard, in my memory, would present something general—all the Roma, for instance—but there would also be a picture of at least one real person with their name and a little story. It made it all human. Instead of just this vastness, each thing was human.

I couldn't come out of it thinking, "Well, that's just some monsters under Hitler." There were too many people on all the different sides. These were normal human beings. Some really disturbed individuals, okay, but mostly normal human beings—individuals caught in vast, huge forces of politics and circumstance, each person having to make their own decisions based on their own particular story, to the best of their ability. And decisions catapult.

Whether decisions based on denial, or fear, or trying to protect your family, or greed, or delusion, or hatred—whatever the motivation—that was so strong in me as I walked through.

And as I came out, I could really see: pick any place on the planet in just the last fifty years. It doesn't only happen then. How many people are involved in hatred and genocide, in trying to get rid of "the other"? Whether the other is immigrants or another ethnicity, another culture, another political persuasion, another social class. What about the way people were treated at Guantanamo? What about the Congo? What about the Balkans? What about Soviet Russia under Stalin? The Burmese government is doing atrocious things to its own people right now. Human beings.

I came out of it thinking: I could have an idea in my mind—"Oh, I would never do something like that." But if I don't know intimately, if I'm not able to be with my heart and mind in any situation and know how it works, know how it's responding, recognize when I'm acting from greed, know when there's fear and what fear actually feels like instead of getting lost in it—I don't know how I would behave in a situation I've never been in. I could have all kinds of nice ideas: "I would never do that. I would be compassionate." But I don't know.

I really don't know.

But I do know there's nothing more worth doing with my time than learning to know how the mind works and where freedom is. And if I'm afraid of being with the unpleasant, if I'm afraid of fear, if I'm afraid of pain—then if I don't recognize that, I'm going to act out of it. And that action could have... well, we never know what the consequences will be. But if I know how to get in touch with, "Oh, this is fear," then I can look at the bigger picture and make a wiser decision.

This doesn't come from wishing or hoping or waiting. It comes from sitting here and walking here and going home and learning how to really be interested—with wisdom, with love, with mindfulness—to just see what kind of tricks the mind is getting up to now. Over and over and over. How does greed work? How does delusion work? How does wisdom arise? Are the distortions in the mind of greed and aversion and confusion actually suffering? Well, you have to see if it's true for you. Don't believe us.

Mostly, we don't think wanting is suffering. We think not getting what we want is suffering. But watching closely, you see that wanting is kind of leading us on to happiness, you know.

So I say half of this practice is learning to recognize these distortions. And I'll give a couple of simple examples of how they distort. The other half is recognizing when there's the wisdom mind, when there's

peace in the mind, when there's love, when there's brightness, when there's faith. It's not just about focusing on the negative, but it's also not about running away from it. It's not about thinking that anything uplifting that happens is a freak of nature and nothing to do with you. It *is* nothing to do with you—but then again, the other is nothing to do with you either, because it's all just things as they have come to be in this moment, how they act.

A couple of simple examples. When the Buddha said that the Dhamma is visible here and now, in those moments—and this is my paraphrasing—in those moments when there's no greed, not hatred or confusion arising in the mind. It's not personal that those happen; that's just habits of mind and how they cloud. Recognizing accurately means seeing that they distort our perception. They narrow our vision, and we don't recognize accurately when we don't see that these qualities are distorting our understanding of things. We see inaccurately, we understand inaccurately, and then the whole ball gets rolling.

Simple examples—because that's what's great about a retreat. It's a laboratory. Everything, little things that happen, get really blown up in your mind. Have you noticed that yet? It's only the second day, you know. You're like, "I'm so upset about this!" And your rational mind comes in and goes, "It's not a big deal." Okay, so they ran out of oranges. I think you'll live. "No, I've got to have an orange *now*. I'm going to die without my vitamin C in the desert!" I think this is exaggerated. Maybe.

You're mindful if you think it's exaggerated. You don't always catch it. But in a way, it's good that it gets exaggerated, because sooner or later we notice, "Oh, this might be wanting. Ah, maybe this *is* wanting. Could I notice how wanting feels?"

When there's wanting, it runs us. My brother had a hunting hound. Well, it didn't hunt, but it was that kind of breed—really a lovely, sweet dog. He just lived in suburban Atlanta. The poor dog didn't get a chance to hunt. But that's what he was bred for. He's led by his nose.

Really, the nose was so sensitive that when he'd come in the house, he was simply enthralled to it. His nose would take him to every new thing in the house. If I had come to visit, he'd be in the room, in the suitcase—anything that any human had touched, he'd pull it out, rip it open. The garbage, the suitcase, anything. He'd go out in the backyard and just run with his nose along the ground the whole time.

It looks like suffering, doesn't it? But to me, that's craving, wanting. It's just pulling us. "Yes, this next thing will do it. This next thing will do it. This next thing will do it." But do we notice that?

The Buddha said craving and hatred are makers of measurement. In our mind, they narrow the whole world.

Let me give an example. I used this one a few years ago—it happens here. It happened here the other day. It happens here all the time. You go out walking in the desert. I love this desert. It's one of the reasons I like to come here. The space and the kind of smell in the air—it just feels like it purifies my mind. I love it.

So when you're walking out and you're just with whatever's arising, you see a little chipmunk, you see some birds. You see, you hear, you smell, and there's just this sense of isness of things. Notice that—not just in the desert, but it's a good place for it. That sense of isness, I call it—just being. In that moment, there isn't greed. There isn't aversion or wishing things would change. You're not thinking, "I am having such a great moment of smelling the smell in the desert." You're just there. No biggie.

This is a moment that inclines toward freedom. Totally present with things as they have come to be, not needing to describe or explain or reference or anything. Just this. It's so simple. Someone else said the other night—no, we all have moments like this all the time. We don't notice, or we're looking for something more.

But in that moment, just notice how many moments there are here. And many of them will not be in the formal sitting or walking. They'll be when you're drinking tea or standing in line or going to the toilet. It doesn't matter what. When the mind at that moment is pure, notice it.

So we want to understand the distortions, but we also want to recognize and trust—really trust—those moments of wakeful purity when the mindfulness is present.

So you're walking like that. I was walking like that in the desert the other day. And suddenly I remembered how last year and the year before, I knew exactly where three tortoise holes were. So right away, I said, "The tortoise holes! Can I find the tortoise holes?" And everything collapsed. What had been really pleasant—I got tightness in my chest, which I recognize as wanting from watching it for thirty-five years. I started pressuring. I'm looking for the tortoise hole, which, by the way, I couldn't find. So don't ask me. I can't remember this year. I'm wondering, "Was it that tree? Was it that tree?" I know there was one tree out there.

There's three trees together. Try to find three trees together. Everywhere there's three trees together! And it was under that tree. And the search was completely unenjoyable. I noticed that.

So I thought, okay, stop. Just walk. La, la, la—pretending to be relaxed. But really I'm scanning: that's not it, that's not it, that's not it, that's not it. Pretending.

Then I acknowledged, okay, this really isn't pleasant. I did have a moment where I said, okay, forget it. And guess what? Just then I saw a tortoise.

Now that's bad news, because what do you think that did? Right? Oh, I just have to relax and I'll see a tortoise! Everything happens the way we want it. That's what we were joking around about with the managers—that's a sign the divine is taking charge. As soon as I relax, there's the tortoise. It's all about me. That's the third hindrance, you know.

But anyway, this is how we make measurement. Everything else is not what we want, and that becomes what we want. And if we don't notice that, we think we're having a good time. Yeah, I'm looking for a

tortoise—far out.

So notice that feeling of wanting, how it distorts. We can't see what's accurate. What was accurately happening? Smelling, tasting, hearing, and tightness. And wanting feels like this. As soon as I recognize wanting feels like this, it's still there. But what's being fed in that moment is mindfulness, is purity—not feeding the wanting.

Explore that. That's what we get a chance to explore here. Don't believe me. See.

Aversion is more obviously suffering. But we can still easily jump over the aversion itself. We think the suffering is that thing that shouldn't be happening. When that's gone, it'll all be okay—as if we're going to somehow manipulate the whole world. But somehow we keep thinking we're going to manipulate the whole world. Rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic. We're missing something.

Have you noticed—Thich Nhat Hanh talks about this—if you have a toothache, it takes over your world, doesn't it? That's all we notice. But how many teeth don't hurt? How often do you notice when you don't have a toothache? Or even not a toothache, just a little rough spot that doesn't even hurt. Can you keep your tongue away from that little rough spot? Is your tongue running over all your other teeth? No.

Is there a sound you don't like? Have you noticed how when you're lost in aversion and don't notice it, that sound takes over your entire world?

Once I was on a retreat at our center, IMS. I'd been living there for years, way up in the attic. And I got into what we call "yogi mind"—this really exaggerated wanting or aversion. There was this sound, like a low humming. I started going nuts. I was running down into the furnace room, running all over the building. It was the heat. The heat had been running all winter for several years just like that. There was nothing wrong with the heat. I was losing it. "I can't stand it. There's no way I can practice if this sound continues. It's absolutely making me crazy. There's no way." I mean, I was really out there.

If you start to notice that kind of thing happening in your mind about anything, you might want to check in. What's happening in the mind right now? Don't keep focusing on the object. "Oh, that's aversion." And as my teacher in Burma says, aversion is just doing its job. But mindfulness is doing its job too—noticing aversion.

And the third mark of measurement—well, delusion is when we just don't have a clue what's happening. That's when you wake up and think, "Oh, thinking. Maybe I'll feel the breath." But the other aspect of delusion is what I was describing earlier: that every sight, not every one, but many sights, sounds, thoughts, smells somehow get referred back to "What does that mean to me?" It's all about me.

I'll give you a good example from Joseph. He told us this a few years ago. Joseph Goldstein, one of our colleagues, was on a retreat somewhere, sitting in line waiting for lunch—second in line. You know how it is, everyone lined up in the cafeteria. I call it the hell realm of retreat, actually, because there's so much

going on. You notice everybody's minds and thoughts flying around that room.

Anyway, he was standing there, and the person in front took the lid off a giant pot, and it dropped and made a heck of a racket—clang, clang, clang, clang! And Joseph said his first thought was, "It wasn't me. You can all see it wasn't me." First thought, right? That's the sense of self. So inundated with comparing everything to me, me, me, me—we don't even notice it.

So just for fun, for the rest of the night, the rest of the retreat, notice if that ever happens. Not that you drop the thing or the person in front of you does. But notice. And this is with interest: How does the mind work? Somebody's walking along—"Hmm, not as good as me." Somebody else is sitting—"Oh, they're doing better than me." Is this pleasant? Is this uplifting? Is this onward leading? Is this what you'd call freedom—comparing ourselves to every other person here?

Better, worse, equal? It's exhausting. It's really boring. And you'll do it over and over and over again.

Don't take it personally, though. Because every mind is doing that. I know yours is doing it the most of everyone's mind. Everybody's mind is doing it. That's the nature of identification.

But mindfulness doesn't care. Mindfulness can also be with identification. Nothing can stain or harm or damage the quality of awareness and mindfulness. We can forget about it, but it's just right there. As soon as you remember, "Oh, I wasn't mindful," you are already mindful. As soon as you think, "Oh, I was lost in thought," you're not anymore.

Recognize that moment of awareness, that moment of mindfulness. Being mindful, remembering—that moment isn't hard to do. Trusting it, really trusting the power of mindfulness rather than "I have to fix it, these things are wrong, I want to get here"—trusting that mindfulness and the steadiness of it is enough—that is hard to do. Because we think we are in charge, despite all evidence to the contrary.

So that's just my encouragement to you: to recognize that awareness of anything is like this. To appreciate and trust awareness. And don't despair, because however long you haven't been noticing what's happening, as soon as you notice you're not noticing, you're here again. It's always accessible, and nothing can damage it.

And the steadiness of mindfulness is the cause and condition for wisdom—wisdom of how things have come to be in this moment—to arise naturally. You don't have to make that happen.

Huge relief.

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