Mindfulness and Full Awareness: Sampajañña

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:42

Meditators don't look very happy. But I know that's just perception, and I have no clue what's going on.

Tonight I want to talk about a word in Pali: *sampajañña*. Usually when you talk about mindfulness, *sati*, it comes together with *sampajañña*. *Sati* and *sampajañña* are often discussed together. I want to speak about this not as a corollary but as a support, a broader aspect of mindfulness, to help round out how we come to awakening—just looking at all different angles.

Last night Sally spoke so beautifully about the transcendent dependent arising and that very precise, subtle, and specific way that the heart and mind can open up to freedom. That's not just in retreat, of course, but that specificity, that subtlety is certainly more accessible when we're in the silence of intensive practice.

Sometimes, though, as I talked about with generosity, all different aspects of the path are each in themselves a way of awakening. Deep in retreat, we can start to confuse mindfulness with the very narrow, focused, precise, magnified kind of attention that comes with deep stillness, with concentration. And often when that's not available—if by now you ever have a moment when that's not available—it means you've failed. So what I'm saying is second best. I'm kidding. I'm kidding.

But when that quality isn't available, isn't that what you think? "Well, now I failed. I had it and now it's gone." So you do whatever, but you're kind of waiting until the goodies come back. It's easy at times, and also when we leave retreat, to think that mindfulness needs this really highlighted, specific, narrow-focused, laser-like quality. And it doesn't.

Sampajañña is often translated as "clear comprehension"—that's the classic rendering. But Thanissaro Bhikkhu translates it as "alertness." *Sati* and *sampajañña* are used together often in the suttas. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates it, and I like this even better, as "full awareness." Full awareness. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu describes it, coming together with mindfulness: be aware of what you're doing in the movements of the body and in the movements of the mind. Knowing what you're doing—not just this tiny little bare attention. Yes, that's mindfulness. But in the broader context, wise discernment, knowing what we're doing, that's clear comprehension.

I wasn't going to say this—it's an embarrassing story—but it gives a good example of the difference between laser mindfulness lacking clear comprehension and how clear comprehension, full awareness, is really necessary for understanding.

Years ago, many years ago, I was on an intensive retreat at IMS, one where I was really, really slowed

down, noting every moment, very committed. I was walking extremely slowly, noting every little subtle step. At IMS, there's a coat room you walk through to get to the upper walking room, which you then walk through to get to the meditation hall. Those of you who've been there know how this is. So I was walking slowly through the coat room, and I had my zafu—that's how long ago it was, like a *suññatā* zafu. I put it down. I'm noting the whole thing: taking off my shoes, picking up the zafu. This is taking like five, ten minutes. Then I turn, noting incredibly carefully.

It so happens that right where the coat room meets the upper walking room, there are three steps. I lived there. This was not unfamiliar to me. I just walked right off that top step, noting every moment, and fell flat on my face. I forgot to notice the bigger context. There are steps. Hello.

This is a lack of *sampajañña*, a lack of full awareness. You can see how narrow attention doesn't really get the whole picture, right?

So I want to use this broad template to talk about whatever I feel like talking about tonight.

But classically in the commentaries, things are broken down quite precisely. There's a very nice grouping of four aspects of full awareness, of alertness, that we need to notice. I want to use these as a sort of outline.

The first, and I'll just name them all, is full awareness or clear comprehension of the purpose—the motivation of one's actions. The second is full awareness of the suitability, the appropriateness, the broader context. The third is full awareness of the range, the domain of meditation, which basically means not abandoning your meditation during your daily activities. And the fourth is full awareness of non-delusion in life, which is described by Bhikkhu Bodhi as simply being aware that there's no abiding self. But it's really about seeing how all aspects of life come to be shot through with non-delusion.

This is broad. Of course, they always give the highest potential. But I just want to say how if we give a little attention to each of these areas, it really deepens and broadens and stabilizes both our practice—in retreat and out of retreat—and our understanding.

So the first: full awareness, clear comprehension of the purpose, the motivation of one's actions. We've talked a lot about intention. This is basically intention, so I don't have to describe it at length because Guy did so clearly. Cetanā—that impulse that leads to speech, action, and even thought, that comes together with whatever mental qualities it comes together with in a moment—that's the seed of karma. You remember that? We've talked about noticing that "about to" intention in our practice.

But the seed of that—this is so key. Mindfulness gives us the bare attention, the simple recognition quality that gives us the tools to recognize a moment of intention. Full awareness, clear comprehension, brings in something more—really on two levels. Our willingness, our remembering to pay attention, to notice what the motivation is, why we're doing what we're doing, over and over—to really bring this into deep awareness is key to purifying our heart and mind, to freeing our heart and mind from suffering.

As Guy talked about, we can notice that the same action can come from many different qualities of intention. So we can't judge someone's intentions by the results or by their actions. And even for ourselves, we may think we have the best intentions, but that doesn't mean we can control the results of an action. Really, the results of actions are pretty much out of our control. What we can notice is the intention. And so we start to bring our awareness into the subtlety of why we're doing what we're doing. To do that, it takes interest, non-judging, and awareness.

The example I always give—it's very basic and simple—is this: if there's someone you care about and they've been doing something unskillful, something that bugs you, that brings them suffering though they don't know it, and you really want to give them that feedback. You can already see the many different ways that could play out. And much of what determines the range of outcomes comes from our intention in the moment, doesn't it?

In your mind, you can say, "I really want to tell them because I love them and it's for their own good." That's a thought. But in the moment of saying it, it might be when they've just done it again and you're really bugged, and you say, "Yeah, I'm just telling you this for your own good. Let's have a talk. I want to give you some feedback because I love you so much." The words are right, but they're not really conveying the true intention, are they? The true intention leaks out. Nobody's fooled there. Maybe you're fooled. The person you're talking to—they're not fooled. Because we forget to check.

But another time, you could really stop, see that intention, and not say it then. You wait and get in touch with mettā, compassion for that person, and actually feel it. Then you sit down, and from the mettā, you say it. You can play with this. You can really see the difference.

Another time, you may feel it, feel the mettā, but you're completely oblivious to the circumstances of the person at that moment. As if it's all about your intention. This is where it moves out into suitability—the second aspect—which I'll talk about more later. But it's not just about my intentions. Mettā is completely overlooking the fact that the person just stumbled into the house after twelve hours of a really difficult day at the office, people were on their case, they're totally exhausted, and their dog just died. And you say, "Let me give you this feedback with all the mettā in my heart." And somehow they can't hear it.

I think, "Well, it's hopeless. They can't hear it." But you see, there's again that quality of missing the big picture, like me falling down the steps.

These are just simple examples, but you get a sense of how the quality in mind that comes with the intention is really what's key. As Guy said when he talked about kamma, that's what forms the seed of kamma, of wholesomeness, of unwholesomeness. And it's powerful. Even when we're not aware of it, that doesn't make it less powerful. I don't want to say it's scary, but it's not something to be underestimated, the power of intention.

I heard this—I was kind of half listening to the news, the BBC, a couple of weeks ago, and I didn't get all

the details, but I think I got the main gist. This was a little scary to me. They said in the U.K., the military was talking about the possibility of experimentation with drones—you know, those drones they have that they fly and bomb people from a distance, operated by computers or whatever. So, okay, that's bad enough. But they were thinking about somehow beginning to experiment with drones that would respond to the operator's thoughts.

Yes, exactly—whoa.

So you know, the person might think, "Well, I didn't actually push a button to make it bomb, but I just had the thought and the thing did it." It would really be easy to feel, "Well, the thought just popped in my mind. I didn't really even want to do it. Never mind." I'm really hoping I heard that wrong, because that's really scary.

It's something to look at. But that's not to make us scared. It's not to make us afraid to see unwholesome intentions arise. In fact—and this is again still part of the clear comprehension of motivation on the moment-to-moment level—this is where we want to look out of interest, out of what's really freeing. What brings us suffering? What brings us happiness? What brings people around us suffering? What brings people around us happiness? Hating ourselves and being afraid to see unwholesome intentions doesn't bring us or anybody else happiness. But the interest to look does.

There's a very well-known sutta where the Buddha is talking to his son, Rahula, who joined the order of monks as a novice when he was a young boy, about seven. In this sutta, the Buddha asks Rahula, "What is a mirror for? And why is this important?" And Rahula says, "Well, it's for reflection." The Buddha responds, "Yes, just so. And just like a mirror, what's really important is to reflect before actions of body, before actions of speech, before actions of mind."

He goes through each one individually, starting with action. Let me read just the way he phrases it to make it more precise:

"When you wish to do an action with the body, reflect upon it thus: Would this action lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome action with painful consequences, painful results? When you reflect, if you know that it is painful, then you definitely shouldn't do it. But when you reflect, if you know this action would not lead to my own affliction or the affliction of others, it's a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results, then you may do such an action."

And then he goes on to say—because of course we don't always reflect before we do it—"If you're in the middle of an action and you recognize you're in the middle of an action, reflect upon it in the same way: Is this action that I'm doing leading to my own affliction or the affliction of others?"

Notice it's my own affliction and or the affliction of others, not only the affliction of others. Sometimes we forget that we're also included. And sometimes we don't even notice what we're doing in the middle of it.

So then the Buddha says, "After you've done an action, reflect on: Did it lead to my affliction, the affliction of others, the affliction of both, or not? And if it did lead to affliction, then you should reveal it, lay it open to your teacher or to wise companions in the holy life." In other words, don't try to hide it away, hoping nobody saw. Lay it out, and then try to refrain from such actions in the future.

The same applies with actions of speech, the same with actions of mind.

Now the mirror part is really important because he's not saying reflect on it, see that you're doing an action that might lead to your own affliction, and then hate yourself, beat yourself up, beat your breast and tear your hair and say, "What a bad person I am." He just says, notice it. Like a mirror reflects what's put in front of it.

This is the quality of mindfulness, of sati—recognizing just what's happening without judging, without aversion, without clinging. Clear seeing. How else are we going to see what leads to our own affliction or the affliction of others? What leads not to affliction, but to pleasant circumstances for ourselves and others? Only by this willingness, this interest to explore, without any judging. That's how we learn—before, during, or after.

So it comes to be really interesting, much more natural. We just keep on noticing what's the attitude in the mind. Does that sound familiar? This is exactly what this is. When we're doing something, before we're doing something, after—we just check what's the attitude in the mind. "Oh, I'm filled with aversion. Maybe this isn't the time to tell that person that incredibly important feedback." We start to notice that. We don't have to analyze it, but you can just start to tune in more and go, "Okay, there's aversion. Not the time to do it."

As we begin to notice cause and effect, we don't look so much to what's going to happen if I do it, whether I'm going to get the result I want. Because big picture, we never know. But we look to what's this speech, this thought, this action coming out of. Is it as clear as I can be? And then we start to see, as Ajahn Pasanno says, we start to nurture the appropriate causes for the results we're seeking.

So if the result we're seeking—and this is assuming we're embracing wholesomeness, that we're coming from a place of wanting to foster our own happiness and the happiness of others, our own wholesome heart and the wholesomeness of others. If the result we're seeking, back to that simple example of giving someone feedback because they're doing something that's bringing suffering to themselves and to me too, all of us suffering. If, without tuning into intention, the result we're seeking is just to make them stop doing that thing, you might just go blat them over the head—"Stop doing that or I'm not going to be your friend"—blackmail, whatever, because you don't care about the motivation. You just want that thing to stop. But you're not tuned into the fact that that's leading to more suffering for both of you.

If we want to nurture the results we're seeking with the appropriate cause, then what we're really seeking is the happiness of that person, the well-being of both of us, out of a sense of caring, out of a sense of

mettā. So the appropriate cause for that is to speak out of a sense of mettā, out of a sense of connection, out of a sense of caring. And then that person will hear it or they won't. They'll act on it or they won't. That's not in our control.

This is kind of a big leap to make from a small action, a small motivation in our mind, but my mind does make this leap, so I'll put it out there. Knowing in little actions of speech, body, and even thought—when we have the choice—how our mind works, how we get lost in suffering and greed and wanting and negativity, how we can see that and not act on it. Knowing how the mind works is the cause that's going to nurture the effect of being able to live our lives in the world of not causing harm, of cultivating wisdom, of cultivating compassion.

I'm making a leap. I'm assuming that's something that's interesting to you, to live in that way. I am making that assumption, but not everyone has that as a result they seek. But just to say, "I want to live in a compassionate way" but not pay attention to how and why I'm doing what I'm saying and doing—it doesn't work. It's sort of like the motivation of what I'm doing and saying is the result. It is destiny, really.

So the leap I'm making is—and I've told this in other talks—a couple of years ago when I was in Germany, I go every summer, I went to visit the museum at Dachau, which had been one of the concentration camps. It was very well set up, with big billboards describing all different aspects of that whole period, all different people from all different walks of life. People who worked there, people who came there, different populations that were incarcerated in Dachau—different ethnic groups and gay people and different religions and different cultures. Different people who worked there, different things that went on there, people in the community. It was very, very broad-ranging.

They would tell a story, but they would also usually then have one person, like a picture of one person. So if they were talking about Roma who had been incarcerated, they might have a photograph of one person who was Roma and their name and a little of their story. It made it personal. If they were talking about guards, they might have a photo of one guard and their story.

What that did for me was—it just shows there's so many people involved in so many ways. I couldn't walk out of there and think, "Well, just a few really rotten eggs, really evil people did this."

Vast amounts of people, vast amounts of people. And I couldn't walk out of there and think, well, if I'd been living in Germany, I wouldn't have had anything to do with it. I couldn't think that.

I really got the sense of how so many people were incarcerated, and among those who were incarcerated, some would act heroically, some would act cowardly, some would just mind their own business, some would help people, some would snitch on people—all different ways. Same with the guards. Some were awful, some tried to be kind. Same with people in the community. Some knew nothing, some just did what they did and pretended to know nothing. All these different ways.

And I thought, I don't know what I would do if my family was threatened, or if I thought my family was

threatened, or if I thought my life was threatened. You really don't know. And I realized it was just normal people, and each little decision we make is a little decision we make. No one could really have imagined where that was going in 1933. I can't even imagine it now—how could no one see where that was going?

So everyone would make whatever little decision they would have to make in the schoolroom, or as teachers, or if someone was taken away. Do you say something about it? Do you pretend it didn't happen? Do you deny it? Do you talk to people? What do you do? If you feel your family is threatened, what do you do?

And I saw how each little decision that's made, we do the best we can. You never know what the results are going to be, and it could end up as something like Dachau. So it was actually one of many wake-up calls for me to recommit in a way, to deepen my faith in awakening, in the Buddha Dharma, in the power of love, of awareness, to really pay attention to what's going on in my mind.

I might say I would never do something like that. But I don't have a clue. If I don't know when my mind is reacting from fear, when I'm acting from fear, if I don't know how to be with aversion without acting from it, if I don't know how to be with a sense of wanting to blame people, wanting to put it all off on somebody else, if I don't know how to be with that without acting on it—then I can't say I'm going to do the good thing, I'm going to be the bodhisattva. I don't know.

We have to really know how our mind and hearts are working, and we only know that by loving attention, by the courage it takes. That's what you are doing here, moment after moment, day after day. Those hard times—I've said it before, we've all said it—that's not the waste of time. That's where we're really learning. Because stuff like that, that's not just Germany. Pick your country, pick anywhere in history in the last two hundred years. It just keeps going back. It seems to be that horrific things keep popping up in human society. And great, beautiful responses keep coming up in human hearts.

So all we can do is really have that commitment, that caring, that trust to keep looking in our own heart and mind. And not be afraid when we see aversion. Great! We see it. Not be afraid if we see hatred or fear or greed. I mean, have you ever, just with greed, seen yourself want to—for something stupid, like a piece of chocolate cake when there's only one left—knock everybody in front of you out of the way to get that piece of chocolate cake? It's horrific! I've seen my mind do it. Social shame is a good thing because it often keeps us from acting on it. I'm not saying it's wholesome, but it keeps us from acting.

So this sense of being willing to look, not just in the big things but in the little things—this is what the Buddha was talking to Rahula about. It's not just about looking good. This is about freeing our heart and mind.

I'll give you another simple little example. A friend of mine emailed me and said, "Oh, this is a good talk example." I said, "Oh yeah, you're right, it's a good talk example." Earlier this retreat we were down in the bookstore. We can go in the bookstore because we're not on retreat. I don't even want to know how many

of you have been down in the bookstore. But anyway, we were down there, this friend and I. She helps there sometimes. I was looking for a particular statue that I remembered from last year, a small statue of a White Tara that I wanted to buy.

And as she picked up a different statue to get the one I wanted—it was Manjushri, I think, with a little sword—she just barely touched it, and the sword snapped off. And then I was putting one down, and I mean, I really just touched it like that, and the sword snapped off.

Now what?

And just for a nanosecond, just for a fraction of a nanosecond, it comes into mind: this must happen all the time, and I didn't do it on purpose. Let's just put it back and close the door. No one will know. I could see that in my mind too. We're both like, oh God, now we have to buy this.

And it was so great because just to see that—as soon as we saw it in our mind, right away there's the suffering. Not even the suffering that would come from acting on it, but the suffering of even just having the thought, you know?

So immediately, no, no—we took it out, closed the cabinet, went to Marianne's office, and started writing out a whole explanation. We took care of it. And then Marianne came in. She caught us like two little girls. "What are you guys doing?" And she said, "Oh yeah, that happens all the time. No problem. We just glue it back together and sell it half price." Oh, good. Okay, that ended well.

But just to see that little second in the mind—that is what's so great to see. Don't gloss over it. Be really happy to see it, because that's where the purification happens, that's where the choosing of wholesomeness comes in, and there's a happiness from that. We were just lucky it ended up good, that we didn't have to buy it. It doesn't always end up good. Maybe you have to buy it. That's okay.

So that's the moment-to-moment aspect of motivation, of clear comprehension, full awareness of purpose—why we're doing what we're doing.

There's also, especially as Nyanaponika Thera talks about in his commentarial work *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, motivation in a larger aspect, our broader aspiration in life. It's a little bit like on the very first day of the retreat when you went around and spoke your intention for the retreat. But I would say in an even larger way than that—a sense of your greater aspiration in life, your greater purpose. And it can be very useful to clarify for yourself what that is.

It's said that without that, we tend to just go through life—even if we check our moment-to-moment motivation and it's wholesome—but we can easily just drift from one situation to another. Well, this is okay, or maybe I'll do that, or this seems nice. And we don't really have a broader overarching focus.

The way Nyanaponika describes it, a sense of tuning into your broader purpose, your deepest aspiration, has the function in our life—not just in a moment—of collecting our dispersed energy. It's sort of like

making priorities, you could put it that way. And then we can align our moment-to-moment decisions with our broader, deeper aspiration.

Now, this serves in all aspects of life. It doesn't necessarily have to do with Dhamma. It doesn't have to be wholesome. Just to give a pretty obvious example, take professional athletes—which is really far from any realm of personal experience that there could be. But I happen to really enjoy watching professional tennis. And as I've watched it over the years, and read about some of the tennis players, the amount that their whole life, from the time they're young, comes to be directed at playing professional tennis is remarkable. I was reading the biography of Andre Agassi, which is quite interesting—he's an interesting guy. Sometimes it's forced by the parent, but from very young, the decisions of how you live your life, of what you do, are based on what's going to support you to keep on playing professional tennis.

And a lot of these guys didn't even finish high school. Andre didn't finish high school, which led him now to really use all his time and money to raise money for the school that he started in Las Vegas for underprivileged kids, with the commitment that every kid that goes there goes to college. It's really a great thing he's doing.

So he didn't finish high school because he goes to a tennis academy. And just one example, even later in life—he's married, he has two kids, but he's still playing and he wants to play another couple of years, even though his body's getting old. And he says everything he does, he has to evaluate. Going to the beach with the kids: if I sit on the beach for an hour, how will that affect me? It'll affect my energy too much. I'll get too hot in the sun. I won't have the energy to play tomorrow, so I don't go to the beach with the kids. What do you eat? How do you sleep? Do you go out at night? What do you do? Everything is focused on being able to keep on playing tennis. It's a huge commitment, huge renunciation, but because of that focus and then aligning your decisions with it, you're able to do all kinds of things you never would have thought you could do when you're just kind of drifting along in response.

For example, sitting here for a month. When you first started, whenever you first started your practice, could you have imagined sitting here for a month? It was just impossible at that time. So for whatever reason, this has become enough of an aspiration that you have made many choices in your life to support your being able to be here, because it was important enough for you.

You see what I mean? Tuning into what really is your greatest aspiration, your deepest aspiration—I think to do that consciously is extremely important because it really can serve as a guideline, as a beacon, both here and in the choices we make in our daily life.

So I would advise—I was going to say do it now, but I think it takes more time. Take some time if you don't know or you're not sure. Just hold that question, let it settle. Not go write pages and pages about it. It's not so intellectual. It's like, what really bubbles up from the depths? Just set the question. It may not come for a while, or maybe you already know. And it could be something quite deep and profound, and then your judging mind may say, "Oh no, that's not possible for me," or "I'm not good enough for that," or whatever.

Don't pay any attention to that, because it'll be a feeling. It won't just be, "Oh, I want to be a nice person." It's some really deep intuitive sense. It's important to let yourself really honor that, because then it can serve, and it does serve.

I know you all in some way have that, or you wouldn't still be here. It can manifest as faith. It can manifest as courage. It can manifest as confidence, or it can just manifest as how you choose what to do.

But I bet many of you, if not all of you, have had at least a couple of moments here where you very seriously thought, "I need to leave, like right now. There's no way that I can stay." And you do stay. I mean, you have so far. I've had that many times on retreat. Sometimes it's just a passing thought, just aversion. But sometimes it really has that hook—like, this is really not the right time, or I'm too hopeless, whatever story you make up.

So I'm assuming it's not that you stay because you don't have a car and it's too much trouble to rebook your flight. That's not deepest aspiration. We're not talking about that. I'm talking about when you really take a breath and you go, on some level, "Okay, this is really hard, but what's really important?" In whatever way you say that to yourself. And you take a breath and you feel the next footstep, or you feel the next moment of aversion, or you go out and be with hearing the birds for a while and your mindfulness gets a bit balanced, but you hang out with it. It's not like you have to put a veneer on it—"I'm so great, I'm living my deepest purpose"—but it informs your moment-to-moment choices.

And sometimes when we've lost sight of it, being able to call it up can help us—in little things and in big things.

So the purpose—and again, I'm making the assumption here that we're coming from really the love of peace, of freedom, of compassion, whatever way it is for you—in that case, the purpose or the result or the aspiration you have is fulfilled by the way we meet each moment. That's back to the mindfulness of the motivation, of how we're meeting each moment. And that's what's really so inspiring, because we affect one another in that way.

I'll give you a couple of examples of how the purpose really becomes the motivation—how the moment-to-moment purity of motivation is actually the acting out of the purpose.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who as you know spent at least twenty years in Burma as the symbol of hope and courage for the people—she said one time that she was really surprised that people think of her as an important person. And this is a quote: "I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they cannot believe it. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there is something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I will do it. The motivation is its own reward."

You never really know where we're going. She didn't go to Burma saying, "Now I will become the icon of democracy and hope for the Burmese people." Just moment after moment of purity of motivation.

Another example: Martin Luther King. Certainly he had an aspiration of integration and nonviolence, but in terms of the whole ethos, the whole way of living and practicing nonviolence, he said nonviolence doesn't just mean you don't hurt a person or kill a person. Nonviolence means you don't let yourself hate a person. It's really from motivation. And at some point after one of the worst bombings, where little girls were killed in that church in Birmingham, he said, "I refuse to become bitter. Hatred must never become our motivation."

Some of the most inspiring acts—and both of those people I find tremendously inspiring to read about, to see old speeches of Dr. King, to see speeches of Aung San Suu Kyi—yes, it's what they've done or what they've achieved, but really what the inspiration is, is that sincerity, that purity of motivation in action after action. It doesn't mean you don't make mistakes. It doesn't mean we don't blow it. And it doesn't mean that things turn out the way we want. But there's that depth of aspiration and then the moment-to-moment willingness to keep looking, to keep aligning. It's a lifetime of work, a lifetime of sati sampajañña—mindfulness and full awareness.

One last example: the Dalai Lama. There was an interview a few years ago where some young Tibetan activists were talking to him—basically the new generation speaking to the old generation. As you know, he stepped down as the head of the Tibetan state, the political wing. But up until recently, he had been both the spiritual head and the head of the Tibetans in exile. And he's always preached nonviolence towards China, nonviolence in all ways.

These young Tibetan activists were saying, "Look, old man, it isn't working. China is just destroying the Tibetan culture in what has been Tibet. It isn't working. There has to be another way. Your nonviolence isn't cutting it."

In this interview, he was—I was reading it, I didn't see it—but they said he was really weeping, saying, "Maybe I've been wrong, maybe it isn't working, but I cannot be otherwise. I cannot abandon the sincerity of motivation."

To me, that is so powerful. And who knows what's right or wrong? Who knows how anything's going to turn out? We don't. We can't.

But you get a sense of how, when we abandon the willingness to align ourselves with non-harming, with wisdom, with mettā, with compassion in the moment—when we say, "Okay, but it's not working, let me jump to the result"—we've lost it all.

The freedom of heart and mind is here now. It's not in some future result.

So when the question comes—how do we continue to stay awake, to wake up in the midst of our own actions, in the midst of a confusing world, just in the midst of our busyness—how do we find the motivation to continue to explore like this? To say, like the Dalai Lama, something isn't working and you have to keep looking at your motivation. How do we find the trust not to abandon?

Sayadaw U Tejaniya, who's been my teacher the last few years, talks a lot about just cultivating this appreciation of mindfulness, of awareness. It doesn't have to be focused, but the appreciation of it here, in daily life. How do we continue to wake up? It comes to our motivation. He says when we appreciate awareness enough, we notice what our mind is like when it's aware, what our heart is like when we're aware, and we notice what it's like when it's not. When we start to appreciate, when it's important enough to us that we appreciate awareness enough, that's when it's going to become our priority.

The way I phrase it—this is my language, not his, he would never use this language—is this: I used to practice because I wanted to know the truth. I wanted it. It was a deep yearning, but it was a want and a sense of me needing the truth. It could bring great urgency, could bring a lot of energy, but it also brought frustration, it brought separation, it brought incomplete feeling. But the shift is when we start to love the truth, or love awareness.

When I go home thinking "I need to be aware, because I should be aware, and I wasn't aware in that last hour, and I should have been, and I lost it"—you know all of that. Even when we have a deep yearning for truth, like "I'll be aware because I want to have that better experience, I need to be aware"—tune back, don't judge it, the mirror not the judge, but tune back to what's the quality in the mind and heart. That subtle or not so subtle yearning, wanting, fuels a subtle discontent and then the judging of yourself when it's not happening.

But when we just love awareness, that opens into surrender. Surrender into what's happening in this moment. And awareness is right there. It's not about trying to make something else happen, but that faith, that trust that Aaron spoke about a couple of weeks ago. For me, when I really think of loving awareness—yeah, I see my mind that wants to say, "Oh, let me just hide that statue." And then there's awareness of it, and the love of that. It trumps everything. Because awareness can be with anything.

So the motivation and the willingness to notice the motivation comes to underlie everything. It strengthens and deepens our practice, it supports our aspiration, and keeps us going.

I read years ago in a dharma book—I forget who wrote it now, but it stayed with me. The person said, in every moment of activity, we are committing to something. The question is, to what? And again, that's not with judgment, but that mirror. Every time we're doing something, that's a commitment, that motivation. So get interested. In what?

When we first begin practice, we first begin our spiritual path, we have really beautiful—maybe you do, maybe you don't, hopefully you did—beautiful ideas about how we want to be, and we're really inspired and lit up. We also, of course, have goals and idealizations. But then our moment-to-moment way of being can seem really far from that, can't it? Just in our little things.

For years, I was always kind of berating myself. You shouldn't watch TV. You shouldn't do this. It's not dharmic. Get back over here. With this kind of negativity. But if I just look without judging—in every

moment of activity you're committing to something, to what—so just look and see. It gets really interesting. In this moment, I'm committing to dulling out and watching this really stupid TV show because I'm just too tired. Okay. No judging around it. Just look and see.

That was a lot easier than all the years of judging. And the more I do that—oh, look, I'm really committing to this—after two minutes, my mind goes, "I really don't want to do this anymore." And I get up and leave.

I hardly make it through things anymore when I'm on my own, especially. And it's not at all about judgment. I'm just noticing: What am I committing to? The mind starts to get dull, and I notice it's not interesting. I get up and leave. It's no effort. It's not even renunciation. It's actually moving towards the pleasant, moving towards wholesomeness. It becomes much, much easier, not more difficult.

Now, very quickly, because this is important: the second quality is suitability, which is really looking at the larger situation. This is crucial because what it's really pointing to is the fact that we're not separate beings. We can't act in isolation. Or another way of saying it is: nothing ever happens twice. Every situation is different.

The other morning there were questions about energy—how do we affect each other with energy? The notion that this is me and that's you and we're two separate beings with our separate energy—that's just a concept. The fact is that everything that's come together to be as it is, *yathā bhūta*, things as they have come to be in this moment, in this room, the effect of all the past conditions is just as it is. And anything any of us does affects everything.

Right now I'm talking. If one of you got up and started screaming, it would have an effect, wouldn't it? It would pretty much affect everyone in this room. Different effects, because there would be different qualities going on in the different particular individual mind streams. But we all affect each other.

So when we talk about skillful means in practice, when people come in and ask, "What's skillful means? What's right effort? I want to know. Just give me the list of right effort," we always say, "I can't tell you because it depends." Some days it's like this, some days it's like that. Should I take a walk? When should I do mettā? When should I move away from the unpleasant and practice mettā? You want a list. We get this question all the time. But the answer is always: it depends on what's going on in the mind. It's always different. Nothing ever happens twice.

So some days the mind is really tight and contracted, and you're trying to be aware, but you're just getting more and more frustrated. The more you try to be aware, the more you get lost. You can see there's no mindfulness. You take a walk outside with seeing and hearing, and the mind balances. There's more presence. It's useful.

So the next day you think, "I might get frustrated, so I better take a walk outside." And you take a walk outside thinking, "Oh, look at the deer. Oh, when am I going to feel this calm again?" You come back all jacked up, filled with restlessness, and wonder, "Why didn't that work?" As if it was the same situation.

They're two completely different situations.

This is a sense of suitability—looking at what's going on in this mind and body, what's going on in the broader situation. If you're in a relationship or interaction with someone else, you try as best you can to understand what's going on for them, but you'll never really know. Heck, we hardly know what's going on with us, do we? Never mind with the other person. But seeing, really, that we affect and are affected by each other and all the conditions.

Weather, for example. Have you noticed? It's been pretty nice weather, but when it's really rainy, pouring weather, it often affects our minds. And then we think, "Well, it shouldn't."

Why shouldn't it affect us? As if we're separate from the weather? In some essential way, we *are* the weather. So really starting to see this interconnection—that's clear comprehension of suitability, of interrelatedness.

The point I want to make about this in terms of our practice concerns this whole sense of spiritual friendship, of *kalyānamitta*—realizing that just as unwholesome qualities can be contagious, so can wholesome ones. Propaganda, for example. When it's really well done, broadcast on radio or television, putting out negative or positive messages about someone... You're all being spared for at least a month from the presidential campaign—nothing but propaganda. But the ad campaigns are rather brilliant in how they try to twist things to get people's minds to think what they want them to think. We're all very influenced by each other.

But just as much as the unwholesome influences affect us, so do the wholesome ones. When I talked about generosity the other night, the point I was trying to make was how goodness and happiness are contagious—it goes both ways. In all aspects of life it's like that. Why does hearing about Aung San Suu Kyi or Dr. King or the Dalai Lama inspire us? I think this came up in the questions the other morning. It inspires us because it opens up those same wholesome qualities in our own mind and heart, in our own mind stream.

This is why the Buddha made a big point about who you spend time with. If you have a choice, choose to be around wise people, wholesome people, because we affect each other. But also recognize that often you're going to be the person who serves as the spiritual friend, the *kalyānamitta*. You're the one who, simply by your willingness to be present with yourself with integrity, by your willingness to see when you do something unkind or foolish or greedy—"Oh, wow, look at that. That's greed"—brings wholesomeness into being. That brightness of your sincere intention, your generosity, your morality, your love of awareness, your wanting to cultivate compassion even when you're not one hundred percent—that affects people.

It's not about going out and proclaiming, "Now I am the Kuan Yin of the ages, let me show you." It's simply about who we are, moment to moment, in really small ways. And that looks different for each of us.

I'll end with one story. Perhaps some of you have seen a movie that was made, I think it was called *Blessings*, about some Western women who traveled with Sogyal Rinpoche, the Tibetan lama, back to Tibet to visit nuns in an area called Nangchen. It was about these nuns of Nangchen.

These Tibetan nuns had lived there for many years. Then, perhaps twenty years earlier, after the Cultural Revolution in China, when many nunneries and monasteries were destroyed and nuns and monks were either killed or forced to leave, these nuns—quite a few of them who had been living in caves or in this large nunnery way up in the hills of Tibet—were disbanded and had to disperse.

What they shared was their sincerity, their greater aspiration. Most of them didn't want to stop being nuns. They were deeply committed to the life of a nun and to their spiritual awakening. They couldn't live there anymore, but they didn't all respond in the same way, even though they shared this deep aspiration.

Some of them simply stopped being nuns. Some went back to live with their families but thought of themselves as secret nuns—wearing regular clothes and acting normal, but in their hearts being secret nuns living outwardly ordinary lives. A few of them went far off and hid in caves way up high, living for those twenty years lives of great privation, starvation, and difficulty.

They all responded in different ways. When Sogyal Rinpoche and these women returned a few years ago, the nuns had been allowed to start coming out again. The women who were still alive and hadn't given up their aspiration were coming back together, rebuilding the nunnery stone by stone, dragging the stones with their bare hands up incredible hills, building the nunnery again.

They had each found different ways that were suitable for their particular temperaments, their particular ways of being. There wasn't one right way. But each honored her deep aspiration, and when they had the chance to come back together in that form, they did.

I want to leave you with this sense: our aspiration—we don't know how it's going to show up. The suitability for our own particular circumstance cannot be compared to anyone else's. We really have to honor it with our own wisdom and our own integrity, and trust that. Trust your own love of freedom, of compassion, of awareness—whatever word works for you. And moment by moment, hold to that.

And you don't know what kind of effect you're going to have on others. You may be doing something where you interact with a lot of people, or you may live in a way that is really reclusive.

The movie ended with them climbing way, way up to visit the oldest nun among them. She looked about 120—I don't know how old she really was; maybe she was 40 and had just had a really hard life—but she was truly old. Way up high they climbed, and they said she was the most awakened, the most enlightened of all of them.

She couldn't really walk anymore. She just lay in her little bed in this tiny hut way up there, all day and night. And she said she spent her days and nights spinning her prayer wheel. "All I do," she told them, "is

send out my love and prayers for the happiness and well-being and awakening of all beings." That's simply how she spent her days and nights.

It's amazing, isn't it? A mind like that. In some way it touches us when we hear about it—but who knows how it touches us when we don't hear about it?

So there are seven billion different ways to show up, to follow the deepest aspiration, and seven billion different ways it will manifest. But what remains constant is the deep devotion, the deep trust, the moment-to-moment willingness to meet this moment with full awareness. Knowing what we're doing in our mind. Knowing what we're doing in our body. And knowing that we all affect one another—meeting that truth with love, not with fear.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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