Awareness in Daily Life: From Retreat to Continuity of Practice

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:16

One of the ways I find helpful to think about or tune into what we want to call practice—awareness practice—is making the shift from intensive retreat to daily life. For those of you who've done lots of retreats and lots of daily life, hopefully what I have to say is really familiar. For some of you, maybe not so familiar. And even if it's familiar, I know I get caught in it.

Even though we're talking on retreat about how awareness doesn't care what the object is, that we can bring awareness to everything—of course, we get lost. We don't always succeed. But when we leave retreat, and even just like now, today, we forget. Things get busy. And then we will talk, in general, about how to keep practice going. Do I sit every day? What do I do?

But what often happens, consciously or unconsciously, is that some view, some idea has formed in our mind—and it's going to happen to everybody—about what we think practice should be like, or mindfulness should be like, or how mindfulness should look in our daily life. When you leave here, especially if it's your first retreat, you may find that you're actually much more sensitive and quieted down than you have any idea. You might have gotten that sense during speaking practice, where it feels like "whoa" when you come back from a little conversation.

Sometimes people find themselves thinking that if this practice is working, that means somehow we carry with us a sense of calm and it should stay. Or you'll remember what it felt like to be mindful in the times when it was really spacious and the difficult stuff wasn't bothering us. You think that's how it's supposed to be if you're practicing correctly. We forget about all the garbage stuff that happened.

In fact, many people come back to retreat because they remember what it was like at the end. And then they're sitting the first two days and it's really common for them to say, "I forgot about this stuff. I forgot what it was like in the beginning." The hindrances and the pain and the aversion—it's as if that's not part of it.

And so also the emphasis, which we have not been emphasizing, but so much there's an emphasis on concentration as a more focused quality of attention. It's often the case that we leave a retreat, and in our life when we think of mindfulness, we tend to think of it in the calm, focused kind of practice. So if we say, "I need to be mindful while I'm doing the dishes, I need to be mindful while I'm on the computer," it's impossible—because we're trying to be really specific, or really precise, really kind of narrow. And that's one way of mindfulness.

But as we've been saying, awareness can have many flavors. So I want to share a little bit about the way one of my teachers, my Burmese teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya, talks about awareness. Although he's a Burmese Sayadaw, he did most of his practice in his lay life, with a family, running a little market stall that his father owned. When he talks about cultivating awareness no matter what you're doing in your life, he knows what he's talking about because he's done it.

The thing I have to say that I've learned that's helped me so much, just in these last few years, is this sense of bringing real continuity of awareness. I don't mean every second—we don't mean that by continuity. That's a nice idea. But the willingness, the remembering that no matter what's happening, awareness can be here. We just have to remember. He's helped me so much.

First is by tuning into how simple and accessible and spacious awareness can be. You remember, I think Guy reminded you the other night, when I said the first night: Can you feel your hands? And you all said yes. How hard is that? Not too hard, right? That quality of awareness is all we're talking about to start with. That's all we're talking about. No one can really tell themselves, "I can't do it." You can't really get so caught up in "I'm not concentrated enough, too many thoughts are coming."

People will say that to him: "Too many thoughts." He says, "Oh, did you know there were thoughts?" Yeah. "Okay, that's awareness."

But if you know what's happening, that's awareness, that level of awareness. That's where we start.

For example, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, towards the end of his retreats, has periods where people practice talking—not because the retreat's going to end, but as part of the retreat itself. Then in the interview groups, he'll ask people, "How was that for you?" And mostly we get caught in trying to be too focused, because that's what we've learned. People would say—and these are people who've been practicing a long time—"I'd start talking, I'd be aware of listening, but then I'd kind of lose track because I'd be feeling the sensations and I couldn't follow. There's too much going on at once. I can't follow what they're saying and the sensations in my body—it's too much."

And he would say, "Okay, can you just know you're talking?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

"Can you know you're listening?"

"Yeah, I can do that."

Can we remember to do it—that's the trick. But when we think, "Oh, just know you're talking," that level. And recognizing the difference—this is key—for yourself, between when there's awareness and when there's not.

So when you're talking to someone, you're blabbing away—like I'll say when I'm in an interview with

someone, I'm blabbing away, or you're blabbing away—and suddenly I just go, "Oh yeah, right, hearing." I don't even say that. There's just this shift. Awareness is here. Then it's gone, then it's here. Notice for yourself the difference. Is it different?

Because the most key, essential thing—and this is obvious, but it can't be emphasized too much—the thing that we have to tune into that's going to support us to continue cultivating a practice, a whole path of awakening, beginning with awareness as our key, is that it has to matter to you. Not as a good idea. Not as a should: "I should be aware, and it's a good thing to do, and then I can cultivate compassion, and maybe I'll be a better person." All of that's true, but when it's a should or a thought, it's the beginning—it doesn't hold. Because we forget. "Well, I try to do it, but I can't, and I don't feel any better, and there's as much greed as ever, so to heck with it. I'll wait till my next retreat." I mean, we've all spent many years doing that. I advise you not to do that. Don't wait.

But if it's not a high bar of awareness, if it's just noticing—you're doing the dishes and suddenly, "Oh yeah, aware of doing the dishes." You don't have to be precise. "I can't feel the precise feeling of the water on my fingers." Never mind. Knowing I'm doing the dishes. Appreciating that sense of awareness.

It's a flavor. It's a feeling. Don't look hard for it. It's not like an object you can look at. As this guy said this morning, it's not an object—but just that sense of awareness. Notice when it's there. Notice when it's not, which you'll only notice because you wake up and remember it's not. Without any judgment or goal.

And as he says, it's really true: when you start to appreciate for yourself that you, in a way, prefer how it is for you when you're aware than when you're not—and you really get clear about that with yourself—that makes all the difference. That's going to be our motivation. Then we go to retreats, we practice every day, we do whatever: we work with sīla, with conscious conduct, with non-harming behavior. We do all the different things we do, and we'll all have different paths.

But the heart of it is first knowing the simplicity of awareness. It's available to any of you, any moment you remember. And then really let yourself feel into: Do I appreciate it? Is it important to me? And pretty much, of course, I have an opinion about what you'll find.

And it takes all of our practice to help us continue to find that. But that, I really think, is the main thing. It's really the main thing.

Once we start to trust, to just touch this simple quality of awareness over and over and over—just as we've been doing here, but it won't be so refined, it'll be more general a lot of the time—something happens. Not from your willpower, but just by the frequency of remembering, the awareness starts to get a bit more momentum, just like on retreat. In daily life too.

So you can be in the middle of a meeting, all this intense stuff going on, and suddenly you just feel the clenching in your gut. Awareness. You don't have to say, "Oh, I'm aware of clenching in my gut—tightness, tightness, tightness." There's no time to do that. But you don't have to. The awareness just starts popping

in. And it can be in the middle of being all caught up. It feels like this: confused, I don't know what the heck's going on. Awareness of not knowing what the heck's going on.

And that's what's so beautiful about it. It's not with any kind of judgment or preference that we'll be aware only if good stuff is happening. Many people I've talked to over the years, myself included, who have been trying to cultivate some kind of steady sitting practice in their daily life, find that one of the big things leading to abandoning a daily sitting practice is the sense that what happens in the sitting isn't good enough or clear enough. We find we're sitting for experience. We say, "All these things come to mind to do—why don't I just get up and do them? Because I'm getting nowhere in the sitting."

But the sitting isn't to get somewhere. It's just to remind ourselves what awareness is like. So that maybe when we do get up at the end of the sitting, awareness will be more easily remembered. It starts to remember itself, in a way, when we're not putting these big demands on either how precise and clear the awareness needs to be, or how clear our experience needs to be.

I can't tell you—well, I can tell you, I don't know if I can communicate it—what an amazing relief it's been not to try to be dharmic. Not to try to get rid of greed and be generous. I know I was talking about how wonderful generosity is, and that's true. But that's different from trying to get rid of greed and be generous, trying to stop having aversion and be compassionate. It's a setup. It's a total setup.

I used to spend so much energy thinking I should be the bodhisattva of the ages, and every time aversion came up—once a year aversion would come up—there would be this judgment. And then you don't want to pay attention because we have this ingrained habit of pulling away from the unpleasant. And so then the whole thing goes down the tubes. I'd say, "Well, I'll wait till the next retreat. I can't do it."

It's such a relief to cultivate this quality of interest—not to be better, because the wisdom will come by itself—but interest in how the mind is working right now. What's going on? When I'm filled with greed, rather than going into denial: "Oh, greed is like this." Like I was saying in my talk the other night, maybe I act on it, maybe I don't. Either way, we're fascinated to watch how it functions. What's the effect? How does the mind work?

That's one way of strengthening the awareness. It's making the tendency for awareness to pop in stronger. No matter what's happening, we can be aware. And two, with the steadiness of awareness, even watching greed or aversion play out, we keep being aware.

And this is what I love: the freedom of heart and mind comes from recognizing things as they are. You keep being aware. Pretty soon, it's pretty clear that acting from aversion isn't really making me or anybody else happy. And that's different from a judgment that I shouldn't be aversive. Do you get the difference? The wisdom comes by itself.

So the instruction is always saying, just take care of your awareness. Take care of your awareness, just in this moment. Just take care of your awareness.

That's the first thing I want to offer and encourage you with today, tomorrow, as you leave here. Take care of your awareness. Keep exploring it. Just see how it is for you. Can you connect with it? Is it something real to you? And give it time—time enough that you trust it, that you notice it, that it matters to you. Time enough that you see a difference in your life, in how you feel and how things are, how you function, the choices you make when you're aware and when you're not.

Because that's the only place it starts from. No one can do it for us. No one. The Buddha couldn't do it for anyone. We have to want to cultivate a life like this for ourselves. So that's the first piece.

Going along in the same direction—I might be jumping around a little bit because this is kind of two or three different talks combined into one, so I'm not going to go into the depth I would want with any of it, or else we'll be here quite late. And I know you don't want that.

One of the ways in the texts, especially in the commentaries, that this broader sense of mindfulness is spoken of—a slightly more classical way than Tejaniya talks about it—is when we discuss mindfulness and wisdom together. We've mentioned *sati-paññā*, awareness with wisdom, not exactly the same, but as I was just describing, with the steadiness of awareness, the wisdom naturally arises. You're like, "Oh, there's a sense of understanding. That's how that works."

In the commentaries, this wisdom is also spoken of as *sampajañña*. So the two are often put together: *sati-sampajañña*. *Sati* means mindfulness or awareness. *Sampajañña* is often translated as clear comprehension.

The two aspects I particularly want to speak about tonight go together naturally. Clear comprehension, since it comes from classical texts, is presented in a very orderly way. But it's essentially saying that mindfulness isn't just narrow—it includes the broader context in which things are happening and the motivation or purpose for which we do things. Not just a kind of blind moment-to-moment mindfulness, but seeing the appropriateness, the suitability, the whole situation rather than just our own little piece of it. It's a natural broadening of awareness.

And then there's tuning into—and I'll talk mostly about this—the factor in our mind and experience of intention, the motivation that gives rise to speech and action and even thoughts. This is such a key aspect driving our lives. Awareness and mindfulness of intention is a huge area for cultivating wisdom and a tremendous area for the natural shifting of our suffering habits of mind—of confusion, of greed.

Aversion or hatred or fear naturally transforms, in the light of clear seeing, to wisdom. Greed naturally transforms—not immediately, but moment to moment—to renunciation, which is simply a dropping away of clinging and attachment, and then to generosity.

Ill-will naturally transforms in the light of awareness and wisdom to friendliness, to *mettā*.

And cruelty—we may not think we're cruel, but notice some of the thoughts that come up toward yourself

sometimes. Cruelty naturally transforms through awareness, through wisdom, to compassion. This is moment to moment, not forever. It's not like once you see clearly, cruelty never arises in your mind and only compassion remains. We get so black and white, so perfectionistic—forget about it. There's nothing perfect.

But tuning into intention—I want to discuss this because it's such a powerful practice of awakening in our lives.

So this *sampajañña*, this clear comprehension, involves noticing motivation and seeing it within the bigger context of what's appropriate, what's suitable.

Now, motivation in English has a kind of broad sense. "My motivation to come to retreat was to feel better." "My motivation in having my job is to take care of my family." Kind of broad strokes. And in that broader way, that's one use of motivation or aspiration.

But there's another way—obviously from Buddhist psychology—that's much more specific. At times we can notice a mental factor called *cetanā*. You won't see this mostly, but I want to describe how it works. It's a little "oomph" in the mind.

It's a mental factor that leads to speech and action. They say even thought, but for our daily life, let's stick with speech and action. The body doesn't move without an intention arising first.

And just as with mindfulness, which comes together with whatever factors are present in the citta, the psyche, at that moment, so too does intention arrive colored by the mind's current state. If you're paying attention to something and there's a huge amount of aversion in your mind that you don't recognize, you kind of see that object through an aversive screen. Someone was just saying this today in an interview. Even as beautiful as it is, they notice when the mind is averse—if they look at something and think, "Oh, another tree, look at that, yeah." And they knew they thought it was beautiful earlier. The perception gets colored. This isn't personal. This is just how it works. It's wonderful to be aware of it, to watch it without judgment, without taking it personally.

So with intention—the intention, the seed that gives rise to action, is fueled or colored by whatever particular mental states and qualities happen to be arising with it. This is so key because in terms of how the Buddha described action, what's wholesome and unwholesome, what's skillful and unskillful, whatever word you want to use, is not about the result. Which is how we pretty much judge everything, isn't it? We do things for a particular result. If the thing we wanted to happen happens, we think, "Oh, that was a good action." But that's the thing outside our control.

The Buddha says the seed of karma—and karma simply means action—the seed of wholesomeness or unwholesomeness in terms of what's helping to purify our hearts and minds, or what's feeding the demon wolf from that story last night versus what's feeding wholesomeness, isn't what happens with the action. It's the quality that is motivating the action. And so learning to explore, to pay attention to motivation, is

really huge.

We can hardly tell our own motivation half the time, and it can be complex. We certainly can't tell from watching another person's action what their motivation is, although that doesn't stop us from imputing it.

Take an example—I always use this one because it just comes to mind. Say you want to tell someone you know well that they do something that's really not for their own good and it bothers other people. When you're not around them and you're not triggered, you genuinely want to tell them this out of kindness. You're thinking, "Let me give you some helpful feedback already."

And someone comes up to you and says, "Can I give you some feedback?" How many ways do we hear that? How many ways can it be meant?

The same seeming action could come from metta—a genuine feeling of "I really want to tell you this out of caring," and you're actually feeling that at the time. Or we can be telling ourselves we want to do it out of metta, but really we're annoyed as anything at them when we say, "Let me tell you this for your own good." And of course you can feel it underneath, right?

Or you come in thinking you want to say it, but you're not paying much attention and you're not even noticing the situation the person is in. You arrive all caught up in yourself, ready to give this good feedback, and you don't notice they've just staggered in the house from a horrible day at work. They're completely stressed out, the kids are screaming, they're feeling a little sick—and you say, "Let me, with all the love and kindness in my heart, give you this feedback." And you wonder why they can't hear it.

Same action, completely different intentions. Or you could consciously be wanting to hurt them. All different things.

So you can perhaps get a sense of how the seed of what's wholesome and the seed of what's unwholesome lies in our intentions, in what motivates the action for us. To begin to explore this, just to tune in, is a wonderful practice. As I was talking about with upekkha, we approach this with awareness, not with judgment. We simply want to see what's happening. If we think, "Well, I don't want to see when it's an ugly intention"—and we do that, right? We just shut it down. That doesn't work. We have to be willing to see the whole show with kind awareness. Then we really learn.

And when there's that mindfulness just noticing what's giving rise to an action—try it with little things—it can become a moment of choice. I think I mentioned this at the last retreat. I started to notice a habit of mine: sometimes when I get in the car and I'm driving—where I live in Massachusetts, it's an hour's drive to anywhere, sort of like here.

Not quite as remote as here, but I get in the car, and if my mind just gets a little restless, a little scattered, I reach out to turn on the radio. Just do it. And if I notice that—just notice it, not having the idea that I *shoul dn't* turn on the radio, because that's putting a kind of negativity on it—but more just watching: what am I

doing?

So I watch it. I'm really clear. My mind gets restless, a little bit bored. I can feel it. And so the hand goes out and turns on the radio. And then if I notice that, sometimes as I tune in, I go, "Actually, it's much more peaceful without it." And I just turn it off. That's the wisdom coming in. That's not "you shouldn't listen." Because if I say I shouldn't listen and I turn it off, two seconds later the same thing happens again, right? But when I tune in—oh yeah, it's much more peaceful without it.

Or if I go ahead and turn it on, keep watching. I notice I turn it on. Well, there's never anything I want to listen to. So I turn it on, I don't like this, and I start punching the buttons. Well, this—I go ten seconds, ten seconds. Then I put it on the one that jumps from station to station. So it's jumping from station to station, going for ten seconds. Do I want to listen? No, I don't want to listen. I'm driving off the road, meanwhile. By the end of it, I'm getting more and more restless and agitated. And I go, "Why the heck am I doing this?"

If you can just watch this stuff, we learn so much. We learn so much about the habits of the mind. It's a kind of restlessness that leads to wanting some kind of input, just some kind of input. But does the input make me happy? No. It's feeding the restlessness. It's feeding the agitation. So just to keep watching—we learn so much. And then there's that moment of choice where I go, "Ah, turn it off," and there's peace. That doesn't mean the whole thing doesn't start again in five minutes.

But when we're taking our stance in the awareness—like Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, awareness is your home, stay where you belong—when you take the stance in awareness, it's fascinating just to watch that whole process. Many, many years ago, in the first years of my practice, I would always have these ideas, as I said, of being dharmic, how I should be. And listening to crap on the radio wasn't it. So I would be listening to crap on the radio and judging myself the whole time. You're doing it without awareness and adding negativity and aversion to the mix.

Bring in awareness at that point. Because we so much don't really like being with negative states, we don't really want to bring in awareness at that point. "Oh no, this is going to go away." So this is where the structure of our practice and the wisdom of understanding—for example, the Four Noble Truths, or understanding impermanence, understanding unsatisfactoriness—comes in. Because that borrowed wisdom, that heard wisdom, gives us a sense of, "Yeah, okay, this is uncomfortable. Let's get interested in seeing what's going on. What's feeding the confusion here? What's feeding the agitation? Where's the peace?"

I wouldn't really be saying all of that internally, because I'm just kind of gently watching what's happening. But there's that quality of trust in the awareness and wanting to really see peace. Because I really trust the stuff I've read, the stuff I've heard, the stuff I've practiced—the Buddha's way of describing.

I mean, just totally. It does not make sense to doubt it. It's real in my experience, everything we've described. And so when I feel myself getting more and more agitated, I know for an absolute fact from my

own experience that somewhere the mind is being strengthened by some kind of greed, or some kind of aversion or fear, or some kind of delusion. Well, delusion always goes with greed or aversion, or stands alone. I know that's there. And my interest is: let's see it. Let's see what's going on. Let's see how the mind is getting seduced. Let's understand how it's working.

Back to Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He has a mind like that. He was just fascinated by what was going on in his mind, no matter what. He said he'd go out with his friends, and they didn't know what he was doing. But he said, "I'm always watching my mind. What's going on in the mind?" He calls it his secret mission. He said, "I'm going with my friends to a bar, whatever they call a bar in Burma, or a kickboxing match or something. And I'm just watching my mind."

He was telling a story, and this is great for watching our intentions. He said he used to love going to boxing matches. And he hadn't gone for a long time, so finally he said, "I'm going to go." And his mind kind of said, "Oh no, you shouldn't." But he said, "No, I'm going to go." And he's watching his mind. So he watched how much trouble it was to take the time off from his work, close down his stall, get on a public bus in Burma—which is hot and crowded—and endure the long journey because he lived in Yangon. By the time you get there, you're totally worn out. Then he goes in and all these people are screaming and yelling at this big sports event. It's really loud and unpleasant. And then the boxers start and these guys are pounding each other. And he's right in the front row. And he goes, "What the hell am I doing here?" That's exactly what he said. And he said that was the last one he went to.

In a way, he enjoyed that whole thing because the enjoyment is the wisdom. The enjoyment is, "Wow, look at how this is working. Look at what we're doing when we're not paying attention." So beginning to get interested in watching our minds, watching as best as we can when we're about to do something.

The Buddha said to his son, Rahula, who became a monk when he was seven years old. And as I said, Rahula became completely enlightened—I think also at seven. So the Buddha did have some kind of... well, it was nice having a Buddha around. Let's put it that way.

But there's a very well-known discourse where he's talking to Rahula about noticing, about really exploring your motivation for any action. And the sutta starts by saying—and this is important—he says to Rahula, "What is a mirror for?" And Rahula says, "A mirror is to reflect, just to reflect." And the Buddha says, "Yes, just so, Rahula. So just like a mirror, you should reflect on your actions—any action before you do it, of body, speech, or mind."

The reason I want to bring that in is that the mirror reflects. It doesn't judge, does it? The mirror doesn't pop up and say, "God, you look like heck today. What are you doing?" The mirror reflects just as it is. That pure awareness is just like that. So you're reflecting not with judgment, not to say you're good or bad. He says you reflect on your action before you're doing it, if you can, to see: is this going to lead to harm or pain for me or others? If so, refrain from it.

If you don't notice before the action and you notice in the middle of the action, reflect. This is how I would put it in my own language: check what's your motivation. Because we don't know the result of the action, but we can tune in and say, "You know, there's a lot of aversion in this. Maybe I could wait and do it when the mind is clearer." In the middle, reflect. Or if you check it and go, "As far as I can tell, this seems to be coming from a clear mind." Maybe it's coming from compassion. Maybe it's coming from just simple recognition that it's time to do this—the obvious thing to do. Maybe it's coming from metta. Maybe it's coming from joy. Maybe it's coming from a sense of duty, but without negativity. And you do it.

If you don't know until after it's over, still tune in, reflect, check what was the motivation. After it's over, you actually have more of a sense of whether it brought some kind of harm to yourself or others. And if that's the case, the Buddha does not say take out the whip, tell yourself how horrible you are—guilt, guilt, guilt. Guilt actually isn't something he ever talks about. He says, in another sutta, if you see that actions you have done in the past have been unwholesome, have led to your own suffering or the suffering of others, when you see that, then you say to yourself, "Okay, now I won't do that anymore." He doesn't say, "Oh my God, I'm so horrible. Sit here and torment yourself." But you feel the remorse. "Oh, that lying, that wasn't helpful. I'm really not going to lie anymore."

So this quality of looking at what's our motivation, just like a mirror, just to see—is really incredibly powerful. And from this is where we start to see for ourselves when we talk about what's wholesome or skillful, what's unwholesome or unskillful. Sure, there are lists. There are lots of lists. There are the five training guidelines we took: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie or use harsh speech, not to harm others or ourselves with our sexual activity, not to take drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind and cause heedlessness and lead us to do other harmful things. But those aren't meant as external rules that you just blindly follow. They're reference points.

Really, when we see what's skillful and what's unskillful, it's by tuning into our own experience as we do something, after we've done it, how we do it, how it affects others—and seeing what actually leads to the happiness and freedom from suffering of others, to happiness and less suffering for ourselves. So it becomes not borrowed knowledge and not just having to obey some rules, but we know for ourselves. We experience the goodness of non-harming.

And when a mind that's not clouded by confusion experiences that goodness, it prefers it. Even though the habit of going after the pleasant and pulling away from the unpleasant is so strong, when with conscious awareness, with a wise mind, we actually experience the wholesomeness of—I want to say goodness—of non-harming, there's such a sense of higher happiness that even our sense of self prefers it. It just feels lovely.

I'll tell you a little story. A friend of mine told this at the last retreat, but it was just an example of how you prefer it. This is Spirit Rock, which some of you have been to. They have a big store—much bigger than ours—a giant store. They sell all kinds of things. I was teaching there in February, and I wanted to go

down and get a little statue, a White Tara statue that I'd seen the year before. Because you go and buy it, it's just self-service, like here. So I went in and was looking all around but couldn't see it. I happened to run into a very dear friend of mine who was just coming through that day, who from time to time has worked with the person who runs the store. She said, "Oh, I know where the statues are kept in these closets outside. And I know where the secret little magnet is kept that opens the closet doors"—because you couldn't open them otherwise.

So she did that, and the two of us were rooting happily through these closets. We finally found the one with tons of statues. We're going through all the statues, finding the little one I wanted at the back, and we get it out. Then she's putting back another little statue—it was a Manjushri statue with a little sword. She barely touched the thing, barely touched it, and the sword snapped.

And she said, "Oh, no." And then I said, "Oh." And then I was holding one. I put it back. And the same thing happened. We're both like, "Oh."

She sent me an email later, because without saying anything, we both were looking at each other, and it just flashed through. She said, for a nanosecond, both our minds went to: *just put it back, no one will know.* And I'm thinking, *I don't want to buy this Manjushri statue.* We're both thinking, *I don't want to buy this Manjushri statue.*

So that went through our minds, but we saw it immediately. And there was no question, right? We could have—no one would have ever known. But no, we can't. So we took them out, locked up the closet. Then we went over to Marianne, who runs this place, to her office, like two little bad girls going to confess. She wasn't there, so we're writing out a whole sheet, you know. And then she came in and goes, "What are you two doing here?"

We really felt like little bad girls. "Here, we're confessing. We have to buy these."

And she goes, "Ah, that happens all the time. We just glue it back together and sell it for half price."

That was great. But the sense of—you know, it's a funny story now, but she reminded me. I wouldn't have even thought about it. But that sense of so appreciating the quality of awareness that would just see that little moment arise. And it's so clear. It's not even a conscious choice. It just feels so off. And the appreciation for honesty is just right there. The wisdom is right there.

The more we pay attention to all the ways our mind is working, the more it moves in that direction. It's not like we're such great people or something. It's nothing personal. But wisdom prefers non-harming. It just feels better. If you just want to stay on the level of me, of personality—it feels better. Sometimes it works out nicely like that too. It doesn't always, but it doesn't matter because that's not the point.

I said before, and that was a little example, of how the steadiness of awareness transforms unwholesome qualities—the torments of mind, the habits of greed, of ill will, of cruelty—naturally transforms our

motivation. And this is really true. It's really true.

I just want to talk a little bit about it. Maybe I'll talk about it in terms of compassion. Because for many of us, one aspect of cultivating mindfulness practice is to wake up, to be free. And another aspect—not for everybody, but for many people—is really wanting to act and move in the world through compassion, through a motivation of compassion rather than *it's all about me, me, me,* right?

This also gets to where the seed, the truest essence of an action, isn't in how it looks or its result, but in the movement in the mind, in the heart that gives rise to it. This is also very true with compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh likes to give very simple examples where the natural effect of understanding a situation will bring the mind into compassion when we were perhaps annoyed. He gives an example of a brother and sister, or two friends, and say the sister is younger and being really fretful and whiny and bratty, and the brother's getting really annoyed and upset and going down a bad road.

And the mother explains to the brother, who's a little older and can understand, that the little girl is sick and hurting and in a lot of pain, and she can't really help herself. She explains it in a way that the brother can understand. And when he understands that, the sense of blame and aversion, even in a child, can go away.

And there's just this sense of—it doesn't have to be like the bodhisattva of the ages—but this sense of, "Oh, you're hurting. I'm really sorry." I'm sure you've all experienced that. Even to yourself. Just this sense of moving from blame, moving from ill will, moving from "Oh, how could I do that? That was so bad to say." That sense of self-forgiveness: "I couldn't have done any differently at that time." And a sense of compassion comes in, a sense of understanding. I'm giving very simple examples, but that's really how it works.

Compassion is described or defined in the Theravāda as the quivering of the heart—you could say, the quivering of the mind—in connection with, in response to pain, in response to suffering. Another way of describing it, in terms of our mettā practice: when you feel a sense of mettā, not some huge flood, but just that open connectedness with a person, or that open acceptance—"just as you are, may you be happy"—that open presence, that connectedness. When that quality of friendliness connects with the suffering aspect of yourself or another, particularly the suffering aspect, the quality of heart and mind that is elicited in this open, wise space is compassion. It just feels a little bit different. It has a slightly different shading. It's a tenderness, really, of heart that is willing and able to stay gently present with the pain, with the sadness.

It may or may not be able to fix it. If there's the movement to alleviate the suffering, that's wonderful if it's possible—coming from compassion, coming from a being-with the suffering, not from a hating the suffering. That is not compassion. Compassion is the ability to be really present with it. If there's something to do, great, we do it. If there's not, compassion has this open, tender quality of wisdom and

non-judging mind that can still be with the person or be with the suffering.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who is always reborn as the manifestation, the embodiment of compassion—I was at that teaching in California where he was talking about how compassion develops. He says it develops from deep insight into what the experience of suffering actually is. And how does that insight develop, you may ask? By being present with our own experience when there's suffering, when there's physical pain, when there's emotional pain of any sort. Bringing this same interested awareness, this careful awareness, allowing the mindfulness to just gently touch—whether it's physical pain or aversion in the mind, or a whole self-judging story, or a memory that in this moment brings up a sense of shame, whatever it is. Or it's rage and despair at what's going on in the world.

Whatever it is, it's an experience arising in your mind and body right now. The thought may be about the past or the future. The thought may be about somewhere on the other side of the world. But it's a thought arising right now. It's a sensation, a feeling arising right now in your mind-body experience. And awareness can touch it. Awareness can meet it. And that quality we bring of simplicity, of kindness, of awareness—that is, in that moment, shifting the habit of mind from resistance and aversion toward the suffering to openness. That's what allows compassion. It's not that we have to think about how to cultivate it. It's just that moment, even if it's just a moment, where you can touch that burning pain and just let it be as it is—just for a moment, and then it bounces off. That was a moment of openness in the mind, of non-aversion. Non-aversion opens into mettā and compassion.

So it's not that we have to jump from being lost in reactivity to being the Dalai Lama. But this is how moment-to-moment awareness is actually cultivating compassion. Awareness of aversion is not aversion. Do you understand what I mean? The aversion is aversive. The awareness of aversion is not aversive. Awareness of suffering, when it's not colored by aversion, is actually how we open to compassion.

And as the Dalai Lama then goes on to say, as our compassion—our ability to just be with ourselves with clear awareness and suffering, even little sufferings—as that strengthens, then it begins to automatically, just moment to moment, turn into a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings, and then too with all beings.

And I'm sure you must have seen how this works. If you've ever been really sick—I had years ago developed an autoimmune disease, and it's one of these things that everybody and their brother has something you should do for it. Try this, try that. All well-intentioned, though maybe not wisely, but well-intentioned.

But can you feel the difference? When somebody comes and says, "Do this, do this, do this," and you can feel underneath it, there's trying to help, but the motivation is actually fear or aversion or real discomfort with being with you while you're uncomfortable. If we can't be with ourselves when we're uncomfortable, it's really hard to be with someone else when they're uncomfortable. And even if we're trying to do the compassionate action, the internal seed of the action is not compassion—it's discomfort or fear or

aversion. So we get interested to see that.

And have you ever been with someone who can just come and be with you? Maybe they've got nothing to offer to fix it, but they're just there with you in the difficulty. You can feel, to me, a real sense of compassion—the sense of being present without needing to blind oneself or look away. Then if something occurs to do, you do it. Sure, there's all that energy to act. If there's not, you can just be there, really open and together. It's a beautiful thing.

There are a lot of nurses here. I'm sure you know more than I exactly what I'm talking about because you're manifesting that all the time. And if you've ever been in the hospital and had a nurse who wasn't manifesting that—it's rough. I've got to tell you, it's rough. So to the nurses and doctors, I bow. I really bow.

Joko Beck, who was a Zen teacher, has a wonderful way of saying it: Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness when we're going through something? Even a little confusion and unpleasantness. This is really where awareness brings wisdom, and the wisdom naturally transforms our fear of suffering, our dislike of suffering, into compassion, into connectedness with ourselves and with all beings. It takes trust, it takes practice, it takes real courage sometimes—even to be willing to look and see and to begin to trust that we can act without trying to do so much all the time.

There's so much suffering in the world, I don't have to tell you. And being quite active in all the different realms, the results can be doing a lot of good. They can be. But if the motivation is coming largely from anger—which of course is going to happen, we're not perfect beings, and stuff is so difficult—it starts to eat us up. So this is where we want to pay attention.

I can tell this story because this is the perfect place to tell it—it happened here. The first retreat I taught here, and it was one of the first retreats at Spirit Rock, if not the first. There's a photo on the wall in the dining room of all the people who were at that retreat. I was teaching it with Joseph Goldstein. This place had just opened, and the retreat was billed for burned-out environmentalists. So most of them had no sense of meditation or dharma practice at all. It was before even stress reduction and MBSR got so big. Grove really pulled them in from environmental activism.

Yes, it was a tough bunch. A tough bunch. Really smart lawyers and activists, burned out for sure. High-powered and willing, you know—open but with a sort of "prove it" attitude, though interested. I was a little... what would you say? I was a little like, okay, let's see.

So we taught about a ten-day retreat, and we did mettā every afternoon like this. When we first introduced it, we were talking about it, and one man—I don't remember his name—but people generally were saying, "Are you kidding? Mettā? Soft? Accepting? Open to people? Do you know what it's like in the courtroom against these big corporations? They hate you, and they're attacking you, and they're doing everything they can to get you. You have to have your anger. You have to have your energy to go in and

fight back. That's what you need. Don't tell me mettā—it's too mushy."

Okay, but you're here.

Just do it. I mean, they did it. To his credit, this one particular guy was very much involved in some very difficult, angry lawsuit, right in the middle of it. And at the end—I'm not exaggerating—at the end of the retreat, just talking, he was actually crying a little bit. And he said, "I had no idea how that anger wasn't just coming out against the other lawyers. It's eating me up. It's coming out in my family. It's coming out everywhere I go. It's not just at the lawyer—it's everywhere."

I never saw him again, so I don't know what effect it ultimately had. But just stopping to look, to turn around and look—it's a huge thing we're doing.

We're practicing it here, and it may feel like, well, we are really privileged to be able to be here. But we can meet that with gratitude rather than guilt, because it's not so esoteric. It's not that we're just sitting here so that we can look inside our own hearts and minds and feel better about ourselves, really getting into emptiness and compassion and subtlety. Yeah, that's fantastic—I love all that stuff. But how does it affect our speech, our actions in the world?

This awareness, this mindfulness, this understanding of how greed and confusion and hatred bring suffering to ourselves when they guide our actions and we don't know it—when we don't know it and try to blind ourselves to it, these forces run our actions. Just to have this tool of mindfulness and wisdom, the willingness to apply it over and over, the willingness to see how when these defilements are active and stronger than awareness, the suffering they cause us. To see how wisdom comes in and the mind naturally, habitually, moves toward awareness. The actions of compassion, actions of friendliness, actions of non-harming, connectedness with other beings—how we manifest in the world affects everybody we come in contact with.

There's no way we can say this is just an isolated, separate, esoteric little practice. We're learning these tools to go out and do whatever you do, whether you do some kind of environmental activism, whether you stay home and take care of your family, whether you're working in an office, whether you're being a nurse—it doesn't matter. Whatever we're doing, we come in contact with people. And how we act, and the motivations of our heart and mind, are contagious. They communicate. Just like when you're around someone really angry, it's a lot easier to get angry. When you're around someone that's angry and you can tune into the anger building in yourself and say, "Maybe I don't need to do that right now"—that is huge. I really feel like it's a huge gift to the world.

And how we show up—there is no one right way, right? How we manifest.

So I'll just end with a story from a movie, a little hour-long documentary that was made with Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who is a pretty well-known Tibetan teacher in this country now. He was going back to Tibet with some Western women to visit some nuns up in an area called Nangchen. And one of the women was

filming and put together this documentary.

These nuns in Tibet had been there for many, many years. And during the Cultural Revolution, twenty or thirty years ago, they were forced—well, the Chinese came in and forced them to leave their nunneries. Some were killed. Some were put into prison camps. And the ones who weren't had to make a choice. All of them had to disrobe. Some of them went way, way up into the mountains, into the caves, and just hid, trying to stay nuns secretly and do their practice. Some of them starved to death. They had really difficult times—we can't even imagine.

Other ones went back to their families, and some of them just gave up and went back to normal life. But a lot of them, though they looked like they were having normal lives, said they were secret nuns. They were wearing their normal clothes. They had to seem to take part with their family. But in their heart, they never abandoned being nuns.

And when Tsoknyi Rinpoche and these women went back just a few years ago, things had eased a bit. The nuns that were still alive were coming back together. The ones who had almost starved but lived had come back down. The ones that had been with their families had come back.

They'd taken robes again, and they were rebuilding their nunnery, high up on a mountain. They were dragging timbers and giant stones by hand, rebuilding this sacred place.

You see, they all had this deep commitment to their awareness, to their awakening, to goodness. How they carried it through this difficult time was unique to each of them. Then when it was time, they came back together, each doing different things.

And this is where I want to end. These Western women were taken up to meet someone special. The nuns said, "This is our oldest, most senior nun. She's the most realized of all of us."

They took her up, and there she was in this tiny, tiny little shack way up high. She looked like she was 150 years old—I don't know how old she really was. She'd certainly been through a lot. She was lying in a kind of wooden bed. She couldn't get up anymore, and she just lay there all the time. Her eyes were so bright—one of these old awakened beings with incredibly bright eyes. And she was just spinning a prayer wheel.

She said, "All I do all day is send out prayers of loving-kindness for all beings. I just lie here for twenty-four hours"—except when sleeping—"just saying, 'May all beings be happy and free from suffering. May all beings be happy and free from suffering.'"

I thought, wow. What a life. What a mind. What a cultivation.

You could say, well, nobody knows. It's just some little lady up there and nobody else knows it. Like I said about that nun in Burma who chants metta—who actually I know who he meant, but I hate to tell you she died. But this other nun's still up there chanting.

So there are as many ways as there are people to manifest wisdom and compassion. Take care of your awareness. It's really the most precious gift we have.

And thank you all for being here, for your commitment, and for your caring for yourselves and the world.

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