Awareness of Things as They Have Come to Be

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:41

So tonight I want to talk hopefully rather simply. Basically the bottom line is I just want to encourage you to keep going. That's it.

What I want to talk about is really different ways—certainly not exhaustively—that this simple moment-to-moment awareness can be so powerful and transformative.

Remember last night or at some point Steve was saying that what we're really starting from, the angle we're beginning from in the instructions and the way we're talking about this particular technique or form of practice, is from the wisdom side, from the understanding side. And if you remember when he talked about right view, he said that understanding is what frees our minds and hearts from suffering. Really the only tool, you could say, or technique that we're offering or talking about here is just this simple recognition of moment-to-moment mindfulness, moment-to-moment awareness. And we're saying this purifies the heart and mind, this leads to the understanding that frees us from suffering.

Has that been your experience so far? There might have been moments. If there's even a moment, that's already great, because then we get a sense of how it works. But I just want to talk a bit about how this simple awareness, moment-to-moment awareness, the steadiness of awareness, can be so transformative. And what gets transformed anyway?

I think Steve said, but it always bears repeating, that all of our suffering arises not because of how things are, not because somehow we need to change things in the world. All of the suffering—not all of the pain, pain will come—but all of the suffering, this is how the Buddha saw it, arises because we misperceive. We recognize wrongly our experience of ourselves, of so-called others, of the six sense doors. We perceive incorrectly. What we perceive we think about, so we think about and describe our experience incorrectly. And then we respond, we react in a way that maybe not consciously but through habit we think is going to make us happy. And the responses coming out of misperception and confused thinking keep us confused and suffering.

When the Buddha talks about freedom from suffering, what we're talking about here isn't about some way to fix it all so that it's all okay. As I was saying in one of the groups, it's not that somehow finally we hit that moment where everything is like, "Ah, it's all over. Thank God we've got it." We're waiting for that. Secretly, look and see if you're waiting for that. It's not what it's about. And awareness or enlightenment isn't about somehow escaping from this world to a better place. The Buddha woke up in this world, lived in this world. We awaken into this world, in this mind and body, but recognizing with different eyes—using eyes as a metaphor—recognizing accurately.

We can't even imagine how something that sounds so simple could so completely change our understanding and the way we live our life. But it does.

And the basis, what allows us to even begin to recognize accurately—and you don't have to believe me—mostly we don't even know we're recognizing inaccurately. That's actually the delusion, the moha, the root of our problems. As I like to say, and friends and I have this little saying, we don't have a clue. Not a clue that we're recognizing inaccurately.

So I want to talk a little bit about that and how sati, mindfulness, which we've been calling awareness here, is just that moment of awareness that's free—what we're calling intelligent awareness—free from bias, free from assumption, free from opinion. Just, it's like this. It seems so nothing, right? So mundane. That's the seed. That's the incredibly powerful seed, and the steadiness of that can just turn our understanding of ourselves and the world around. It completely transforms. It's not really that we're transformed—it's that our understanding is transformed. It comes in line with the way things are, the way things have come to be.

To start by talking about the sense of right view, or how we don't understand that we're perceiving inaccurately: I actually really like right view as a translation of the Pali sammādiṭṭhi. View as a metaphor is really how we see things. So we're using "see" as a metaphor for understand—it's not about actually seeing with the eyes. But right view is really the sense of how we understand ourselves in the world, the view we hold of how things are. I find this fascinating to explore because often, frequently, most of the time, we have all kinds of views about ourselves in the world that we just assume are true.

That's where we get confused and lost.

Right view is simply how we perceive. The Buddha had a great ordering of this: what we perceive is just that simple recognition—tree, person, bell. Oh, that's Carol. We're going to perceive what we perceive, and that's already complicated. That can be misperception.

What we perceive, we think about. We make a story: this is what it means. What we think about forms into a view of "yes, this is how it is." Mostly we're not actively thinking "yes, this is how it is"—we just know that's how it is. And when different views of the world meet each other, that's where so much of the conflict in the world comes from. It doesn't have to be conflict, but we all have views just from seeing through our different cultural backgrounds. We grow up holding different views of things, of how things are, without even knowing how it's different for somebody else.

One of the joys and complications of multiculturalism is trying to first see your own view, then understand others, and see where they connect. But we always want to think, "Well, mine's right though. I'll try and understand these other people. I'll make allowances. But this is really how it is."

So I'll tell you a little story. I was just telling this last week in Barry, but I liked it for this sense of view—how we perceive, how we think about things is shaped by the views we're believing, the views

we're holding about the world, about how things are, about who we are.

This was a few years ago. I was in Burma with a few friends—two Western women who are nuns and the rest of us lay people. We were at a ceremony where dāna offerings were being given to a group of villagers who had lost a great deal in the cyclone. There were big offerings of food. It's a whole ceremony. These things are done very formally in Burma, and they're like a happy celebration time.

So that was the setting, and as always, ten million photographs are taken every time there's any kind of dāna, any offering of generosity. It's just a million photographs. So we got back and we were looking at one of our friend's cameras, photographs of different aspects of that day—us standing there handing out medicine and food, other people present.

On a few of the photographs, there were these very exact circles of light, very precise circles, not like smudges or little marks. They were just kind of on different ones of us in the photograph. So I looked at them and said, "That's funny, I wonder what that is."

Then my friend who speaks Burmese and has spent many years in Burma—you have to remember, Burma, the majority of the Burman ethnic group, which is where we were, are Buddhists growing up in a Buddhist culture. There's a complete faith in the Buddhist worldview, in different realms of existence. That's just how it is. To us that might seem quite strange, but to them, that's just how it is.

So my friend said, "Oh, well, that's devas. That's how devas show up in photographs." Devas are celestial beings. I said, "Really?"

Then our third friend, also a nun but with a PhD—she's a botanist, a trained scientist—she said, "That's not devas. Don't you know that's the way light reflects? There's probably a little drop of water in the lens..." And she went on for a whole five-minute scientific explanation.

Who knows? That's the question—who knows? Not "who's right," which is what we want to figure out. This is just how views work. The perception colors how we think about it, and the perception is already colored by the views we're living by that we don't even know we hold.

We thought it was funny. Who knew? All the Burmese people would say, "Yeah, sure, that's devas." Then we came back to the West and I was showing the photos to some friends at IMS and they said, "There's no way, are you kidding?" And they came up with another explanation: "See that light from that window? And see this? It's just her camera." But then we looked at other cameras from the same time, the same moment, and they had it too.

Since then, I've seen different photos of unusual situations that have the same thing. Like just last year, there's a photo of me and a friend with this incredible old sayadaw—sayadaw is a word for teacher, like ajahn or rinpoche—who's about ninety-eight years old.

He lives up in the Sagaing Hills, and he just oozes metta. He's one of the most amazing beings. He's been

there his whole life. He remembers when there were tigers roaming around in Sagaing, and he would walk down on his alms round once a day, this huge walk. So anyway, he's an amazing guy. And there were a lot of those orbs in that picture. I started to think, you know, maybe it could be Davis. Who knows?

So my point is, the awareness—a moment of awareness is from that sense of "who knows?" But that's not so comfortable for us. It's more comfortable to land in the knowing, even if it leads to conflict. And never mind conflict with another person—conflict with our own experience.

So this sense of what we're cultivating, the quality of awareness, is this willingness, this freshness of presence—just in one moment, you don't have to try and hold it all day—of "who knows?" Whatever it is that's arising in your experience.

And so you may start to notice how many views come in when you're in conflict with your experience. "Well, this shouldn't be happening. Second day of a retreat, I shouldn't be this sleepy. It's because of..." you know, fill in the blanks. And then, "I shouldn't be thinking this. I'm getting lost in that. I shouldn't be." Why? Why shouldn't you? Because there's no "it shouldn't." This is what's happening. As Byron Katie says, when you fight with reality, you lose. "This shouldn't be happening." It should be happening because it is happening. In this moment, this is what's happening, and there's no way around it.

So the moment of mindful awareness is just, "Oh, it's like this." And if a view comes in—"it's because of this and this and the other"—fine. Recognizing that view is the next arising thought, rather than just automatically believing it.

This sense of recognizing incorrectly, responding out of the thoughts of that incorrect recognition, forms a view, and then that view colors our perception, and it keeps on circling. It keeps on circling. So that's just a little example of how this works.

In the big picture, the misperceptions the Buddha always speaks of—I'm just mentioning them, I'm not going to go into them tonight—are that we perceive constant change, but we don't actually perceive that. We perceive things as permanent. You might say, "Well, I know it's going to change later," but we don't perceive it in the moment. We don't perceive the unsatisfactory quality of experience. Somehow we think it's going to do it for us. We don't perceive the lack of substantial, separate, inherent self-existence in things. We see not only ourselves, but especially ourselves, as separate, self-existing, unchanging. And that feels comfortable and safe, but actually these misperceptions are giving rise to our continuing misunderstanding and responding to simple experience in ways that really increase our confusion and suffering.

Don't believe me. I mean, you can believe me or not—it won't do any good. Because we can read this, we can hear this. And it's useful, as Steve said—it's beginning knowledge to help us look. And we can think about it. "Well, maybe it makes sense. It's worth having a look." But it's the steadiness of moment to moment—just that open recognition of awareness of what's happening without needing to make sense of

it. Without needing to have this experience fit neatly into all my little patterns. Or if you need it, you just notice the needing.

That quality of: Is it Davis? Is it the moisture in the lens? Is it possible to just be really present and open without needing to know? It's just stepping into the unknown in each moment.

So this view—really, the deep view of misperception that the Buddha talked about, that I would not say guides all of us, but it's under there probably for most of us—is the belief, you could say, or the trust in what's called samsara. Samsara being the seemingly endless round of

looking, wanting, getting or not getting, leading to the next thing, leading to the next thing—the so-called endless round of rebirth. And you don't have to believe in different realms of existence, but birth after birth, moment after moment.

I'm going to read this from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. I've been appreciating this a lot lately. He says, "The Buddhist teachings describe three fundamental attitudes, which can be practiced together as a whole." The renunciation he's talking about—renunciation, compassion, and pure perception, or wisdom. I'm going to talk about what he's calling renunciation tonight, the way he's talking about it, not what you might be thinking.

"Renunciation is the foundation, the root of all the subsequent stages of the path. It implies the strong wish to free oneself, not only from your immediate sorrow, but more so from the seemingly unending sufferings of samsara"—meaning the seemingly unending cycle of conditioned existence.

So how does that manifest, this wish to free oneself from that? "It manifests as a heartfelt weariness and disillusionment"—I think the word "disillusionment" is important—"with this endless quest for gratification, approval, profit, and status."

And that, I think, is a very succinct definition of samsara that I appreciate. It's the cycle we are so often caught in—this seemingly endless quest for gratification, self-gratification, for approval, for profit, for getting something, for status. Basically, wanting something. Seemingly endless.

The Buddha's not saying this is bad, you should hate wanting, you should hate yourself for wanting, and you should stop it right now. No. Why do we do this? Because in our twisted perception, that's the refuge. It's like a message whispering that this is what's going to make us happy. This seemingly endless quest—you don't get this thing, but the next one will do it. This particular sitting was unpleasant, but the walking will be better. This retreat so far is a washout, but maybe next time. That lunch—I don't really like chickpeas—but dinner could be better. Or you can go on the aversive side, but it's the same thing.

And without this moment-to-moment simple awareness of just watching that process, what's so fascinating is when I describe it, you laugh. It's not like you're all thinking, "I can't relate to that at all." Maybe you are—can't relate at all—okay, that could go either way. But still it keeps seducing us. Not even

seducing us—it's like it's whispering, "This is the way."

Why? What helps us see through it? And that's where we come back to awareness. Not awareness with the idea "I need to stop this," but just to turn our attention. As long as we're caught in that flow of samsara, part of the effect is it keeps us looking outward, so to speak, toward the object, toward what's happening.

Another simple way the Buddha described how we get caught in this—just the habits of our mind, and you've all seen this—is the sense of how all day, as Steve said, just six things are happening. You remember what the six things are? Thinking and mental experiences are happening, over and over and over. And you see how fast stuff is happening.

Our habit all day—not only on retreat but our whole life—what we're practicing when we're not recognizing it, is that something comes, a sight. It's mildly pleasant or unpleasant. Mostly we don't notice that, of course. But the habit is, "Oh, that's so pretty." There's just this leaning into it. It's not like you abandon your life and go running after it. Just this subtle, "Oh, that's nice. I'll look at that a little more." And a sound comes that's unpleasant, and there can be this subtle reaction we don't even know about—"Oh, I don't like that." Not even the bigger version, just "Oh, I don't like that."

The neutral—where Steve was talking about how much of our experience in the day is so mundane—we just don't even notice it. And that's becoming even more prevalent in our culture, isn't it, with all the media and stimulation? God forbid there should be thirty seconds when something isn't coming in. And so we don't even notice that neutral experience.

This is like a habit of response that's just going on all the time. And I'm not saying it's bad or good—I'm just saying this is what happens.

And what this can lead to in terms of the way we think about experience and the views that get inculcated in the background, reinforcing this habit, is that first we're deriving meaning from the objects, from what's happening. It inculcates the sense that the pleasant is basically good or acceptable.

When you think about enlightenment, do you think about your back hurting? When we think about it going well—you know, you've had a sitting where you're just filled with anger and rage—are you describing that as, "Oh, that's great, that's a great sitting"? Yeah, thanks a lot. It's not what I thought of as a great sitting. It just inculcates the sense that that's what happiness is. That's what's right, the pleasant. It doesn't help, in a way, that wholesome mental states are actually more pleasant too, but that's another story. The fact that it has to be pleasant to be good—that gets in there.

And when difficult stuff, unpleasant stuff is happening, it's so easy for the mind to respond in some way with, "This is wrong." The world out there is wrong, or I'm wrong because this is happening, and to do this right, whatever it is, this needs to be fixed. I'm not saying we can't change things in the world. I'm saying, in this moment, this is happening. That's the way it is. But the mind says, "No, this shouldn't be happening." And it's only happening because I'm bad, I'm stupid, the world is wrong—we're just lost in

aversion. And the neutral doesn't even exist. So we're really in a state of disconnect from what's actually going on.

Both in a very gross way and also more and more subtly, this view takes hold: that right is pleasant and unpleasant is bad. And that the way to happiness is this samsaric search for more and better things. Whether the pleasant is status or money or people liking you or getting things, it doesn't matter what it is. It's the search itself that's taking us away from the simple recognition: this is what's happening now. Things as they have come to be in this moment, recognized accurately moment to moment—this is the avenue to freedom.

When we're caught in this samsaric spin without recognizing it, thinking that we're trying our best to be happy, we're just feeding the confusion. How to get out of it? Then we bring the same mind: "Okay, it's bad, how can I get rid of it?" Instead, bring in that awareness. Watch the whole process. Not just once, I'm sorry to tell you, but ten million billion times. Each time fresh, each time new. This steadiness of knowing is where the wisdom comes. It's really quite amazing. Also humbling.

So I'll tell you another little story about that—just recognizing how samsara works from my own life. A little embarrassing, but never mind, since everyone who knows me knows this anyway.

In terms of thinking that what we're doing will bring us happiness or joy or comfort or whatever: I happen to be a big fan of watching professional tennis, professional men's tennis. I'm a complete non-athlete. I don't know why, but anyway, I'm a big fan of this. So this is something I do for enjoyment, right? I do it because it's going to make me happy. No one else cares, it doesn't do anybody else any good. There's this belief, unspoken, that this is a really enjoyable aspect of my life. And someone spends a fair amount of time doing it—not that much, okay, but still.

So last year, when I first realized this, I went through the whole process last summer with just more steady awareness. I don't think it's bad or wrong, so I didn't have any judgment about it. But it was during the time of Wimbledon, which is one of the big tennis matches, one of the most important ones. And of course, I have a favorite player, because otherwise you don't suffer as much. If you don't care who wins, you've got to care who wins to really get in there, you know.

Friends who know me say that when I'm watching tennis, if it's two players I know but it's not my favorite player—oh, I just watch and I'm appreciating the skill. It's fine.

My favorite player's playing? I'm a nervous wreck. Really. Sometimes I have to leave the TV and go take a walk if it's the fourth set of a five-set match. I can't bear it. I have to go take a walk and come back and calm down, and then I can watch it. Maybe.

So this was Wimbledon, and my favorite player, who's one of the main guys—anyway, Roger Federer—he actually won it that year. But anyway, he won it, and it was a huge thing because it made him have the most wins of anybody in the Grand Slams. It also meant he went back to number one. In the tennis world,

these were huge things.

So all the stress of watching it, I was noticing just more clearly, without judgment: I don't actually enjoy watching the match. As I said, I have to leave. I'm stressed out of my mind. It's really unpleasant. But then I can't not know what's happening either. So I'm running back and looking, and maybe I'll just look on the computer. What's the score? And I'll say, "Oh my God, he just lost. He got broken twice. I can't stand it." I'll go away. "Oh, he's up again now. Okay, that's good." And then I'll watch. I mean, it's so bad—the year before, somebody on the board of IMS called me up the day he lost in the quarters and said, "I'm so sorry, Carol." This is a guy I hardly even knew. I was really embarrassed.

Anyway, so that's the best it could be. He won Wimbledon. He was number one. In terms of samsara, that's the most you could have. You're happy. And I really saw: how long does that happiness last? Maybe two days. Because right away you've got to start worrying about the Olympics. And then after the Olympics, you've got to worry about the US Open. And it keeps going like that.

I thought, "Oh my God." I sort of knew that in the back of my mind, but the awareness—watching it without any judgment, just: look at that. And I thought this was making me happy. So that quality of awareness lets us see what's really going on.

But do you see the quality that has to come into the awareness? It's just interest, curiosity. If we start out with the assumption that this is wrong, this is bad, you're not going to see clearly. If we start out with the assumption that this is how it should be happening—and think about this in your practice—"Oh, this is how it should be." It's so subtle. You just give this little nudge, trying to nudge things in the direction of how they should be going. It shuts down clear seeing immediately.

So when I talk about awareness as being radical, that's what I mean. It's radically present with everything, with this open unknowing. How is it now?

And awareness doesn't really have a quality of kindness. I like to talk about kind awareness, but awareness itself isn't kind—it's just what it is. But for us as humans to talk about it, you could say that the quality of the awareness we're talking about is almost like a quality of listening. You know what I mean? Like we're just hearing.

Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about awareness receiving experience, rather than us going out and creating it somehow. So awareness is just receiving hearing, or receiving judging, or receiving sadness, or receiving frustration. Frustration is just like this.

There was a slogan on NPR a few years ago when they were doing a series of interviews about different people's lives. The slogan was: "Listening is an act of love." I like that for the quality of awareness. Simple awareness—only this moment, whatever's arising—is an act of love. An act of complete surrendering. Oh, it's like this now. Couldn't be any other way.

And it's not just to feel better in the moment, as I'm saying, but because the steadiness of awareness is what allows wisdom to arise. The wisdom that arises from recognizing accurately.

So back to the tennis example—recognizing accurately all that stuff that goes on doesn't mean it simply ends. I continue to watch tennis, but I'm more aware. As I'm watching it, it really isn't quite as fun as it used to be, I have to say. Of course, Roger's getting older and about to retire, so maybe it's that. But it really isn't quite as fun. I'm not negative about it, but I'm more aware, and so I can kind of go, maybe I don't need to watch it right now.

And that's a tiny example of what Dingo Kenzie was saying—a kind of disillusionment with the endless quest for gratification, approval, status. It's not saying, oh, it's bad and I'm bad. But it's also not saying, I will now stop craving. That doesn't work, have you noticed?

It's this sense of, oh, I want to... maybe not. The craving doesn't make sense in the moment of clear seeing. The aversion to things as they are makes no sense in the moment of clear seeing because it's just, oh, this is how it is.

The steadiness of awareness is what allows us to see the whole process, and seeing the process is what allows the wisdom—craving just drops away for that moment. It's really quite amazing, and then that strengthens our trust in the whole process, our trust in awareness.

There's a Pali phrase I like to use a lot: *yathā bhūta*, usually translated as "things as they are." In different lists of various kinds of insights in the commentaries, there's one called *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, usually translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are."

I just want to talk about *yathā bhūta*. Several friends whose understanding of Pali is a whole lot better than mine—which isn't hard—have told me that the more precise translation, according to the tense of the verb, is "things as they have come to be."

I really like that because there's only this moment. Awareness arising, meeting, receiving things as they have come to be in this moment—that gives me a certain sense.

"Things as they are," or when we're reacting—I like, I don't like, it's good, it's bad—what that feeds is the sense of separate, unique experiences. This is here, it's bad, it shouldn't be here. Oh, this is nice, let's keep this going. It keeps us looking outward to the experience, to the object. It keeps us involved in our relationship to the object and what it means about me. That's the big delusion, right? What does this mean about me?

Yathā bhūta—things as they have come to be. I love it because what it gives me is a more accurate sense that there's no separate thing. I mean, how did this bell come to be? It isn't some separate thing. If we start to reflect for just a moment on all the conditions that came together for this bell to be here in this moment—where can you stop?

There's whoever gave it, and it's been sitting here all this time, and Spirit Rock exists, and it's made of a certain kind of metal that was mined in a certain place, and all the men and maybe women who mined it, and then the people who had to turn it into this kind of metal, and then the people who transported it to the factory or wherever they make bells, and then back to however many hundreds of years ago when these kinds of bells were first designed. And what's the cause for this bell? What made the people who donated it decide to donate it? What made the people who accepted it decide to accept it? And because Spirit Rock is here, we're all here—and how did each of us come to be here?

You can't separate anything.

And in this moment, as I said, it can't be any different because this is how it is. Things as they have come to be. So if I'm just allowing this kind of radical surrender awareness, just receiving things as they have come to be in this moment—

it gives more space and less personal reactivity.

Because so many things have come to be, we can bring in curiosity—the kind of curiosity that we bring to the steadiness of our experience here. So you come in and you're sleepy in a sitting, and instead of "Oh, now I'm sleepy, bad," it's like: things as they have come to be. Everything's arising in this moment lawfully, due to all kinds of causes and conditions. The steadier our awareness is, the more we notice what those causes and conditions are. How we respond comes out of that seeing, and then we notice what effect our response has.

And so the whole thing that might have seemed haphazard, or "why me," or "I blew it again," starts to shift. We start to see that everything is arising due to causes and conditions, affecting the next thing. And with clear seeing, that recognition, that understanding unfolds naturally.

This is again what it's so hard for us to trust. Our job is just this receiving—letting awareness be an act of love, being willing to wake up in it again and again and again, and trusting that with the steadiness of awareness, the clear seeing, the right view arises naturally. You don't have to figure it out. And in fact, we can't. Because we try to figure it out from what we already know.

Do you remember Krishnamurti? Jack was telling me that someone who sounds knowledgeable was saying nobody remembers Krishnamurti anymore, that I have to stop quoting him. Anyway, his first book, when he first broke free, was *Freedom from the Known*. And I think that's a wonderful phrase in terms of awareness. It's freedom from the known. We sit down and our knee hurts. "I know why my knee hurts." No, no, no—just wait. What's happening now? Freedom from the known, open to discover. And then seeing. And the trust will build that accurate recognition will give us the information that we need. Accurate perception leads to wise understanding. If we try to figure it out, we're just going to go down the path we already know.

Thich Nhat Hanh said that understanding does not arise as a result of thinking—he's talking about

Dhamma understanding. It does not arise as a result of thinking, but from the long process of conscious awareness. Thinking can express or contain some understanding, but it's too limited and rigid to actually hold much understanding. So I just say that we can't think our way into it. God knows we'll try, and that's okay. Awareness just notices thinking. That was a little aside there.

Even when there have been times—and we've all had them, I'm sure—where we have enough steady awareness to see through the seduction of this round of samsara. Haven't you all experienced a time where you really see, "Oh, wanting isn't doing it"? Getting those M&Ms really didn't make my day, whatever it is. Or someone said yesterday, "It's so obvious for a moment, and then we just forget again."

Isn't that the most amazing thing? To me, that's the most amazing thing about how our minds work when they're in their confused state. Just a moment of simple awareness, in that moment of clarity when you're not fighting against something or taking it personally or making a story—it's just like this. Doesn't it all seem so simple? Does anyone know what I'm talking about? Just checking. It's like, "Oh."

And in those moments, when we've let go of wanting, the sense of ease, the sense of presence and openness to the world and connection and freedom is so palpable. Why would I want to pick up that wanting again? It's so clearly suffering and constricting.

Two minutes later? You pick it up again. It seduced us again. We've heard the siren song: "No, come with me and you'll be happy."

How does this happen? Come! It really is amazing to me.

And I would say, if anything, all these years of practice, one of the things that's really strengthened is my deep respect for the power of habits in the mind. The habits of this wanting, of this aversion to the unpleasant, of evaluating our happiness based on that and getting involved in every experience and thinking: What does that mean about me? How does this make me happy? How does this make me sad? How does that person walking across the floor so mindfully—what does that mean about me?

Do you notice that? It's amazing. Then you hate it. No need to hate it. It's not personal. Everyone's doing it. It's not personal. It's like, wow, look at how the mind works. I like this. I don't like that. This is good. This is bad. This isn't worth paying attention to. What does it mean about me? What does it mean about me that I don't like that? Wow, they really like this music. I don't like that music. What does that mean about me? What does it mean about them? It's exhausting.

Just—ah, it's like this, this music. So simple. Why do we jump out of it again? It's amazing.

So the force of habit just sucks us right back in. There's a kind of comfort in the familiar. Where do we really take refuge? We're talking about the difference between refuge and comfort. Where do we take refuge? And this is back to right view—not even conscious—when we're in stress, or when we're confused, or when something's difficult, what's the place our mind and heart, our habit of mind, goes to for refuge?

So often what we've been practicing, most of us, is that when something's really difficult, our refuge is to get the heck away from it. And when you think about it, well, of course that makes total sense, doesn't it? I don't think I should sit with pain. If I can get away from it, I should. That makes sense, right? So what's wrong with that? Refuge into the pleasant. Well, if I could have pleasant rather than unpleasant, I'd go for it. If I could have food I like versus food I don't like, I'd go for it. What's the problem with that?

We take refuge in that. We really believe it's comfortable. And then the other form of delusion is all the stories we tell about ourselves, the assumptions we make. I think I mentioned yesterday, talking about delusion—one of the aspects of delusion Tejani was discussing is assumptions we make about people. But notice the assumptions you're making about yourself a hundred million times a day. Because I'm no good, I don't understand, I'm too tired, this other practice is better, I don't know what the hell they're talking about, I had too much to eat. Or I can be aware and I am so good because of all the practice I've done, because I'm such a great person. Or who cares about that anyway, but the fact that I ate too much at dinner just shows what a kind of weak and—you know, and on and on and on.

You sit down and your breath is choppy. Oh, and suddenly your whole life story unfolds because your breath is choppy. All of it just based on assumptions.

The steadiness of awareness cuts through all of that.

Let's look at Ajahn Chah. He says, "We get so absorbed in objects and our reactions to the objects that we neglect to notice how the mind is working." This is our whole practice here—getting interested in how the mind is working. And yet, the mind is where suffering and peace are found.

I'll just read a little bit from him. "Escaping from suffering means knowing the way out of suffering. It doesn't mean running away from wherever suffering arises." By doing that, you just carry your suffering with you. But don't we think getting out of suffering means running away?

He talks about sense contact. Most of us are either afraid of contact, as if it's going to cause suffering, or we like to have contact but don't develop wisdom from it. Instead, we repeatedly indulge ourselves through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—delighting in the objects and getting lost in them. These sense bases can entice us into delight and indulgence, or they can lead to knowledge and wisdom.

So we take everything as practice, even the bad things. When we talk of practice, we don't mean taking those things that are good and pleasing to us. That's not how it is. In this world, some things are to our liking, some are not. Usually, whatever we like, we want. Usually whatever we don't like, we don't want to see or even know about. But the Buddha wanted us to experience all of these things. *Lokawidu*—look at this world and know it clearly. That's our practice. Look at this world and know it clearly.

If we don't know the truth of the world clearly—and we are the world, this mind and body—we don't go anywhere. Living in this world, we must understand the world. The noble ones of the past, including the Buddha, all lived with these things. They lived in this world among people and realized the truth right

here, nowhere else.

That's really our practice—just to meet suffering in the heart, to meet happiness in the heart, right here. When suffering arises in the mind, awareness is right here receiving it with that quality of interest. What is this? How is it arising? Not by thinking about it, just the steadiness of awareness. We start to see how it arises. When happiness arises in the mind, awareness is right there. Happiness is like this. How does it arise? How does it end?

Seeing that suffering arises and it ceases right where it arises. This is Ajahn Chah again: "Happiness arises and it ceases right where it arises." Our job is just trusting this moment-to-moment receptive awareness to reveal *yathābhūta*—things as they have come to be. And amazingly enough, that is the seed that brings that clear seeing, that brings the freeing of heart and mind. It's really amazing how that can happen. And it does happen, over and over. Really noticing that—it's like a shift of refuge. And we're practicing it here. That's really all we're doing here: practicing awareness. Just the simple recognition of the knowing.

We're just practicing it. I know you might be thinking something better is supposed to happen. You're doing this, you're humoring us, but you're waiting for the real thing to happen. This is it. We're practicing moment-to-moment awareness. And each moment of recognizing—well, so what?

Because we're focusing out on wanting something, we're in samsara. How do we step out of samsara? Through yata bhuta—things as they have come to be—with total presence and reception. Nowhere to go, nothing to change, nothing to do. Total wakefulness, this moment, and this moment.

We don't have to figure it out. I can't tell you what a relief that is. Because we haven't been doing such a good job if we had to figure it out.

Let me read this from Tejaniya, talking about this awareness, which is always available. That's how we're shifting our trust, our refuge—to recognize that it's always available as soon as we remember.

So this receptive awareness—we're not trying to create something. We're not rejecting what is happening. As things happen or stop happening, we don't forget awareness of them. We notice it stopped. We notice it starts.

And I think this is quite interesting: acceptance of an experience doesn't mean we stop being aware of it. We bring awareness along with it. Often people talk about a difficult experience and say, "Okay, I just have to accept it." And accepting becomes, "Okay, I can be with it"—as if, well, that's it, that's accepted. And a little bit the mind shuts down onto the next thing. "I did my task with this difficult one, I accepted it, what's next?"

No. What's happening now? Accepting means it's like this now. Does it change? Does it stay? Does something else happen? Who knows? Yata bhuta—this moment will lead to the next, and we never know what the next will be. So it's this constant opening into the unknown with full awareness.

In terms of how we get sucked back into samsara with these habits of wanting and aversion to the pleasant and the unpleasant and the stories of "me," there's one thing the Buddha said in the Suttas that I find both very important but incredibly poignant. It really evokes this kind of sadness every time I read or think about it, because it's so true, but it's so unnecessary.

He's talking about our habits of reacting to the unpleasant with aversion, of reacting to the pleasant with wanting, and of reacting to the neutral with just not knowing what's happening—how all of that comes to be habits in our mind.

"The unenlightened, ordinary worldling"—that's us. Or "thickster," as I've heard it more accurately translated. I love that. Thickster.

How does the thickster react? We get all upset at the unpleasant. We love the pleasant. But this is what touches me so much. He said, "A thickster, having been touched by a painful feeling, resists it and resents it." You can relate to that. Then, "In one who so resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance against painful feeling comes to be a habit in the mind." It just comes to be a habit.

And under the impact of that painful feeling and the resistance to it, he then proceeds to search for and enjoy sensual happiness. You're feeling bad and you go to the refrigerator and have some ice cream. That's basically it. Your back hurts and you go and take a hot bath, turn on a movie. Not that any of it's bad—see, our mind goes, "No, not bad"—but just to see the habit.

So under the impact of the painful feeling, he proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. And this is the part I find so poignant.

Why does he do so? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness.

And that's samsara, right? There's no other way out of our unhappiness, out of our suffering, except to go get something more pleasant. And in the moment of looking, when we're just focused out there, it does it—it distracts us from the unpleasant, it changes it, we get the pleasant. And so that's the promise. We'll keep on doing it, keep on doing it. It keeps us looking outward.

The shift of refuge is this willingness to be aware of the problem. Unpleasant—just what Ajahn Chah said—when suffering comes up, awareness comes in right there at that suffering. And the refuge is the awareness. The escape from suffering isn't the escape from all unpleasant. It's that step out of that endless quest for pleasant into awareness itself. *Ah, unpleasant feels like this.*

It doesn't mean we can't make an intelligent decision to change something. We can make a much more intelligent decision when it's not coming out of reaction. So it doesn't mean acceptance where you lie down and become a doormat. But it means we bring awareness in right here. That's the only way we're going to see clearly.

The steadiness of mindfulness, the steadiness of awareness with whatever's coming—whatever's coming—gives us a kind of real freedom because we can stop judging and censoring and saying, "This is okay to bring into my meditation and this isn't. I have to meditate so this can't be arising in my mind."

I was talking to Alexis today. He said something I thought was really great in terms of this. He said I could share it—I asked, so don't worry, I wouldn't quote any of you without asking. He was talking about when he'd been sitting for some time with Sayadaw U Tejaniya, with a sense of just bringing steady awareness to whatever arises. He said it felt so freeing because it gave him permission to be totally himself. To bring all aspects of mind here in the practice, in the awareness. To be totally yourself in your practice. Nothing left out. Nothing censored. But bringing awareness along with it. It's really an amazing kind of freedom.

And how does this purify our heart and mind? You might think, "If I'm just myself, well, all that stuff we don't want to see—that's what's going to come up." As if it's not coming up anyway, right? Instead of it coming up and it's like, "Oh no"—receiving. Receiving. It's an act of love. Listen to it. That's what's arising. See how it arises, what causes it, what are the effects, what are the thoughts, what happens next. It's all just part of a lawful process. It isn't personal. It brings so much freedom from this judging—the steadiness of awareness.

How does it purify the heart and mind? Just that example I gave before: when we recognize accurately, clinging and aversion as a response just don't make sense. They just don't make sense. We don't have to decide we're never going to be aversive again. It starts to drop. That thing you always judge yourself about arises again, and though suddenly you're aware—you're aware of the judging and all—suddenly there's a moment of, "Oh, look at that. It's just like this. I know why it came." Nothing else. You don't make that happen; it happens itself.

One of our friends and colleagues, Guy Armstrong, likes to say something I really appreciate. He said it's what makes him believe and trust that reality is really beneficent—that when we recognize accurately, it doesn't increase our hatred and our dislike and our fear and our greed. When we recognize accurately, it's these suffering states that drop away, that lose their power. And what gets more trustworthy, what gets more obvious, is compassion and metta and wisdom and equanimity. Naturally. We don't have to create it.

It's really quite amazing.

I was going to close with a quote from Ajahn Sumedho, but I think it's just time to stop.

The last thing I'll say is simply this: it's just this moment—simple opening into the present, no more than that. But every moment. Tejaniya has this big sign on his door: "Never give up." No striving, simple perseverance, no looking for result—but never give up.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

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