Simplicity and Honesty of Awareness

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

So what I'm thinking I'm going to be talking about tonight is the simplicity and honesty of mindfulness, of awareness. We'll see if that's what I actually talk about.

But first, I have to acknowledge these poor flowers. I keep looking at them, and I feel a real kind of identification. Sometimes we're feeling really upright, filled with the beauty and joy of practice, and sometimes we're just flopping around, but doing our best. They're trying—they're kind of trying to curve up again, not giving up. I kind of love them.

Last night, Steve mentioned in passing the first of the three jobs of the meditator, of the yogi, which is one of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's fun little lines—the first job being right view. The second and third jobs of a meditator are so simple: mindfulness, awareness is the second job—the simplicity of awareness. The third job is the perseverance, the continuity, the willingness to be steady. So simple.

Our job isn't to figure everything out. Our job isn't to explain everything. Our job isn't to have our experience move in a certain direction. Our job—you may not be happy to hear this—isn't to feel good. Or you might be happy to hear it because you probably don't feel so great, so you're doing fine. You're here with some awareness, with the intention to remember to be aware when you forget. That's our job. The rest takes care of itself.

I want to talk a minute about the simplicity of mindfulness itself. We've been saying how awareness, the sense of just recognizing what's occurring, doesn't take a lot of energy, doesn't take a lot of effort. When I gave that example the first morning about seeing—and then, oh, seeing is occurring—you can say, "Oh." It's not such a big deal. Very available. The only trick is remembering. Not stressful or exhausting. So in that way, mindfulness awareness is simple.

Another way I want to describe this quality I'm calling simplicity and honesty: in a moment of awareness, of mindful presence—I'm using different ways to describe the feeling, the sense, and these are not necessarily abhidhammically correct—but the simplicity of a moment of mindful presence is that mindfulness, or mindfulness with right view as Steve was talking about, is this quality of attention where the whole psyche in that moment is really present with just the experience that's happening, just as it is, without adding anything extra. Just simple. Without preconception, without assumption, without judging, without liking or disliking. Just kind of open for discovery. I think of it as friendly interest in whatever's arising. Sounds nice.

So your knee is killing you. Awareness would be friendly interest in the sensation. Is it burning? Is it

tingling? How quickly does this simplicity of sensation move to, "Oh my God, and it's only day two"? Or how do you wake up and you're in the emergency room? I mean, you're not really in the emergency room—you're here—but you wake up from imagining you're in the emergency room.

What's actually occurring? The simplicity of mindfulness would be: oh, you notice those thoughts. The thoughts aren't the problem. When we recognize thinking is occurring, great—that's the simplicity of mindfulness again. Oh, this is thinking. But the complications from sensation, not really noticing how we get into that whole story—I'm in the emergency room, and in general, not only this moment but this whole retreat is unbearable, not only this retreat but my life, and anything I can see from this moment... You get a sense of what I'm meaning?

The simplicity, the honesty of mindfulness is just what's happening now. Just meeting each moment with this kind of freshness, aliveness—just what's happening now without preconception. It's so refreshing in the moments it happens. But we can't say, "I'm now going to be free from preconception." It doesn't work. It's such a habit. But learning to recognize, to kind of feel, to taste what this simplicity feels like, how to bring this friendly interest, and how to notice when it's not like that, when the complications are coming in.

One way I noticed this in my own experience—I think yesterday afternoon—is how it doesn't have to be a big suffering experience or a big joyful experience. Something that seems to be staying the same, something that we assume we're familiar with—this quality of simple, honest freshness of attention often gets lost.

kind of blurred away. We think we know, so we don't really pay attention. We could say we're mindful, but it isn't really. It's a simple example of how with the familiar, we stop paying attention.

The cottage I live in down the road—when I moved into it, it had just been built, so it's over twenty years ago. I moved in, brand new, everything's brand new, the paint's brand new, the floors are really good, everything's perfect. One whole dharma talk, which isn't this one, is how quickly it stopped being perfect. The way I'm using the example here is the opposite: how I stopped noticing. I keep thinking of it—oh, this house is brand new and the paint is perfect and the floors are really good. And I'll come in and I'll see all these stains and stuff on the floor and I go, well, what's that doing there? It's so new, so fresh! Because I'm not looking. I'm not looking. I'm just assuming it's the way it's always been. And meanwhile, it's had twenty-plus years of deterioration.

Does that sound familiar to anything—like in our bodies, in our habits? You just don't look in the mirror. Hey, I'm the same as I was at twenty-five. How come this and that doesn't work?

So just bringing in this freshness, meeting something new each time. This habit of dulling out is one very common pattern of mine that distorts, that is in the way, that blocks this simplicity of mindfulness, this freshness—which is just meeting each moment as fresh, each moment as new. And that's the truth. Next

moment anything can happen. Each breath is a new breath. You can never have the same breath twice. Each moment of that twinging pain in the knee is really different each time. Or the reaction in the mind is different. No two moments are ever exactly the same.

We don't have to think about the next moment. It's just this sense of complete commitment to presence with this moment's experience. That's one way I think of mindful awareness. Not "I'll be present if this moment's okay"—like sticking a toe in the water, checking whether this is an okay experience to be mindful of. No, it's just here.

Someone in a group today used an expression I loved. She was realizing she'd been kind of fighting with experience—it was unpleasant experience, that's what we usually fight with—and then recognizing, in my language, just to be there for it. Quit fighting. And in that moment of what I'm calling complete commitment to presence with this experience, the expression she used was really seeing, appreciating the richness of the moment. The richness of what's going on, which is only available to us when we're totally present. Just for one moment.

The simplicity of mindfulness, of awareness, the honesty of it—just being with things as they are, not as we think they ought to be, or should be, or were yesterday. Now, I'm not saying this is easy, and it's not that we can do it with an act of will, because the habits of our mind, our emotional habits, our personality, our psyche—Steve was mentioning it last night—they're pretty deeply ingrained. That's why they're habits, and they're comfortable. But we can learn to see those habits themselves with mindfulness.

Another example I remember when I'm thinking about this freshness, this quality of fresh interest without preconceptions: it's a documentary I saw on TV in Germany years and years ago about Yo-Yo Ma.

He's a really world-famous classical cellist, very interesting guy. So just to cut it short, he was really interested in music from all cultures all over the world.

In this documentary, he flew in a helicopter into a meeting with the head music man in a very small tribe somewhere in Africa—I didn't catch what country. He flew in a helicopter, so he was meeting this head musician of this particular tribe. The guy came out, a really old man, and he came out with his instrument, which was literally a big round oil can. He'd taken off the top and the bottom so it was a round cylinder, with a big wooden stick pole—kind of like if you were holding a cello, that would be the handle—and then with some frets and some wires coming out to make the strings. So that was his instrument, which he would play with his fingers and sing.

And Yo-Yo Ma gets out of his helicopter with his literally million-dollar cello. Maybe it's only a second-string cello, I don't know how much, but anyway, he gets out with it. He's listening to this head man play and sing, just totally present—not comparing it to how classical Bach should sound or anything, just really listening. Then he plays his cello for the guy, then the guy plays again, and then Yo-Yo Ma sings, wow! And then he tried the guy's instrument. He goes, "I can't do this nearly as well as you can do it. I just

can't do it." Because he could right away get into appreciating the different background, the different culture, the different form of music, and the skill it took.

What freshness of mind and seeing does that take? Not to say, "Well, that's good as far as it goes, but listen to me play Mozart." And in fact, he said, "You take my cello, you try to play the cello. I want to try and learn how to do this better, your one." I just love it. That image has stayed with me for years and years. Whenever I'm noticing that I'm feeling really just dulled out or assuming something should be a certain way, I just think of Yo-Yo Ma. I think, "Oh yeah, that freshness, that childlike innocence, that interest free from preconception."

So what we're cultivating here, moment to moment to moment, is just remembering, recognizing, getting a feel for this, learning to trust it, seeing how it works. And in a way, this quality of interested attention—Sharon Salzberg has a line I like, which is, "To pay attention is to love." You could say that in a way. This commitment to simply be fully present in this moment, what we call richness of the moment—it's a way of loving, a way of opening completely to just what is.

Why is this so difficult, you may ask? Or maybe you already know, in which case I could stop now, but I'll remind us. The habits are so deeply ingrained. And you know how the Buddha described it, but first just to say about the habits of mind in general: it becomes, I think Steve was saying in different language, kind of a default mode. In times of stress, in times of hurry, when we're not really aware, the places that our mind, our personality, our reactions tend to go under stress—they feel more at ease, more comfortable, they don't seem to take as much mental energy.

Tara Brach, in her latest book, was writing about the default modes, the habits of our minds, of our reactions. And these response habits, she said, take less mental energy because they can operate a little bit under our conscious level. She gives the example, which I liked, of driving. Probably most of us here drive, maybe not everyone, but if you drive—when you're driving on the highway and changing lanes, that's really become so automatic that there's actually quite a lot going on, isn't there, that you're doing to change lanes at sixty miles an hour with a lot of cars around you on the freeway. But it's so habitual that for many of us we can do that almost below the level of consciousness.

All these many actions are taking place. Even deciding why, and what's the intention in the mind, and what particular sense experiences give rise to wanting to change lanes. Then checking the front and the rear and the turning and all of that. Moving the body, calibrating the speed, having your attention kind of global all around in all directions, and when to come back again. There's a heck of a lot going on in that. But we can do it. There's consciousness, but we're not necessarily aware. It can be below the surface of awareness, quite natural. It's comfortable. It's a habit of mind. And so we don't necessarily clearly recognize—this is Tara again—or understand all that's going on or what's happening in that process.

So when it's a confused or suffering habit of mind, it's that same thing. We don't quite know what's going on, and we end up in this kind of fog of bewilderment, of confusion. How come everything's so off? How

come I'm suffering? How come I can't quite seem to get in alignment with experience? Or how come I'm in this place of fear again?

But mindfulness, sati, awareness of the moment to moment—and this is why the continuity, the perseverance is so important—the moment-to-moment awareness of just what's occurring actually brings these workings of the mind into awareness. As Steve was saying, this becomes the next object of awareness, and we start to see what's going on.

So just like in changing lanes on the freeway, if you're more global, you'd be becoming aware of the process rather than talking to someone else or listening to music or trying to text or all the scary things people do when they're driving. And you're just noticing the movement of the arms, you're checking the mirror, the aversion to the slow person, the wanting to shift.

You can just gently, gently be aware of that whole process. This brings it into the light, and that really gives us the space to respond in a different way—from wisdom. Before, it's just on automatic.

If you want to get to perhaps the root level, the subtle level of where and how easily we get so quickly away from the simplicity of mindful awareness in any particular moment, the Buddha starts by describing our experience. Basically, he says, all we're experiencing is rapidly rotating moments of sixth sense experiences. There's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—physical experience—and then the whole mental world, which can be thinking, emotions, mental states, ideas, all of that.

These experiences arise in different ways. One physical sensation might be pleasant, one might be unpleasant. One mental experience might be thinking, another might be happiness, another might just be simple calm. But the processes are just these six things happening over and over and over. And we often say, if you find a seventh, let us know—we'd be very interested.

As the Buddha goes on to describe the experience—and I'm really not simplifying here, but just picking out the salient points for our discussion—each of those experiences, when it comes, we're very much in the habit of experiencing it as pleasant or unpleasant or neither one. But that's quick and subtle, and it's not something inherent in the experience. Take the sound of a bell: in one moment you might experience it as pleasant, in another moment you're distracted and it's just neutral, in another moment you were quiet and it shocked you so you hear it as unpleasant. It's not intrinsic to that particular sound, but rather how it comes together in our awareness, in our consciousness at that moment. That's very quick and subtle, and it's just how things happen—no big deal.

But what we spend our life practicing is: something comes up and we think, "I don't like that." Or it comes and we think, "Yeah, that's nice, I like it." Or, "It's not really worth paying attention to, it's neutral." We don't go quite that far with everything, but on a really subtle level, we're practicing this quite a lot throughout the day, throughout our life.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says we spend our whole life—all these sense experiences happening—practicing

liking and not liking. Pleasant leads to: "It's good, I like it, I want more." Unpleasant leads to: "I don't like it, it feels bad, it hurts, of course it's bad." Neutral? "What? I better send another text message."

This becomes a habit of mind. We practice it enough, it becomes ingrained. And that overlay—pleasant goes to good, I like it—then comes to mean something about me. Unpleasant becomes bad, this shouldn't be happening, how can I fix it, how can I get rid of it? It comes to describe and define ourselves and our life. It reinforces the sense that all unpleasant experience is bad, to be avoided, while pleasant is what we're here to get more of. We pretend we don't notice this is what's happening. It sneaks up.

I'm sure many of you are aware of this. I keep being surprised how it sneaks up in the back of my mind, even when I know it isn't true—that I'll be in the struggle and go, "Oh, it was pleasant and now it's not," and I'm wondering what's wrong, as if it's going to stay one way, when nothing stays the same for longer than a moment. But we keep not noticing. It reinforces this view, and it comes to mean something about me.

How much of what you've been through today, when you've been discontent with yourself, your experience, with us, with here, the food, whatever you're dissatisfied with—how much of that comes about as a response to something that isn't the way we want it to be? Instead of saying, "Oh yeah, this isn't the way I want it to be, this is unpleasant, I don't like it"—that's actually mindfulness. That's the simplicity of awareness: "This is unpleasant, and I'm feeling aversion."

I hate this zafu. It is so hard. How come I can't have one of those? Oh yeah, what's happening now? Physical unpleasant experience, aversion in the mind, thoughts arising—you're seeing the whole pattern. That's mindfulness.

We think, no, that's not mindfulness. Mindfulness means I'm sitting here and things are arising in the space of awareness, and there's no reactivity in the mind because I'm clear, I'm mindful. "Oh yes, that's unpleasant, but it doesn't bother me." That's what we think it should look like.

This is so deeply ingrained, and it often goes unexamined. It really comes to be the underlying way we're defining ourselves and describing life. So really look and see. I'm talking from how the Buddha talks and from my own experience. Hopefully it can trigger something—look and see. Use it as something to explore in your own experience. Not to say yes or no, right or wrong, or to believe it's true and then move on. Just to look and see. Because real wisdom comes from the steady awareness that lets us see how these things are working, not from believing whether something is so or not.

What gets ingrained in us—and this is really poignant—is this habit: some discomfort, something uncomfortable comes up. It doesn't have to be excruciating pain. Look and see. It can be the littlest uncomfortable thought, or a mood. It doesn't have to be the deepest trauma we've had—it might be—but it can be just a little bit of discomfort that we don't even really notice. The Buddha says our tendency is so fast.

He says the unawakened ordinary person, when confronted with an unpleasant experience—which could be just the littlest twinge—knows of no other escape from the unpleasant than to lust after, to chase after a sensed pleasant experience, sensory pleasure. He says this then becomes a habit that underlies the mind, the heart. It becomes a habit. It's so poignant.

I've seen this in myself ten million times. It's natural. It's normal. We've practiced it a lot. Something unpleasant comes—it may be noticed, it may not. If it's not noticed, we're off to something pleasant. And if you're sitting here, you can't just get up and walk out, so we're hoping you notice. You might walk out not because it's time, but because you had a bad thought, didn't like it, and better go have some tea. You can start to notice how that works. Or if you did notice the unpleasant, the whole story arises: this is bad, this is wrong, I better go get something pleasant. Of course, we don't say it like that, because the pleasant thing is "the good thing."

And so this becomes a habit that underlies our mind, the Buddha says. I find that really touching—that an ordinary person without the practice, without the understanding of this simplicity of mindfulness and the willingness, as Charlotte Joko Beck says, to just rest for a moment in this unpleasant, uncomfortable situation. Just so simple. Can I find in myself a willingness just to rest here? Not to fix it, not to make something better, not to torment yourself either, but just to have the chance to see clearly, free from preconception, free from "this is bad, this is wrong, I can't, I'm bad." No—just what's occurring now.

This is where we learn how these habits work: by the willingness to be there and see them. This sense of thirst, this yearning for the pleasant, the better experience, to move away from the difficult, the unpleasant, the conflicted—this is really one of the ways that samsara is defined. This endless round of leaning forward to the next thing, to make it better, to make it better, to make it better. Even when it's good now.

As Steve said last night, you have the best meal of your life—but how long? How long can you keep eating? You've got to stop sometime. You eat the best meal of your life and keep going until you're really sick and never want to see that food again. It doesn't work like that. It never stays perfect. So this yearning for the next, for the next, for the next—this is really samsara. This is what keeps us in this cycle.

There's a Tibetan saying, a definition of samsara: the urge to correct.

It's pretty good now, but it could be a little bit better. Or it really stinks now, so it could definitely be better. But even when it's good, it could be a little bit better. Always leaning into the next thing. This is that unconscious, not quite aware quality—not finding the peace of total presence with this moment right now, whatever it is. That's the freedom, the peace the Buddha's talking about.

But when we think of freedom—freedom from suffering—really look and see: isn't this just freedom from unwanted experience? When you come on a retreat thinking, "I really want to purify my mind and body, I really want to cultivate compassion, I really want freedom"—all of this is true. But does your bad back

figure into your image of freedom? Is sciatica still going to be there? Are you still going to have those annoying relatives acting in that way? But it won't bother you because you're floating on a cloud? Are you going to have a new personality? Good luck with that one.

It's really understanding in a different way. And the support, the key, what allows this understanding to grow is the steadiness of simplicity—mindfulness, awareness, the willingness to just rest at ease in this uncomfortable situation or in this beautiful situation, this incredibly wonderful experience. Can mindfulness just meet it as it is without that impulse of "yes, now it's going to be like this forever"?

When we're in that poignant place, the habit of mind is to jump away, to make it a little better, a little better, the next, the next, the next. What I notice this does is keep the habit of mind focused on the object itself. As Steve was exploring—object and awareness, object and awareness—when we're focused on the object, it's bad, it's wrong, I've got to fix it. And then that becomes how we define ourselves, what it means about ourselves. "This is all messed up." Or "It's wonderful—wow, I'm finally getting it, I'm doing great." But we're all focused on the object, the object. Attention, the field of awareness, becomes really quite narrow. And then we're tossed around by circumstances, by our moods, by our reactions. We get entranced by our reactions to the particular experience. So that's the next thing we can be aware of—the reactions. That's the habit. But when we're not aware, then again our experience defines us. And really, it's exhausting. I don't know if you've noticed, but it's exhausting.

An example of this—how we're so tossed around from moment to moment—and this is how I'm reading the experience of someone else. At the end of the Super Bowl this year, and we're in New England so probably quite a few of you are aware of it, which I'm not a football fan—football is not my thing. But it doesn't matter where I am; someone's always watching the Super Bowl.

I heard the last minute was really amazing. I'm not even going to try to go through the whole thing, but the last twenty seconds—and if I get some of these details wrong, football fans forgive me, that's not my point, it isn't the football. So anyway, it's the last twenty seconds. New England's quarterback, you know, Tom Brady, is sitting on the sideline because Seattle had the ball on the goal line. There's like twenty seconds left. New England was ahead, but basically Seattle—it was a sure touchdown. They're right there. They're bound to get a touchdown and they're going to win because there's no more time. So my friend Guy had recorded it, and I went back and watched this last part to see.

So that's happening. And then the camera cuts away to Tom Brady sitting on the sidelines as the other guy is about to get a touchdown. It was—I mean, it cracked me up. It was total, total dejection. He was completely, 100 percent caved over, head in his hands, just to see this man totally lost.

And then, of course, the completely unexpected happens, as it often does. For whatever reason, the Seattle quarterback did a pass instead of running, and New England intercepted it, and so New England won. They cut away to Tom Brady on the sidelines. He's ecstatic. He's jumping up and down, throwing his arms in the air. It's like twenty seconds different. Not even twenty seconds—two seconds different.

This is samsara. This is how we live our lives. You can see I was a little detached. If it was Wimbledon, I might have had a different response. But I'm detached from football, so I can kind of watch the process. So that's another way of practicing mindfulness—I'm really there, but I'm not making it all about me.

That's samsara. That's what we do. "Oh my God, it's so horrible!" "This is incredible!" And then the whole boring rest of his year, right? Until he can be in another Super Bowl. What a life. Anyway, this is how we're tossed around when there's not awareness, when we're not recognizing the process but just caught in our reactions to experience.

So here, what we really want to cultivate is a moment of that sense of mindfulness. "Oh, I'm so dejected. What's happening?" Not "Oh my God, the guys are all..."—no. Dejection feels like this. Feeling dejected. Just noticing how that feels. You'll notice the thoughts, you'll notice the whole process. So there's the moment of that awareness, the willingness to rest in this uncomfortable situation, but then the perseverance, the steadiness, where we just hang with it and kind of watch whatever arises, all the different processes. And this is what allows the wisdom to arise. We don't create wisdom, but really seeing, understanding what's going on with these habits. And if they're just habits, it doesn't have to be automatic reaction.

A good friend of mine—actually she was just here, she's left now, but she's given me permission to use this story before—from doing this style of practice for many years, where we're not trying to have a particular experience but really getting that we just bring awareness to whatever's going on in the mind and body, with particular emphasis on watching the mind, the reactions of mind. Is the mind just being with what is? Or is it putting on this overlay of "it's bad, I'm in aversion, I can't see clearly" or "it's good, it's what I want more"? Just being with it.

So the example she gave, where she saw how all her years of practicing in this way had really dramatically shown up in her daily life. She was going home to visit her family in another state, and I've known her for many years, and it's always been quite difficult—a difficult family dynamic. Probably some of you can relate. And I don't know if you've ever gone to family or whatever, where you get on the plane and you have a very sincere intention and motivation, right? "I'm really going to..." Right? Whatever it is. "I'm not going to get angry when my sister acts like that. I'm going to walk in with loving-kindness to my mother even when she starts going on about 'you need a haircut' as soon as I cross the threshold," or whatever. And we really mean it.

We're not just blowing hot air. We really mean it. And you walk in the front door and boom—right? How long does it take?

So then you feel... and she said she'd go with this sincere intention, practicing compassion all the way on the plane, she gets in, and then she'd feel defeated, dejected. "I couldn't do it. All my practice is a waste of time. Here I am, back in the old patterns."

Again, we're reacting to that unpleasant situation from aversion and judging it as wrong. And again, the

simplicity of mindfulness isn't there. We've kind of checked out—it's wrong, it's bad, I blew it again, I've got to wait until I can fix it. This fixing-it mentality is samsara.

So she said this time she was going home, and on the plane as she's going, she had those same thoughts—"I want to be..." But she also was just being aware of what was actually occurring, which was a lot of anxiety. She was feeling it. She was noticing, just being present. "Yes, I want to be filled with love and kindness, but at the moment I'm a little apprehensive." That's what's happening. And she just kept cultivating that steady awareness of her mind and her reactions and what was really honestly occurring.

She said she noticed, walking in the door, it wasn't just that her sister was reactive. She herself walked in already with barriers in front of her, ready to react to the expected insult. She was actually walking in with negativity before anything had even happened—which she had never noticed before. She was trying so hard to be good. Trying so hard to do the right thing. But by actually just being aware of what was really occurring, she said it was the best visit she ever had.

Because the honesty of mindfulness lets us see what's occurring. You see your own reactivity coming up to the expected insult. You notice the reactivity, and that becomes the next object of awareness. You don't have to automatically act out of it. And because we're meeting that reactivity in our own heart and mind with this simplicity, this friendly attention—not with judging, but "Oh, reactivity, of course, it's understandable how it would be there"—in that moment, that's like stepping out of samsara. It's a stretch, but just to give a sense of it.

Instead of just spinning in reactivity and judging, or pretending I'm not reactive and just blaming them, to see the reactivity, to meet it with interested awareness—in that moment we've moved from taking refuge in our normal habits and automatic reactions to taking refuge in the simplicity of awareness right then. Not trying to fix, not trying to change, not trying to evaluate. Just: "Oh, self-negativity, or reactivity, feels like this."

And in that space of awareness, that's changing the pattern right there. That's shifting the whole dynamic. Sure, it can come back again, and we notice it again. But this awareness is really shifting our refuge, shifting our habit. It's making a whole other way of responding possible, accessible. And it's not like you plan it out. When she's at ease with recognizing her own reactivity, then when the sister does say something, she already sees it and there's a kind of space—like someone said today, "Pain in the knee, but I saw the aversion in the mind." Recognizing the aversion, there's space. We're not caught in the reactivity. The same thing happens in our life. Sister says something, and she goes, "Oh yeah, that's really unpleasant. I'm with the unpleasantness." Don't have to respond out of it.

So this is really quite profound. It may not seem like very much on a retreat when you're sitting or walking. We're so used to reacting to experience, so used to being entranced by our reactions, that our habitual way feels more easy and comfortable. That's one of the reasons we take away so many of our normal activities on retreats—so we can really watch what's happening. But it's so easy to say, "This knee

pain, this sound, this fear—this defines me, this is what's going on," and fall into our normal habit.

But here, just remember the simplicity of awareness. Okay, knee pain feels like this. Anger feels like this. I have a moment of really, really wanting to go have a cup of tea—and wanting is uncomfortable. Wanting is unpleasant. And it feels totally normal and natural when we want something to go and get that thing. There's nothing wrong with having a cup of tea. You might think, "This is really sick. I want a cup of tea. I should sit here and feel wanting rather than go have a cup of tea? What kind of stuff is this?"

And I'm not saying you should. There's no should. But sometimes we might get interested. What does wanting feel like? It feels totally normal and natural to move away from wanting and get the thing we want. It feels totally normal and natural when something's uncomfortable to do something to get away from it, to fix it. We've practiced this our whole life.

And it's not that that's a bad thing, but if we bring in awareness and start to see the whole process, there are times when we'll say, you know what, let me just sit down and explore being with wanting. Can I find in myself, for this moment, a willingness to rest in this uncomfortable, painful situation? Wanting is uncomfortable. So we just rest there with that awareness, that interested friendliness, and see what happens.

And sometimes the wanting—I mean it will, if you're actually just hanging with it—it goes away. But here's the thing: steadiness, perseverance, continuity of awareness. Keep with it. The wanting has gone off and then we stop paying attention because now it's calm again. We pay attention when it's really bad, when we're really suffering, when it's really high, but then in these neutral times we think, okay, it's gone, did the job, now I'll go have tea. Notice when the wanting stops and it's just calm, just peaceful. Keep on being steady with the awareness.

When we do this, we can begin to recognize and actually cultivate an appreciation. This is actually an intimation of the quality of freedom of heart-mind the Buddha's talking about. Not whether the experience is good or bad, but just that ability to be present without so much fuss, without so much identification, without making it all about me.

Steve used the phrase last night about everything being natural, it's just nature. I mean, we are nature. I think it's funny how we talk about nature as if that's nature over there, as if we're not nature. But when we start to see—part of right view—that whatever's occurring, the wanting, the habits of mind... my friend going to visit her family, those habits that came up aren't a sign that she's some kind of bad, twisted person. They've arisen through natural causes. And we can see that. It's really helpful.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was a Thai forest monk and scholar, very famous in Thailand in the last century. He died in the late 1990s. A very interesting figure. In one of his books, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, he was talking about how recognizing that all arising experience is nature. All arising experience. By that he means it's not my personal doing. Everything is arising due to causes and conditions that have come

before, really an endless stream, such that in this moment, this particular moment could not be otherwise. It could not be otherwise.

When Steve talked about these things as they have come to be in this moment—we can't track all the causes and conditions, but we can see some of them. And this gives us a sense that it's nature. It's not something to be in contention with. When we see the causes, it really lets us stop taking it so personally.

Buddhadasa said, "We have been thieves all of our lives by appropriating the things of nature as I and mine." He explains that the Pali texts—Pali being the language the Buddhist texts were first written down in—use a phrase that was translated into English as "throwing back." He says that in a moment when the mind, the heart is free, when we're not appropriating something as I or mine, we throw everything back to nature. We stop saying it belongs to me. And we can really see how these patterns of mind and reactivity and heart get created through a series of conditions.

Here's an example, from the body. The other day I went to a physical therapist. I was having some weird pains in my back and here and there. I mean, there's always something going on. But anyway, I went to see her, and it was unusual. First it was kind of like right view, like when Steve said the voice of another. She could just kind of look at me and goes, "Whoa, I've never seen you like this," and she started explaining what was happening in my body.

And she said, "Your rib is out and it's connected up to your collarbone, and the shoulder bone is out, and it goes all the way down to your left hip and your sacrum." She's naming all this stuff, you know—all the way down to your foot and your elbow. So, okay, I just knew it hurt. But she could see all these connections.

And then she said—nothing had happened. I hadn't fallen or done anything unusual. So we just got interested in seeing how it could happen. And I remembered that the previous week I had been in a place where I was walking about a mile back and forth from a parking lot several times a day, carrying a bag. Not particularly heavy, but carrying it and walking fast.

She noticed that. She said, "Your body already has this habit of being a bit curved in like that. So you're walking, carrying something like this. And when you're in a hurry, you kind of hunch and walk fast." Over time, that becomes an ingrained pattern in the body. And then she could link all of these things she saw to that way of moving and holding.

That's really interesting. When I could see the pattern like that and trace it, I said, okay, I can understand how that could happen. It doesn't make the pattern go away, but it kind of takes it out of the realm of "What am I doing? Am I so hopeless? Am I falling apart?" You can just go, "Oh yeah, look at that. Cause and effect. It's a natural effect." And then you can work with it.

Same with the habits in our mind. Buddhadasa says we realize, okay, here's this pattern of mind. It's not mine. It's arising due to natural causes and conditions—throw it back to nature. Quit taking it all so

personally. And then that really lets us just look at it.

Like I could look at this pattern of stuff in my body she was pointing at and go, "Oh, that's interesting." And then today I was just taking a walk, and I wasn't holding anything, but I could see how the tendency was to start hunching because I was a little cold. And I just noticed it, having had it pointed out to me, without getting any "Oh my God, it's hopeless, I'm going to be like this the rest of my life." Just, "Oh yeah, look at that." And I naturally stood up a little bit straighter and could feel the difference.

Yes, it's just these simple little things. It's not "Ah, everything's changed and better." But this is what starts to feed our trust in the steadiness of awareness, the willingness to look, the trusting of being able to see with steady sati, steady mindfulness, steady awareness.

Gradually, gradually our refuge changes. It shifts from just falling into these unconscious habits of reactivity—of liking, of disliking, aversion and clinging and self-blame and owning everything as mine—to something else. And this might be a little far, but it feels like it to me: a real love of awareness. A real love of this willingness to be simply present with experience.

When I notice I'm in a pattern—spinning and confused and suffering—and I suddenly ask, "What's happening now?" I might say, as I said in a group once, "Oh, big ball of confusion. Feels like this." And I just feel a lot of... I couldn't name anything. The body feels like a bunch of gunk. The mind feels even more like a bunch of gunk. And I'm just present with that.

There's a sense almost of relief that I feel—of not being in contention in that moment with experience. And then I recognize, "Oh yeah, there's awareness of bunch of gunk." Bunch of gunk, and awareness of it. And with the awareness—that's really what we can trust. The bunch of gunk is going to go. Something incredibly beautiful is going to come. It's going to go. A lot of boring stuff is going to come. Bunch of gunk is going to come back. But awareness, awareness, awareness—this can start to be where we really take our refuge. And it really becomes powerful.

So the little examples we go through in our practice here—like the one I gave about sitting and watching wanting instead of having a cup of tea—you may think, "So what? Big whoop." But these examples matter. As I showed with my friend, when we don't recognize what's going on in our mind and heart, what the habits are, what the reactions are—when we're lost in the assumptions, in the preconceptions, in the distortions—we're not just present with what is. That state is so familiar and comfortable that we don't know when it can take over in the big things in our daily life. The unrecognized habits drive the bus.

And we don't know that that's what's happening. And in a moment of stress, in a moment of difficulty, when we're not quite aware, that's what pops up.

So these little examples here—if there's a million every day—don't think, "Well, this isn't important enough," or whatever. What we're cultivating is this willingness to keep coming back into the awareness, the awareness, the awareness, because we never know otherwise.

I heard on the radio a couple years ago—I came in the middle, so I don't know if I have names—but they were interviewing two men who had been working with young men in prisons, doing kind of anti-violence work with young men who were in prison for violent crimes. I didn't really get how they were working with them, but one of them was describing a young man he'd been talking to. The young man was in prison—I don't know if it was life or how long—for some act of violence. And he said, "If only I could have back those three to five seconds when I acted in that violent way."

We never know. That's all it can take. We're just present, we're not aware, the habits drive the bus. And we all—well, maybe you don't, but everyone I know—have plenty of times that we've acted in ways we regret. It doesn't have to be that much violence, but how much stuff has come out of my mouth that I wish I hadn't said? I don't want to have to start counting. Just in the moments when there's not awareness, the habits drive the bus.

So when we start being aware, awareness doesn't end the habits. Awareness alone is not enough. You may wonder what I mean by that. Awareness doesn't mean the difficult habits, the reactions of mind, go away. But like my friend, you start to see them rather than believing them. We don't even know they're there in the beginning. We start to see them. Then there's more space and more space. And the wisdom comes in and starts to say something like, "I don't need to say that." It really shifts the whole show.

I want to end with one thing from Dipa Ma. Dipa Ma was an amazing little lady, an Indian Bengali lady. People often talk about her. She really had very profound practice and understanding—a lot of metta, loving-kindness in her heart, very deep wisdom. She was about four feet tall, the tiniest little lady, but very energetic and strong. Metta doesn't mean everything's nice and easy. She was really strong.

Joseph and I and some friends were visiting her in Bodh Gaya the year before she died. Joseph had a very long, deep connection with her. She's saying to him, "You should sit for a weekend." And he's like, "Yeah, okay, I'll sit for a week." And she says, "No, no, I mean sit down for a weekend. Sit and don't get up." That's what she meant. She was filled with metta, but a tough cookie. And Joseph being Joseph just starts laughing. She goes, "Don't be lazy." Just so simple: don't be lazy. She could do that. She could sit down for a weekend. So she was like that.

Anyway, this is from her: "There is so much sameness in our ordinary life. We experience everything through the same set of lenses—the lenses of greed, the lenses of aversion or hatred, the lenses of delusion, confusion, identification. But when greed, hatred, and delusion are not present, you see everything fresh and new all the time. Every moment is new. Life was dull before."

Now, every day, every moment is full of taste and zest. And she was just living a life in a really poor little apartment in Calcutta. Every moment is new.

That's really the simplicity and honesty of mindfulness.

Thank you for your kind attention. Let's just sit for a moment.

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