Extraordinary Seeing: Simplicity, Honesty, and Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:01

One definition of Vipassana, a very often used definition, is that of extraordinary seeing—seeing in an extraordinary way. And the main agent or the main tool that we have for this so-called extraordinary seeing is, of course, the mental factor, the experience of mindfulness, of awareness.

Now, what's actually quite amazing to me about this so-called extraordinary seeing is that when we first hear that definition, my mind tends to think that to look for something extraordinary would be something incredibly amazing, otherworldly, something really elsewhere, blow your mind. That's where my mind goes with extraordinary seeing.

But meditation—this is Sayadaw U Tejaniya's definition of mindfulness meditation—is simply experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. That is what extraordinary seeing is. And what's amazing to me is that it could be called, and it is, extraordinary seeing to actually recognize our moment-to-moment experience accurately. That's extraordinary. Because so much of the time, we're not recognizing our experience accurately at all. In fact, to put it in a silly way, we don't have a clue half the time what's really happening. And we don't have a clue that we don't have a clue. We think we really know what's going on.

And so the experience, the practice of this simple moment-to-moment mindfulness, experiencing our mind and body directly, just as it is, is amazingly enough the process that conditions the wisdom that frees our heart and mind from suffering, from confusion.

The Buddha shared, in my understanding, that his motivation for sharing what he had understood and experienced was not so that we could have a new complex philosophy to embrace. It's turned out that there is a very complex philosophy with a lot of lists we could embrace and memorize, and maybe that's helpful, but that's not the point. The point is to help us, to show us a path, to give us tools, really, to recognize for ourselves—only I can recognize for myself, no one can give me that, same for each of you—to recognize for ourselves the seeds of suffering, the potential of freedom from that suffering, how these seeds of suffering are created and arise in our own mind and heart in a moment-to-moment way. Not some big monolithic something out there, but just by this extraordinary seeing of simple moment-to-moment presence with our mind-body experience with the right view—and that's key—we start to actually recognize for ourselves how the seeds of suffering and confusion may sprout in a moment and lead to more suffering in our mind and heart, but how also in a moment that can be released. That

cannot happen. With clear seeing, with accurate understanding in a moment of what's going on, the confused responses that bring us into further suffering just don't need to arise.

That's how the clear seeing leads to wisdom. When we understand accurately, we respond appropriately. And that, to me, is like the miracle, really. Thich Nhat Hanh has this phrase, "the miracle of mindfulness." The miracle of the way things are, the miracle of freedom, is that it's not about becoming somehow different from who or what we are—good luck with that. But actually coming fully into presence in this moment, one hundred percent present, without the distortion of greed, hatred, delusion, and recognizing what's actually going on. The accurate recognition of reality is what frees us from suffering and confusion.

It's not that reality needs to change. It's changing every moment. But it's not that extraordinary seeing is going to take us to some other plane where we can get out of this mess. I mean, we'd like to. I'd like to. But it doesn't work like that. It's landing in the middle. We see how much of this mess is completely unnecessarily created by the response of our heart and mind based on just not seeing clearly.

So that's really how the process of mindfulness works—this is our Vipassana practice. And I know we've referenced once or twice in the beginning of the retreat, in terms of instructions, that there are various techniques of Vipassana. I'm talking about Vipassana mindfulness insight practice here, not specifically absorption samatha practice. I'm talking about Vipassana insight practice.

And so, as we've said, this moment-to-moment simple presence—there are various techniques and instructions, some of which we've talked about. I'm not going to go into them all, but like having a single focus and coming back quite rigorously for some time to one single focus, or having a more broad noticing of whatever's occurring, using mental noting, being really precise and connecting very precisely to the particular sense object that's arising, or being more receptive, more relaxed, more open, sweeping the attention through the body—all kinds. I'm not even going to name them all. All useful.

But what I want to reference tonight is that each of these, all the different techniques, are skillful means in service of and coming out of this kind of broader field, broader understanding, which is what I just said: mindfulness of whatever's arising in our mind-body moment to moment, with the right understanding. And the third aspect is continuity—the steadiness, the perseverance of that from moment to moment to moment.

Those three aspects, one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, calls the three jobs of a yogi. Mindfulness, moment to moment—you've probably figured out that's one of the jobs. With right understanding, which I'll talk some about, and we do our best to see that. And the third job is the continuity, the moment-to-moment.

Not that you're going to be perfectly mindful moment-to-moment—it's not that you're doing it wrong unless you're absolutely mindful from the first moment your eyes open in the morning to the last moment you go to sleep. That's not what we mean by continuity. It's simply the intention, the willingness, whatever

you're doing, whatever posture you're in, to recognize: this is a moment for awareness. Whether it's been two seconds since your last moment of awareness or three days, it doesn't matter. I mean, it matters in some way, but the fact that you have the intention in that moment of awareness again—it's fresh, it's new. It's not a lesser moment of awareness because it's been longer since the last one.

So continuity is not about another way to be perfect. It's about really getting it that whatever is happening in this moment, whatever you're doing, whatever activity you're engaged in, this is the only and the perfect moment for sati, for mindfulness. There is no other moment. There's no better moment to wait for to be mindful. And the wisdom that comes, comes from the steadiness of mindfulness. That's what allows for a clearer seeing of cause and effect and what's going on.

So these are our three jobs, and this is what's at the heart of awakening. We all have subtexts, our reasons for coming, our reasons for practice—of course we do. Don't think that there's something wrong with that. But it's helpful to recognize that really the essence is these three things: the moment-to-moment awareness, the familiarity, the cultivation. So as I said the other day about metta, but it's the same for awareness—that moment-to-moment awareness becomes our default. It becomes our refuge. It becomes our home. It becomes more interesting, more fulfilling than all the endless hoo-ha that our mind goes through about every sense experience that arises.

So it's not about having a particular experience, getting a particular experience, and then you've made it. It's not about fixing yourself, although of course we all have aspects we'd like to fix. It's not about having a better sitting. It's not even about getting concentrated. It's about this cultivation of moment-to-moment awareness. And that can only ever be done in one moment, in this moment. You can't do it in the last moment. You can't be mindful now for the next moment. All there is, is this moment. And whatever particular sense experience is presenting itself, that's the perfect object for awareness. It's the only one, because that's all that's happening. There's nothing better to wait for.

Mindfulness doesn't care. It's not like mindfulness is only really good when it can be mindful of something really sublime, something really subtle—the heart of boundless metta—and then, okay, we can call up mindfulness. But this nagging, irritable, grumpy mind that makes some really negative judgment about everybody that walks past? "Look how they walk. Look how they eat. Look how they dress. What are these people doing here?" We don't want to be mindful of that, right? But that's what's happening. And awareness doesn't care. It's the same pure mindfulness as it is with a sublime experience—when we have right view, right attitude, when we're recognizing that simplicity of awareness for what it is, not getting lost in evaluating the content of experience. Which is mostly how we spend our lives. Well, I notice that's how I spend my life. Maybe not you, and if that's the case, I bow to you. But mostly, that's the habit of what our mind does.

So in terms of this mindfulness with right understanding, with right view—in a simple way, at the heart of awakening, as best I can understand it, which is of course limited—the most profound level of right view,

right understanding where the Buddha was talking, is a really fundamental shift in the way that we recognize and understand reality. The way that we recognize and understand our moment-to-moment mental and physical activity, because that's the particular representative of reality that we have the most access to. But it's a fundamental shift. And how we understand ourself, how we understand a moment of experience—that's what's going to lead to how we think about it, how we describe it, how we respond, how we react.

It just makes sense. If you think somebody did something—say you're in the dining room, and you think somebody picked something up, and you believe they're taking something that belongs to someone else. Whatever you do or don't do, that's the thought you have. You think that's describing reality. And whether you say something or remain silent, the way that you think and feel about that person is going to be informed by that perception and that description of what's going on.

Then if you see the same thing, but someone informs you, or somehow you realize that actually that is not what was occurring—the person was working in the kitchen, doing their job, which was to come out and pick up this plate and clean it—suddenly you have a whole different explanation of what looks like the same action. Your thoughts, your feelings, your possible response to that person are going to be different. This is just normal. This is just normal cause and effect.

So when we don't recognize or understand accurately, our responses are a little bit askew, and our responses and reactions to our responses are a little bit more askew, and it just keeps cycling. We're all kind of banging against each other's ideas of what's going on. We don't even know what's really going on for us. Then we project what's going on for the other person. They don't know what's going on for them either, and they're projecting what's going on for us. We're trying to have a conversation here, and we wonder, how come we don't understand each other? That's just how it goes.

So the Buddha is really saying that at the heart of freedom is accurate recognition. That's where our practice of simple moment-to-moment mindfulness, which seems like nothing much in any moment, is so transformative, so extraordinary—this kind of accurate recognition, accurate seeing.

There's a phrase I like to use a lot. It describes in some of the texts a so-called advanced insight, though it's not as if it's linear. We see something, then we bounce to another, and we don't see, and then we see again. But the phrase is translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be."

I like that because what it really helps us see is recognizing accurately in this moment just how the mental and physical experience has come to be in this moment. In this moment, it could not be otherwise. All the conditions that have come together—which we can't even trace, can't even try to trace—create this moment that cannot be changed. Just how this moment is, mentally and physically, recognizing that accurately: knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be.

And then all the different conditions arising in this moment, some of which would be the quality in our

mind and heart of how the mind in this moment responds—this then becomes again a cause and condition for the arising of the next moment. So this sense of accurate recognition through the steadiness of continuity is what allows us to really begin to recognize differently.

And it's not that then the wisdom arises—the wisdom of clear understanding, the wisdom that allows the heart and mind to just put down greed. Not to give rise to clinging to something that's already changing before the mind has even started to cling to it. It just doesn't make sense.

It's not like we have to sit and say, "I think I won't cling to this sunset because I know it's going to change, and the moon's really beautiful, so the moon will be pretty, so let the sun go, and I can do that because I know I have a new thing to cling to..." We don't have to do that. The sun's going down. It goes down. It's lovely. We appreciate it or not. It's gone. You don't have to drill yourself not to cling, do you? It's just obvious.

It's like that with everything. We really can put down trying to figure it all out, trying to control, trying to create wisdom. It's such a relief. It's so amazing. To me, it's amazing.

It keeps on being amazing. Through the steadiness of mindfulness with right understanding—which is mindfulness not distorted by confusion—through that steadiness, wisdom naturally arises. And the wisdom then responds appropriately, and the potential for peace in this moment can naturally arise. In this moment. The next moment it can all go to hell again, but in this moment it can arise. Knowing it's all moments is also incredibly freeing to me.

So let me start by talking a little bit about the simplicity of sati, of mindfulness. As someone said, I think it was Sally, mindfulness is just knowing that you know what's happening. But let's keep it really simple.

Right now, most of you have your eyes open. Are you aware right now that seeing is occurring? Are you? Were you before I said that? Probably not. Maybe you were, but probably not. Now, do you get a sense of the subtle different way it feels? Before, you were seeing. You were seeing. But then when I say you're aware that you're seeing, aware of the seeing process, it's a subtle shift of how it feels. Do you get a sense of that?

That's mindfulness. How difficult is that? How much energy does that take? How special does the experience you're mindful of have to be? Not at all. How easy is it to completely forget about? Easy, right?

So that, in a way, is the simplicity of mindfulness. Oh, awareness of seeing. How long—like now, are you still aware of seeing? That seeing is occurring? Other things may come to the forefront, becoming more predominant, because that's how it is. But are you aware of it? Suddenly hearing became more prominent, or how long does seeing last before thoughts arise? Perception, which would be recognition—maybe you're recognizing Carol, or you're recognizing the statues, or you're kind of glomming onto what the object is.

And then, as Greg talked about last night, pleasant and unpleasant. We may notice that, but we may not notice it, yet it's happening. And then suddenly, "Ah, no, it's not so nice. Look at this. It's kind of messy up here. Can't they get their act together? I like the Zen style when it's all black and everything's the same. Look at this—there's schmutz all over the place." Or the other way, either way. How soon before that's occurring and we don't recognize that that's occurring, and that becomes what we think is happening? "I'm sitting here not liking blah, blah, blah." Really quickly.

Now, it's not that the thoughts or the pleasantness or unpleasantness, the liking or the disliking, the judgment—it's not that any of that needs to be a problem or that it's wrong or that it's in the way of mindfulness. It's simply that with steady mindfulness, we would recognize the next arising experience is this thought. Or this feeling of, "Uh, it's just kind of messy up there." You'd recognize that, oh, that feeling's occurring. You'd recognize a thought, you'd recognize a judgment. You might then come back and recognize seeing again. Do you see what I mean?

That the steadiness of mindfulness with right view is simply recognizing just barely what's occurring, without confusing all the assessments—the liking, the disliking, the greed, the aversion, the "what does it mean about me?"—without confusing that for the simplicity of the process. "What does it mean about me?" as a thought or a feeling can be the next arising object of mindfulness, and that's fine.

But I'm hoping you already get the sense of how fast the mind moves and how much we don't recognize that that's what's occurring. And that's how we get a bit askew from reality. If I'm sitting and recognizing seeing, then I feel sensations in the body, then I notice a sense of subtle discomfort arise, I notice a kind of aversion come into the mind, then I'm aware of seeing, then I notice the naming of what I'm seeing, and the associations in my mind, and that I don't like it—all that stuff's still going on. But awareness just moment to moment noticing it, that's the practice. That's the practice. And that awareness noticing grumpiness and judgment is just as beautiful and pure awareness as noticing anything else.

So our job in cultivating the steadiness of mindfulness is to keep on recognizing what's really happening now. Seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling, tasting, assessing—whatever the particular habits of mind. This is the simplicity and the honesty, really, of mindfulness. Not, "Oh, that's really kind of nasty. I don't really want to notice that in my mind. Let's go do some metta." Rather, "Okay, nastiness feels like this. That's okay." Awareness isn't stained. Awareness doesn't have a problem with anything.

Seeing how these habits of our mind work, getting interested in them, is how the understanding of how suffering and freedom arise grows. These are habits of mind. That whole example I gave of the grumpiness—that's just a habit of mind. We all have different habits. There's only so many different permutations. So that's the grumpiness habit: seeing something that's a little bit unpleasant, or feeling something in the body, and then you get a little grumpy about it, and then you make up a story about it, and then off to the races—somehow thinking getting that all organized is going to make me happy.

We're really happy sitting here criticizing everybody and everything up the wazoo. That really makes us

happy, doesn't it? But has it stopped? Has it stopped any of us?

Or thinking of all the things we don't have that we want, and how happy we'll be when we get those things—has that made us happy? It's actually more insidious, the wanting one, because somehow it gets in there and we think it's making us happy. You sit there wanting whatever—a new relationship, a chocolate chip cookie, or just for this talk to end so you can go to bed. That could be a big one. You're just sitting here wanting it. And we get lost in the wanting, even mistaking the wanting for happiness. Have you ever noticed that?

How nice it's going to be when I get in the bed. I just spent seven or eight weeks in Burma. You get up at 3:34 in the morning. You guys think you have a tough life—you have no clue. Even when I wasn't on retreat, you get up at 4 in the morning when you live in the monastery, breakfast is at 5:30, lunch is at 10:30, and that's it. That's it for the day. And the bed's not comfortable. Talk about not lying in luxurious beds—a mattress like that. But actually, I'm usually quite happy there.

Still, there would be times in the middle of the day, a really busy day, and the mind's just so tired, you start thinking, "Oh, how nice to be in the bed. I can't wait till it's time to go to bed." And it's so—all I can say is stupid—because it's having the illusion that that's making me happy. All it's doing is cultivating wanting, cultivating dissatisfaction, disconnection with what's really going on. This is called samsara, really.

The sense of this leaning into the next thing that's going to really do it for us. Or if you're on the aversion side, it's the leaning away from this thing here that's not doing it for us. And that can be anything—a sensation in the body, a sound that we're hearing, the habits in our mind, anything.

The simplicity and honesty of sati, of mindfulness, is just simply: oh, what's happening now? Wanting feels like this. I hate how it feels. Unpleasant. Wanting feels like this.

And, you know, that's hard, difficult, as someone—several of you have said already just in two days—but it's not news to any of you, I don't think, that the simplicity of sati in that moment of recognizing, seeing, is really easy. It's not effortful. But to actually continue to do it moment to moment is incredibly difficult—to keep remembering, or to actually come into the simplicity of what's happening. Because all our layers of association and wanting and aversion and comparison and distortion are happening so fast, and we're so entranced by our reactions to things, that sometimes we just really don't even know what it is that triggered all these reactions.

So in terms of mindfulness with right understanding, mindfulness with right view—I mean, right view is a huge topic, all the way to really understanding all the ways that we don't recognize accurately, to freedom. But just keeping it simple for our practice here, thinking of mindfulness with right view as just the simplicity of a moment of clear presence without the distortions of putting onto it aversion, greed, or really the bottom line one: it's all about me. Me, mine. What does this say? What does this mean for me? How does this affect me?

And I think Greg talked some about this last night. It's just such a deep habit for all of us. And it's how we've been taught. So deeply ingrained that what is pleasant, what feels good, is right, is good. It's how it is. And when it's pleasant, we're right. What's unpleasant is wrong. Need to get rid of it. And at the bottom of both of those is that it's all about me. And my happiness depends on getting more of the pleasant and less of the unpleasant.

And it's kind of like—it just seems as though somehow it's so ingrained in us that we don't even recognize it, even when you know it. And many of us here, we've experienced this quite deeply, you know, in practice, in life. Because it's not a different mind in practice than in life—it's just that we kind of clear the decks a little bit when we come on retreat so we can see a little bit more the subtlety of how the mind's working. But it's working the same way in more complex situations in life.

So we may have really experienced the truth of that many times. I know I have. But then there are other times when I'm tired or the mind isn't very clear, or I do get entranced into the object and what I think about it and how it's going to affect me and what it means—and it just slips back in again. I go, oh, right. I'm totally caught up in it. I've got to get rid of this unpleasant experience and get to this pleasant experience, and then it'll be okay.

For me in particular, with emotions, that happens a lot. Having sadness, or discomfort, or a headache, or whatever. And it doesn't mean we can't act in an appropriate way. If you're ill, you act in an appropriate way, but it doesn't have to be from aversion and fear, if you see what I mean. But what slips in is the sense of: I don't want to feel this unpleasant emotion. It's too unpleasant, so let me do something to get away from it. And not even recognizing that's what's going on.

So in retreat, there's not so much you can do to get away from it. That's what's helpful. What can you do here? We kind of take stuff away. But you know, that's the thing with cell phones. My God, you know—I'm a little bit bored. Let me go look online at something. How often has that made me happier? Really, like one in ten thousand times. But we still do it. Or you go wash your socks, or you go have a cup of tea—not that those things are bad. But it's more about bringing awareness to seeing: why am I doing this? Because this feeling I'm having isn't pleasant, and it would be better to be somewhere else.

When we don't have, in a moment, the trust or the habit of this mindfulness that's just willing to die into this moment, then the old habits take over and drive the bus, basically. We run from the unpleasant, we go towards the pleasant, we evaluate all life in that way, and we get more and more confused.

The Buddha described experience—I don't know if Greg talked about it last night—that really all we experience in our mental and physical process is six things. There's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and physical sensations, and then the whole mental world: thinking, emotions, visual images—the entire mental realm. Each of these arises moment to moment and passes moment to moment. Check it out. There's no solid thing here. Arising and passing, arising and passing. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Well, not quite

that obvious.

And then it's pleasant or it's unpleasant. We don't notice that. We're right into liking and disliking and analyzing and thinking and discussing and describing—just like that example I gave with the seeing. That's just what our minds do. I'm not saying this is a problem. This is what our minds do. Mindfulness with right understanding, with wise view, is simply having the willingness to be with this too, so we start to recognize what the mind does.

In a way, a lot of what our practice is about is, as someone said, an investigation. We're really looking: How does the mind and heart work? Moment to moment. How is suffering being created? How is it being released? Moment to moment.

So now when I see how fast it can go from hearing a sound—just hearing a sound—to a whole world of my entire past and future, all based on what's just a bell ringing, instead of going, "Oh no, I lost mindfulness," I bring mindfulness in and go, "Wow, that's amazing. Look at that." You're back in mindfulness. But these habits are so, so strong, and it moves so, so fast that we get entranced by the particular object, by our descriptions and reactions to it. Because again, it's all about me.

What are we really entranced by? Bottom line: me, me, me. How I feel, how I think, what's happening to me, what's going to happen to me, what other people think about me, what do I think about other people, how does everything relate to me? How does that deer standing out there in the field—is it looking at me? Does it see me? Is it scared of me? It's really like, duh. But it's just to see that, you know? That's really kind of the bottom line. This is what keeps us entranced by objects and our reactions to them. This is what we call samsara.

And we lose—we just don't recognize in that "what does the deer think about me"—the simplicity of awareness, which is always available. Oh, seeing. Oh, thinking about me. See, it's not that awareness has to get rid of this stupid thing our mind is doing in order to be aware. We bring it in, no matter what's happening. There's nothing, nothing that needs to be outside the field of awareness. There's nothing that occurs in our mind and body that shouldn't be known with awareness. Not "we've got to get rid of this so we can cultivate mindfulness." Nothing. We may not want to see it—right, that's another thing. But there's nothing that's outside.

So we're standing there feeling like a fool, thinking all about the deer. Look at me. Ah, feeling like a fool is like this. That's Ajahn Sumedho's terminology—I love it. Instead of analyzing everything, what am I doing? Oh, feeling like a fool is like this. Awareness just lands in it. You don't have to make a big analysis. You just kind of feel the mental and physical gestalt in that moment, and that's it. You landed here.

You're back with awareness. That's our job. Not to figure out the whole story. Just land in the awareness again. Over and over and over.

So another way of talking about how not to take experience so personally—Greg mentioned it last night.

It's funny, because I had the same quotation, and I'm going to use it again. It's from Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was quite an interesting Thai forest monk and scholar. I spent some time at his monastery ages ago, when I was a nun for about a year in Thailand. And he was quite... for a monk in Thailand within the system, which has a lot of limits on it, he was a little bit radical. A little bit. But he was quite a scholar.

He's talking about this in his book, *Mindfulness of Breathing*. And Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses the same language. When we take everything that's occurring so personally—particularly the patterns and habits of our mind—but it's all nature. The physical experience coming and going is nature. The mental experience coming and going is nature. Whatever arises in this moment—physical pain, mental states, even if it's a strong mental pattern of yours, say, of shame or of grief or of greed or of self-love, whatever it is—it's arising due to all the previous causes in a lawful way. This moment couldn't be otherwise. It's also nature. This moment couldn't be different.

Ajahn Buddhadasa says that the Pali texts use the phrase "throwing back." He says when the mind is free—and I'm going to say when the mind is free, not meaning you have to wait until absolute freedom, but in any particular moment—he says, "We have been thieves all of our life by appropriating the things of nature as I and mine. We have been ignorant and we suffer for it." It's not that we're bad or good. It's just that we suffer for it. "But now, in a moment of freedom, we become wise. And at this last step of practice, we realize, oh, it isn't mine. It isn't me. It belongs to nature. So we throw everything back to nature and never steal anything again."

That's just it. Whatever's occurring is just an aspect of nature. *Yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be, couldn't be otherwise. And my getting in there—it's not even a "my"—but the idea, "Oh, this shouldn't be, and I've got to fix it," is just an appropriating to some sense of me, stuff that's just natural and couldn't be otherwise.

Even our really painful, difficult personal patterns, which we all have—they're not something separate, just belonging to us. We can trace, for all of us, our patterns, our responses to life, our personalities. We come in with something, but they also are informed by the environment we grew up in and our family and the experiences that we have and the people we know and the stuff that we go through. There's no way to separate all of that. It's all part of nature. It's all in a way lawful—not like good or bad—but we can kind of see when certain particular patterns of mind come up that are difficult, that are suffering, and I don't like them. "I don't like them" is really kind of the bottom line.

Having understood to some extent some of the environmental and familial conditions that gave rise to them—and I'm not even talking about anything really intense or traumatic, but just stuff, you know?—understanding that, I don't have to, every time the particular pattern comes up, sit and go, "Okay, let me go back, and my mother was like this, and my father was like this, and because of them I'm like this..." Thank God, I don't mean that. It's like looking at it and saying, "Yeah, that's why. It was completely lawful. I understand. Great." Now it's like this. It actually releases any sense of ownership or needing to fix

it. This is how it is in this moment. Just relax into nature.

It's like going out and wishing the moon wasn't full. What's the point? This is how it is at the moment.

So this sense of learning to trust the simplicity of awareness, rather than getting distracted and completely absorbed in the reactions and habits of our mind—liking, disliking, looking for something a little bit better. It's going to happen. We learn to recognize those as the next arising mental experience.

But this is a huge shift, because so much of the time we've just learned to believe all these reactions and responses. The habit is to really get absorbed into what's happening—the object, the physical or mental experience, our thoughts, our emotions, whatever—really absorbed into it and our responses to it.

There's a subtle Tibetan definition of samsara: the urge to correct. Just somehow we could get it a little bit better, couldn't we? Of course this doesn't mean we give up and never do anything to improve life. I'm not saying that. I'm talking about our moment-to-moment experience, that sense of "this is how it is." Rather than landing in it with open-hearted, kind, interested, friendly attention—that's mindfulness, "Oh, it's like this"—we think, "But only if it could be like that, it would be better." Right? That movement forward, that movement toward something—that's what keeps us on the wheel of confusion. "It would be better, I will be happy with this next thing." That's really what you could call samsara.

In my experience, it keeps me locked in that sense of separation, of isolation. It's about what can I do, keeps me in the sense of "me," leaning forward either away from what I don't like or toward getting what I do like, or the next big thing. And so that sense of "I" or "mine," that kind of stealing from nature, is an isolating tendency. You don't see the big picture. You don't see the process of what's happening. We get lost in each specific experience, and it's never enough. There's always going to be something better.

And I don't know if you've noticed, but for me, it's like we're jerked around by liking and disliking and liking and disliking, and the next thing, and this emotion and that emotion. One thing you may notice here—you have a lot of thoughts, right? Thoughts come up frequently, telling you what to do, what you like, how you're going to do this, how you're going to do that. Have you had times when you have completely opposite thoughts and feelings about something within five minutes? And you believe in both? It's crazy, isn't it? Think if we acted on all these thoughts—it would be insane. But what's scary is how much in our life we do act on moods and thoughts.

So just to give an example. James pointed this out to me from the Super Bowl the other night. I won't say much in case there's somebody who's taping it and waiting until they go home in a month to watch it. I won't say anything about which team or whatever. But anyway, it was very close to the end, like a couple of minutes, and one team had the ball. It looked inevitable that they would score. The team that was about to score was behind, but if they got a touchdown, they would win. Two minutes to the end. That's what was occurring.

But anyway, that's not the point. The point is, it was close to the end. So this was going on, and they had

the camera on the quarterback—not the quarterback of the team with the ball, but the other quarterback, who had been doing a really good job. He'd gotten his team in a winning position, and now he has to sit there and watch the defensive team blow it.

So anyway, they had the camera on the quarterback, and he's just sitting there looking like the picture of total dejection. Just completely, totally collapsed. And then—I won't give you details in case you're saving it—but they messed up the play in an unbelievable way. And it was clear that they weren't going to win and the other team was going to win. They cut back to the quarterback. He's leaping up and down, throwing his arms around.

It cracked me up—within two seconds from total, total dejection to leaping around like a maniac. Oh my God, this is saṃsāra. This is saṃsāra. It's a game. It's a game. And then it's over. Those minutes are over. And now he's got to get all revved up for the next season and the next game. And it's endless until he retires. And he'll probably never remember anything because he's probably had so many concussions from all these years of being a quarterback. And then you have to suffer from that. This is so saṃsāra.

But anyway, that was to me the perfect example of life. This is what we do. And we believe it all. We believe it, and we wonder why we're exhausted. We wonder why the world is nuts. We wonder why retreats are so hard. We say, sit down and look at your mind—this is what we're looking at.

The only refuge that makes sense is awareness. If you take refuge in activity, this is what you get. But awareness can watch the whole show with interest, not with judgment—to see how suffering is created, how freedom is created, in this moment, in this heart, in this mind and body.

And so that's like the three jobs, the overarching jobs, within which all the techniques are supportive of this simplicity and honesty of mindfulness, moment to moment, with the right understanding—not taking it personally, not liking, not disliking, just what's happening now. Simply six sense experiences, and the continuity, the steadiness—just remembering: am I aware now? Okay, great. Whatever you're doing, nothing is more or less important in terms of what you can be aware of.

So I'll just end with two things. One, in terms of the continuity: Joseph, our friend Joseph Goldstein, had a great little way to help get a sense of whether there's a way we're prioritizing sitting, which many of us do. He said, just imagine throughout the day—we say it's all equal: sitting, walking, daily activities. But in our mind, we really think first there's sitting, then there's walking maybe, daily activities okay. We give it lip service, we try. He said, so imagine reversing those priorities. The most important place to bring your mindful awareness is your daily activities—taking a shower, work meditation, going to the toilet, walking out of this room. The second is walking, the third is the sitting meditation. Just explore that, see what your mind does with it.

And so, in a way back to saying what I find has been most vivid for me over these years: what becomes more and more real, not tangible but accessible, is this sense of trust in the power of simple awareness.

However difficult something is for me, when something is going on and I'm struggling and working and trying to figure it out—and this is in life too, not just on retreat—at some point when I realize I'm all caught up and confused: What's happening now? Oh, confusion. And the awareness of just what's happening—it's like everything just relaxes into this moment. Awareness doesn't need to push this moment away. You don't have to figure it all out. The next moment will take care of itself.

More and more, I trust that. That's our practice here. Whatever technique you use is in support of that.

So thank you for listening to the Dharma.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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