Sammā Sati - Mindfulness and Right View

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:49

So tonight I mainly want to speak about mindfulness. Seems appropriate. And just mostly talking about recognizing it and pointing to how it can be such a powerful tool in service of clear seeing, in service of awakening.

One definition of Vipassana meditation that I often use and like very much is that meditation—Vipassana meditation, insight meditation—is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. Those are three aspects that I think go together. The mindfulness part is experiencing the mind and body directly. The right understanding speaks for itself. And "from moment to moment" is the continuity, the steadiness, the perseverance, which is also essential in terms of practice.

But I want to start by talking about experiencing the mind and body directly with the right understanding. That's really key. Our tendency often is to talk about or think about meditation as beginning from learning a technique and doing it right—and if we get it right, the understanding will come. It's true, of course, that the more we practice and the more steady our mindfulness gets, that's actually a condition that allows for wisdom to arise. Right understanding deepens kind of endlessly as we go through our practice and our life. But to think that we just do the technique and it doesn't matter what quality of understanding is in the mind that's paying attention—that is a piece of ignorance, a mistake.

What makes it sammā sati—*sati* being the word for mindfulness, and I'll be using mindfulness and awareness to mean the same thing in this talk—is the quality of understanding present. *Sammā sati* is right mindfulness, the path factor of the Eightfold Path. The Buddha also talks in a few suttas about *micchā sati*, or wrong mindfulness. So it's not that if you experience the mind and body directly any old way, it's mindfulness.

What does wrong mindfulness mean, very simply? It's when you could be experiencing the mind and body directly, but the motivation could be quite unwholesome. For example, a thief is extremely careful, aware of the body and the mind, to sneak into a house and do all those things to steal something. You could say that's *sati* in terms of experiencing the mind and body directly, but it's not *sammā sati*. It's not path mindfulness. It's not understanding. So that's a very simple way of describing it.

The right understanding, basically—and I'll talk quite a bit about this—is when the moment of experiencing the mind and body directly is not distorted or unrecognized by greed, by hatred or aversion, or by delusion. In the moment of *sammā sati*, right mindfulness, we're just experiencing sensation or sound or sight or thought, just as it is.

We all know that. We've all been practicing a long time. We know what mindfulness is. But I just want to point out a bit about practicing and really bringing in, from the beginning, a sense of the right understanding—just the beginning right understanding. You don't have to wait until the end of the path.

Right understanding is a translation often called right view, which is also a path factor—the first of the Eightfold Path. I like the translation "right view" because for me I find it to be quite literal. The way the mind is viewing experience is what gives rise to how we think about things, to how we respond, to how we understand.

When the Buddha was talking about what frees our hearts and minds, what the liberating wisdom is, it's not something that doesn't exist now. It's not that somehow we move to another plane of existence where everything's all love and light and wonderful. You know that, right? We're not going there, because it's not there. Rather, it's like suddenly the scales, the distortions drop—even if just for a moment—and the mind recognizes things accurately.

To me it's so far out. Liberation from clinging, from confusion, arises naturally from accurate recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment. Not from making things in this moment different. And this accurate recognition isn't something we can create with an act of will. But we can start to get interested in also seeing how the inaccurate recognition comes to be.

Mingyur Rinpoche, the Tibetan teacher, says: if we want to be happy, we must figure out which causes and conditions lead to well-being. Similarly, if we do not have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how could we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?

Our steady mindfulness practice means we're going to be spending all this time recognizing both. To really see, as the Buddha said—everything he taught us, as far as I can understand, is not about taking on board a new intellectual philosophy, even though there are twenty volumes of teachings. In all of those twenty volumes, it's not about memorizing them, although one can.

There are in Burma still, they call them Tipitaka Sayadaw. Sayadaw means teachers. There are a few still alive in Burma who have memorized the complete Tipitaka, all twenty volumes, which is as it was in the days of the Buddha. They're quite revered in Burma. So one could do that, and you would gain a lot of wisdom that way. But that's not why the Buddha was teaching.

It's so that we really recognize that suffering arises in a moment as conditions come together in our own mind and heart stream. Freedom from suffering arises in this moment when those conditions are seen through with right understanding, with wisdom. Mindfulness, samma sati, right mindfulness—not distorted by greed, hatred, confusion—is the tool that allows for clear seeing.

So just a few examples, two different examples that I like, to give a sense of how natural it is when we see clearly and the confusions drop away.

One very simple one. If you watch young children learning—I have a new nephew, he's about two and a half, so it's been fun visiting. He doesn't live around here, but each time I go, you see a new stage of learning.

Very simple: when he was around two, when they're playing with wooden blocks, you have a big wooden thing with different shapes—a triangle and a circle and a square—and the child has blocks in those shapes and tries to put the block in the matching hole. To us it's obvious, but to someone who doesn't know, you keep trying to put the triangle into the circle. It doesn't work. You put the square into the triangle. It doesn't work. You throw the blocks all over the place, you scream, you yell, you get upset, right? Because that's what happens when you don't understand. The not understanding leads to frustration, impatience. You blame the blocks, or if you're older, you blame yourself. Why am I so stupid? Why can't I do it? I see my mother do it. She just goes boom, boom, boom. It works for her. Why not for me? Of course, a two-year-old isn't thinking like that. They're just throwing blocks around. But that's an expression of the frustration.

Then they keep doing it, and it's just a natural function of the mind-body process getting older. Suddenly, you know, we say the penny drops in English, and he goes, "Oh right, triangle goes in triangle. That's how it works. Going in a circle doesn't work." He just suddenly sees how they go together. In that moment, that's like a moment of insight, recognizing the way it works. That's all. All the frustration, the self-blame, the other-blame, the throwing of blocks—it just drops away. Because it doesn't make sense anymore. You don't have to decide to abandon the frustration because, oh yeah, the triangle goes in the triangle, the circle goes in the circle. So simple.

It's like that. It's a law of nature.

So you get a sense. It's like how we stop fighting gravity. If you want to really suffer, go out and keep trying to fly. Fight gravity, get upset. But we don't do that. I hope. I hope you're not doing that. These are laws of nature. So you get a sense of what I mean.

In terms of right understanding—which we simply begin our practice with, not the endpoint of course—we can just begin to look and see: what is it that hides or blocks for us accurate recognition? Because it's accurate recognition that allows us to come into harmony with things as they are, the mind and body as it is, the world as it is, the way things work. And from that we can respond in an appropriate manner. We don't have to throw the block through the window. We can respond appropriately. But first we have to see clearly.

So what blocks for us? Obviously the habits of our mind. But even behind that, where do the habits come from? I'm going to give another example of how the views, the way that we view the world—based to a great extent for all of us on our culture, our upbringing, the environment we grew up in, the environment we live in, all kinds of things.

Because that's the cultural background of most people, the sense of the way the Buddha talked about the world—like for example, the Buddhist cosmology of different realms of existence—that's just taken as how it is.

So you might notice in the metta chant that we've been doing, there's a place where it says, "all devas," those are celestial beings, "all human beings, all those in lower realms." In Burma, that's just a fact of how the world is.

So I was there one year, and we were taking many photos of different things. At one point we were with a group of people offering food dana, food donation of rice and beans to some villagers after a strong hurricane—what they call a cyclone there—where the rice paddies and their food had really been destroyed. We were just offering and doing this beautiful thing. Offering in Burma is quite special, because there's a whole ritual around the offering and the receiving that's really dignified and beautiful on both sides.

Anyway, later, looking at a friend's camera—one of the friends who had taken many photos—in some of the photos, all over them, there were these perfectly round, bright light kind of things. As we were looking at it, two friends, one who is Burmese and one who is Western but had spent twenty years there as a Burmese nun, they said, "Oh, that means that's devas. Those bright lights in the photos, that's devas. Devas were there."

And then another friend, also a nun, who is a scientist with a PhD in biology, said, "It's just the way the light's working in the camera and the water and the refraction," and she gave all these explanations. I showed the photos to some friends here and they also offered all the scientific Western explanations.

And it's like—who knows, right?

If it was just the camera, I went back and looked in my camera. I'd taken a few photos, and those round things were also there. Who knows if it's devas? Who knows if it's just a quirk of the light in that particular camera? But to see how the Burmese people, the people really steeped in that culture—there was no question. They know that's devas. And the others had no question either. They know it's some refraction of light in that particular case. They *know* it.

At least we didn't come to blows about it. We were just like, okay, whatever.

Can we just be with not knowing? That's the mindfulness place. What do we actually know? Seeing. The perception is round, bright light. That's it. You don't have to create anything around it. That's the quality of mindfulness—really present. Maybe it's this, maybe it's that. Who knows?

Although I will say, my scientist friend later—this is a bit of a sidetrack, but later she went to Tiruvannamalai, Ramana Maharshi's ashram, where there's this really sacred mountain. And there is something there.

I spent a lot of time there. I was totally surprised. I'm not into sacred mountains or anything like that, but there's something there, I'll tell you.

Anyway, on the full moon – this is in India – many Indian pilgrims come to walk around the mountain. It's a thing you do, a *pradakshana*, walking around the mountain. It's quite some miles. And in India, when many people come, we're talking a million. I'm not exaggerating. We're talking a lot of people when many people come in India. So it's just solid people walking around this twelve-mile route at night.

My friend sent me this photo, but I don't have it on this computer so I can't show you. But it was just these round things all over the place, everywhere. She wrote me, "Okay, okay, maybe it's dust." Who knows?

But you get the sense that this is what affects how we perceive. And rather than getting into right or wrong, what mindfulness is doing – the steadiness of mindful awareness – is bringing us into stepping outside of having to know, being caught up in our worldview altogether. Not having to justify or say it's right or wrong. The worldview is going to come up, we recognize it, but the moment of mindfulness is just stepping outside of either "Oh yeah, it's like this" or "It's not like this." Just seeing. Who knows? It's like this now. It's like this now. It's like this now.

And when we're not adding the extra liking, disliking, aversion, whatever – it's just what it is – that steadiness, the perseverance, is what allows for wisdom, which is accurate recognition of the mind-body process of things as they have come to be in this moment. That's what allows it to arise.

I use that language on purpose. The steadiness of this clear mindfulness, with right understanding, without all the overlay of opinions of liking and disliking, allows wisdom to arise. It's not an act of personal will. It's not that if you do it right, you've got to figure out what you need to see and try hard enough and see it. In fact, that's just the opposite of what's going to help you see how things are.

I found that a huge relief. Oh, my job isn't to figure out everything and see it and create wisdom. My job is just: what's happening now? Learning to almost love the simplicity of mindfulness, rather than getting so involved in what I think about each experience – what does it mean, is it good enough or bad enough, what am I doing wrong, what am I doing right, is this on the right path or the wrong path?

Just what's happening now. Ball of light. Seeing. Finish. What's happening next? I wonder what it is. Wondering. Just this moment. Just this moment.

Coming to really... well, for me, it's almost like loving mindful awareness. I was feeling that on the way up here, thinking about this and that. And then just awareness of what's happening right now. It gets almost tangible in some kind of way, mentally tangible. It's just like this now. And that's so complete in the moment. It's a moment of being purely present, without needing to push away or include something that's not here, or push away what is here. Just whatever is here. Maybe it's precise, maybe it's broad – doesn't matter. But the quality of experiencing the mind and body directly, with right understanding, is just, in a way, the sense of total presence.

There was a quotation – I put it later, but I want to say it now – from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He talks about "the fresh instant of the present moment." I like that. Just feeling the fresh instant of the present moment. That's all. The *what* of the present moment is whatever it is, changing every moment.

That's not as important as just recognizing, coming into trusting that fresh instant, that quality of direct experiencing with right understanding.

One of the habits, the views that keeps re-arising for pretty much all of us—and Winnie mentioned it last night—is one of the largest habits that obstructs accurate recognition: this sense of identity view, the sense of taking any experience in a moment as me or mine. Of course, that's not going to just go away, but we can begin to recognize how it's arising and functioning in a way that distorts our recognition of experience.

Just in a very light way, you can notice how it comes up throughout the day. There's just the six sense experiences arising and passing pretty much endlessly, right? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensations in the body, physical sensations, and the whole mental realm—thoughts, emotions, moods, mental images. That's just what's happening over and over and over again, every waking moment. Have you noticed that? Are you waiting for it to stop? But this is what's occurring.

Now, mindfulness is just noticing what's occurring in this moment without adding extra. But in terms of this identity view, you might just—very lightly, don't make a big deal about it—you might notice how, say you're sitting, you're out walking, there are many sense experiences. A thought comes, it just comes and goes: "Oh, it's Tuesday today," or there's a sight, there's a sound, you're feeling the sensations of the feet. Many, many experiences are just coming and going. They may be neutral, pleasant, unpleasant, but no big deal. They just come and go.

But suddenly there's one that somehow the mind privileges as "this is me," or "this is happening to me," or "this is mine." And suddenly the whole experience takes on a different quality. Do you know what I mean? And to see then what effect that has. We react.

A couple of days ago when it was so hot and muggy, for example. Walking, there's a sense of heat, there's a sense of hearing, all the different things, and suddenly one becomes, "God, I'm so hot." Even that could just be a thought coming—"I'm so hot"—and it goes. But this thought, "I'm so hot," becomes privileged as my thought. And then the experience of the heat, of the mugginess: "Ah, that's so unpleasant. That shouldn't be. What can I do about it?"

So it moves from a sensation and a thought to my thought, my sensation. And then there's the reaction—it's unpleasant, the aversion comes, all kinds of thoughts come about what can I do about it, or what's the matter with me, if I was really a good yogi it wouldn't bother me, or whatever way your thought goes. It doesn't really matter which direction. But when there's that privileging, when it's all about me or mine, that just keeps going. And instead of just "oh, heat feels like this," it becomes my heat, or that

heat, or "how can it be like this? How am I going to last for six weeks in this kind of heat? And the rooms aren't air conditioned..." And then there's flies, and there's mosquitoes. And pretty much you're like, "If I wanted it like this, I could have gone to India. I could have gone to Burma. You don't need to come to Massachusetts for this kind of weather."

It just gets out of control pretty quickly, right? And there's suffering, there's confusion, there's just agitation through clinging, which is what the Buddha called it. Agitation through clinging.

A friend of mine was telling me one of her Tibetan teachers described it in a way that I liked very much. He says, you know, everything's just arising and passing—our thoughts, all the different sense experiences coming. There's a sense of our body, but it's all nature. There's nothing personal. It's just all nature. But then suddenly something becomes personal, mere mind. And what had been wide open, all-inclusive, just nature occurring, suddenly gets all solidified into what he called "the narrow bandwidth of being a human being"—somehow separate from everything else.

I like to just get this sense of it: suddenly solidified, me against the humidity, or me against that other person who's walking slower and making me feel like I'm a lousy meditator, or whatever it is. Solid. Everything has gotten solidified, and it distorts our perception.

It distorts our perception, it leads to more thoughts, it leads to more wanting. We get really seduced and entranced by the mind's reactions to these things. And there's no way when that's going on unrecognized that we see accurately.

So when the mugginess is a problem, or "I'm too weak," or "I can't be with it," or "I have a medical condition, there's no way I can continue" with whatever it is—there's no way to recognize accurately: "Oh, heat feels like this, sweating feels like this, aversive feelings in the mind feel like this." It's not that the aversion has to go away, but the flip from the narrow bandwidth, the solidity—"this is really how it is, I'm like this, I'm separate, and this is causing me trouble"—to "oh, it's just like this now," without adding anything extra: that's when clear seeing, when insight can begin to arise.

This sense of taking it personally—anything—is one of the most pervasive patterns in our experience. For pretty much everybody, whatever our background, whatever culture, whether we believe in the devas or don't believe in the devas, this is what the Buddha was talking about. This sense of taking it personally is one of the biggest wrong understandings. When we don't recognize it's arising, it prevents accurate recognition. It keeps us spinning, spinning, trying to be happy but not understanding why we're not happy—because we keep looking in the wrong direction, which leads to clinging, leads to aversion.

Ajahn Sumedho says, "We create ourselves through our thoughts and we cannot create an ultimately peaceful self." So take that as a challenge, because you're probably not going to stop creating yourself with your thoughts. We're not here to stop it, but we're here to bring awareness to it, to bring mindfulness to it. It's not that the reaction stops. It's not that I still don't have the worldview of devas or not devas. But

mindfulness can see: "Oh, this is muggy feeling, this is unpleasant heat, this is aversion—feels like this." That's the difference.

Mindfulness, as Ajahn Sumedho calls it, is the point that includes. It includes anything. That freshness of the present moment, whatever is here—it's like a totality of presence, just for a flash. Don't try to extend it in time. All we can do is be fully here for this moment. That makes it more possible in the next moment. But that moment is all-inclusive. This moment is all-inclusive. That's the power of simple sati.

We take a lot of things personally, don't we? I'm staying with simple examples, but I hope you understand that the simple example of the heat and the reactivity, the reaction of aversion, taking it personally—both the heat, the unpleasantness, and the aversion—we're taking it all personally when we're caught up in it. The only way to bring mindfulness, to explore the quality of heart and mind, to see what's creating the suffering, the only way to be able to do that in a balanced way is in a moment when we're not taking it personally. And that includes the aversion, that even includes the habit of sense of me. It's just a thought. Nothing is personal. Nothing. It's all just, as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, nature. We are nature. It's all aspects of nature.

The aversion arising from the unpleasant feeling of the heat that arose from a thought about it—that's just conditioned from habit. The more we react, the more that aversion reacts to unpleasant; it becomes an ingrained habit and shows up when we're not aware of it. That doesn't mean you are a bad, aversive person. It means that's just aversion doing its job, as Sayadaw Tejaniya says. We want to get interested and see: What is aversion's job? How does it work? What is fear's job? How does it work? How does wanting show up, and what's the effect when wanting is happening in the mind?

The quality of mindfulness with right understanding isn't to stop things from happening, but to get interested in whatever's happening, because none of it is personal. And that's what really allows for this quality of—I call it affectionate curiosity—that mindfulness can bring to whatever's arising. Without that, the effect of taking it personally is we really get caught in striving and reactivity, completely entranced by the habitual reactions of the mind and heart to whatever's occurring.

We start or continue in our habit of looking to experience, or whatever object of awareness is happening, for self-confirmation, for meaning, don't we? When you think about coming in to talk to a teacher, it's so habitual—you think, "What should I tell them?" And you want to say the good things, whatever the heck that means to you that day. But the "good things" really is either it feels good, usually, or somehow we think it means we're getting somewhere.

Where are we getting? Where are we going to go? There's nowhere but this moment. Yet we think we're getting somewhere. It's as if we're looking to a particular experience to give us meaning.

You come in and say, "I'm so sleepy, so tired, my thoughts are all over the place." And we take that experience to mean, "I'm a completely useless human being on the face of the earth. I shouldn't even be

here." And why? Because I was sleepy in the ten o'clock sitting.

If you really question people—"I'm sleepy all day, the whole day"—and you ask, "Really, the whole day? How about lunch?" "No, I was sleepy then." "How about when you were walking?" "Oh no, I wasn't sleepy then." "So when were you sleepy?" "Well, the sitting after breakfast." Oh my goodness. Okay, you're sleepy, all right.

Sleepiness is like this. The difference between taking it personally and not is the difference between throwing your blocks through the window and simply putting the triangle in the triangle. Oh yes, sleepiness is like this. No big deal. It's a completely different experience. And that's strengthening the habit of mindfulness.

We think mindfulness is only strengthened when something incredibly good is happening, or when the mind is really steady. No. In fact, I can tell you from personal experience of forty years—actually it's more than that, which is really embarrassing—but it took me a long time to trust this. Sleepiness, that kind of low energy, is one of my hindrances of choice, let's say, one of my good friends, especially on retreat. And it took me ages to see that getting all resistant to it—"I'm not going to fall asleep, I'm not going to fall asleep"—and somehow thinking that's mindfulness? I'll tell you, that's not mindfulness. That's aversion. Aversion is aversion. Mindfulness of aversion is mindfulness, but aversion masquerading as mindfulness is aversion.

So if I'm sitting here and I don't fall asleep through sheer force of will, what have I really been feeding? What have I been cultivating in that sitting? Aversion and tension.

When I finally understood this—okay, sleepiness is like this—I realized something important. Sleepiness is dull. You think, "Well, I'm not mindful. It's not clear." Of course it's not clear, because the job of sleepiness is dullness. You're not going to have incredibly clear awareness when you're sleepy. It's going to be dull. But there's still awareness if you're there with it.

What I started to really come to trust—you can't see it happening in the moment—but when you go through a period where you're really sleepy, and you didn't just check out in your pajamas for the whole day, you did actually keep on trying to sit and walk to some extent, then suddenly you're awake again. It will happen. I promise you it will happen. You will be awake again—probably at three in the morning—but you will be awake again. And there's awareness. There's mindfulness.

Well, that didn't just drop from the sky with no causes and conditions. Everything is lawful. During that period of dullness, you were practicing: dullness is like this.

Sleepiness is like this. But that's mindfulness—albeit weak and dull, it's still being cultivated. It's very different from just giving in. You're feeding the wholesome rather than feeding the unwholesome by saying, "My God, I won't fall asleep." So really looking and seeing: what's feeding the wholesome, what's feeding the unwholesome? Feeding the wholesome is what supports our waking up.

Nyoshul Khenpo again—he was a wonderful Tibetan Dzogchen master. I'm taking his teaching in context to fit this discussion. When we're really practicing without a little bit of right understanding, when we're taking it all personally and we don't recognize that, we can practice extremely sincerely, putting in a huge effort. But with this wrong understanding, it's all about me trying to create something.

As Ajahn Sumedho said—I know I'm jumping around, I'll get back to Khenpo—people used to say, "Don't talk about identity view or this sense of creating self in the beginning because it's too complex." But he said, "Why not? Why spend twenty years practicing through the delusion of me trying to get somewhere? Why do that? Let's start seeing accurately in the beginning."

In this way, when we don't see, when we're coming from the sense of me, when taking it personally, as Nyoshul Khenpo says, we exhaust ourselves in three ways. Probably more, but I like these three. The first is we create fabrications, we create mental concepts. The second is then we exert a lot of effort. And then we create many targets in our minds.

Can you get a sense of this? When we're taking it personally, when it's about me, first we create many concepts, we construct all this stuff—like the example I gave about it being humid and hot. That's all that's happening. Yet from that, in thirty seconds or two seconds, we can be into a whole thing about our health and our past and our future and our retreat and what we're going to do. We're creating all these concepts from that sense of identification.

Then we create a lot of effort. The effort may be in the so-called environmental world. How can I get cool? You're running all around. You're going to L.L. Bean to order one of these fans with a battery that you see at tennis matches. And how can I hide it so nobody knows what I'm doing? I can't have it in the hall, so maybe I won't sit in the hall. You can spend days like that about whatever. This is a lot of useless effort based on a lot of concepts and a lot of goal orientation, creating many goals. Your goal is to get cool. Well, next week it'll be freezing, and then your goal will be to replace the fan with a little heater. You've got to get those gloves with a battery. This is our life if we're not seeing what's going on.

No wonder we're exhausted. No wonder we're not happy—because everything's always changing. If you just notice, "Oh yeah, muggy and hot, feels like this," it's so much easier. So much less exhausting.

And not just environmentally, but internally the same thing happens. Whether with mindfulness—"I think my mindfulness should be more precise. I think I should be feeling my breath more really precisely"—we set up a sense of how it should be, a concept. Then we put in a huge amount of effort, but it's effort based on wanting, on greed, personal effort. You're going to know it eventually because it brings conflict, it brings tension, it brings frustration.

In fact, if you feel frustrated, pretty much for sure there's some idea in the back of your mind that you think should be happening and it's not—or something is happening that you think shouldn't be. And you think the frustration is about this thing that isn't or is happening, but the frustration is actually just the

wanting based on a concept in the back of the mind that sets up a goal, sets up a target, that we're putting in a huge amount of effort to try and make happen. Completely exhausting.

Yes, we do put in a lot of effort, huge energy here, but the effort is that of the steadiness of just remembering mindfulness in this moment, and now in this moment. As soon as we start aiming it to try and make something happen, we're moving into those three ways of exhausting ourselves that Khenpo is talking about. So let's not put in a huge sincerity of effort all towards trying to make something happen, when really the effort could be into just relaxing back into what's happening right now.

In terms of what I just mentioned, someone might have the idea that mindfulness should be very precise and really try for that. I think Joseph mentioned this morning that mindfulness isn't about a particular technique. Sometimes we can get ideas like that—mindfulness means it's very precise, or mindfulness means it's more broad and all-inclusive and settled back. This is right mindfulness, or that's right mindfulness. But as I think Joseph mentioned, both of those are fine. It's not about whether it's broad or narrow. Mindfulness is that quality in the citta, in the consciousness, in the mind-heart, of clear recognition in that moment—sammā-sati—free from distortion of greed, hatred, confusion. And that can be very precise, or it can be broader, more all-inclusive.

In fact, the Buddha even mentioned both ways in a couple of suttas. So I just want to read that so you know it's not just us saying it's whatever. Someone said to me once, "Whatever I come in and say to you, you're just going to say, 'Just notice it, it's all fine.'" There was some truth in that. But the noticing part is what's important.

In one sutta, the Buddha is talking about two types of thought—it's an important sutta, I'm not going to talk about the rest of it—but he's describing his exploration of his own mind before he was the Buddha, before he was awakened. He said he noticed two types of thought. One type is thoughts of harmfulness, thoughts of greed, thoughts of ill will—the unwholesome, the akusala kinds of thought. And when he really looked at it, he saw that the more he thought about them, the more they led to his own suffering and the suffering of others and tired him out. Then he saw on the other side what you could call wholesome thoughts—thoughts of non-greed, thoughts of non-ill will, mettā, thoughts of non-harming, compassion. And he saw that as much as he thought those thoughts, there was no harm that could come from them to him or another—unless, he's so practical, he thought too much all night and could tire himself out with thinking too much. Totally practical.

That's just the context. So he says, "Whatever a person keeps pursuing, whatever is the habit of your mind, that becomes your inclination." So if we keep thinking about aversion and not recognizing it—not recognizing it being the salient thing—it becomes a habit.

And then, talking about when he's noticing the habits of harmfulness, of ill will, of greed, he said, "It is just as in the last month of the rains retreat in India at that time, in the autumn season, when the crops are ripening, a cowherd would closely watch his cows. He would tap and poke, he would curb them, he would

make sure that they don't go into the crops that are ripening. Why? Because he sees that there would be a fine or public censure or difficulties arising if he let his cows wander into the crops and cause them damage." Very simple. "In the same way, I saw for myself in the unwholesome states, unskillful qualities of mind—I saw drawbacks and defilements and suffering. And I saw that in the wholesome states of mind, there are the blessings of renunciation and the aspect of cleansing."

And then when he saw the wholesome states, he said, "It is just as in the last month of the hot season, when all the crops have been gathered into the village, a cowherd would look after his cows. While resting under the shade of a tree or out in the open, he simply keeps himself mindful. He simply needs only to be mindful that there are these cows." Very much as Joseph was saying from the sutta: "Oh, there is a body." Just has to know there are these cows. And then the Buddha says, "In the same way, I simply needed to be mindful that these wholesome states are here."

Both of those, he says, are ways of practice. So when it's wholesome, when the mindfulness is getting its own momentum, there's the sense of the more broad quality—settle back under a tree with the simple steadiness of mindfulness: these states are here, these states are arising, whatever they are. Yet at other times—and he linked the other times to when there are difficult states of mind—we're still aware of them, but the quality that we bring into the mindfulness, it's still relaxed, don't get me wrong.

They're both relaxed because we're not trying to change anything. But when there are unskillful qualities zooming in, we need to have a little more sense of care. A little more sense of not just settling back and going, "Okay, whatever," because aversion is zooming in in the background. Instead, it's recognizing: "Right, aversion is like this." It's still mindfulness. It's still relaxed. You're not going, "Oh my God, aversion! I've got to be really careful and keep it from coming." It's not that. But it's just being a bit more careful.

Both of these qualities are needed. When you're more open and settled back, you're aware there's a state—there's hearing, there's seeing, there's thinking, there's wanting, there's bliss—that things are coming and going. And people think, "Oh, that's really nice. It's all just coming and going. I've got it now. This is balanced mindfulness." And then all of a sudden a memory comes up, or someone starts making a heck of a racket, or you remember whatever. Something comes and all of a sudden—zoom—something has been identified with, something's coming up strong. The whole thing is rocky and you think, "But it's right that I need to be open and relaxed." And you try to maintain what you think is right mindfulness, and what happens? You just keep getting carried away, carried away, carried away.

So you go, "Okay, let me be a little more careful. Maybe I specifically come and feel sensations in the body." Not to block that stuff, but to reconnect with balanced mindfulness. Mindfulness that's not distorted by the kleshas. And then you can recognize the aversion. You need to just be careful enough to keep the mindfulness sharp and steady so that we see it when it comes. Because these habits are so familiar. We don't tend to notice them. "Of course I'm aversive to humid, muggy weather. Who wouldn't be? That's normal." And we're off. But with mindfulness: "Oh, aversion's like this. Aversion's like this." Sometimes

precise, sometimes relaxed. Both are mindfulness.

I want to share another example from a contemplative master. I've known this teaching for a long time, but I was reading it when I was on a little self-retreat this fall, and I just have to share it because it's so perfect.

Nyoshul Khenpo was a truly great Tibetan Dzogchen master who died at the end of the last century. He's talking about what was really a hard life when he was a young monk at age ten in one of the monasteries in Tibet. He said, "At the age of ten, my job was to take care of the sheep that belonged to the monastery, sometimes shepherding the animals out in the wilds. When it was sunny and nice, I would stay outside, very relaxed, feeling happy, just watching the sheep munching the grass." Just like the cowherd—simply aware, like that.

"But sometimes it was raining and freezing cold with hail and wind, and I was without shelter, and I could not see the sheep who were lost in the mist in the ravines. So I had to chase them everywhere in order to collect them and bring them back at night. I knew exactly how many there were. I recognized each of their faces and called them each by name."

I love that, because in a sense, that's the quality of careful mindfulness. Sometimes with different techniques, we shouldn't confuse the technique with the idea that mindfulness only exists in a particular form. So for example, in the way the so-called Mahasi technique or Sayadaw U Pandita would teach, mindfulness is described as really coming face to face with experience, naming the object, seeing it clearly. It seems to be more object-related—very much in the way that Nyoshul Khenpo was really looking out for each sheep, recognizing them, able to give each one its name, seeing them face to face. Sometimes that approach is really helpful and skillful.

Then there are other times when it's just settling back under a tree, all the things coming and going, the sheep munching, and you're not focusing in on each one. That's also mindfulness.

So seeing for ourselves, it's not about how mindfulness shows up. Both of these approaches are very useful. What matters is that quality of just experiencing the mind and body directly, from moment to moment, with right understanding.

Whether it's precise or whether it's more broad, both of these can be right understanding—the fresh instant of the present moment. This is the meditation. This is the work of the mind that is knowing. This is really what we're practicing here.

And that's where we come to the continuity or perseverance. When we talk about right effort, this is where the effort comes in. Not for a goal, but to really completely open into this moment with right understanding. Because every moment is Dhamma—Dhamma in the sense of the truth of things, the way things are. As the great Zen master Dogen said, if you cannot discover the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it? It's only accessible here because that's all there is.

So this retreat—we're not trying to achieve something in six weeks or three months or at any time. It's really practicing recognizing mindful awareness, recognizing right understanding, just meeting the mind and body experience as it is, noticing when we're suffering, how that's arising in the moment, getting really interested in that. Noticing when there's suddenly that aha moment of, "Oh, I'm holding on to wanting it to be different," and it all just falls away. How that arises in a moment.

Noticing that mindful awareness can be the thread through all of these, that there's nothing, no experience we have that needs to be outside of mindfulness, outside of awareness. When you notice you're putting something to the side and saying, "This has to change so I can practice," that's the place to really get interested. Because awareness doesn't care what's occurring. Everything that arises—as Joseph said—in our day, in our mind, in our body, is a key opportunity to come back into mindfulness if we've gotten out of it, to recognize awareness again. There's nothing that needs to be steadied, that needs to be kept away.

So Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says, as mindfulness is remembered, that's our perseverance, that's our effort—to just remember mindfulness every moment that we can remember it. And in the beginning, it is a personal effort. It's not just happening by itself. We're up here talking, we're having sittings, we're meeting with you, all to help you remember mindfulness. But it starts to develop its own momentum. I'm sure most of you, if not all of you, know that—where it starts to get easier, where you're not having to remember it every moment, it starts to come in by itself.

And we come to appreciate the mindfulness itself, the quality in the mind-heart that's present and aware. We come to appreciate that more. That becomes much more fulfilling than trying to have a particular experience or confirming or describing ourselves by experience. Like I was saying when I was coming up here tonight, I suddenly remembered, "Oh yeah, right. Just the freshness of the present moment, just that." In that moment, it doesn't occur to want something else. It doesn't occur to judge or evaluate. It's just this, but totally present and awake. It's like, "Oh, what's the problem?" And the mind goes, "I'll tell you what the problem is. There's plenty of problems." "Oh, problems feels like this." It's always available to come back again.

This steadiness of mindfulness, when it starts to get its momentum, is the condition for insight wisdom to arise. From Sayadaw U Pandita: "When mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of mind and body." It's not like if you want it or if you're good enough. It's just a law of nature. It's how it is. The more moments of clear, accurate recognition—we recognize accurately—we're going to see how it is. We see how it is, wisdom arises. Try and stop it.

We do try. We try really hard. We really try to get in the way and not see how things are. But that's why we set up this structure. So by hook or by crook, you're going to get mindful and see how things are. "Oh yeah, what was the problem? There's no problem." I've had so many moments like that—"Oh, what's the problem? There's no problem."

Five minutes later, big problem, big problem. A minute ago, there was no problem. Why can't I get back to no problem? It's like, no, there's a problem now. Okay, problem feels like this. We kind of just land in where it is. Not an act of personal will.

But as Mingyur Rinpoche says, and I'll close with this: once we start our path of Dharma, every practice is an awareness practice. Every activity is an awareness practice, an opportunity to practice awareness. Every activity here—broad, narrow, whatever it looks like, wholesome, unwholesome—as soon as we're aware, that experience brings us back into clear seeing.

Nothing is excluded.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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