The Two Darts: Mindfulness of Vedanā can Purify the Heart

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:17

To explore together, expanding and discussing a bit more on this aspect of our experience of vedanā that Bonnie introduced in the instructions the other morning. Because one, it's fascinating, and two, it's really one of the key experiences that just happens to arise every single mind moment that we're alive. Understanding and meeting it with mindfulness rather than overlooking it is really one of the keys to clear seeing and liberation. It's an amazing thing. To me, one of the signs of the genius of the Buddha is that he even noticed it and figured it out. This can be really interesting to explore, and I'm just offering these reflections in that spirit.

Mingyur Rinpoche writes, talking about recognizing cause and effect conditions: "We can recognize that the same interplay between cause and effect conditions our own mind and shapes our experience." Hopefully we're all seeing that as we explore here. If we want to be happy, we must figure out what 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?

To me, those are kind of the two aspects of our ongoing spiritual practice—the two sides of a retreat, and the two sides of the things we talk about. Sometimes we're talking about the causes and conditions that lead to happiness, that lead to well-being, and sometimes we're talking about the causes and conditions that create a moment of suffering in our hearts and minds. Sometimes you're experiencing a rare moment of the causes and conditions that lead to well-being, and other times you're experiencing many moments of the causes and conditions that lead to suffering.

This is really what we're exploring in our practice, what we're seeing. I remember Sayadaw U Tejaniya once said something that was so obvious I thought it was brilliant precisely because it's so obvious. He was talking about someone really wanting to get concentrated and wanting to be free. He said, "You know, concentration doesn't happen just because you want it to. That's not really the cause and condition that gives rise to concentration." Just take that in. "I want to be free. I want to not have this experience anymore." And we get so frustrated when it doesn't happen. So here it's like, stop. We just look, moment to moment to moment, with steady mindfulness without assuming we know. And then the causes and conditions for both happiness and suffering reveal themselves. That's really why we have to go through both sides in our practice.

Vedanā, this quality, this moment-to-moment experience of feeling tone, is so important that the Buddha

picked it out in his sutta on the four foundations of mindfulness. When he decided to divide up experience into four areas, he picked vedanā for a whole section, the second one. Until I really heard and read about it from the Buddhist teachings and started to explore it in my experience, I never would have even noticed it. I didn't even have a clue that it existed. How did he figure that out?

Really understanding and exploring how we suffer, really looking at these qualities in the mind—remember, meditation is the work of the mind. It's not just about some kind of subtle, esoteric looking at these things separate from life. What goes on in the heart-mind is what conditions how we speak and how we act in the world. It's not separate.

I think very frequently about a quotation I love from Maha Ghosananda, who was a Cambodian monk and peace activist during and after the time of the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge killed millions of people in Cambodia, and basically all the monks and nuns had to flee if they were going to survive, as did many other people. Maha Ghosananda, who has since passed away, was giving part of a speech in Washington, D.C. some years ago. He said, "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts." So to understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to remove them in the world. To me, that just really points to the inseparability of understanding the landmines in our own mind and hearts from how we speak and act in the world.

So what are the landmines in our hearts? In the big picture, the Buddha said: the qualities of greed, the qualities of aversion or hatred, the qualities of delusion. When they're present in the heart-mind in a moment and unrecognized, that's what leads to unwholesome speech and action. And it's not just something that makes you feel a little bad—it's actually running the show.

This brings to mind the first two verses of the Dhammapada, which are also very famous: "All things are preceded by the mind, the heart, are ruled by mind, are made of mind. If you speak or act with an impure mind"—basically greed, hatred, confusion in the heart-mind—"then suffering follows you as the wheel of the cart follows the ox that pulls it. All things are preceded by the mind, the heart, ruled by mind, made of mind."

And if you speak or act with a pure mind, a calm, bright heart, then happiness follows you like a shadow that never leaves. This very famous couplet from the Dhammapada says to me exactly what Maha Gosananda says and exactly what Mingyur Rinpoche says: understanding what leads to suffering in our experience, and thus in the world, and understanding what leads to happiness.

Each of us, as human beings, is just one representative of humanity. We have our own particular stories and our particular patterns, but underneath that, we're all the same. It's the same things that lead to suffering, the same things that lead to happiness. So as we come to understand how confusion and complexity gets created moment to moment, how we can see through it, and how recognizing accurately releases the confusion—even if just for a moment—we're not just doing it for ourselves. We're understanding how this works in everybody.

This doesn't mean it fixes everybody. The Buddha couldn't fix everybody. But we can certainly move into our relationships with ourselves and others in the world from a very different place of understanding—when the corruptions aren't present. I'm going to use *klesha*, the word for greed, hatred, and delusion, because I really don't much like the translation "defilement." "Torments" is another option, but I'll just use *klesha*—that's what I mean by it. The torments of heart-mind: greed, hatred, confusion, the habits.

When the Buddha came to talk about this, when he picked out *vedana*, this quality of feeling tone to explore, it was really because—while there are different angles to enter—this is one that's very accessible to us when we start to notice, to really come to understand.

I want to start talking about it from a sutta the Buddha gave, called "The Darts." I'll go through the sutta bit by bit and then offer my ideas, my comments about it.

He starts out by saying, "Now what is the distinction, what is the difference that exists between a well-taught noble disciple"—basically an awakened person—"and an untaught worldling, an ordinary person?" That's an interesting question, right? What's the difference? That gets my attention.

And he says: "An untaught worldling, monks, experiences pleasant feelings. She experiences unpleasant or painful feelings and experiences neutral feelings. A well-taught noble disciple likewise experiences pleasant, painful, and neutral feelings."

So what's the difference?

I would suggest—if you're anything like me, maybe you're not—just take a moment to look at what might be the background, perhaps not quite conscious assumption when you think about what it would be to be enlightened. And don't pretend you've never thought about it either. When it slips in, do you think, "Yes, I'll experience the same unpleasant feeling tones that I'm feeling now"? No, you don't. Don't you think it's just going to get better and better, nicer and nicer—in other words, more and more pleasant *vedana*? Doesn't that somehow slip in the back door?

He's saying no, it's not like that. An awakened person, like an unawakened person, experiences pleasant *v edana*, unpleasant *vedana*, and neutral *vedana*.

So first of all, if we can even let that one go, that's huge. Okay, it doesn't go that easily. May it be so for you, and I won't have to give this talk. But I'm giving it to myself, not just to you.

So what is the difference? That's the rest of the sutta.

"When an untaught person, an ordinary person, is touched by a painful, unpleasant bodily *vedana*, feeling tone, they worry and grieve and lament. They beat their breast. They weep and are distraught."

Can you relate to that? It's not just, "Ah yeah, that knee, it's a little bit unpleasant." No—you beat your

breast, you're distraught, you weep, you pull out your hair. It's like, "Oh my God, it's the end of the world!"

"They thus experience two kinds of unpleasant feelings: a bodily and a mental one. It is as if a person were pierced by a dart, an arrow, and following the first piercing is hit by a second arrow. So that person will experience feelings caused by two darts. It is similar with an untaught, ordinary person: when touched by an unpleasant bodily feeling tone, they worry and grieve, lament, beat their breast, weep, and are distraught. So they experience two kinds of feelings."

That's the first part he presents. He's saying this is what an ordinary person does. Can you relate to that at all?

Let me describe *vedana* for a moment, and then say what happens with this. *Vedana*, feeling tone itself, as Bonnie described the other morning, is a very subtle and fleeting, quick experience.

arising in every moment of consciousness.

So how does the Buddha describe our experience, really? Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, mental experience and thinking or emotion—he calls these the six sense experiences. And they're just happening, over and over and over, all day long. Have you noticed that? Just happening.

So what is a sense experience in that moment? All these things are happening very quickly. Say seeing, for example. There's the physical eye door that works, if it works. There's a form, a visual object to be seen. And there's the consciousness in that moment. When they come together, there's seeing. But what we experience, what we really recognize, is just that seeing is happening. Recognizing the seeing—that's mindfulness.

So the seeing occurs, and right away with it is perception. That saññā, that recognition: it's a bell, or it's a light, or this is a room. You may not even say the word, but that just comes up. It's just normal nature. Nothing wrong with that. The perception can be accurate or inaccurate—that's a whole other talk—but that perception arises is just natural.

And it's perceived, it's recognized in the mind with this feeling tone that is also felt in the mind: this kind of pleasant feeling tone, unpleasant feeling tone, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. This is just arising as nature, cause and effect, just as with perception, just at that moment of contact. It's just nature. It's not good. It's not bad. It's not personal. And it's so subtle, arising in every moment.

It's easy to think that the feeling tone, the quality of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality, is somehow embedded in the object—like this bell is pleasant to look at. But it's not. It's how it's felt in the mental sphere in each of us. The same sight—well, it's never the same, right? How I see this bell in this moment, someone else may see it differently. It may come in as neutral to me. It may come in as unpleasant or pleasant to you. And five minutes later, to the same person, it could come in with a different feeling tone. It's not a steady state thing. It's just what arises due to conditioning.

But it's so quick. It's so quick that, as I said, until I read about it, I didn't really notice. I don't look at the bell and think, "Hmm, neutral feeling tone. Nice gold color. Pleasant feeling tone. Ah, it's pleasant." We don't really notice. It's so fleeting, so quick.

And in the not noticing, of course, is where the habits come in. You know this. We talk about this all the time. But it's so deeply habituated in the mind stream: when there's pleasant feeling tone, there's that little leaning forward. When there's unpleasant, that little pushing back. When it's neutral, look for something else.

In the not noticing, that's where it moves from unpleasant bodily feeling tone to lamenting, beating your breast, pulling your hair, and thinking it's all over. It's like that. It's so fast. Because we don't really notice the feeling tone so often, the whole experience—all the reaction—we're immediately into complexity and story. What does it mean? What to do? Without mindfulness, it's really easy for us to think that the reactions and the story is really what's happening, the accurate description of reality. Do you get a sense of what I mean?

Take unpleasant sensation, just a little unpleasant sensation in the knee or the elbow or the hand. We may actually be mindful of the sensation but not recognizing the unpleasant, and then immediately the thought arises: "This really isn't good. I don't think I can continue to sit with this like this. In fact, I remember someone I knew who kept sitting when it was like this in their back, and they really hurt themselves."

And that's really not wise attention. That's really not mindfulness. That's really not compassion. It's just "I've got to do something and I've got to do it now. This is bad. This is wrong." And all of that could happen in like a tenth of a second. Or am I the only one?

We may recognize, as it's getting really ramped up, that this seems a little exaggerated. "Fear is like this, fear is like this." But really, in there, not noticing the unpleasant, the reaction, the response is just—of course. Of course it's wrong. Of course it's bad. Of course I shouldn't hurt. You know? Hello?

And someone said, you know, we have a body, and cause and condition. We have a body and we're sitting still for half an hour. At some point we're going to hurt. So then your mind goes, "Okay, so why sit still for half an hour?" Right? Because we should be able to organize it so we don't hurt, because hurting is bad.

Same with pleasant. There's a pleasant feeling just at lunch. Something tastes good. We know it tastes good, but we miss the pleasant feeling. And it's just, "Oh, this is really great. I've got to get the recipe. I've got to have some more, but I don't want to be greedy. How much are other people eating? It's okay, they had four—I can have another one. It doesn't really... this is really good for me and it soothes me. It's compassionate. It's really the way we're supposed to be, and there's still enough. And the cooks will appreciate it—I'm really doing it so the cooks will feel good, so they'll know that I like the food." Right?

There's nothing wrong with pleasant food. And there's nothing wrong with moving so you're not harming

your body. But when we don't recognize the vedanā, the complexity—we're entranced by the reactions. We're really lost in that. And we think that's really... we're taking that as a description of reality. And we respond in that way, and through that to the next thing that happens. That's how we get so confused. Confused and lost.

So basically, without mindfulness—because the six sense experiences, that's all that's happening all day. And notice how fast they're changing sometimes when you see it. Nothing stays really for more than a moment. So all those vedanās arising through the day in our daily life too, and the not recognizing the tendency to move toward the pleasant, away from the unpleasant, ignore the neutral—we use that really as the overlay of what's meaningful, what's valuable, what's worthwhile in our life.

Think how many mind moments we've practiced that. No wonder it's such a deep habit. No wonder it feels right, really, and normal in a way. Do you know what I mean? It's like, of course pleasant is better. Of course, if it's been a pleasant sitting, if it's been really clear and then suddenly it's all muddy and the body's really hurting—even though you're aware of it, but it's really turned unpleasant—it of course feels like something's wrong. It's just such a deep habit.

But it's a habit. Because it's a habit doesn't mean it's the truth. But it's, as you know, very difficult to change habits. So a lot of our practice is this exploring to see how this process is working, really being interested, not taking it personally, because we're all kind of running in these habits.

So really starting to explore, back to reading the sutta, which I put down somewhere. Here it is. The Buddha goes on to describe how we ordinary people react.

You're beating your breast, you're resisting. "Having been touched by that painful feeling, one resists it, one resents it. Then in one who so resists and resents that painful feeling, an underlying tendency of resistance, a habit of resistance against painful feeling comes to underlie the mind."

Do you get a sense of that? It just becomes the habit to resist and resent unpleasant feeling. And because it's a habit, it feels normal. It feels appropriate.

Then he goes on: "Under the impact of that painful feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. And why does one do so? An ordinary person, O Bhikkhus, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

This kind of breaks my heart, actually.

"So in one who enjoys sensual happiness, the underlying tendency to lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind. He does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, nor the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. And in one who lacks this knowledge, an underlying tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings comes to underlie his mind."

Let me talk about this a little. To me, this is the classic description of samsara—what keeps us spinning in

this wheel of wanting and becoming. This deep tendency of immediately resisting the unpleasant, and the only way out, we think it's the way out, the only one we know, is to go look for something pleasant.

That's just the sense of samsara: always leaning a little bit forward, if not a lot, but a little bit forward to something a little bit better. The next good thing, the next good thing. Even so simple as: this thing I'm eating is good, so let me have the next one.

Just as Guy was saying, the Tibetan saying that samsara is the urge to correct—just get it a little bit better, a little bit better. That sense of always leaning into the next thing and confusing it, not really seeing the effect of that, which keeps us really quite narrow, looking forward, with a sense of incompleteness, a sense of insufficiency, a sense of needing something to make it okay. And the second it's here and okay, it doesn't last—we're needing the next thing, needing the next thing.

So we're always kind of leaning into that object, not seeing the whole process, not recognizing the sense of connectedness and vastness, but really under the influence of unrecognized greed and aversion and me, me, me. The mind becomes really narrow and focused, like tunnel vision. And we experience it in different ways—as alienation or neediness or a sense of what's wrong, always needing something more. And we often confuse this with happiness, with pleasure.

Have you ever noticed that sometimes just the wanting of something, we almost think it's pleasant? We confuse it. Oh, just the pleasant fantasy. Well, that thought's pleasant in the moment—just imagining how great it's going to be when you get whatever the heck it is. The orange at breakfast or the amazing new relationship or whatever it is.

Is it ever as good as you imagined? If it is, how long for? Really, pretty quick. So then the next thing, the next thing, the next thing.

And we start to see how in each moment—it can be emotions, it can be physical objects, it can be pleasant meditative experiences—there's always that sense when we get it of thinking, this is supposed to do it. Not understanding, of course, the impermanence or the fleetingness of vedana itself. We're looking at the object, thinking it's going to make me happy, when really the craving just goes away and there's a sense of ease, a sense of peace. And really what we're craving is pleasant vedana, pleasant feeling tone.

How quick is it? When we start to explore, just noticing pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, feeling tone is so fleeting and insubstantial—and we're running our life by it.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a really wonderful Thai forest monk, teacher, and scholar, quite interesting—he said once, just explore pleasant feeling tone. Start to notice how it feels, and I'll talk a bit later about unpleasant too. Just notice how quick it is.

So try it in eating. Say you're eating an orange or something that you like, something that's pleasant. When you take a bite, we tend to notice the juiciness and all of that, but just notice, if you can, just the burst of

pleasantness. How long does it last? You have to take another bite to get another burst, or eat another orange, or think a happy thought, or remember how the previous bite tasted so that thought is pleasant.

See how quick it is.

So Ajahn Buddhadasa says, as you start to notice how fleeting pleasant feeling tone is, you start to see—and he says this: think about all the decisions and choices you've made in your life. He says, I bet you'll see ninety-five percent of them were based on wanting more pleasant feeling tone.

So maybe that's exaggerated for us, you know, more awake beings. But look and see, not with judgment, with interest. With interest, see how this works.

We don't see the vastness, the non-separation. It keeps us looking, looking, looking. And another thing it does is we keep landing in each experience, whether it's emotional or something to eat, pleasant, unpleasant. And it's so—this is it. We take each one as so—I mean, it's real in that moment, but it's like we really die into it. *This is going to make me happy.* We're really there with it. And then when it goes away, we're distraught. We're so—*oh no, this is really gone.* And that's so complete. And then the next good thing—*oh, finally, now it's good again, and now I can relax.* And then another difficult one comes.

Some of you have mentioned in interviews how you're starting to see emotions just coming really quick and fast—beautiful ones, difficult ones, confusing ones, complicated ones—coming through, coming through. And you see, wow, when you really identify with each of them, how exhausting it is. And we're doing that in our life a lot of the time.

A place I like to watch—it amuses me—I kind of think of it as a metaphor for watching how samsara works, is if you watch friends who are really involved in watching a particular sport, a particular team. It's good to watch friends if you're not particularly involved, right? Easier to watch them.

So, for example, last year when the basketball team here, the Golden State team—those of you who are here know—it was like a big deal when I came out here in the spring during the playoffs. I've never in my life been anywhere out here where everyone, everyone I spoke with without exception, was completely caught up in the Golden State Warriors and where they get through and have the most wins or whatever, and then in the playoffs. And I mean, even people, friends of mine on staff here who to my knowledge had never looked at any kind of a sports game at all. They're like, "Gotta go, Carol, I gotta go watch the Warriors play." I almost fell off my chair. Really? You're gonna go watch the Warriors?

So one night I was out to dinner with a friend from Germany. We were driving home into San Rafael around 7:30 on a weekend evening. I was driving, and I said, "Jeez, it's like there's no cars on the road. It's weird. It's spooky. What's going on?" And Franz goes, "I bet there's a Golden State game on." And sure enough, when I went home and walked past the window of my friend, I could see in the TV—Golden State, two heads.

And if you watch people—something like basketball is fun because it's fast moving. So you're watching and you want a particular team, so that team scores a basket. Yay, yay, pleasant feeling, pleasant feeling, so excited! And then they're running around, and then the other team scores—oh no, unpleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, oh, it's so bad. And it's changing every second, every two seconds. It's exhausting, but each one's really real. It's so true, you know? And it's like, halftime, "Oh my god, they're twenty points behind!" I said, "But it changes so fast. How can you worry now? There's another—you don't know what's going to happen in forty-five minutes. It's so fast."

It's fun to watch when you're not the one who cares. It's different when you're the one who cares. But to me, it's a great little metaphor for samsara.

And then, you know, finally, thank God, the game ends. And it's good if they won, but even if they lost, thank God it's over because it's exhausting. But how long do you get? If they won, great, you can be happy. For how long?

If you lost, you're sad. For how long? Because the next day, there's another game. You've got to get all revved up again. You've got to go watch it again. You've got to see where they are. So to me, this is like a little metaphor. It's exhausting, but we think we're having a really good time. We're choosing to do this.

But in our life, here we are. We can notice what we're choosing and what's really bringing us happiness. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with watching a basketball game—don't get me wrong. I'm just saying, watching what we really think is bringing happiness and ease, and seeing how it works. It's fun to see how it works in something that's not the most important thing in your life, because then we can really explore.

That's kind of what's great about this time we have on retreat. Now we're really in the heart of the retreat, well into the second week. And sure, stuff from your daily life is still coming up—it doesn't go away. But all of you, no matter what you think, you're quieter than you were when you came. You might notice, actually, as awareness strengthens and gets its momentum, that one might actually notice more thinking. You might notice more wanting arising, more aversion arising. You think, "I'm more of a mess than when I came." But it's really that awareness is noticing more and more subtle things.

People come in and say, "Oh my God, everywhere I look there's craving." And we go, "Great." And you probably think we're really twisted, but it's like, wonderful! You're really seeing what's going on—and not only you. That's a wonderful thing to explore in retreat. Here in the smaller things, start to see how it works. When there's pleasant or unpleasant, or when you notice you're all caught up in wanting or aversion.

And the question might come up: so what's wrong with wanting and aversion? Okay, we can see, if you really don't see it, you can do bad stuff. But if you're just sitting here minding your own business and feeling some wanting and aversion, and so what, you go have a cup of tea instead of doing your walking

meditation—big whoop. We're not saying there's something wrong with what you did. That's again looking at the object. But we want to explore: what happens with vedanā? And when we don't see it going into wanting, aversion, delusion, why does the Buddha pick those out as being so not just problematic, but the roots of suffering, the roots of confusion?

This is just a quick aside: when they're not recognized in the mind, coloring and distorting perception, it's exactly this that gets in the way of recognizing accurately. And as I've said before, waking up, freedom from suffering, isn't about coming into another reality. It's about recognizing accurately—just what Mingyur Rinpoche was saying—what brings happiness and what brings suffering. Not our habitual ideas that more pleasant equals happiness. That's not real reliable happiness. But what really does.

And so when there's desire present in the mind—maybe you didn't notice the pleasant, but you're noticing desire—get interested in watching the effects of it. Notice what it does in the mind. It has a kind of narrowing, a tunnel vision. You can see how it really, from being kind of just present, calm with whatever's arising, suddenly the awareness snaps shut on the thing that's wanted.

My brother used to have a hound dog, the kind they breed for hunting, although this one was just living with him in his house in Atlanta. But because it's bred for hunting, it's a really sweet dog, yet the nose is so highly sensitized that he'd come into the house or go out in the backyard and all he could do was follow scents. His nose would just take him to any human, any animal scent. He had no control over it. He'd come in the house and go into my suitcase and pull out any dirty clothes because they had a human smell on them. He'd leave the clean clothes alone. You had to hide all the garbage. He'd just be pulled by the nose, by scent.

And I think of craving as like that. It just kind of pulls us by the nose. It's like, "I just want..." and we're off after it.

The story I often tell, but I think it's a good one, is when I was years ago at Yucca Valley in the high desert there in Southern California. I like it there very much, that high desert. We'd go walking out in it every morning. And I find there's just something very clear and bright in that dry desert air—the different Joshua trees and the birds and the little bunnies and the chipmunks—just being present with all of that and just walking, just being there.

So again, one morning doing that, and there are a few really large land tortoises there, but you don't see them very frequently. Normally I was walking in the desert and just present with that, just that exquisite awareness we have sometimes but we don't recognize. It's because there's no wanting going on, there's no aversion going on, there's just—you're just awake. But the thought comes up: "Maybe I'll see a tortoise." And that thought was grasped at: "Oh yeah, maybe a tortoise! I know where the beds are..." And immediately, what had been awake walking, inclusive, became: head for the tortoise, head for the tortoise. And everything else that came—not tortoise, not tortoise, not tortoise—just head for the tortoise, head for the tortoise, whether you see one or not. The experience, totally different.

And we think, "Oh, that's going to make me happy, seeing the tortoise." I was happy before I got into wanting to see it. And now I don't even remember if I saw it or not, because at some point I noticed what was happening to me. "Oh, look at that." And then the peace that comes back is when the wanting is just put down. It goes away. Ah.

So whether I saw the tortoise or not, I don't remember. But if you see it, it's like, "Ah, great. Saw the tortoise." The wanting's gone. There can be a wide sense of just presence with all that is in that moment, whatever arises.

That's why it's often said—I think Guy said this, a Buddhist said—wanting and aversion are makers of measurement. It kind of measures me and the thing that's wanted. "Me" immediately springs up when there's wanting or aversion.

Aversion works the same way. The mind shrinks back, really like a sudden reaction to the unpleasant. And in that shrinking back, almost we get just as caught up in the thing. Have you noticed?

Thich Nhat Hanh always gives the example of what it's like if you have one rough tooth. One tooth that just has a little chip in it. All your other teeth are fine. How much time does your tongue spend going to that little chip in the tooth? It's not like feeling all your other teeth and going, "Oh, these are fine, these are neutral." It's: rough tooth, unpleasant, rough tooth, unpleasant, rough tooth, unpleasant. Right?

Or if there's some sound going on that you find annoying, that you find unpleasant. We're not just noticing unpleasantness, that sound. And it's intermittent and not regular, right? So it happens. And then it's quiet. Then it happens again. And it happens, but it's not regular. Do you notice the time in between when the sound is not happening? The mind can be completely caught up with unpleasant expectation, waiting for that sound. We're like married to the unpleasant experience with aversion, the same as with pleasant.

And then delusion—well, for unpleasant, Ajahn Chah has a great line. He says it's as if we spend our life walking around tensed up like we're in the dentist's chair. Just trying to hold away anything unpleasant.

And delusion—first it's just not noticing what's going on, that's one aspect. But really the deeper delusion is that this all becomes about me. When there's craving, there's definitely me, it's about me. When there's aversion, it's about me. It all becomes the center focus of everything.

As someone was saying today, they noticed the sense of "me" came up in something, and they said, "Wow, I was just paying attention to it and I noticed—this is really unpleasant." Just kind of contraction and limiting and really, really unpleasant. That's interesting.

It wasn't aversion—just noticing.

So this is the most simple way to start exploring. Not to say, "Oh, wanting is bad, I'm going to stop wanting." Forget that. But get interested in exploring it. Get truly curious about it. Because as the Buddha said, until we start exploring it, we know of no other escape from unpleasant feeling except to lust after

the pleasant.

Until we get interested enough to see what's really going on—with the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, with the lusting after the pleasant—until we see what's actually happening, we don't get it that this isn't making us happy. We just keep thinking, "The next one, the next one, the next one, the next basket, the next basket."

So our practice here is simply to bring attention to see, to explore craving and aversion, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Remember, the Buddha said that the ordinary person doesn't understand as it really is the arising and ending of these feelings. As I was saying, they're so quick when we start to see them, these feeling tones. And the ordinary person doesn't understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape.

The Buddha talks about this frequently, and I think this is another piece of brilliance—the gratification, danger, and escape in feeling tone, in the world in general.

He says that before he was awakened, he was exploring: What's the gratification in the world? What's the danger? What's the escape? He said there is gratification. Whatever pleasure and joy there is in the world—pleasant feeling tone, in a way—is gratification. We enjoy it. We get pleasure from it. And that's how it is. He's not saying bad or good. He's just saying, yes, this is a fact.

So when people say the Buddha's teaching is that everything is suffering, everything is unpleasant—he's not saying that. He's saying, for sure, there's gratification, there's pleasure and joy in the world. This is pleasant feeling tone.

What's the danger? The danger is that the world is impermanent. In terms of feeling tone, they're so quick, so fleeting. There's no way they give any kind of lasting gratification at all. Bound up with dissatisfaction and subject to change—this is the danger. If we're not seeing the feeling tone, if we're letting it drive our decisions, how we respond to life, it doesn't work. Because we're looking for something it can't give.

The escape is the abandoning of desire and lust for the world. This is the escape.

I want to say a few things about that. I've talked about the fleeting quality of vedanā, the confusion of thinking that going for the pleasant is making us happy. But when we really look at it, we can see that's not necessarily so. However, this "abandoning the lust for the world" is often confused—when we hear it but we don't experience it in a moment—it's often confused with thinking we should abandon the world. And that's not what the Buddha's saying.

When we abandon, just in a moment—like when I was describing the simple craving for a tortilla—when that drops away, there's peace. Not the peace of incredible gratification from getting what you want and the big jazz of that, but the peace of contentment. Just contentment. It's like this now. This is really a much deeper peace.

It's the escape from the lust in the world, but it's not escaping from the world. It doesn't mean there's no appreciation of beauty, of joy. These things are still happening. It's not like we want to abandon pleasant feeling tone. But what drops away in a moment is this lusting for it and this fear of the unpleasant—which has been driving the bus, running the show.

One of my favorite quotations from the Buddha is: "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer craves after it."

Explore for yourself, just in little things here, a sense of that difference. A sense of the difference between appreciating and craving, this contentment.

It's not from an act of personal will. That's just more wanting. "Now I'm going to stop craving and really feel contentment with just this breath, no matter how it comes."

Contentment. Ease. These are out of our control—how we're going to feel. We don't know what feeling tone is going to come up. It's not an act of will. But notice in those moments, it's wisdom that recognizes, "Oh, this wanting, this seventeenth orange—maybe it's not going to do it." And you put it down.

So I'll tell a story like that. And let's just see it: simple moment-to-moment mindfulness.

From the Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta, where he's talking about vedana, how to be mindful: "When feeling a pleasant feeling tone, one knows, 'I feel a pleasant feeling tone.'" That's it. You don't need anything more. "When feeling an unpleasant feeling tone, one knows, 'I feel an unpleasant feeling tone.'" Not "Oh my God, what can I do about it?" Simply: "I feel an unpleasant feeling tone. It's like this." "When feeling a neutral feeling tone, one knows, 'I feel a neutral feeling tone.'"

I know—we're like, "Okay, yeah, right, then what?" Try doing it. Just try doing it. And with steady attention, see what happens. The whole world opens up. And we can start to see how these patterns work.

I'll give this example. I think it was the first time I sat a three-month retreat at IMS, a long time ago. And this is a story of bad behavior on retreat that I am not recommending, okay? But I happened to have a car, and it was deep in November in Massachusetts, and I got this intense craving for cookies. I got in my car, went into the little town there, and bought a bag of chocolate chip cookies. It's not my usual thing. I took them back—I had a room by myself, which is sometimes unfortunate.

The going and the getting and coming back—I knew what I was doing, but that wasn't mindfulness. I was just being pulled by the nose of craving, with no understanding of what was happening. I went back to my room and sat down. But then I started eating the cookies. And I was being very mindful of eating them—picking one up, chewing, swallowing. Very mindful. Feeling how it goes down. Very mindful.

And I kept eating them. I don't usually tend to binge, but I ate a lot of those cookies. A lot. And I kept on being mindful. At some point I thought, "This is a lot of cookies, Carol." And I kept on being mindful.

Because I was mindful—and mindfulness doesn't have a hierarchy—I started to notice something. It was as if, following the cookie down, it would drop into my stomach, which was starting to feel less and less pleasant, I have to say. But I noticed in my heart area there was this real painful feeling that the cookies were dropping past. They weren't fixing that painful feeling, which I hadn't noticed before.

And then I realized: this is a really deeply unpleasant feeling of loneliness and sadness. Oh. And feeling it was like, "Oh, that's what's happening." This unpleasant feeling so often gives rise to not wanting to feel it, not even noticing it, gives rise to seeking pleasant feeling tone. And I hadn't even recognized that.

As soon as I saw it—"Oh, loneliness feels like this"—I didn't eat another cookie. I didn't eat another cookie.

I just put it down. Oh, loneliness feels like this. That was fine. That was completely fine.

So we can explore these processes and we can really trust the steadiness of awareness. You don't have to figure it all out by yourself. Simply have the willingness—if you notice wanting, let your attention feel how wanting feels. Generally, I find wanting unpleasant. We're used to doing something to get away from it because it's unpleasant, hence we get what we want. It doesn't feel natural to just hang out with wanting without acting on it. But explore that in little things. I promise you won't die from wanting. And I promise at some point it will go away. I don't know how long, I don't know how soon it might come back, but at some point it will go away.

So sometimes work with this in little things. You're walking and it comes up: "I've got to go have a cup of tea right now." Just explore the wanting. But if it gets stronger than the mindfulness and you go have the cup of tea, then still bring the mindfulness along and watch. Watch the whole process. It gets really interesting.

Another approach—if you've missed the feeling tone but you're already in action, which can be interesting, like me with those cookies—is to have an eye of mindfulness watching the little decisions you make throughout the day. It's fascinating to see what's motivating them. Often, not always, but often, a little decision like walking into the dining room and choosing where to sit can involve a quick sense of "oh no, unpleasant, I don't want to sit next to that person," so you go sit somewhere else. It happens so fast we don't even notice it.

Or you decide, "I want to have a cup of tea." You're in walking meditation and you notice the wanting. Stop a minute and feel what's going on. Maybe it's just wanting pleasure. But maybe there was a moment of boredom, neutral or unpleasant. Or maybe your foot hurts. Or maybe it was just "enough of this." Or maybe the rain—my God, I can't stand it—was just an unpleasant thought. Let me go inside and have some cozy tea.

Whether you drink the tea or not, that's not the point. Watching how this process works is fascinating. To see how frequently this habit pattern operates—immediately jumping back from some subtle unpleasant feeling, not even a big deal, and going toward pleasant—reveals how deeply ingrained this is. It's just

habits of mind. And you don't have to try to forcibly stop it. Just bring the mindfulness along, bring the mindfulness along.

At some point, when wisdom sees clearly—like when wisdom saw, "Oh, that's loneliness"—I didn't have to tell myself to stop eating cookies. The whole thing just fell away. It wasn't necessary anymore. The craving stops making sense in the light of wisdom in that moment. It's not something you give up as an act of will. The aversion to unpleasant feeling stops making sense too. All that aversion does is bring us into more suffering. We start to see: pleasant feeling is like this, unpleasant feeling is like that, and we can really be with it.

This is how the Buddha describes the awakened one: "When a well-taught noble disciple is touched by a painful feeling, he does not worry or grieve or lament, beat his breast or weep, nor will they be distraught. They experience one kind of feeling, a bodily one, but not a second mental one." You're pierced by a dart, but you don't shoot yourself with the second one. "Having been touched by that unpleasant, painful feeling, they do not resist and resent it." So the underlying tendency of resistance against the unpleasant does not come to underlie the mind of someone who understands this.

"Under the impact of that painful feeling, she does not proceed to enjoy sensual happiness. And why not? Because a well-taught disciple knows of an escape, discerns an escape from painful feeling tone other than by enjoying sensual happiness." So the underlying tendency to lust for the pleasant does not arise. "She knows, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings." We just know it. Unpleasant feeling comes, it comes, it goes.

You don't need to do anything about it. Pleasant feeling comes, it goes. We don't need to do anything about it. Neutral feeling comes. We actually notice it's happening. We don't need to do anything about it. It comes and goes.

So when an experience carries a pleasant feeling tone, a painful feeling tone, or a neutral one, they feel it as someone who is not bound to it, who is not joined to it. "Such a one, O bhikkhus, is called a well-taught noble disciple who is not chained by birth, by old age, by death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair. Such a one is not chained to suffering. This I declare."

So the same things are happening, but we experience them as not chained to them.

I want to end with the conclusion of the Buddha's instructions on being mindful of feeling tone. First, simply recognizing pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling tone. You might pick particular moments to explore this—don't go crazy looking for it every moment. Sometimes it's not the obvious thing; notice what's obvious. But sometimes when your mind is fairly calm and you explore, you can choose experiences where feeling tone is very apparent.

For example, if it's cold out and wet, and that carries an unpleasant feeling tone for you, you might simply experience it. You don't have to go stand in a downpour—I don't mean that. But just for a little while, feel

the cold. And instead of lamenting and beating your breast, simply feel... unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant—just exploring the feeling tone. Then go inside where it's warm and dry and simply feel pleasant, pleasant—just exploring that. When nothing else big is going on.

So this is the Buddha: "Whatever feeling tone one feels, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, one abides contemplating impermanence in those vedanā. Contemplating, recognizing the fading away. Contemplating, recognizing the relinquishment, the not holding on, the simply letting it go." You don't put it away—it just goes. "Contemplating this, one does not cling to anything in this world. When one does not cling, one is not agitated. When one is not agitated, one personally realizes nibbāna."

Just from noticing such a simple thing, over and over.

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