Investigating Dosa with Wisdom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:53

So what Sally was so subtly alluding to is what I'm going to talk about tonight: exploring the three unwholesome roots that the Buddha speaks of all the time—really the cause of our suffering in our minds and hearts on a moment-to-moment basis. Tonight I want to offer some thoughts about exploring one of them: dosa. You know, that moment when you want to throw something against the wall—that's the moment of dosa.

I really want to talk about it in terms of inviting us to explore how this root arises and functions in our moment-to-moment experience. I'm going to be speaking mostly from a being-in-retreat point of view, because retreat gives us, as we know, the stillness and opportunity to explore sometimes on a less complex level how this root—how everything—functions in our mind. This talk is by no means comprehensive because there's so much to say, but I wanted to share different aspects from a lifelong exploration of this particular root in this particular mind-body system.

Dosa is often translated as hatred, and we often talk about it as aversion, but it has a whole wide range of different moods or mental states that partake of its particular function. I made a list of some of them, just so you can start to feel the common flavor: hatred, aversion, ill will, irritation, boredom, frustration, disappointment, impatience, denial, resistance, self-judgment, grief, despair, sorrow, depression, guilt, shame, anger, rage, aggression, regret, hostility, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror.

Feeling better now?

You see, some are really very intense emotional states that, when we're not aware of them or when they're stronger than our mindfulness, can lead into unwholesome speech and action that bring harm to ourselves and others. Obviously, this is suffering. Some are perhaps more subtle but pervasive—like background states of heart and mind that we may not quite recognize are present, but they're still having the effect of coloring and distorting our perception. The suffering aspect of dosa is rooted in the fact that when it's present, we don't perceive ourselves, others, or reality accurately. I talked about this in the very beginning with Right View. Once perception is inaccurate, it gets fed by more dosa-thoughts, and we get farther and farther from what's really true. Our actions and speech can cause ourselves and others more harm, more suffering.

I want to talk about dosa tonight not to say that aversion and all these things are bad and we should get over them now—that we have to purify our mind and these states are bad, so stop it. That's just meeting dosa with more dosa. It doesn't work. This is really an invitation, with a wise attitude of interest, to not take it personally but to truly explore how these particular mental states act in the mind. How do they

create more suffering in our own experience and for others?

This interest becomes possible in the moments when we recognize that dosa is a conditioned habit, a human experience—not just me being a bad person. The other side of being a bad person is really reveling in the anger or self-righteousness, thinking, "Yes, this is the right thing." I'll talk a little bit about that too. But really seeing this as just part of the human condition is essential.

In most cases, dosa and aversion are more obviously suffering states to us than greed or delusion. We tend to notice them more quickly. And when we're acting from them, we tend to get more feedback from other people—they don't like us so much. That feedback can further feed the dosa if it's going into self-judgment. Even though dosa may be more obviously a suffering state than greed or delusion until we explore them, that doesn't make it easier to understand. So just to have this interest to explore and not take it personally—that's so huge.

I remember for myself, quite some years ago now, having an aversive tendency doesn't mean you go around being angry all the time. As I mentioned when discussing the brahma viharas, there can be a habit of mind that just tends to notice the unpleasant first. That's simply the habit. Another habit might notice pleasant first, and another doesn't really notice much of anything—greed, hatred, delusion, as tendencies.

I had been branded while on staff at IMS as "clearly the aversive type," to which my first response was, "I don't like that." Then we'd just joke about it: "Yeah, Carol's the aversive type, Joseph's the greed type, Sharon's the deluded type." Because it's true—people tend to respond differently to these. No one goes around to Joseph saying, "Oh, you're so greedy." I just have to look cross-eyed and people say, "Oh yeah, you're such an aversive type."

But I didn't realize that when little aversion would come up in my mind, there was a kind of subtle sense of not quite wanting to see it—taking it more personally than other experiences that arise. I remember one time I was with a particular teacher, not even a Buddhist teacher, and everything was just arising in the space of awareness, to use the language we're using here. Whatever was coming, no problem. Then a really aversive thought came up. And I saw in that moment that it just came and went like everything else—because it was just another thought.

Wow.

Aversion is just another arising mental state, just like anything else. And I had been really identifying with it, making it more of a thing, which actually prevents clear seeing. So that was a really freeing moment. I'm just offering that in terms of the space we can bring to explore this, or anything else that's difficult in our experience.

So the first thing I want to say, talking about the moment-to-moment level that we can at times explore here—and it may seem very subtle and precise, but it's still the same way our heart and mind functions in more complex situations in our daily life—is what's going on in a moment of dosa.

The whole dependent origination: there's contact, feeling, unpleasant feeling arises, and as we've talked about, the habit of mind really is the dosa of unpleasant. The habit is to go into dosa if we don't see it clearly—aversion or fear, just to say it that way, with all the ramifications.

How that functions is: in a moment there's unpleasant, whatever the sense contact is, and the dosa just pulls back, just doesn't want to connect in a way. I'm personifying it, but it's like, "This is unpleasant," and there's just a pulling back, like a knee-jerk reaction. So there's a disconnect in that moment. The attention, the awareness, just isn't really landing wholly in whatever the experience is. It could just be an unpleasant sound—it doesn't have to be anything dramatic. It just pulls back.

And in that response of pulling back, first, whatever is occurring that's unpleasant—that pulling back of dosa is occurring in response to a sense contact that's happening right now. Right now. So even if there's a thought, a really painful memory of ten years ago, and it shoots into all the memories and it's really painful—it's shame or it's fear or whatever—because of the pulling back and the not recognizing accurately, the awareness may not actually recognize that it's something occurring now that's unpleasant, that's giving rise to that dosa reaction.

We go off, because there's that gap. This is the gap between dosa and becoming. But it's not the gap that's freeing—it's the gap of delusion, the gap of disconnect. And in that comes flooding, because the mind is so fast: thoughts and memories and emotions and reactions and a whole story, so quick that we may not even be able to find our way back to what's the sense contact that triggered it.

But even if, say, shame—just pick shame, that's a huge one, really difficult to land in and feel—even with all the stories, the memory is a thought that's occurring now. The shame that's being felt is a physical, mental experience that's occurring now. The content may be about the past and about our whole life, or it may be about the future. Fear projects into the future: "It's going to feel like this forever, I'm going to keep acting like this forever." And you see how we're in the story in no time.

We may be aware that it's shame, that it's fear, but because the tendency is to jump away from the contact, it may be that without steady sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, we may not recognize: "Oh, this memory is a thought arising now." And mindfulness can just meet that thought arising now. This shame is a feeling arising now. Sometimes if mindfulness is balanced enough, we can meet that thought arising now.

I don't know if this seems simplistic or unworkable, but to me this has been incredibly freeing and useful. Because when I get all involved in my daily life in some really suffering dynamic, and I'm trying to figure it out and think it through, I go, "What's happening now?" I just relax into the present moment, not looking for an intellectual answer. What's happening now? And I may just feel something in the pit of my stomach. Couldn't even name what it is. You don't need to. It's difficult, unpleasant, whatever. Mindfulness just can be with that for that moment. And then it moves into whatever happens next.

So this is where we cut through all the papañca to see: whatever it is, it's being triggered by something occurring now, because that's all there is. Past and future are thoughts. But it really is amazing when we can watch how quickly everything can flow into that little quick gap of pulling away.

A simple example—I'm making this up. There's some unpleasant sound. You're sitting in the hall and there's some sound from a person, and it's unpleasant. You don't quite notice "hearing, unpleasant." The mind immediately does that pulling away when we don't quite notice it.

And that reminds me of my father. Maybe that's not even clear—there's just a feeling of my father. He used to do that. I remember all the times he used to do that. And it was unpleasant, and we'd get in these arguments, and he didn't respect me, and nobody respects me. And in two seconds, it's down the road—not recognizing sati right at that sense door. Maybe I'm aware of the story, but maybe I'm not quite in touch with the resentment or the aversion that's fueling each new thought and each new memory. I'm not quite present with each thought and memory. And pretty soon it's amazing how fast the mind moves. We're in a whole storm of resentment and all the times that I wasn't respected, back through my life.

Sometimes we can bring mindfulness to that and actually it unwraps a whole—it allows to arise a whole personal insight into habits that have developed in our life, and we really see it in a purifying kind of way. You all know what I mean. But that feels different, because at some point your attention lands in the middle of that process and you're no longer fighting it. You just go, "Oh, wow, no wonder I feel disrespected. That's how it all worked. That's how it is." We don't spin on it anymore. We're just seeing how it is.

But when we don't recognize, we can get into a whole cycle of judgment or fear. Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it like we're a cow chewing the cud. We get all upset about something—that sound, my father, the past—and then it passes. And then we think, "Yeah, that sound, that really bugged me. And that's because..." It's like we regurgitate the cud and chew it some more. Let's just chew over that unpleasant thought one more time. Some of you have mentioned noticing how the mind does this when things get calm. Nothing's happening now, so let's just call up that unpleasant experience that happened and really think about it some more. That's when you know—the Buddha said puthujjanas, the unenlightened worldlings, are mad. We're crazy. As Buddhadasa says, who wants to volunteer for suffering? "Me! Things are calm. Let's get all activated."

We don't always do it a lot. It's just that we pull away.

One of the significant things about when dosa is coloring and distorting the citta is that we don't recognize accurately what is occurring. This is really one of the biggest suffering aspects of it. The Buddha says a similar thing about greed and about delusion too. I'm just reading the one about dosa: "Again, Brahman, when one dwells with a mind—which is citta, mind-heart—obsessed and oppressed by ill will, by dosa, one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, arisen dosa. On that occasion, one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

I have taken this so much to heart—to really just notice. Whether there's greed or dosa or confusion, as soon as you can even notice it's tinging the perception—maybe it's huge, you know you're in total rage. That's not rocket science. You can tell rage is going on. You may not be mindful, but you can tell rage is going on. Or it may be more subtle disappointment. But as soon as you keep recognizing that this quality is present in the citta, in the heart-mind right now, and you can tell you're not really quite able to be mindful of it, that it's distorting things, then you know: you can't really trust whatever assessment or evaluation thoughts are making then.

You just can't trust it. Is it right? Is it wrong? You can't trust it because the perception is distorted by risen ill will, by risen greed. As the Buddha says, you just can't see your own good or the good of another or of both.

And even more, you can see sometimes how dosa in the mind really distorts the actual perception. It's not uncommon when you're really in a negative mood, or really particularly angry at a person, and you look at that person—they look more ugly. You know what I mean? Or you look at yourself and you look more ugly. When there's that pulling away, the dosa coming in, every time the sound comes it's louder and louder, more and more obnoxious.

I'd forgotten this, but once I was on a long retreat at IMS and the radiators there in the winter would make these pinging sounds. They'd been doing that forever. I'd lived there for years. This was not new information or a new experience. But one day—one of those days when you kind of know there's dosa in the mind but not quite, when suddenly your body hurts, everything hurts, nothing works, the pillow's too hard although it's been fine for three weeks, the people next to you are disgusting even though you loved them yesterday, the food is repulsive—and it takes a while to notice that maybe there's a lens going on here. It really takes a while.

So this was a day like that. And then the radiator sounds literally started to sound like little explosions. A little explosion and I'd jump, and there'd be so much negative, unpleasant feeling radiating out of that. And then the next radiator sound would be even more of an explosion. It just builds and builds when we're not aware. You might have a sort of mindfulness—you kind of know it's there—but there's still this pulling away, which can manifest as blame, aggression, or it can manifest as fear, which is like retreating dosa, retreating aversion. But it can literally distort perception, and then that will distort our judgment.

The only escape we know is to escape from unpleasant feeling by getting the hell out of there. If the best you can do is have a pleasant fantasy, you'll do that. But if there's something else available, you'll get out of there—or do whatever you can to avoid the unpleasant feeling that's giving rise to dosa. And because we're not seeing the dosa, we can't see clearly.

A friend of mine told me a story from her daily life a few years ago. She was in Massachusetts and was just beginning to teach Dharma some weekends. A very close friend she didn't see often invited her to come teach a weekend quite a few states away. The fact was that my friend was really busy, and to drive down

to this state and teach this weekend would have been very difficult and exhausting. She really didn't want to do it. But the thought of saying no to her friend and imagining her friend being hurt or angry—that thought was so unpleasant that she didn't even want to go there. So the thought would come, she'd move away from it, and she was making all these plans to do this crazy weekend because she didn't want to feel the unpleasant feeling that came when she had the thought: what if my friend's upset?

She went through quite a long time of not being able to actually call her friend and say, "You know what, I can't do this." And then she saw: this is crazy. Look at everything I'm trying to do to avoid feeling this unpleasant feeling of hurting my friend. And I don't even know if that's even the truth—it's just a thought occurring now that I don't want to feel. Can you relate to that? So she finally called her friend, who was of course totally fine. It was no problem. If we just tell the truth in the first place.

So that kind of thing—maybe you've noticed this. I see it all the time in my life and talking to many of you, sometimes on retreat. Things have been going fine, whatever that means to you, or good, or calm—in quotes, whatever that is for you. And then, as one yogi used to come and say to me all the time, "It's all gone to hell in a handbasket." And I used to say, "What does that mean?" I get the drift, but anyway. You come in and say, "It's all over, it's gone."

What's happening is that all of a sudden there are lots of thoughts going on, or you're in a lot of self-judgment, or there are dosa-laden thoughts happening. All different patterns, and you really feel caught and spinning. It's what I call in my own experience "the crazy place." There's a certain intensity to all the different things that are coming up, but it feels disconnected. There's this sense of why is all this happening, and what really is going on?

And then, after some time, I recognize that certain kind of crazed intensity—all these unpleasant, really difficult patterns coming up, whether avoidance or thinking about past things or anger at someone. But it doesn't quite hold together in some sensible way. And then I'll say, okay, what's happening now? Just feel my body. And I'll say, oh.

loneliness feels like that, or I really feel hurt, or whatever it happens to be. And it's a particular pattern, emotion, feeling—one of the ones that in the conditioning of my life I've either been afraid to feel, or conditioned myself not to feel, or it's just too unpleasant, or whatever. I have the habit of being afraid to feel it.

This is all unconscious. I'm not saying, "Oh, here's shame. I'm afraid to feel it. Let me go make up a bunch of stupid stories." You just don't know what's happening. You land in it. Just touch it with mindful awareness—oh, it's like this. And I always know that awareness has touched what's happening because all the hoo-ha, all the *papañca*, just for that moment dies away. And there's a sense of relief. It's like, "Oh, yeah. Really unpleasant. It feels like this."

And so I see it's that same habit of the mind doing all this stuff not to feel a particular really painful feeling

that I've been in the habit of not being able or wanting to touch. As I say, this isn't something you can force. There can be many good reasons in our lives—past trauma and such—where you don't force your way in. I'll talk a little bit about that. But I'm just talking about the process now.

So even just recognizing this process is going on, or that there's something happening and you don't know what it is—maybe you can touch it, you don't have to stay there—but just to see: when *dosa* is in operation and we don't see it, and we're pulled away from experience, it just keeps feeding on itself and complicating and complexifying, and we're the one who's suffering.

The Buddha said, in talking about how aversion, how ill will arises in the mind—this is in terms of the hindrances—that it arises from unwise attention to the unpleasant aspect, the repugnant aspect of an unpleasant situation.

The example that Thich Nhat Hanh always gives, which I find easy to relate to: if you have one tooth with a little chip in it, it doesn't actually hurt. All the rest of your teeth are fine, but you have one tooth with a little chip. Do you notice how often your tongue goes to that little chip? You're sitting there—you're not usually running your tongue over your teeth while sitting—but in this case? And a little bit of aversion, a little bit of aversion. "Yeah, that's really bad. I've got to go to the dentist. Why did my tooth chip? My body's crapping out. I'm getting old. It's all over." Just unwise attention to the repugnance of an unpleasant thing. So simple. And it can go so far, so fast. So just noticing that.

I want to mention the particular *dosa* experience of self-judgment, which one or two of you might have experienced during this retreat. It very much grows and builds in the same way. The reason it's a condition in your particular mind-body system—we can all look in our past and see the reasons why the particular habits are there. I find they may come up on retreat, but are in therapy to explore. It can be useful. For me, once I've seen why a pattern's there, it really helps my mind not take it personally anymore. I don't have to go back to my mother and my father and my upbringing. "Yeah, right, I understand why that's there." These conditions come, it's unpleasant. Without awareness, this habit comes. It's impersonal.

So for whatever reason in each of your minds that there may be this habit of self-judgment, recognize it's basically an expression of *dosa*—a pulling away from, a rejecting of, either not wanting to see the particular experience that's arising, the particular sense contact. One of those six, as I think Sally said—that's all that's happening. And really, on a very radical level, even when it's extremely intense, and sometimes we can't see what's really happening—we can't, that's not in our control sometimes—but on the radical level, all this going on, total self-hatred, and I look and what's happening? Well, it started with a pain in my toe.

This is a real story. It started with a pain in my toe that went unrecognized as I was walking. Each step brought a little pain—not even a big pain—but unrecognized. The mind didn't want to see it. It went into more negativity, more dosa. And that took the form of self-judgment: "Well, you're not doing it right now.

You're in aversion."

Self-judgment is almost always arising from a dissatisfaction with whatever the particular experience is that's happening now. It's similar to doubt. When things are going well, are you racked with self-judgment? Unless craving comes up and then you can find a way to rack yourself: "Well, but now there's craving, I blew it," right? But usually self-judgment comes as a reaction of dosa to some particular thing that's occurring.

It's often in response to a view—that's a whole other talk, but we've mentioned views. The view is "it's supposed to be like this and not like that." The view, in talking about dosa, is that we're here to really purify our heart-mind. Dosa arising is a suffering aspect, causes suffering to me and others, therefore it's bad, I'm wrong. I've been practicing all this time and dosa is still arising—I'm hopeless. It shouldn't be. And all the views, right? Have you noticed that happening at all?

When the view comes and our experience doesn't match it, there's an unpleasant feeling, a pulling away, and then it can totally feed into self-judgment. And because each self-judging thought is unpleasant in itself, the experience of self-hatred is very unpleasant. Again, because dosa is functioning, the mindfulness isn't landing on the experience and it just keeps spinning out, spinning out, spinning out.

There's one last thing about self-judgment. Notice what can often feed believing in self-judgment: an unseen view of perfectionism, basically. That somehow things are supposed to be perfect. We think, "Well, no, I know things aren't supposed to be perfect." But look and see in your mind. We think, "Well, no craving should arise. I've understood now that craving brings suffering and I'm going to let it go." We expect—you know—that's how it should be. When we talk about open awareness and noticing things come and go, people think it should all be neat and tidy.

But it's chaotic. It's chaotic. "What am I doing wrong? It's supposed to just be come and go, come and go, nice, nice, nice. But it's not. Things are all coming and going. I don't see the beginning and the middle and the end. It's not like—how can I see the beginning and the middle and the end? It doesn't stay there. Something else comes. What am I doing wrong?" And then we go off into self-judgment. So just check it out. That's just a little side hint.

So our practice of mindfulness-wisdom, sati-pañña. Just a few little hints—this is by no means comprehensive—of how we can use sati-pañña to begin noticing how to be with the various forms of dosa, and also how to work with wisdom and compassion when the intensity of the dosa is stronger than the energy and the mindfulness, and we actually need to balance the attention by doing something else. That's not the same as running away, the knee-jerk avoidance of dosa.

The Buddha, as always, taught the middle path. And I think—again, this is very simple sketching—the two most common responses to really strong, unpleasant dosa states, whether anger or hatred or fear or whatever we notice, are these: One is that it comes up and there's the self-judging. It's obvious suffering,

we don't like it, others don't like it, it shouldn't be here. And so the tendency is to disconnect, to avoid it, to repress it, to not even quite let it up into consciousness.

And sometimes we sort of—you know how denial works—you kind of know you're doing it, but then you don't. But sometimes we really don't even know. It's way below the level of consciousness. This is when sometimes on retreat a really strong pattern—I'll pick shame again—comes up that we really hadn't consciously felt, because the system in our mind of keeping it out of sight, out of mind, has really been very stringently cultivated over our life.

So that's one—we think it's a mistake when it comes up. And then the other side, the flip side—the Buddha says neither of these—is to really completely, fully embrace anger, rage, aggression, fear, whatever it is that comes up. And as you know, anger particularly is very energizing. So the energy comes, and we think, "Well, I can't just push this energy down. I've got to really, really embrace it. This is the way to go." Especially sometimes if we're just discovering that we've been repressing it our whole life, and we really don't know any other way than letting it up. So I'm not saying we don't let it up, but I'm saying it's the total embracing of it that's a little different.

This is what the Dalai Lama says. He's talking about compassion, of course. When someone asks him why there is a lack of compassion in human society, he says, "Perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling or reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger." And I say that's also what we're doing with mindfulness, with awareness—giving the same energy to mindfulness and awareness.

So not fully embracing and identifying and going with it and acting from dosa, and not pressing it down—the middle way of the Buddha, of satipanya, mindfulness wisdom at the sense door. Ideally. This is ideally, and then with all different ramifications of how it is in the moment. So please, if the ideal isn't working for you in a moment, here are the other things I say too.

Ideally, it's like the awareness wisdom can just fully meet that. So say it's anger—let's pick that. Anger arising in a moment can be a really strong energy. Mindfulness can meet that energy. It's not trying to deny it or push it away. It can really let the energy roar, but with mindfulness we see it—this is mental state, this is physical energy—we can see what it is, and it's not necessary to act on it, it's not necessary to be afraid of it. It can come, it can go. We're not denying the energy, but we're not getting into the content so much. Do you see what I mean? Simple awareness is really powerful that way.

I think for some of us—we're all different, but for some of us, like for me who's been in the habit of not really wanting to let that up—there can almost be a kind of fear of experiencing the powerful fear or anger or hostility energy, even just sitting here. Afraid of: if I really feel it, I'm going to act from it. So really learning that with mindfulness, we can trust it.

Sayadaw U Pandita said to me one time in an interview—I actually don't remember what was going on with me, but it really stuck with me. He said, "You know, with mindfulness, you don't have to be afraid of anything." He was talking on retreat, basically, but I don't have to be afraid of anything that arose in my mind, in my body. Mindfulness could be there with it. And that was really impactful for me. I hadn't even realized I was afraid of something, but he was so astute. He could tell what was going on.

Something Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche says really helps me with a strong energy of anger, for example, or any of the dosa states. You know, Dilgo Khyentse was a very great awakened Tibetan master. He's saying thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color, right? So when a thought of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive—is that thought of anger actually brandishing a weapon? Can that thought really burn things like fire, crush them like a rock, or carry them away like a violent river? No. Anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no real self-existence, not even a definite location.

And this is what he says: it's just like wind roaring in empty space. I love that. I love that. Let the energy come up. Just sitting here, it's roaring in empty space. Thoughts of aggression can come up. We don't have to be afraid of them.

If there's awareness, we're not going to get up and hit the person next to us upside the head. Hopefully. So far, so good.

These thoughts come up in—I want to say to all of us, maybe not in some of you really cooled out folks—but stuff comes up. Let it come. Let it go. Really see. It's like wind roaring in empty space. Awareness doesn't have to be afraid of it. Yes, it's unpleasant. Okay. It's unpleasant. Half of life is unpleasant. Let it roar.

The last line: "Instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, you can realize their essential emptiness."

So this is really one way the Buddha was talking—sati at the sense door, as best we can. Either just that simple sense of the sound that's triggering it, or the wind roaring in empty space, when that's possible.

Sharon has a line I really like: "The opening to truth is what frees our heart from fear and selfishness." And Dogen Zenji said, "If you cannot find truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?"

So when anger is rising, and we can really let it roar like empty space, bring awareness and mindfulness to it—that's the truth of this moment. And the opening to that truth is what frees our heart from fear and selfishness. Not the avoiding it or trying to pretend it's not happening. And knowing we're not going to be perfect. Of course it's not always going to be like that. But that as a possibility.

So these are some nuts and bolts, a few little hints on working with different ways of aversion or dosa coming up in our mindfulness practice.

The first one is simply bringing your attention. None of these are always possible, just different

approaches. When something keeps eliciting anger, aggression, aversion, fear—whatever—it keeps happening and we're maybe even mindful of the state, but not quite able to notice the sense contact. Maybe you can bring your attention there. That really helps.

Here's an example. There's always a practicing-in-Asia example. One time I was sitting at a retreat center in Burma, and for whatever reason—well, this is normal—they were doing construction. It's extremely rare to sit at a retreat center in Burma where they're not doing construction. But they're doing construction, and just across the little road outside my kuti, not even as far as the wall back there, they started with electric sanders. Two different ones on two different frequencies. From 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., all day. And it would stop, and it would start, and it would stop. So you can imagine all the different things you go through.

Finally, out of total desperation—which is, of course, the last thing we ever do is surrender, right?—out of total desperation, I just brought the attention right to the ear door. Just hearing. Just quit resisting the hearing and be there. So that's what just hearing really meant. And because there's just being with it, without the gap and without all the stories—what are they, insane?—and all that stuff, it's just what it was. Really, it's just what it was.

So that's one way. Definitely not always available, but sometimes we don't even want to try it. It's amazing sometimes.

Another approach: when there's a bigger thing going on and we can see, "No, I don't want to, I can't go there." A friend years ago who sat a lot of three-month retreats told me how she related to this. She said she was a middle-aged woman, not a real athlete or anything, and sometimes she would go to the beach with her grown sons. She'd be at the beach, and they'd be in the water near the shore, and whenever a big wave would come, she'd see it and turn around and run to try and get away from it. She said the wave would always come and clobber her, turn her over and over. And her kids would say, "Mom, don't turn and run. Face the wave and just dive into it, and then it won't bother you."

She said she was only able to do that once or twice because the habit of "Oh no, here it comes, turn and run" was just so strong. But she was relating this to her practice on retreat, when some unpleasant, difficult thing would come and she could see the reaction: get the heck out of here.

Larry Rosenberg, a great teacher in Cambridge, used to love to watch old movies. He said—I don't know if this is true—that he read somewhere about a compilation of the most commonly said line in movies, and it was, "Let's get out of here."

So anyway, she would say that would come up for her. "Let's get out of here." Turn and run. But it doesn't work.

Then sometimes—and Bonnie always reminds me of this because she says she heard me say it in a talk years ago—sometimes when the anger's there, it's wind roaring in empty space, but it's not quite that

empty. You want to be with it. You really don't want to act on it. You don't want to speak from it, but it's so strong. And kind of, "Oh yeah, let me just be mindful of the contact, seeing, seeing..."

It's like, forget about it. But mindfulness isn't always neat and tidy. So this is what I call stomping meditation. There's this energy, it's really strong. You can't just sit here and go "mindful, anger, anger, anger," because you feel like you're going to explode. But that doesn't mean we can't be mindful. Mindfulness can be precise, it can be wide.

So go outside, hopefully where no one can see you—and not in the hall up there where you're two inches away from somebody else. Go away from people and just stomp. Anger, anger, you're feeling it. Let that energy move, but you're aware it's anger. You don't have to try and be precise, thinking "Let me see, where's the sensation here?" It's just stomping. But I found that extremely helpful. The thoughts roar and the energy's moving, but you're aware. You're aware. That counts. It's awareness. It'll cool out eventually.

And the other approach, the last to mention, is what I was saying first: sometimes you can tell something's going on, but you can't tell what. So remember to tune into the subtle background state. Really noticing the attitude in the mind, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya is always talking about. Take care of the awareness first.

Notice when you start to see there's a lens of ill will over everything. Just tune in and see. You might feel tightness in the heart and the mind. You might notice there's aversion. And that's the place to bring the attention—not trying to fix it, not trying to deal with each specific object that's occurring. It doesn't even matter. But take care of the awareness, as he says. Just notice that's what's going on.

Sometimes you might see something really simple that's giving rise to all of it. A friend told me about a three-month retreat years ago. He noticed—it took him most of the day to notice—that he'd had a real ill-will aversion lens on his perception about everybody and everything. And finally he noticed it. So that was good. That's awareness. Then he was kind of wondering, well, what's happening now? So he just tuned in and he saw—and he was laughing as he told me—he noticed that a sweatshirt he'd been wearing all day was too tight. That was it. When he'd move his arms, it was a little unpleasant. He didn't notice. And it led into a whole day of ill will. Mindfulness is our friend. We don't need to be afraid to check this stuff out.

Not recognizing—to me, this is the most profound suffering of *dosa*, of all the three roots: when we don't recognize it, it blocks the radiance of the pure mind, the pure heart of simple awareness. Once we make friends with—I can't say make friends, but we can just be with. My friend could be with that *dosa* covering his experience. He could say, "Okay, my sweatshirt's too tight. This unpleasant feeling's like this." And that radiance, just the sense of peace and ease, is available again. This pulling back, all this confusion that comes in through the knee-jerk response of *dosa*—it prevents, blocks the recognition of that. To me, that's the deepest suffering.

Bankei, the Japanese Zen master, said: "When you do not set yourself in contention, in conflict, with

things, then your primary nature reveals itself in its true form." That's really the heart of the suffering of *dosa*—and the freedom when we're not fighting with it.

Pema Chödrön makes a beautiful simile about our habit of shutting down in the face of even just fearing the unpleasant—not even the unpleasant itself—comparing it to a sea anemone. You know what a sea anemone is? A soft sea creature with tentacles, and if you just touch it, it closes around itself. She likens our habit of closing off to avoid unpleasant experience to that protective reflex, which is really a movement to protect, in a way, our tender heart. But the effect is to shut ourselves off from ourselves and from everyone else.

That's the drawback of the way things are. We can't shut down selectively. We don't get to just get rid of the unpleasant aversion and hang on to the pleasant.

I've noticed in myself—often in retreat, but even more in daily life—that the times I feel most alienated or disconnected or just out of sync, my mind can be telling myself any story about why. But I've noticed again and again that when that's true, when I finally stop and look, I find that it's because I'm somehow trying to avoid or deny or repress some unpleasant or difficult experience. Just trying not to be there for it.

It could be so-called internal or so-called external. It could be some unpleasant thing going on with me in relationship to a friend, or it could be that something really difficult or painful or sorrowful is happening with a family member or a dear friend, and it's really painful. It's like, okay, I want to know, but you don't really want to completely let it in and feel it. And as soon as I recognize, oh yes, right, that's really sorrowful—she's really suffering right now and there's nothing I can actually do about it, and it feels like this—then the whole sense of opening into feeling alive again. Feeling connected again. Feeling open to the sorrow but also open to the beauty, open to love, open to connectedness, to how it is. It all comes together in that way.

This is, to me, the jewel in the heart of our practice, the jewel in the heart of mindfulness and wisdom: being willing and able to be with all the aspects of dosa, which are suffering in themselves, and the unpleasant that gives rise to it. The jewel is that by landing in this, even just for a moment with mindfulness and wisdom, that's the arising of compassion. That's how compassion comes.

As the Dalai Lama has said over and over, compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is, and this insight comes from being with our own experience. What else? Being with our own experience, and it naturally widens and strengthens into a sense of empathy with all beings.

So when something really difficult is happening and all the forms of dosa are present—the dosa itself could be the difficulty or the instigating sense contact—that's arising due to past karmic conditions. That it's happening in this moment is out of your control. You can't change this moment; it's already gone. How the mind and awareness are meeting this moment of our experience—that's what can affect the shift of habit.

Meeting aversion, fear, resentment, or whatever—the attitude of how we meet this arising moment—that is the path of purification, of change, of opening the tender heart. This is really how compassion is being cultivated on a moment-to-moment basis here. Not just in the Brahma Vihāra practices, but every time there's something painful or difficult. It's okay, it's like this. Just for a second, that moment of tender awareness without dosa, without greed—just like this, now. That is the cultivation of compassion and wisdom. That is the shifting, the purification of habit. Just a mind moment, but it's all mind moments. And this is not something to overlook. It's really being present with it.

I don't have time for all the practices, but I need to mention that Shabkar, the great Tibetan yogi, said: meditating without compassion is simply to inflict hardship on yourself.

So sometimes just the meeting itself is compassion. But there are times, as I referred to earlier, when the intensity of the difficulty coming up—the painful emotion—is just so intense. Either it comes up so strong and fast, or it's such a deep traumatic habit pattern, and in the moment the mindfulness awareness can touch it but bounces off. It's just too strong to stay with. Compassion is recognizing this is how it is right now. It's not good or bad. Don't go to the judging, "I'm not perfect" place. Recognize this is how it is right now.

And then, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, when we realize that the ill will, the fear, the terror, the rage is stronger than the mindfulness right now, stronger than the awareness—and the more we're trying to be mindful, the more the dosa is being fed, we can see it's spinning out of control—well, that's just wisdom to recognize this is what's happening right now. So Tejaniya says it's not necessarily skillful mindfulness to drown in the difficult situation. Check what's going on in the mind, whether it's a mental state or physical pain. Don't keep paying attention to that. We need to refresh the awareness—to move the attention away from the triggering physical or emotional pain and refresh the awareness.

It may be that we bring the awareness – we don't abandon awareness, that doesn't have to be our first line – but we bring the awareness to something neutral or to something beautiful.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to talk about cultivating seeds of joy. In the midst of the Vietnam War, when he was working with social workers who were in really difficult situations, he'd say, "Just go out in the fields and smell the herbs at night." You may think, in the midst of horror, smelling the herbs at night – what's that going to do? It refreshes the awareness. It brings balance back to the heart and mind. It moves attention away from getting lost in dosa. And it can bring, just for a moment, balance. This is really important. This is an act of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh says it's very important to adjust your attitude first. Take care of your awareness, the way the mind and awareness are looking at the situation, before you do anything about adjusting the environment. As I said before, we can't recognize accurately with ill will, with dosa.

There are many ways to shift the attention to refresh the awareness: something neutral, something

pleasant, going with seeing, going with hearing, the Brahma Viharas, or contemplating something the Buddha offers. Contemplate your own wholesome moral conduct. Contemplate, bring into heart and mind, all your acts of generosity of thought, speech, and action. This isn't an ego thing – it actually brightens the heart, the mind. Contemplate whatever brings you faith, whatever your aspiration is.

The Buddha often used this. He'd look over a group of people and see someone who he thought could hear the Dharma, but their mind wasn't ready. So he'd talk about sila, he'd talk about dana, he'd talk about faith, until the mind and heart were brightened, the awareness was balanced, and then they could hear the Dharma. We can do that ourselves. Find ways to refresh the awareness.

It's not like we've got to get to the bottom and get rid of all the dosa and all the unpleasant right now. Forget about that. Each moment that we're cultivating, either you start with sati-pañña, or when that's not possible, refresh the awareness. You're still practicing sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom. You're cultivating the wholeness and the balance that can then again meet the difficult situation.

I want to end with a story that speaks to what the Dalai Lama was saying – that by being able to meet our own difficulty, our own suffering in whatever form it's taking, whatever dosa, not letting dosa run the show but recognizing it, this widens that compassion for ourselves into empathy and compassion for all beings. And really, for me, so-called internal and external are not separate. Why is someone else's pain hard for us? Because we don't want to feel it here.

I heard this story on the radio last fall. It was about the migrant crisis in Europe, which I'm sure you're aware of – so many people in so many wretched and horrible situations. A reporter was talking about interviewing people in Calais, France, on the coast. I don't know if you remember – in Calais there's a huge refugee internment camp that they call "The Jungle." At that point, a lot of refugees were caught there, basically trying to get to the UK and not able to make it. They were kept there in really horrible conditions, of course, not wanting to be there. At this time they were trying to close the camp, so it was in the news a lot.

This reporter had gone there, reporting about the conditions and how hard it was. Then he went into Calais and was talking to just ordinary French people. He was speaking with one particular woman, a middle-aged French woman, and she was saying how this camp is so horrible, and the people in it shouldn't be here, they should go back where they came from, and they're really bad, and it's bringing trouble to Calais. All the usual kind of things you can read. She was clearly coming from anger but also fear – you could hear that.

As he spoke to her, he got her to agree to come to the camp with him. This is already huge for someone feeling that way. She was already willing to just meet her fear. So she went to the camp with him, and they walked in. She's looking around, seeing how people were living out in the elements, in crummy tents, packed in, with nothing to do. She's just going, "Wow, these conditions are horrible. Nobody should have to live like this" – just seeing it. But that meant she was willing to touch that pain in herself.

Then the reporter mentioned he was talking to one young man who was describing how hard it was being there without his family. All he wanted to do was work, but there was no work, nothing to do. If they went outside the camp, he felt preyed upon by various truck drivers and the police. He just felt completely vulnerable and attacked.

And she got so moved. She saw, oh, this is a really lovely young man, an educated young man. He just wants to work. He just wants to live in safety.

So then she ended up by going to the office of the camp and saying, "What can I do to volunteer here to help people?"

It's amazing—just the willingness to face our own suffering and fear naturally morphs into connectedness and compassion.

As James Baldwin says, an enemy is someone whose story we have not heard.

So just hearing what story is coming up in this mind moment, in your citta.

Thank you for listening.

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