Mindfulness and Right View (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:04

I'm sure you remember everything James said, and remember him saying that in the Sutta, the Buddha describes the direct way for the ending of suffering, sorrow, lamentation, and despair as cultivating and developing the foundations of mindfulness.

I want to elaborate a bit on that—which, of course, everything we say is an elaboration of that. Saying that it's the direct way to freeing our hearts and minds from suffering, I want to start with that, to really make the punctuation that the heart of the Buddha's teachings, and why we all practice and share and live our life as best we can from within the heart of the Buddhist teaching, is that the point is really this possibility, this potential to truly free our hearts and minds from confusion, from delusion, from greed, hatred, and confusion. When we act from those things, we bring them about in the world as well. That's really the heart of the Buddha's teachings.

And he says, in different places, don't settle for anything less. Don't settle just for wholesome states of mind, of heart. That's a vast statement. Because really, when we're suffering and a happy, wholesome state comes, that's wonderful. That's onward leading. But how much of the time is it like, "Well, okay, that's really good. Good enough. I'm ready to go home." And it gets more and more solid. These are wonderful, and don't settle merely, he says, for wholesome states of heart and mind.

I want to put that out again—that even, especially at the beginning of a retreat, at the beginning of our path, not waiting until fifteen or twenty years into our practice to say, "Oh yeah, maybe this could happen." He's laying it down: this is why we can take up a path. This is what's possible.

To echo what James said last night when he was talking about faith, about confidence—just opening, I find for myself anyway, just opening my mind, my heart, to read those words, to hear them, to talk to people, to admit it as a real possibility, real potential for this mind, this heart, in this world, in this life. Never so much looking to a future goal, but really saying: how we practice now, how we explore, how I explore what's occurring in this moment in this heart and mind—in this moment, it's possible to get a sense of what this liberation could taste like. It's not something we wait for twenty years.

So having that as we begin a retreat and as we continue on our path shores us up, supports us. As James said, with the faith it gives us—it gives me anyway—the confidence, the willingness to do. That's one way that Sayadaw U Pandita translated saddhā. It gives us the willingness to do, as James was saying, the strength, the courage to just show up, be present with, bring this quality of non-judging, relaxed, accepting

mindfulness to whatever is arising in this moment, in this body, in this mind, in this heart.

That's a huge challenge, an incredibly beautiful possibility, and in a way it holds everything. It's like the container for everything we go through in our practice here, in our practice in our life.

From that, I want to then talk about how the simplicity of mindfulness can be so powerful—to be, really, one of the central tools, central supports for this at least one-lifetime journey of purifying the habits of our heart and mind, of really opening to the potential of freedom. How is it that mindfulness is so central? What does it do? What is it? I want to talk about that a little bit in my own way.

But rather than start from the doing—you know, so frequently I find, having grown up in a middle American, middle-class culture, there's just this sense of doing and achieving, and we're kind of assessed by what we've done. Isn't that such a common way of greeting when we first meet somebody? "How are you? What do you do?" That's not every culture; that isn't the first thing you say.

So here I want to talk about mindfulness, but not to begin by talking about the technique. Even though meditation is a skill and an art, and we're going to be giving all instructions that we very carefully discuss and think about—you may not be able to recognize that, but we do—I'm not here sharing this to help you master a technique. The technique is secondary. It's rooted in wisdom, in right view, in wise understanding.

So often we start by saying, "Let me do it, let me get it right, and then I'll get to understanding." But the Buddha, when he gave the Eightfold Noble Path—the path of the Fourth of the Four Noble Truths, the path of life, of practice—it begins with right view, right understanding. Everything else springs out of that. It's really more like a circle than a path.

Of course we don't begin our practice with completely understanding everything. Then we wouldn't need to practice. But there's a definition of meditation that I'm liking a lot these days. I think it's from Sayadaw Tejaniya. I've been using it for so long I kind of forget where I got it, but it sounds like him: Vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. I love that description of Vipassana meditation—experiencing the mind and body directly. That's essentially mindfulness, what I'll be talking about.

What does that mean, directly? From moment to moment—that's the continuity that James was talking about, where you don't just keep taking the kettle off the flame. From moment to moment, with the right understanding. With some sense of wisdom about why we're doing what we're doing.

There are many ways to talk about this, but that's what I want to speak about for the rest of this talk. What does it mean, "with the right understanding"?

The Dalai Lama said—and you can read this from many different sources—so much of our unhappiness originates within our own minds and hearts, in how we react to events in our life, so-called internal,

so-called external. And that's what the Buddha was talking about when he spoke about freeing our hearts and minds from suffering. He wasn't talking about rearranging the world so that nothing bothers us anymore.

I mean, we've all been trying to do this. Maybe you're not, but many people I know, including me, spend an inordinate amount of time trying to rearrange the world and other people so that we're not bothered. And then even more time—if you're a thinking person like me—rationalizing it so we don't really acknowledge to ourselves what we're doing. Rationalizing what's really wrong with that person's behavior, or this situation, and how we can fix it and everything will be okay.

The Buddha is saying just what the Dalai Lama said: seeing that what frees our heart and mind isn't going to come from fixing everything. And we kind of know that on some level, right? But not really. Don't we somehow think everything's got to get better? I wish everything would get better. But the Buddha wasn't saying, wait until everything gets better.

What truly frees us from reacting to experience in ways that increase our unhappiness and suffering is literally right view—recognizing what's occurring in this moment in our mind and body accurately. This, to me, is incredibly radical. He's saying that freedom isn't about everything getting reorganized. In some ways, even we don't get reorganized—certainly not as an act of will. But when there's this moment of experiencing the mind and body directly, fully, with complete attention, with the right understanding—in other words, recognizing accurately, without dragging in all our views and concepts and filters, which we mostly don't know we're doing—without that, we see how things are. And boom, the suffering reactions don't arise because they don't make any sense.

It's so inspiring to me. And then, of course, really frustrating. Because why the heck can't we just do that? The Buddha said, come and see for yourself.

So that's the miracle of mindfulness, as Thich Nhat Hanh often phrases it. Because in a moment—just one moment, and all that we can ever experience is just this one moment—in a moment of really clear recognition of what's occurring, that's the moment we get a little taste of the freedom of heart-mind that's not lost in fear or greed or reactivity, responding in an inappropriate way. This is the miracle of mindfulness. This is what we're practicing here.

In some ways, when I do a retreat for myself—I just had a month-long self-retreat in November, it was so lovely—I thought, should I do this practice? Should I do that practice? Should I do this technique or that technique? And in the end, it doesn't matter. Well, it matters—I mean, you've got to do what we tell you. But what I thought was, it doesn't matter. It's a month just to practice awareness moment to moment. It's not to make a particular experience happen. It's to practice being with this moment's experience just as it is.

How many moments do you have? Don't count it up. How many moments do you have to practice that for

this month, or two weeks, or two months? That's amazing. It's an amazing gift to yourself and the world. And we'll forget ten million times, because that's the habit.

So that's what I'll talk about now—habits. But then mindfulness will reassert itself. It'll do itself. Suddenly there will be awareness again. Also ten million times. It's amazing.

We come to trust that more and more.

The Effect of Accurate Recognition

Let me give a simple example I've been using lately, because I have a new nephew. I never had a niece or nephew until the last four years, and it's fun for me watching how kids learn and grow. This example, to me, is just the perfect illustration of how right view frees us from internal suffering.

You know those games for really young children, maybe two years old, with wooden blocks of different shapes—triangle, circle, square—and a big board with holes of the same shape? They learn to put the right shape in the right hole. They still do things like that with their hands, even though two-year-olds can work my cell phone better than I can. My nephew picked it up—I have four screens of apps, and he flips through them, goes to one that does some kind of spin art. I didn't even know it was there. He opens it, starts drawing colors. The kid was two and a half years old. It's shocking. But that's another story.

Back to the simplicity of squares, triangles, and circles. To us, the matching is just obvious. But to a child who doesn't know, who doesn't yet see shapes as distinct categories, they watch the adult do it, they try to do it, and it doesn't work—because they don't have the concept of the right shape fitting in the right matching hole. You watch them trying to put it in, and it doesn't work. The adult does it, and it does work. The frustration. The anger. They want to throw the blocks, get mad at the parent, throw the whole thing away. And if it were an adult person having that kind of experience, the thought trains might be things like, "I'm so stupid," or "They're holding a secret from me. They're not telling me how it really works. I hate them." All of that.

And then at some point, the penny drops. He gets the triangle in the triangle hole, the circle in the circle hole. Maybe first it's an accident, but then two, three times—he gets it. And as soon as he gets it, all that other stuff just vanishes. There's no more anger. There's no more sense of "you're hiding a secret from me." There's no more frustration. It's gone. Because it simply doesn't apply anymore when there's accurate recognition of the experience.

It's so simple, really. That's a simple example, but that sense of *ah, that's how it works*—there's no more struggle. The mind-heart is at peace in that moment. *This is how it is now.* That's really right view. *This is how it is now.*

I think of that as an insight moment, whether it's a personal insight or a dharma insight. It's like, "Oh, it's like that now." It's not something we can plan or create with an act of will, because we don't even know

what we don't know. But this is what mindfulness does, this careful attention, just seeing what's going on. Suddenly—oh, it's like this. That's right view. And the struggle stops.

When we see things as they really are, what's the effect? It's like we don't fight with gravity, right? Gravity is one of the laws of nature. Somebody said that *dhamma* means the laws of nature.

So for instance, gravity—when we really understand it, we aren't going to waste our time getting upset because if we jump off the roof of a building, we're going to fall. We know that. That's just how it is.

Right view, which is a result of steady, simple mindfulness, has that same effect. We stop fighting with things as they are.

Last fall, I had lunch with a woman I've known for many years—a dear friend, very wise, a deep practitioner, and a mentor and benefactor. She's now in her early nineties. She has had a really rich and full life, with many wonderful things she's done.

Now she lives in a retirement facility. Externally it looks like her body's quite frail. She can walk, but gingerly, and she doesn't go out and do things so much. So externally it would appear that her life has gotten quite constricted, quite narrow.

But she began her introduction to Buddhadharma and meditation practice, I'm guessing, in her mid-fifties. She wasn't at all in Dharma before that. And she just devoted herself to it—even in the midst of her full life, devoted herself to it. Many, many years of long intensive retreats and practice, really one of the more profound meditators we know.

What she said was so inspiring. We were just hanging out, very simple, had a little lunch. She liked my socks. Just very simple and normal. And then she said, "You know, this is the most interesting time of my life. This is just so interesting."

I said, "Really? How so?"

She said, "Well, for instance, when I walk across the floor to the little kitchen, I'm just so mindfully present—just walking across the floor. That's everything. That's what there is. And then when I'm making the water for the tea, it's just what there is. It's everything. It's so interesting. Noticing what's going on in the body, in the mind, whatever I'm doing. The most interesting time of my life."

This to me isn't just some simple thing somebody's saying. I do know her a long time. It's really the effect of a heart and mind that's quite awake in the moment. And in that wakefulness, that ability to be just fully present with walking across the floor, the mind, the heart at that moment isn't distracted by thinking, "I used to be able to walk better." It's not distracted by looking for something more interesting to land in. It's not wishing for something else—not looking anywhere else for fulfillment, not caught in wanting, not caught in judgment. All that energy is just present without looking for anything. It's like this now, with total presence and wakefulness.

This is really the purity of citta—heart-mind energy. There's a purity of presence that comes when we're not so caught up in recognizing inaccurately, when we're not looking for happiness and ease and peace in ways that can't offer it, that can't bring it. Instead, we see that happiness, that freedom, isn't about any activity or any object. It's just as available walking across the floor as being in some really deep state of meditation—which this person had experienced many, many times. It's just as available in pouring the tea, because it's got nothing to do with the activity or the object or being fulfilled by some experience. It's that collected purity, that presence of heart-mind that is recognizing accurately: it's like this.

Given my choice, if it was an act of will, I'd live like that. Maybe you would too. Maybe you're thinking, "I don't want to walk across the floor and be happy. I'm looking for something a little more oomphy than that." But here you are—you're going to walk back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Why not try it?

See if it's possible, instead of wishing you were walking into Bhutan or something. Just walk back and forth and explore the quality of heart and mind that's just being fully present with this, without bringing in all our filters.

That's why the Buddha talks about right view—the filters over our perception that get in the way of accurate recognition. It's just our human condition. Mindfulness can help us recognize this, but without mindfulness, we don't know.

Simple examples of what I'm saying: perception is just this recognizing what's happening. Feeling a sensation in my foot, or seeing light, or hearing a sound and knowing. If I ring the bell, you just hear that sound. But without mindfulness—or even with mindfulness if we don't recognize it—when we hear that bell, the perception of "bell," whatever our past experience might have been around bells, is somehow there. It may be mild, that's a pretty mild thing. But maybe when you were in school the bells drove you crazy, and you hear a bell now and you still tense up. Maybe you hear this and you think, "That's the most beautiful sound I ever heard," and then you're off thinking about all kinds of things. Where did they get that bell? Or you think of the person who rang it—rang it too loud, rang it too soft, they were this or that. All this garbage. And this is just a little nothing thing.

But that's normal. We're all the product of our whole life, the conditions of our life, our family, our culture, our schooling, what we've grown up to believe, the way we've been viewing the world. That's inescapable. It's part of being human. And where we get caught is when we don't recognize that it's a filter. We don't even know that there's a filter on how we're perceiving and recognizing and responding. We just think... we don't even think "that's how it is." We *know* that's how it is.

And then we have also the pain of different people and different cultures from different backgrounds not understanding one another, feeling threatened, feeling angry—and just not really having... how can we have that sense of recognizing that you relate to the world in a very different way than I relate to the world? Of course I like the way I relate to the world. It's comfortable. It feels true. Can I know, though, that

that's a cultural conditioning? Yours is different. Neither one's right.

Mindfulness is like a stepping outside of the views of all of our cultures. It's really radical in that way. It's the stepping outside of the comfortable, often unrecognized, familiar view of self and the world. And even though there are a lot of teachings from the Buddha, it's not positing another view. The Buddha gave many teachings, many descriptions of how the mind and heart work and how the world works, but at the end he's saying, as Greg and James have said, *Ehi Passiko*—come and see for yourself what's true. What brings freedom and ease of heart and mind? What strengthens compassion, love, and connectedness? What strengthens greed, hatred, and confusion? Look and see. Believing what he said, believing what I say, isn't going to free you. It may just give you a way to look. So he's not positing another view. I love that. Just staying or being in the "okay, this is what I think, and I don't know—what's the bare experience right now?"

That's so freeing. But it's also often not so comfortable. Mindfulness is just practicing this, moment to moment.

So a simple example is a story I often tell, because I love the sense of our different worldviews. I've spent many years in the winter going to Burma with friends. We go to different nunneries. There are many, many women who are nuns, and young girls who are nuns—very poor, many of them, rather simple in terms of a different kind of education from what I had here in the West. And the worldview of the nuns that I know is very classical Buddhist—different realms and devas and hell realms and all of that. That's just the worldview.

So we were there once after a huge cyclone, like a hurricane, had destroyed the crops in many areas of the country. We were just going to a couple of small villages and offering donations of rice and food—a one-time donation. So we were doing that in a big room with many people offering and receiving, very good energy. And I was taking tons of pictures.

We looked at the photos when we got back to the monastery where we were staying. And in some of them, through many of the photos, were these perfectly round circles of light—just bright light, circles of light all through the photos. So we're looking at them, and a couple of friends, Burmese women, and also another friend who'd been living as a nun there for many, many years, they all said, "Oh yeah, well, those are devas"—devas being celestial beings. "That's how devas look in photos."

"Oh, really?"

And then another friend, who has equally been there many years, but she's a scientist—she's from a medical background, a PhD scientist—she looks at it and goes, "Well, that's some refraction of the light, some water in the lens," and all this stuff.

And we're like, oh, yeah, it could be. Who knows? But she was positive.

So we were caught between these two views. And I could see how my mind worked—I didn't have a big investment in it, but my mind immediately went to "yeah, right, refraction of the lens, water in the lens, of course." I didn't go right to "it's devas."

So we left it at that. Then later I looked on my computer and I had some photos from a different camera—same thing, circles of light all over. Different camera, but the same phenomenon. That's interesting. Maybe there were devas after all.

The thing is, who knows? Who knows? But each person, coming from their particular background, was really sure that's what it was.

So we played with it. We'd show the pictures to people back at home in the monastery, and the scientifically-minded ones would say, "Oh yes, that's refraction, light particles, whatever." Other people, really more faith-based, would say, "Oh no, that's devas. That makes sense to me."

Some years later—two or three years later—the scientist friend went to Ramana Maharshi's ashram in Tiruvannamalai in southern India. There's a sacred mountain there, Mount Arunachala. I find it a very powerful place. On every full moon, people come from all over India to circumambulate the mountain. It's quite some miles to complete the whole thing. And when we talk about people coming from all over India, we're talking hundreds of thousands of people. On this particular full moon night, it was some especially auspicious one. She said they were estimating a million people—a million people coming from all over with great faith, circumambulating this mountain at night, because they do it at night.

So she sent me a photo, which I haven't been able to find again. There were just perfect balls of light all over that photo. She said, "I give up. I give up. Maybe it's devas."

Who knows? Who knows?

Sometimes Greg does his deva chant, and I love it. We don't have to determine what's true or what isn't. But seeing the filters, recognizing them—that's valuable. It's fine. We're human. We're all going to have those filters. It's not a problem when we recognize them.

So then, to say what being mindful would look like: if I was looking at the photo, it would really be not needing to make an assessment or a story at all. I'd be aware of seeing. I'd be aware of the mind thinking. I'd be aware of liking or disliking or whatever. That's what's occurring in this moment. Then if I had a memory of devas or whatever, I'd be aware of that thought and that memory. Very different from looking and declaring, "It's this" or "It's that," and "You're right and I'm wrong."

This is really the quality of mindfulness. That's kind of how it works. The power of mindfulness is just this willingness to completely land for just a moment. It's like this, now. You don't even have to know, you don't even have to be able to recognize what's happening—but you're just walking and there's a feeling. It's like this, now.

You're sitting and there's a noise that's bugging you. It's like this now. That doesn't mean you suddenly like it. "It's like this now" means I feel really annoyed. It's like this now. Annoyance feels like this. It's just relaxing into, with fullness of presence, just what's occurring in this moment—again and again and again. We like it, we don't like it, but not needing to make the story. The sense of just opening with wonder. The sense of discovery. Each moment is new and fresh. It doesn't mean we love each moment, but it means we're not in struggle. We're not fighting.

And then there's the possibility to recognize accurately. Because what gets in the way of recognizing accurately is the habits of mind of aversion. Right away we don't like, we push away. There's no way to even be fully present. We're already holding the situation at a distance. Or wanting, which is again looking out there, looking out there. Or trying to keep it like this instead of just acknowledging it's like this. Let it go. I don't even like to use "let it." It's not in our control. It's coming. It's here. It goes. That's what's happening. Whether you let it or not, it's going to do that. So it's just this sense of relaxing fully into what's occurring now. This is our practice.

And it's not easy. What really fuels the habits of pushing away, of aversion, of not liking, of wanting it to be a certain way, of just getting completely confused and lost in thoughts and stories—really the bottom line is this: the moment-to-moment relating to any particular experience as being me or mine.

I just read something from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche the other day, and I thought he gave a very pithy explanation of this. He writes: "The very root of delusion is the thought of 'I,' the habit of clinging to the notion of self. This notion is simply due to a failure to investigate. There's no such thing as a truly existing autonomous self. Our minds fabricate this concept in the same way that it makes up all of our thoughts. Then, after constructing this self over and over again, we get so used to our invention that it seems to really exist as a distinct entity. And then, when the thought has deeply taken root, we demand that the self should be happy and comfortable, enjoying wealth and pleasures. If it could be the center of the universe, that would be the best. This attitude is the very basis for our wandering around and around in samsara."

This attitude is the very basis for not recognizing what's happening accurately—relating to it in terms of whether it's going to make me happy or unhappy, and then taking that response out into the world and suffering.

But I bring this up not to suggest that we should hate or fear or judge or think we're here to somehow dig up and uproot the self. As Rinpoche says, and Ramana Maharshi says the same thing, the self exists just because it's not investigated. Investigated. So you don't even have to go investigating self. The steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness—what's happening now? What's happening now?—reveals things the way they are. It's not like you have to actively will yourself to go out and stop creating a sense of self. I'll tell you right now, you're not going to do that. But the sense of self is simply another thought, another experience that can be met with mindfulness, as with anything. So it's nothing to fear, or to hate, or to think, "I'm so bad, I have such a strong sense of self." You hear people say that. I hear people say that.

And then you listen to it. It's like an unfinished loop. "Oh, sense of self is like this right now." Simply another arising experience.

So I'm trying to take the mystery out of it. Don't make it a big bugaboo. But we must start to see that when we don't recognize this, it becomes the strongest filter blocking accurate recognition, right view. It's kind of like the core habit of life—just a habit of mind, just a habit of thought that, unrecognized or recognized but taken personally and reacted to, leads us into all realms of confusion and suffering.

This brings us back to that definition of vipassanā: experiencing the mind and body directly, moment to moment, with the right understanding. This doesn't mean that you can come in, or any of us can come in, saying, "I'm giving up sense of self. I will no longer have that thought arise, and when it does arise, I won't believe it." We can't do that. But the right understanding is simply starting to recognize that we don't have to take experience so personally. Even the sense of self is just a habit.

So whatever's arising, when we're taking it personally—you know how that feels, right, to take it personally—but what's actually going on? One of the ways the Buddha describes experience, and we'll explore this as we go through the days: What are we experiencing? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, physical sensation, and the whole mental world—thoughts, emotions, perceptions. Those are like six things that just keep happening over and over and over. The mental world is of course much more complex, and it constructs whole stories about whatever is occurring.

But notice: say you're walking. There are many sights and sounds and touches on the body and thoughts that come. They're just coming and going. No big deal, right? And suddenly there's a sight or a sound or a thought, and the next moment of mental energy grabs that thought. It really identifies—it's me, or it's mine. That particular thought has become personal.

It was simple. I was walking outside and I felt chilly. So the moment-to-moment experience was a sensation of walking, coolness, chilliness, a kind of contraction in my body. I felt that—that's the experience. Then there could be just that. It could be unpleasant. There could be a thought, "It's chilly," noticing all of that. No big deal. Then there's, "It's chilly. It shouldn't be like this. I should have worn another sweater. What if I get sick?" And on and on and on. The whole thing has become contracted and all about me. And then it takes off into the infinite universe. Have you noticed that? It doesn't usually stop with one thought—"I'm cold and it's not good for me. Okay, la la la." It usually keeps going. That's taking it personally.

It doesn't mean you can't go put on a sweater. I'm not saying that. But so much of the time, experience moves immediately into aversion, into wanting, into stories of me, into taking it personally. And often when difficult stuff is happening, we get really lost in self-blame, in self-judgment, taking it personally.

So when we're saying "recognizing what's occurring with the right understanding," when you're experiencing something difficult—say aversion is coming up, or fear is coming up—taking it personally

would be somehow thinking, "It's my fault," or "It's me, I have to fix it." Especially when we're seeing unpleasant stuff. As James said, the whole world of difficult stuff will come, the whole world of beautiful stuff will come.

When we take it personally, awareness in that moment kind of ends there. It stops, and it becomes all about how can I hold on to this, how can I get rid of this, how can I fix everything. We remain caught, and we don't recognize accurately.

Recognizing with right understanding means understanding that whatever's arising, there are conditions. Everything arises due to the conditions that came before. We can't see all the conditions—just sitting here, there are conditions going back to the Big Bang that led us all to be here. You can't ever really stop somewhere. But we can't say that it's all about me.

When we start to see that aversion is arising, instead of thinking, "Another sign of what an aversive person I am. It's hopeless. I'd better do metta from now until the end of time"—instead of that, there's the possibility of simply recognizing, "Ah, aversion's like this now." Awareness just notices it without making it personal. We notice it arising and then simply being there without all the extra. We might experience coldness, notice the shivering, notice that it's unpleasant, notice the mind doesn't like it. And when there's no awareness of that, the not-liking-it leads into aversion, leads into a whole story of aversion. "Oh, that's how it works."

Mindfulness lets us see how all this works. And when we see how it works, when we can drop the triangle block into the triangle hole, we don't have to throw the blocks. We don't have to hate the parents. We don't have to get all whacked out because there's aversion or wanting going on. We can see what's happening. We can take our refuge in the awareness, in the mindfulness—not in having the perfect experience to make it okay.

Ajahn Sumedho—I find him a wonderful, inspiring teacher. He's an American man who's been a monk in the Ajahn Chah Thai tradition for many, many years. I heard him say once that he'd thought you shouldn't talk about in teaching or in practice the concept of no permanent self, the concept of sakkāya-diṭṭhi—personality view, grabbing hold of any experience and making a "me" or a "mine" out of it. That's what I was just describing: personality view. He thought it shouldn't be talked about until you've been practicing for a long time because it's too subtle.

But then he reconsidered and thought, "You realize that's crazy. Why spend twenty years practicing from wrong understanding?" All that time thinking it's me doing this to get that particular state and be happy, when there's no particular thing to get that's ever going to last. The happiness isn't about my personality being happy or getting a thing, but about—as I described with my friend—just the purity, the simplicity of total presence, recognizing things as they are and not adding extra. We start to recognize what perhaps wasn't able to be recognized when we're caught behind that idea of self, looking through it at the world and all of our experience.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu—you know who he is? The South African archbishop who was a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, one of the chairpeople after apartheid ended in South Africa of the Committee for Truth and Reconciliation, a very powerful person. He described an African concept: "A concept that we have at home, the concept of Ubuntu. It says a person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu says, when I have a small piece of bread, it is for my benefit that I share it with you, because after all, none of us came into the world on our own. You realize that in a very real sense, we are part of a profound complementarity. It is the nature of things. You don't have to be a believer in anything. I mean, I could not speak as I am speaking without having learned it from other human beings. I learned to be a human being from other human beings. We belong in this delicate network. It is actually quite profound. Unfortunately, in our world we tend not to recognize this until times of great disaster."

I'm offering this as a possibility of perceiving in a whole different way that isn't me at the center and everyone else out there. But that's not something we do with an act of will. This is really where the trust in this steady, simple, moment-to-moment mindful awareness of just whatever's arising becomes so powerful. When we start looking for what we think we should see, we're already in some kind of wanting, some kind of moving away.

To experience Ubuntu, complementarity, as he describes—I can't think my way into that. It may have been something my thinking mind would never have come up with. But when the filters of me and other and wanting aren't arising in a moment, then things as they are become accessible, perceivable. The filters may come back again in the next moment.

And a good clue that the filters have returned is that we're going to start feeling stress again. We're going to start feeling some tension, some wanting, some discontent. Don't take that personally. Simply notice: all right, so what's going on? Discontent feels like this. Whatever's occurring in this moment—that's the only moment there is—that's the doorway to present moment awareness. And the steadiness of present moment awareness is the condition that allows clear seeing wisdom to arise.

To me, that's a huge relief. It's not that I or you have to generate wisdom. In fact, you can't. But it's a law of nature that when there's steady, non-judging awareness, suddenly the clarity arises naturally—oh yes, that's the triangle, it fits in the triangle. It just emerges on its own. We can trust that.

This is where the tool of steady mindfulness and awareness becomes so powerful, because it's something we can recognize and practice again and again and again. If we can trust enough to let that land in whatever is happening, rather than continuing to get sucked into trying to organize what's happening to match some idea we don't even know we have. There's just a moment of recognition. Ah, we're not dragging in the past and the future. It's just this. Just the sensation of warmth on my foot. It's enough.

I want to end with a description of what full presence looks like. When the Dalai Lama greets you, he takes your hand and then rubs it tenderly, as a grandparent might. He looks into your eyes, feels deeply what you are feeling, and touches his forehead to yours. Whatever feeling—elation or anguish—is in your heart

and reflected on your face, it is mirrored in his. But then, when he meets the next person, those emotions are gone, and he is wholly available for the next encounter and the next moment.

Perhaps that is what it means to be fully present: available for each moment and each person we encounter, untethered by the memories of the past and not lured by anticipatory worry about the future.

This is our practice. This is our practice—moment to moment, simple mindfulness.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.