Liberation through Non-Clinging: Undaunted Courage (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:43

I used to think I would talk about the third noble truth, but somehow this teaching is headed in another direction. We'll start with it, though.

Since we have talked about the first truth of dukkha, the second truth—the cause of dukkha, this tanha, this craving that I spoke about a couple of weeks ago—the third truth being that there is an ending, a cessation of dukkha, and the fourth truth being the path, the Eightfold Path, which I believe Greg spoke about at some point. Everything we talk about is the Eightfold Path.

I just want to read to you the Buddha's definition of the third noble truth when he first taught these four truths: "This, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the cessation of dukkha—the remainderless fading and cessation, the renunciation, relinquishment, release, and letting go of that very craving, of that very tanha that is the cause of suffering."

One way that I find quite accessible in our moment-to-moment experience of our mind and heart—one way of describing, really meeting, understanding, experiencing moment-to-moment the third noble truth—is in the moments when the heart, the mind, is completely free from clinging. Liberation of heart-mind through non-clinging.

Because of the fact that the mind-heart, the citta (that word for both), is a phenomenon arising and passing, changing in every moment, you don't have to wait for total, complete, absolute cessation of clinging to touch, to taste, to experience a flavor of this quality of liberation through non-clinging, moment to moment to moment.

As Joseph Goldstein really likes to say: liberation through non-clinging, and it doesn't matter to what the mind does not cling. Just like I say awareness doesn't care what it's aware of—it doesn't matter to what the heart-mind doesn't cling. Because it's not about the what. It's about that quality of non-clinging in this moment of heart-mind, in this moment of consciousness, this moment of citta.

So now we start to veer.

All of you really, even if you don't believe it, have moments where you know for yourself that it's the clinging, the craving in the heart, in the mind, in a particular moment—you really see when it ends, when it dissolves, that it was simply that clinging, that craving, that was blocking. As someone said today, it was so clear that it was clinging that was blocking the perception of emptiness. When the clinging is gone, that

perception is available.

Even more, many people see that when the clinging lets go in a moment—whether the clinging is to any of the five aggregates, to whatever experience—in the moment when the clinging dissolves, so does that particular sense of self.

One of my favorite quotations about this comes from Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai forest monk and scholar from the last century. He says the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's it. We make this big brouhaha about the sense of self—it's got to go, it's always here—and then when we stop and look at it, it's simply a condition that arises. Okay, it arises a lot. But every time it arises, it passes. Every time.

You say, "Well, not this time. It's here now." You just didn't see it arise. It's kind of fast. And because we don't look, we assume it's always this same sense of self. But it's every moment of sense of self arising, clinging to some different particular experience. That's a whole other talk—I have like seventeen talks in this talk.

But there are times when we really see it, when we really experience: the clinging goes, and there's no particular sense of self. And it's not a huge experience. It's just so normal and natural. And there's that sense—well, this is really where I'm going—"Well, this is obvious, isn't it? How could I possibly get caught up in it again? It's so clear. Yes, emptiness, everything is insubstantial. How could I possibly get upset about that noise of the beeping smoke alarm? How can that possibly bother me when I know all phenomena are empty?"

And then you find yourself up in the middle of the night throwing pillows at it and writing notes about it as you're mumbling, "Empty phenomena rolling on." Doesn't feel too empty.

But when we really see it, when we really get it, it's not an imagined thing. We're not making it up. We really do know in that moment that when the focus of attention, of awareness, is on the object—whatever of the five khandhas the object is: smelling, tasting, thinking—when the focus is on that, we're looking to the object for fulfillment, for meaning, for sense of self. That's where the clinging comes in. That's where the whole suffering, the whole phenomena ball gets rolling.

And we know as soon as there's that kind of Tai Chi move, that stepping into the awareness of the same object, the same experience—just the stepping into refuge in awareness instead of sinking into looking into the object for self-reference—oh, the same experience is occurring without the Velcro. It's just happening, just as it is. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That extra suffering isn't there.

I really want us all to trust in those moments that this is a real perception, that this is a true understanding. And just as it arose, it passes away.

This is what I really want to talk about tonight. We really get it, but—so how can we, this is kind of a pep

talk—what can we do? How can we keep on finding the courage, the trust, the determination to continue to open into, with totality of presence, this whole path, this one particular moment? That's what I want to talk about.

People are really in different places, and you all keep changing places, right? Because that's how it goes. Everybody's path is unique. But there are times when each of you has been really experiencing deep insights into Dhamma, into freedom, into the three characteristics, into emptiness, maybe into aspects of your personality, habit patterns that you hadn't seen, really understanding, seeing through them. And then you turn around and you're doing the same thing again and you're really caught again, and it can really take us into discouragement. Or am I the only one? Yeah, I don't think so.

Or you know it's going well. And I think if you come into any of this and say, "Oh, it's going well, it's really good," we never let it sit there, because what does that mean, you know? But it's going well, there's insights, it's flowing, and then all of a sudden some really deep, difficult, painful thing comes up. Or even worse—a lot of just niggly, stupid thoughts, and you can't focus on anything. At least if some big thing comes up, you can feel like you're working with something, right? But when it's just, "Oh, I'm thinking this, I'm thinking that, it's not even about anything, but I just can't focus"—that's when you're really ready to hang up the towel.

Doubt, impatience, frustration, despair, really—can it be? I'm in despair because I was in walking meditation and thoughts kept coming up. I'm in total despair. We hear this stuff all day. The thing is, you are in total despair. And so this is where we want to bring our awareness to understand what's going on here and not to let ourselves get caught in these emotional reactions to what's happening.

Ajahn Buddhadasa had a translation of a talk he gave, and I'm sure many of you have heard quotations from this, where he was talking to Thai lay people. "Nibbana for Everyone" is the title of this talk. I'm just reading very briefly from it. He's talking about how Nibbana is a natural condition—a natural condition, not some amazing huge thing only for special people. That's what he's telling Thai lay people. Don't just think it's for nuns and monks who are going to be arahants and you just have to wait for another lifetime. Nibbana is for everyone.

And so he's calling it a natural condition, the cool state of mind, of heart, without any kilesa, without any torment. It's just what we've been saying all along. And just a little piece—he goes on to say that if we really look at this, we see that the kilesas, greed, hatred, confusion, are also sankhara-dhamma, compounded, conditioned phenomena. They come together when the conditions are ripe, and when those conditions change and cease, then those causal conditions are not present, and the kilesas, the torments, simply become extinct.

So this is in any moment when there's suddenly clear seeing—kilesas in that moment have become extinct. And he says, although the extinction is temporary—don't dismiss it. In other words, the coolness takes place temporarily. The phenomenon has the real taste of Nibbana, even though it's not the lasting

one.

And he says we all experience many, many moments of this coolness of heart and mind, of the moments free from kilesas, because without it, the fire of the kilesas, he said, we'd die. This is what nourishes our life. This freedom, these moments of freedom from kilesa—to really notice that through the days here. These aren't about any amazing thing happening. This isn't about big insight: "Oh, non-self!"

It's just the little moments where the heart-mind is cool. It's not burning with the fire of greed, the fire of hatred, the fire of delusion. So just notice this—in the walking, in the sitting, when you're eating, sitting in the bathroom, anytime. I often experience it as just a little exquisite moment. Or one of those moments of what the Zen people call the is-ness of things.

Often when we're in a place like this where the nature is really beautiful, there are these moments of pure presence when you're outside. What can easily happen is that we overlook that it's the quality of the coolness, the absence of kilesa, that's creating the sense of purity of presence. We tend to attribute it, or can attribute it, to the circumstances or the object. You walk out and there's the beautiful crescent moon and the sky is just... so beautiful. And we forget to notice that really what that coolness is—in that moment, consciousness is free from kilesa. It's a moment, a little taste of liberation of heart-mind through non-clinging.

But our habit is... so just notice these moments. Many, many, many through the day, they come and go, no big deal. Let it start to be no big deal. Then we'll stop striving so much to achieve some idea of nibbana. Whatever idea you have can't possibly be correct, because it's not about an idea or words. So put the ideas down. Let go of the views and just notice a little nothing-special moment of putting down your foot. There's just the sensation of pressure and tingling. The mind isn't saying, "Okay, a couple more steps and I go to lunch." Just the sensation of pressure and tingling and wakefulness. And it comes to, well, nothing's happening. I'm just walking, feeling pressure. Notice that—just that moment of purity of heart and mind. Many, many moments, so that we can really trust it more.

As Ajahn Buddhadasa says, nibbana is for everyone.

So that's on the one side. And on the other side, our tendency, as I said, is so much to attribute experience to the object, to the circumstance, that we forget to notice the purity of heart-mind. And then we're kind of sucked back into the story, sucked back into this place of confusion and doubt. "It was so beautiful. I was just at ease. And now I go in my room and I'm lost in all these weird emotions. How can that possibly be?" And then we start spinning.

Nibbana is for everyone, but the true liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging is also really challenging for everyone. These moments, yes, they're absolutely natural. They're free from effort because effort gets in the way. They're absolutely available to all of us much of the time. But they come and they go, and the habits are so strong.

I want to talk a little bit about some of the ways that, as we deepen in practice, as we're really touching and experiencing freedom—maybe as I described it just now, or seeing through your patterns, or some of the things I said before—and then seeing that go away. Even though we may tell ourselves, "Oh yeah, well that's okay, it's really okay, it's all one, I don't mind"—maybe there's a moment when it's okay, but it starts to spiral down and we start to believe it more.

Freedom from clinging is absolutely uncompromising. There's no aspect whatsoever of our experience that's exempt from that. So at times, as our practice is deepening and understanding is growing but going back and forth between understanding and getting caught—the language I use is that we hit a wall in different ways. We're really practicing very sincerely, and actually understanding is deepening, but at times we hit different places that are really challenging in our practice, in our life. I want to mention a few tonight so you won't think there's something wrong with you, but also so you can see it's all part of the path.

As I was saying, freedom from clinging means nothing is exempt—freedom from greed, hatred, delusion. When we think about what freedom from clinging would be like, what nibbana would be like—which we do, because that's what we do—of course we're going to have some idea about that. We want to know ahead of time: What am I doing this for? What's it going to be like? How's it going to be? How can I steer my experience in that direction? Isn't that what all the techniques and all the instructions are about?

We lose the fact, we lose noticing, that the steering has become wanting, and the wanting is in service of some idea we've made up. We forget that we can't know, that what's required moment to moment to moment is just this—just in one moment.

Remember, it's only ever one moment, which to me is the only thing that makes it workable. So what I'm saying is about this one moment. What's required is full commitment in this moment to open with fullness of presence into the unknown of what's occurring right now. Without having it all sussed out, without being able to put it in a trajectory of where it's going, without knowing—if I really open into this scary thing, what's going to happen? What will I get out of it? What will I know? You don't even know. Just to completely open into the unknown in this moment, with mindful awareness, with kind attention. It's what we've been saying all along. But there are no guarantees. Ever. Just into this moment.

And at times this is really freeing when it happens. It's like, "Oh yeah, how could I forget?" But there are times it's really challenging. Really scary.

Awakening is not a self-improvement project. As Ajahn Sumedho said—I remember hearing him say once—it's not our personality that gets enlightened. Awakening doesn't confirm us, make us feel all good about ourselves, give us a sense of self-fulfillment: "I'm such a better person now that I'm enlightened." It's actually the standpoint of "me" that gets seen through. As I was saying, really noticing the arising and passing of the sense of me, the sense of I. When we recognize that in those moments, we can't take it so seriously, and that's freeing. When we don't recognize it, again, it's really serious and not so freeing.

So along the way, what happens is that all of our views, our beliefs about ourselves, about what the world is like, about practice, about anything—at some point all of our views, our beliefs, our attachments, our strategies of self-interest are going to be challenged. Not to say they're all bad or wrong. But at some point as we practice, any view that we're holding to is going to be challenged. Because the Buddha talked a lot about not attaching to views—views of enlightenment, views even of the teachings, views of who you are, views of anything. Even the teachings are not to be held on to. No view to be held to.

And so many times when we're in places—happening to some today and some not—where what I call "hitting the wall" occurs, we're going along and actually we can tell the practice is going great. It's just that what's coming up is unpleasant or disconcerting or not what we'd expect, or we don't quite know how to be with it. And so we think our view of what practice is, is what's being challenged. But actually our path of awakening is going along just fine.

A lot of what our job is—I don't know if you've noticed—we kind of pat you back into shape. "Okay, that's okay. Shake yourself up. Keep going. It's going along fine." Have you noticed how often we do that? Because it's all about just keeping on meeting the moment with open awareness. It's not about making the moment different or better, or making us feel better about ourselves. But God knows we'll keep trying.

So just a few of the ways—there are a million ways, but just a few that came to my mind that are very common in my experience, and I know I'm not the only one—of how we hit a wall or don't recognize we're running into a view we're holding, a personality view, particularly sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

One is simply when things are going along and you think it's going well, and then it changes. There's that deep sense of "I had it, I was doing it, I understood it—and what did I do wrong?" Have you ever had that experience? "I blew it, how can I get it back?" And so it's not only a sense of discouragement because basically now it's unpleasant and before it was pleasant—let's face it. But also really feeding into self-judgment, the whole personality of "I can't do it, I did it wrong, somehow I'm controlling this whole scenario and I blew it."

But really it's just seeing—we call this anicca. I think we've mentioned that once in a while. Things change, conditions change, and it's not just us. This is a sutta from the time of the Buddha, one I often use.

He's talking to a monk, a bhikkhu, named Asaji. And it says, on one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove. And he heard that Venerable Asaji, a long-term dedicated bhikkhu, was very sick. He was afflicted. He was gravely ill. And the Buddha went to see him, and Asaji was not only ill, but he was upset. He was basically saying that he was troubled by remorse and regret.

So the Buddha questions him and is saying, well, do you have something in terms of your virtue, your sila, to reproach yourself with? Something you've done wrong that's bringing up this remorse and regret? And Venerable Asaji said, no, no, no, Venerable Sir. So the Buddha said, so what, basically, is your problem? And he probably didn't say it like that, but who knows?

So Asaji says, well, formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was ill, I was able to keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations, but now I cannot obtain concentration. And so it occurs to me, let me not fall away. In other words, he's lost his concentration, he can't tranquilize it, and he's thinking, oh no, I've lost it. Don't let me fall away, I'm sick.

And the Buddha basically says, Asaji, haven't I told you, whatever phenomena are subject to arising are subject to ceasing when the conditions change? He's basically saying, you're sick. You're sick as a dog. You can't cultivate concentration because the conditions of mind and body aren't present. And that's freedom—recognizing that. The freedom isn't getting the concentration. The freedom is recognizing that's what's happening. That's the essence of the path.

So the lack of freedom is really making a whole personality view around the belief that it should be different. In fact, I think often when we're in conflict with experience and we don't quite know why, it helps to check what's the view in the background, in the back of your mind. I find for me, it can almost always be boiled down to either it should be better or it should be different. And that's of course an endless one, right? It should be better, and no matter what's happening, it could be better. And so to really see that's what's going on can be a moment of freedom.

So that's one—not recognizing causes and conditions and taking it personally.

Another one, and this is like a whole phase in practice that's really important: when on the personality level, we're really starting or continuing to see with wisdom some of our particular habits of mind, of heart, that bring us suffering or unhappiness, that bring others suffering. They don't have to be huge ones, just little habits, like a habit of impatience, for example. And we start to see it and really understand it. As we become aware of it, we feel the pain of it more. We think, well, I really see how that's not helpful.

And then we turn around, wait in the food line, and there's impatience springing up and we're acting on it. But we're acting on it with awareness, which the Buddha says is more useful—but it happens to be a lot more painful. Because as you're cutting to the head of the line and taking all this extra food and you're so embarrassed because everyone's looking at you, you're so aware: oh, this craving is still running me even though I know it's painful. Have you ever experienced that? Just to see.

And even more when we go out into our lives and see the habits still running, and we're really aware, we can get so discouraged. What's the point? I'm more neurotic now than when I started the practice. I'm doing these neurotic things more. Not really—we're just much more aware of it. And if we don't really bring in mindfulness and wisdom here, we can really talk ourselves out of practice, because it's discouraging.

What this is requiring of us is that willingness, that courage to keep dropping into this unpleasant, painful experience with awareness. When we're saying, I don't want to see this anymore, and maybe the practice isn't helping—no, bring it in. Bring the awareness in. Meet it. But that's what's really hard. Really hard.

Another obstacle, and this is again obvious on one level but on another level can be quite profound: sometimes there's just too much pain—physical pain, emotional pain.

And for sure, for all of us, there are moments when an emotional thing coming up is simply overwhelming. The physical pain is too strong. You need to shift your attention. That's just part of practice.

But I mean something larger, where it's more like the fear of: "Oh no, if awakening means I have to incorporate the awareness of *this* in my experience, no thank you. I'd rather not." Or just some unpleasant sensation—not even a killer pain, not pain that's going to damage you. We're not talking about that. But sometimes, take an itch. I'm not going to die of the itch. But sometimes it's so hard, so hard just to be with it. I'm using a simple example, but imagine something stronger than that, where you think, "I cannot bear this another moment. I cannot bear to see this pattern again in my life." And if we're not aware of that, the habit of avoiding the unpleasant reasserts itself and we abandon mindfulness. We abandon awareness.

But again—moment to moment.

Another line I love from Ajahn Sumedho. He was describing his early years practicing in Thailand in the hot season in his kuti. Believe me, I've done it—hot. In a kuti with a tin roof, it's like 105 degrees and the sun's beating down and you're inside with long-sleeved robes on. You're cooking. So he's sitting in that kuti. There's no AC. You can't go get an iced Coke or something. You're just sitting there, and there's no food—it's afternoon, that's it for the day. So he's just sitting there, sweating through his robes, thinking, "What am I doing here? I can't bear this another second." And then he'd find that he could.

I love that. I'll be sitting, thinking, "I can't be with this for one more second." And then—it's like this, now. That's all. The one moment. The releasing of the clinging to the idea "I can't bear it," and just that relaxing, surrendering into the moment. Not with a sense of, "If I do it this moment, I have to do it the next moment, I have to do it forever." Just this moment. That complete surrendering with awareness. Coming out of the cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

We don't know where it's going to go. It really requires us to keep connecting with, to keep finding our aspiration, our motivation, our trust and confidence. Which is why I started this talk with really acknowledging for yourself, recognizing the moments of wisdom, the moments of freedom. Not to try and hold on to them, but to trust them. To have confidence that those are true and will happen again. And that gives us the courage to say, "Okay, there's nothing but this moment. Truth is only available in this moment."

As Dōgen Zenji said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?"

Something in this gives us the courage to just surrender for one moment. Not for anything—just to be here.

Now, a different way that we can hit a wall is one that Sayadaw U Pandita called "stopping within." One

way this happens—and here I'm extrapolating, I don't know if this is exactly how he meant it—is when our practice or our life is going along well. There's maybe been a lot of insight, or particular levels of suffering that brought us into practice, that brought us on the path, have really been ameliorated. We're not suffering as much. And there really is a difference. It's like, "Wow, this is great!" And then it's kind of like... "And it's good enough." It's good enough, you know? We might find—and sometimes people say this, and I've seen it in myself too—

It's just part of our journey. As we go along our path, we discover this is good enough. And we might think, "Oh, maybe I wasn't really in this for full awakening. I was in this to make life a little bit better." Which, of course—I mean, why does any of us start? There's nothing wrong with that.

But the stopping within is when we say, "Okay, that's good enough"—and maybe we're not quite conscious of it. And then if you're on retreat, for example, you might find something else comes up that's a little difficult, but you have a way of thinking, "I don't need to go with that. This is good enough. Let me go and open to the stars. Beautiful."

Now, there are times that's totally appropriate, right? Like when James was talking about really accessing the uplifting qualities, the joy—there are times that's totally appropriate. I'm not saying no. But that's to bring us back into balanced awareness, to keep on being fully present for whatever presents itself.

What I was just describing now could sound like it's the same, but it's really more like, "I've had enough. Okay, the stars are so beautiful. Where did Greg say that Andromeda was? Maybe I could go write him a note. Oh, if I could get my phone from the managers, I could look on that app someone was telling me about..." And Rachel was saying you point it at the sky and it shows you everything—and then we're gone, right?

So just look and see, and this is not about judging. We really want to see deep in our own hearts and minds. We keep finding what our motivation is. And for me, I found that it keeps deepening and changing over the years. We come to more understanding. "Oh yeah, this is pretty good. But real freedom might be possible." But that means to keep on going, to keep on looking. And it means we'll come again at some point. We'll keep coming back into facing some aspect of our views or ideas about ourself, or ideas of what freedom is, that are going to get challenged. There's no way around that.

Or sometimes we're starting to get the intimation of that—wow, some aspects of my personality, I'm really going to have to let go of. And then we get these ideas that aren't necessarily true, but like, "Wow, if non-clinging is really uncompromising, that means I'm going to have to let go of the beauty of nature." Whatever our mind comes up with—all kinds of stuff. "That means I'm going to have to let go of loving my family. That means I'm going to have to let go of caring about the environment, or of doing social justice work in the world." Whatever we come up with. "Well, if liberation means that, I don't want it."

Or sometimes—and this is weird, but I've experienced it, maybe I'm the only one, I don't know—there's a

sense of certain aspects of my personality, even kind of suffering ones, but they're so familiar. They're so comfortable. It's like putting on an old comfortable bathrobe that you don't want to take away. Who would I be without this impatience? Who would I be without whatever it is?

It doesn't make sense, but I've often felt it's like a small death of some idea about my personality. I want to go back to the pleasure garden that the Buddha had before he was the Buddha, when it was all nice—but it was nice because we were in complete delusion of what was going on. I want to go back. I don't want to see that there's dukkha in these aspects. Let me just get all comfy in my delusion.

You know it's too late for that, right? It's too late for that. But we want it. Chögyam Trungpa called that nostalgia for samsara. We want to go back, we want to go back. We've done all this work, but let's pretend it never happened.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, again from his preface to that book, *The Island*, that Adrian mentioned.

As one begins to realize or recognize non-grasping as the way, emotionally one can feel quite frightened by it. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart, and it can be frightening. But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find that our stability is not in achievement or attaining, but in being—in being awake, in being aware.

That really is where the stability is, where the freedom is. Taking refuge in the awareness that's receiving whatever particular phenomenon is arising, existing, passing away. Awareness receiving, awareness receiving. We take our refuge in that, moment to moment.

And that awareness receiving is also really feeling whatever is occurring. It's not holding experience at a distance. To me, this is really where the courage comes—to find for ourselves that courage, that patience, to take a breath and just surrender into this moment.

Stephen Batchelor has another way of saying the same thing. He says emptiness is not just an experience of oceanic bliss. It's a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection. And although it's freeing, at times it can bring about a great sense of disconcertion, of dis-ease. It's like being in no man's land, no person's land. You don't know where you are. You don't have the familiar reference points.

Shantideva talks about three aspects of transcendent patience that we bring to our practice. The first is patience when wronged—that's the way we normally think of it. The second is patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma, and that's a lot of what I was talking about, all the different difficulties. Patience to bear the hardships for the Dhamma, for awakening. And the third is the patience to face the profound truth without fear. Not that fear doesn't come, but we don't let it run us.

So when Stephen Batchelor or Ajahn Sumedho is saying that it's a falling apart of all of our strategies, all of our ideas about things—the patience to face that, the patience to meet that with awareness, whatever arises—that's really taking refuge in awareness. That sense of courage, determination, really finding how we connect with it, how we keep connecting with it. We all have our own ways.

I'm mostly talking about this tonight just to remind us that this is the path for all of us. Everything that's occurring—these most scary, difficult experiences, these boring ones, these hard ones, these repetitive experiences that you think you've seen seven million times and it's happening again—these are the path. They're not what we get through to get on the path. This is it.

In the moment when awareness, when citta, meets the arising experience—that's the place of freedom and purification. The freedom isn't getting rid of the experience. It's in that moment when, like Sayadaw was saying, "I can't be with it" and it's aversion, it's me, it's all the stories—and then it's like this now. Just that simple moment of heart-mind free of kilesa, free of clinging. It seems like nothing. You're sitting here sweating through your robes, the same as you were a second earlier. But in this moment, the heart-mind is free. It's the same sweaty robes.

Everything is our path. Trusting that, connecting to it, remembering the moments of freedom, of wisdom, of understanding—this really helps so much to reconnect with whatever your deep aspiration is. Aspiration, not expectation, right? But we need to remember what it is, because it takes a lot of courage to keep going in this way.

To discover the wisdom, the courage, the humility to keep just surrendering again, no matter what. We think we had the biggest insight, and the next hour we feel like we never meditated before, and you have to go in and tell the teacher that you're completely hopeless. Can we find the humility? This is just another arising experience. How is the awareness meeting it? That's the place of freedom or the place of suffering.

One thing that helps is connecting with the aspiration. Another thing that really helps me sometimes, when it's real dukkha, real suffering, and I can see I'm caught in the personalness of it, a lot of sakkāya-diṭṭhi around it—it's a little bit of a reflection, but often it moves into a real perception experience. When I'm all caught in my own story, whatever it is, I just start to recognize that this is a particular expression of an aspect of dukkha that is shared by all humans.

You could try really hard, but I bet no one can come up with something that, when you get to the nub of what it's about, you're the only human being that ever experienced. You say, well, the particular story—okay, but that's not it. Whatever it is, I start to recognize: oh, this experience of unbearable loss...

This experience of fear, losing the sense of who I am. This experience of just hating having this cough. To start to expand it and see it as a representative expression of the human condition.

And when I do that, it starts as a contemplation sometimes, but it almost always—not always, but almost always—really moves into empathy and compassion. That sense of compassion that we're all in this

together, that this is just a unique expression of the human condition. May I meet it for the benefit of all beings. It really helps to die again into this particular moment.

Another mental quality we don't talk about too much but that really helps is one of the pāramīs, one of the ten perfections, the ten wholesome qualities that are developed. In Pali it's *adhiṭṭhāna*. It's translated as resolution or determination.

When it's wholesome, it's a very wholesome quality. It's a pulling together of the energy. It's that resolution of "just do it"—not "I'm going to do it, by gum!" Just do it, like the Nike thing. Just do it.

I use a simple example. In the morning, your alarm goes off and you're lying there thinking, "Ah, I don't want to get up." You can wander around in the thoughts for a while, you can think about your dream, you can get into the aversion. Or you just get up. Just do it. Without any big production, you just get up. That was so much easier. So much easier.

Starting to recognize this quality of determination, it's like a bringing together of the energy in a moment—the energy and the aspiration in the moment. Okay, just do it. I don't want to go to the sitting hall, but the bell rings and you just go.

Have you noticed how that starts to happen? The bell rings for the sitting, and instead of deliberating—should I walk? Should I have tea?—you just go and walk. It's so much easier than all that hoopla. You just walk and then you sit and then you walk and then you sit. It's so easy. And determination is just, "Oh yeah, just do it."

We can do it on small levels. Sometimes it's with wisdom. When there are obsessive thoughts going on, sometimes you can really just see: not now. Not with the hammer, not with aversion, but those times you just see—what Joseph calls the sword of wisdom. Not now. That's determination. Energy coming together.

In a larger picture, this is how *adhiṭṭhāna*, this resolution, works when we have a sense of our aspiration. For example, if I feel that my aspiration is the path of practice—which is really all of life, not just being on retreat—is really to free the heart and mind from clinging, of course I'm not thinking that every moment. But then when something gets really difficult, or not even difficult but too pleasant—"I'll practice later, right now I'm going back to the pleasure garden for a while"—the sense of tuning into the larger aspiration can give strength to our present moment motivation.

Not with a "should" or anything, but with wisdom I might say, "Should I go do that?" No, it's okay. I think I'll just go sit right now. Or in daily life, when you're getting all confused—"I've got so much to do in the morning, make my toast, make my coffee, do this, I don't have time to sit"—and you're spinning around like this. You know what? Just sit. Just sit. Just a moment of determination, resolution, in service of your larger aspiration.

The larger aspiration becomes a guideline to bring our moment-to-moment motivation into alignment

with what's really important to us. Determination can really help in this way.

Again from Ajahn Sumedho: I think it was in a retreat where I heard him say this. He was talking about a point when he was the abbot of Amaravati, during one of what I'm sure were many very difficult phases interpersonally in the monastery. A lot of difficult stuff was going on over a long period of time.

And he said that he felt very blamed, he was feeling very blamed, and he said, "My personality hated it and feared it." He was getting caught up in hating and fearing the blame. And then he said, "And then I really got in touch with my aspiration, and I determined to put my trust in awareness, not to put my trust in my personality and moods."

This was his whole practice—trusting in awareness. But we have to remind ourselves. We all get caught up in it, right? We make the determination to trust awareness, to really take refuge in awareness, not in the moods, not in the personality. Not denying the personality, but not relying on it for freedom, for ease. Because we never know what's going to come up.

When I talk about surrendering into the moment, surrendering into what's happening, I don't mean by that abdicating choice or decisions or actions. In some ways, I think it means really sometimes taking much more courageous choices, much more courageous action—really, because there's no other choice if we truly want to wake up.

There's an example I often use from a documentary I saw some time ago, about two friends who were mountain climbing in the Andes. It's called *Touching the Void*. Some of you may have seen it. It's really quite intense.

The short version: They're climbing very high mountains in the Andes, roped together, just the two of them. One of them slides and falls over the edge of a deep crevasse. So they're roped together, suspended like this for hours. The one still up on the mountain can't pull the other up—there's no purchase, he can't do it. He tries for hours, but he can't pull him up, and if he goes any closer, he's just going to get pulled over himself. So he has to make his decision. He cuts the rope.

The other guy falls into the crevasse. The one above can't see down there, can't go down. So he makes his way back to their base camp, waits there for a few days to see if his friend might come. But he figures he's probably dead.

Meanwhile, the one who fell dropped into that narrow crevasse but hit a ledge and didn't go too far down. He broke his leg from the impact, but he's caught on this ledge, and the crevasse is completely dark, just going down and down into blackness. He said the deepest fear he had was of that abyss. To go into that abyss was his absolute deepest fear.

So he's just hanging on that ledge with his broken leg overnight. And then he realizes: nothing's going to happen. Nobody's going to come. The other guy couldn't get there, and there were no other people. Finally

he said, "I had to do something. I could not just abdicate. I had to do something." And all he could do was try to lower himself back down into that abyss—the very thing that was his deepest fear.

So he did it. And it turned out that it wasn't so deep. He hit ground, and it went a little bit upward, and he saw light at the end and could scramble his way up. Mind you, he has a broken leg. So he scrambled his way up. The rest of the documentary—this was a recreation about twenty years later, but it really happened—shows how he's scrambling over amazing terrain with that broken leg. It took a couple of days, over rocks and all, making his way back.

By the time he was almost there, without food, without water, in all that pain, his friend was just in the act of packing up camp, thinking he couldn't have survived this long. The guy crawling out was so out of it, totally delirious. And the only thing that brought him back to consciousness as he got close to camp was the smell of the acid from their latrine. That smell was so acrid to someone who hadn't eaten or drunk anything for days that it shot him back into awareness, and he made his way back.

It's intense, isn't it? But that moment of deepest fear—the way out, the only way out, was in. It won't always be that intense for us, but it feels like it sometimes, doesn't it?

It feels like it sometimes, though, doesn't it? It feels like it.

So, never abdicate. But it's just this moment of awareness. What's happening now?

The Buddha said, "Two things I never lost sight of: not to shrink from the struggle, and not to rest contented merely with wholesome states of mind."

The Dalai Lama said, "One day you will become bodhisattvas in reality. So whatever obstacles there are, however long it takes, do not be discouraged."

There's only this moment we can meet with mindfulness. Notice those moments of purity—when you're looking at the stars, or whatever it may be. Just this moment of awareness.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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