Investigating How The Deluded Mind Works

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:30

At this point in a retreat—in the middle of a retreat—I'd say almost every retreat, and it's true for this one, I start to feel, after talking with people, really touched by how much everybody's going through. It's just life. It's just a microcosm of life. All the moods and emotions and fears and beautiful stuff. A lot of it is just coming and going with awareness, and that's fine.

But how often do we get, as Mark was talking about last night, to that tipping point where we get really caught up in the struggle? It becomes a huge thing, and then it calms down so much. We sit here and tell you: just be aware of it all. Just be with it. Everything that's coming—you're caught up, it's like this. You're not caught up, great, just be with it all. That's the whole point of mindfulness.

There are times when that seems so real and true and there's no question. And there are other times when you're thinking, what the heck are they talking about? What good is any of this doing? Am I the only one? So what's the point?

I want to talk a little bit about some aspects of this. Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Dzogchen master and died some years ago, said the main purpose of these dharma teachings, of dharma practice, is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, the non-deluded heart, as well as how the deluded mind works.

We're spending a lot of time on both. But how the deluded mind works is an essential aspect. Learning about that is really one of the main things that frees us to recognize the non-deluded mind.

Nyoshul Khen goes on: meditation practices work to uncover our innate wisdom and purity by recognizing the obscurations for the changing, insubstantial appearances that they are, thus revealing what has always been available.

Now, no one said that the time spent on each of those is equal. There's probably a lot more time spent exploring and coming to recognize the way the deluded mind works. But that's okay. It doesn't take as many equal moments of recognizing natural awareness and purity.

Did you notice that? You're all caught up for however long—it feels like forever, maybe it was five minutes—but suddenly awareness comes in. You go, "Oh, it's like that." And the whole thing passes. You don't have to have that fantastic feeling for the equal five minutes. That one second just clears it all, because awareness is pure no matter what was going on.

You're saying, "Yeah, right, that's not my experience." Look for it. You'll see.

I want to talk about one way the confused mind works that is really interesting, that the Buddha spoke about, just to help us see: when we get all caught up, it's not random. You feel like you're minding your own business, being mindful, and suddenly—whomp—out of nowhere. Not just that a mood comes, that's fine, but we're really caught in it. Yesterday the same mood came and you weren't caught. We can feel like a victim, but it's not just happening randomly.

Once we get more interested in watching the process with awareness, it really gets interesting. We can see the lawful nature of how these things work. That's where the wisdom comes in, and we don't always go down the same path.

I noticed—I wrote this the last time I gave this talk—I had just had this recognition in my own practice, noticing how when I first started practice, very reasonably, I think quite many people would, what I really wanted was to get away from the confused and unpleasant and difficult aspects of my personality. We've been waiting for those to change into the bodhisattva of the ages. Really thinking that would all change. You'll become the most loving, compassionate person on the planet—waiting for that. And all the difficult stuff of my life would disappear. That's why I started practicing, probably. Not quite saying it that bluntly.

But I couldn't have imagined from that place—most people couldn't—that the peace, the freedom, the moments (not all the time, okay), that the peace and freedom that's available, that arises, comes in a totally different way. It's not from getting rid of all that stuff.

But it's actually from this purity of awareness—of being with what's arising totally, without being lost in resistance and wanting. Being with what's happening, surrendering into it. The wisdom comes from the total presence, not from getting rid of the stuff we don't like.

You can't imagine that. You can't imagine that. That's why we keep saying, "Oh great, you're feeling sadness? Feel it with awareness." We kind of just push you into it because the Dharma reveals itself. You don't have to figure it out ahead of time. It will show you.

If we just keep learning how to bring full awareness, full tenderness, full presence to whatever it is that's arising, we start to see it clearly. We can't not. Ajahn Sumedho often says the practice of freedom is awareness. Or I put it differently: awareness is the practice of freedom. We don't always notice it because it's just little easeful moments, not a big thing.

One of the wonderful aspects of steady sati, steady mindfulness, steady awareness, is that we do begin to see, to recognize some of how this process of getting all caught up and identified occurs in a moment. What Mark was mentioning last night about a tipping point—where maybe some difficult memory or mood or experience comes up, and there's awareness, so you see it's difficult, that's okay, difficult's like this. There's some thoughts, awareness is noticing the thoughts, it's a little uncomfortable, but it's awareness, it's not really suffering. But at some point there's that tipping point where suddenly it's like, wow, now we're really in it and this is really not okay. What can I do to get out of it? And we're back into

all the old patterns.

What we forget is the intrinsic purity of awareness.

Ajahn Chah—you've probably heard this, it's very well known—about this mind: "Within itself, it's already peaceful. The mind, the heart—remember it's the same word—the mind-heart is not peaceful these days because it follows moods. The real mind is simply an aspect of nature. It becomes happy or agitated because moods deceive it. Sense impressions come and trick it into happiness, suffering, gladness and sorrow, but the mind's true nature is none of those things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind but only a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things. It forgets itself. And then we think it is we who are upset or at ease or whatever. But really this mind of ours is already unmoving and peaceful, really peaceful. Like a leaf which is still as long as no wind blows. If a wind comes up, the leaf flutters. The fluttering is due to the wind." The fluttering is due to those sense impressions. The mind follows them. If it doesn't follow them, it doesn't flutter. "If we know fully the true nature of sense impressions, we will be unmoved."

That's really what I want to talk about tonight. "Our practice is simply to see the original mind. So we train the mind to know those sense impressions and not get lost in them. Just this is the aim of all this difficult practice we put ourselves through." From Ajahn Chah.

So one way of describing our moment-to-moment experience, or what can happen, how we get lost in sense impressions—to use Ajahn Chah's language—I want to talk about two aspects of experience in the mind that the Buddha spoke of, that are arising in every moment of sense contact. They're subtle. They're rising every moment. So sometimes we see them, sometimes we don't. But really seeing how they can, unrecognized, lead us into all this morass of whatever's going on—just by not recognizing what's happening.

These two aspects are two of the five aggregates, things that are rising according to the Buddha's way of looking at our experience in every moment. One of them is perception in English, saññā in Pali. The other is vedanā in Pali, which is feeling tone.

So I'll just describe them and then talk a bit—more than a bit, probably—about each of them.

Saññā, perception, is that simple quality of recognition. This just happens naturally. You hear a sound and immediately the mind, first it knows it's a sound. And then if it knows what it is—oh, bird call. Or if it doesn't know what it is, it makes something up. That's what I'll get into in a minute. But perception, this recognition, is just natural. It's happening all the time. We're not trying to stop that. It's not thinking about it. It's just "oh, that's a robin" or "this is a chair."

And then vedana, this feeling tone, which we've mentioned, is also arising in every moment of sense contact. It's this subtle feeling in the mind of experiencing each sense contact as having a pleasant or an unpleasant or a neither pleasant nor unpleasant neutral flavor. This is a subtle thing. I've always been

really amazed that the Buddha could pick this out, because as you see when I talk about it, it goes so quickly into wanting and aversion that we don't even notice this subtle, quick vedana. But it's arising with every sense contact.

Now, they're both coming together. Sometimes you'll notice one more than the other. You can't necessarily tease them apart. But when we're not aware, the habits of mind with these two things can get us into big trouble—when we're not watching. When we watch, we can just see the lawfulness of how it works.

This is one way it's described by the Buddha: What one feels, one perceives. What one perceives, one thinks about. This is assuming deluded mind. What one thinks about, one complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas, with comparisons, and these notions then assail and overwhelm a person. Like the monk who painted a tiger on the wall of the cave and then turned around and it scared him. This is concocting—the concoction of sense of self, of everything that gets us confused.

I'm going to describe a lot more about that. But to start by just talking about perception: it's happening in every moment, and a lot of the time we don't necessarily notice it. It's a useful thing because one perception can kind of describe—in a way, it puts us in place of the whole world of what we're doing. You hear the bell a little while ago and you know it's the bell, you know what it means for the time of day and the time for the talk, and you know to come in here. And when you come in here there's the perception of zabuton, and which one is yours and which are others', and it's all very helpful because we're having more or less joint perceptions—which is not always the case in this world.

Because perception, as the Buddha talked about, is informed by our life experience. It's really based on our experience and our memory. If I know it's a bird call, it's because I've heard birds before, or someone's told me it's a bird, and I know it.

This is why, depending on how we've grown up in different cultures, in different families, in different ways of looking at the world, the same experience can be perceived very differently by different people. And perception is something that seems so—I mean, it's easy to just take it for granted that my perception is accurate, don't we? We do. Even very simple things.

An interesting little example: I was at a friend's house, and I said something about the blue shawl that was over the sofa. She said, "What blue shawl?" I said, "That blue shawl." She said, "That's not blue, that's green." And then we got into discussion. I really tried—I could not see green. And she could not see blue. And you wonder, is there some objective reality out there? Is it azure? And there's not.

It's all perception. And that's something simple—we weren't going to come to blows about whether it's blue or green. But take that to any other level. Look at different cultural experiences. What's the whole thing with culture shock?

Whenever I've practiced in Asia, the relationship to personal space is very different from the relationship to personal space I grew up with. I want space. I want my room alone. But my Burmese friends—they

don't want to sleep in a room alone. The more people, the better. It's scary to be in a room alone. And then they have to have the light on at night. We Westerners are going, "Turn off the light! We can't sleep with the light on." And they're saying, "No, we can't sleep with the light off." Little things like that, but the perception is just "this is how it is." It's safe with the light on. No, can't sleep with the light on.

Once when I was a nun, I was staying at a monastery, and they were very kind to me. They kept moving me around, but at one point they put me in this huge second-story room—it was like a barn or something. I just had my little mosquito net in the corner. I was the only one in it. Then one day they came and told me I had to leave because some people were coming. Some people. A whole busload of women moved into this room—fifty women moved into this room that I'd had all to myself. They were perfectly happy to be all together.

So perceptions are very different. You see how we can really not recognize that our perception is conditioned—and come to blows about it. That's just one thing. But beyond that, our perceptions, as different as they all are, often aren't really accurate. And this is where we start to get into even more trouble. This is where we're moving into the area of insight.

When I was talking about the experience with my nephew, suddenly the perception got accurate, and then my experience matched his reality and there was no more dissonance. There are a million examples, but here's another simple one.

I was in Burma at a meditation center, walking up this little pathway. At the end of it is a Bodhi tree planted with a round concrete form around it, creating a circular little path. I was walking up, and I saw up by the tree—not that far, maybe halfway to the hall—a nun walking around it with her hands in añjali like this, circumambulating the Bodhi tree. And I thought, "Oh, isn't that sweet? There's so much faith here. It's really inspiring." I was having all these pleasant feelings and thoughts and the perception of faith.

Then I got closer, and she was texting on her cell phone. That burst my bubble. That first perception was delusion, *moha*. I didn't have all the information. And a lot of the time we don't have all the information. Someone has asked, "How do we know when we have all the information?" And a lot of times we don't. So let's always take things with the grain of salt.

I got closer and then realized, oh, she's texting on her cell phone. It didn't have to be a problem, but you just see the delusion and how with perception, the mind—I've noticed this many times—when it doesn't have all the data, it fills in something that's close. It uses some memory: "Oh, that's what it is."

Once I was walking in the woods in Switzerland and I said, "Oh, what's that yellow and white striped circus tent doing here?" I was walking with a friend, and he said, "What, are you out of your mind? Circus tent?" It was just a big rock with yellow lichen on it, with kind of stripes. I want to say I didn't have my glasses on. Let's hope so, but you never know. The mind will just make stuff up.

So just be willing to see that we may not have all the information. That's not really suffering—that's just seeing how perception works. With steady awareness, we start to see clearly instead of just saying, "Okay, that's what it is. She's doing that." You keep on going. You keep on looking. And oh yeah, there's more information. It's different. Steady awareness reveals more accurately. That's what we can trust.

Now, other ways that perception is distorted is when there's kilesa in the consciousness and we're not aware of it. Kilesa is the Pali word that Sayadaw U Tejaniya translates as "defilements" in his book. I prefer kilesa or "torments," which refers to the qualities of greed, of taṇhā, of grasping, aversion, rejection, fear, and moha, delusion.

When greed or wanting, desiring, or aversion, rejecting, resisting is affecting the perception—when it's in the mind, in the consciousness, at the same moment as that perception, and not recognized—then it really can distort the perception. And we don't know. Like, if you're really hungry, what happens if you go to the supermarket when you're really hungry? Have you ever noticed? Not the time to do it. I get home with all this stuff that I'm never going to eat, that I don't even like. "Wow, that looks good," and you just buy it. When the craving's gone, from the perception you look at the thing and go, "What?"

Or when you have a crush on somebody. You look at them, you think about everything about them. It's so wonderful. It's so lovely. You love all their little peccadilloes. And then when the—as one of my friends says—when the desire eyes have fallen off, you go, "I loved that little peccadillo? That's driving me crazy now."

Or later when you're angry at somebody, they look ugly when you look at them. They're not more ugly than they were the day before. It's the distortion of our perception through the anger mind or the desire mind.

Now, that's just, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya has said, desire and aversion doing their job. That's how they act. When they're present in the mind, that's what they do. Steady awareness helps us start to recognize that's what's happening. That's why we're always on about this: Notice when there's a sense of dissonance, a sense of dis-ease in your awareness. You know you're aware, but there's a sense of dis-ease in relationship to what's happening. Check it out. Just check out and see. What's the tone? What's the attitude? What's the flavor in the mind that's aware?

For me, often I'll look and I'll be looking—I know something's there, so there must be craving—and no, there's no craving. It's just open and natural. And I just hang there for a minute, and suddenly it's like, "Oh my God, it's filled with craving. It's so filled with craving I didn't even notice it."

It was just comfortable and easy.

So this is just a short introduction, but I want to emphasize how perception is completely subjective, completely conditional, and how easy it is for us to not even notice this and to absolutely think "this is the truth"—and how perception gets distorted when we're not recognizing the presence of suffering mental

states in our mind.

When we do recognize them, as I described with my nephew, when there are difficult mental states and we suddenly recognize accurately, all that extra stuff drops away because it doesn't make any sense anymore. We simply say, "It's like this now." The actuality doesn't change—that's the power of correct perception. The actuality doesn't change, but our understanding of what's happening comes into alignment. And then there's not the dissonance, there's not the struggle, there's not the trying to change it. We're not relating to something that isn't happening, which is what we're doing much of the time.

This is a whole other talk and I don't have time to go into it fully, but the Buddha speaks extensively about inversions of perception, or what might be called hallucinations of perception. In the really deep Dhamma understanding, the perceptions that are inaccurate—that are continually reinforced by the habits of our mind—include seeing permanence where nothing is permanent. We simply don't recognize the changing nature of things, so often. Intellectually we know it, but the perception is "no, it's steady." And when it goes, we think, "Where did that go?"

In terms of dukkha, we don't recognize the unsatisfactory nature of experience. Something can even be pleasant, but we think it's going to hang around—not seeing the impermanence—and really make us happy, not recognizing that nothing can truly do that.

And the third, of course, is the frequent perception of a self, a solid self, where there isn't one. Because perception arises in every moment of experience, and we're not recognizing this, the sense of self feels like, "Yes, sure, that's just how it is." So there are countless moments of that reinforcement. When we're not exploring, when we're not bringing in steady awareness, that pattern just keeps getting strengthened. It feels—I was going to say comfortable. It may not feel pleasant. The sense of self is often the biggest pain in the neck there is. But it's like an old comfortable bathrobe. You just want to cuddle up in it, even though it's disgusting. I don't know where that image came from.

Anyway, my point is that inaccurate perception isn't just a superficial thing. It's happening every moment.

Now I want to move into vedana—feeling tone. Putting perception and vedana together is how things really get rolling.

I'm sure most of you, though perhaps not all, are familiar with the way the Buddha described vedana: that sense of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral that arises in every moment of sense experience, often without our really noticing.

So we're going through our day, and every sight, sound, thought, mood, taste, smell, sensation in the body—how many sense experiences happen through the day, if you count every thought as one? I don't know, millions perhaps. You know how many, because it's every waking moment, very quickly. Each one of those moments involves a perception, and there's the vedana, quick as lightning: pleasant, unpleasant, or neither one.

And here's what the Buddha saw with real genius: when this goes unnoticed, the tendency of mind is that of course we like pleasant, we don't like unpleasant, basically. Neutral—maybe we notice it, maybe we don't. In our kind of hopped-up culture with so much information coming in, neutral almost veers into unpleasant for some people. We don't know what to do with it. We've got to fix it.

Going through our day, going through our life, our mind is practicing the habit of liking whenever it's pleasant, not liking whenever it's unpleasant. You're probably sitting there thinking, "Well, of course. Who likes unpleasant?" And so that just seems normal and natural. It is—it's nature. But because this seems to be just how it is, the sense of pleasantness and unpleasantness comes to be the way we really describe and define ourselves and the world—what we do and what we don't do, what we want, what's beneficial and what's not. At times this is really gross and obvious, but at other times it's extremely subtle.

The habit—and I'm putting out information here, so don't believe me, just keep looking and see for yourself because it gets fascinating—see if this is true for you. We've really cultivated this habit. So the sense of unpleasant experience that happens, often an unpleasant mood arises, and we turn it against ourselves: "There's something wrong with me."

An unpleasant mood came up. The sense that pleasant is better and that—let's come back to practice, really at the bottom line—look in the back of your mind. I keep finding this; it keeps slipping in there. I think I'm practicing to see the truth, but it veers into what's more pleasant. If it's going right, shouldn't it be more pleasant? Isn't that a sign that things are going the way they're supposed to? And when a sudden unpleasant thing comes up, it's a problem.

And this again is because of the moving into the pleasant. Then we end up just with the habit of desire—getting more pleasant, getting more pleasant, getting more pleasant. And with unpleasant, it's like push it away. Don't be with it. I don't want to be with it. I don't know how to be with it. And I shouldn't have to be with it because it should not be happening. It should only be pleasant.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was quite a great Thai forest meditation master and also a scholar—and a character; I spent some time there, and he was a character—he said once that ninety-five percent of everything we do is for pleasant feeling. So that's where we get even more to it: we think we're wanting the thing, but really what we want is this pleasant feeling. And it's so ephemeral. It's like this. Same with unpleasant feeling—it's so ephemeral. And we're not used to noticing it, and we get lost into the greed, into the aversion, and that just feels like, of course, the normal response.

This is what the Buddha was talking about when he saw that we really want to be happy, and we keep doing the thing that keeps us suffering. Because in following this—going for the pleasant, going for the pleasant, feeding the craving, feeding the habit of craving, feeding the habit of aversion—that's never going to work. But we don't see it because it didn't work this time, or this one went away, so then there's the next one, then there's the next one, then there's the next one. Endless, right? That's samsara. Just the leaning into the next thing, the leaning out of this thing. This one doesn't work, go for the next one. "Ah, I

finally was with this unpleasant—ah, thank God it went away, I finally learned how to do mindfulness right"—and then there's the next, and then there's the next, when we're really in it.

The Buddha has one sutta where he talks about this that I love, because he's just really describing how these habits get inculcated in our heart and mind. And I find it poignant—that's the word I use—because it really touches me about our human condition. He's saying, what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person? So that gets our attention. What's the difference?

And he says both—awakened and unawakened people—both experience pleasant vedana, unpleasant vedana, and neither. Both. He's not saying that if you get enlightened, unpleasant vedana stops. Both experience all three. So what's the difference?

And he says when a regular person is touched by a painful, by an unpleasant—and he uses bodily sensation to start with—he worries, he grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Can you relate to that? When your knee starts hurting? It's as if you were shot with an arrow and you shoot yourself with another arrow. So we can notice how we do that. Something unpleasant happens, and immediately we go to aversion and we start railing about it. We've ramped it up.

But this is what really touches me. Having been touched by the unpleasant feeling, she resists it and resents it. And so then in one who resists unpleasant feeling, the underlying tendency of resistance, of aversion, of negativity, comes to underlie the mind. It just becomes a habit to resist the unpleasant.

And this is the pain. Under the impact of that painful, unpleasant feeling, one then proceeds to enjoy sensual happiness. Why? Because an untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful, unpleasant feeling except the enjoyment of sensual happiness. And so then that becomes the tendency to crave, to lust for sense pleasure, just for pleasant feeling. And that craving comes to underlie the mind, becomes a habit.

I just find that so, so sad really. That in the normal world, and certainly how I grew up, the only way—even if it's unconscious—the only way when something painful or unpleasant is happening, the only way out, he's saying, that ordinary people know, is to go do something pleasant. You know, open the fridge and eat some ice cream when you're feeling bad. It's not like it's a bad thing. It's not like it's wrong to go enjoy something pleasant. Sometimes it can be helpful when we're all lost. But when that's the only out we know, then the habit of aversion and resistance to the unpleasant, the habit of lusting and going toward the pleasant—that becomes the habit that underlies the mind.

And then he goes into neutral feeling, and he says there's a tendency to ignorance as to neutral feelings. You don't even know them. This becomes the habit of mind.

And then he says you experience these vedanas, these feeling tones—I say feeling tones because we use "feelings" to mean moods and more complex mental experience—one experiences these feeling tones as if fettered by them, as if chained by them. Like, oh, this is unpleasant. We don't even notice the unpleasant

itself; we're lost in all this world of suffering around it.

And the difference in the case of an awakened person? When they're touched by the painful feeling, they don't worry or grieve or lament or beat their breast or tear their hair. So they experience one kind of unpleasant feeling, not two kinds of unpleasant feeling. And because they understand, they understand according to facts how these feeling tones work—the arising and the ending of these feelings—they don't need to run away from it.

So they understand. Touched by the painful feeling, they do not resist it. So there's no underlying tendency of resistance. They don't need to go searching for sensual pleasure, so there's no underlying tendency or habit of greed. Just able to be fully present with whatever feeling comes, experiencing the feeling tone as one who is not fettered by it. It's just what it is. There's no need to run away, there's no need to do anything. It comes, it goes.

Really, it's the knowing of impermanence, but also of the fact that pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—is rotating through life. And that's not the way to happiness, to get rid of one. It's not the only way to evaluate what's useful.

So you put these two together: inaccurate perception and the tendency to get lost in wanting or aversion. And it really can take us very far, very quickly. To start to watch it is really quite interesting.

I just want to say something about the escape, because this is part of why practice is so hard. Even if you haven't recognized how the concoction came to be, you know you're in, say, an unpleasant experience. And there's aversion there. And you can see that—there's enough awareness, you know the aversion. But we can see aversion, and it's really hard to be with, isn't it? It's like all our training says: get the heck out of here. And so it just feels so wrong to hang out with aversion. Aversion has really been driving us.

Or the reverse: when there's strong desire in the mind and the heart, we really focus on the thing desired. But one interesting thing about retreat is that the same strength of desire and aversion can come up about little things. Have you noticed that? And it can make it easier to be willing to hang out, just hang out with a desire without acting on it.

Because sometimes it's harder to convince yourself absolutely that that thing is the most important thing in your life. You can see that whether you get a banana at breakfast or not—you can't really totally convince yourself that it's absolutely essential.

So going against our habits, sometimes when the desire isn't so strong, this is where we let the awareness stay steady. We take our refuge in awareness and hang out with the wanting. If you're walking and wanting comes, keep on walking and just let the awareness be with the wanting. See what it does, see how it feels. It's unpleasant. We're trained to do anything not to feel it. But it'll go away. And then there's the peace that was there before the wanting. You didn't have to get the banana for peace. Peace is available. We can move into the awareness. Learning that.

Same with aversion. Something Tejaniya says, in terms of really bringing awareness when there's kilesa in the heart, in the mind, distorting perception—he talks about how the degree to which the suffering mental state comes into the mind could be like from one to ten, how strong it is. And we tend, like say with aversion or fear or even grief, when it's little we think, "I don't have to pay attention to it yet. I'm just being mindful. There's a little aversion, it's okay." We don't want to pay attention. We wait till it gets really up to number eight or number nine, and then it's—forget it. It's stronger than the awareness. We're lost.

So he always says, take care of your awareness. Notice it as soon as it's there, when it's little, when it's like a one or a two—notice it then. And it's really true. I find now in my life, I'm often, not always, but kind of happy when I see a little aversion come up. Not a big one, but just some little thing. I'm driving, someone cuts me off, a little aversion. Wow, great to see. Great to see. Because in the seeing, then the awareness is really where the trust is. "Oh yeah, that's aversion. See it come, see it go." I'm not landing in it. It's not making the decisions. But when we're not really recognizing it, it's making the decisions a lot of the time.

So when we decide to do something, that intention—that's a mental movement that is informed by whatever particular mood or mental state is in the mind. And it's conditioned like everything else. If you make a decision, it seems like you're making it, but you walk into the dining room and you're deciding where to sit at lunch. Just a little thing. Just be aware of what's going on in the mind. Notice the perceptions. You walk in and people are there already. "Ah, I don't want to sit next to that person." Unpleasant. These are little. You maybe don't even say it, you don't even feel that unpleasant. "Oh, I'm going over there. Oh, that's in the sun. I'm going over there. That'll be nice." First bummer, negativity. "Where else can I go?"

Just watch how much subtle aversion to unpleasant, how much subtle going towards something we envision is going to be pleasant, is driving the bus. It's really fun to watch because we want to know these things.

We don't want our only escape from unpleasant feeling to be getting something pleasant, because then when the pleasant doesn't come, we're lost. We don't know what to do. We think peace isn't available until we get the pleasant again, and that's way too conditioned.

So how can these two come together to create a big story? I use this example often, but just to see how perception and vedana—pleasant, unpleasant, aversion, and greed—can create a whole storm. This is papañca. We think about it, we complicate it, it creates all kinds of moods and responses that assail us and torment us.

A friend of mine was doing a retreat many years ago in a rented facility in Switzerland. They have these old camp houses, like two or three-story wooden houses that they use for children's camps in the summer. But they're not winterized, not insulated, so they can't use them in the winter. Just at the end of summer, they would rent them for retreats. This was her first retreat, so she didn't have a lot of experience, no experience, no dalai lama wisdom.

In this house, on what we would call the second floor, was the big room that was the meditation hall, and then an equal room below it was the walking room—sort of like here, but no insulation at all, just thin wooden floors. So anywhere you moved in that house, she said, creak, creak, creak. You could hear it everywhere.

They were in a scheduled sitting. This was scheduled sitting and walking all day. And this was Switzerland—you follow schedules in Switzerland. That's part of the cultural conditioning. You follow the schedules.

So they were in the sitting, and she was doing ānāpānasati, following her breath. Remember, she's new to this, so she's just trying to get really present with the breath. And then she heard creaking—somebody walking downstairs, back and forth. Creaking, creaking, creaking. It was completely distracting her from the breath. You can probably relate.

The immediate aversion arose: "This is ruining my meditation! I was finally getting to feel the breath and this person starts walking." So there's the perception of the person walking, the unpleasant feeling of that, and then the thought, "They're disturbing my meditation." There's a perception, a view of how the meditation was and how it should be, leading into more views. And every time a creak came, the attention just got glommed into the unpleasant.

Have you ever noticed that? There's something unpleasant and your attention just gets glommed into it. So every creak, she glommed in. "It's ruining my meditation, I can't feel my breath, and you shouldn't be doing it, and it's the schedule..." She got all worked up. And there was nothing to do, because she would never get up and go downstairs in the middle of the sitting and yell at the person.

So finally—whether it was out of wisdom or just out of dumb luck—she just dropped back into the present moment experience and started feeling the breath again, just however it was. It's sort of like we tell you: when the mind's all caught up in something, just shift the attention to something more neutral. So she did that. She went back to the breath and started feeling the physical experience.

And then she noticed she was leaning against the wall. Whenever she breathed in, her back went into the wall, and that's what was making the noise. It wasn't somebody walking downstairs.

Well, you can imagine all that anger about that person. The perception was wrong—delusion, fed by aversion, the whole story fed by aversion. She was really suffering a lot. Seeing that, that whole mass of suffering went away. Now, she probably—knowing her, and it being her first retreat—replaced it with self-blame and aversion, because she didn't really see the whole process. But I love that example because we can see in it exactly how perception and vedana, unaware, when we're not aware of the process, can take us anywhere. And we really can suffer.

So you get a sense. We can play with this here on retreat. That's a simple one I told, but this is where we go all the time anyway. There might be a difficult mood coming up. That's okay. There's going to be sadness.

There's going to be grief. It's not that the stuff shouldn't come up. It's the difference between meeting what's happening—"It's like this now"—with awareness.

"Oh, I'm angry because of it. I don't know why I'm angry." But anger's arising. And sometimes it will come and you don't know the reason. You can just be with it, with a kind of purity. Feel how it feels in the body. Notice the thoughts coming and going, but not going into story, not going into changing it, not going into aversion. Just perceiving it as it is without needing to have all the information. And it goes—it really goes—in the light of awareness.

These are subtle things. You're not always going to see this process clearly. But what happens as we take more and more refuge in awareness is that we start to get more and more interested in the process itself, rather than jumping into each particular experience—"this is good because it's pleasant, this is bad because it's unpleasant"—and getting entranced by our reactions and all the perceptions. As we get more and more interested in the process, awareness gets stronger. And as it becomes a bit more continuous, you really start to see the whole conditionality, the cause and effect relationship. You really start to know.

There are times when you see clearly: "I could really... that's unpleasant. I want... I could really pick that up, but I need to just be with unpleasant right now." Wisdom comes in and starts to make those decisions in little ways.

This is nothing major, but it's just popping into my mind as an example—the dining room thing again. On retreats, I like space. I don't like to be cramped up next to people. So I'd always try to look for the right spot when I was on retreat here. And the same with food. I'd want to go and be sure I got there before it ran out. It's not going to run out, don't worry. We used to run out when we didn't have enough money. It doesn't run out now.

Then I noticed one retreat, I just wasn't even thinking about it. I'd go in and maybe I'd look and think, "That's not such a good spot," and I'd just sit down wherever there was space. And I'd just go and whatever food was there, I'd eat it. It was so peaceful. It was so peaceful. And all that agitation—"I've got to get the right thing"—it takes so much energy. This is what we start to discover with the steadiness of awareness.

This is from Mingyur Rinpoche: "Discovering our own awareness allows us to access the natural steadiness and clarity of the mind, which exists independent of conditions and circumstances, independent of our emotions and moods. Awareness does not increase or decrease whether we are happy or sad."

So if we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness—and that's what we're doing, just in a simple way—if we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness, we comprehend that awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind is. That's really interesting. Don't think about it too much, but let that idea drop in. This allows us to discover a sense of peace and stability that is not dependent on the presence or absence of pleasant or unpleasant feelings.

I can say I know this is really true. There are little moments we can experience it—not a whole steady state all the time—but play with this. Just that sense of being all caught up in suffering, and then that tai chi move into awareness: "It's like this." You're touching, just for that moment, that inherent calmness, that sense of ease, that sense of peace. It's not a huge peace, just "ah." Let yourself notice those moments. Don't make a big deal of it—go home and write a whole book about it and it's gone.

These moments often involve neutral feeling, and this is where I think neutral can be kind of interesting. They say neutral is where the kilesa that comes out is moha—we just space out, we just don't notice. But many things like calm and peace and stability also have the quality sometimes of neutrality, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And it's really interesting to see that the habit of moha around neutral means that sometimes when you're actually experiencing peace or freedom from kilesa, you kind of don't quite notice it. We don't quite notice it. We're looking for the big lights to go off—enlightenment! We don't just notice, "Ah, there's this ease. This unpleasant experience is like this, and in the awareness there's an ease, and the unpleasant thing's still going on." Awareness doesn't care. Notice these little moments. Then you start looking for them, and you notice the craving, and okay—you notice that, and there it is again.

So neutral is really an interesting thing. I think I mentioned this, perhaps in a group: often on long retreats—three-month retreats or month-long retreats—people will come in and say, "Well, nothing's happening." Deep into the retreat, I ask, "Nothing? You're sitting there, absolutely nothing?" "Well, no," they say, and they describe all this stuff they're seeing and hearing. But nothing, you know, nothing really interesting. I ask, "Could that be calm?" "Oh, calm. Oh, yeah, calm." And then they notice their mind creating all kinds of imaginary difficult scenarios, because that's better. The mind will create trouble because it amps up the sense of me. Calm—there's not so much "me" hanging around. It's just calm.

So start to notice that, generating a contentment with just the simplicity of awareness, a contentment with the mind that doesn't have to go get pleasant or run away from unpleasant. In just little moments, the mind not going out to experience and getting over-involved, just letting experience come and go and really feeling it, but not with this looking for some big meaning out of it, looking for fulfillment. The awareness itself, the sense of steady awareness, the sense of this natural peace and ease, comes to be more and more trustworthy. And we lose it—we know we lose it a lot. But it's not like it has to be created over time. It's, "Oh yeah, right. Awareness of unpleasant is like this." That's what we're practicing here.

Upasika Kee, who was a Thai laywoman and a great teacher, wrote this book called *Pure and Simple*, which is a lovely book if you want to look it up. She was very much "this is how it is"—tough. I mean, you read about these old Thai forest people and how they were practicing, they were tough cookies, I tell you. Anyway, she says, "What is, is. What is not, is not. There's no need to add anything extra." That's like the whole teaching in a nutshell, right?

Does that sound unbearably bleak? It's not, you know. We think, "Oh well, it's nothing. It's calm. It's just this big, empty, dull space." And it's not at all. When we're not needing something from experience, when

we're not having to push it away, we're able to be fully present in this moment. It's what it is—I'm not going to say it's always delicious and beautiful. Sometimes it's unpleasant. But it's like a totality of presence with just this. That's really, to me, much more alive than chasing after pleasant whatever-it-is, or having to run away from unpleasant.

And sure, the more unpleasant something is, the harder it is to see through our habits. But when there's just a little fraction of a moment of this peacefulness of awareness, even in the midst of some difficult thing—just a little moment shot through and then the difficulty, you're in it again—to me, that's extremely powerful. It really strengthens the faith, the sense of "Yes, I know this is true." The habit right now of getting lost and identified with aversion is in this moment stronger. But suddenly there's a moment of, "Oh yeah, it's like this now. What is, is. No need to fight it." And there's that peace, that contentment, that stability of mind. This is really possible for all of us.

I'll just end with this from the Buddha. There's a sutta in this book, *The Island*—I don't know if you know this book—that Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno from Abhayagiri Monastery put together. "The island" is a reference to Nibbana, and they're pulling out various suttas. They're great scholars.

One's Canadian and one's English. And this is in California. But they're both scholars. They've been monks in the Thai forest tradition under Ajahn Sumedho for many years. And so they've pulled out—it's quite a thick book—all different suttas talking about various aspects of Nibbana and enlightenment, along with their own understanding. It's a great resource.

From this book, they point to a sutta where the Buddha speaks about how a great deal of our practice leads to disenchantment—getting out of this entrancement with our reactions, with wanting, with aversion, with "me, me, me." So much of our practice is just what I was talking about: seeing how the deluded mind works. And the more awareness sees it, the magic show falls apart. We don't get so caught up, and there's more ease.

But also at times, they say, the Buddha talked about simply inclining the mind toward the peacefulness of Nibbana—almost as a contemplation. Not always so caught up.

And this is the reflection. He says: "A bhikkhu reflects thus: This is peaceful. This is sublime—that is, the stilling of all mental activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, disenchantment, release."

Now, that's not a craving, but just—how often do we incline our mind simply to this? This is sublime. A sense of peace. A sense of not craving. Not a whole lot of action going on, but just beginning to incline toward appreciating that. It's a beautiful thing. Something to drop into your mind from time to time. It's not always a struggle.

So that's part of what we're doing here with our steady awareness practice.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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