Wisdom and Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:47

Tonight I want to talk about wisdom and awareness. That's pretty much it for the month. But really, I want to start by talking more about wisdom.

As you are aware, wise understanding or right view—however you want to translate it—is the first step of the Eightfold Path. You could think of wisdom, or freedom of heart and mind, as the beginning, the thread that goes through all of our life of spiritual development. And it keeps strengthening wisdom throughout.

To begin our practice, to begin each day, we really need to remind ourselves again and again of the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Again and again he said why he was even teaching was to free our hearts and minds from suffering, from confusion. That was the really deep—and maybe not only, but the main—motivation of everything that he taught.

When we come to our spiritual life, our spiritual practice, it is essential to begin from this, to really hold it in our heart and mind. As the Buddha said, do not settle for anything less than real freedom of heart and mind from suffering. Not even wholesome states of mind. How often have we said, "Okay, that's good enough. It's pretty good right now." We don't actually say "I'd settle for it," but there's a sense of "it's enough already." Not even settling for wholesome states of mind.

This is what can really bring us a depth of commitment, of faith, and the willingness to hang in there—not only on retreat, but in our whole life. The willingness to hang in there when everything gets tough, to really embrace this potential, this aspiration, in whatever language is true for you or touches your own sense of aspiration. This isn't to create craving. That's why I like chanting the Refuges and Precepts—it's really a way of honoring the depth and power of what we're doing and reminding ourselves why. It gives a whole strength to our practice, even when we're just schlumping along one foot in front of the other, thinking, "What am I doing here?" We don't think of this every moment, but it has an effect in the mind stream. It strengthens our faith.

I was listening to a talk by Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche. He's the older brother of Tsoknyi and Mingyur Rinpoche. He seems like a very sweet man. I don't know him, but he said liberation practice means that we practice the Dharma with deep motivation, not only for some ease and happiness in this life. When we start our practice with this understanding, with this potential of really freeing our heart and mind from suffering, it will bring faith and confidence and real strength to our practice.

I'm saying this here for people who are on a month-long retreat. I might not say that to a group that had a lot of beginners in it, because saying "not only practicing for some ease and happiness in this life"—I

mean, mostly why do any of us begin practice? We'd like some ease and happiness in this life. That's not a bad thing. We're not throwing that out the window. But by the time we've done as much practice, as much commitment in our life as people here, I know I'm not saying anything new. I just want to highlight the power of reconnecting with the depth of wisdom that the Buddha is offering and reminding ourselves that's why we're doing this. This isn't an aspiration of "I'm no good, I'll never get there." It's like, "Yeah, right." It's not just to feel good. Doesn't that help in the fifty percent of the time that you don't feel good here? That's what we're here for.

Whatever type of technique of meditation we're doing—we're doing one particular one here—whatever aspect of bhavana, of mental cultivation we undertake coming from any aspect of the Buddhist teaching, it's all with this potential for real freedom from suffering. All the different techniques are coming out of that and offering us a way to wisdom, to understanding.

What is the wisdom, the freedom from suffering, that the Buddha's talking about? How am I going to talk about it? Let's put it that way. I am in no way saying that I am encompassing all the wisdom the Buddha talked about, please.

The freedom he's talking about—of our hearts and minds not being caught in suffering—is not that we get a different world or a different body, or that people start acting more appropriately in this world, doing what we want, or that injustice and bias and hatred and war and racism and everything stops. No. But it's really that we understand ourselves and the world differently. This is what I love about the freedom, the wisdom of heart and mind that the Buddha is talking about.

It's like right here—the way things already are doesn't have to change. The confusion and suffering arise simply because we don't recognize ourselves or experience the world accurately. And when we recognize inaccurately, we respond inappropriately, and we suffer.

The Dalai Lama has said that so much of our unhappiness originates within our own minds and hearts. It originates in how we react to events in our life—so-called internal, so-called external. The freedom that the Buddha is offering us is not freedom from the events or the experience. It's not freedom from the unpleasant.

We all know that on one level, right? But how many times do you find yourself—I certainly do—getting caught back up in that subtle or not so subtle assessment that this experience is *wrong* because it's unpleasant. We don't say that exactly. It is unpleasant, and so the assessment is it's wrong, or I'm wrong. And we carry this sense that our freedom is heading us toward a beautiful land of pleasant, pleasant, pleasant—just getting better and better, going up and up in a nice steady way. More and more pleasant until finally it's just a big blast of pleasantness, and we never have to experience ourselves or anything we don't like again.

Yes, we laugh, but look in there. What are you really thinking sometimes? It's a riot when you really look

at it.

So the Buddha really shared what he recognized when he woke up. The world wasn't different, but with the eyes of wisdom, the heart-mind of wisdom, we see things the way they are. We simply recognize nature, Dhamma, the way it actually is. And our reactions and responses that are based in confusion just stop for a moment. We see that the seeds of suffering and the seeds of freedom are rising moment to moment, here and now, in this mind, in this heart. This is what we can really come to understand. This is what I think our practice is about—recognizing accurately.

Mingyur Rinpoche, the younger brother of Tsoknyi Rinpoche—quite the family those guys, you know. Their father, Tulku Urgyen, was one of the greatest Dzogchen masters of the last century. Anyway, Mingyur says, "If we want to be happy, we must figure out what causes and conditions lead to well-being. Similarly, if we don't have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how can we possibly expect to free ourselves from it?"

You can see how this is leading into our steady awareness practice. Right view, right understanding—we can think of that on so many levels. One level of right understanding or right view is really quite literal: recognizing experience accurately. Just recognizing accurately in a moment—that's a moment of insight. That moment frees our heart and mind. Little moments, but they count. Notice them. It frees us from the suffering of inappropriate reactions.

This is really amazing. The wisdom, the freedom the Buddha's talking about isn't that we have to have some amazing experience somewhere. It's the natural order of things. When our perception, when our awareness is really present and not confused, we see how things are. Then the suffering aspects—basically greed, hatred, and confusion—they don't arise in that moment because they don't make sense.

A lot of the translations use words like *abandon* and *uproot*, and that can be useful in a way at times when we say, "Okay, not now." But I know for me, those words slide into a subtle sense of bad, aversion, get rid of. And the way my mind works—and I doubt I'm the only one whose mind works this way—as soon as I think, "These are the causes of suffering, I must uproot them," what's going on right away? Bad, get rid of, aversion. And that's exactly back in the same cycle.

That's why the steadiness of simple awareness without judging, without picking and choosing—the willingness to be with what's happening and see how it works—is so profoundly liberating. It really doesn't seem like much of anything. You're just being aware of clinging for the ten millionth time, right? What the heck? This doesn't seem like it has anything to do with freedom, because we want it now, and we want it the way we want it.

But this is really changing the whole show. The more we come to really trust, to take refuge—or as Ajahn Sumedho says when he's really caught up in something or having a hard time or his personality's being challenged—"I would just determine to take refuge in awareness." Sometimes we have to just say to

ourselves, "Yes, I'm going to cultivate awareness, even though this is a complete mess. I'm totally caught in it. There's no way. It's hopeless. It's like this."

Sometimes we just determine. So this is really the power of awareness to reveal reality. Reality reveals itself. And that is the wisdom that leads to freedom of heart and mind.

A simple example I often use of the effect of accurate recognition—of how it just frees the heart and mind from suffering—involves a small child. I got this from watching my young nephew growing up. He's four now, but when he was two, he was learning those simple games where you have blocks of different shapes—square, triangle, circle—and you have a board where you put the right shape in the right hole.

For a little kid who doesn't know how to do that yet, they see the parents do it. You go plop, plop, plop, and it looks simple. And then he would take the block, but he'd have the triangle and try to jam it in the circle, and it didn't work. And he didn't know why it didn't work, because all he saw is if you put it in, it works. So he's trying, it's not working, and frustration and anger arise—whatever's going on.

Expand it as if it were an adult. It's either like, "There's something they're not telling me. There's a secret of how to do it, and they're not telling me." Or they are somehow setting me up, or I'm really stupid, or this is a stupid game anyway—you know, all the things, until the blocks go flying across the room.

And at some point with a little kid, as they keep doing it, maybe there's a mistake the first time and the circle goes in the circle. Ah! But he doesn't really see why. It was just by chance. But little by little, the attention gets a little older, there's a little bit more steadiness of attention. And at some point, the perception matches what's happening. He really sees the difference of the shapes and how they match the holes. And then it goes in. And every time it's simple.

And all that other stuff just goes away, doesn't it? It doesn't make any sense anymore. He doesn't have to say, "Now I need to uproot this frustration," because it's gone, right? "Oh, they were telling me the secret." It just doesn't make sense anymore.

So that's just natural. That's nature. That's what happens when we recognize, or the mind-heart recognizes, accurately. But we can't exactly think our way into this. Lord knows we've tried, but we can't really think our way into it, because we don't know what we don't know. You know what I mean?

The nephew doesn't know why it's not working. And then when it's working, you can go back and see why. But we don't know what steady awareness is going to reveal. And if we think we're looking for something, that gets in the way. The insight is just that sense of, "Oh, it's like this now." It's just so clear. There may be thinking about it, some understanding, something mental, but then you don't really need to hold onto it. It's an understanding that's there for that moment, for that particular experience.

So this is really like a very simple corollary to the wisdom that the Buddha's talking about. It's nothing personal. It's just that when the awareness is not steady, or when it's distorted by wanting or confusion or

thinking about something else or looking for something—just not really present—when it's like that, we just don't recognize how things are. But when it's cleared up, it's just like the laws of nature. A triangle fits in the triangle hole. That's not really going to change. It's the laws of nature.

So we stop fighting when we see how things are. The classic things that are talked about, of course, are recognizing impermanence, recognizing not-self, recognizing the unsatisfactory nature.

I'm not going to go into those tonight. But I'm sure all of you have had moments when one or the other, or all of those ways that experience truly is, becomes really palpable. Am I right? In some sense we forget it later, but when it's there, it's like, "Oh, there's no point in arguing about the fact that everything's changing, because it's just how it is." All the arguing does is create the suffering. All the resisting does is create the suffering. And that's so obvious. It's just nature. It's just how it is. It's like fighting gravity. Or fighting the body that's aging—which we do, which really helps a lot. I'll just tell you, it really, really helps. It just adds.

Everybody's body is aging. I'm just noticing it more lately, I don't know why. And I can really—it's fun to play with, actually. It is. Because I can see certain moments when it's, "This is not okay. It can't be like this. It wasn't like this two years ago, and it is not okay that it is like this now." And then at some point it's like, "Get a grip. This is how it is." And when the mind, the attention, arrives at, "Oh, this is how it is right now"—there's not a past, there's not a future, there's no fighting—it's just like this now. It's fine. It's just fine. Because the problem isn't in what's happening; it's in the mind making up a whole story and wanting and confusion and holding around it. It's like this now. There's nothing to fight about that. Remember I said the other morning, Byron Katie's line: when you fight with reality, you lose.

So this is really the wisdom that the Buddha's talking about—just the laws of nature. It's how it is. It's kind of sad and shocking, in a way, that so much of our energy, so much of the stories we tell ourselves, the ways that we perhaps unconsciously describe or think of ourselves in the world, are not in sync with how things are. And I'm not about to go and ask, "Why did it start like that?" The Buddha lists four things—and I'm only going to mention one of them—four things that will make you crazy, basically, to think about. And one of them is the beginning of things. So we won't go there. But we can look at how it is now.

So how do we recognize accurately? What does block or obstruct the arising of wisdom? As I say, this arising of wisdom, accurate recognition, is a lawful process. It's not like what I thought when I first started practicing. I thought I did whatever they told me, and I tried, tried, tried, and push, push, push. But in the back of my mind was the feeling that at some point, some kind of magical occurrence would happen. Something would descend from the clouds, or something would blast apart in my mind. And somehow—I didn't know how—boom, wisdom and freedom would come. But it's extremely lawful. Everything has cause and effect; nothing arrives just magically from the sky. And mindful awareness, the steadiness, the perseverance of mindful non-judging awareness, is absolutely the key. It's such an amazing tool for its simplicity, for its availability.

I'm sure you've heard the Buddha talking about Nibbana, saying this Nibbana is visible here and now. To what extent? For Nibbana you can substitute freedom from suffering. To what extent is it visible here and now? To the extent that greed, that hatred, that confusion are not present in the citta, in the mind stream, in the heart stream, in a particular moment.

Because these distort. This is what obstructs, what prevents accurate recognition.

Now, right here this starts to get a little bit tricky in the ways a lot of our minds work. Because I'm saying that these three qualities—and we talk about them all the time—are the qualities that when they're present and not recognized, perception is distorted, understanding is distorted. They lead to suffering and confusion.

Can we hear that without the mind jumping into the habit of "this is good and this is bad," "I like this, I don't like that"? Right away, we're into "these are bad, they must be uprooted, they shouldn't be happening." Does that come up at all? I mean, that's just how the mind has been trained to think, really.

And so this is where the steady awareness is a complete game changer in the ways that we meet moment-to-moment experience. Yes, when these qualities are present in a moment of mind, a moment of citta, and not recognized, they do lead us astray. We recognize inaccurately, we draw the wrong conclusions from experience, and then we act on them, even very simply.

Say there's a really loud sound, and the aversion—unrecognized—that that sound shouldn't be happening. "I'm suffering because of that sound." We may or may not then act on it, do something about it. We may even stop the sound. And then we think, "Now I'm not suffering anymore. I fixed the sound"—which is adding delusion on top of the aversion, because that just keeps feeding the ideas we have: if I can control experience, then I'll be happy. That's what happiness is, right? That's the definition, really, of samsara. The Tibetans say samsara is the urge to correct. Fix it, fix it, fix it.

And so whether it's that or whether it's a really nice experience—a beautiful sight, a lovely smell, the sight of lunch, or whatever—and we don't quite recognize that sense of greed coming in, the going after, the sense of maybe excitement or uplifting or getting something and tasting something good. There's nothing wrong with any of that. But not recognizing the greed when it's there really focuses us on the object and makes that particular object or experience the source of our ease, the source of our happiness. And again, we just keep on in samsara, in suffering, not seeing clearly.

With all of these three, but particularly with greed and aversion—two sides of the same coin. You know, tanha, when the Buddha talked about the cause of suffering, the second noble truth, the cause of our confusion. He chose tanha as the cause, which could translate as craving, as thirst really. Thirst. We use "desire" in English to cover a lot of different states. So tanha is thirst, and that can be the craving for or the craving to push away. Either way. So we get aversion and clinging both in there.

And the thing about it—we're so seduced. Our hearts and minds are so seduced by the habits of craving

and the habits of aversion. This is really, in a way, what we've been taught through the culture, through growing up: that the unpleasant is what makes us suffer, the pleasant is what makes us happy.

The craving, even in the definition in the second noble truth—the Buddha says something like, "tanha, accompanied by delight, now here and now there, looking for happiness now here and now there." But that phrase "the craving accompanied by delight"—I think that's a really interesting way of phrasing it, because we do so often mistake the craving for a kind of happiness.

Which, as you know, those of you who've been watching craving arising ten million times and just can't bear it another moment, you go, "How could I ever mistake this for happiness?" And that's part of the mystery. But basically, it's so habitual—okay, I'm speaking for myself—it's so habitual to arise. It's become such a deep habit that as soon as craving comes up, we go with it. It feels right. It's so comfortable. We don't tend to question it in normal life.

If we're not even looking at our experience—just going with it—we don't even think craving is a problem. We don't even notice craving, frankly. We just go after the thing. Or with that unpleasant sound, we may notice aversion, but still it's all about the sound. And of course I don't like to be with the unpleasant—what masochistic person does? Only a masochist would want to be with the unpleasant, so that's really sick. Of course that's normal.

We're so seduced by these patterns. It just feels like the right thing to do. To even shift the attention from just going with it to instead saying, "Oh, let's just look at this. Let's just keep steady awareness being with this whole process rather than getting sucked into following the craving, following the aversion"—before we start really exploring steady awareness, that might never have occurred to us, because it's just so obvious that's how things are.

That's what our invitation is when we're talking about simple, relaxed awareness of whatever's occurring. That "whatever's occurring" includes, a lot of the time, these qualities that arise moment to moment in heart-mind that obstruct clear seeing. They're also simply mental states that awareness can notice. They're not outside of awareness. When we abandon awareness, we get lost in them, just out of habit, just out of familiarity.

But when we take our refuge in awareness—or as Ajahn Sumedho said—we go, "Oh, yeah, right, I'm really caught up right now. It feels like this." That's all. You don't have to analyze. You don't have to figure it out. You just kind of take a breath and go, "Right, it feels like this now."

Sometimes I was looking for craving and I don't see any craving. It's just—everything's fine. It feels like this. And I just surrender into the moment. And suddenly—this has happened so much—I would have sworn there was no craving. The mind was clear. I was just mindful of what was happening. But everything's all caught up. I can tell something's going on. So, okay, it's like this now. I'm just looking, looking, and all of a sudden, it's like a huge mountain of craving comes shooting up into my mind. I'm like,

"Oh my gosh!" It's so much, occurring so frequently, it's so familiar, I didn't even notice. And I was even looking for it, and I didn't even notice.

Have you ever had that experience? It's like, wow.

But then the trick is this: you simply allow awareness to notice the next moment. We don't take that personally. We don't go off into a whole story about how bad we are because we didn't recognize the craving, and it's hopeless, and I'm hopeless. That's just the same thing—aversion.

So this is the invitation with the steadiness of simple mindfulness. You don't have to think about what to look for, but it's bringing interest in. As Mingyur Rinpoche said, if we want to understand suffering, we have to get interested and see: How does suffering arise? How does it dissipate? In just a moment. You don't have to look at your whole life. Just a moment. It's all happening right here in this heart, in this mind, in this moment. That's all we have, this moment. That's all there is.

So instead of going with the habit of thinking greed is bad, aversion is bad—

I'm bad. It's hopeless. It shouldn't be here. Instead, it's more like, "Oh, here it is." How do you know it should be here? Because it's here.

This moment has arisen through all the different causes and conditions that have come together, stretching back to the Big Bang, really. There's no way we can ever isolate which causes and conditions brought us to this point. They've all come together to create this particular moment, which in this moment couldn't possibly be any different. Because it's here, it's what it is.

So when there's greed here, okay, awareness gets interested. How does it feel? Explore it as it comes and it goes, watching it come together, watching how it behaves. What is its nature? Or as Tejaniya likes to say, how does greed do its job? What is its job? It has a lawful job: go get that thing, it'll make you happy. And if that one doesn't do it, the next one will. Keep on wanting. Keep leaning forward. Keep going for it. That's greed's job, and it does it very well.

So we always want to bring awareness to see how it works. How does it arise? What conditions? Not thinking about it so much—I mean, I have to say it to talk about it, but you're not thinking about it. You're just watching. Seeing what conditions bring it up. Seeing how it behaves when it's here. What kind of thoughts come up? How does the body feel? How do we behave under the influence of strong greed?

The more we see it—and that's actually the positive side of seeing greed arise ten million times. When there's willingness, the moment of awareness that's just interested in greed isn't distorted by greed at that moment. This is tricky, but you can get the feeling. Sometimes you know there's greed, but you really feel caught in it, or aversion. Other times you feel it, you still feel it, but there's this little bit of interest. "Look how it works." I'm walking to get the food and I'm not even hungry, but then I smell a particular smell and I notice this upwelling of, "Oh my God, this is going to be so good." And the next thing I know I'm sitting at

the table shoveling it down. Whoa, I missed a little bit there. That's how greed just kind of took over.

We see that a lot in different ways, and we start to see, without having to think about it, the lawful way it acts. And without hating it, without trying to just shut down—the awareness watching it—this is the condition that allows natural wisdom to surface. The steady awareness that's just recognizing the causes and conditions, how experience acts, how greed does its job. Keep on watching.

The fact that the presence of unrecognized greed ends up causing us suffering—it doesn't have to be something you believe. It's not a philosophy you should take on. We can take it as a piece of interesting information and then follow the Buddha's invitation: *Ehi Passiko*, come and see for yourself.

So the willingness to just keep with steady awareness as the greed, as the aversion are coming up and doing their job—stay with the awareness rather than saying, "Well, awareness isn't strong enough, forget it. I'll pay attention again when it's doing better." Do you notice how that happens? And that happens in our life too. "Well, I can tell I'm going to eat this whole quart of ice cream, so I'm just going to tune out right now. I'll wake up when it's over and say, 'Why did I do that?' But during it, I'm not going to pay attention."

But we bring attention along during these things. And at some point, now or down the road, it's just a law of nature that it starts to become obvious that the greed isn't really the way to happiness. We don't have to believe it. It's just actually how things are.

That, to me, is what's so wonderful about the wisdom the Buddha talks about. It's not that we have to memorize all the philosophy and then try to bring our experience into alignment with it, and when it doesn't match, we get really dissatisfied. I don't know if that ever happens to any of you. But rather, you take it in and go, okay, maybe I can get interested. When greed is arising, it's like this. When it's gone, keep paying attention. When the aversion is gone, we keep just being steady with the awareness. And notice what the heart and mind feels like when it has this quality of purity—purity meaning it isn't distorted by the kilesas.

Maybe nothing special is going on, but notice that there are many, many moments throughout every day when the heart-mind is not in the thrall of greed, hatred, or confusion. It's just simply present and peaceful. It's often neutral, and we often don't notice neutral, but just begin to tune into that. Because we notice how the kilesas cause confusion and suffering, but it's equally important to keep the steady awareness going. And we notice, oh, there's a kind of peace that's not dependent on having things the way I want.

I'm sure everyone here, we all know this. We've all had moments. You couldn't get through even a week retreat or two days of retreat—you certainly couldn't get through a month. None of us could get through all the amount of practice we've been doing without many moments of that.

You know Ajahn Buddhadasa's talk we often quote from, where he talks about Nibbāna for everyone. It's a

whole long talk, but he was a funny, funny guy. In that talk, he's discussing the kilesas. I don't like to use the word "defilement" just because it feeds into my connotation of negativity and aversion right away. It isn't helpful for me. So I use kilesa, that's why, or "torments."

But he says, really seeing that they arise due to causes and conditions—you can see, when greed is arising and we don't see it and we're going with it, it's like that is being practiced. That's being fed. When we sit in the sitting this morning, like I was talking about, with a lot of pain and we're not moving, but what's really being fed and strengthened is moment after moment of aversion. That's really what's being practiced. That's lawful. So when you get up, there's a lot more aversion, because one moment of aversion in the mind stream makes the next moment a little easier, then the next moment, then the next moment.

Luckily, the same is true for the wholesome. So that's what Buddhadasa was saying. The kilesas arise due to causes and conditions. And when the conditions dissipate, the kilesa vanishes. Everything arises due to conditions and everything vanishes when the conditions change—and they always change.

So he said—what I was trying to get to—he says, you know, if there are many moments a day that the heart and mind is pure, free from kilesa, he calls it the coolness. He's using a pun because the word Nibbāna in Thai, they use the word "nibon" to mean cool, like to cool the rice. So he's playing on that—the coolness of no torment in the heart and mind. We can feel that. He said, without that, if we didn't have many moments a day of that, we would die. Or we'd go crazy, and then we'd die. It's just unbearable. But we tend not to notice because the kilesas make a lot more noise. The reactions in the mind are more familiar, and we just get entranced by our reactions. We just believe it. "Well, I'm really not going to get through this."

So this quality of steady awareness, not picking and choosing what should be happening, not judging or evaluating what should be happening or how good the awareness is, but the willingness to, whenever we can remember, just come back into this steady being present—this is the key that allows wisdom to arise.

We're also using wisdom, or right attitude, kind of on an intellectual level when we keep reminding ourselves that the quality of wise attitude in the awareness isn't about wanting to make something happen, but just simply recognizing—as both Sayadaw U Tejaniya and Buddhadasa use this same way—recognizing that everything that arises is simply nature arising due to causes and conditions. They've come about, that's how it is. And they'll change when the conditions change. It isn't personal. Nothing's personal. And so when we keep reminding ourselves, if there's a lot of wanting coming up—

Not to think there's something wrong with me, but rather that interest can come in when we realize, yes, wanting is arising due to conditions. Let's just get interested and see how that's manifesting. It isn't about me having a lot of greed. It's not about ownership at all. It really changes the dynamic, again, to just seeing things as they are.

One insight that's often described as a high level of insight is called recognizing things as they have come

to be in this moment. That's like a really high level of freedom, just *yathā bhūta ñāna dassana*. I like the *yat hā bhūta*—recognizing things as they have come to be. It doesn't sound very glitzy. It doesn't sound like some amazing insight, but this is really moment to moment, this willingness to just recognize that whatever's happening is happening due to all the previous causes and conditions. It's not mine or me. It doesn't mean I'm good or bad. It doesn't mean anything about me. It's just nature.

As Buddhadasa says, the Pali texts use the phrase "throwing back." When the mind is free, he says, we throw everything back to nature. He says we've been thieves all of our life by appropriating the things of nature as I and mine. But we've been ignorant and suffered for it. When we become wise, we can realize, oh, this isn't mine. It's just an aspect of nature. So we throw everything back to nature. And we never have to steal anything again. It's all just natural things happening.

This is perhaps one of the most deeply rooted aspects of clinging and aversion—this habit, this view of clinging to, holding to any particular experience as I or mine. We all know this, but it's really just another habit of clinging. We can also recognize that with awareness. We don't have to uproot it, get rid of it, extirpate it. Just notice how it comes together. Notice how it goes apart.

This is from Ajahn Chah: "The Buddha talked to us about being free from attachment to the five aggregates, but we can't give them up because we don't really know them for what they are. We believe happiness to be ourselves. We see ourselves to be happy. We believe suffering to be ourselves, and we see ourselves as unhappy. We can't pull the mind out of this view, which means we are not seeing nature. There isn't any self involved, but we are always thinking in terms of self."

So it seems that happiness happens to us, suffering happens to us, elation happens to us, depression happens to us. The chain of self is constructed just through thought and attachment to any particular experience. And with this solid feeling that there is a self, everything seems to be happening to us. But when we are free of this constructed belief that there is a self, then the condition of selflessness is naturally revealed.

The main thing here is to really keep remembering that everything in the mind is moment to moment. So when we talk about being free of this construction that there is a self, it's not helpful to posit that as some kind of future great insight that's going to come and we're done with the sense of self and we never suffer anymore. It's all moment to moment.

As Andy Olendzki says, the mind, *citta*, in Buddhism is not a subject that has objects as content. It's not a thing. It's the process of knowing. And it's informed by whatever particular mental qualities are arising in that moment. And it's changing. So there's no there. We just know the mind by its activity. And it's arising in each moment due to conditions, including the previous moment. So each moment is new and fresh.

To me, this aspect of impermanence—and this is really the moment-to-moment quality of impermanence—this is what is so uplifting, so inspiring. It's what makes freedom possible. It's what

makes it accessible to my mind to be willing to really explore greed and aversion, to really be willing to hang in there when it gets tough.

Because it's not that I have to be aware, aware, aware for ten years of suffering, suffering, suffering, and at the end of it, finally it all blasts through. That would be impossible. But there are moments—again, as I mentioned before—just simple moments when there's not greed, hatred, or aversion. There may be nothing special about them. Notice those moments.

The sense of self is constructed. You can see it happening. It's constructed moment after moment. And then that construction falls apart moment after moment. So there are equally many moments when, as Ajahn Chah says, there is no construction of sense of self, and there isn't the suffering around it. Again, there's nobody there to appreciate it, so we tend not to notice it so much. It's just, "Oh, isn't that nice?" And then the self is back. We don't notice it.

We can watch with steady awareness because this is just how it is. I mean, I'm saying that—don't believe me, don't believe the Buddha—but get interested to explore. We can really see.

All day long, the six sense experiences are just cycling, cycling, cycling. Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, thinking, thinking, thinking, emotion, emotion, emotion, seeing, wanting, whatever's going on. Endlessly. How many mind moments have there been in the day? I don't know. It feels like millions. Who knows how many? Not every single one of them has been a moment of sense of self.

Notice—and this is where it gets interesting—how they're all happening, different things coming and going. And out of the field, it may happen quite frequently, but it's not everything: a particular experience, a sight or a sound, an emotion, a smell, a feeling in the body, suddenly there's some clinging, some sense of "that's me" or "that's mine," a little contraction. It just feels like a little contraction around it. It comes up, and that particular experience out of the whole field is like it's been pulled out, privileged in some way. This one is me or mine or says something about me. It's unbearable, or it's really great, or we have to do something about it, or we have to keep it going. The thoughts that come around it and the story of me keep coming.

If we don't notice that this is just construction—different building blocks being piled on top of each other—there's the unpleasant sound, there's the attachment to the aversion to the unpleasant, there's the thought about what I can do, there's the sense of self-judgment, there's the memory of all the unpleasant sounds, there's the thought telling yourself, "Well, if you were deaf, you would love to hear this sound, so what's the matter with you?" And then you think about... and this can go on and on and on. Out of nothing, nothing. And then we come up and go, "Ah, the sense of self is horrible. I'll never get rid of the sense of self."

Just keep watching. Just keep watching. As strong as it is, at some point that dissipates. You hear the bell for lunch and that's all gone. That's all gone. We're just walking, happy as a clam. I don't know what that

means—are clams happy? Why do we say happy as a clam? And you're just walking to lunch. No sense of self. And then you see the food. Oh wow, this is a new one.

Just keep watching. What I love is that if we're willing to just keep taking a step back into awareness—that Tai Chi move—the way things are reveals itself.

Reality reveals itself. We don't need to be—in fact it doesn't help—to put our concepts on top of it.

So this sense of self, when it's there and unrecognized, is really one of the stronger habits. Talk about familiar! Talk about really feeling like the old bathrobe we never want to take off, even though it's totally disgusting. That's like the sense of self—no, don't take it away from me! Just sitting here with peace? No, I want something.

Have you ever seen your mind make up a whole, really suffering scenario that isn't true, simply because things were calm? It's quite amazing to see that. "What's going on? Well, I'm at least here suffering. That's better than peace." And that's really the habit. It's so strong.

So we don't have to figure that out. Steady observing—I don't like the word observing—just being present with what is. It's really a surrendering into this moment. It's not that we get a piece of knowledge, a piece of wisdom, but the natural processes reveal themselves through steady awareness.

It's not an act of personal will. I feel this is a huge relief. We don't have to figure it out. We don't have to create wisdom. In fact, we can't, because we're trying to do it out of some idea. But the natural laws, just as how greed does its job—steady awareness that isn't too distorted, steady, steady, steady—reality reveals itself. And that's wisdom. Wisdom does its job. "Oh, it's like this now." And then if there's a response needed, wisdom makes the appropriate response.

There can be many different responses. That loud noise that's bothering you—wisdom sees, "Oh yeah, that's unpleasant. Oh yeah, this is aversion. Aversion feels like this, just like this." And that's what's happening. No need to create anything around it. And there's peace for that moment. It's all just moment to moment, but this is really the power—the power of simple awareness.

So rather than accumulating knowledge, it's more like, I find, a deepening of radical trust, radical faith that the truth is accessible, only ever accessible in the totality of this moment's experience. There is nothing else. Dogen Zenji said, "If you can't see the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?"

So it's like this radical trust that when I remember awareness, there's more and more trust to just drop into: it's like this now. We never know what will happen next. There's no "so that," there's no fallback plan. But there's the trust that with clear seeing, with steady awareness, wisdom naturally arises. And wisdom recognizes that the responses that bring suffering to our heart and mind don't make any sense.

You've all had that experience. You're caught in something and suddenly it shifts and you see it clearly,

and the wanting goes away, or the aversion, or the self-judgment goes away. It feels like a miracle because it wasn't through self-will. Have you noticed that? When an insight comes, it's not like you did it through an act of will. Wisdom is doing the work.

Are there times when there's a steadiness of awareness? Some people have mentioned that. And you can't make it happen through wanting. That's right. But you see, it's the effect of natural causes. We learn to trust that more and then just keep falling back into the awareness.

I just want to end with another line from Mingyur. As we cultivate a sustained recognition of awareness,

We begin to comprehend that awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind. 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 love that. Just take a moment with this: awareness itself is inherently calm, no matter how turbulent the mind. Learning to trust that.

So we have a month here—not to have some big experience, but there are so many moments just to remind ourselves, learning how to recognize and trust awareness. So simple. And the truth and freedom reveals itself in its own time.

Thank you all for your kind attention. I appreciate it.

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