Recognizing the Non-Deluded Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:00

There's a statement from Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche that I often use to preface what I'm talking about tonight. He says that there are two purposes to this dharma practice that we do: one is to discover the nature of the non-deluded mind, the non-deluded heart, as well as learning how the deluded mind works. Both of these are what's going on in our practice here.

Awareness recognizes the wisdom mind and goes back and forth between these two modes. Sometimes—maybe a lot of the time—we're recognizing how the deluded mind works. But equally, we're recognizing the nature of the non-deluded mind. Steady awareness with wise attitude and right view are equal support, the tool, the avenue for clear seeing and wisdom in both cases.

Sometimes the skillful means could be a little bit different depending on which modality is going on. That could be one of the reasons why people sometimes say it seems a little confusing—they know it's really not, but sometimes you say this, sometimes you say the other, and it seems like you're doing two things at once. Or neither one.

The nature of the non-deluded mind: this is from the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha talking about the third noble truth, the ending of dukkha. I just love this translation:

It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving. Its forsaking and abandonment, liberation and detachment from it. The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion. This indeed is called nibbana. And for a disciple thus freed, in whose heart dwells peace, there is nothing to be added to what has been done, nothing more remains to do. Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, neither the desired nor the undesired can cause such a one to waver. One is steadfast in mind, in heart. One who has considered all the contrasts of this earth and is no more disturbed by anything whatever in the world. The peaceful one, freed from rage, from sorrow, and from longing, has passed beyond birth and decay. That unshakable deliverance of the heart—that indeed is the object of the holy life. That is its essence.

I think it's so wonderful, and we should repeat that to ourselves every day. Not as a wanting or a goal orientation, but as a reminder. And not as some distant state, because I know that's said in a lot of superlatives—the complete extinction of all these things.

But how I want to talk about it tonight, and how we explore and recognize in our practice day to day, on or off retreat, is recognizing that the citta, the mind, the heart, is not a steady state. It's not a thing, a subject, that has objects as content. It's an activity, the process of cognizing, a flow of events. And as such, as everything, it is changing. Even "it" is not the right word to use because that makes it a thing. But this

flow of activities is changing from moment to moment. This is how it is. And this is the only thing that makes practice, that makes liberation possible.

Thinking of it this way, it's not that the ending of craving is only some distant state, but there are many, many moments of heart and mind, recognized with awareness, when there isn't greed, hatred, or delusion arising in that moment of citta. As Sayadaw U Pandita says, a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom.

If we hear or think about or contemplate what I just read—this potential of freedom of heart—and are afraid that's going to put us into some goal-oriented clinging mind so better not to think about it, we're really doing ourselves a disservice. That's delusion. Really recognizing, as Ajahn Buddhadasa says, that nibbana, or freedom of mind, is a natural condition. The cool state of heart and mind without any kilesa, without any torments—this is a natural condition arising in all of us many times a day, often unnoticed, because it's just kind of cooled out. There's no big greed or fancy object to get entranced by or try to get rid of.

It's a natural condition that arises. As he says, without moments of this coolness, of these moments when there are no torments or kilesa identified with in the mind, we would die. We just couldn't live like that.

And so that means in any moment, as awareness is steady—and this is one of the wonderful things about steady awareness—these moments of purity of heart and mind, coolness, the mind of non-clinging: this is the deathless, namely the liberation of mind through non-clinging.

As Buddhadasa says, nirvana for everyone. It's a natural condition. Through steady awareness, we start to see more and more moments of this. But do we even let it in? Can we let it in? Do we even notice it?

A great deal of the awareness in our practice is more involved in recognizing the suffering aspect of the torments, of the kilesas—hopefully recognizing the suffering aspect. That's when there's wisdom in the mind. When there's not wisdom in the awareness, we're just in them, thinking, "This is really going to do it for me." But to start to see the power of the kilesas...

Once the Brahmin Jāṇussoṇi approached the Blessed One and said to him, "It is said, Master Gotama, that nibbāna is directly visible. In what way, Master Gotama, is nibbāna directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise?"

And he answers: "When, Brahmin, a person is impassioned with greed, with lust..."—and by "person" it just means that moment of mind. It's not like, "I'm a person who's impassioned with lust and that's who I am from now on." Just don't go there. A moment. "When the mind of a person is depraved through hatred, bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion"—he gives that one a little extra emphasis—"then they plan for their own harm, for the harm of others, the harm of both." Basically, he says that when there's lust, hatred, and delusion, one cannot recognize one's own good or the good of another or the good of both. You just can't recognize what's true and what's helpful and what's good when

the mind is clouded with these things. "But when lust, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, then, Brahmin, one does not experience in their mind suffering and grief, nor plan for the harm of oneself or others. In this way, nibbāna is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see."

So for us here, the invitation is to really continue exploring—because this isn't new information for any of you—to continue trusting in the steadiness of mindfulness, awareness with right attitude. But recognizing that sometimes it's really about seeing, recognizing, feeling, getting familiar with, trusting this coolness, this purity. Other times we're much more involved in reacting to—or hopefully, if there's wisdom, seeing how—the torments obscure the truth, the way things really are.

Both modalities have to be here. They support each other. And in fact, without some knowing, even if we don't know we know it, some experience or some intuition of this pure, cool quality of heart-mind that's unobscured, we wouldn't practice at all. It's like we know it.

There's that very famous quotation from the Buddha that speaks to this: "Luminous is this mind, luminous is this citta, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it. This unlearned people do not really understand, and so do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands. So for them, there is cultivation of the mind, cultivation of the heart."

That's what we're all doing here. There wouldn't be cultivation—you wouldn't be sitting here all these months and years—if there wasn't the knowing somewhere in there, the touching somehow. Many of you really know it, but sometimes we lose the trust that we know it. But it's there, this nirvana for everyone, the coolness of the heart, the mind that is free from greed, hatred, delusion. That touching—whether you call it radiance or just purity or just coolness—that freedom from suffering, that steadfast heart-mind that just for a moment isn't bothered by whatever's occurring.

And so our practice can have these two aspects: recognizing the moments of clinging, or hours of clinging, of the aversion, of the confusion—at times really caught, but then suddenly there's the wisdom, the recognition—and then noticing the absence, the dissolution, the cessation of that moment or hour of clinging. Really, with steady awareness, being present with that cessation, with those moments of coolness, really observing. And then with that steady state, you're bound to notice, awareness is bound to pick up, when the obscuring kilesas arise again—usually all too soon. Whenever it is, it's too soon.

This is really how it works. But for many of us, as we go on and on and can taste at times those moments of freedom, the times when you're just tuned into it—it's no big deal, but it's just so obvious that that's the way things are—in those moments of wisdom, the clinging really doesn't make sense. It's so obvious that it's based on delusion and suffering. And then it comes back again. Many people have described how you can feel the sense of the mind about to start clinging. You can tell. It's just changing a little bit in there. And everyone goes, "No, no..."

Get away. Get back. And it's already over by then. But still, we can see the mind doing that. This is how it works.

And in some ways—this is my opinion, not only my opinion, but it is my opinion—you could look at all aspects of the Buddha's teachings and all the aspects of our practice as really being about simply purifying, shifting these habits that arise in the heart-mind. It's just this nature, it's just habits. That greed arises so much, that aversion arises so much, isn't because it's an act of will. It's just the habit of how the mind has been working, how it's been responding. And in moments of not really much attention, that's what comes up.

But everything in practice is shifting those habits. You could say purifying, but really just shifting it from taking refuge in the greed, the hatred, the confusion, to this real trust of the coolness, the purity.

And I just want to say: every moment of this awareness with wise attitude, just meeting what's occurring without getting involved in pushing away or identifying, just meeting it—that is actually a moment of shifting the habit. Even awareness of greed, and the greed is really there, but there's moments of awareness back and forth. The awareness isn't greedy. Awareness isn't aversive. And that's a very different moment of response than the usual.

And because awareness is getting more and more steady, but it's nothing special—it's just really, as many people are saying and noticing, more ordinary—it's easy not to recognize that this is actually this quality, this kind of purity, this simplicity, this non-involvement in kilesa that's going on.

So, the skillful means—whether the awareness is really caught up in a lot of kilesa, or whether it's more steady awareness and there's more moments of coolness—sometimes the Buddha gives a little bit different instruction, and we do as well.

I just want to read a little bit from one sutta. This is in the Majjhima Nikāya. It's translated usually as "Two Types of Thinking." This is a long sutta with lots of little nuggets in it that we quote all the time, but I'm only going to focus on a particular one this time. It's the sutta where the Buddha is talking about before he became a Buddha, when he was doing his practice and he noticed two types of thinking—one unwholesome type and the other wholesome. The unwholesome would be thinking with, guess what? Greed and cruelty and hatred. Not delusion—delusion's part of all of it. And then the wholesome is, of course, the opposite of those.

So he was just noticing in his mind that the difficult states would come up, and what it would be like if he kept thinking about those—that it led to suffering and tiring. The wholesome states would come up, and if he kept thinking about those, he couldn't see any problem that would come from it. Except if he thought about it for a day and a night, no problem would come except his body might get tired. He's very practical.

So there are two different ways. He says that when he noticed that the unwholesome led to his own affliction—so when awareness noticed that, wisdom notices, "Oh, this is causing suffering"—because of

the wisdom, that type of thinking subsided. But he was watching carefully. And he noticed that it leads to the affliction of others, the affliction of both, that it obstructs clear seeing and wisdom, that it promotes vexation. It subsided. So the steady awareness allows the wisdom to arrive that lets it subside.

But this is the skillful means he mentions. "Just as in the last month of the rains, in the autumn season when the crops are ripening"—he always gives all these agricultural metaphors—"a cowherd would look after his cows..."

He would be looking very carefully. He would tap and poke them, make them move this way, make them move that way. He's looking at them very carefully. Why? Because he's trying to keep them from wandering into the crops. He knows if they wander into the crops, they'll cause destruction. And not only that, he'd get in trouble—fine or public censure.

So the Buddha says, "I foresaw in unskillful qualities drawbacks, degradation." And so he was being very careful. Here he's saying we're careful with the awareness. He's not saying kill the cow so it doesn't get into the crops, but watching carefully.

This is really what we've talked about when we say just be with steady awareness, notice whatever occurs, don't get involved, there's no doing. But then we'll also say, when you recognize that the mind is really caught up in the kilesas, and the more awareness that's given to it, the stronger the kilesas are getting because they're really stronger than the awareness—then we give all kinds of suggestions: avert the attention to something neutral, brighten the mind, do something else. It's like being really careful. It's not running away from it, but it's not "okay, whatever happens." We're not saying whatever happens, just follow it. With wisdom and awareness, when there's wisdom in the mind, there's no need. But when the kilesas are stronger, that just kind of gives us a little clue: oh, that's going on. You don't hate it, but let's just have a little care in the attention.

But then he talks about when the wholesome states are in his mind. He said, "I noticed when thinking imbued with harmlessness, for example, has arisen, it leads neither to my own affliction nor the affliction of others nor the affliction of both. It promotes wisdom, lack of vexation. It leads to freedom. If I were to think and ponder in line with that for a night and a day, I do not envision any danger that would come from it except, as I said, it would tire the body. When the body is tired, the mind is disturbed. And a disturbed mind is far from collectedness." So he steadied his mind.

This is all just very practical. The simile he gives for this is about when there's wisdom, when there's wholesomeness, and the steady awareness sees that there's wholesomeness—then there really isn't anything you need to do. He said, "Then it is in the last month of the hot season when all the crops have been gathered into the village. A cowherd would look after his cows in this way while resting under the shade of a tree or out in the open. He simply keeps himself mindful of those cows. In the same way, I simply kept myself mindful of those mental qualities."

Do you get a sense of that? That's really a lot of what we mean when we say just be aware, noticing what's arising. Imagine yourself lying under the shade of a tree, watching the cows go by, watching the mental states, the thoughts come and go. You can see they're wholesome and there's no need to get in there and do anything. When it's like that, we'll notice when all of a sudden something comes flying up. And that's not a problem.

So we start to see how the kilesas obstruct, how they do their job to get in the way of just recognizing this simplicity, this coolness of heart-mind.

Ajahn Sumedho, in speaking about the third noble truth, the cessation of clinging, says a normal person doesn't notice the cessation of clinging or the cessation of most objects. Our attention tends to be too flighty, too jumpy. We're not really able to take boredom. We can't really take just a moment of nothing. We all know this, right? The mind jumps into the next thing. And especially these last years with social media and phones and this immediate gratification—it's really quite something. Just noticing.

You see it with kids—it's a million times worse. But I just notice it in my own mind. I'll be sitting, having a cup of tea, which I enjoy. It's like the nice point of the morning. And I can see, within a minute, my mind going... Let me just check—the phone's right there. Let me check this. Let me check the weather. What's the weather going to be tomorrow? I already checked it last night, but I forgot, you know. Or just something. And I can feel that flightiness, that restlessness, that subtle wanting of—what? It's nothing really, because the actual checking and looking at whatever it is, just keeping awareness going, I notice the mind gets a little bit tighter. Everything gets a little bit more constricted. Remember the maker of measurement—where it was really just kind of peaceful and open the minute before. But as a normal person's mind, it's a little bit flighty. It doesn't really recognize.

But as we cultivate steady attention, we do start to recognize—this is still samādhi—that what arises, ceases. We start to see, as Andrea was speaking about the other night, that everything is conditions. All the qualities that come and go in the mind are constructed phenomena. And with steadiness, we can see them arise—this is still samādhi—arise and cease in consciousness. With steady awareness, seeing this again and again and again: arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing. And we start to get—or wisdom starts to get—a little bit disenchanted with all this endless arising and ceasing.

Disenchantment doesn't mean—it's often translated with words like disgust or revulsion, something that has an edge of aversion. That's neither accurate nor helpful, I think. Disenchantment is a better word because the habit of the kilesas is to be enchanted with the object, with the reaction of wanting, or just the restlessness, or "give me something not to feel this subtle, unpleasant restlessness." We're enchanted with that. And with steady awareness, we start to really see how this works—the sense of purifying the habits of the kilesas, seeing how, as that quotation I read about the luminous mind, they obscure the purity, just the simplicity of ease.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "What then is meant by pure perception? The way we usually

experience the outer world, our bodies, and our feelings is impure in the sense that we perceive them as ordinary, substantially existing entities. From this erroneous perception come the negative emotions which perpetuate suffering. However, take a closer look at all these appearances"—I don't mean peer; the steady awareness takes a closer look—"and you'll find that they have no true self-existence. From a relative point of view, they appear as a result of various causes and conditions"—that's what we were just saying, the conditionality—"like a mirage or a dream. But in reality, nothing that arises from causes and conditions has any true self-existence whatsoever. In fact, there is not even anything to appear."

I love getting into this real radical teaching. As it is said, one who realizes this emptiness of the self-existence of anything is the true sage.

Remember, moment to moment. It doesn't have to be all or nothing—that's when it can get discouraging. But recognizing in moments: this is the way things are. And for all of us, to really get interested. We don't create awareness—we recognize it. The steady awareness with wise attitude is shifting the habits, as I said.

So in terms of carefulness: when it's the middle of the rainy season and you don't want the cows to get into the crops, when there are kilesas going on and they're all too familiar and comfortable—

And there's enough wisdom and enough awareness-wisdom to recognize that that's going on. And we all know that. You'll be caught in it and then out of it, caught in it and then out of it.

But what we start to really see—and I don't know, to me this helps me, I don't know if it's discouraging to you, but it helps me—we start to recognize and continue to recognize, to respect the power of the habits of conditioning, of craving. And craving can be like the wanting or the aversion, this sense of identity, of identification with things.

Many of you have been mentioning in the groups and interviews, as the awareness is getting more steady, and experience is getting a little bit more subtle—you've been here a while now—people are seeing different habits, really more subtle habits of mind. Self-judgment, wanting, fear, whatever it might be. And then they say, "Oh, I recognize this from my life, but this is much more subtle." Seeing all these little things—this is really great, because this is starting to see when the subtle is operating.

In the beginning of practice, the big fears and aversions and greeds take us over, and they're really hard to be with. They seem so strong. But as practice goes on and we notice those more, you start to see—and this is what I really have so much respect for, it makes me interested—it's these subtle habits that are almost below the level of consciousness that are running the show when we're not aware of them.

Tara Brach gave the example of how the habits under the level of consciousness operate. When you're driving and changing lanes on the freeway, there's so many little things that go on in consciousness and perception and thinking and value and judgment. You're not naming each one. You're probably not even thinking about it. But there's so much happening, kind of under the level of consciousness. Sixty miles an

hour, five lanes, and you're doing all this stuff. It's kind of amazing. If you tried to think about all of it while you're doing it, you'd probably have a wreck. It's too much.

So it's like that—the habits are under there. A simple example: you're sitting, and there's a pain in your knee. You think, "Well, I'm just going to be with it." And the next thing you know, you've moved. Not that it's right or wrong to move, but it's more the sense that conscious mind is saying, "Oh no, I'm not going to move from aversion, I'm just going to be here"—and the next thing you know.

I remember one time I was sitting on a long retreat in my room over at the retreat center, just doing my own thing, not the schedule. I was sitting in a chair, really in there. I wasn't just thinking about something—I was really in there, noting, noting, noting. And all of a sudden, I was at the door with my hand on the knob, thinking about cake. It woke me up so much. How did that happen? It's just under the level.

So it's great when we're seeing it here. Respect that. Because this is what happens in our daily life, doesn't it? When you go home, or to your partner, there's some issue that's really hard. I used to go home to visit my parents, and you think, "Well, I'm really not going to get sucked into the dynamic this time." Have you ever tried that one? "No, I'm going to go and just be filled with metta." And you mean it. It's a sincere, conscious intention in that moment. Unfortunately, you can't string it over. And the unconscious is so subtle and so quick. So you walk in, the mother or father says one thing, and it's off to the races. And you say, "Oh..."

But this is just how it is. So we still keep on trusting the steady awareness in these situations at home, and I'll talk more about that next week. Here's the same thing—really seeing how it works. Understanding this is called the latent tendencies for lobha and dosa, greed and hatred, to arise. Not the really gross ones, but given a particular set of conditions—one of which would be just not quite having awareness at that level of subtlety—that habit will arise. It's kind of latent.

That doesn't mean no matter what happens it's going to arise, because then there would be no point in practice. But it's understanding why. Why, when I thought I was really aware, suddenly there's greed and I'm at the door thinking about cake, and that's like a tenth of a second. Not to get into a whole, "Oh no, I'm bad, I wasn't mindful." It's like, wow, isn't that interesting? Look at that.

But in the moment of awareness, with my hand on the door—oh, look at that—awareness and wisdom noticing it, that awareness-wisdom didn't feed the greed. And it wasn't aversion. Aversion also feeds the same kilesas. It was just, "Oh, look at that." So right away, with the steady awareness, the wisdom is there. It's not that we need to fear it. In the seeing of it, even a moment of greed coming out of latent tendencies and mindlessness becomes the catalyst for wisdom, for clear seeing, for a moment of coolness, of non-clinging.

To experience the peace, the coolness of the heart and mind that's free from kilesa—it doesn't mean the

externals have to be beautiful and nice, with only nice things coming up in your mind and body. It doesn't at all. We see the drawbacks of the kilesas, but that doesn't mean the conditions have to be perfect.

In fact, I personally find, and people have mentioned this too, that often it's in the more difficult times that—especially now that we've been practicing a lot, everybody here—in the difficult times it can kind of wake us up to say, "Oh, okay, this is the place to really take refuge in awareness." As Ajahn Sumedho says, really determine to bring awareness, to trust awareness.

I know times when there's something physically very difficult going on and the mind wants to either go unconscious or find some way to distract, or there's a subtle aversion. And the last thing the habituated mind wants to do is say, just really drop into this with total awareness. It's like this now. Although from a hundred thousand times in my life, the thinking mind knows that the way in is the way of freedom. It knows that. Not freedom from that unpleasant experience—freedom from the kilesas that are obscuring that quality of ease, of coolness, that isn't bothered just for a moment by whatever is occurring. As I was saying this morning, my body may be afflicted, but the mind doesn't need to be afflicted.

So as much as we know that and recognize it through the steady, non-interfering mindfulness, we still have to sometimes take a breath and remind ourselves: yes, refuge in awareness. Just because the subtle tendencies of kilesa are so strong—not because we're somehow hopeless, useless meditators. That's the habit of kilesa speaking. We just have to remember to shift the habit. And every moment of steady mindfulness is shifting it.

As we see more of the drawbacks of the kilesas, we're less seduced by that unrecognized belief that craving is taking us in the way of happiness, that aversion and pushing away is taking us in the way of ease—as if we could be separate from this difficult and unpleasant experience. The more we recognize that, the more steady the awareness gets when we're just lying under the tree, being present with what is. That sense of becoming disenchanted with the ceaseless coming and going of objects, of kilesa.

So that's the way the aspect of practice that is understanding how the deluded mind works leads to the abandoning of craving, the abandoning of identification.

But also inspiring to me is that it doesn't have to only be that we endlessly focus on the kilesas to get rid of them. There are also times when the kilesas aren't strong. When there is that peace, we can consciously incline the attention, incline the mind in that direction.

There's a quotation I was reading in *The Island*. I could read that again and again—that compilation by Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno of quotations from the suttas dealing with awakening. All different kinds of quotations, and you get great sutta references. This particular one speaks about just this: nibbida, disenchantment, losing one's taste for. You just lose your taste for it. You know that example of a dog that comes upon an old bone, and he's all excited, chewing on it.

But the bone is so old, there's not one drop of anything in it—no marrow, no nothing, just an old, dried-up

thing. So the dog chews it, and then, "Ah, there's nothing here," and just goes away. It's not hatred or disgust. It's just losing one's taste for it.

So that's from seeing how the kilesas work, seeing the constant coming and going of conditioned experience—we lose the taste for it. But as well, and this is something the Buddha said, at other times when we're not so engrossed in kilesa, a bhikkhu—and bhikkhu can mean anyone who's practicing—can reflect thus. It's like inclining the heart, the mind, to the deathless. Not thinking about it, but just recognizing, "Ah, this is peaceful. This is sublime. That is the stilling of all activities, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, disenchantment, nibbana."

Bhikkhu Bodhi notes that this is a reflective contemplation. But I found it to be something subtle—just not always being so engrossed in the kilesas, in the impurities, in the coming and going. Just that sense of peace, coolness. This is sublime. As Buddhadasa says, generating a contentment with emptiness.

At first, we don't so much have that contentment. At first it's a sense of, okay, it's like putting down the bone, but then what? We're still a little bit used to wanting things.

There's a very famous quotation from Ajahn Sumedho about this—very famous in our little Vipassana Buddhist circles. He says: "Try to think about knowing the unconditioned, knowing the deathless. Would that be interesting? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be incredibly fascinating.' So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. The space in this room—is it interesting to look at? Not to me. The space in this room is like the space in the other room. The things in this room might be interesting or uninteresting, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. But the space—what is it? There's nothing you can really say about it. It has no quality except being spacious. So one recognizes space only by not clinging to the objects in the room."

When the clinging stops, when you let go of the absorptions, judgments, criticisms, and evaluations of the beings and the things in the room—when that isn't arising—you begin to experience the space of it. But mostly we're so involved in the absorptions and the judgments about everything: the beings, the space, the room, the mind. When there's no grasping, and there's just the space within which things are arising, that's that place. Someone was saying we often don't recognize it—the mind gets restless, too flighty. But here we do start to notice it, and we don't just have to stay bored with the space.

This really did inspire me—recognizing just that moment of peace, nothing special going on. And you might just, as a little skillful means, incline toward it: "Ah, this is sublime. This is peaceful." Not "Oh God, I've got something." But just letting it in—that sense of the peace, the coolness that isn't reacting off of anything or creating any sense of me in relation to anything. You don't think all that stuff. But you're kind of noticing what that feels like. We get more tuned into that quality in the heart, in the mind, in the awareness.

I'm using words that are all too gross, but it's kind of like purity. A friend of mine described it as feeling squeaky clean. Just squeaky clean. There's nothing there—just that awareness with nothing extra.

A lot of times when we have little moments like that on retreat, and off retreat too of course, but it's easier to notice on retreat—in the past, I would think about certain moments that were so vivid, but I would attribute it to the circumstances. It was beautiful weather, I had finally finished worrying about whether I was going to get a new job, this little lizard went by and it was so lovely, the people were so nice. You remember it in the context. But I would tend to give too much credit to the context, to the conditions, not recognizing that the sense of happiness or peace or freedom—whatever way your particular mind stream would name it—that is just the quality of that purity of heart-mind, and it's nothing to do with what the conditions are.

So that can be experienced—not so easy, but say in the midst of a bad headache, just for a moment. Yeah, it's easy.

OK, it's easier. It's easier when it's a beautiful day and you're outside and the peonies smell good and you're not sneezing from pollen. But maybe not. Maybe that's actually what sucks the mind into "isn't this wonderful."

But anyway, the skillful means, as the Buddha was teaching, is just that we can recognize and incline the mind to appreciating this—to the wholesome, to the heart-mind that isn't colored or distorted by kilesa.

I want to mention one other sutta from the Buddha where he's again giving two ways of giving attention. And this is, again, when the mind is pretty steady, as we're talking about now—not lost in gross kilesa. He's teaching that it can be skillful to brighten the heart-mind.

I like this sutta because it starts with Venerable Ananda taking his robe and bowl and going to a settlement of nuns. He's going and meeting with a group of nuns. Ananda, by the way, in the suttas is the friendly monk that we can more easily identify with. He makes mistakes. He's really friendly. He's very supportive of the nuns all through the suttas.

So he's approaching the nuns, and they say to him, "There are a number of nuns here who abide with our minds well established in the four foundations of mindfulness. Their understanding, their wisdom, their freedom is becoming ever greater and more excellent."

And he says, "So it is, sister, so it is."

Then he goes and tells the Buddha about this. He's basically talking to the Buddha about these nuns, these women, who are really well established in the four foundations of mindfulness. It's very steady. Their wisdom is growing. Their compassion is growing.

And the Buddha says, "Yes, very good." And as a monk or a nun abides contemplating—and he gives the four foundations—the body as body, feelings as feelings. Just in the simplicity of like under the tree, just a

body. Just aware of the body, just to the extent necessary to know there is a body. Aware of feelings to the extent necessary to know there are feelings. This is this subtle, steady quality of mindfulness.

Still, in that time, it can happen that a bodily object or bodily distress arises, or as one translation says, a fever of kilesa might arise in the body, or sluggishness might arise in the mind, and either of those might arise and scatter the mind outward.

So he's saying, even when the practice is getting much more steady and refined, yeah, hello, this can happen.

And he says, so then the bhikkhu could direct their mind to some inspiring sign, some inspiring image. Basically, this is to direct the attention to something wholesome. This is where this sutta is called "Directed and Undirected Attention."

The mind gets scattered outward by some fever of kilesa in the body, some sluggishness in the mind. And so he said—this is what we've been saying as a skillful means—refresh the awareness. It may just be moving to something neutral, but here, when it's much more refined, we can really consciously tune into the wholesome.

So for example, "This is sublime." That's been really working for me lately, like a reminder. That's so peaceful, just the mind of non-clinging.

But it may be aspiration, as I mentioned the other day. It may be an image or a memory of someone who really inspires you, or an insight that you had.

I know when I'm in Burma, many of the nuns that we visit—sometimes for many of them, their main meditation practice is Buddhānussati, which is reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha over and over and over. Now for me, that particular practice doesn't particularly inspire me. But being with them when they're doing it, the faith and the brightness that practice brings up in their minds—that faith and brightness then does inspire me.

So I can call up some nuns I know and just get a sense of their faith and brightness. And then that's like a sense of the wholesome. And the mind gets collected again.

And he's saying, from this happiness, joy is born. With a joyful mind, the body relaxes. A relaxed body is more content.

The mind of one content becomes more collected. So the bhikkhu then reflects, "The purpose for which I directed my mind has been accomplished." In other words, the mind is balanced again. I withdraw attention from that particular wholesome object. I no longer think about it, no longer pay attention to it. And inwardly mindful, I am content.

That's directed meditation—skillful means, even when our experience is quite subtle.

And what is undirected meditation? Not directing one's mind outward or to any specific thing, one knows, one understands: "My mind, my attention is not directed outward, not focused on before or after, free, undirected." And one understands, "I abide being aware of body as body, ardent, fully aware, mindful. I am content."

I just love that. This is really what we're practicing when we say "just the steady awareness, just to the extent of knowing what's occurring." And knowing that that's what's happening—I am content. Nothing to want, nothing to get rid of.

So we have these two ways. With the steady awareness practice, sometimes we need a little more care. You see the kilesas coming, they're too strong, so you think, "Okay, a little more attention." Not knocking them away, but a little more taking refuge in awareness. And maybe you need to shift attention to something else. But when it's more steady, you don't need to do that anymore. The mind is aware. Just whatever's occurring—no before, no after—I am content.

This is really our practice. And as Ajahn Sumedho says, the practice of freedom is awareness. Just one moment, one moment, one moment.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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