Unentangled Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:15

We'll talk tonight about steady awareness and hopefully some of the ways that it helps wisdom, how it supports wisdom arising—hopefully helpful little hints.

Alexis and I both were thinking today of a particular poem that's at the beginning of a long Pali commentary in the Theravada tradition called the *Visuddhimagga*, the Path of Purification. The beginning stanza is:

The inner tangle and the outer tangle—this generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama Buddha this question: Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?

The *Visuddhimagga* is a long book. I'm not going to go on that long, but I love that. We're entangled in a tangle, the inner tangle and the outer tangle.

The Dalai Lama offers a couple of descriptions of our tangle. As you've probably heard him say, if you listen to him at all, he says with great confidence that our true human values—what I call our good qualities: wisdom, compassion, generosity, equanimity, loving-kindness—these he considers our truer nature. And he says this with real conviction. These qualities are what naturally manifests in our heart-mind in response to life in a moment when our heart-minds are not clouded by confusion, by the three gang members: greed, hatred, and delusion. And that's really what we can discover and explore—that when the heart-mind is not clouded, when those qualities aren't distorting, these beautiful qualities, these wholesome qualities, are what naturally arise in response to situations.

Again, His Holiness says this all the time: all of our difficulties come from mistaken perception. He doesn't just say it—Ajahn Sumedho says that all the time. Thich Nhat Hanh said that all the time. I say that often enough myself. But really, I see how that's true. All of our difficulties come from mistaken perception. This ignorance, this mistaken perception, is at the root of the 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations.

Feels like that, doesn't it? We start with greed, hatred, and delusion, but somehow they blossom into 84,000 destructive emotions and cognitive obscurations. I like that phrase, "cognitive obscurations," because when delusion is present, you may not notice it as a destructive emotion. You may be feeling quite fine—everything's fine—but it's a cognitive obscuration. It's confusing perception.

So this is at the root of the tangle. And our path of awakening, as we're presenting and offering it here, as we're learning from the Buddha—this path of wakefulness, of practice and wisdom—it works, and hopefully you're getting that, not by somehow annihilating the destructive emotions or wishing them

away or somehow destroying them or somehow moving into another plane. It's the simplicity of steady, receptive awareness that sets the condition for clear seeing, for wisdom to arise, for a moment of conscious awareness with interest present without cognitive obscuration. And the accurate recognition there in a moment is what starts to see through, to see accurately. And the accurate understanding—that's the wisdom that untangles the tangle.

Of course, that's only in one moment, because it keeps recreating, recreating. Have you noticed that? You think there's just one big tangle we'll figure out, but it's all a moment-to-moment arising and creation.

Samsara. Vance mentioned samsara last night, often described as the rounds of wanting and loss, birth and death. I like the way—I've really liked this a lot the last few years—a definition I read from Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He's an American man ordained in the Thai forest tradition, and he's very prominent in translating Pali into English. In the Theravada, he's one of the three most prominent translators, along with Bhikkhu Analayo and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu: "Samsara literally means 'wandering on.' Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live, the place we leave when we go to Nibbana. But in early Buddhist texts, samsara is the answer not to 'where are we?' but to 'what are we doing?'"

I really love this. It's the immediacy. The action is no place. It's the answer to what are we doing. It's not a place. It's a process: the tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them.

As soon as one world falls apart, you create another and go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds too. Do you get a sense of that? You don't even know we're in our different worlds, and we bump into someone else. No wonder things are a tangle.

So the Buddha looked for and found a way to stop samsara-ing—like giving up an addiction that was really based on misperception. Ajahn Sumedho says in a similar way that samsara and nibbana are not places to go, but modes of perception. That's really it.

He's saying that samsara is when the perception—this is the deluded, confused perception—is from or through the self, which is personality view. In any moment, the perception—and here saññā refers to a very specific activity of mind—occurs in any of the six sense contacts. Say there's a sound. Perception occurs naturally. It's based on memory and conditioning, but it's like recognition. So it would register "bell." That would be the perception in that moment. You see how that perception then gives rise to how we think about things, how we feel about them, and then the whole world gets started from that moment of perception, from all the different sense contacts. And perception isn't always accurate.

So Ajahn Sumedho is saying that when that perception is through or from the sense of self, the sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, that is the core misperception—the core mistaken perception. Whenever perception starts through the sense of self without being recognized, it's already off, and that's the beginning of that particular world.

If anything came up in your mind just now—she's coughing, what about me?—that's what we do. That's exactly the beginning of a world. This is the core misperception we're so familiar with: that any perception comes from the sense of "me." And this is where these whirls that bring the tangle start.

With steady awareness, we can bring interest—awareness is interest—to see how it's working, not to annihilate, not to stop. Because we don't even know what to stop. That's just another cockamamie idea we make up. "We should stop this." We don't even know what. We make up some idea of what nibbana would be like, what it would be like to be free, and then we try to make that happen. Tangle, big tangle.

So with our practice, as we've been encouraging here, we can watch the complex worlds arising and dissolving in our experience all day long. Do you get a sense of that? Often we don't notice, so that's what we get to do here. This is in daily life too—this isn't something just happening on retreat. One of the reasons for not interacting too much on retreat is so we can watch this stuff. Otherwise, as he says, we're all creating our world, bumping into other people, and the worlds don't match. But here we can watch it come and go, hopefully with steady awareness and interest. It gets interesting. It's really quite fascinating to watch concoction—I love that word—a concoction, just things thrown together. To watch a concoction of mind, a world come together and fall apart, and watch how it happens again and again.

Let me give you a simple example. When the starting point is misperception, there's always delusion or kilesa—one of the kilesas: greed, hatred, delusion. But this can arise with any sense experience. Sometimes there's a sound. The sound arises. It's known as hearing. You recognize a sense of pleasant or not.

It's the bell. And nothing else happens, and the next thing happens. There's no concoction going on there. That's a sense of peace. This is just what it is. That could be with any sense experience as well.

So this example from a friend just popped into my mind. She said she was at work, sitting there, and one of her colleagues—I guess it was a big office—came in and frowned at her. My friend thought, "She's mad at me. She's angry at me. Why?" So that was her perception: this colleague is angry at me. But the colleague didn't speak. She went on by and was just on the phone doing her thing.

So all day at work, my friend was watching. Every time she'd look at the colleague, she could see that she looked angry and fuming and doing stuff, but she wasn't talking to her. And my friend was getting, you know, alternately self-conscious, angry, irritated—what's going on? There's this whole bubble world. And because there was a lot of aversion—dosa, the Pali word for all the kinds of aversion: greed, aversion, fear, irritation, the whole 84,000 varieties—because that was present in her awareness without being recognized, of course it distorted a lot of other perceptions. And as you can see, it was all about me. All about me. So the aversion in her mind affected her whole day, the decisions she made. And every time she looked at that person, the colleague looked more angry. My friend got more angry.

Of course, at the end of the day, she checked it out. None of that was accurate. The colleague wasn't angry

at her. She wasn't even thinking about her. She had just come in looking somber because something had happened at home, and she was just going through her day. There was no connection with my friend at all. A complete made-up story.

This doesn't sound outside the realm of possibility, does it? At least she could check it out, but she spent the whole day in this crazy fuming. So the original misperception was: she's angry. That was the first misperception. But then the sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, the sense of self—she's angry *at me*. That's really the sense of personality view that riles up the concoction, because we put our self, the sense of self—which isn't accurate anyway—at the center of the universe, and it all just takes off.

So with steady awareness and an interest—the quality of interest that we bring to awareness when it's balanced—that is so helpful. There's one of the wholesome enlightenment factors of mind: dhamma vicaya, usually translated as investigation of dhamma, or interest. It's not investigation as thinking about things, as we tend to understand investigation. It's a mental quality, a mental factor, and it's really that quality of interest. It kind of lights up the field in the mind. So you're being with a sense—say there's a sense of pressure in the chest—and it's either pressure and bored, or pressure with aversion, or pressure and "I don't want to be with it," or it's "What's that like?" You're not saying it, but just really that quality of listening, almost of receiving, of just being really tenderly but fully present. Let reality reveal itself—that quality of interest. But that can only be present when kilesa is not, right? That's the thing with these three.

I'm going to keep using the word kilesa just because I find it... I don't really like "defilement." I don't want to keep saying "torments." Anyway, that's my preference. I'm going to keep saying kilesa. So you know what I mean, right? Greed, hatred, confusion.

Now, why I said that, I don't know. But investigation—we're used to thinking about stuff, but it's not that. It's just this quality of steady, awake attention.

This is one of my favorites. For twenty years now, this has been one of my favorite quotations from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking." I think I'll say that again.

Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It's the result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding.

This speaks to the nature of experience, and why thinking our way into something unknown can't work—because thoughts can only think what they already know. So this long process of conscious awareness, that's what we're doing. That's exactly what we're doing here. And it takes the awareness, the alertness, the interest, and the patience to keep trusting and to keep coming back into the awareness. Not expecting some big understanding light bulb to go off every ten minutes and then everything's copacetic.

Watching, watching, watching—and then suddenly you see: *Ah, she wasn't angry at me at all. Look at all the stuff the mind was creating about that.* That's a kind of insight, a later seeing of how it all works. You

may not notice it the next time, but you might.

There are a couple of points I wanted to make from this example of creating a world. I think you can sense that the mind is doing this all day long with all kinds of different sense experience. Do you get a sense of that? Some experiences are more gripping than others. Some are lighter—they don't have to take hold. Like I said, it can just be steady awareness: a sound comes and there's awareness; a thought comes and it can be of your mother and it can be a difficult thought and you feel it. Awareness knows it, feels the difficulty. And it goes. That's not creating a world. That's just seeing what's happening with awareness. The world is created when we take off, fed by the sense of me, by greed and aversion.

One point I particularly wanted to make concerns the power of unrecognized torment—*kilesa*—in the mind. Some people ask, "Why do we have to keep noticing? What's the point of continuing to notice these defilements when they come all the time?" Because without recognizing them—as in that little example I gave with my friend—the power of that unrecognized irritation, or anger at the person, or fear about what she's angry at me for, that unrecognized quality keeps distorting further perceptions. It flavors our assumptions. It flavors the stories we make. It can flavor our actions and our reactions. It's incredibly powerful.

And it doesn't have to be a huge, overwhelming anger. That we'll probably notice. We may not be able to be really balanced and aware of it, but at least we'll notice it. But the subtle or small aversions and greeds that arise—they can just be kind of niggling in the back of the mind. "Oh, she's mad at me, okay. I'm not really averse, it's okay. Not enough to have to pay attention to." So we don't.

Sayadaw—I went from Ajaan to Sayadaw; I was in Thailand, now I have to come back to Burma—Sayadaw Tejaniya sometimes likes to talk about recognizing the *kilesas* and how they do their job. One year when he came to a retreat, he had something he would keep repeating in every interview group. And it was really helpful. He talked about getting interested in recognizing *kilesa* in the mind and realizing that, of course, like anything, sometimes it's very subtle, sometimes it's gross. We can see that they arise in a range of zero to ten.

He would say it's like when you go to the doctor and they have those little smiley faces moving into frowny faces, and you're supposed to say to what degree you're in pain today—zero to ten. I never know what to say. Compared to what? But anyway, he says it's like that. So say with my friend, if there's a little bit of aversion—"It doesn't matter, I'm not really bothered"—

Don't have to pay attention to it. It's like a 1 or 2 level. And he said, that's what we tend to do. We think, "Oh, it's no big deal. I don't need to pay attention to it." We wait until it's up to eight or nine before bringing in awareness. And then, you know, the horse is out of the stable. It's at eight or nine, and awareness—we're gone, off into it. Then it's struggle.

When we bring awareness, when there's a sense of balanced awareness, stable awareness, and we

become aware—"Ah, it's really, really wanting, wanting"—okay, be aware of wanting. When the awareness is truly balanced, it's not feeding the wanting. When we're not aware of the wanting or the aversion in the background, every new little experience makes it a little easier for the ill will, for the wanting to color the next experience. It can be subtly growing in the background. When we become aware—"Oh yeah, wanting, aversion, it feels like this"—then we're seeing it clearly.

As I think we said, Joseph Goldstein has said he'd much rather see a *kilesa* than not. He's happy when he sees it. I feel like that too, up to a point. Because when you see it, then it's not going to be behind the scenes, making choices, coloring our interpretation of ourselves and others and what's going on. So, "Oh yeah, here's aversion. It feels like this. It's like this now." Really taking refuge in the awareness, but seeing it.

The Buddha says, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will—and he says the same thing for craving, the same thing for delusion—obsessed and oppressed by ill will, craving, or delusion, and one does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both. He says this in quite a few different places, and I think it really cuts to the nub.

When our mind-heart is obsessed by ill will—and all we mean by obsessed is that in that moment it's unrecognized, coloring the perception—in that moment we can't perceive accurately. We can't really trust what assessment we make of how to act for our own good, for the good of others, or the good of both. Because perception is distorted. Perception is unreliable. When we don't know these qualities may be in the mind affecting our perception, that's when we really might be trying to do something good and maybe by luck we hit it, but we can't tell.

Notice he starts with, you can't tell your own good—what's good for you. So really, just starting to tune into that out of compassion for ourselves and the world.

"One neither knows, when one does not understand as it really is, the escape from arisen ill will." So guess what the escape from arisen ill will might be in this context? It's not a secret. It's not something we haven't been talking about. But really, this is the power: we take refuge, as I just said, aware of the ill will. It's still here. Awareness doesn't make it go away.

Sometimes people think that with mindfulness, if they're being mindful correctly, the difficult thing goes away. How many people have ever thought that? That you're not being mindful correctly because the unpleasant thing is still here. And then we know that's not true, but secretly in the back—right? I mean, we all do it. "I'm being mindful, I'm being mindful," and then, what's the problem? Well, I'm being mindful, and then—oh yeah, it's still here. "I'll be mindful. If I do it right, it'll go away." It gets more and more subtle.

Anyway, the awareness is the condition—the steady awareness: "Oh, ill will, it's feeling like this." Noticing

the thoughts that it's sending up, noticing how it feels. The awareness is just watching how it's acting, or the greed. But it's not feeding it. And that steadiness of awareness not feeding it is the condition for wisdom to arise. It's wisdom in the mind. It's not a personal act of will: "I will now end this ill will."

I mean, we've all tried, right? "I will now end this greed." We can, with an act of will, choose not to act on it—and that's a good thing. That's why we have precepts. But the ending of the defilement itself is not an act of will. It's wisdom, a quality in the mind that sees clearly, and suddenly—*ah*.

Have you had a moment when ill will or greed just stops? And you didn't feel like you did something—it's simply gone? Keep noticing that gone-ness; that's really important too.

An example of how this works: Vance's story about the lungi. He wasn't bragging about his awareness. He was talking about the real destructive quality of greed—what it does in our heart and mind, and then how we perceive and act when it takes over. But he was noticing all of that because there was awareness present. Clearly, the greed was strong. The suffering was strong. It made sense—it wasn't a harmful greed or anything.

But the awareness of watching all of that—watching the craving, watching what came up—meant there was enough awareness present when that sense of the anglerfish arose. When that anglerfish with its teeth came up and he saw his friend as the enemy, that was awareness seeing it. And wisdom popped in: *Wow, look what it's doing.* That was a moment of wisdom. And he said, "I couldn't possibly take it then. What am I cultivating here?" That recognition isn't personal either, just as the aversion isn't personal. That's a moment of how wisdom functions. It's like, "Wow, I'm not going to do this." It puts down the craving. That's wisdom acting.

It's the steady awareness with interest in just being present for however the experience is manifesting that sets up the condition for this wisdom to arise. In that moment, craving is abandoned. These are really faith-inducing moments if we stay with the awareness and notice. We don't take it personally either. We don't take the *kilesas* personally, and we don't take the wisdom personally—but we recognize it.

This is something Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about frequently, this understanding of wisdom. It wasn't new to me, but somehow he brought it home in a way that's been quite helpful—thinking of it more in these terms. It's a further taking out of the sense of self trying to do it right. "I think if I practice enough, if I do all the things, if I'm steady with awareness, then I'll have some wisdom. And I can act from wisdom. And I'll put down the clinging." But there's still all that *me, me, me*—which is a misperception.

Wisdom is another quality of nature arising when there's steady awareness recognizing things as they are. The wisdom—the natural quality of heart-mind when it's not distorted by *kilesas*—as His Holiness said, is to move towards the wholesome, to manifest the wholesome. So wisdom, when it's present, isn't interested in the *kilesas*. It abandons them and moves into the wholesome—in that case, renunciation, putting down the greed.

This is a natural occurrence. It's natural cause and effect. So it's not something that requires you to be some kind of incredibly wise person for it to happen. It's not about intelligence. It's not about personality. It's cause and effect.

If we practice anger, anger, anger, what's likely to be the first reaction that arises in an unguarded moment? Anger. We've simply practiced it. But when we practice awareness and clear seeing, bringing interest and non-reactivity—real presence, non-identification, because awareness isn't "me," it isn't identified—the wisdom comes. And in that moment of wisdom, that starts to arise more frequently. It's cause and effect, but it's not personal.

To me, that actually strengthened faith a great deal. Just cultivate steady awareness, and nature takes care of itself. All we do is get in and muck it up. Like if we're trying to grow a daffodil bulb and we get in and mess around and do all kinds of stuff, we end up killing the thing—overwatering it or pulling it up or whatever. Leave it alone and just watch what's happening.

With the steadiness of conscious awareness, as we're doing, you'll see as you go through the day—I already said this, but I want to highlight it again—really watch. As worlds come together and fall apart, really get interested in exploring, seeing how that's happening again and again. When you're walking or eating, whatever you're doing, just being a little more tuned in.

Thoughts come and go, but when it's a world, there's a real me in it, buying into the whole thing. I use this example frequently because it might change every five minutes. Say, walking meditation. Aware of walking, and somehow it's really pleasant, and the thought comes up, "I'm really an ace yogi here. I'm really getting it." That thought can come and go. It doesn't have to be a world. But it could be a world.

So it comes up. It's pleasant. There's a sense of me—you can feel that. "I'm doing well." There's a sense of gratification. This can be subtle, just a gratification. We feel good. There's nothing wrong with feeling good. Remember, I'm talking about just being aware of how this world is being created. Feeling good, and I've seen this in myself, and then all kinds of thoughts about me and memories of all the good times and all my great practice, and then plans for the future—all the retreats I'll go to, or I'm going to meet the Dalai Lama, or whatever it is. We go on and on. We might be aware of the thoughts, but it's not complete awareness because we're not noticing the clinging. We're not noticing the sense of me driving it.

So that goes on. That's a world. We're in that world. That's a happy world.

And then, I don't know, you trip over something, almost fall on your face. And just immediately: "Who saw me? What an idiot, what an idiot. And that person I was really respecting—they saw me trip. So they'll know. I think I'm so mindful and I can't even see the crack in the sidewalk."

A completely different world, right? Five minutes later. We don't notice they're different worlds. We think that's the same me. They're completely different worlds.

So that one goes on. And watch the thoughts that come. There's the identification. It could be you just trip, you say, "Oh yeah, how funny," and then the next thing happens. It doesn't have to be a world. But when it is, notice that gripping of me. In the sense that rather than gratification, there's a sense of the unpleasantness or the shame or whatever. And then all the memories that come.

I call this selective perception. We have so many memories of our life, but in that world, the only memories that come up are of all the times when you blew it, when you were a stupid jerk or you fell or you couldn't do it right. "I knew I couldn't do it. I'm so conceited. I was thinking that, and here I am. I can't even walk in a row without falling on my face." And that goes on for a while.

Then without awareness—or sort of awareness—we kind of forget. We don't really notice it go away. But the next thing we notice, we're just kind of bored. I think that's enough.

Maybe I should go have some tea. It's another world. This could all happen in the space of fifteen minutes. And none of them, thank goodness, require you to intersect with anyone else—you're just being quiet.

So do we notice that what arises ceases? This is really where the steadiness of awareness is so key. The worlds are no problem when awareness notices them. This is what the mind does. This is how identification works. Awareness isn't identified. We're not trying to annihilate identification. We're not trying to say there's no self, so don't feel this. Yes, the sense of self is felt very clearly. It happens to be a misinterpretation, but it's felt very clearly. Be with what's actually felt, as it is, with steadiness.

So watch as the story concoction comes together. It feels like maybe you're caught a bit in the middle, and then it drops away, and then it's gone. Notice the gone-ness. Notice with steady awareness—or do we just jump right into the next world?

Ajahn Sumedho says most people don't notice cessation of the concoctions, or cessation of any experience, because our attention is too flighty, too jumping around. Of course, that's the condition. And I think probably now it's more flighty than it was at the time of the Buddha because of the whole thing about attention spans. Just the fact of—my mind goes to Elon Musk's thing, Twitter. You can't have more than a certain amount of syllables. Nobody's mind can comprehend more than that. You've got to move to the next thing. Talk about flighty.

So our attention is too flighty. But that's just a habit. We're cultivating a habit of steady presence, steady awareness. And that's growing over days because we're welcoming it. With this steadiness, notice the world dissipate. Notice the world fall apart. Notice cessation. Notice that's not there and things are just coming and going and there's awareness. And then notice another world starts to come together. You don't notice it right at the beginning, but you notice in the middle, wherever you notice. And then you notice, oh no, another one. Oh yeah, sense of aversion. Just that comes and goes. So it can be really interesting just seeing how it works.

In a similar vein, sometimes on retreat here, as we're getting more and more tuned in to watching our

mind—what's arising in the mind, which is what gives rise to these worlds—I like to play with this when I'm moving around on retreat, and then it comes into daily life. Just watching what quality in the mind—it could be *kilesa*, but it could not be, it could just be whatever it is—is giving rise to the intention, the motivation to make a choice, to act.

Like when you walk into the dining room to sit down, watch your mind choosing where to sit. How does it choose? Sometimes one just goes and sits down. Sometimes one can feel the greed. I like that place. It's over by the window. I can see that. How can I get over there? Or sometimes you feel the greed, but awareness chooses not to act on it. Or you've noticed it's "I want to sit there"—oh no, that person.

I can't be near that person. I have to go over there. I don't want anyone near me. Just watching all of that stuff. Or noticing how you eat.

I've started seeing this at home with all kinds of little things. It's almost funny, but I notice when I'm making tea, I really notice. I tend to always hold the spoon in my right hand and the honey in my left hand. And then sometimes I'll switch it, and I'll be noticing. It doesn't matter, right? But just noticing the different things we do. "I always go for this first. I always have to make my bed before I do that." Any kind of little thing—when you choose to go have tea or you choose to go do some walking. Not making it wrong, but just tuning in to these little things.

This is really training the awareness to notice what's arising in the mind. And then when it kind of gloms on and a more strong world starts to be created, you might notice it. So that's just something I wanted to offer as a way to play with practice—really seeing the effect of kilesa, but then also seeing how worlds come and go, and with steady awareness we can really watch that.

In the midst of a world, or when there's not steady awareness, I want to say another word about taking refuge in awareness, reminding ourselves what that means in the middle of something. Ajahn Sumedho describes awareness as a natural activity of awakened attentiveness. I like that phrase—awakened attentiveness. The mind is alert. Not created, but recognized. Very natural and often overlooked.

Alexis said this morning, referring to completely resting in awareness in a moment, one moment, as being home, coming home. It's funny because I was thinking that same thing before he said it. I was listening to a talk by Thich Nhat Hanh where he talks about this. You know, he talks about the miracle of mindfulness—that was his first book. But in this one talk, he was saying that this mindfulness, this awareness, this sense of really resting in total awareness in the moment, is our home. It's our true home.

He talks about coming home, and it's not a place. It's not an activity. It's just this sense of fullness of presence in the present moment. The totality of the present moment just as it is. To use Ajahn Sumedho's phrase: it's like this now. It's like this now. A kind of relaxing of any resistance that might be there—we don't even know—but completely coming into this moment.

Ajahn Chah talks about it in a similar way. He talks about the sense of this is home. Citta doesn't really

reside anywhere, but you feel here, a sense of home, awakened awareness. And he calls it Grand Central Station. He says, just stay home in Grand Central Station. The thoughts are like the trains—they all come and go. They all start at Grand Central Station, and they all just end at Grand Central Station, the home of awareness, the home of present moment awareness. So we don't have to get on the trains and go out. Just stay home. Let the trains go. Let them come back. But just stay home with present moment awareness. No need to figure it all out. Relax and drop into.

We can do this in just little things and get a feeling for what that totality of present moment awareness feels like. Alexis, you mentioned the question someone was asking about what U Tejaniya meant by superficial awareness in his book. I'm going to talk about something similar. Joseph has a phrase—he's so good at coming up with phrases—of "more or less mindfulness." You know, we're kind of mindful. We're going through. We're walking.

We know we're walking. We know what we're doing, sort of. And it's not spaced out, but it's not really quite here. We do that a lot. It's not bad, but there's a difference between that and when the attention is wholeheartedly, fully present.

Like this morning, I was just doing the dishes, no big deal. And I was like that—more or less mindful. Thoughts were coming and going, but thoughts can be here with total presence too. I wasn't lost in thought. I knew I was washing the dishes. But it's subtle—there's a bit of disconnection. I know I'm doing it, and there's a thought, la la la. You're kind of here, but there's a disconnect. It's not whole. It's not really fulfilling. More or less mindfulness. And it feels disconnected and unsatisfactory if you tune into it. You're not quite here.

So somehow I just noticed that—oh, it's like this now. That wasn't a right or a wrong. It's just that suddenly I recognized it was kind of half disconnected. It's a delusion. Not really quite here. And then awareness just opened and dropped in.

For me, that phrase of Ajahn Sumedho's—"it's like this now"—that's one of my helpful phrases. You can all find your own, as some have asked. But when I say that, it's not like saying what it is that's like this. It's that whatever resistance or interpretation or looking was present just goes away. All my awareness drops into the body and however the mind feels. Oh, it's like this now. It's just a moment of total moving into what is. And whatever it is, it's fine. It might be unpleasant, it might be pleasant, but the sense of struggle, the sense of disconnect is gone because it actually brings me right in touch with this totality of awareness. Just relaxed, not thinking about.

It feels like home. A home of awareness is fulfilling, and from that the next thing arises, and one knows what it is. That's an always-available home.

Really, I think—and Alexis talked about this with the First Noble Truth—at least half the time when we drop into what's here now, it's unpleasant. And we're so conditioned, again by the sense of me, that we

just naturally recoil, both our mind and even our body, from the unpleasant. Then we interpret that as being a problem—it's bad, it's wrong, we've got to fix it.

But when there's that sense of just dropping in—so when I dropped in this morning, I didn't even remember what was happening. But it could be that I drop in and maybe there was some unhappiness about some thought, or maybe my back was hurting, or maybe I was feeling in a hurry and doing the dishes in a hurry, which is unpleasant. But I can drop in and just say, "Oh, hurrying feels like this."

So that complete dropping in is letting go, but it's not a conscious act. Awareness just is here. It doesn't buy into the resistance.

Joko Beck said, and I find this helpful: Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in this confusing and uncomfortable situation? That's the invitation. Sometimes you can ask yourself that consciously. You just kind of acknowledge, I know what's going on, but what's happening? Oh, can I just rest with awareness in this confusing and unpleasant situation? And sometimes the mind goes, "No way!" But sometimes it goes, "Oh yeah, okay." And there's a kind of tuning into the possibility of peace and ease that is available when there's not resistance.

So as I was saying, the core misperception is that sense of self, or self-clinging. Any experience that arises—it's an aspect of craving, clinging—is clung to: this is me, this is mine, this is myself.

So just something to look at. I'm not going to go into detail, but as the Dalai Lama often says, just tune in to notice yourself. When there's that sense of self-clinging, don't fight it. Notice—just like with any kilesa—how does it act?

And we can start to notice the narrowness that's present in our interpretation of the world, in our field of experience, when it's all about me. It's a self-centered world. It's really so narrow. It can feel like a prison, and it gives rise to greed and aversion.

The Buddha spoke about the kilesas as being—this is a phrase—"makers of measurement." When there's greed, when there's ill will in the mind, when there's a sense of self, he says it's a maker of measurement. You can just see very much the sense of self: me and other, that's a measurement. Me and that, that's a measurement. They're better than me, they're worse—that's a measurement. And this sense of self creates that.

Just a simple example of the difference between a self-centered world that's created and one that's not. Very simple. A couple of years ago, I was just home, kind of present, but there was some aversion in the mind—not a big deal, but just an aversive, grumpy mood, annoyed at myself about something. Not a big thing, just a normal day going on. And I heard—maybe someone told me on the phone, I don't remember—but something a colleague, a friend, had done that was really a very generous, beautiful thing.

And the first response that came up in the grumpy, self-centered mind was: They're better than me. I should have thought to do that. I should be willing to do that. Look how generous they are. A completely self-centered world leading to more ill will and clinging. I recognized that. That's how we go through the world so much of the time, with that center of me.

Then the next day, a similar thing happened. It wasn't that I thought myself into feeling better about that person. But a similar kind of thing occurred where I heard in some way about someone I knew who'd done something really thoughtful or effective. But this time the mind was really clear and balanced. There wasn't any big sense of self—it was just awareness. And immediately, spontaneously, without any thought, the quality of appreciative joy, mudita, arose. Like, wow! That's such a great thing. How generous. That's so wonderful.

And that's the joy. That's what the Dalai Lama was saying. When the heart-mind isn't distorted by these kilesas, that's what arises. So the world is so much more open and broad when it's not in that little circle of self.

Just to explore this, to see it, to see the self doing this again and again—and the wisdom will arise that at times just doesn't get so sucked into it.

Two quotations about that, one from His Holiness and one from Desmond Tutu. His Holiness says: "The paradox is that although the drive behind excessive self-focus is to seek greater happiness for yourself, it ends up doing exactly the opposite. You become disconnected and alienated from others when you focus so much on yourself. With too much self-focus, all about me and mine, your vision becomes narrow. And with this, even a small problem appears out of proportion and unbearable."

Have you noticed that? Even a small problem—our fears and our distrust are strengthened. But really the main thing is our vision becomes narrow. We become more alienated, even though we think focusing on ourselves is taking care of ourselves, making us happy.

But with compassion, with seeing clearly, with mudita, that's not abandoning oneself. It's all included. Our idea of taking care of you while not taking care of me—that's a self-centered view, that sense of separation. So noticing it, then thinking I shouldn't be like that—that's just more delusion. It's just another world that gets created from sense of self. Watch it arise, watch it fall away. Let awareness just see what feeds that world.

How does it feel when it drops away? How is it when it's not there, when things are arising and no world is being created? Just give attention to that. And then when there's not that narrowness of self, we can recognize how things are more accurately.

This is Bishop Tutu—one way he describes how things are in terms of us as human beings. The Archbishop of South Africa, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. He says:

"We are wired to be caring for the other and generous to one another. We're wired that way. We shrivel when we're not able to interact. That's part of the reason why solitary confinement is such a horrendous punishment. The concept we have at home in Africa is the concept of Ubuntu. It says a person is a person through other persons. Ubuntu says that when I have a small piece of bread, it is for my benefit that I share it with you."

It's the same thing Shantideva says—not because I should, but because we're all connected. Because, after all, none of us come into this world on our own. So you realize that in a very real sense, we are meant for a very profound complementarity. It's the nature of things. You don't have to be a believer in anything. It's the nature of things. I learned to be a human being from other human beings. We are all part of this delicate network. It's actually quite profound.

So that's just another way of expressing how the tangle untangles—just in a moment, when the kilesas aren't coloring perception, when the world isn't being viewed through the lens of me and other. It's just very simple and natural. It's nothing we create with a sense of self. But with the steady awareness that allows wisdom, in a moment of wisdom, that connectedness, that complementarity, that lack of me and other—that's just how it is. We don't have to think about it. You don't even have to recognize it as such. It's just that sense of how it is. And what naturally arises are the beautiful qualities in response to anything: equanimity, concentration, wisdom. This is really the natural result of wisdom.

And this steady, steady awareness—even though it's so hard and we have to meet so much difficulty at times—it really is amazing, the power it has. The miracle of mindfulness, as Thich Nhat Hanh says.

So thank you for your kind attention. As I had this insight: awareness will never abandon you. Sometimes we abandon awareness, but it's always available when we remember again.

May the beneficial energies created by our sincere practice here together, our sincere commitment to awakening, be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms of existence. May our practice truly be a condition for the awakening from suffering and confusion of all beings, including ourselves.

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