Power of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 50:27

Goenkaji, a long time ago, used to start each evening Dhamma talk by saying, "The first day is over. Eight more days to go." And believe me, I was dying in those retreats. This is Kush.

But the first day can be pretty long, no? Sometimes not, but yeah. I imagine some of you feel a little bit tired? A little bit blasted? That's normal. It won't stay that way, but it's such a shift from our ordinary life, whatever that is. This is somewhat different, one way or the other. And so sometimes we're tired, or just because we're not doing so much, the mind just wants to shut off.

But also, realistically, many of us come into this from whatever our lives have been—more busy or stressful. Sometimes just getting ready to come is stressful. And we get here and, quite legitimately, the mind and body are tired. So not to make any problem about it. You can take a little nap after lunch, whatever—take a nap in your sitting. When you wake up, you wake up. There was a lovely Sri Lankan monk years ago, long gone now, and he would say that on any retreat, you'll get as much sleep as you need, on or off the cushion.

I just want to normalize it. You don't need to be judging yourself, and you don't need to be—what my mother used to call—"awfulizing," projecting into the future: "Oh my God, eight more days like this." It won't be. The next moment won't be like this.

So I just wanted to talk a bit tonight about mindfulness, sati. Sometimes I like to talk about what I think of as the liberating simplicity of mindfulness, of awareness. I mentioned to my colleagues the other day that Thich Nhat Hanh used to talk a lot about this. I think his first book was called *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Actually, when I first heard it, I thought, "Oh, la la." But it is a miracle. It is a miracle—the power of mindfulness to start transforming our suffering habits, our suffering relationships to life.

Something that I've always so appreciated, that has always drawn me to the teachings of the Buddha—as far as I know them from reading in the Pali suttas—is how extremely pragmatic he seemed to be, even though there are books and books and reams of material. He always said that of all the things he knew, he knew so much. He said, "How much I know is like all the leaves in the forest." But he picked up a handful of leaves and said, "This is what I'm teaching, because it's all you need to know to free yourself from suffering." And that's what he was concerned with, even though there is all this philosophy and stuff we can study. It's fascinating. It can really relate to our lives, to our practice. But it isn't necessary.

The Buddha was really concerned with the salient point of our lives: the suffering, the discontent, the dis-ease that we all experience in one way or another. And he asked really practically: Why? Does it have

to be this way? Why are we discontented and suffering? Is it necessary? If not, what's a way to understand it better? What's a way to live differently? How does this suffering arise? How does it cease?

So that, in a way, is what's taking us into this practice. And at the core of it is this quality of awareness, of mindfulness. The pragmatic part of the Buddha is that he's saying, "Let's look and see what's bringing about suffering, unhappiness, dis-ease in my mind and heart." Not the whole world—in my mind and heart. What's bringing it about? What conditions bring it up? What conditions allow for it to release?

As Mingyur Rinpoche says, very practically too, if we want to be happy, we must recognize the causes and conditions that 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? Or as Joseph always talks about, his teacher Munindra used to say, if you want to understand how your mind works, sit down and look at it. Let's really look and see what's going on.

And this is like the whole core of the Buddhist teachings—that nothing just falls from the sky without causes and conditions. Everything is very lawful in the sense that if something is arising, there have been all kinds of conditions that led to it. It didn't just drop from nowhere. So we can start to look and understand it. And this is where mindfulness is really the key.

Why can't we just see how things are? Why do we get so confused? When the Buddha talked about his Eightfold Path, the path of practice, it begins—and really the path begins and ends—with right view, right understanding. Of course, in the beginning of the path we don't have complete understanding, but we have some sense of right view. And that's the core of it. So I want to speak a bit about what I mean by that, this being the beginning and the ending of the path.

I'm talking about this word view—*ditthi*—not as a belief, not as a philosophy. The Buddha's not saying you have to have right view meaning you need to master a million Buddhist teachings. When we talk about understanding them, understanding the fact that everything is impermanent, you could say that's right view. But he's not talking about—and here I'm not talking about—right view as learning and adopting a set of beliefs. Going around saying "everything's impermanent, this is right view" does not, as an intellectual belief, transform our understanding and our heart. It does not transform our suffering. Try it.

When we go around holding something as a belief, thinking "this is true"—that's one of the ways *ditthi*, or view, is defined in the suttas: the belief that this is true and everything else is false. We don't say that in neon lights, of course, but that's what's happening. The Buddha actually says that people with views, attached to views, go around in the world annoying one another.

So when we're talking about right view, it's not about saying, "Yes, everything's impermanent, and you're suffering because you don't know that everything's impermanent. But I do, and I'm right, and you're wrong." That's the same thing. That's the same samsara we're suffering from. He's not talking about that.

What he means is much more simple. The word that always comes to my mind is elegant. View, using the

English word, I like because it points to appropriate view—the way we see, the way we recognize our moment-to-moment experience. Right view, or accurate view you could say, or wise understanding, is recognizing this moment of experience, our self and the world as it is, rather than through the veil of all our assumptions and views and beliefs that we don't actually even recognize we have, because they range from gross to very subtle.

When we're in the grip of a view, or we're looking at the world through a view, and we don't quite recognize it accurately, then the way we think about the experience doesn't match reality, the way we respond doesn't match. This is where we get into what are called the disturbing emotions: greed, hatred, anger, fear, self-centeredness, separation. All of this comes from recognizing inaccurately, responding in a way that our inaccurate recognition tells us is going to make us happy, then being completely confused because that doesn't work. And we don't know why it doesn't work, because the way we're understanding the world isn't in alignment with the way it really is.

So I'll give you an example of how view works. Really, in some ways, the whole purpose of mindfulness and all the techniques around it is to keep introducing us to how to bring our totality of presence and awareness into this moment, free from all the assumptions—and even to understand that that's possible, to get a feeling that that's possible—and then recognize. I say "see," but it's not really visual seeing. It's more recognizing, just being with what's happening as it is.

Ajahn Chah, I think I mentioned the other night, was saying: in a nutshell, the point of the teaching of the Buddha is to transform one's view. It is possible to change it. It only requires looking at things, and then it happens. And that is the essence of the steadiness of mindfulness. Looking at things—not trying to figure out which things to look at so we can put it all together. That's just coming from our misunderstanding. Looking at what's naturally arising in this moment. And there's never any other moment. In this moment, what's naturally arising—not what we think it should be or how we think it ought to be. How is it now? The steadiness of mindfulness is what allows for clear recognition to arise.

It's based on our conditioning—our society, our cultural background, our experiences. We don't have to get rid of that, but we can recognize when a particular view is operating. When we don't recognize this, that's when we clash.

It can be kind of fun to see the differences, actually—if you're looking from outside and you're not so attached. If we leave politics and certain other things out of it.

An example: I was in Burma a few years ago with some friends. At that time, staying in monasteries in the central part of Burma meant being immersed in a very Buddhist culture, with deep faith in the Buddha's teaching and the different realms of existence. This faith in various levels of existence was something everyone had grown up with.

Several friends and I, along with a bunch of Burmese people—monks and sadhus—were going to a small

village to offer a donation of rice to the villagers. This is a very joyful occasion, very much part of the culture. When there's a donation of rice, all the donors are there, all the village people come, and it becomes a big event done with tremendous joy—and ten million photographs of everything.

So we were taking photos, different friends taking photos. Later, when we looked at the pictures on the camera, in several of them there was this perfectly round, bright light appearing in the images.

We're all looking at it, and the Burmese people say, "Oh, that's devas." Devas—celestial beings. "That's devas." And all the Burmese people agreed: "Oh yes, that's devas."

Then one of our friends—who is actually a nun in that tradition but happens to have a PhD in biology and botany, coming from a very scientific, medical background—she says, "No, there's no way. That's a watermark. A little moisture got into the lens. There's no way that's devas."

So who knows? Our tendency is to ask, "Well, which one's right? We've got to figure out which one's right." But that's not the point. Who knows what's right? It might not be either one.

What's interesting is that a year later, this same friend was in southern India at the ashram of Ramana Maharshi. Every full moon, people walk around the whole mountain, Arunachala—about a ten-mile walk. People come from all over India for this. It's a huge pilgrimage. Millions of people bus in. I'm not exaggerating—a million people walking around this mountain at night.

My friend was also doing it, and she took a lot of pictures. When she looked at her photos, there were these round deva things all over the place. And she said, "Ooh... maybe it is devas."

Who knows? It's not that there's a right answer. But we have different information, and the information we have and believe—that's how we describe our world. That's how we create our world. That's what it means to us, and that's how we might respond.

Our sense that we need to know—"If I know, then..."—when that takes over, the quality of freshness of attention, the wonder, the curiosity that comes with mindfulness that's open to discover, all of that shuts down. "Well, now I know what it is. It's a watermark. It's moisture. It's devas. That's it." And the curiosity goes out.

But no—it's just fresh. It's like this. We're not meant to settle on it. That's a little example of not being about getting it right.

But when we're believing that, if either side had really believed it, you could easily get into struggle or conflict around it. And in other kinds of views, we get into struggle or conflict with our moment-to-moment experience once in a while. Anybody notice today any moments when you weren't totally at ease and at peace with your mental or physical experience? Any moments of that? No, everything's totally copacetic, right?

So there are lots of different ways one could talk about this, but I just want to start with the really obvious tonight—in terms of the views that are affecting the way we relate to our experience that we don't quite recognize, because it seems so obvious and normal. But it's what's leading to, what's giving rise to, our sense of dissonance, our sense of being not at ease with things as they are.

Because a lot of times people think the freedom the Buddha's talking about means that finally all this crazy stuff in the world and everybody is going to stop. When you think about—or don't really consciously think, but in the back of your mind—what freedom from suffering might look like, what liberation might look like, are you still going to have backaches? Are your relatives still going to be as obnoxious as they are now? Is this stuff still going to go on? Are people in the world still going to be so crazy, getting involved in wars and such? If we don't really look at it, somehow on the surface level it's easy to say, "Oh, no, of course that goes on." But on the background level, somehow everything gets kind of nicer in there. And that's not the kind of thing he's talking about.

It took me a while to realize, but when I looked at the Buddha's life, when he woke up, he didn't spend the next forty-five years floating around on a cloud. He was walking barefoot around northern India, begging for his food. And the monks and nuns that he was training—they were wonderful people, but if you read the rules for the monks and nuns, every rule came about because of some stupid thing that the monks or the nuns were doing. He said, "Okay, I guess I have to make a rule about this. Don't do this. Don't do that." His relatives would get into wars about water rights. All kinds of endless sadhus would come and want to argue with him. To me, that's like the worst—every day some sadhu would come and just want to argue with him. The world didn't change, is my point. But he was known as the Peaceful One.

And that peace that he's offering us the chance to explore—with the tool of awareness to bring us in to see—is the peace that comes from a mind and heart that's at ease with things as they are. And that's only possible when we actually are present with things as they are, not as we wish they were or think they should be.

So this one habitual assumption is one of the root views we are caught in, and we don't see it. I'm sure those of you who've done practice a lot before are well aware of it. But that doesn't mean it doesn't keep sneaking in the back door or the front door.

One way the Buddha described experience—very basic experience—is through six sense doors. There's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensation, and then the whole mental realm: thoughts, emotions, all the mental experience. And those things are happening over and over through the day, right? In one way, he said, there's nothing else going on but that. A lot of it's mental, and it gets all complicated, but if we're really looking, it's thinking, it's mental experience, emotion, physical sensation, sound, seeing. All these things are coming and going. Don't believe me, but just look and see and let us know if you notice something else. No, seriously. But check it out first before you write me ten million notes.

So these things are coming and going, and we're so in the habit of thinking... Some feel pleasant. Some feel unpleasant. Some are kind of neither one nor the other—we don't notice that so much. But it's so immediate. We like some things. We don't like some things. And that can be quick and subtle. Or we kind of don't have much feeling, or we kind of ignore some things that are happening. And because things are happening quickly, we don't tend to notice that. But we've spent most of our lives practicing this. And so, basically, if something's kind of pleasant—say there's a sound, say at the end of the sitting you hear this bell, and we didn't make it a nice, quiet sound.

It might not be pleasant for everybody, and it might not be pleasant for you every time, but this one time it's pleasant. We don't notice hearing pleasant without steady mindfulness—it's just, "Ah, that's nice." Nothing wrong with that. But when we don't notice it, that's nice—that's the reality, that's a nice thing. Not even sound and then pleasant and liking it, just "that's nice." And that's how it should be.

Then something unpleasant happens. You're sitting in the meditation, and you just feel this heaviness come over your face, your body, and your mind goes, "Oh no, sleepiness. Oh my God, and there's thirty more minutes to go. What am I going to do?" So you're not seeing this as a lot of different experiences. It's one big unpleasant experience. And that's wrong. It shouldn't be happening. It's wrong. Either I'm doing something wrong, or this whole stupid retreat and meditation is stupid, or why is sleepiness happening? There's some way it's not okay. And that's just a little thing, sleepiness. It's a pretty normal thing.

Of all the people I've talked to over a lot of years of retreats—and I've talked to a lot of people, and in my own mind as well—there are many things people enjoy, many things they suffer. The amount of suffering, mental suffering, that people have expressed to me about the experience of sleepiness is unbelievable. Unbelievable. And you look at it, and what is it? For the love of God, you're sleepy. What's the worst that could happen? You fall asleep. Oh my God, you fell asleep, the end of the world. But I'm not exaggerating the amount of suffering that people put themselves through.

This is the suffering the Buddha's talking about—not the fact that there's sleepiness, but the reactivity to it. And the reactivity comes basically on this aspect I'm talking about. Because it's unpleasant, and the deeply held assumption that we go through our lives with is that unpleasant is bad or wrong. Either the experience itself is wrong and shouldn't be happening, or there's something wrong with me and I shouldn't be experiencing this. And then we do something else to try and make it more pleasant.

Rather than with steady mindfulness seeing just what's happening—a simple experience like sleepiness—or say there's a pleasant experience and we get, "Oh, this is wonderful, this is good, this is how it's supposed to be"—it coheres into a lot of thoughts and emotions and reactions around it, a whole story. To the point where—I'll go back to sleepiness because it's a simple experience—the story that coheres around it is so complex and so fast that we don't even, without mindfulness, without this just simple, steady attention to the experience—there's no way to unpack it. When people come in suffering so much from sleepiness, it's the whole package that's really wrong and bad. And the only way to fix it is to

somehow get rid of that experience. Is this making sense?

With the pleasant, it can be the same thing. Maybe you haven't had enough time yet. But say you have a sitting, or say there's ten minutes of the sitting, and it's just peaceful. Why is it peaceful? Because there's not any wanting, and there's not any aversion going on. You're not fighting with experience. That's why it's peaceful. But we don't necessarily notice that. It's peaceful because the body feels good, because finally I'm doing it right. And this is how it's supposed to be. And after six or seven days, it's going to always be like this, because this is what we're aiming for. This is what freedom feels like. It's peaceful.

And we just get sucked into that so quickly. It's all around pleasant or unpleasant, liking or disliking. And we take our meaning from that—the meaning about ourselves, the meaning about experience, what it means in the world. This is what keeps us in the cycle of samsara, of always wanting something better, something new, wanting to get away from the unpleasant, and defining ourselves and the world by that.

We know something isn't working, but we don't exactly know why. It's because this sets up a view that we don't quite see. It's such a deep assumption, such a familiar habit that we don't even notice it. We take it for granted, sort of like gravity. Pleasant is right. Unpleasant is wrong. We don't even notice pleasant or unpleasant—we just feel that this is right and this is wrong.

The view is the attachment to that. Of course we can tell the difference. Of course if we had a choice, we would tend to go to the pleasant. I'm not saying otherwise. But that doesn't have to come with the view wrapped around it that absolutely this is the only right way, and this is what it means about me, and this is what unpleasant means about me—that I'm hopeless and useless.

So we're practicing this all day long, this one particular confused view. And when we're experiencing through the veil of that, we can't even recognize accurately. This is where mindfulness comes in, where we want to learn to trust the simplicity of awareness, what's actually happening. What's actually happening?

When sleepiness comes, what's the actual mindfulness? It's just meeting the experience. Today, Winnie offered feeling sensations in the body, or hearing, or sensations of breath. Take hearing, for example. Our tendency would be: that's the bell. And it may feel pleasant or not, we like it or we don't, we may notice that or we don't, but that's the bell.

But what's the actual experience? It's just pure hearing. And if a thought comes—"that's the bell"—that's fine, but that's a thought, that's not the hearing. Of course it comes, but that's not the same thing. And if it's "oh, I like it" or "I don't like it," that's fine, but that's another thought. That's not the hearing.

What we're training is how to really trust the simplicity of mindfulness. It takes a willingness to just rest into the experience. As much as we're holding back, that's a little bit of the aversion, the fear. You can't rest right into it. Mindfulness is right in there, just as it is—without assumption, without any story, without holding back, without our comparing. It's just like this.

That's not our habit. But when there is a moment where we just drop in, then there's clear seeing and the response can be more appropriate.

Just a little story from one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He tells about himself when he was in training in his monastery in Burma. His teacher was giving a dhamma talk, with many monks and lay people sitting in the hall. Outside the window, some work was going on—there's always some work going on in any monastery in Burma you ever sit in. So it was really noisy. That's normal, not an aberration.

He was sitting there trying to hear his teacher, and this was really noisy outside. He found himself getting really angry and agitated at that noise. "I want to hear my teacher, and they're making so much noise." Then he'd be hearing his teacher for a while—"Oh, that's what I need to hear"—and then the noise would intrude again, and he'd start getting angry and agitated. You can imagine, right?

And finally, at some point, he noticed what he was doing. Wait, what's actually happening? Let me just look at that.

So the sound started outside, and he just allowed his attention to rest in the hearing. Oh, it's just hearing. All the agitation—that was extra, mind reactivity. But when he was just resting in the hearing, at that moment, it didn't come up.

And then his teacher would start talking, and he's just resting in the hearing of that as well, not getting caught in the wanting. And then he said, "Oh, it's just hearing, hearing." All the wanting and the aversion wasn't arising anymore in those moments—just the simplicity of hearing.

And then he thought he could see clearly. Oh, I could just move closer and hear my teacher better. Because you can see more clearly when all this fretfulness isn't going on—"it shouldn't be like this, it shouldn't," and "I like it, I don't like it." It's just hearing. He could really see that's all it was—hearing—and everything else was reactivity, made up. And then you can see clearly.

That's what we're practicing. It seems simple, but that is what we're practicing. We start very simply with feeling the sensations in the body, the breath, or hearing, just because the mental realm, as you can see, is so fast-moving and complex that it's difficult to be purely mindful of the mental activity, especially in the beginning. It's just too active.

But that's what we're doing. We're cultivating the simplicity of mindfulness—just meeting what's happening. Body sensations, hearing, and it'll move to thoughts and whatever, just as it is, whatever the experience is. Not just for that, but really what we're doing is cultivating again and again this clarity of totality of presence, free from all our assumptions and ideas and comparisons and all of that.

So then you might notice if there's a time in the sitting, a walking, an eating, where you're feeling present and it's fairly easeful. Not completely, but just fairly easeful. Notice—don't make any big deal—but just notice the quality in your heart-mind at that time that is easeful.

Because I know for myself, in the early years of practice, when it was easeful or nice, I would attribute it to the situation. "Oh, this is such a nice cup of tea." Or, "It's so peaceful, it's a lovely day today, and it's so nice out here in the country," and la-di-la-di-la. We're attributing the peace to external circumstances. We forget to turn around and look. It's peaceful because the heart-mind is fully present, collected, and it's not caught in reactivity and liking and disliking. It's not fighting with what's happening now, but present with what's happening now.

We tend to think something's not good and we pull back, but actually the surrender into this moment, the totality of presence, is the way into the ending of suffering, just in a moment. It's useful to notice.

But then you try to recreate it. You go back and sit in the same place and look at that same tree and have that same kind of tea. It never works exactly the same, does it? Because it isn't. No moment's exactly the same. Our mind and body have changed. Somebody else is sitting next to us that we didn't want to see. Someone sits across and gets in the way of our view. The water's not hot enough. The tea feels old. But it's got nothing to do with any of that. It's the quality of presence of mind-heart that isn't fighting with what's happening.

John Samedo, talking about awareness and mindfulness, says, "It's not about making value judgments about our thoughts, our emotions, or our sensations, or whatever happens. We're not making value judgments. Awareness is about knowing, being with these things fully, that they are what they are at this moment." That's it. They are what they are at this moment.

He goes on to say—and this is me paraphrasing—as we expand our experience of mindfulness to all our experiences, which we will in a few days, then this becomes a kind of total freedom to receive life as you experience it in this moment. No more trying to say, "This is okay to happen. This is not okay to happen."

So even though we're giving instructions—let the attention come to the breath—we're not saying, as Woody said, we're not saying the breath or the body is somehow better than other experience. We're just using a skillful means, a more simple, easily accessible arising experience—sensations, hearing, breath—

to help us keep cultivating, keep recognizing this simple, steady mindfulness.

But mindfulness doesn't reside at the breath or the body or in any particular place. So when Woody said today that when you recognize you're lost in thought, and there's that moment of mindfulness again—he said that's a good thing. It is. That's a moment of mindfulness. You don't have to go back to the breath to get back to mindfulness. It's right there. In that moment—oh, thinking was happening—we appreciate that's a moment of mindfulness, mindfulness that thinking was present. And it's right here. The thinking was also right here, because there's nowhere else we can go but this moment. We just weren't aware of that. But as soon as we were—oh, thinking—that's a moment of mindfulness. We appreciate how that feels, what he described as the difference between mindfulness of thinking and being lost in it.

And then for now, we're saying allow the sensation of breath or body or hearing to arise into the forefront

of mindfulness as a way to simplify, as a way to help us continue recognizing the mindfulness. But it's not that breath or any other experience is somehow better, or that mindfulness only exists there. These are just techniques to help us recognize it more and more, because we're so inured to our habit of deciding this is okay, this isn't okay, choosing this, rejecting that, judging ourselves or whatever is happening. Just get simple. Learn to trust the simplicity of mindfulness, free from the overlay of our views and conditioning. It's so simple in one moment, right? But as you see going through this, it's hard. It's difficult. One of the reasons is that it's not our habit.

But also because our conditioning—our subtle assumptions and views and preferences—that's going to stay. We're still going to have preferences, of course. But we're so used to this conditioning, and it can be so subtle, so embedded in us, that just deciding "Now I'm going to drop these views, I'm not going to be caught anymore in wanting and aversion toward pleasant and unpleasant, I'm just going to be present with clear mindfulness and let things be as they are"—we can't just do that. It would be nice if we could. This is why we start to appreciate the conditioning, the power of our habitual patterns. With mindfulness, we see that too, and then it's okay. We know this conditioning is affecting how I like or don't like this experience. That's fine. That's different from declaring this is good and this is bad. We can see, oh yeah, look how that is. Mindfulness is just noticing that rather than taking it personally.

Am I making sense? Does that land?

Another example came to mind today of how we can get caught, rather than resting in that fresh, open quality of mindfulness—that sense of openness into the unknown. Each moment is the unknown. Not dragging in all our opinions, all our previous experience—that is so difficult.

So this came up: someone I've had great respect for, a kind of hero of mine over many years, is Yo-Yo Ma, the classical cellist. He seems like a wonderful person. He does really good work in the world. And I've seen various videos where he has this quality of really open, interested wonder about all kinds of things, but particularly about music.

I don't know if you know, but in the year 2000 he started this project called the Silk Road Project, which has been going on now and has grown quite large. What he did was bring together, with this open, fresh attention free from assumption, musicians from all over the world. It's a huge thing now. The first one was called the Silk Road Project because he was bringing together musicians from all the different countries along the old Silk Road—Mongolia, China, Persia, Iran, Central Asia, North Africa, Turkey, India, Western countries, and later Finland. Okay, Finland wasn't part of the Silk Road, but it expanded over time.

He'd bring together musicians and the instruments from their countries. And it wasn't that he would have the Chinese musicians play with certain Chinese instruments—though they would do some of that, really beautiful—or Mongolian throat singers, really beautiful, or classical Western music. But the thing he did that's so amazing is this: he would bring together, say, someone from Iran, and someone from Mongolia, and someone from India, and someone from the West. They'd get together and write music, bringing

together all of those traditions into one piece.

So it might be some of the Iranian music, some of the Indian instruments, some special Chinese kind of flute, and the classical cello or violin, and different kinds of tonalities. I mean, it's really wild. And he'd bring it together.

So you can see I get really enthusiastic. I think it's so wonderful, this openness, this bringing together. And in my mind, I think how incredible that you can do that—bringing together musicians who are then writing music where they're mixing all the different ways and the different instruments from all over the world.

I still think that. But that's in my mind.

When I actually listened to it on the first album—and there have been many more since—I kept listening. And my ear couldn't like it. I wanted to love it; I love the idea of it. And if I hear each separately, you know, if I hear the Chinese instruments, it's beautiful. Same with the Iranian. But when they put it together with the Mongolian throat singers and the classical instruments, my ear just can't hear it in a relaxed way. Much as I want to, much as I think it's wonderful.

That kind of amuses me in a way. And I keep trying. But I see it's not right or wrong. I can see that thinking about embracing a view isn't transformative. And it doesn't mean that I have to like it. But can I just listen totally free of assumptions and conditioning? Yes, so far not. There might be moments one can. But just looking to see—this is what the Buddha is saying—looking and seeing how the mind works.

Now, there's not suffering in what I'm describing, unless I get upset because I can't really go, "Wow, I just love this. Let me listen to this in the car all the time." I start and then I go, no. If I got upset about that, then that would be suffering. But I can see, oh, that's how it is now. I love the idea, but the ear is just used to what it's used to, and I'd rather hear Chopin piano nocturnes. That's just how it is. It's not good or bad. And someone else would be completely different based on their conditioning, and that's not good or bad either.

But just to see—I like looking at these different levels—to see how it is, not to think we can think our way through these things. We're so used to, many of us, thinking that we can understand through thinking. That's what mindfulness is helping us drop underneath. The thoughts can be useful, can turn our mind to the Dhamma. We had thoughts that brought us to this retreat. Thoughts are useful. But then we turn our attention into just the simplicity of presence, just as we are.

As mindfulness is remembered more and more frequently, gradually it develops its own momentum. In other words, it gets easier and easier; it starts to happen more. You know, like our old habits happen by themselves. We don't think, "Now let me cultivate a little bit of greed and aversion." No, it happens all by itself and knows how to do it very well, thank you.

So we're learning to cultivate mindfulness. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we

appreciate our entrancements with our reactions of mind to whatever is arising. Let me say that again. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we appreciate the entrancements with reactions of the mind to whatever is arising.

For example, about recognizing thinking. *Thinking.* We appreciate that moment—ah, awareness is here again, thinking—we appreciate that, rather than getting entranced by our reactivity and our judgment and our ideas about what should be happening. We're entranced by that. But instead we say, oh yeah, here's awareness again. Oh, and judging is like this. And we're more appreciating the awareness.

That starts to become a bit more natural. And as Sayadaw U Pandita says, when mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, this is where the steadiness comes in. You can't stay steady through the whole day, but the willingness to try and remember—the sitting, the walking, the eating—that's why this matters. Practicing once and then forgetting doesn't work. It's the steadiness, and that just takes time and patience.

When mindfulness is persistently and repeatedly activated, wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of mind and body. That's really the whole game. The steadiness of clear seeing, the steadiness of mindfulness of just what's happening by itself, is a condition for wisdom—paññā. Not thinking wisdom, but the wisdom of really recognizing, insight into the true nature of mind and body.

And one of the beautiful things about when there's really that wisdom that's recognizing—it's not an act of will, of personal will—but when wisdom recognizes how things are, the confusing reactions naturally drop away. Like Sayadaw U Tejaniya's story about the sound. When the wisdom was just present—oh, that's just sound—all the suffering reactions dropped away. That's a natural effect of wisdom. I love that because it's not like you have to figure it all out and then somehow put it down. We can trust that the steadiness of mindful awareness is setting up the condition for this to happen.

So I just want to end with a little inspiring story of a friend of mine who's passed away. This person was a long-time meditator, probably one of the more accomplished yogi meditators among just regular people that we knew—someone who'd done a lot, a lot of retreats. A person that started in their middle age, not when they were young. A person who lived a very rich and full life outside of here, who had done many things in their life, really quite accomplished. So they had a very rich life and done a lot of practice. And so, really, very wise. The sort of person the Tibetans often call a "secret yogi"—someone just living a normal life, where regular people wouldn't know anything special about them, but they had really quite profound wisdom.

I was visiting them when they were in their nineties, the last couple of years of their life, living in a nice assisted living place—they had some money. Just in a little apartment. The body was frail and couldn't really go out and do much. I was just having a visit and they were saying, "You know, this is the most interesting time of my life."

Yeah. Sincerely. This was a very sincere person.

And I said, "Really? But you've done so many interesting things and practiced..." They couldn't practice formally that much anymore. The life seemed so constricted, you know?

They said, "No. No, it's like... it's all right here in this moment. When I walk across the room to the little kitchenette, that's everything. All of life is present here in this moment, walking across the room. When I'm putting the tea kettle on to heat, that's everything. The totality of presence in that moment. And life is so alive. Every moment is so interesting."

Dipa Ma said a similar thing: every moment is so interesting.

And this was so completely honest from this person. And you realize the interest is not in the activity. The interest isn't in the object. The interest is in the quality of wakefulness in the heart and mind, that quality of presence—and what I would call the purity of the citta, of consciousness. Purity meaning just not in any kind of dissonance. Not trying to hold back from the experience because it's maybe unpleasant or not good enough. Not half present and half thinking about something else, but just here with it. Just walking across the room is all of life. It's really quite amazing.

And I heard later, when this person was in hospice, they said the same thing: "This is the most interesting time of my life."

So that's really the direction, this quality of simple mindfulness. It seems like nothing special, or like work, in the moment. But it's really taking us in this direction. The freedom is this quality of real presence, freedom of heart and mind in this moment without pulling away, without making it a story.

So just having the trust, the faith, to be present for this next moment.

That's it.

That's it. That's all we can do.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

May the beneficial energies of our sincere practice together be a cause of our own awakening from suffering and confusion. May it also be a cause and condition for all beings to awaken from suffering and confusion.

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