Wise Attention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:59

I want to share about a particular sutta of the Buddha's that I've always liked a lot. It so exactly talks about this way that we're practicing. It's also considered a very important sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya, the Middle Length Discourses—it's number two. It's called the Sabbasava Sutta, or "All the Asavas."

Let me try to explain asava. I'm going to keep it simple because there's a lot of information. Don't try to remember it all. It might get a little wonky. This is practice too—being aware as you're sitting, listening, noticing whatever comes up in your mind. As Ajahn Sumedho always says when he begins to talk, this is just a period for reflection, for taking in and noticing whatever is happening in your body and mind. In one way, there are a lot of different things the Buddha's saying. In another way, it's just one thing. The whole sutta is saying the same thing over and over.

Asava is a word that doesn't have a good translation. It's sometimes translated as "taints" or "cankers"—these are weird old words. It refers to a category of the kilesa, the defilements. I don't like that word either, so I'm going to use kilesas. In a way, these represent the most subtle level of defilement, the deepest level, almost the latent tendencies, you could say, that "defile, bring renewal of being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to further birth, aging, and death." They are specifically referred to in the sutta as craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being or becoming, and ignorance—like the ignorance at the beginning of dependent origination.

But what I love about this sutta is that the Buddha isn't hammering on about what they are. The main point of the sutta is wise attention. He's giving different ways that by how and what we pay attention, and the quality in the mind that's aware, these deep-rooted tendencies can be abandoned. It's often said that when they talk about someone who's completely awakened, an arahant, it's one who's no longer experiencing the asavas. But what I love about this sutta is that it gives seven different ways of how we pay attention—things we can give attention to, how we give attention—that will abandon the asavas. It covers all different aspects of our life. It's very broad. I've always loved this sutta for years because he's talking about how we give attention, what's wise attention, what's unwise attention, to the different things we're doing in our life. It's not just about really refined sitting on the meditation cushion.

First I want to talk about something that's in the suttas, but I heard Sayadaw U Pandita first speak about it. You could call it describing how the kilesas manifest in our experience and what helps to abandon them. It's the three levels of kilesa, three levels of habits of mind and what helps them to transform, to be abandoned.

The first level is called the level of transgression. This means the kilesa is so strong that it serves as an

intention—we speak or act from the kilesa. Transgression. What protects us is sila. When we're cultivating sila, when we're tuned in to sila, it's just enough of a reminder that we won't act on greed and take something that isn't ours. It's not the level where you never act on greed, you never take a second bite of a cookie or something. We're really talking about the level where we're doing something egregious, harmful—hitting someone, saying something really appalling. The level of transgression is pretty obvious. We all know when we've acted from that level: strong greed, strong aversion, strong sense of me. And the cultivation of sila, the tuning into sila, protects us from that.

I really love that—how all the different aspects of practice aren't just something to do so you can get to the really subtle stuff. They're all, in their own way, supporting freedom of heart and mind. So we expand our idea of practice to include everything. I know it already does, but just in case something isn't included in your idea of practice, we keep expanding it.

The second level is called the obsessive kilesas, obsessive torments. "Torments" is a good translation for kilesa—they feel like that. I'm pretty sure we all have experienced this. This is when the torments are just creating spinning thoughts, thoughts of greed. Anyone experience that?

Thoughts of me, just obsessive – that's exactly the word. It's like, "Please shut up." Just, "Oh no, not this again. Why?" We all know that. I don't have to spend any more time describing it.

And what balances this, what protects us from this, is the collectedness of heart-mind, the steadiness – samādhi. It doesn't have to be one-pointed samādhi, but also the way we're cultivating it here: the steadiness, the balance of mind. When the mind is collected in that way – and we all experience it – that it's temporary, but the stronger kilesas, the obsessive quality, doesn't get in, basically. It doesn't arise so much.

Of course, with really focused concentration, that's more obvious. We can even think thoughts don't arise. And it's also more obvious how temporary that is when the conditions for the really focused concentration go away. But also in what we're cultivating here – the collectedness, the unification of mind, all the qualities brought together – stuff happens. But I know you've all experienced at different times, not always, but at different times when some sense experience or some object comes up, or a thought that would have driven you nuts or led into obsession at another time, and it doesn't.

Does anyone experience this? You just see something, and nothing happens. It's just the next arising thing. That's an experience. It's really, really helpful noticing this. It may just be calm. It may just be a kind of spaciousness. "I thought there'd be big trouble from that thought, but there's just space." Noticing that strengthens our faith, as we're always talking about. It strengthens the sense of confidence, the sense of appreciation that there are moments of heart and mind, moments awareness picks up, when the kilesas aren't running riot – when maybe they're not even manifesting in that moment.

So this is where the collectedness of mind, the steadiness of mind with right view, wise view, is the

protection against the obsessive qualities of defilement. But as we know, that doesn't uproot them completely. It tones it down, and we can really appreciate it more. But sometimes, especially if you've been in really focused concentration – it doesn't have to be, but it can happen – when that goes away, it seems like the kilesas were just lurking around the edges, and then it's like they can party. It's just like, "Whoa!" It doesn't have to be like that, but sometimes it is a bit flippy. This way that we're practicing doesn't tend to be so hot and cold like that, but it can still happen. The kilesas come back – they're not abandoned. But it's very, very helpful to see this and to understand how it works.

And then the third level, which in a way we're talking about with āsavas, with this sutta, is more the level called the latent torments. And this is like, you know, give me a break. It's the potential. They're not arisen yet, but it's the potential for the torments to arise given the appropriate conditions. They're not manifesting at this point, at this latent level. But as they say, it's like a seed – it might just sit dormant, but given the appropriate conditions, the seed will sprout.

So when he's talking about abandoning the āsavas or the latent tendencies, it's really on a very subtle level that he's talking about, which I want you to remember as we go through the different ways he describes wise attention.

You can see it just in little ways, maybe here. Someone was telling me once on a three-month retreat – I think they were at the back table after the meal, and they were planning not to eat. They were walking past the tea table, and there was just a big bowl of oranges. They were present, clear, not spaced out – because then you'd expect something to come up. Present, clear. But just for some reason, all of a sudden the hand went out and grabbed an orange. And they said, "Who did that? It wasn't me!"

But you can see that. You're just minding your own business, you're pretty present, and all of a sudden – boom – this thing of aversion just comes: "How can that person do that?" It's like, "Whoa, where did that come from?" Don't take it personally, but this is just seeing, "Okay, okay." So we keep cultivating wise view, wise attention. This is why we deepen our aspiration, why we keep going.

And what abandons the latent tendencies, he says, is paññā – wisdom, wise seeing, really understanding. And that's where he goes on with this sutta. So this sutta is really, really pragmatic. He gives seven different ways, but this sutta is, he said, "a discourse on the exhaustion of the āsavas in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see." So he's talking about wise attention.

And this is what he says: "When one attends unwisely, both unarisen taints arise and arisen ones increase. When one attends wisely, both unarisen taints do not arise and arisen taints are abandoned."

Now, does this sound familiar? I really hope. I really pray it sounds familiar. Because it's exactly what we've been saying all along. And what's the quality in the awareness?

So the quality of unwise attention—when we're attending to experience and there's greed, aversion, or selfing in the mind that goes unrecognized—the unarisen taints arise, and more arise. When the

awareness is with right attitude, then it's the reverse. This is really very basic, and I love that this is the central point, the driving force of everything he's saying.

But then he gives seven different aspects, seven different ways this plays out in our lives. I just want to mention each of these. They won't be new, I think, but I've often found it helpful to have different lenses through which to examine what I'm doing.

He starts, of course, with taints that can be abandoned by wisdom, by seeing. It's quite long, so I won't read the whole thing, but he's saying that when one doesn't understand, when one pays attention to dhammas—and dhammas here simply means experiences—that are unfit for attention, or when one attends in a way that is not wise, the taints arise.

What dhammas are unfit for attention? They are dhammas such that when one attends to them, the unarisen taints of sensual desire, being, and ignorance arise, or the arisen taints increase. So it's not really about declaring this is bad and this is good. It's about paying attention to a particular thing and *how* one pays attention. We're watching and seeing what feeds the kilesas, what starves them.

How does one attend unwisely? It's lengthy, but you can see it's through the lens of "me." He gives examples: Was I in past time, or was I not? How was I in the past? Having been what? What will I be in the future? How shall I be? What shall I be? Having been what, what shall I become?

You get a sense of this? We do this, right? Maybe not quite so elaborately. And we think it's so important, so very important, not noticing that craving and confusion and doubt are strengthening, strengthening, strengthening. We think the content is so important. But the content is unfit for attention precisely because it's unwise attention. And the more we pay attention to that content, the stronger the unwise attention gets. It's just a cycle. That's all he's saying.

He goes on to explain that when we attend unwisely, one of six kinds of views arises—all different views of self. You're attending: What was I? What's going to be? Whether it's what happens when I die, or what's going to happen when I leave here, or what's going to happen tomorrow at lunch—it doesn't matter what.

One of these six views arises: "Self exists for me," or "No self exists for me"—which can be a view, you know, not an insight, just a view. "I perceive self with self," or "I perceive not-self with self." You see, back in that time, the various ascetics who would come to talk to the Buddha would get into these really nitpicky discussions that make you crazy to read them. So I'm not going to make you listen to all of that.

You get the idea. As we're attending to a particular experience, and the attention starts feeding these views of "me"—what am I going to be, what was I, I'm perceiving myself, whatever—a view is forming. The kilesas are getting stronger.

So our job is to notice that with wise attention. And the Buddha says the well-taught disciple of the noble ones recognizes when dhammas are unfit for attention. When this is happening, they recognize it.

And how does one attend wisely? First, by not attending to dhammas unfit for attention, and by attending to those fit for attention. Unarisen taints don't arise and arisen ones are abandoned. So one attends wisely basically through the lens of wisdom, of the Four Noble Truths, as the Buddha describes it here: This is suffering, the origin, the cessation of suffering. This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

That doesn't mean every time there's awareness of an experience, you've got to run through the Four Noble Truths in your mind. You know that, right? But it means there's that sense of clear seeing, of wisdom. So all those thoughts—of me and what was I—arise, and there's a sense of recognizing that holding to those thoughts is leading to suffering. The cause of suffering is the clinging. The way leading to the ending is to see that clearly, and the clinging drops away. You don't have to run through all of that. But that's what's going on when there's wise attitude in the mind, when there's wise attention, when we see that. Experiencing that over and over and over really strengthens our visceral understanding of it. You're really seeing that.

The fitness is not inherent in the object—like, that object's bad to pay attention to, and this one is good. Because we can make these little rights and wrongs in our mind. So many people have mentioned it; we just tend to do that. The fitness really, in this context, is always coming back to: what's the quality in the mind that's aware? If in really paying attention to something—and I'll describe ways later how it becomes so clear that greed is arising—okay, maybe in that moment, in that situation, this object is not fit for attention. It's really not inherent in the object. It's just seeing: paying attention with this quality of mind is feeding kilesa. And wisdom sees that and can put it down.

So the Buddha is saying, one who could do this—when one attends wisely in this way, fetters are abandoned in them: embodiment view, doubt, and holding to rites and rituals. So that's basically describing stream entry. Just looking at things in this way. These are called the taints that can be abandoned by seeing.

And now he goes through, I think, five different ways of how we relate to experiences in our life. And this is why I love this sutta, because it's really saying how we pay attention—with wise attitude in the mind, right view, wise attention—in different aspects of our life, can actually be a cause, a conditioning for the abandoning of taints. He's not saying, just do this because you've got no other choice, and then when you can come and meditate, you can see. It's like what I was describing from Ajahn Chah this morning: it doesn't have to always be subtle experiences to see this stuff.

The next category is asavas that are abandoned by restraining. This is like restraint at the sense door. One reflecting wisely—so it's always with wise attitude in the awareness—one abides with the eye faculty restrained, and then it goes through all the other senses. "While fever of defilement might arise in one who abode with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no torments or fever of defilement in one when he abides with the eye faculty restrained."

So what does that mean, restrained? Of course, it does mean some kind of restraint. It doesn't mean going

around blindfolded, restraining, don't let anything come into the sense experience. It doesn't mean it has to be hugely ascetic. It's really, as I think Ajahn Buddhadasa called it, sati-pañña—mindfulness and wisdom at the moment of sense contact, at the sense door—so that there's reflecting wisely, meeting the sense experience with awareness, with mindfulness and wisdom, just seeing what's happening here. The awareness is right there. It can just be there at the sense door. It doesn't have to go and proliferate so far, so fast on one sense contact.

That there can be just a little sense contact, a pleasant or an unpleasant, and boom—the papañca we talked about—just off so quickly, so quickly, and believing it. But restraint doesn't mean holding tight and not letting that happen and being afraid to look. It's not that, because that's unwise. That's cultivating aversion. But this satipañña is really more and more about what people are describing: just this presence with wise attitude at the moment of sense perception. Seeing what happens. And how often different people have mentioned it as just seeing—and no big story comes. Or experiencing a pleasant taste and it's just that. Not a whole other thing has to happen. This is really wise attention at this point. It's not just avoiding.

Once, some years ago, a friend who was on staff at the retreat center was working with restraint. So he decided he really didn't want to get lost in sight and lost in all this greed. So he walked around for three days blindfolded. And they say, that's not it. We can shut stuff out, and maybe one would notice there was less wanting. And then when you take it off, maybe you notice more. I mean, that could be a wise way to go about it. But sense restraint doesn't mean that. It just means paying attention, seeing what's going on, and also seeing how far it can go when we're not meeting it with wise attention.

As Ajahn Chah says, "When the nose smells an odor, just leave it at the nose." I've always liked that. Just leave it alone. It's happening. We leave it alone. That's sense restraint. So it requires just this interest to see what's happening.

A hint from the Buddha, in terms of seeing—another way he's describing satipañña at the sense door: "On seeing a form with the eye, one does not grasp at the signs and the features." And this is interesting, because you're not going and saying, you see someone that you think is really attractive and grasping at this, like, "Oh, look, the hair's really nice, and I really like how they dress." Or you smell, and it smells like a nice lunch—"What's that smell? Is that potatoes? Or what could it be?" It's not quite papañca, but you're really like, "Oh, that smell, that smell." You're going into grasping at the obvious things that are pleasant. Or aversive.

If you notice aversion to something—I guess I'm the aversive type—the greed type, probably much more what I just said. But the aversive type is like that, where something's unpleasant, and then the mind focuses in, "That's just so awful. Look at that. It's just so uneven." Focusing in on the little things. It might not be huge suffering, but this is lack of restraint at the sense door. And the aversion is just slowly increasing. It's being fed in that moment.

So when we notice, "Oh yeah, aversion's like this," you just leave that thing as it is. You don't have to fix it. This is a really interesting thing to explore. It doesn't mean having some kind of idea of how you have to restrain the senses, that you have to be somehow ascetic, that you have to keep it simple. But it can help. You explore and see what helps to support less craving, what kind of feeds it.

This is just from memory, not his words exactly. But the essence was this: you're feeling overwhelmed. So much stuff is coming in, pleasant and unpleasant. You like it, you don't. It's all coming in. He said, well, you don't have to sit there and open all your windows and open all the doors and try to listen to everything the neighbor is saying and turn on the TV. You don't have to invite everything in and then feel lost in craving and aversion. You can be a little more simple.

So that's also a kind of restraint at the sense doors. But not "I should be simple." Not like I have to be incredibly ascetic, or I shouldn't eat much. You could look externally like you're being really restrained, but internally you could be feeding aversion and clinging just as much.

I know U Tejaniya used to say—people would say, "Oh, you stopped your lay life to live as a bhikkhu, and that's so much giving up." And he'd say, "There can be just as much tanhā, just as much craving, in the life of an ordained person. It's just that there's less things you can direct it to. But that doesn't mean there's less craving. There's just less things."

It's really about looking internally. And looking at signs and nuances—something that's really interesting. We're not doing this with aversion, but noticing, say, what's the quality in the awareness when we're giving attention to something beautiful? Like nature. Sometimes people get into, "Oh, it's so beautiful. It's bringing happiness, it's eliciting joy," and that's fine. But really noticing the quality in the mind that's aware, because the same thing could be wise attention, or it could be increasing this sense of "I need more, I need more, I need more." And it can be subtle.

Sometimes—and this isn't helpful—practitioners notice that and think, "Well, true freedom from craving means I have to somehow avoid beautiful or pleasant experience because I'll crave." We might crave. We're here to learn about it—that's okay. But it's not about avoiding out of some kind of aversion. It's really about learning. Really notice: "Oh, it's beautiful. This is peaceful. Oh..." And then suddenly you don't quite notice the wanting coming in, but you're planning a hike for the next afternoon, or you need to go somewhere. It kind of creeps in. "Oh, okay. That's interesting."

That's interesting. You can explore. What was the quality of the attention? How did it move from just being present? It's beautiful. Leave it at the eye door. How did it change? This is a wonderful exploration through our whole life. Not to do the right thing, but to learn. This is really how the subtle aspects of clinging and aversion come up and kind of drive things. We don't notice when they're coming up subtle—until they're not at the subtle level anymore. Now they're at the obsessive level. How did that happen? I was just so peaceful.

So there's no judging in this. It's just exploring. This is one place to really notice how we pay attention to things.

Shankara, who was an Advaita master, said, "Cease dwelling upon sense objects and peace will arise in your heart." It doesn't mean don't notice, but the dwelling on—"Wow, this is so nice. Oh, this is so horrible"—the dwelling on, the meaning.

So these are just different ways to explore this restraint.

This one is called Āsavas Abandoned by Using. The Buddha is saying that reflecting wisely, one pays attention, one notices: What is the quality in the mind? How does one use things? What is the attitude with which we use things?

This is what he says: "Reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu uses a robe for protection from the cold, for protection from heat, for protection from insects, flies, wind, burning, and for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience. So reflecting, one uses alms food not for amusement or intoxication or vanity or for embellishment, but for the endurance and care of the body, the continuance of the body, for ending discomfort, for assisting in the holy life. And considering thus: 'I shall terminate old feelings'—like being hungry and eating food—'without arousing new feelings of greed, and blameless shall I live in comfort and health.'"

Then, since it's for bhikkhus, he continues with how they use their resting place, how they use medicine—because those are the four requisites that one can have. But for us, I think it's really interesting noticing the quality in the awareness when we use things. How do we relate to food? Moment to moment, not in the big picture, but noticing what gets fed.

I remember when I was first thinking about this on retreat at the retreat center. Sometimes there's an extra apple or banana, maybe the bananas have run out. And I'd think, "Well, I'll just save this for later." There's nothing wrong with that—there's plenty of food, it's not taken from anybody. But noticing, I would notice after a while how much extra work that was. You have to get the thing, wrap it up, put your name on it, put it in the fridge, save it. Then you think, "Do I want it now or later?" "Can I take it to my room? No, there are ants." All this extra hoo-ha! And what was going on? It's different from saving something because you really need to have, say, a boiled egg in the evening for your health—that's a completely different quality in the mind that's aware.

So we're noticing this. Is the way we're using something feeding the wanting? Or feeding the aversion? Or feeding the "me, me, me" in comparison, whether you think you're embarrassed or whatever it does? Noticing how that's working, how burdensome it could be—I started to notice. When it's just simple, you just take what you need and don't take extra if you don't need it. A little bit hungry later? That's okay.

Now, I'm not saying this is what one should do. I'm not saying to set up an ideal. But noticing—I started noticing for myself. I used to arrive at meals early, in time in case some aspect of the food ran out and

there wouldn't be enough. Then sometime after a while, I stopped doing that. I just didn't think about it. And it was so free and easy. You get there, something's run out, but there's something else and it doesn't really matter. And where do I sit? I just sit wherever—so free and easy. The difference is simply not the "me," not the kilesas being created.

So just play with this in all aspects of our life. Do we take more than we need in terms of the environment, in terms of how much energy we use? Again, this isn't a view that we're trying to meet. If it is, then with wise attention you notice: What's the quality in the mind as you're trying to meet the view? "It's good, it's bad, I'm good, I'm bad"—that's more subtle kilesas coming up. So this isn't about meeting an idea, but just noticing. Go into a store when you're shopping for clothes—just noticing. Not that there's anything bad about buying clothes, but we're always paying attention to what's feeding and what's starving the kilesas. Sometimes notice how craving is just looking for something to land on.

I mean, in the old days when you had catalogs and you'd shop through them – you didn't want anything, didn't need anything. But you'd sit down with a little restlessness and start looking at the catalog, and you'd keep going until you found something you could want. Now it's a million times worse with the internet, my God. "I'm bored, let me go to Amazon." This is great practice.

We watch the relationship in the mind without judgment. What's feeding kilesa? And of course, this comes from the sense behind it – that we really, in some way, feel and honor the suffering that comes when kilesa is running the show. And that we feel and honor those moments that are kilesa-free. Oh, it's just peace now. You're looking at Amazon. No, I don't want anything. You put it down. Ah, peace. How long does it last? That's another question. But noticing those moments of freedom from kilesa, freedom from torment – that's very, very strong.

I remember one time I was listening to a Dhamma talk Ajahn Sumedho was giving at Spirit Rock. At Amaravati, when they have a retreat, like a ninety-person retreat, they ask everyone to take eight precepts. There might be medical reasons for exceptions, but basically everyone's on eight precepts. So he was talking away, giving the talk, and he was laughing. Usually people laugh along with him – he's pretty funny. But on this occasion, he said, "I happened to go in the dining room and look in the refrigerator – it's called the yogi refrigerator, where people can save food and have their name on it and stuff – and it was so full of things." And then he said, "Well, how would it be if we just donated everything in that refrigerator to the homeless?" Dead silence. I cracked up. You could tell – I mean, I could just project because I wasn't seeing everyone's faces – but anyway, exploring this, the attitude with which we use things. I love it that he brings this in.

Okay, the next one. How does he phrase it? Āsavas that are abandoned by – this translation says "enduring." I would say tolerating, or really more patience. So the quality of being with things that are difficult, with the quality really of patience, which is non-judging acceptance, not pushing away, not creating aversion or wanting.

And he gives the examples of how āsavas can be abandoned by patience, by tolerating. "Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, and contact with gadflies" – which we can all relate to – "flies, wind, burning and creeping things." Just that. We all have plenty of time to explore this. Is it even possible when that tick starts crawling up your leg? Not that you should have a moment of patience necessarily. But anyway, it's more the ones you can't avoid. Like when I walk home down the hill – just the last couple of days, I ran into Vlad yesterday. We stopped to say hello for one minute, and like fifty-five thousand flies just swarmed around both of our faces. It's like, okay. You don't have to answer, but the taints that can be abandoned by patience, by enduring.

And then he goes on: "ill-spoken, unwelcome words, arisen bodily feelings that are painful, wracking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life." He's not messing around.

These are things that, in a way, we can't really do something about. Because in the next section, he does go to avoiding. He's not saying you just subject yourself to everything, but for the things we can't avoid – how can we meet them with patience so that we're not cultivating more greed, hatred, and confusion?

I remember, again, a talk by Ajahn Sumedho where he was talking about the first years in Thailand. The monks had these heavy robes. Have you ever been to Southeast Asia in the hot season? It's hot. It's really hot. When I was a nun, it was like that. You wear these long sleeves, and you're inside this kuti with a tin roof, and the sun is just baking it. It's hot. So he was talking about sweating through his robes in his kuti, and after hours thinking, "I can't endure this another minute." Have you had that feeling here sometimes?

I can't endure this another minute. And then I'd find that I could. And that's so often how it goes—oh, I can't endure this another minute, and then I'd find that I could. The next minute is like a completely different moment. It's really quite wonderful.

I love practicing in Asia for this reason. It's incredibly supportive for an aversive mind to really learn the patience of equanimity. In a situation that seems so unbearable or unpleasant, with no way to be at ease with it, later I could be really happy and at ease in just the same situation. It's not exactly the same, because the conditions in the awareness, the conditions in the mind are different, but really seeing how this is so—this comes from just this attitude of being with, just as it is, and exploring it.

When I was a nun in Thailand, there was this place in the jungle with only a few nuns and only one Western nun—me. I'd be in my kuti, and it had a door and a screen, which was really nice. But people would come up and stare in to see the Mechi Phalang sitting. "Oh, look, she's sitting!" I hated that. And whenever you'd go out, "Oh, Mechi Phalang's walking!" with all the noise and commotion. You go through that feeling of, "I can't bear this another moment." And then you find that you could. And then you discover that particular situation isn't actually the cause of suffering. It really wasn't. To discover this for ourselves—it may not stay, but to discover it—is very energizing and freeing. You really learn so much. I've developed so much more ease and equanimity in difficult situations. Not always. Every time I go back to Asia, I have to get over it again, but it doesn't take so long.

I actually value it hugely, because one of the ways that I get lost is through comfort. Too much suffering, too much difficulty, may be more than one can stay balanced with. But too much comfort, for me—I can have a modest, pretty comfortable life, I'm not opposed to comfort—but when it's all comfort with nothing difficult, I just zone out. So I notice that, and I pay attention.

This is the Buddha's advice to Rahula, his son: "Rahula, develop meditation that is like the earth. For when you develop a mind like the earth, arising agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Because just as people throw clean things and dirty things on the earth—excrement, urine, spittle, blood, everything—and the earth is not horrified, the earth is not humiliated or disgusted because of that, so just so, develop a mind that's like the earth. And then arising agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain."

Then he goes through all the different elements—water, air, fire, and space. Whatever's coming, it won't invade your mind. It comes, it is like it is, it goes—when there's this mind of patience, of non-reaction.

But it's not just that you have to be patient and stay with anything. He's so practical. I really like this. The next category is pains that can be abandoned by avoiding. This is what we've been saying: when what you're paying attention to or what you're being with is just so strong and it's feeding the kilesas so intensely, it's unwise attention and unwise attitude in the mind to stay with that thing. He's calling it "avoid," but what we mean is turning your attention.

He says the bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, avoids a savage elephant, a savage horse, a snake, a stump, a bramble, a cliff, a cesspool, a sewer. Reflecting wisely, he avoids unsuitable areas and frequenting unwholesome friends. Really paying attention.

I like this because he's not saying you should be completely balanced and at ease no matter what's happening. He's not setting that up. He's saying: look and see what's supporting and feeding the kilesas, and what's supporting their abandoning. Sometimes being with something that's just too difficult—the savage elephant or the inner danger, when something's coming up too strong—that's when we turn away.

You know, we talk a lot about when there's past trauma coming up and it's just so strong. There's awareness of it, but at some point, often, it gets so strong that we'll say, it's time to turn the attention away and balance the mind. And no one ever wants to do that, because they want to end it. But it's really looking at not the result but what's starving kilesa, what's feeding wholesome mind, and what is it time to avoid, to turn the attention away from.

I really like that the practice isn't idealistic. We're not saying, "If we really understood the Dhamma, we would be able to be with anything with somehow a mind of peace." But that's just not how it is. Look how it is: you're trying to be with something and it's just feeding, feeding kilesa. That's unwise attention.

Something U Tejaniya says: if what you're doing, and you're really aware with right attitude, what you're doing is just causing the kilesas to get stronger and stronger—stop doing that thing. Stop paying attention

to that thing. It's not rocket science. We get so caught up in views.

But of course, there are things that are supportive. We don't have, you know, like in the airport, CNN blaring in the background. We do say it's really helpful not to be on your devices. We do have silence. There's all kinds of things that are supportive of not feeding kilesa and also being able to see more clearly. It's not being extreme, it's just being reasonable. But he's really saying this is in order to see what's feeding wholesome mind states. This is what helps the abandoning of the kilesas. And remember, when he talks about abandoning of the āsavas, he's talking about the deepest level of freedom, not just some little thing.

So just put this out: next time you think of kilesas getting too strong, and you realize you need to shift and not be with this thing, not pay attention—don't need to go, "Because I'm a failure, because I couldn't have good enough mindfulness to be with this thing, I have to change my attention." That's not helpful. It's more like really appreciating your motivation to abandon the āsavas and how you're being present in this moment with this thing. So really looking and seeing.

Sometimes the avoidance may be a little bit difficult. It may be avoiding something that we like. Like when I was saying about comfort, there's a certain way I get too comfortable. Okay, just avoid lying around in bed for twenty-four hours, whatever it is—eating too much, whatever it might be for you. That feeds kilesa. But it's not about feeling deprived, because over time, the more we notice...

Like people coming here—just the other day I was at the doctor's, and the nurse was asking, "What do you do?" I never used to say what I did, because people thought it was weird. But now they're like, "Oh, that's so cool." They have no clue, but they go, "Oh, that's so cool." And then they say, "Oh, does that mean no talking?" Well, yeah. This particular show? Well, this one's a month. Just a month. "I couldn't even do a day." So you don't start with a month. You start with a day. But people say, "I could never do that. I could never do that."

So we all have these things—"I could never do that." But over time, what we're avoiding here, we're avoiding talking in order to be able to be more present. Over time, we start to see that that avoidance, that simplicity, is easy. The same also with renouncing things. It starts to lessen the kilesas. You start to notice it. It may take time. Over time you notice it, you don't notice it right away. But gradually, noticing the beautiful qualities—they're more available. They're increasing more. You may not be able to point it exactly to the fact that you're not quite as comfortable, or you may not be able to point it to the fact that you haven't been on your computer for a while—I mean, that one's more obvious.

But just looking over time, life's getting more simple. You don't push yourself into things that increase the kilesas and confusion. Just start to notice. And I'm sure for all of you over the years of practice, the beautiful qualities of heart and mind show up much more than they used to. They're more familiar. And then, oh, okay, they're familiar—maybe we don't appreciate it as much. But anyway, knowing that you can really avoid what's feeding kilesa.

And then this sixth one, and this takes wise attitude too, is removing. And so this is—remember hearing it through wise view—"here a bhikkhu reflecting wisely does not endure an arisen thought affected by desire, ill will, cruelty." So this is right thought. He abandons it. And I'm going to read this language just because the language comes out so harsh, but we don't have to hear it in that way, just as I read the Four Right Efforts the other day. "He abandons it. He does away with it and annihilates it." A little harsh, but that's the language. "He does not endure arisen evil, unprofitable dhammas. He abandons them. And what taints and fever of defilement might arise in one who did not abandon these thoughts—there are no taint or fever of defilement in one who removes them."

But I would say, if you don't buy into the harsh kind of annihilation language, take on the possibility—and it's really maybe more than we recognize. This is speaking to adhiṭṭhāna, to resolution, and to wise discernment.

So we'll start with thoughts. More often than we think, reflecting wisely, one does not endure an arisen thought affected by sense desire, ill will. One was like a clear insight moment in my practice. It wasn't sitting practice—I was at home. And some years into my practice, cause and effect, and an old, old pattern of really self-denigration and self-hatred came up. And I was quite aware of it, noting it, noticing it, feeling it, each thought, noting each thought down the road. Not thinking about why, but being really present with it—but in it, in it, in it. And it wasn't like being free.

Suddenly, just a thought came: I know this. I've seen this ten million times. I don't actually need to explore. Why don't I just turn, change the channel to mettā? And it was like that. It wasn't from aversion. I said, okay, I'll just say a few mettā phrases, it works or it doesn't. So I say the four phrases. The second time I said the four phrases—totally mettā. And that whole self-hatred thing had just vanished. And that was really interesting to see.

When we say we can really—when the mind can get in habits, right? Of going with the negative, of going with the greed. And more often than we might think, when there's awareness, when there's some right view in the mind, you can notice it and you can say, you know, don't really need to go there. So it's abandoning it, it's removing it, but it's really just turning the attention to the wholesome. And if it's from aversion or it's from greed, it won't work. You'll still feel all caught up. But often we do have the feeling that I have to be with this no matter what.

So you ask, why? That was my question: why do I have to be with this? Just turn to mettā. And it's like, cultivate the wholesome. And there's a kind of resolution, adhiṭṭhāna, just a willingness to do that.

Another time when I was doing walking meditation, not so long ago, some years ago, I was walking and some little thought came up of some little email I could have sent. It was just a tiny little bit of aversion, but funny, you know. I was always like, oh, that's amusing—it's just a little aversion, doesn't matter. And I thought, wait a minute, it's aversion. It matters.

Don't overlook it. Not to beat myself up, but no—this is really this subtle level. This is the resolution. If we want to really understand freedom, to free the heart and mind, then we notice when it arises. We don't think, "Well, this was just so little, it doesn't matter."

That was a really impactful insight for me. It really deepened my resolution, really deepened the determination to be willing to see whatever's arising. It's not personal.

And then you start to see that really, more often than we realize, you can change the channel. You know—"I would just love to have this thing, I would love to have this dress"—and we're just thinking, not with judgment, "I don't really need to do this." You just come back and feel your hands or feel your feet or take a breath. It's not out of aversion. It's just out of knowing, "I don't need to do that."

Joseph calls it the sword of wisdom. But that's when it's a little stronger. And sometimes, again, the sword of wisdom can't be wielded with aversion. So you have to have a mind of awareness to see that there's not aversion. But there are times when it's a little stronger: "Oh no, why can't I do this? No."

And adhiṭṭhāna—when it's with wholesomeness, when it's a willingness not to get caught in aversion, when it's with clear seeing—adhiṭṭhāna is a quality in the mind of resolution. It's one of the ten pāramīs. It collects all the dispersed energy: "No, I'm not going there." And we can call on that. It's a strength of heart and mind.

We don't just have to flounder around and think, "Oh, the aversion, the greed, I'm caught, what can I do?" It's enough. Bring in some awareness. And if it turns to aversion, you'll feel it right away. And you'll go, "Okay, this isn't the time for that. What is happening? Aversion." Maybe this is the time to shift, to do something else, one of the other approaches.

But I think this is really important to recognize: none of it's me, none of it's us. We don't have to hold on to the beautiful thoughts in our mind. We don't have to hold on to the difficult ones either. And the more we see the emptiness, the more we see that it's all causes and conditions—the aggregates coming together and going apart—the more you can see it's actually much more workable. We don't have to think so much like prisoners of our minds and our thoughts and what's going on. "That's enough with that one now. I can really change the attention. I can change what I'm doing. I can stop doing that thing that's feeding the wanting and go do something else"—whether it's getting up from sitting and going for a walk.

And so doing these things from the sense of wise attention and wise view, rather than that contracted feeling of "Oh, I couldn't do that, so I've got to do this." You see how we go to that? But really appreciating that everything we do, everything we pay attention to, how we do it—paying attention with wise attitude in the awareness—can be a supporting, contributing condition for the abandoning of the most subtle kilesas. So it's our whole life.

The seventh approach I'm not going to go into now—I've just mentioned it in passing. It was about developing the seven factors of awakening. So also developing wholesome qualities. That's a whole other

talk, but there's that too.

But I really wanted to talk about these middle approaches, about how we live our life. And the quality of wise attention is always available to us. The quality of awareness, and what's arising in the mind that's aware, is always available to us.

So that's really how everything comes together—it's just saying one thing. How you pay attention and what you pay attention to. Is it increasing unwholesome qualities that have arisen, causing new ones to come? Or is it like abandoning them? Are wholesome qualities arising that haven't yet arisen? Are wholesome qualities being increased and developed?

And this is just an exploration for our whole life.

Okay, so that's enough. Thank you for your kind attention. Like I said, you don't have to remember any of it except that one last thing, which is what we've been saying the whole time anyway.

So let's end with the acts of generosity, of sharing merit with all beings and with ourselves.

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