Transforming Habits of Greed, Aversion, and Delusion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:26

A couple of quotations from the Buddha.

The Brahmin Janusoni approached the Blessed One and said to him, "It is said, Master Gautama, Nibbana is directly visible. In what way, Master Gautama, is Nibbana directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise?"

Gautama says, "When, Brahmin, a person is impassioned with lust, depraved through hatred, bewildered through delusion, overwhelmed and infatuated by delusion, then they plan for their own harm, for the harm of others, for the harm of both, and they experience in their mind suffering and grief. But when lust, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, they neither plan for their own harm, nor for the harm of others, nor for the harm of both. And they do not experience in their mind suffering and grief. In this way, Brahmin, Nibbana is directly visible, immediate, inviting one to come and see, worthy of application, to be personally experienced by the wise."

You see, you can't get away from the kilesas.

One other very familiar quotation—I'll use Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno's translation: "This mind is radiant, but it doesn't show its radiance because passing defilements come and obscure it. The unwise, ordinary person does not understand this as it is, and therefore there is no mind development in the unwise, ordinary person. Bhikkhus, this mind is radiant, and it shows its radiance when it is unobscured by passing defilements, passing kilesas. The wise, noble disciple understands this as it is. Therefore, there is development of the mind in the wise, noble disciple."

So development of the mind—cultivating and exploring the abandonment of the habits of greed, hatred, and delusion—this is what we've been talking about all along. And as the Buddha says, it's when these qualities are absent in the heart-mind that Nibbana is directly visible.

I want to talk a bit tonight about the fact that in the teachings of the Buddha, mind development is not just something we do on retreat. As much as we say that steady awareness, receptive awareness, is the condition for paññā, wisdom, to arise—and this is perhaps the most profound and powerful and always accessible way of really understanding how these qualities obscure peace and allowing the kilesas to be abandoned—our whole life, all aspects of our life, the Buddha viewed as opportunities for this work. We can meet all aspects of our life with this interest, this willingness to use everything to explore, to discover

how to transform these habitual responses of wanting, of aversion, of "me, me, me," of confusion, of looking at the world in an upside-down perspective.

It's not that the development of the mind has to wait for retreat. And the way the Buddha talked, it's not even all about meditation. He said everything.

There's far too much for me to go into tonight. I'm going to cover a number of things but not be able to explore them in as much depth as I'd want. But I want to give you a sense of the ways the Buddha talked about looking at aspects of our life, looking at how with our attention and awareness we're meeting experience. We can learn, with attention, to meet this moment of experience, seeing when we meet it in ways that create more suffering, that feed the kilesas, that keep the habit going. And we can learn to meet this moment of experience in ways that truly abandon, even just for a moment, the creation of kilesa.

As I said, there's a lot, but I'll use one conceptual tool: the three levels of the habits of mind. I first heard this from Sayadaw U Pandita, who called them the three rounds of kilesa—three different levels of intensity at which they show up and wreak havoc in our lives and minds.

The first level, the strongest level, he called the kilesa of transgression. It's so strong that it manifests as the motivation for speech and action. This is when the kilesa is really going to town. What counters it, the habit that strengthens and protects us from being lost in it, is sila—non-harming behavior. I'll talk a bit about that.

The second level is called the obsessive level, which I think everyone here can relate to very well. This is being caught up in obsessive thoughts, the torments, just feeding and feeding. Familiar? Wanting, whatever—just caught up in it. What protects in the moment, what can shift the habit, is actually samadhi, the collectedness of mind. It doesn't have to be one-pointedness, though that's one way. But as you've all seen, as the mind and attention get more stable and balanced, we're not tossed around. There's right view in it, so things that arise don't elicit so much reactivity. There's less aversion, less greed, less selfing. I know everybody has been saying they're seeing selfing so much, but that's actually a sign of wisdom seeing. Before that, we don't even know. So don't be discouraged about that—that's actually the mind starting to balance out. The aspect of our life that we can pay attention to, so as not to feed kilesa in this obsessive form, is samadhi, the balance of mind.

The third level is called the latent or underlying level—the level that isn't manifesting now but is just lurking there, waiting to cause trouble, although there's no "there" for it to lurk. This latent level is what the Buddha called the asavas.

The asavas are a category of—sometimes it's translated as "taints." It's a strange translation, not a great one. Asavas is a very specific category referring to the very, very subtle level of kalesa that really isn't manifesting, but the tendency, the habitual tendency, if met with the right conditions—as Thich Nhat Hanh says, if those conditions are watered—it's like a seed that will sprout.

The asavas are described by the Buddha very specifically as three: craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being or becoming, and ignorance. And ignorance covers everything. So those are the three asavas. And the quality that helps abandon this level of kalesa rising, as he says, is not abandoned by acts but by wisely seeing, by wise attention.

So I want to talk a little bit about those three in light of one particular sutta of the Buddha. There's no way I can cover it all, but I'll introduce it and then you can look at it in your own life. I love this sutta. It's called "All the Asavas." It's basically talking about different ways that our mind can employ wise attention in connection with any particular experience—how we pay attention and what we give attention to. All of this is possible because of awareness, and it can either feed the asavas or starve them.

This might sound subtle, but as I go along you'll see it's not just about sitting on the cushion. The Buddha is talking about all different aspects of our life. That's why I love this teaching, because he's addressing the most subtle level of kalesa. In other places he says the person who's completely free from all asava arising is basically an arahat. So he's talking about very subtle levels. But he's not just saying you have to go into fourth jhana and this and that. He's talking about different activities in our life and looking with wise attention, with interest, with steady awareness, and seeing: How are we paying attention? What are we paying attention to? Is it increasing kalesa? Is it increasing wholesomeness?

Does that sound familiar at all from anything we've said? It's exactly, in some ways, what we would often quote from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: what you're paying attention to, see what's happening in the mind.

So in this sutta, the Buddha says there is an exhaustion of asavas in one who knows and sees, and not in one who does not know and see. Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. Yoniso manasikara is wise attention in Pali.

He says: when one attends unwisely, both unarisen asavas arise and arisen asavas increase. When one attends wisely, both unarisen kalesa do not arise and arisen kalesa are abandoned.

He goes through seven different ways of attending wisely. I'll describe each one as we go through it. You don't have to remember them all, but just see what lands in you as a way you can bring this into your life. This is about our life. This is about every single aspect of our life. There's nothing in our life that's outside of this. That's the main reason I want to talk about this.

As soon as you're thinking, "I can't be aware with this," or "I'll practice tomorrow," you're blowing it off. But everything in our life is included. All of us here—you wouldn't be here this month, you wouldn't have all been practicing as many years as you've been practicing, if you didn't really deeply believe or know in some way that your heart and mind can be much more free than it is, and that you care about that. So we have to remind ourselves that we care about it, again and again, because the other voices are so loud and so familiar. This is just another way of trying to plant that seed to help you remember.

I'm going to break this down because the Buddha talks at length about the first way of seeing wise

attention. This is really, I think, the important thing. What dhammas—and in this usage, dhammas just means things that are arising—what dhammas are unfit for attention that one attends to? They are dhammas, or things that arise, such that when one attends to them, the unarisen taints of sense desire, being, and ignorance arise, or the arisen ones get stronger.

These are the dhammas that are unfit for attention. But the interesting point here, and this is really what we've been saying all along, it's not that those dhammas in themselves are the problem. It's the way we're paying attention to those things.

Something in itself may be neutral, beautiful, or difficult. It's not that the thing itself is unwise attention, but as we're focusing on it, as we're giving it attention, we can see whether the kilesas zoom up or not.

The example I think we've used here, and Sayadaw U Tejaniya would always use it: When somebody does something, says something, and it elicits anger in your mind or some other difficult emotion, you're aware of it. But if you keep looking at that person—you're sitting there being with anger and then you look at them again—what happens? The anger kind of squirts up. And so we keep looking, getting more and more anger. This is unwise attention. It's not that that person is an unwise object. It's the way we're paying attention.

Or say there's a sound that's unpleasant and it's really eliciting a lot of thought: "How can they do that? How can they make that sound? How can they mow the lawn when I'm trying to meditate?" Pick your own version. We can be sort of aware of the aversion, but the focus keeps being, "How can they do that? How can that sound be like this?" And the more attention is given to that object, the greater the aversion grows—even though we think we're with balanced awareness.

If the attention is just, "Okay, sound is like this," you all know what happens. With something strong going on in you—a story and all the stuff the mind does to try and avoid it—it's feeding it, feeding it, feeding it. But when you suddenly allow attention to just land on it and feel, "It feels like this," it may still be difficult, but you can see that with wise attention, the kilesas aren't growing, growing, growing. A sense of wisdom can come in. It's just like this.

This is something we can pay attention to all the time in our life—this kind of wise attention.

So I'm going to take that and then go back to get a sense of his very beginning description of what wise attention is and how we can use it in all three of these levels. The aim is to see, to realize when it seems like we're getting more lost in the kilesas—and not just the "what" but also: What can I do? "Oh no, I'm overwhelmed. Can I trust awareness?" We know we're with awareness, but still, it's going on.

You can just have a look and ask: What is the attention singling out here? What aspect of the experience is it singling out? As the kilesas are growing, growing, growing, try shifting to another aspect—from the thought to the feeling, from the thought to the sound, from whatever it is. Just try shifting the attention to something else and see. Stay and watch to see if it really starts to go down. We can use that.

We can use that with sīla too. I think it's a wonderful thing to mention sīla not just as "we should" or just as non-harming behavior with these five precepts that we're supposed to follow. That's not it. It's really seeing, looking deeply with wise attention at what the actions, the thoughts, the moods that lead to action—what's feeding kilesa, what's not.

What prompts non-harming behavior, or restraint from harming behavior? Consciously refraining from doing something unskillful is itself a wholesome motivation and a wholesome act. So instead of thinking, "Oh, I wanted to do this bad thing. I didn't do it, but I'm so bad because I wanted to do it"—which is just feeding more kilesa—instead notice: "Oh yes, I saw the potential to do it. I consciously refrained from doing it."

That's a wholesome motivation. And so with wise attention, you can bring the attention to that wholesomeness rather than spinning into the negativity, and see that the kilesa isn't being fed.

With sila, with a real commitment to noticing how we are in our life, how we act—it's a very profound aspect of our practice and of purifying our heart and mind, and it's always available to us.

I'd like to read a few things from teachers I appreciate, just to offer a sense of the depth and power of giving wise attention to our motivations, our speech and action, and the effect it has on ourselves and on the world.

From Mingyur Rinpoche: "Our behavior, how we relate to the world around us, even in very difficult situations, becomes the most reliable means of protecting our mind from anxiety and frustration." The most reliable means. Difficult situations, inner or outer.

And from Ajahn Sucitto, which I quite like, speaking about the five precepts: "It's not a superficial practice. The transcendent point is not what it looks like not to do these things—not following the precepts for appearances—but what they call forth, what it takes in our heart and mind to keep them, to follow them, and the effects that they have on your life."

So it's an ongoing, moment to moment, really deep attention and exploration. What does it call forth in our heart and mind not to tell a falsehood? Not to harm someone with our sexuality, or ourselves? Not to take some little thing that is not offered? It's not like, "Okay, I didn't do it" or "I did." It's really, really attending with wise attention, resting in what's arising, resting in awareness, truly exploring what comes up, how it feels to act in these wholesome ways, the effect it has on your mind, the effect it has on the world around you.

Again from Ajahn Sucitto: "Morality carries with it the strength of restraint, the empathy of concern for how one's actions affect oneself and others, and the clarity of discerning the difference between short-term happy feelings and long-term well-being."

I like that one a lot. Short-term happy feelings—"I'll just take this, no one will know"—versus long-term

well-being. But you can break it down simply to what's feeding kilesa.

We always use this example: you're in a place like this retreat center and someone left their shampoo, and you think, "I could use their shampoo." Of course you could—no one's going to care, right? But just to notice it wasn't offered, and you put it down. What's the effect on the heart and mind? That wanting comes up, or that feeling bad, or that "I hope no one sees me" kind of thing. You put it down, you don't do it, and you're protected. The heart and mind is protected from the kilesa, and the wholesome is fed. It's such a little thing, but it's so uplifting. So purifying.

Notice in your mind when this becomes more and more normal and natural, when you hardly have to think about it. You can trust your heart and mind that you're not going to do these things. Some temptation might arise—you kind of look at it—but you have this freedom from fear that you're going to act in inappropriate ways. It's a wonderful feeling, because it's really strengthening the wholesome, really helping to abandon the greed and the aversion.

From the Buddha: "Wisdom is purified by sila, and sila is purified by wisdom. The combination is the highest thing in the world." That's from the Buddha, so you can't argue with that. And he says a wise person is known by their actions.

I think sila is such a beautiful practice—so rich, so subtle—and something we're faced with in so many moments of every day. We can't say there's no place to practice awareness, no place to remember awareness, no place to bring wise attention. Just seeing that.

Do you know what also protects and strengthens our commitment to non-harming behavior and awareness? Two wholesome qualities of mind, perhaps you've heard of them: hiri and ottappa. They're called the bright guardians of the world. According to the Abhidhamma, these two beautiful qualities are present in every wholesome state of mind. There are many beautiful qualities present, which perhaps I'll read tomorrow morning. But hiri and ottappa are present in every wholesome quality of mind. And ahirika and anottappa—the reverse—are present in the unwholesome qualities.

They had these not very onward-leading, rather Victorian translations: "moral shame" and "moral dread."

But that makes them sound really negative when they're actually beautiful qualities, guardians of the world.

You can think of hiri as conscience. It's more inward-looking, and it's like—well, maybe it's like disgust or fear, but really it's that it's painful to think of doing something harmful. It pains us. Conscience is probably a close connection. You think of doing something that causes harm, and you can almost feel pain in your heart, in your body. And when you do something harmful, the pain of that—because we keep paying attention. As the Buddha says, if you do something unskillful, do it with awareness. Don't turn off the awareness. Do it with awareness. And then the pain, the discomfort of that in oneself and others serves as a wake-up call. So hiri really protects us from our own potential for painful actions, helping to decondition

the greed and the aversion.

Otapa is more outward-turning—like awareness, like fear, tuned into not wanting to elicit the painful results that would happen when you do something unskillful. You do something unskillful and people will not like you, or in a kinder way, you realize that you've hurt somebody, caused some pain. It's tuned outward, protecting us from causing pain to others with our actions, and to ourselves as well. And these are called the bright protectors of the world.

Ajahn Amaro was saying in one talk that when Ajahn Sumedho bought Amaravati and was building the new hall there, he had two statues put on each side from some statues he'd seen in Thailand. These aren't that common—I don't think I've actually ever seen one. But they're like deities, Hiri and Otapa, the two deities, the bright guardians of the world, one on each side going into the Dhamma hall. I love that.

Thinking about it, "moral shame, moral dread"—that doesn't do it, right? It just makes you feel bad. But thinking of these as beautiful qualities, or as Sayadaw U Pandita said, that living with sīla actualizes our sense of oneness with others—it really does. In actualizing a sense of oneness with others, it's also not feeding the sense of me, me, me. It's tuning into a sense that our actions affect one another. You can't do something in isolation.

So this is what I wanted to say about sīla, but really I'm encouraging us that this is a great and always available aspect of life to meet with awareness and wise attention. We can see what's feeding unwholesome states and what's starving them, what really brings up the sense of ease, of non-harming, of appreciating that, of a calm mind. Or as Andre read from that one sutta: for one who follows precepts, for one who follows sīla, there's no need for an act of will for freedom from remorse. It's just cause and effect.

So that's the first of the three—working with sīla for transgressive kilesas. The second one, obsessive kilesas—I don't think I need to talk about that since we've spent a month looking at how awareness and steady mindfulness with right attitude works with obsessive defilements. I don't have time to go into that.

So back to the latent ones, because I want to give you a glimpse of some of the other aspects of our life, how the Buddha talks about using wise attention with awareness—wisely considering, wisely reflecting—to serve to abandon the kilesas, abandon the āsavas.

The latent tendencies—I mean, you must have a sense of this. You feel like you're going along some days, quite aware, the mind is calm, you're not feeling wanting or aversion. And some little thing just happens, and out of nowhere, craving or aversion just springs up. Has that ever happened to anybody? It's like the "out of nowhere" bit, though—you're walking along, and someone told me once they were on retreat at their retreat center, and they were walking past the tea table. They were like, "These apples, I don't want them. I'm fine." They really thought they didn't want them. And as they walked past, their arm went out and took an apple and walked behind. Who did that? Greed did that. Greed was driving the bus at that moment.

So that's a little thing. But these tendencies can just spring up in unexpected moments. And that's a funny example. There are some not-so-funny examples.

There's a lot of not-so-funny examples. She must have had one recently. I, of course, haven't. I can only use other people's experiences because I can't think of one.

But there's one I always use because it's actually extremely poignant to me. I heard on the radio a few years ago—came in in the middle of some interview on public radio. I didn't know who the interviewer was or who they were interviewing, but it was clearly an interview with young men who were in prison for serious crimes, in prison for years. I want to guess murder, but I don't know—serious crimes. And the young man was saying, "You know, sitting here, I wish so much that I had back those three to five seconds"—when the urge to do whatever he did just came up and he acted on it. Three to five seconds.

I can relate to that, right? You're just going along and something happens and this aversion springs up. Luckily, I think we must have enough awareness that it wouldn't move to physical harm. But plenty of times you're just minding your own business and some little thing happens and—how can they do that? Just read the news. Just so strong. And it can die away really quickly too with awareness. It doesn't have to go on and on and on and take over.

But just to get a sense of what he means by these latent torments, and not to be discouraged, but just to know it's possible to meet them with awareness—and to then also pay attention, give more awareness to how we're paying attention to experience.

So I'll just go through these other five ones that the Buddha mentions, because they might not be what you'd expect.

The first one is how asavas can be abandoned by restraining. Restraint at the sense doors. And all of these he says, "Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely..." He says that for each of them. "Reflecting wisely, abides with the eye faculty restrained. While asavas and fever of defilement might arise in one who abides with the eye faculty unrestrained, there are no asavas or fever of defilement in him when he abides with the eye faculty restrained"—or all of the faculties restrained.

This doesn't mean tight, never looking around. One time years ago—I guess it was a three-month retreat—someone who was on staff was sitting for three days. He said he wanted to really restrain at the eye door. So he walked around blindfolded for three days. That's not what we're talking about.

And again, this is reflecting wisely. So we're noticing, whether it's the eye or the ear or thinking, when it's unrestrained, when it's just flowing out. We go outside and we're walking, and you can see the difference. It's not like, "God forbid I should look around"—it's not that. But we're walking and, "Oh, the chipmunks! Oh, the birds! What kind of bird? Where can I go see that?" And you're going here and you're going there. Then you think, "Someone told me they saw a bobcat the other day..." All of this coming from a seeing or a hearing and thinking, and not noticing it, not with wise attention. The attention is on how interesting that

would be. It's on the gratification from the pleasant, rather than on noticing that through that seeing without wise attention, greed is growing, growing, growing, growing.

So restraint at the sense doors is just seeing, being right here with it. That old quotation from Ajahn Chah: when we hear a sound, the sound doesn't bother us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound. And that's it.

Clearly, restraint—it's not like there's some rule of how restrained you should be. But reflecting wisely, with wise attention, we notice what's feeding the kilesas. Aversion does the same thing. You get caught up in, "How could that person do that? When I get home, I'm going to say this..." And we're in the thought.

And sometimes it's out of our control. Even with wise attention, of course, the *papañca* has taken over. And when we recognize it, then with awareness, we can land again in something concrete here.

But other times, it's not that it's taken over, but the sense door is just a bit unrestrained. So there's that thought that came up, that memory that could just be met with wise attention. It's unpleasant. But no, it's unrestrained. So the attention to the unpleasant aspect gets stronger, stronger, stronger. The unwise attention is paying attention to what's wrong, what that person did wrong, what I don't like. And it balloons. Or the same—you pay attention to that lunch the other day. It tasted so good. Unwise attention to the gratification of the pleasant is an interesting place. *This is so nice. How can I get it again?* It's not like it's evil. But if you notice that, yes, just a little bit of craving grows and grows and grows.

So this is a good place for awareness to let us explore wise attention in terms of gratification, in terms of the reverse of gratification. We really grasp at something. So, clear awareness. And the restraint—it can go into our life too. Just paying attention, as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, we don't have to leave all our doors and windows open all the time in our life and just let everything come in, everything come in.

And we can look at this with our receptive awareness and right attitude. So this isn't about saying you're bad or wrong or something. *I should never watch television because it's bad and adharmic or something like that.* It's not that at all. It's bringing wise attention to what we do. So if you're watching TV or reading a book with attention, just noticing what's being fed in the mind. You could watch something on TV that's quite inspiring and it's uplifting. You can watch plenty of stuff that isn't quite inspiring. It might just be flat and bored and you're tired and it's helping you relax, but it's not really increasing *kilesa*. You could notice that.

Or you can notice—I've noticed more now when I turn something on, like eight out of ten times, I don't make it past five minutes. And it used to be, I thought, *Oh, this is bad, but it's just five minutes.* After five minutes, the mind is just not happy. It's like a little bit, *These people, they're so nasty. What do I want to watch that for?* And I just turn it off. But it's different from a judgment. I can watch something that's really stupid that I'd be embarrassed to tell people I watched. But it's not feeding a lot of greed or it's not feeding a lot of aversion in the mind. So we pay attention to that. But we don't just let everything come in, no

matter what. So we each will find our own way in our life, in the way that we live. Restraint at the sense doors.

Once at the end of a three-month retreat in integration and asking questions, I was with Joseph and someone was saying, you know, they found after a retreat they go home and they'd go to a dinner party. They remember this, and they just felt they didn't really enjoy it—the conversations were kind of meaningless. What could they do? How could they not feel like that? And then we both said something. And then I thought, and I finally just said it, though I didn't know if it was really what I should say: "Well, one thing is you could quit going to dinner parties." And Joseph said, "Yeah, actually, really." Not that they're bad, but you're paying attention and you're seeing the sense doors are unrestrained and it's just feeding negativity. It's feeding *kilesa*.

So it's not a judgment on the thing. Again, as with wise and unwise attention, it's our commitment to our own heart and mind—to see what's feeding kilesa and what's starving it. Because we care about ourselves, we care about awakening, and we care about the world. So it's not a beating yourself up thing. It's out of love. It's out of compassion.

Okay, the next one is āsavas abandoned by using. "Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely uses their robe only for protection from cold, for protection from heat, for protection from contact with gadflies, flies, wind, burning, creeping things, and for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience."

You get the drift. I like this—it's reflecting wisely. It's the attitude with which we use things. I love it that he puts that in there. Are we using something like food? Great, we need to eat. It's fine to appreciate it. But are we using food for emotional comfort? Again, this isn't intellectual. It's paying attention in yourself. Am I using food, you know, when something's really good and you taste it, you eat it, it feels fine? And then we're using it more to feed wanting, to feed wanting. If you're aware of how you're feeling, your stomach's really saying, "I've had enough now." But we keep on going, keep on going, using it just to feed pleasant feeling.

We're saving stuff for later. I remember on retreats, over at the retreat center, sometimes I'd want to save a little bit of food for if I was hungry at two in the morning—which never happened. But if I was hungry at two in the morning, I would have this little bit of food. There used to be all these shelves and all these rotting little things of food. And how much extra trouble it is, like with that mug I talked about. Save the food and put it there. Do I want it or do I not want it, or should I eat it? And then there's more food. There's always more food here. You're not going to starve. And then it's all piling up, and then it's embarrassing, and you don't want to clean it out because yogis are watching you. And it goes on and on.

The attitude with which we use things—take what you need. Again, this isn't like an ideal in the mind. It's just really noticing. It's so peaceful. It's so liberating. Life is just so much less burdensome. You take what you want and you put it down. You're done. With food, with clothes, with whatever. Not being too much of a strain on the planet. Just using how much water we need. Just, you know, whatever we can do—again,

actualizing our oneness with others. But this is with wise attention. Paying attention to how we're using things. Is it feeding greed? Is it feeding shame? Is it feeding kilesa? Or is it that sense of ease where you can put it down?

I remember the very first three-month retreat I sat. I was new to the whole thing, and you project all kinds of stuff. There was enough food, but in those days there wasn't a lot of extra. I think we had cheese like three times in three months or something. People paid six dollars a day to sit there at that time, so the budget was a little less. Anyway, there was enough food, but I remember I would always be there in time in case something ran out.

There was this one guy who I totally projected onto. I don't even know who he was. He would come in twenty minutes late, twenty-five minutes late to lunch, cruising in, carrying his offal food. And I would think, he must be enlightened. He must be so enlightened that he can come in late, and the food's gone, and he's just mellow about it. I had no idea what was going on in his mind. I didn't even know who he was.

And a long time later, years and years later, in the middle of a three-month course, I just noticed I had stopped caring. I was coming in really late, and I would just take whatever was there, and if something was gone, it was gone, and I really didn't care. It wasn't any big deal. It's so relieving. It's so simple and easy. You take what you need. You don't have to feed the wanting. Just noticing this, the attitude with which we use things—I like that a lot.

The next one is what I would call actually patience, although it's translated here as enduring or tolerating. "What āsavas can be abandoned by patience?" Here a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with gadflies, flies, wind, burning and creeping things. Remember, they're out in the woods—there really are burning and creeping things. He endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words, and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life.

We're talking some serious patience here. But the Buddha's not saying patience like, "whatever." It's the attitude in the mind, the wise attention that can help not feed the kilesas. That's what it's about—really seeing that it's possible, not always, but to meet this experience. Many people have said there's this receptive awareness that's just receiving an unpleasant. Mostly we don't have to be patient with pleasant, but when there's receiving an unpleasant, as of the awareness, you get that sense of equanimity, of non-reactivity. That's the quality that's feeding the wholesome and starving the kilesas.

We can't force patience, but we can incline the attention in that direction. Like what I said from Ajahn Sumedho about sweating through his robes and thinking, "I can't bear it, I can't bear it." Have you ever had a moment when you felt like that? And if I keep the awareness on "I can't bear it, I can't bear it," what keeps getting stronger? "I can't bear it. I really can't. This is unbearable."

But when I just drop the attention—seeing with wise attention, reflecting wisely, that's just feeding it,

feeding the aversion—drop the attention back into sweating, hot. It's like this. It's like this. That's the patience. That just shifts into wise attention. In that moment, it allows—not always, but often—the kilesas to just dissipate, to be abandoned.

But it's possible then. But with all kinds of things, with words—when people say something to you that's rude, how hard is that to really be patient with? It's really interesting to explore all the different places in our life.

When I was a nun in Thailand—and that's a long time ago—I stayed in a kuti in a forest monastery. I really just liked to be private and quiet, but you're the *falang* nun, you know, the foreign nun. And in a lot of the meditation centers in the woods, they're like parks. People come, lay people come. This was up north. Lay people come to spend the day, have a picnic. It's in beautiful spots in the woods.

And so I'd be walking and they'd come up in your face and take a picture. I mean, you can't overtly be rude, at least, right? But they'd come up in your face and take a picture. I'd be in my kuti—like a screen door—and they'd come up and be staring in the screen door. "Oh look, the *farang* nun is meditating," you know, stuff like that. Definitely aversion would arise. Definitely.

I could put up a cloth so they couldn't see into the window. But it's like, okay—patience. Patience. If I focus on "how can I stop that," it just grows. If I focus on "I don't like it," it just grows. It's like, okay. It's like this now. Unpleasant. It's over in a second. They take a picture and it's gone. I stew on it for half an hour. I mean, who's causing the problem here?

So patience. The Buddha said in the Greater Discourse to Rāhula, his son: "Rāhula, 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. Just as people throw clean things and dirty things—excrement, urine, spittle, and blood—on the earth, and the earth is not horrified, humiliated, or disgusted because of that, so develop a mind, a heart like the earth."

Then he goes through all the different elements. But that's just a way to think. It's just, okay, this horrible thing was said to me. It's like this now. Tuning into the quality in the mind with wise attention, reflecting wisely.

The next one—and you might be surprised—is avoiding things. The Buddha is not saying every horrible thing, you have to go right to it. Here, a bhikkhu reflecting wisely avoids a savage elephant, a savage horse, a savage bull, a savage dog. Okay, we don't have that here. A snake, a stump, a bramble, a chasm, a cliff, a cesspit, a sewer—we can avoid all of that. Reflecting wisely, they avoid wandering to unsuitable places. Reflecting wisely, avoid frequenting bad friends, unwholesome friends. Reflecting wisely—so that wise companions. "So while taints and fever of defilement might arise in one who did not avoid these things, there are no taints and fever of defilement in one who avoids them."

I think this is a really important one too, because sometimes we have that sense that to be really mindful

means you can just be with everything, and you should just be able to be with everything. And he's saying, no, you don't have to be with everything. And again, it's with wise attention.

wise friends, not avoiding good friendships. It's not like you're judging them. You're noticing what happens, what's fed in your mind and heart. It's always about what's going on in the mind and heart. They may be lovely people, and the more you hang out with them, the more you get into greed, the less you want to pay attention to your mind, the more you just get into some *papañca*, useless chatter. And you're paying attention and you're feeling not so wholesome, not so good. And it's not about putting them down—it could be a lot worse. Of course, it could be a lot worse. But just to say it's not about judging them. Like the dinner party example: lovely people, but it's just not supporting what's important to my heart and mind. So we see that.

Sometimes avoiding may have a little tremor of loss. It's a choice we're making from wise attention not to feed *kilesa*. But also, it's practical. It's not idealistic. We don't come here to have a retreat to try and understand wise attention with TVs up here like they do in the airport, saying you should be able to be really present no matter what's going on. We have it in silence. When you're having a bad hindrance day—you're just lost in hindrances—and someone else comes up and talks to you, it's not a good scene, is it? One time many years ago, I was on a retreat with my partner, who was also on the retreat, a long retreat, and we happened to run into each other and started talking. We were both in a really ratty hindrance state of mind, and it was such a bad idea that we talked to each other. The hindrances—forget it, you know?

So we avoid. We don't have to let go to the most difficult thing. We're not trying to do this in Times Square. If you're in Times Square and you can't get away, then we use wise attention: what feeds and what starves, how can we cultivate patience, how can we have restraint at the sense doors—there's all these different things. But it's not expecting that if I really could practice, I could be with anything. No. Avoid what's dangerous. Avoid what's completely unnecessary. Avoid what feeds in you getting more and more into greed and aversion and me, me, me.

Okay, we're getting there. The next one is removing. Avoiding would be more like when I put the cloth up so the Thai people couldn't see in—I was avoiding that. Removing is a little bit more tricky because it's talking about not feeding certain mental states. "Reflecting wisely, one does not endure, does not feed an arisen thought affected by sense desire, by ill will, by cruelty. One abandons it. Does not endure arisen unwholesome, unskillful states."

Now, we can only hear that with the wisdom from receptive awareness that it's not a judgment—that there are times we all know when we don't have the choice. We totally know that. And he's not talking about that. But he's talking about something that's really interesting to explore with our wise attention: there are times, more than we might realize, when we can actually choose what thoughts to follow and what thoughts not to follow. More than we might realize. And this isn't a choice out of aversion—"I don't

like this, I don't like this"—but really seeing with *sati-paññ̃a*, with wisdom and receptive awareness: I don't have to go down that road. I can go here.

There are times we don't have that choice, and the steady awareness helps us learn how these *kilesas* work. We all know that. But this is from that *sutta* where the Buddha was walking and he's really seeing when he had thoughts of greed, thoughts of aversion, thoughts of cruelty. It was for his own suffering, for the suffering of others, and there was nothing useful about it. And then he resolved not to follow those thoughts, to abandon those thoughts. But when thoughts came up of compassion, of kindness, of non-ill will, of generosity, he looked and he said, "I can see no harm that can come from those thoughts. Even if I thought them for a day and a night, there could be no harm, except perhaps the mind and body would be tired out, so that I would rest." It's so practical.

So this is something to think about: not getting into judging when we're caught in this stuff, but recognizing the potential with wise attention that more often than we might think, you can make the choice.

Now there's one more thing. I'll give you an example—I think I've used this in some groups. A few years ago, I was sitting, not on retreat, just at home. And something triggered a pattern of self-judgment, which I have been looking at for fifty years. I know all about it. It's coming up.

So I'm being mindful. There's this thought. There's this feeling. I wasn't reacting. Just noticing, noticing, noticing.

And the thought came up: I don't need to explore this. I've been down this rabbit hole ten million times. Let me change the channel to metta.

It was just like that—just a kind of exploring. So I simply substituted metta thoughts. "May I be free from danger. May I be happy and peaceful." I just said the four phrases, just like that, without trying to feel metta, and without aversion or running away. Just changing the channel.

By the second repetition, the mind and heart actually shifted—that quality, that mental state of metta, arose, and the other was gone.

I thought that was really a huge learning for me, because it wasn't aversion. I could have been just as mindful of the self-judgment, but why? We can actually consciously cultivate the wholesome with wise attention.

And this, I think, is a really huge thing for us to learn—very different from "I've got to be with it to the bitter end for the one hundred fifty-eight million billionth time." No. Be happy. May all beings be happy. Maybe just come back to mindfulness of something else.

I'm using that tone of voice because it's really like that. It isn't a reaction.

So start to look and see with wise attention. With wise attention, we can consciously cultivate the wholesome, consciously starve the unwholesome.

Okay, that's enough. You get the drift. But do it. Do it. This is what our life's about. And it doesn't lead to more suffering. And it doesn't lead to being shut off from people. I gave the example about unwise friends, but it doesn't mean we're cutting off friendships. It just means we're meeting the world with more wholesomeness and less reactivity—because we're meeting ourselves that way too.

And every moment's a chance to explore.

So thank you.

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