Liberation and Mindfulness (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:03

Ringing the bell before a talk makes it sound momentous, but actually I just like ringing the bell. We received it on the opening day of this retreat hall. We were thinking we needed a bell, and then magically San Francisco Zen Center sent us a gift, saying, "We think you need a bell." And we did. So thank you, Zen Center.

You've completed one day of retreat practice. A few of you are on your first retreat, and many of you have done quite a few retreats—yet it still is a process of settling down. Tonight I'd like to talk about the core of our practice together. I'd like to talk about mindfulness, or what I will also be using as a synonym: loving awareness.

If you read in the Buddhist texts, they begin in the most wonderful way: there is a path for living beings to realize well-being and liberation, to overcome sorrow and grief and lamentation and despair. I think Spring talked about that. And it's the practice of mindfulness. In other texts, it says mindfulness is all-helpful—that mindfulness is the gateway to liberation and freedom. And so I want us to think together, those of you who've been practicing for a long time and those who are newer, about what this means and how it operates for us.

There are two ways to function in the world. One is without mindfulness. This is sometimes called the samsaric way, or cyclic way of living. Because without mindfulness, without some sense of awareness, when experiences arise, what arises with them is habit and reactivity. We get fearful, we get caught, we're blind—we like it, we don't like it. Without mindfulness, we live in a somewhat unconscious set of patterns that simply enact the conditioning around us: the cultural conditioning, the educational conditioning, and so forth.

As we do this, not only is there not much sense of awareness and freedom, but unfortunately, those patterns build. Because they're based in delusion, in fear, in a sense that we can't trust the world, that we have to protect ourselves. This is called the body of fear, and it grows.

Having just come back from teaching with Trudy in China, being in Asia, talking to people in Singapore and Korea—as those societies have modernized, there's a tremendous amount of stress. There's all the great prosperity that's happened, but there's also extremely high suicide rates among children in Korea and Singapore and parts of China who are being driven to be ambitious and fulfill the goals of their parents or society. And then there's the grief that comes and the struggle. All of this is a samsaric way of

being, where things continue to operate but there's not a sense of inner freedom, of mindfulness, of being able to step back and really listen in a wise way.

If you read what is called the Fire Sermon, one of the first major talks of the Buddha, he begins: "This world is burning. This world is on fire"—which is something that I think you can taste in the air here. So it's not just metaphorical. But then he goes on: In what way is this world burning? It's burning with the fires of greed. It's burning with the fires of hatred and ignorance. It's burning with the fires of delusion. And these fires cause immense suffering. We can see those forces as they operate in the world and, to a certain extent, in our own lives when we're caught in greed and grasping, hatred and fear, ignorance and confusion. That's the samsaric nature, the repetitive nature of unconsciousness.

After his enlightenment, as the myth tells it, the Buddha surveyed the world with the eye of compassion in all four quarters and saw that there were beings suffering everywhere, in different ways, from delusion and greed and fear. And he saw that it would be possible to teach them a way that brought inner peace, liberation, wakefulness, ease, a sense of trust, graciousness. The way that he taught was to offer what we're doing here: the training and practice of mindfulness.

Now, whether you're a long-term practitioner or somewhat new, you don't have to wait more years to find freedom, and you don't have to go on a long retreat in Thailand or Burma or travel to the Himalayas. Freedom and well-being is available exactly where you are. I mean, where else would it be? This very body and this very mind is the place of liberation. It's the place we can get entangled and lost and habitual and repetitive and reactive and fearful. And it's also the place where trust, graciousness, wakefulness, and compassion can be born.

As we find these qualities, or as we mature into them over the years of practice, we also bring them to the world that so much needs them. You're all familiar with the passage from Thich Nhat Hanh where he says that when the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked, all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained centered and calm, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.

And so as you train and practice in this great art of mindfulness and loving awareness, you become that person on the boat of the world that so much needs it. The invitation, however many years of practice you have done, has two sides to it. One side, which Spring spoke about this morning, is an invitation to ease.

This is from Zen Master Ryokan, the most beloved poet in Japanese history. He writes, "If someone asks what is the mark of enlightenment or illusion, I cannot say. Praise and blame, wealth and honor are nothing but dust. As the evening falls, I sit in my hermitage and stretch out both feet as an answer."

And so there he is in his mountain hermitage—praise, blame, gain and loss, wealth and honor. What is the mark of enlightenment? I stretch out my feet in answer. There's something so gracious and lovely about this. He's not in conflict with the world.

So one of the invitations for your practice is to find ease in your heart, in your body, in your mind. And the other, which is a complement to that, is the invitation of fearlessness.

Fearlessness doesn't mean you won't have fear. Anybody in this room not have fear? Raise your hand. You can have your money back. It doesn't work that way. Fearlessness is something else. It is the steadiness, the courage, and the discipline to be present for this world with graciousness and ease on one side, but also with your full being. This is the invitation of practice—both ease and a kind of fearlessness that grows as we sit and walk.

When you think about where we're going on the spiritual path, the goal is not so much to get somewhere, but rather to open to the mystery of life. As it's said, the mystery of life is not a problem to solve, but a reality to experience.

I think about sitting with one of the teachers from Spirit Rock, Marlene Jones. A couple of years ago, she had heart failure. Unfortunately, where she was in the circumstances, it took a long time for the paramedics to get to her—fifteen or twenty minutes. So she had no oxygen to her brain for a long time. They got her to the hospital, iced her down, put her in a coma, and brought her back out. For a week they tried everything they could to get any response from her. Nothing. They did all kinds of tests—brain dead, zero.

So sitting with her family, together we decided it was time to take her off all the life support machines. I was holding her hand and looking at her, saying, "Marlene, you know, you've been so important and such a great colleague. You're dying too soon. I'm going to miss you, and there are so many things you could have done with us. But the least you could do is give us a sign." Sort of teasing her a little bit, trying to make the people sitting with her—her daughter and so forth—smile a little as well.

And as soon as I said that, two tears rolled down her cheeks. A week, nothing. The doctors prodding her, the different electrical brain monitoring and so forth—nothing. "The least you could do is give us a sign," and then the tears.

Who are we? Who are you? What is that spirit that was born into your body and that will also leave your body when you die? I could tell lots more stories, but you get the idea—that we actually live in mystery. To be a human being is the most remarkable, mysterious thing you can imagine.

I was at the first White House Buddhist leadership gathering a couple of years ago. I don't think that will be happening again soon—but I'm going to leave that aside. I was able to give one of the key talks there on the Buddhist teachings of wise society: treating all members of society with respect, coming together in harmony and leaving in harmony. Taking care of the vulnerable—the young, the elderly, those who are sick, the women. This is a way, said the Buddha, that a society prospers and does not decline. And care for the environment. There's a whole text about wise society.

But it's also not all that different from what you'd find in the great spiritual traditions around the

world—from the Native Americans, from the wisest teachings in Jewish and Christian traditions, from Native traditions in Africa, and many other places.

The difference, and what made this conference so compelling, was that while these are beautiful visions of wise society, there's actually a way to do it. With the five thousand studies and neuroscience papers in the last few decades on mindfulness and compassion, it's now in school systems—tens of thousands of them—in clinics, in business, in the arts, and so forth. I have a big packet that was sent to me called "Mindful Nation," signed by the eighty-five members of the British Parliament Mindfulness Group.

We can only hope that this initiative is transmitted across the pond to our side sometime soon.

With mindfulness comes an invitation to freedom here and now, where we are. It's the only place we can find it. And it manifests on three different levels. Call it mindfulness or loving awareness.

The first level of freedom is our ability to know and be present for the content of experience. So we're sitting with our breath and our body, and we have tension and pain and pleasure and ease and tingling and heat and fire. We learn how to sit with it. We can name it gently: this is tingling, this is tension. These are the different experiences we have. But as we sit and the body starts to open, we become aware of the content of our body experience—all the sensations and feelings that make up our embodied life.

What grows with this, in neuroscience terms, is called the window of tolerance. Because we live in a society that is pretty much terrified of pain. We live in a culture of comfort. Too cold? Turn up the heat. Too hot? Turn on the air conditioning. Do whatever you can to make yourself comfortable. If you're uncomfortable, the problem is out there.

But here's the thing: is there anybody in the room who doesn't have discomfort or pain in their life, in spite of all those attempts to keep it at bay? You don't have to bother raising your hand. This is simply the way it is—praise and blame, pleasure and pain. We have it all.

And so if we can actually be with the content of our experience, we start to find a freedom already. Freedom with pain, freedom with tingling and tension and hot and cold. Instead of being reactive, mindfulness allows us to be present for that experience.

Of course, it can get more extreme. Trudy and I had dinner in Hawaii while visiting some friends, and the world-famous magician David Blaine was there doing card tricks that I couldn't imagine how he accomplished. He said he loved doing them especially in front of scientists. He showed us videos he'd done with Stephen Hawking and Bill Gates, and they were going crazy asking, "How could you do that? What's the physics of this?" I just said, "This is really good magic."

He was talking about how he pushes his body to extremes—he's the guy who hung in a glass box over the Thames River for forty-three days, only drinking liquids without eating. He's an extreme kind of guy. I talked about living in a monastery where our training was to master the postures by sitting for

twenty-four hours without moving, or standing for twenty-four hours without moving. He said, "Oh yeah, I once did twelve days standing without moving." I said, "Okay, you've got me there." But it felt like there was some kind of brotherhood with him.

What happens when we learn to be mindful is that we can actually tolerate this world rather than be frightened of it. And it's not just a personal freedom that comes. As James Baldwin writes, "I imagine one of the reasons that people cling to their hate and ignorance so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

When we can't bear our pain or our fear or our insecurity, we project it out onto others—onto the communists, or the black people, or the yellow people, or the native people, or the Muslims, or the immigrants. It was Russia for a while. I think Russia is coming back as an enemy du jour; it's going to have a recurrence now. But we project it out because we live in a way that we can't bear the reality of insecurity. And yet, insecurity is the truth of the world.

So we learn more and more what it's like to be present for our body. In the same way, we learn how to be present for our feelings—the tears and joy and grief and all the things that will come up on retreat.

Here is a story from Frank Ostaseski, who started the Zen Center Hospice and is a good friend I've been teaching with recently. He writes about a woman named Jillian who worked in publishing. Her mother developed Alzheimer's, and Jillian decided to bring her mother to live with her and arranged for a caregiver. One day she came home and walked into the living room to find all her beloved books, including her favorite Buddhist texts, scattered across the floor. Her mother announced, "I'm tired of all these dusty books. I'm going to give them to my dentist." You can sense the mind state arising in Jillian.

And she became immediately angry, trapped and caught up, and started to scold the caregiver. "How could you let this happen? How could you let her do this?"

And the caregiver, who wasn't caught in that drama, replied, "Madam, today I pack the books up. Tomorrow I will unpack them. If this gives a sense of control to a woman who has lost so much, well then, that's okay with me. It doesn't matter so much. I just like being with her."

You can feel the graciousness of heart and the ability to be with uncertainty and change that's in that story. And this is why we call it loving awareness. We start to learn a graciousness with the body experience, with the feelings that we have, with the mind states that come. Because we'll have all kinds of views arise. Your mind tells you, "You're doing well. You're not doing well. The world is a mess, but it's so beautiful." And everything in between, because the mind has no pride and just keeps spitting out stories and plans and wise things and fearful ones and beliefs and so forth.

When I was eight or nine years old, probably around nine, we lived in Buffalo, New York—lots of snow. There was this huge snowstorm with icy winds, and my twin brother and I, along with my other brother a year younger, decided to go out and play. We got all wrapped up, but the wind was blowing wildly. My

twin brother was a lot bigger than I was. He played football, and I was not a football player, we'll just say that. Much more robust. I was really skinny then, and I was shaking and shivering. It was freezing cold and I'm shaking out there. He looked at me and said, "It's not cold."

I said, "What do you mean?"

He took off his hat. He unwrapped his scarf. "It's not cold." The wind is blowing, freezing. He took off his jacket. Pretty soon he had stripped himself down to the waist and started dancing around saying, "You just think it's cold. You just think it's cold."

I remember this for my whole life. There was something about him, even as a young boy, knowing that mind states determine how we live in this world. And I didn't have to be caught in "Oh, it's terrifying and it's cold and I'm frightened and I'm shivering and I have to go inside."

As we become aware of the content of experience and can see the stories we tell and the beliefs, we go, "Oh, that's a belief. That's a story. How interesting." But we don't have to get caught in it.

Now the next level of mindfulness is mindfulness of the process. Those of you who've been practicing for some time over these months and years, as you quiet your mind and open your heart, the sense of freedom of being able to be with experience begins to shift because you start to look at the process of body and mind and senses in the world. What you see is that it's all impermanent. It's all arising and changing and passing away. And selfless, in the sense that you don't choose your thoughts—I hope not. Anyway, most of them in there you wouldn't choose. You don't choose your feelings very much. You certainly don't choose your body sensations. And you see that it's ephemeral, insecure, subject to change, subject to pain. This is the way it is. Everything you pay attention to arises for a time and vanishes. All of it.

In the time you listen to this one sentence, fifty thousand cells will have been born in your body and fifty thousand will have died. That's a billion in a day. Your body is always dying and being reborn and remaking itself, as is your whole idea of yourself.

As you start to see the process of experience, then a different kind of freedom comes, because you realize it's all changing and you don't want to hold on to it. Otherwise you get rope burn.

I remember walking with Ajahn Chah one day out on alms round, and there was a big boulder in the field nearby.

And he said to us, "Is that boulder heavy?" And of course we said to the master, "Yes, it is." And he said, "Not if you don't pick it up."

That was a kind of pith teaching about seeing the process of life and realizing that we can tend to it. We can respond, we can care for our family, our community, and the world, but we don't have to grasp it—because it's ungraspable. And there grows an ease with birth and death, joy and sorrow.

So the second level of freedom comes when we start to see the nature of things and we get easy with it.

Frank Ostaseski tells a story about a woman who died at Zen Hospice, and one of her sons was twelve years old with Down syndrome. They were afraid to bring him—Tommy—because they didn't know how he would understand his mother's death. But Frank said, "Let's try it out." The father said, "Maybe we should talk to his therapist." Frank said, "Bring the therapist along. We'll work it out."

So Tommy went in to see his mother and stood there for a bit. Everybody was frightened that he'd freak out. He looked at her and said, "What is gone?" Just kind of in wonder. "What is gone?" He looked at his mother for a while, and Frank said, "What do you think, Tommy?" He started to talk about the Transformers movies, where one thing would transform into another. "She died. Maybe she'll turn into something else." Very wise.

Frank said he stood there with him, realizing that Tommy was trying to understand in his own way. And then he did a kind of remarkable thing. Frank said, "Is there anything else you want to say to your mother, or do with your mother?" Tommy went over and first touched her very gently on her cheek. Then he began to smell her. He sniffed her whole body, from her head all the way down to her feet.

Frank said he remembered one time driving in New England when a car ahead of him had hit a deer and killed it. There was a fawn with this mother—the deer that had died lying on the side of the road, and the fawn coming and sniffing its mother, trying to understand what happened. He said standing there with Tommy was so tender and so mysterious, to have him just go and be there and smell his mother. And then Tommy said, "Yes, okay." And he walked out.

This is us. We're in this mystery of birth and death. To know the process of things gives a profound sense of freedom—that it is natural to be born, natural to die, natural to have birth and death and joy and sorrow and praise and blame and gain and loss. There grows a graciousness and an understanding.

And then the third level of mindfulness arises: the mindfulness of consciousness itself. Content, process, consciousness.

My teacher Ajahn Chah had practiced as a monk in the forest for about ten years, very ardently. In those days the forest had tigers, and everybody got malaria pretty much. He did all these austere practices and lots of deep meditation—had visions and profound insights and so forth. He finally went to see the greatest master of that time, another Ajahn named Ajahn Mun. He told him all about his practices and said, "Do you have any guidance for me?"

Ajahn Mun looked back at him and said, "Yes, Chah. You've missed the point." He said, "Those are just experiences. Dissolve your body into light, have a great vision, have some deep insight, overcome pain and pleasure and so forth—those are like movies. You get a war movie and a documentary and a romantic comedy, your love story. They all come and go. The only question for you to ask for your freedom is: to whom do these happen?"

So turn your attention from the content, or even the process of the experience, back to the knowing, and become the one who knows.

And this invites a shift of identity. "You live in illusion in the appearance of things," says Kalu Rinpoche, a great old Tibetan Lama. "There is a reality, but you do not know this. When you remember, you will discover that you are nothing. And being nothing, you are everything. That is all."

So there's something for you to reflect on for the next nine days. What it's pointing to is this—let me see if I can say it much more simply, because this is really a key to liberation.

When you look in the mirror, you notice you've aged, right? We all have that experience. Losing its fur and sagging and doing the things that aging happens—wrinkling and all those things. But the weird thing that's very common is you don't necessarily feel older. You know how common that experience is. And that's because it's only your body that's aged. Your body exists in time. It grows. A little child, then an older child, then a teen, then a young adult, and it goes on. And then it gets older and it dies.

But the awareness that's looking at that body in the mirror doesn't exist in time. And it says, "Oh, well, how are we doing at this stage of life? Hmm, lost some more fur," or whatever your commentary on it is. "I wonder how much longer this one will last." Because, you know, you get it from Avis and then you have to turn it back in or something like that, right? It's just how it works.

So you start to look into the mystery of who you are, and you turn your attention back to become the awareness itself, to look into who you are and to become the knowing, the one who knows.

And you know this already in yourselves, you know this in your being. Alice Walker writes, "One day I was sitting there like a motherless child, which I was, and it came to me, that feeling of being a part of everything. And I knew if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house." When it happens, you just can't miss it.

Walking in the high mountains, listening to a piece of sacred music, making love, sitting there with someone who's dying, or being there at the birth of a new human being—it's a really wild thing. Here's another person, you know, coming out of someone's body. It's wild. And you go, okay, all right, I don't really have the kind of intellectual answer, but I'm present for this mystery of life itself coming out of nothing.

And you start to become the witness. You start to trust that you can rest in awareness itself. And this level of mindfulness gives you, as Ajahn Mun said, the greatest freedom of all. The freedom to sit with birth and to sit with death.

And when you have this freedom—I think of my good friend and colleague and teacher, Maha Ghosananda, who was the Gandhi of Cambodia, nominated for the Nobel Prize many times. I've told these stories so often. But he went back after the Cambodian genocide and the Khmer Rouge and spent fifteen

years leading people back to their villages on foot, saying, "You can't go in a bus or a car. You have to reclaim your land step by step with chants of loving kindness. Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed." Walking through the jungles and the killing fields, ringing a bell and chanting all the way back.

He was somebody who had had this very deep training. And he knew—all nineteen members of his family had been killed. There was a way in which he knew how to return to the world, because the end of this process of mindfulness from content to process to consciousness itself doesn't end in some kind of spaced-out realm. Rather, when you enter and discover that who you are is nothing, and being nothing you are everything, as Kalu Rinpoche said, then the world is your family. Then you return and you enter the world with a wiser heart and with a freer spirit, no matter what happens.

Now as you continue to practice on this retreat, you will sense these levels as you go through what are the foundations of mindfulness. As your body opens up more—and Christiana is going to talk more about it tomorrow evening—you can learn how to be present for your body, not by striving, but as Spring talked about, with a graciousness or an ease. And you let your body settle. Or if you can't be with your breath, you can pay attention to your hands or to the sound that's around you. But you keep gently coming back and steadying your attention.

And as you do, of course, at the content level, you become able to be aware of the different pains and tensions and the things that are carried in your body. But at the same time, you also will start to find moments of ease and pleasure. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment, peace and equanimity other factors of enlightenment.

For those who are experienced practitioners, one of the best instructions you can have is to look for the moments of ease and the moments of joy and the moments of presence, and invite them to expand. Let the sense of well-being that comes, that starts to come periodically as you sit or you walk—invite them to open, dwell in them, rest in them. You start to shift the figure-ground from the struggle with the body, even though sometimes you have to sit with things that are quite difficult and painful. Instead, you also invite a sense of ease and peace and well-being. This shift becomes really helpful.

Then as your mind gets quieter and you shift from content to process, the experiences of the body and the senses begin to break up and pixelate. Every sensation that's tight in the body, or the sounds you hear, becomes like many little vibrations. Whatever seems solid starts more and more to become visible to your mindfulness or your loving awareness as a kind of vibrating energy field that's full of life and not solid at all.

Trudy and I were at a conference together with Elissa Epel, and she works with Liz Blackburn at UC Medical Center here. Liz got the Nobel Prize for discovering telomeres. Part of their research, which completely shocked them, was that after eight weeks of meditation practice, the telomeres—which are the caps on the end of chromosomes that protect them and keep them longer alive—actually grew and

extended. They couldn't believe it. They replicated it a few times. They were afraid to publish it because people would think they were kind of kooky. But that wasn't what she talked about. We kind of knew that.

She talked about some new research. Part of it—and I really want to read this study to figure out how they did it—is that they studied the telomeres in a community that had a big disparity between rich and poor. Those who are poor, as you would expect, had frayed telomeres. The stress and the poverty and the racism and all the kinds of suffering affects the body very deeply. But the thing that was interesting is that those who are wealthy in that community, even if they were in a gated community, their telomeres also had diminished. It's as if the cells of your body are tuned in to the environment. You are not separate from your environment. It's really wild.

So as you get deeper and quieter, you start to see the body as an energy field. Yes, you can be with the content, but you see the process of life itself. And then there comes the mysterious thing that happens where you both love the body and tend it and care for it because it's really precious—and yet I think of this quadriplegic who came to some Dharma teachings. I can still hear his voice at one point where he said, "I've discovered I am not the body." He'd been unable to move for a number of years. He said, "I've discovered I am not this body. Hallelujah!" He shouted it out. And so there's both the care for the body, but in this paradoxical way, there's also an understanding that you rent it, you use it, you love it, you care for it, but it's not who you really are.

In the same way, these levels work with feelings. You notice the content of your feelings. As C.S. Lewis wrote, you will discover inside "a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, and a harem of fondled hatreds"—and every other feeling in between. I won't read it, but I have a list of five hundred different feelings.

So you start to see the content of the feelings and you're able to be present for them and to name them, acknowledge: "This is sadness. Sad, sad. This is excitement. Excitement, excitement." By naming the experiences, like naming the dragon, there comes a kind of freedom in relationship to them. Then, as that goes on, there comes a kind of maturing, because people often don't even know what they're feeling.

I have a friend named Arturo Bihar who was the vice president of Facebook for a while. His job, among other things—he was an engineer—but then he was in charge of problem solving for Facebook. He said, "So I was also the complaints department. And because we have nine hundred eighty million users, it didn't take very long to get a million complaints." Talk about a complaints department. He said about a third of them were engineering problems. He gave them to the engineers and they fixed them. That's what engineers do, mostly, if they're good. But two-thirds of them were the problems between people.

You posted a picture of me that I don't like, I don't look good in it. You posted a picture of my children—how dare you? You said that thing about me. It was conflict between people.

At first, he sent the boilerplate policy: if it's lewd or lascivious or hateful, then we'll take it down; this is

our policy. Nobody was happy.

So then he realized they had to do something about these complaints. He thought maybe it would be good if people contacted each other. He started sending out a message: "Why don't you talk to the person that upset you? Message them." But then he realized people weren't very skillful at that. So he said, "Why don't you tell them what upset you and how you felt about it?"

After a little while, he found that people didn't know what they felt. So he sent out those little emoticons—angry, sad, whatever. You can show them how you felt about it. And then he suggested, "Why don't you get curious and ask them why they posted it?"

The people who answered would say, "Well, I thought you looked good in that picture," or "I love your children. I thought it was a great thing. I'm so sorry." It turned out that in ninety-five percent of the cases where people talked to each other, the conflict was resolved.

As Arturo said, "I get to teach social and emotional learning and conflict resolution skills to nine hundred eighty million people."

But this is something we're learning in a much deeper way in ourselves—to recognize what we're feeling. Often that means recognizing the trauma, the deep hurts carried in our body, the stories that come with it, the emotions, and being willing and able to be present for the content of it all.

Then something very interesting happens. Because you feel both the suffering you've been through and the beauty of your life, you open yourself to that. You become able to bear your measure of tears and your measure of sorrows. As the heart becomes more tender, as you've practiced—and many of you have for a long time—you actually become more sensitive. But you also become more courageous and wiser. You're able to tolerate both the tears and the joy of the world, to bear witness to them.

Then you receive something called the tears of the way, which are tears that are poignant. You feel the sufferings of the world and you see its unbearable beauty, and you let your heart be touched by them all.

The fact that we don't know this in our culture... As someone said, I'd like to take every mother by the hand and walk them next to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and have them read aloud the names of everyone who was lost before anybody votes for war. Do not send a man to war who does not know how to weep.

When we talk about our body politic, the conflicts that are happening and have happened—if that person isn't weeping, they're not paying attention.

So we become more sensitive, but we also increase our capacity for love, for presence. As we do, we start to see the river of feelings that make up human life: fear and longing and love and grief and loss and delight, the feelings of connection and creativity. We can bow and name them. Fear is like this. Longing is like this. Love is like this. Sadness is like this. Connection is like this. We start to inhabit, to feel—this is the

nature of human incarnation. We see the process of life itself rather than taking it so personally.

Then we look at the mind—the third foundation of mindfulness—and the thoughts. This becomes really important as those of you who've practiced for a long time have matured, because we're talking about how we live and embody this, not just on retreat.

In the Buddhist texts it says: Who is your enemy? Mind is your enemy. No one can harm you worse than your own mind untrained. Who is your friend? Mind is your friend. No one can help you more than a trained and tame mind—not even the most loving parents or loving members of your family.

You start to see the stories and the attitudes, the content of it all, the whole inner dialogue that you build your sense of self and world out of. It's sometimes rather alarming for those who come on their first retreat. It's like you're stuck in Motel 6 late at night and the shopping channel is on and you can't turn it off. You start to realize that ninety-five percent of what's in there is reruns—the same bad show as from yesterday, or good show, whatever.

They keep repeating themselves. The mind secretes thoughts like the salivary gland secretes saliva. It just does. But you also begin to notice the attitudes that you glom onto, that you get attached to. This is right and this is wrong, and so forth. You start to see those different thoughts and attitudes.

And then, because you've been practicing for a while, you get to do what my beloved Trudy has taught me about, which she calls an attitude adjustment—where you see, okay, this is an attitude, but it actually doesn't have my best interest in mind. And you begin to realize that you can shift from one particular view or attitude to another. So you start to know the content and the stories, and you don't believe them so much. You don't take them so seriously. The stories of unworthiness or the stories of grandiosity, the stories of success or failure—you know what your mind does, all of those kinds of things.

And there comes a shift of identity where you're not so much identified with your thoughts. It becomes more about the process. There's that wonderful story I'd like to tell of Ram Dass coming back from India with his beard and beads as Baba Ram Dass, teaching, and a woman in the front row waving her hand saying, "Ram Dass, you're teaching all these Hindu things, Hindu guru, but aren't you Jewish?" And Ram Dass said, "Yeah, I am actually. I was bar mitzvahed, Jewish." And then he said, "There's a lot I love about Judaism. The Hasidic masters are like the Zen masters. If you read Buber's Tales of the Hasidim, they're fantastic. And the Kabbalah has all these maps of the levels of consciousness that are a great match to all the great Hindu teachings I like." But then he said, "Remember, I'm only Jewish on my parents' side." He was, of course, very witty as well as deep.

Because your identity is not your parents. And it's not even your gender or your race or your class. Those are things to honor and pay attention to, and without acknowledging them, we can have a lot of suffering. But that's not fundamentally who you are. As you become quieter, you start to see, oh, that's only the personality—when you look at the thoughts in the mind. Like your pet. You've got it. Unfortunately, in

some cases you've got a mutt, one of those adopted from the shelter. But you start to realize that the thought structures and the beliefs and the things you've been told about yourself—not only can you adjust your attitude, but you can also step back from them and see that those are just thoughts coming and going. They're like bubbles in a stream, and they don't last.

And it doesn't take that much. Here's a letter I received:

"Dear Jack, I really don't know how to talk to you directly, but I wanted to express how grateful I am just to be aware of your teachings. I found out about you through Duncan Trussell's podcast last year"—he's a kind of dharma comedian with a big following among millennials, and I did some things with him. The letter continued, "Little by little, your ideas of loving yourself and having compassion kept inching their way toward what I guess is my heart. They soothed me in darker days and given me a glimpse into a more loving reality for myself.

"Tonight, I finally gave in and tried meditating. I decided, after hearing you speak through my phone for months and months, I'd finally give in and just sit with myself for a while. I'm not sure I've ever cried tears of joy like that in the twenty-one years I've lived so far. For the first time, I stopped and really held my anger that I latched onto, my anxiety, my hatred, and everything else I criticized myself about, with softness and compassion, without judgment. And all of a sudden, I felt like I really could be loving to myself in the same way that I want to love others. I finally got some relief with what I felt inside, and I want you to know that I love you for it. Thank you so much."

It doesn't take that long. You don't have to go to the Himalayas. Maybe you have to come to Spirit Rock, but that's another story.

So you start to see these layers of mindfulness—that acknowledges the content, that sees the process, and then steps back. And the shift of identity, as Thomas Merton says—Thomas Merton, the Christian mystic—"There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from unseen roots of all creation, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with humility and humanity." He's talking about his meditation, that all these things come unbidden—the joys and sorrows—but underneath, as we shift our identity and become the one who knows, there comes a spaciousness, a freedom, and a beauty.

And that's the fourth foundation of mindfulness, which is mindfulness of the dharma, of the laws that are operating. For example, the law of cause and effect.

That if you practice anger, guess what becomes more your habit? Anger. And not only that, if you plant seeds of anger by getting angry at lots of other people, guess what you will get back? Anger. If you plant seeds of love and practice love in yourself, that's what will grow. And you plant it in the world, that's what will return. If you plant greed in yourself, that's what will grow in you. And so you start to see this is very impersonal actually. This is simply how consciousness works.

And then you begin to see the emptiness of it, as it says in the Dhammapada and the Diamond Sutra: like a star at dawn, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, an echo, a rainbow, a phantom, a dream. Things arise—thoughts, feelings, experiences, whole years. I mean, what happened to 2016? It's back there with Y2K. And also back there with the Great Depression and the Egyptian empires and dynasties, all in the past. It went back to emptiness. There's this, and then it disappears.

And as you get quiet, you start to see—whoa, wait a second, it seems very solid, but all there is, is now. All there is, is this present. And as you become more and more able to rest in the awareness of this, you become the one who knows. There's a shift in reality for you. The experiences of the world still arise, but there's a sense of spaciousness, openness, graciousness, and of deep love.

As my teacher Nisargadatta in Bombay, the old guru, said, "Wisdom sees that I am nothing and love sees that I am everything, and between these two my life flows." Because as you get more empty and if you look to see who am I—am I the little awareness inside here, like that's yourself—you look and you can't find anything except that it's aware. There's no self, nothing separate. And you start to realize that awareness is what the world is made of, consciousness itself. All things born out of consciousness.

And from this place, you realize that it's your family then. This is who you are. Wisdom says, I am nothing. Love says, I'm everything. Between these two, my life flows. Mother Teresa puts it one way. She says the trouble with you is you draw your family circle too small. Life is your family. You come out of life. You are life. And you are what life is born from.

I think of Sharon Salzberg, our dear friend and colleague, who was walking down the street one day in Seattle when a somewhat toothless homeless man came up to her and said, "Don't you know me? Don't you know me?" And first she had to stop because we've had a lot of students on retreats—and I was at my 1978 three-month retreat, or whatever it could have been. But it turned out it wasn't somebody she literally knew. But she said the moment was so affecting to her when he said, "Don't you know me?" Because he's one of us. He is one of us. He's one of our family members.

And as you get emptier, or as you learn to rest as awareness itself, you discover that this is what's real. This, and love. Because in the end, the point isn't to perfect yourself. It's to perfect your love. To be able to open the heart and mind and realize that, as the texts say, "Oh nobly born, remember who you really are. Remember your true nature. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. Everything is waiting for you."

The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

I feel so grateful to have had the years of practice and training where I've learned some of these things I speak about in myself. Sometimes I don't really know how people can even get through great difficulties

without having some inner practices. It's so much harder. And I also just feel grateful that we have a community together to remind one another. It's welcoming and revolutionary—who you really are.

There's a freedom and an invitation. The beautiful thing that the Buddha says when he speaks about freedom is this: If it were not possible to free the heart and mind amidst all the changing circumstances of the world, I would not teach you to do so. But just because it is possible—and possible for you—I offer these teachings.

You are sitting at the bedside of the world, the world of birth and death and joy and sorrow, and you're learning how to do it beautifully.

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