Basic Goodness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:54

Last night in her opening talk, Sharon said a great thing that one of her teachers told her: the Buddha's enlightenment solved his problem, and now it's up to us to solve our problem.

I thought I would talk a little about the first question that comes up: what actually is our problem? And then how does this practice help us to solve it? I don't claim to answer all of that in one talk, but we'll just begin the process, hopefully.

Actually, I think our problem is very simply put: we want to be happy and we don't know how. We think we know how, and that's the problem—because it doesn't work. Until we stop and really pay attention, we don't realize that it's not working. We don't even know what we're doing, never mind that it's not working or how.

So what our practice is about is stopping and taking a look at what's really going on, as opposed to what we think is going on. There can be a wide difference between those two things in any given moment.

It's said that one of the things that motivated the Buddha to teach, rather than just hang out in Nibbana for forty-five years, was that by looking through the world, he could see with his omniscient Buddha eye that everyone is united in wanting to be happy—but that we do just the things in pursuing our happiness that keep us spinning and suffering. The very things we do to be happy are the things that keep us lost in confusion. And so he taught out of great compassion.

We get so hooked into somehow trying to manipulate, control, and rearrange our environment—our outer environment, our inner environment—to manage experience in such a way that we'll finally hit that place of lasting happiness. And the cosmic joke, in a way, is that this very trying to manipulate keeps us from noticing the fact that basic peace and ease, basic goodness, as Chögyam Trungpa calls it, is actually available. It's who we are, here and now, in this moment, in every moment. We don't know how to notice it. We don't know how to recognize what's really true.

What we're actually running after, trying to find, is already here. But it's not what we think. We're looking for some big goodies, some final blast, some incredible bliss, some pleasant experience that never goes away. And when that doesn't happen, we don't remember to turn around and notice that peace. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, peace is available, happiness is available—please help yourself. But we keep going, "No thank you, I think I'll look over this way and see if it's somewhere else."

Trungpa's phrase is "rediscovering our basic goodness." That to me is really what our meditation practice is about—not to create some special state, not to become Olympic meditators, but to rediscover our basic

goodness, which is available in each and every moment of experience. So we've got to learn how to notice that, how to see it or hear it or feel it or be it.

What stands in the way, seemingly? Just think about today, because a day here is a microcosm of our life. Whatever tendencies of your mind are happening here, they didn't just arise for the first time today. I really will bet that for anybody. This is a microcosm of our life.

Have you had an experience today of being totally at ease, at peace, at one with whatever happened throughout the whole day? No. You might have had some moments of that, and that's really important to notice. But when you think about it in the normal way our mind thinks—well, what was in the way today? Why wasn't I happy? What was the problem?—there's a whole variety of things. I was sleepy. My knees hurt. I kept having this unpleasant memory. It's not nearly as nice as it was two days ago. I should have come to another retreat because I have all this unfinished business at home. Or I had a headache. Or I didn't bring the right pillow. Whatever it happens to be.

We really get involved in thinking that these particular things are our problem, whether it's an internal experience of pain or sleepiness or boredom or restlessness, or the externals—the person sitting next to me is the wrong person to be sitting next to me, whatever it happens to be.

This is where we get so lost. We get so entranced by our reactions to experience that we mistake the reactions for what's real. We pay so much attention to our reactions that we don't know how to turn our attention back to simply rest at ease in whatever's arising.

At the root, one of the deep patterns underlying this—Sharon mentioned it last night, and I want to talk about it a little—is that deep misunderstanding that we often don't even recognize: that pleasant experience is what's going to give us happiness, that unpleasant experience is what's causing our suffering and is bad or a mistake, and that neutral experience—we don't even know what's happening, so we make something up. The thing is, we make something up whether there's pleasant or unpleasant experience too. We're making up the stories about what's happening continually. And when we don't recognize it...

What we can end up doing—in a day here or in our lives—is spending our life chasing after pleasant experience: a pleasant sight, a pleasant sound, a pleasant thought, a pleasant emotion. Running away, doing everything we can to avoid or change or get rid of the unpleasant.

And certainly, if we have a choice, no one here is going to say, "I think I will take restlessness and a pain in the knee as opposed to bliss, because I really don't care—I can't tell the difference." We're not talking about moving in that direction. But if you *need* the bliss to be happy, and if you can't have sleepiness and find peace, then we're in big trouble. Because meditation doesn't mean that we get more and more pleasant experiences, like we're heading to some dreamland of constant pleasure and no more unpleasantness and no more boredom.

But isn't it easy to see how we slip into evaluating our experience in this way? And in our life, without

realizing it, this is what can guide so many of our choices, our decisions. With all good intention, really trying to be happy, really trying to do what seems most important in life, we can end up so far from where we ever meant to be, or what we ever thought was important, and not quite understand how we got there.

This really moved me. It was an interview with Marlon Brando in a German magazine, which a friend translated for me. He says, "I was never a good father or a good husband. I was always busy with my own life. Now I'm a guilty old man who feels ashamed of his life. Besides food, there is nothing else in the world for me. That's the only thing in my life. I know this eating will kill me, but I just can't stop."

It's intense. This was a couple years ago, so change is possible—I actually read he was doing better somewhere. But that's an extreme of a state we can all get into by pursuing what we think is the best, while underlying it is the tendency to go after what is pleasant. Whether it's more money, a better career, or having people think well of us so we have a nice feeling about ourselves—whatever it is. Always looking for some reality other than this one in order to make things okay, in order to find ease, in order to find peace.

And we bring that tendency here, of course. In doing that, if we don't stop to notice it, we're missing the truth. We're missing the secret. The secret of happiness, of our meditation, of happiness today in this next sitting, is that it really doesn't matter what's happening.

See if you believe that.

It really doesn't matter whether you're sleepy or whether you're really concentrated. You believe that? It really doesn't matter. But when we get lost in our reactions instead of being fully open-hearted and lovingly present with what is, that open-hearted connection allows any aspect of our experience to be the avenue in to re-recognizing our basic goodness—because it's always here. The only thing we have to do to recognize it is be fully present, awake, and non-judging in whatever's arising. The moment we're off into wanting something else, into pushing away experience, into getting lost in interpretation and extrapolation, what that's doing is just taking us out of being awake and present. And so we just can't recognize what's always here—that basic ease.

Here is an example of how ease, this natural peace, is available. It's a very simple example of being caught in a traffic jam.

I remember one time I was on the way to the Boston airport early in the morning to catch a flight to Thailand or somewhere—some flight where you have to make connections and go overseas. It was real early, like six in the morning, and if you know Boston at all, to get to the airport you can come from all directions, but you end up funneling through this one tunnel. About ten different routes come down with not much form or structure into two lines going through this one tunnel.

We were flying along at six in the morning, and just before we were coming off the highway onto the exit—which still is about a mile down and around to get to the tunnel—everything stopped dead, just as

we got into the line to get off. It's the kind of place where there's nowhere to go. It stopped dead. It's not like there was another route to take, because you have to go through that tunnel unless you have an extra hour to go back around from the north, which we didn't.

It was really interesting to watch my mind, which of course didn't say, "Oh well, let's just rest in natural great peace here until the traffic starts again." That's not our first usual reaction, although it can become that. I fretted. I pretended that my first reaction was okay: "Oh yes, it's fine. Let's just hang out. It's nice." And underneath: "Let's go, let's go, let's go. It's been twenty minutes now. I'm going to miss the flight."

Until the point when I actually consciously took my attention and turned it around onto my experience and met it fully. Oh—anxiety, tightness. Pretense of being okay. But let me feel what's really going on. And in that willingness—this is our mindfulness practice—to simply be fully present with that, without making a story, without projecting into the future, just feeling that anxiety without adding to it: "Oh, okay. It's just what it is." It stops defining our experience, and we can recognize the vastness of ease of heart that is always accessible.

It's like: okay, the worst thing that can happen is I miss the flight. I mean, in the big scheme of things, so what? I don't know any flight that is that life-and-death—that I've ever taken—although they all feel that way. And when I really saw that...

The situation didn't change, but the sense of really resting at ease, of reconnecting with natural peace, was absolutely palpable.

I'm not saying that's a steady state. The very next moment, it's easy to lose it again because we're so inured to getting lost in our reactions. So our practice is simply to recognize the difference between the reactions and what's actually going on, and just rest in what's going on. In that, peace is always available. Learning to trust this is what allows us to open fully into experience, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

There's a passage from a Tibetan text that speaks to this natural peace:

Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that it is never impaired or improved in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very first. How amazing that it is liberated by just resting at ease in whatever happens.

I love that last line: resting at ease in whatever happens. Participatory in whatever happens, not standing five feet away. That's our challenge. That's our practice.

When we recognize this even for a moment, there's the potential of finding our true refuge, our true home, once again—even if only for a moment—within the headache, within the back pain, within the fear. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, our capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love is our Buddha nature, and

it's always here. Or as the Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging."

That moment of recognizing our basic goodness—we recognize it because the heart is not clinging to wanting things to be other. And we're awake. You have to be awake. You can't be totally zoned out and non-clinging. You have to be really awake and connected. That's the undercurrent. So we're learning both of these: how to be awake and how to recognize that quality of non-clinging.

So how do we get so sidetracked? Why don't we recognize this deep habit? As I said, it's really around being so caught in our reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral that we don't even see that we're evaluating all experience through that filter.

There's a wonderful sutta from the Buddha that I really like because it explains what keeps our suffering going. It's called the Two Darts—like arrows, two darts. Someone is asking him, essentially, what's the difference between an awakened being and ordinary beings? His words for ordinary people is "an untaught worldling." That's us. We're getting a little taught, but we're worldlings anyway.

He says that we experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. And an awakened person experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. So what's the difference? It's really interesting to hear that, because somewhere in the back of our minds, don't we think that the Buddha didn't have problems? He didn't have pain. You transcend that.

But he said the difference is this: when an untaught worldling experiences a painful bodily feeling, a painful sensation, he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Thus he experiences two kinds of unpleasant feeling—unpleasant bodily feeling and unpleasant mental feeling.

It's very basic, but so true. He says it's as if a person were hit by a dart, pierced by an arrow, and following that first piercing, he is hit by a second arrow. That person experiences pain caused by two arrows. And that's what we do. In a similar way, when we have a painful or unpleasant feeling—physical, mental, or emotional—we add to it by sticking ourselves with another arrow. And then of course we judge ourselves for that, so we stick ourselves with yet another arrow. He only mentioned two, but we can really go on and on down that road.

Being touched by that painful feeling, he resents it. And because we resent the unpleasant, we go looking for something pleasant. We get caught in lusting after some pleasant experience to escape the unpleasant one, and that becomes our pattern of mind.

When an awakened person is touched by a painful feeling, he experiences a painful feeling—that's it. When he experiences a pleasant feeling, he experiences a pleasant feeling—that's it.

It's so simple we can't stand it. So we're hit by one dart and we don't add another one to it. That's the

difference. That's really the difference. It's not so complicated, but it's not easy.

So our practice isn't to say, "Okay, from now on, no more reactivity." That's already sticking yourself with a dart. Our practice is to learn how to see how this is happening. And it becomes fascinating rather than blameworthy. Like, "Wow, that's amazing. I can't just hear an unpleasant sound. I've got to bring in my past, my future, everything that's going to happen, what's wrong with all the other people here, and get into a complete knot of pain and aversion and everything else that goes back to my early childhood." We laugh, but we do it, and it's immense suffering. We're not choosing to do it, God knows. But it really helps to begin to see what's actually happening here.

A good example: a few years ago someone told me this in an interview. It was after quite some days of the retreat, and she said—it's always nice when you hear the story after it's been worked through because you really see the power of understanding what's really happening to bring us back to peace. She said it was a metta retreat, actually, and she was starting to feel really concentrated, a lot of metta, and then she started to notice some ongoing noise in the hall, kind of a repetitive, ongoing noise. She didn't say what it was, but I actually surmised she was sitting in the front row, and if you get really quiet, you can hear this clock ticking. I think that's what it was, but she didn't say.

She said she went through days of so much anger and aversion. This sound was ruining her meditation. It was ruining her concentration. It was ruining her metta—implied but not said. She didn't go on, but I can certainly extrapolate all the things that would come out of that: "I can't believe the teachers are so insensitive as to have a clock that ticks. Don't they know how sensitive..." It just goes on and on, whatever your proclivity is.

And then one day she said she heard us say for about the ten millionth time, "When an experience arises, bring your kind and full attention to the bare sense experience itself. So hearing—bring your attention to hearing." So she said, "Oh, maybe I'll try that." Brought her experience right into the hearing, without holding back, without making a story, just meet it fully. And she said, "Oh, hearing. It's unpleasant." That was it. She said, "Oh! The sound wasn't disturbing my concentration. My mind was disturbing the concentration."

Or Ajahn Chah had a great line: when the sound arises, it doesn't disturb us. It's we who go out and disturb the sound. All that suffering—that's the second dart. That's the second arrow. It's all extra. Once we can learn how to bring wise attention to what's really going on, that's where the skill of our practice comes in. That's where we are developing here with mindfulness the tool of wise attention to help us see what's really happening.

It's often counterintuitive because, as I describe it a little more, you'll see—especially if something's unpleasant, the wise attention says, "Bring your full-hearted, no-holding-back awareness right into the experience, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant." And what we feel is our intuition saying, "Let me get as far away from this as possible." The thing is, that's not our intuition. That's our habit that says pleasant is

good and unpleasant is bad, and I have to somehow control this—which we can't.

So it's a little counterintuitive, but it's radical. It's a radical change because as soon as we give up fighting and controlling and manipulating, just drop into that—"Oh, hearing. Unpleasant."—I mean, it doesn't work like a charm every time because we have to be really wholehearted and awake. But when we are, there's that moment when it all just vanishes and there's hearing and unpleasant and that's it. Natural great peace. Our basic goodness.

So our path of wakefulness and compassion to ourselves and others is not about cultivating some really far out, incredible state of mind and heart that's going to last us for the rest of our life. It's transforming our life by transforming how we relate to our life. And the little things that happen here are the stuff of our whole life. It's just in this little microcosm.

No amount of meditation is going to stop illness, old age, disease, and death. It's not going to stop separation and loss. No amount of meditation is going to make everything in the world hunky-dory, get rid of injustice and poverty. It just doesn't happen.

But what meditation does, what mindfulness practice does, is give us the tools to see clearly, to meet our experience wholeheartedly, and to come out of a life of reactivity, dissatisfaction, and fear into a life of wholehearted connectedness—to ourselves, to others. It offers us a life that allows us to trust in the true potential of resting at ease in whatever arises, rather than thinking we have to manipulate and control and keep everything at bay. Because that is such a difficult and tension-producing state.

Our basic tool is mindfulness—wise attention. Learning how to pay attention and what to pay attention to. How do we pay attention in a way that keeps us coming back to clear knowing, to clear seeing, to openheartedness? How do we meet this moment with balanced awareness, as Sylvia said this morning? That's really what mindfulness and wise attention are about.

This word, wise attention—the Pali word for it (Pali being the language the first Buddhist texts were written in) is *yoniso manasikara*. You don't have to remember that, but I'm mentioning it because I was talking to Andy Olenski, the executive director of the study center. He's a Pali scholar—if you didn't know, he's our resident Pali scholar, so we always go to him for his very insightful translations and history. I asked him how he translates *yoniso manasikara*, and his answer is very interesting.

The word *yoniso* comes from the Pali word for womb. So he translates it as womb-like—nurturing, protecting. *Mana* is mind, and *kara* is from the same root as *kamma,* which means action. Taken all together, he puts it as "an active quality of mind that is nurturing and supporting." I love that.

If you can get a sense—not think about it, but get a sense—of bringing attention to any experience with that quality... It's active; you really connect with what's happening, but in a way that's nurturing and supporting, supportive of being fully present with an open heart. That's the quality of mindfulness: an active quality of mind that meets the experience fully, but in a way that is nurturing, non-judging,

non-reactive—that supports our open-hearted presence.

Hopefully this isn't just intellectual, because it's so important. You can take the words in, but then really play with that quality of attention in your experience—in the attention you bring to the breath, the attention you bring to your steps in walking, or as we open up to physical sensation, emotions, whatever is arising. This quality of nurturing, active attention.

This quality has a couple of aspects that help us really be with the experience rather than our interpretation of it. The first aspect we call bare attention. That's really seeing the difference between a sound and all the mental extrapolations that go on with it. This seems obvious when we're sitting here talking about it and we're not caught up in something. But really watch, with your breath, the difference between bringing that full, open-hearted attention to the bare experience of sensation without confusing it with the interpretations and stories we tell about it. It's very interesting to begin to see the difference.

It's like bringing a sense of wonder, of freshness, no preconceptions. Someone sent me this birthday card last year—I don't know if you can see it. It's a picture of a little baby with wide eyes and an open mouth, like, "Wow, what's that?" That's the kind of attention. Not, "Ah, another breath." But rather, "Oh, this breath!" It's tight, it's controlling, I can't really get it deep—and then the story begins: it really shows what a shallow person I am, it's all tight... But no. It's just sensation. Wow, what's that sensation?

And not, "Now it's deep. It's flowing like a waterfall. I'm connecting with all the molecules of air in the universe. This really shows my sense of oneness, and it's good. I've been doing my yoga and it's really bearing fruit." No—it's just sensation. There's just pressure, or coolness, or tingling.

And then we often get into the neutral territory, where it's like, "That's not very interesting. I've got to spend all day with in and out, in and out, pressure, tingling, coolness. Where's the fruit of this? I didn't come here for that."

Pressure, tingling, coolness. Pressure, tingling, coolness. But each time it's a fresh pressure, a fresh experience. It's not like last time it was pressure, tingling, coolness, so now I know this next time it's going to be pressure, tingling, coolness. Just meet it with this freshness, this bare attention, and in that moment, what's the problem? Whether it's tight, whether it's loose, whether it's pressure, whether it's tingling—it doesn't matter. That quality of open-hearted attention is all we need. In that quality, we are able to recognize again our basic goodness, open to discover rather than to judge.

And really, for those of you whether you've been on the metta retreat or not, perhaps you can get a sense of how this quality of mindful attention is actually imbued with metta. Metta has the qualities of inclusiveness, non-reactivity, real connectedness, real kindness, non-judging. That's the way we meet each experience—non-manipulating and inclusive.

This brings us to the next aspect: meeting the bare sense experience itself without discriminating. As Sylvia said this morning, this is where the instructions start to sound paradoxical, because we're saying

just come back to the breath. And in this, that is a discrimination. It's saying, for right now, I'm choosing the breath as more important to pay attention to than anything else. But if you can see that this is a skillful means only, meant to bring in a steadiness of focus, as she said this morning, so we can then open to everything else—don't get into the habit of thinking somehow the breath is a superior experience to knee pain. It's not. But we need to develop some steadiness of attention to be able to open to knee pain or bliss or boredom or excitement, to be fully present with the bare experience and able to tell the difference between it and our reactions. So that's why we need some steadiness of mind. But in this quality of open-hearted, wise attention, it's also non-discriminating.

As you'll see when the instructions go on, we're with the breathing, and a knee pain arises. We don't say, "Knee pain—I don't want to really be with that. I think I'll just stay with the breath until something nice comes along." It's not like, "Well, I've seen that knee pain before. I know all about it, so I don't really need to investigate it. I think I'll just hang out here in the breath." You see, our discrimination will generally come from this sense of going to what we like and avoiding what we don't like. Or if you have a perverse mind that's drawn by the unpleasant, the reverse—going to what we don't like and ignoring what's pleasant because it's somehow a mistake. Either one, it doesn't matter; one's not better than the other. But the quality of open-hearted mindful attention doesn't discriminate. Something arises, fine—meet it fully, no judging. It goes away, fine—it's gone away.

Now, can you imagine that with no matter what comes up? No matter what? No exceptions. There are no exceptions. Some great, incredible meditation experience is not an exception. Some really awful pain, some really yucky emotion is not an exception. Whatever arises, we learn how to meet it just as it is in this moment—open-hearted, no judging—notice what it does, notice the reactions of mind without believing them, let it go when it goes.

It's quite a challenge. We're just not used to it. We're afraid of the difficult. We get really lost in the pleasant, of course. That's what we do. And so a lot of the form of the practice and the concentration is to help us cut through these patterns of discriminating and just rest at ease in whatever arises. Just what presents itself.

This cutting through our basic habit is one of the reasons I feel retreats can be so uncomfortable. You know how it is to break a habit—even though the habit itself is engendering suffering, it's comfortable, it's familiar. And quite a few people have said in groups that in moving into some experience or some space that's unfamiliar, even though in itself it's not particularly unpleasant, just the unfamiliarity brings up a real thrill of fear. And that fear in itself is interpreted as, "Oh, something's wrong. I better fix this"—because that's how we respond to fear. So a lot of the way the retreat is structured, the way we keep saying just meet what's happening, is breaking our habit of avoiding the unpleasant by moving into it. It's breaking our habit of holding on to the pleasant by allowing it to go away. And at times that's very uncomfortable. But that's okay.

So, bringing our full, gentle attention to the experience just as it is. You'll see with physical discomfort—that's a really good place. We haven't talked about it yet, but either tomorrow or the next day, that's where we'll go with the instructions in the morning. That's a great place to really watch and notice the difference between the bare experience, the physical discomfort, the sensations, and all the response and reaction of heart and mind around it.

And to see how intertwined they can get. To see how hard it can be to tell the difference. Because in my experience, as soon as I label something "pain," there's already a whole lot of baggage connected to the way I perceive that experience.

So when I have a sharp feeling in my knee, if I move my attention there and notice, "Oh, sharpness," that's one thing. If I move my attention there and think "pain," there's already a mental reaction of fear, of holding back, of judgment, just in the way I label it. You see how subtle it can get.

It's not about judging ourselves that this happens. It's more about using the discomfort—not to martyr yourself. In this practice, we're not glorifying discomfort either. I'll talk about the comfortable in a minute. It's both. But to be able to just move toward the discomfort and see if you can, just for a moment, touch it lovingly with attention, just as it is, free of preconceptions. It's not easy.

Pain in the shoulders translates as tension, which translates into the way I live my life and all the things I have in my job and the way I respond to myself and the way I hold back from other people and how shy I am—on and on and on—when it's just, you know, tightness or pressure.

I've experienced headaches since I was a teenager. From time to time, I get really debilitating headaches, not migraines, but the kind where I can't really function too well. I can sort of deal with other pain, but headaches—I always really hate them. They're such a veil on experience that I would just be lost in some kind of aversive snit whenever I had one. There was no sense of being able to see through it. It colored the whole world.

And just in the last few years, I've really been able to experience this differently. Some days when I'm teaching, I wake up with one of these throbbing headaches, and I watch my reaction: "Oh no, how am I going to get through the day? I have to talk to people all day. I have to be nice. I can't be snarly. I can't be in an aversive snit." And I watch myself projecting that headache and how I'm going to react and everything that's going to happen through the whole day—all within the first two minutes of the headache coming on.

We do that, don't we? You have a pain in your knee and you're already in the hospital having arthroscopic surgery, and it's only been two minutes. What are you going to do with the rest of the day? It can only go downhill from here.

To watch all of that, and then deliberately bring my attention to the actual sensations—it's so amazing because they're just what they are. "Oh yeah, this throbbing and tightness." And when I'm really present

with it, that's all it is. I pull back a little bit, and in comes: throbbing, tightness, "Oh my God, how am I going to get through the day?" Oh yes—and aversion and fear. Come back to the throbbing and the tightness.

Now, it's not magic. It doesn't make it go away. And a lot of times people get into evaluating. It kind of slips in: "If I'm really mindful properly, the unpleasant thing is going to go away." Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't. Eventually it always will, but not on our time frame. And that's not a way to evaluate the practice.

But I've really come to where I can have this throbbing headache and at the same time be in touch with basic goodness—with the fact of our basic okayness, no matter what's happening. We can really connect with that in ourselves. And we can use our little pains here to just experiment with how to do that, how to tell the difference between the second arrow and the simple, bare, unpleasant sensation.

So that's why when we say, "If you have a little unpleasant sensation, don't move that first second"—what you're really doing otherwise is depriving yourself of an opportunity to discover that peace is available. It's not about being macho. It's not about winning an Olympic gold medal in the longest sitting you do here or the slowest walking. It's not about that. It's about using whatever arises as our opportunity to touch basic goodness, through the avenue of opening into it just as it is, rather than getting lost in the second arrow and all our stories.

I just want to give an example of how we do the same thing with the pleasant, where we mistake the pleasant feeling—we get entranced by it. In fact, we get so entranced we often don't even notice there is any pleasant feeling, and we think the thing that is pleasant is the best thing that ever happened. We believe our happiness depends on holding on to that forever, because we don't know how to see what's really happening: a sense experience, pleasant, clinging to the pleasant, and thinking, "Now life is great."

This is a story from the Buddha's time that I really like. It shows this beautifully. The Buddha had an attendant for the last twenty-five years or so of his life named Ananda, who was a monk.

Apparently, he was a wonderful attendant and very loving—just very kind, very supportive of all the people who came to the Buddha for teaching, really trying to help them gain access to the Buddha. He was simply a kind person.

So in this story, Ananda was sent on a mission by the Buddha, and he passed by a well near a village. There he saw a young outcast woman. In India, they have these different castes, with the lowest caste being the untouchables. There were all these rules that you wouldn't take any food from an untouchable, you wouldn't go near them, and so forth.

Ananda saw her and asked her for a drink of water—it's permitted for monks to ask for water, though they can't ask for other things. And she said, "Oh monk, I am too humbly born to give you water to drink. Don't ask any service of me lest you be contaminated, for I am of low caste."

And Ananda said, "I'm not asking for your caste, I'm just asking for water."

Her heart leapt so joyfully. She gave Ananda water to drink, he thanked her, and went away. But she followed him at a distance. And she heard that Ananda was a disciple of the Buddha. So she went to the Buddha and said, "Oh Lord, help me and let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells, so that I may see him and minister unto him, because I love Ananda."

And you see what happened. The Blessed One—thus the Buddha—understood the emotions of her heart at once and said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you do not understand your own sentiments. It is not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice towards you, and practice it towards others."

You see the basic mistake that we always make. There was so much pleasure, so much happiness at his kindness, and immediately we make the leap from the pleasant sensation to the thing that engendered it. Now I have to have Ananda for the rest of my life because I feel so pleasant—because he took water from me!

And really, that's how we mess up our lives, isn't it? Somebody does something nice, and so I've got to have this person, I've got to have this thing, I've got to have this car, whatever—and I'll do anything to get it because it's going to make me happy for the rest of my life. And it's just pleasant feeling.

Which again, it's sort of like the breath—just tingling and pressure. "Oh, I like..." But it's a much better story, isn't it? "Ananda is so wonderful. Let me minister unto him. Let me follow him around." Pleasant feeling, you're saying? It's just pleasant feeling? I'm just attached to pleasant feeling? That doesn't make such a good story.

Are we willing to give up the stories in order to touch our peace? What's interesting is that a lot of the time, no, we're not. We'd much rather hold on to the story, even though it keeps us spinning. Running after the pleasant—the image that always comes to me is like a hamster on one of those hamster wheels. We're running, running, running. And the faster we go, the more dissatisfying our experience becomes, because we never get there. Even if we get something pleasant, sure, it's nice. No one's debating that. But it doesn't last. So then we have to run after something else, and something else. Run away from the unpleasant.

But sometimes we don't even know it's a story, or we do know but we can't quite put it down yet. So that's okay. That's why we practice. And that's the power of this aspect of mindfulness, or wise attention—okay, in this moment I can't put down the story, but now there's the next moment. And you don't have to think about it or figure it out. Just bring your attention to the bare experience that's happening, and everything else takes care of itself. You'll notice if it's pleasant or unpleasant, or you'll notice that there's a reaction, or you'll notice that there's suffering. Or you'll just be able to touch that breath—and there's no big bliss, there's no big story, it's just simply what it is. And in that, we can again rest at ease in whatever arises.

I think really the reason we don't recognize it so much is because it's so simple and so close and so present—just this total awareness, total presence—and we're looking for fireworks. Through these days, through moments, little moments when you're feeling really present and awake, there's no problem. But nothing special is going on.

You're having a cup of tea, or you're just feeling a breath, or just feeling your foot as you take a step, just lying down in bed, brushing your teeth, whatever it is—but one of those moments where you're really exquisitely present, and that's all. Let it in. Learn to begin to recognize it, because these are the intimations, these are the guideposts that will bring us more deeply to trust and rest in the peace that can be available when we stop manipulating and fighting and trying to control.

The Dalai Lama said, "Why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it is the only place where you will know love." It's the only place where we will know love. It's the only place where we can awaken to the true potential for peace and ease, no matter what's happening.

So that's our practice.

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