Meeting Aversion With Kindness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:04:20

Tonight I want to pick up where Sylvia left off last night, which you may or may not remember. She was beginning to talk about the state of aversion or anger—being with that difficult state. Tonight I want to talk specifically about, in some detail, investigating together these various states of heart and mind that get lumped together under the big title of aversion.

The word in Pali—I like the Pali word just because it's broader and doesn't have all the same limiting connotations we have on aversion in English—the Pali word is *dosa*, and it covers a wide range of mental states which have in common what we would call aversion, pulling back from the experience. So I'll just read you a few of them: hatred, aversion, ill will, irritation, boredom, resistance, denial, impatience, annoyance, anger, rage, guilt, dislike, depression, sorrow, regret, violence, aggression, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror, self-judging, self-hatred. That's not the whole list, I'm sure. But it's amazing, isn't it? What a range. And you can imagine, you can feel the underlying similarity.

What's very important in exploring this aspect of our experience is that we hold it in the larger context of the non-deluded heart and mind, that we explore these states from the understanding of truth rather than from the perspective of identification and self-referencing. One of the great difficulties many of us have in really understanding these states of heart and mind and seeing for ourselves how they continue our suffering is that we get so easily identified with them. By even acknowledging their presence, we already feel ten times worse about ourselves just because they're there. And so, of course, we don't even want to look at them. And we just get further and further from the truth.

I think it's really important as we begin looking carefully, exploring, to have a willingness to explore these experiences when they arise for you, to see that it's not personal. It's not who I am. It's not who you are. Aversion and any of these states arise due to habitual conditioning. If we can see that and not identify so strongly, then we can begin to discover how aversion functions to obstruct our connectedness to inner peace, our connectedness to wholeness, to integrity of being, how it obstructs joy and connectedness.

Aversion arises due to lawful conditionings, the root conditioning being ignorance. Aversion arises because we do not know things, we do not know ourselves in their true nature in the moment that aversion arises. We're not understanding or seeing clearly. Because of that not seeing clearly, aversion comes.

The first thing that I think we don't understand fully in a moment when we get lost in any of these states of aversion is actually the First Noble Truth—that all of our struggle with these states of anger, fear, ill will, self-judgment basically stem from not fully opening to and integrating what the Buddha stated: there

is unsatisfactoriness in this life, in this mind and body. It's not all unsatisfactory, luckily. But we think it shouldn't be any unsatisfactory. And it's not just individually one or two of us who have that impression while everybody else is clued in to how things are. Really broadly—personally, in our families, in our society—our learned response to sickness, old age, disease, being separated from those we love or from what we want, not getting what we want, having to hang out with what we don't want.

I must say putting 150 people together in a room all day is a great way to begin exploring what it's like to be together with what you don't want and to be separated from what you want. You're sitting here, and you can either be exploring the truth of the First Noble Truth, or we can be going with our normal habits: "This isn't happening; if I don't pay attention, it won't keep happening." Or "It's a mistake that it's happening, and if I get angry enough or figure out the right thing, I can fix it." Or "It's my fault that it's happening because I'm a loser or I'm not spiritual enough." When suffering comes up—and it's not just sitting here, but when you're sick, when something really hard happens in your life—it's really easy to either deny or to turn it inward into some kind of self-blame or self-judgment. In big things and little things.

Society seems to hold, underlying our relationship to the First Noble Truth, the unspoken assumption that if we get it right, suffering's going to stop. Isn't that really it, if you're honest with yourself? Don't you think if you practice right, nothing unpleasant's going to happen anymore? I catch myself in that all the time. And so the unpleasant experience itself—now not the extra suffering of hating and judging, but the unpleasant experience itself—becomes a sign that there's something wrong with us or something wrong with the world.

When we're not deeply understanding the First Noble Truth, we miss that no matter how well we understand the nature of things, no matter how good we are, sometimes bad things happen. That's just the way it is. Aversion arises in the first place because in that moment we're confronted with something unpleasant and there's that underlying tendency: if I can get away from it, everything will be okay; if I can deny it, everything will be okay. Of course, deeply somewhere, we know that's not true. It's just that we don't really know how to meet unpleasant experience wholeheartedly, openheartedly, with kind awareness, so that in that moment, that unpleasant experience can be our access to freedom.

It doesn't have to only be pleasant. But we really don't know how to do it.

And yet somewhere in us, I feel—both personally and culturally—that ability to be open-hearted and courageous in the face of suffering inspires us enormously. Doesn't it? For me, all through history, the writers I'm drawn to, the historical figures I'm drawn to, are most often people who have in some way or other been able to be in the midst of suffering I couldn't even begin to comprehend from my life, and still had the greatness of heart to be present, to be a courageous witness for society in the midst of the suffering, to be open to it without—in fact, not only without losing the beauty, but to see that the suffering, the opening to suffering itself, is our access to truth.

I think it was Jack who was quoting Martin Luther King the other night, just as an example. Incredibly inspiring. Or this woman I've read before, Etty Hillesum, who was in the concentration camps in World War II—a Dutch woman who just naturally had this ability. She wrote diaries; she died in the concentration camps. And I think it touches us so deeply because it awakens that potential in ourselves.

She says: "It is possible to suffer with dignity and without. Most of us in the West don't understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair. God knows it's only too easy to understand why. I'm in Poland every day on the battlefields, if that's what one can call them. I often see visions of poisonous green smoke. I am with the hungry, with the ill-treated, and the dying every day. But I am also with the jasmine and with that piece of sky beyond my window. There's room for everything in a single life. I sometimes bow my head under the great burden that weighs down on me. But even as I bow my head, I also feel the need, almost mechanically, to fold my hands. And so I can sit for hours and know everything and bear everything and grow stronger in the bearing of it. And at the same time, feel sure that life is beautiful and worth living and meaningful."

Somewhere, I just really trust that even if we don't know it consciously, we know that potential for such open-hearted presence in the face of seemingly unbearable suffering and conflict is the point of real liberation of heart, the point of real freedom. None of you would be sitting here hours on end if somewhere there wasn't that understanding.

But I think it's really easy for us to forget. And in the forgetting, we come back into our old habits, which is that if I can get away from this unpleasant thing, then I'll really be happy. And then we get caught in the cycle of judging when the natural habit of aversion comes up.

So we have to begin by understanding: our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. Certainly it looks as though I am separate from other people and all other phenomena. As long as we think we're separate, we're going to suffer. We feel we have to defend ourselves. We have to find something in the world that will make us happy.

The response of aversion to what is unpleasant arises exactly from this misconception that I'm separate, that somehow I can hold myself apart from this difficult experience. We don't think it out so clearly, but that's what's going on. And in fact, what happens is that in trying to hold ourselves separate, in trying to achieve happiness that way, we're actually creating the sense of separation—that needing to defend, that fear that I might have to be united with what is difficult. So it's a cycle. From the misconception of thinking we are separate, we act in a way that continues the experience of separation and loneliness and alienation.

The Buddha said that lust—meaning just that thirst, that driven desire—hate, and delusion are each a matter of measurement. What does he mean by that? Lust or hate or delusion, in the moment it's arising in the mind or heart, imposes a sense of limitation, a sense of restriction to the heart and mind, when in

actuality the heart, the mind, is limitless, boundless.

Explore this in your time here. The desert is a great way to approach that sense of the limitless heart and mind, the boundless, infinitely spacious heart and mind. If you're just walking in the desert, simply present—nothing special—lifting the foot, seeing the cholla, feeling the breath, smelling whatever, just a step, notice that in that there isn't a sense of limitation or restriction. You're not necessarily thinking, "Oh, incredible, the heart and mind is limitless, boundless." But if you were to bring in your attention, that would be the experience. And the moment that wanting something comes up, or not liking something comes up, there's a sense of limits, of walls, of restrictions coming in.

So our work is learning to understand, not to hate aversion or fear or anger—which is, I think, what we often fall into—but to really be willing to meet it wholeheartedly so that we can understand the truth of who we are. And this requires, I think, first an acceptance of the fact of any of these forms of aversion when they arise in our experience. I don't know if I can overemphasize this, because we say this all the time, but it's really rather hard to do.

I know for myself, in the last few years there was a period when something in my patterning shifted, and I really started to accept the fact that aversion frequently arises in my mind—that it's a very strongly ingrained habit and not who I was. It got to be actually very amusing. I amuse myself a lot with the way aversive thoughts come up.

I don't know if I amuse anyone else with it—that's another thing entirely—but to be able to actually be okay with these states when they come up in your experience... and that doesn't mean acting on them. I'm talking about just really seeing and being okay with these states when they arise. It's amazingly freeing because we're no longer locked in this endless cycle of fighting.

To do this, we need the tools of mindfulness, the tools of acceptance, the willingness to do just the opposite of what everything in us is screaming we need to do. Instead of turning away from the unpleasantness, instead of turning away from our fear and anger, instead of trying to pretend we don't feel it or act it out, we just turn fully into it, knowing that there is the place of peace and rest.

It's counterintuitive and it's a little hard to do. A good friend of mine was telling me how—she's kind of a big lady—her two grown sons, when they go somewhere with big waves at a beach, are always trying to tell her that when a huge wave is coming, you need to turn around and just dive right into it. You just go right under it, no problem. And intellectually, she said, "I know this, but I've only ever been able to do it once. Every other time, as soon as I see it coming, I just turn and run and it clobbers me—just rolls me all over. And they're screaming, 'Dive into it! Dive into it!' I just can't do it."

It's sort of like that. We turn and run and we're clobbered. Or we just say, "No, this isn't happening. It's not coming. I'll just sit here and it'll go away"—and wham. The next thing we know, what started as a minor irritation turns into some kind of murderous rage and we don't know how it happened.

So it begins by really accepting that in our normal state—as the Buddha said, we uneducated worldlings, we normal not-completely-awakened beings—for us, aversion, fear, aggression, irritation, that response to the unpleasant, it's part of life. It's part of our conditioning, it's part of the conditioning of every culture. And by denying it or hating ourselves for it, we're just adding more fear and aversion on top of it.

Sometimes in spiritual practice, I find it's easy to use the ideals against ourselves. You know that, for instance, freedom means the complete uprooting of greed, hatred, and delusion. And then subtly, every time greed or hatred arises, there's this subtle thing in the background: "I'm blowing it. If I were really spiritual, I wouldn't be having this reaction now." And it's really hard then to let it in.

Just as an experiment, I want to share something from Pema Chödrön, something I often read because I find it very inspiring. Just listen a minute. She talks about how every day we could think about the aggression all over the world. All over the world, everybody always strikes out at the enemy and the pain escalates forever. Every day we could reflect on this and ask ourselves, "Am I going to add to the aggression in the world?" Every day, at the moment when things get edgy, we can just ask ourselves, "Am I going to practice peace, or am I going to war?"

Now in one way I find that a wonderful and really helpful idea—when I have enough awareness that I notice I'm edgy, I notice aggression is about to come up, and I have a choice. It's a wonderful reflection: do I want to add to the aggression in the world?

But I don't know—did any of you have a feeling of, "Gee, so here today I was so furious at that person sitting nearby doing that, and all I was doing was adding to the aggression in the world. That isn't why I came here. It's another proof that by being here and allowing these thoughts to come up, I'm adding to the aggression in the world. I'm creating bad karma. I'm a bad person."

It's not so easy to just sit there and feel the shoot of aversion and say, "Oh yeah, that's aversion. That's anger. That's fear." So we have to begin by deeply accepting that it's a part of life. Although every culture deals with it differently, most of the ways we deal with it are coping mechanisms—keeping the aggression kind of under the rug, ways to contain it within the culture. I think that's a good idea; it's better that we should cope with it than just all run amok. But there's also the potential for understanding it. And the understanding is what liberates us, what frees our heart from the grip of fear and aversion.

So we have to start first by really looking at it. I just read this in the newspaper, from Tokyo:

"My intention, honest, was not to scar these Japanese kids for life. I just wanted to give them a fun game to play. It was the fifth birthday party last year for my son Gregory, and he had invited all his Japanese friends over from the Tokyo kindergarten that he attended. My wife and I explained the rules of musical chairs, and we started the music. It was not so awful for the Japanese boys. They managed to fight for seats, albeit a bit lamely, but the girls were at sea. The first time I stopped the music, Gregory's five-year-old girlfriend, Chitose-chan, was next to him right in front of a chair, but she stood politely and

waited for him to be seated first. So Gregory scrambled into her seat, and Chitose-chan beamed proudly at her own good manners. Then I walked over and told her she had just lost the game. She gazed up at me, her eyes full of shocked disbelief, looking like Bambi might after a discussion of venison burgers."

"You mean I lose because I'm polite?" Cheetos-chan's eyes asked. "You mean the point of the game is to be rude?"

It's true. I guess that is the point. And he just goes on to reflect about the difference between the values of American and Japanese culture. In Japan, he asks, how else could a country the size of California with 125 million people packed into it—that's half of the U.S. in California—how else could they maintain it?

So he says, maybe that's one reason that Japan has few armed robbers, but also so few entrepreneurs. The American emphasis on winning may help explain why the United States consistently racks up Olympic gold medals, but also why its hockey players trashed their rooms in Nagano when they lost.

But every culture—it comes out in here at the end. Little Cheetos-chan, while she may be polite, shortly after the game of musical chairs, she and her friend Naoko-chan got into an argument over a party favor. Cheetos-chan slugged Naoko-chan in the mouth and grabbed the toy.

It's there, you know. It's there. It comes out one way or the other, however our culture tries to contain it. So we need the culture, but the point of resting at ease is that we really understand and can be there in the middle of losing the toy, or losing the game, or losing our best friend. And we can be there in that uncertainty and not lose our peace.

So let's begin by actually exploring the experience of any of these forms of aversion when they arise. Whenever you notice a moment of aversion, irritation, or fear, in the moment of its arising, it's always arising as a response to one of the six sense experiences that's happening here and now. We might not recognize it, but there's an unpleasant sound and a moment of irritation, or maybe there's an unpleasant memory and a stab of fear, or an unpleasant physical sensation and a moment of irritation or anger or terror. Even when we're furious at something that happened ten years ago, it was still triggered by a sense experience arising in this moment. The memory of ten years ago is a thought arising in this moment.

We of course won't always be able to see that, but one of the great things about these retreats is you can take the little things and explore how it works, because it works just the same in the big things.

So in that moment of an unpleasant sound arising and we don't like it, there's aversion or irritation or anger—what's your actual experience? Tune into the reactive experience. How does it function? It's as if internally what I feel—but look for yourself—it's almost physical, as all the attention, the mind, the heart, almost physically shrinks back away from that experience. It really makes a gap. We don't want to touch it. We don't want to recognize it. We don't want to know it. Really trying to hold ourselves separate.

And into that gap, because wherever there's a gap the attention isn't connected, it's as if somehow that

leaves room for all kinds of really fascinating stuff to come up. And since you're seeing it through the filter of aversion at that moment, what will come up is all the stories about it, the interpretations, more reaction, maybe self-judgment, and a whole cycle. What's actually happening is that we don't really know what the particular experience is that's triggering it, because we're not connected with our attention.

I mean, we give this instruction all the time: something simple and repetitive like a sound in the hall that you can keep going back to. When you find your enormous reaction, there's thoughts and feelings and emotions and they're spinning and they just seem to cycle more and more until pretty soon that person who's making that noise is somewhere equivalent to the great tyrants of the world as far as their insensitivity and the amount of suffering that they're creating. We just project everything into them, followed by a deep sense of unworthiness for having had such a horrible thought. And then we turn the whole mess back on ourselves. And we never actually meet the sound, which is just a poor little sound arising, an experience not really doing anything—and we're gone.

This can go on for hours, days, weeks. What's really interesting to observe about the quality of both anger and fear—those are sort of the two sides of aversion—is how in one moment of its arising, the physiological effects are really quite strong. Dan Goleman talks about this in his book *Emotional Intelligence*. If you have a moment of not liking something, of anger, you really feel it in your body. In fact, if you watch over time, it leaves a real residue. Even when your mind doesn't feel angry anymore, the body is still holding on to it, still buzzing.

And it leaves this real residue. What happens is the residue itself is unpleasant. And so before it's quite gone away, even though the mind might be calm again, the next unpleasant thing that arises, just the slightest aversion triggers that residue that didn't really go away. And so the physical reaction is even stronger. It can be that what starts as a very mild irritation, but we don't really bring awareness to it, ends up so furious—where just some little thing triggers you to such an extent that you explode and you're really surprised. Why did that happen?

Because we didn't really notice the residue, the physical residue building. So without our mindfulness, it's really important to see how this becomes a self-perpetuating cycle.

The first line of understanding how aversion works is this: if it's something relatively mild, see if you can notice what sense experience is triggering the aversion or fear right now. And then you dive into the wave. You bring your attention right into that experience instead of trying to get away from it. This is our place of clear seeing and peace. Everything in you will say, "No, no, no." But if you really dive in, it's like, "Oh, hearing." You can do it with this buzz in the room. When it starts to bug you, instead of moving away and pretending it doesn't happen, go into it. It's just a buzz. We can do this all the time.

Sometimes what happens is this—when Sylvia talked about a kind of grumpy mind, you know, and you're just going on all day grumbling about everything. Every little thing that comes into experience, every sight, every person, you just have some really negative reaction. And you can't really figure out why

psychologically. You don't know what's going on.

This happens to me often. I've noticed on retreat, one time I was doing walking meditation and I felt really present. I was noticing all the mental experience which was moving from mildly unpleasant to extreme self-judging to running through a litany of everything wrong I ever did to anybody back to the third grade. And suddenly I kind of pulled back and said, "What's going on here?" And I noticed I wasn't paying any attention to my physical experience. When I tuned in physically, there was a really mild pain in my toe—really mild—but not noticing it. Every time I took a step, I was just pushing it slightly out of the range of awareness. And so there was a slight aversion, a pulling away. Denial is a form of aversion. And through that veil of aversion, all the thoughts that were arising were taking that color and turning into self-judgment.

I notice this a lot when I'm tired. I used to get really annoyed and cranky and irritable at everything when tired. It took me years to figure out that if I turn my attention to my body, it's really uncomfortable when I'm tired. It doesn't feel good. All I have to do is notice that. "Oh yes, unpleasant." And that's all that's happening. But because it's something going on sort of subliminally all day, whenever we move away from it and get a little off balance, a little spaced out, the aversion comes in. We don't notice it and we get involved in our reactions to something else.

A friend of mine told me once after I was talking about this, "Yeah, I tuned in. I'd been really in a nasty mood and I saw that my sweatshirt was a little too tight." And that's all that was going on. He had worked up all these stories all day and his sweatshirt was a little tight.

So sometimes when you find yourself getting into a state and you don't notice anything obvious, just open up a little bit. What's happening now? Just tune in. It can be so minor. And without our awareness of it, it can turn into a really big thing.

And then, of course, there are plenty of times when either the anger, the aversion, or the fear is not minor. It doesn't just get triggered from some little sound—or whatever triggers it, forget it, you're never going to know—because it comes rushing up in a huge wave of emotion. Sometimes that's the hardest for us to really accept, to be willing to be with. There's this sense of, "I've been going along really well, quite mindful, quite aware, cultivating metta, and suddenly from nowhere there's this wave of anger or self-loathing or aggression." Sometimes it's really hard to just accept that as another impersonal cloud.

So when it's strong like that, it's helpful just to move into the energy itself. The acceptance is so key because without it, we get back into that cycle of "this shouldn't be happening, I shouldn't be doing this," and pretty soon we're way down the road.

I'll give you a personal example from about forty-five minutes ago. Thanks to Franz, who I think deliberately planned this to give me something to talk about. He didn't do anything wrong. I was out walking in the desert just before this—really spacious, happy, open, peaceful. When we're no longer

suppressing things, I think this is really key, because a lot of the way we deal with fear and strong anger is to pretend we don't feel it. So it will come up in these rushes when we're really open and spacious and not in our normal mode of suppression.

I came back in this really open, happy space. We started having a discussion about making travel plans for the future—that's really a great discussion to get into just before giving a talk. Within two minutes—"I want to do it this way," "I want to do it this way"—well, not even two minutes, ten seconds, I went from being really open and spacious to this huge uprush. We could call it aversion, or anger, or "I'm not getting what I want," or "I might not get what I want in the future." And whoosh.

And it's really amazing to just watch that come up. Okay, so I didn't, the first second it came up, say, "Wow, isn't this amazing?" I have to acknowledge it took a couple of minutes. And in that couple of minutes, you could really see how—I mean, we both started like this, and then we both said, "Okay, cool it." Because you could really see: you don't need to do this now. Cool it.

But there's that residual burning, that ash going on in the body. So we say "cool it," but then, you know, we start off again. Okay, cool it. Then the other one: "Yeah, but in fact..." Okay, really cool it. And then the recognition of it.

I know years ago I would have piled on top of that a whole layer of, "I can't believe you're still so infantile to get so upset about something like that. And just before talking you were so open, and now it's ruined, and you're never going to feel open again." And that ensures the fact that you don't feel open again. Believe me. Take it from me. You don't have to do that.

And instead, I could see that starting. We could both see the tendency to want to keep going until one of us battered the other into submission. And we just said, "Okay, you know, cool it." And he went out for a walk and I just stared at the wall for a while. And I just started doing what I'm suggesting you do. I'm here to tell you that it works.

Pay attention. And I saw that actually quite quickly it went away from my mind. I didn't really stay in this tight space. But it doesn't go away from the body nearly so quickly. So I could just feel the reverberations in my body and the tightness and the burning. So I just paid attention to that. And that's all it is, you know—just sensations in the body, tightness and burning.

And as soon as I would start spacing out—this is why the awareness, the willingness to come and be with it with kind awareness, is so important. Not figuring out who's right or wrong or anything, but just being with the sensations, it's fine. As soon as I'd stop that and kind of space out or drift back into the conversation, or "maybe this or that," whoosh—the whole thing was really ready to get triggered again, basically from the uncomfortable physical sensations. That's really what the aversion was too. Fascinating to watch.

If you don't take it personally, it doesn't have to go down that road. We're not talking about being saints

here, but you can really see: ah, this is what it is. It arises not in my control, and often at the most unexpected times. Can I still bring in my awareness? And the power of our willingness to just be present and see what's what is really quite liberating.

Sometimes—I mentioned this in the last retreat—the strength of the anger or fear is way beyond any ability to just sit and notice the sensations. So then you need to move. Like I mentioned, stomping meditation, and quite a few people told me that was really helpful. You go out, you just let the energy of anger and fear move in your body. Stomping, stomping, anger, anger. Really, just let it be. Acknowledge it. We don't need to suppress it in denial, and we don't need to stomp on somebody's face. We just need to acknowledge the energy's there and let it move. We don't have to build a "me story" around it.

It's not the being with the unpleasantness that's the suffering. It's not even the anger that's the suffering. It's that sense of coagulation of "this is me and there's something wrong with me." That's really what creates the alienation and separation. Anger or fear are just clouds that move through when we notice them. They're just another aspect of unsatisfactory experience, of the First Noble Truth. When we make it me—my anger, my suffering, my self-judgment—then it's solid. Then we're in alienation and separation.

So like Joko Beck says, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the uncertainty? So in that example, could I find in myself a willingness to rest in "we didn't figure out what we're going to do, and maybe I won't get what I want"—and just rest there?

It's like, yes, it's fine for the moment. It doesn't mean it won't come back, but can we rest there? It's really hard. We don't really like to rest in pain and unpleasant experience. We're really afraid of it. We're afraid of even the thought of it.

I've noticed in myself the incredible lengths I will go to in order to avoid what I think will be an unpleasant experience in the future. You might recognize this tendency in yourselves occasionally.

I think it was last year—well, this happens all the time, but this was a particular example. A really good friend whom I hadn't seen for years wanted me to come and teach a weekend with him somewhere in Canada. The only available date would have been incredibly squeezed in my schedule. It was really clear from an impersonal point of view that it was crazy to even think about it. I would have just made myself sick and exhausted.

But it took me weeks to actually call and tell him I couldn't do it. Every time I thought about it, the unpleasant thought arose—oh, he's going to be mad at me, he's not going to like me, it's going to make him feel bad. That unpleasant thought would come, and I'd pull back from it. I couldn't just be with it.

I got so afraid of the imagined unpleasantness of the experience—telling him and having to experience him getting mad at me—that I seriously considered going to teach the retreat, never mind what it would do to me, just so I wouldn't have to call him up and hear him say he was disappointed.

Finally, when I saw that clearly, I thought, this is nuts. This is really nuts. I called him up. Of course, he was fine. He didn't really mind at all. But I was willing to make myself ill to avoid future unpleasantness that I had just made up anyway—really springing from the unpleasant thought in this moment of, oh, he might not like me anymore.

Do you ever notice yourself doing something like that? Actually creating so much more difficulty in the process than if we just said, oh yeah, right, this is how it is.

With both fear and aversion, when we are lost in them—not just their presence, but when their presence is guiding our judgments—they're not such good guides. We don't make such good judgments because we're not connecting with what's actually happening. That's the way these states function, and so our judgments are distorted, our perceptions are distorted.

Last year I read a sutta from the Buddha where he talks about the two darts—some of you may remember that, the two arrows. He's asking what's the difference between an untaught ordinary worldling, which is us, and a fully awakened being. Both experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. Do you remember that? Awakened beings also experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. It's the same.

So he asks, what's the difference? He says when an unawakened person experiences an unpleasant bodily feeling, he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of feelings—a bodily feeling and a mental feeling. It's as if a man were pierced by a dart, and following the first piercing, he is hit by a second dart. In fact, we ourselves shoot the second dart at ourselves. So he experiences feelings caused by two darts.

We have an unpleasant sensation or an unpleasant emotion, and then we shoot at ourselves the dart of "we're bad, this shouldn't be happening, I hate it, I want to get rid of it, I'm afraid of it"—and we're completely lost.

And then he says that for one who experiences the second dart, you get in the habit of resisting and resenting that painful feeling. So it's not just the one dart; we really get in the habit of shooting darts at ourselves whenever there's an unpleasant feeling.

But he doesn't stop here. He says that since the only escape an unawakened person knows from painful feelings is to go out and look for pleasant sense experience, we get caught in this cycle forever—resenting the unpleasant, going out to look for the pleasant—until we stop and just look at that first painful feeling. Which is what an awakened person does.

He is, if a man is pierced by a dart but was not hit by a second dart following the first one—so an awakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, experiences one single feeling. That's all. It's like when Jack was quoting Suzuki Roshi: you absolutely believe your eyes and ears. It's just what it is—a painful feeling, an unpleasant sound, a scary memory.

This tendency to judge ourselves for experiencing dukkha, for experiencing suffering, can really escalate. We get lost in the judgment, the second dart, rather than being able to come back to the actual experience.

I want to give another example from my life of how it can be more complicated than just an unpleasant sound. Ten years ago, I started experiencing a lot of physical symptoms of a particular condition—though I didn't know I had it then. The symptoms included a lot of physical pain and a kind of stiffening of the joints and the skin. By the time it was diagnosed, it turned out to be one of these conditions they know nothing about—the kind that could either kill you or stay as it is or get better. And who knows why you get it, and who knows what makes it better? The whole field is open for projection.

It took me a long time to realize what went on during that period of about a year or so when I first began experiencing all these escalating conditions. The normal things—pain, limitations, fear of the future, a sense of self-judging—I could pretty well watch my mind around the fear of the future and say, "Okay, I don't know what's happening, come back to here." I was so grateful for my practice for that. But the underlying self-judgment that it was happening at all slipped by. I really didn't notice that for a long time.

And that sense of feeling betrayed somehow by my body—so rather than feeling connected and compassion for the body, it was really this sense of, "You betrayed me." On an even subtler level, I felt betrayed by my mind, because of this new age belief that if you're truly spiritual and all your thoughts are correct, you can cure any illness. You know how that kind of thing sometimes seeps into the culture? It's true that a lot of our emotions and our physical experience are connected—I'm not saying they're not. But if you follow that belief to its logical conclusion, then any great spiritual master would never die, right? Because they were completely spiritual, and your body would never break down or get diseased. I didn't notice this operating in me for a while.

When I finally saw what was happening, I realized the physical sensations themselves were unpleasant but not unbearable. I wasn't in agony. But in meeting those sensations unconsciously, they would serve as a reminder or actually reinforce this sense of worthlessness, of being a spiritual failure, that my body had betrayed me, that I was no good. The first dart—the physical sensations—was unpleasant but quite workable. The second dart was so much more unpleasant that you don't even want to feel it.

After a while I realized I was completely out of touch with my body. It was like I was walking around about ten feet away from my body, because if I felt the sensations, then I would have to feel, along with them, all the sense of worthlessness and failure. So I just checked out altogether. The aversion and the fear just grew and grew until they became my worldview.

What actually changed was a combination of practice—two aspects of practice that I think are very helpful with fear and aversion: the direct connection with the sensations themselves, and metta and compassion toward them. I was actually doing a Tibetan healing practice. This old Tibetan lama, he must have been in his eighties, just showed up at IMS one day. I came back from the store or wherever, and some friend had brought him along. He was one of those great beings who just beamed, seemed filled with

light. He didn't speak English. I think it was Sharon who went over and told him, "Oh, Carol's going through all this stuff. Could you do some blessing?" So, who knows what he did? He mumbled some things, bonked me on the head, and said, "Okay, say this Tibetan mantra. It's a healing mantra in Tibetan." I have no idea what it means—just two short lines—and he said to do a healing visualization.

So I was teaching a three-month course, and I'd sit there. We'd give the Vipassana instructions, and I'd be sitting there going "Bekanze, bekanze," doing my healing mantra. At first I was thinking, "This is going to cure me. This is going to make everything okay. This is going to get rid of it all." That's usually our idea of going into the difficulty, right? But that's not going into the difficulty—that's more aversion. Still, you start out that way.

What the effect of doing this practice actually was, was that it brought my attention fully into meeting the physical experience. So I was present with the unpleasant sensations, actually, for the first time in a long time. I met them with kind attention.

Kind attention just cuts through all that second dart judgment business. It's simply what it is. And then I saw—instead of taking it so personally—oh, this poor body, it's hurting. This is hard for it. And so I've been hating it when actually it's suffering.

There arose a sense of compassion, fairly impersonal, that again led into a deeper connection. And in that connection with the source of the difficulty, the other stuff really went away—maybe not completely, but almost completely. None of that self-judging, or "I did something wrong," or "my body's betrayed me"—I can really say that since then I've hardly ever had a thought like that. And I'm also, I mean, who knows why things reverse, but I'm not in that state anymore. Physically I feel fine, so I'm not in pain or anything like that. You never know why, but I saw that once I was in touch with what was happening, the extra darts fell away. I could also make much wiser decisions about how to respond. Because as you know, there are a hundred million possibilities—everybody you know will come forward with suggestions: try this, eat this, do that, try that. It's overwhelming. But you can actually make intelligent, wise discrimination when you're not lost in fear and aversion.

So seeing this cycle of the first dart and the second dart, recognizing the second dart and understanding "I don't have to do this"—but the only way not to do it is to come fully into that first painful feeling.

This deep connectedness, diving into the wave—this is the point of liberating understanding. You don't do it once. I know this is what we'd like. We do it once, we have liberating understanding, and it's done forever. Sorry. I used to think that for years. But that's actually not a helpful thing to think, because—assuming nobody in this room has had that moment of totally liberating understanding after which you haven't experienced any moment of greed, hatred, or delusion—that assumption makes liberation into something always somewhere out there. It's a very self-defeating way to hold the idea.

The fact is, there can be hundreds, thousands, millions of moments of touching this self-liberating

understanding, where you dive into the wave and meet it just as it is. In that, we can discover the sure heart's release, the place of peace, the vastness of who we really are. And your knee still hurts. And that disgusting noise is still going on. And your back is still paining you. And the heater still makes a heck of a racket. It doesn't matter.

The thing is, that moment is just that moment. In the next moment, we have to be just as awake, just as present. And when we're not, it's okay. Because then there's the next moment, where there's again this opportunity—no matter what's arising—to practice diving into the wave instead of getting lost in fear and denial and hating our aversions.

Mark Epstein says, "It's our fear of experiencing ourselves directly that creates suffering." It's not the painful thing itself. Our practice is to learn how to experience ourselves directly, and often that includes aversion.

I want to quickly list some of the things I've mentioned that really help you be present within fear and aversion when they're happening, rather than just falling into habits of reaction.

The first is what I've mostly talked about: mindfulness—meeting it directly, feeling the aversion, feeling the fear, noticing if you can come right to the sense impression that's eliciting the aversive reaction. Or if it's really big, just doing stomping meditation, but feeling the aversion, the anger, the fear, rather than keeping it going by feeding into thoughts. The thoughts about it, the story—they're there, they're part of it. But let your attention be with the experience itself. Or when flashes of negativity and fear arise and you can't figure out why, open up and see if there's some subtle background unpleasant experience happening—being tired, your sweatshirt's too tight, something you don't notice but that's coloring your whole day.

A sense of humor also helps a lot.

Sometimes anger, rage, or fear can come up so strongly, way beyond even stomping meditation, where you feel truly overwhelmed. You can't quite bring mindfulness to it because it hits that kind of residue and cycles more and more. Even coming back to feeling your body shoots you back into the cycle of anxiety, pain, fear, and aversion. Then it's very helpful to bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy—consciously balance your perception. It's wonderful here with the desert because you can go out and just look at the space. That really helps me not take whatever's happening so seriously. It's just so vast. What difference does my little concern make?

Or Thich Nhat Hanh talks about the overwhelming suffering during the Vietnamese war and how he would tell the workers to consciously do something as minor as going to smell the herbs at night, to go out in the field and just be with nature. That doesn't deny the suffering and the pain, but it broadens our perception. It takes our mind from just being in this loop of aversion and fear and turns it elsewhere. This really helps to balance the awareness. Then you can come back and see what's what.

Or moving the body—walking faster, running. Sometimes aversion and fear, we have a big story about it, but you can experience it as simply energy. Once I woke up in this wave of fear, and I spent the day psychologizing this and that. I didn't find any good reason for it. I was visiting my sister, and she dragged me to the gym, which is not something I normally do. I was just sitting on the exercise bike, bored—exercise, exercise, exercise, watching fear, fear, exercise, exercise. And I suddenly noticed that without any story or any big psychological understanding, the energy I was calling fear just broke up and moved out.

I thought, that's really interesting. I could just go ride an exercise bike instead of years of therapy, once in a while. Not always. Sometimes it's really helpful to know why. But sometimes it really doesn't matter. It can just move out. We don't have to build so much "me" around it.

Metta practice, compassion practice. Not as we often think—"Oh, I don't want to feel anger, so let me do metta. I hate this person, may they be happy." And then we wonder why it doesn't work. When you do metta for a long period, you find yourself saying things like that. I would find myself saying, "May you be filled with suffering." Time to back off and see what's going on here.

What metta actually does is help us connect, believe it or not. It doesn't override the fear and aversion. What it does is bring us back into connection with the fearful or aversive thing. And that's where we're back in the place of wholeness, back in the place of integrity. Our separation, our dream of separation, is broken. We're back in connectedness. That's really what metta practice does—it lets us see the unity that we already are. It's not just some kind of thought control, although it seems like it.

And the last thing is patience, which is actually an aspect of metta. The willingness to just keep coming back over and over to meet what's happening as best we can, seeing there's still aversion, just being patient with meeting that. This is a huge aspect of practice. I don't think we're very good with it in this culture. I don't really think patience is a virtue that has a lot of support. If you make a long-distance call here, it rings three times and the mechanical voice comes on and says, "Well, they're not answering." I think, give them a chance! It's just so embedded in the culture. Patience is an aspect of metta. It's what helps us connect.

To close, I'll share a story of a man I met at a retreat who told me that for ten years he'd been in therapy because he was so filled with rage and anger. He held on to every slight. He had so much judgment, so much anger, so much negativity. And he said the ten years of therapy—and I don't mean to be saying therapy isn't helpful, it can be very helpful, I just realized it could sound like that—he said it didn't really quite touch the roots of it.

And then he got stomach cancer. He was telling me this while he still had the stomach cancer. And in that difficult situation, when we're finally faced with what we can't deny anymore, can't suppress, can't fix—when we're up against the wall and we have to open into it. I don't know why we wait until we're up against the wall, our heads hitting the bricks, but we do before we let go, a lot of the time.

So when he was faced with his stomach cancer, he said, "Oh my gosh, this is where I hold all that rage, all that anger, all these years. Anytime anything unpleasant happens, that's where I hold a grudge."

And then he said something so interesting—now that he couldn't hold it, he didn't. It just didn't stick. Difficult things would come and he was right there, and there was just no residue. It didn't stick because he wasn't afraid of it anymore.

So I wish for all of us that we don't have to wait till that point in our lives. We don't have to be up against the wall. We can understand the reactions of aversion and fear and anger. We don't have to be afraid of them. And when we can understand them, then we really understand the way that being caught in them obstructs our freedom. It's not the unpleasant experience itself.

This understanding is really available to us in maybe fifty percent of our moments—when we have an unpleasant experience. The other times, when it's pleasant or neutral, we have other opportunities to see through the craving. But really, any unpleasant experience that arises the rest of the night and tomorrow—think of it as a place to practice freedom. We can be really happy that these things arise.

I'm only kidding a little bit.

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