Embodying Freedom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:38

It's pretty natural at this time of the retreat for various ones of you to be in a somewhat assessing mode. People come into interviews and they're thinking, has anything happened this whole retreat? What have I gained? What have I learned? How can I hold on to it? How can I possibly keep this insight for the rest of my life and apply it? How can I hold on to this precision of mindfulness?

And we know—I mean, we know those are thoughts and wantings—but it's natural that we get into them. And when you say, which is really the theme of my talk, that it does come down to the simplicity of how we meet this moment, it's not really satisfying, is it? We want something a little more to hold on to.

So when we point out, or when you tell us about just a moment of really profound peace, or ease, or happiness, and learning to trust that that's true—yeah, but what about later? What about when I'm dizzy? And when you've had moments of being in a really difficult state, you're sick or you're lost and caught in a really powerful and familiar suffering mental state, and there's a moment where one just brings full attention to it, recognizes it—oh yes, this is grief and self-hatred. Just that. Just that. And there's a moment of freedom in that. But we think, well, that was a moment. How can I replicate that always?

Or you notice yourself coming back up through the layers, sort of as the retreat gets closer to an end. And it's normal. Maybe in the beginning there were a lot of hindrances or certain personality patterns, and it seemed they receded. We hardly dared hope that they were really gone forever. And if not now, in a week or two, we'll find out they may not be. Maybe they're not gone forever. But they don't have to be the enemy. We can see that moment of meeting that mental state with mindfulness, without judgment, and without identification—that's what's possible for us. And the way we cultivate that is by how we meet this moment.

So I want to talk tonight about ways of broadening our understanding or our idea of what mindfulness is. Remembering that the word *sati* that is translated as mindfulness is more closely allied to the word for remembering. And being mindful here or not here in a bigger situation isn't difficult. It's the remembering that's the trick. And what we're cultivating here is how to remember to come home to our true nature, no matter what may be arising experientially.

So what have we been practicing? The two wings of the Buddhist practice: wisdom and compassion. And what can we take with us? What's really important? What can we take with us into the next moment?

I'll tell you a story. This spring, in the middle of a retreat I was teaching with two friends, we went to visit a friend, a teacher of mine, whose husband is in the middle stages of having Alzheimer's disease. And

she's, among everything else she's doing, taking care of him. And it was really interesting in terms of this question: what can we take with us? Because this is a man who's had a really fascinating life, devoted to spiritual practice. He's hobnobbed with all kinds of important spiritual teachers and famous psychologists. He hung out with the whole Alan Watts crowd. He's a monk in a Hindu order, done all kinds of fascinating things. I don't know personally what his practice was like, but I'm sure he had lots of insights, understandings. What could he hold onto?

When we visited, he was very gentlemanly, and as long as we were just staying in the immediate present, what he said was quite appropriate. Apparently he knows his wife and all, but as far as other memories, I don't know what he has. And it really was striking: what can we hold on to? Even all our profound spiritual experiences—what's the point of trying to remember them when our whole memory goes? What about, and this could be a relief actually, when we don't even remember our story anymore? We're just relating to how the dogs are acting in the moment. What do we have left?

And I was reflecting, because I don't really know this gentleman well, but what remains is how we have cultivated the way we meet and open into ourselves and experience in the moment. The habits of our heart and mind.

It seems to me that's what's left on the most basic level. What we dedicate our life to in the inner sense—with no views and no memories and no fantastic insights to hold on to. To me it seems like it comes down to: how do I meet this next moment? And it will come from my deeply ingrained habits, not from thinking about how I ought to meet the next moment because that's the right dharmic way. It's going to come down to how I've lived my life, moment to moment. And that's what we're doing here—how we're living our life, moment to moment. That's what's left. That's what karma is.

At the moment of death, what's going to be there?

Another friend of mine told me this story a couple of years ago. I think I mentioned him before. He's an older man who's been practicing for a long time and lives in the middle of the country. He's a farmer. I said he does contemplations riding his tractor because he works thirteen hours a day. But he's one of these people—maybe you can relate—who feels like his practice has never gone anywhere, that he has no concentration and no big experiences to show.

A couple of years ago, he told us he'd had really serious heart problems and had a heart operation where they put an artificial valve into his heart, which is apparently a serious operation. He came through the operation okay, but afterward, when he was in intensive care right after the operation—tubes coming out of every orifice, if you've seen intensive care you know that state, everything hooked to a monitor—something went askew. He was lying there and the bells started ringing, the monitors started flashing, the nurses started running around, and he thought, "Oh, this could really be it. I could really be dying right now."

And in that moment of fear—"Oh my God, what should I do? This might be my last breath"—from somewhere came the thought: "Well, if it's my last breath, I guess I better be here for it." And he just took all his attention into being with his breath.

Who knows? You think your practice is going nowhere, but when it counts, that's what we need. That intention, that deeply ingrained habit to just be here in this moment. And clearly it wasn't his last breath. Now he tells all these jokes because it's a pig's valve they use, so he tells all these jokes about corn and pigs that I won't go into. I just talked to him a couple of weeks ago. He's fine.

So I thought, when we come down to it, our practice is about remembering—not ideology, not our wishes, but remembering: How can I meet myself in this moment? How can I awaken in this moment? And how can I meet myself and whatever's arising with kindness? To me, those two questions—how can I awaken in this moment, and how can I greet this moment with kindness, or whatever's arising in this moment, or whoever's arising—embody in a really simple, moment-to-moment way the two great wings of wisdom and compassion. Or in the language of that sutta: form is emptiness, emptiness is form.

In our practice here, we're exploring that on very subtle levels of experience. Due to the silence, the concentration, the period of time of exploration, the simplicity of our lives, we can explore in moments of experience the subtleties that aren't so accessible to us in our daily life. That's true. We're seeing really that form is emptiness. Over and over we experience that as we sit and notice every thought, every emotion, every sensation, every sound. Everything that arises as you sit just passes. And we've said over and over: awareness doesn't care. Just notice what's happening. And we can do that sometimes.

But we can do that when we're just sitting here. Of course we think, well, in our life—going to work, dealing with the children, driving the car, whatever we're doing—you can't just sit there and say, "Oh, form is emptiness, it doesn't matter, emotions come, emotions go." I mean, we can have that attitude of knowing it's not us, which helps. But we get involved in needing to make choices, needing to make decisions. How are we going to live our life? What direction do we want to take?

And here also we see that the flip side of emptiness is form. We live our lives in this form, in this reality. As long as we're on this plane, in this human life, we're in this form—at least as far as I've discovered so far. I shouldn't claim for everyone, but for me, until you get to the level of Dipa Ma, you can have two forms or three forms or different forms. But we're living in this form. We have to take care of the body.

We have to make decisions about how we relate to other forms. But you can see from the subtlety here that when we really understand from the level of "form is emptiness"—it's all coming and going, and none of it's me—the natural response isn't to say, "Okay, who cares about anything?" On some level, we really care about everything. Not caring so specifically about me as the most central aspect of every experience allows the space for us to truly relate with compassion and metta. And I know you've all experienced that over and over. Talking to the people I talk to, I know you all have experienced that.

So care and respect for form, for each other, for relationships, for taking care of the environment—this arises out of our deep experience that form is emptiness. We see that at a subtle level over and over here on retreat.

And it's true, as many of you have said: "I can't be that precisely mindful in daily life." It's true. We can't. The mistake that's often made, or what leads to this sense of frustration or disappointment, this feeling of "what's the point of all this because then we just have to go back to being so busy"—the mistake sometimes made is to equate mindfulness with this precision, or with this subtlety, to believe that depth of mindfulness is only possible when we can be this precise, when we have this much concentration. It's not true.

What we need to do is remember that mindfulness, awareness, awakeness in a moment can have a much wider lens. While we've really worked a lot with the narrow lens, the microscopic lens here on retreat—and that's extremely valuable—it's not the only way or the only valid way.

The aspect that we haven't talked a whole lot about here, which probably we should have from day one, is the corollary to the microscopic precision of mindfulness: the bigger lens called clear comprehension, *sam pajañña* in Pali. Often you'll hear mindfulness talked about as *sati-sampajañña*—mindfulness and clear comprehension. That clarity of knowing what's what, that's mindfulness. But knowing what's what in the bigger picture, really broadening it out. Don't confuse the starriness, that real precise subtlety that comes a lot from concentration, as being necessary for mindfulness. It isn't.

I want to talk about a couple of ways we can remember to include in our understanding of mindfulness—both here and in more complex situations—ways that we widen the focus, widen the lens. Broadening our awareness of the moment, specifically when we're involved in choices, in relations, in actions or decisions.

The two main aspects I want to talk about are bringing awareness to purpose and intention, which we've talked about somewhat but I want to broaden, and to what's called suitability or appropriateness of actions. That's remembering that we're not acting in isolation, that any particular moment includes the whole picture. What's suitable and appropriate in a particular moment?

When we talk about bringing attention to purpose, widening the lens: How can I awaken in this moment? How can I meet this moment with compassion, with kindness? That's basically the intention we've talked about. How can I awaken wise understanding? How can I meet the moment with kindness, with compassion, with generosity? That's the second step of the Eightfold Path—wise intention. We've talked about that very much on this precise moment-to-moment level, seeing our intentions, how to be mindful of intention.

That's extremely helpful in the bigger picture, in making decisions in our daily life—knowing why we're choosing to do something, or even remembering that we could pay attention to why we're choosing to do

something.

The bigger picture with intention or purpose that I want to bring in is to acknowledge to ourselves that we can hold in our hearts, in our minds, a sense of that question I asked before: What's really important in my life? To look at the decisions, the choices we make, the way we're living our life, very much moment to moment, but to hold as a frame of reference the larger, overarching sense of what's really most important to you, to me, in our lives. It's called clear comprehension of purpose, or of aspiration.

You may or may not have thought of this. Some people have a real clear sense throughout their lives, or as they're practicing, of the overarching motivation. It might be seen as a direction you're heading in or a goal, or it might just be an overarching sense of what's important that informs your decisions in the moment. But some people don't really think about it too much. Or if you do begin to think about it, I've had a lot of people say to me that they're—even quietly to themselves—almost embarrassed, or in some way their personality patterns of unworthiness come in.

Say, if you sit down and really ask yourself, "What is most important in my life?" and what comes up, for example—what came up for me the first time I did this was "to love and serve the Dharma." That just kind of came. It's not like you sit and make up a list and say, "What sounds good?" It's waiting to see what's really true for you. And then seeing how, without a breath, the worthless voice comes in with, "Who do you think you are?"

So whatever your patterns are, don't listen to them if they're on the negative frame. Allow yourself to hold a space in your consciousness, in your heart, over time, to see what really comes up for you.

as the most important thing in your life—the beacon, sort of, for when you have a decision to make, when you have a choice to make—to use this as a reference point. It can be enormously empowering. It can really focus our energy and our sense of purpose, even in seemingly mundane choices and decisions. And there's a way that can bring a kind of resolution to our energy and to the way that we live our life that might allow us to open, in the way that we live and in the things that we do, to live in a whole different way from anything we might have imagined.

It's not that we see the endpoint from where we are. When I first had that thought—not even "I want to," but just what was most important: somehow to serve the Dharma—I didn't have a clue what that meant or what that would look like. And I think actually that's good, because as soon as you think, "Well, that means I should start teaching," for example, that would have been some whole kind of ego idea of what to do and how to get there that would have put, as I see it now, a constraint on the decisions I made, trying to veer them in a certain direction.

But when I took the intention, the purpose of serving the Dharma, as something to hold as a reference point, then over the years—and it's been quite some years, maybe eighteen years ago or something—it served me enormously in making decisions. Already I think I was manager here when I had that thought. I

guess I wasn't thinking of that as serving the Dharma. I don't know what I was thinking. I mean, I'd been working here, I'd been practicing—that's all I'd been doing. But just to have that as a clear purpose without an idea of how it should look has served me enormously.

Because what it does is, rather than thinking, "Oh, I should be a teacher"—which is really the last thing I wanted to do; the thought of getting up and talking to people like this or talking with people all day, I never thought I could do that—so it really often has nothing to do with what we think we can or want to do. That's another thing. It's not about what we think would be fun; it's about what opens into serving the Dharma. For me, I'm not saying that's what it should be for you.

So having that as a beacon, often when I've had a decision to make and I'm really not clear, and I try to look at what's my motivation for going this way or going that way—as soon as I remember, "Oh, serving the Dharma," it's almost always clear which decision I should make. I mean, I'm not talking about whether I have a chocolate ice cream cone or whether I have a piece of cake, okay? I am talking about slightly bigger decisions.

And you can make yourself crazy—which I did. I did for a while. Everything I should do should be serving the Dharma. So I would turn on the TV and get out the whip because I was not serving the Dharma; I was watching television. There's a point where you have to give yourself some slack. But in big decisions, as soon as I would look, I got this question, this thing that comes up in my mind: "Do I want to be comfortable, or do I want to be free?" And as soon as that comes up, I go, "Oh. Well, I do want to be comfortable, but I guess that's not the way we're going right now." It's been enormously helpful. Enormously helpful.

I read somewhere that a teacher said in every moment of activity we are committing to something. It's a question of what. Are we willing to look?

So this tuning into what your overarching purpose is, then holding that—not as a way to be more wrong or bad, not another ideal that we're not living up to. I don't mean it in that way. But to have that sense of "I want to serve the Dharma," or "I want to live a compassionate life," or "I want to be kind"—the Dalai Lama's statement that "my religion is kindness," that's pretty great. "How can I be kind?" isn't a way to hate yourself every moment you're not kind. But it gives one the resolution, the vastness of determination, that we're really willing to look. What am I committing to in this moment?

And for me, if it is to comfort rather than freedom, I'm happy to see that. It's not another reason to beat myself up. It helps me look and see why. Is that really what I want? And of course it isn't, and the decision makes itself when I'm willing to really look.

And this is mindfulness—looking at the larger intention, being willing to look and see the intention of why I'm doing what I'm doing. And remember, mindfulness is non-judgmental. So when I would say, "I really want to serve the Dharma," and instead I'm watching some stupid, totally stupid, half-hour situation

comedy on television—how can I meet that without hating myself and without trying to force, "I will turn it off and read the Majjhima Nikaya"? Really? I experimented with myself. Of course I wouldn't turn it off, or if I did and I opened the Majjhima Nikaya, it would just blur, you know.

It's really to see, over time, that sometimes I just need to relax and this isn't harmful. Sometimes it's to see that amidst the vast multiplicity of choices and situations we have in this life, we're not always, every moment, every single moment, going to choose our overarching purpose.

There's a lovely poem from a Japanese woman from the year 1000 that speaks to this.

Although I try to hold the single thought of Buddha's teaching in my heart, I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well.

I love that poem. My crickets' voices are all so beautiful. But having your deep purpose as a beacon, we come back to it, and it strengthens. And we really don't know where it's going to go, and that's wonderful. We find ourselves heading in directions we never might have thought.

I've been reading recently Alan Clements' book of interviews with Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*. It's really lovely—just wide-ranging discussions he had with her over several months. The thing that I find quite inspiring in relation to what I'm talking about now is that she never had any sense she was going to return to Burma and become the leader of the democracy movement and a Nobel Peace Laureate. No sense of that at all. She was just quietly living her life.

She says she's really surprised that people think of her as an important person. "I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they can't believe it." Her beliefs, the way she meets situations—these are profound and inspiring. But the sense I got from reading these conversations was just that: very simple. No sense of her destiny being to remain in Burma all these years. It just happened that she was there taking care of her dying mother in 1988 when the peace demonstrations broke out and so many people were killed. She wasn't even part of that—she was in the hospital taking care of her mother. It wasn't until afterward that she got involved. And she said all along, never any sense of where it was going.

But at one point she said—and this is a paraphrase, I couldn't find the exact quotation—that in some way, her real purpose is to purify her mind in this life. That she's just always working to purify her heart and mind. She says, "I have very ordinary attitudes toward life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I do it. The motivation is its own reward."

I really got the sense from reading that book that just by following her deep purpose in that way, the way it's ending up manifesting right now is what she's doing—still in Burma after all these years, never knowing when she'll be arrested again, separated from her family. And she doesn't see it as anything extraordinary, or even as an endpoint. Her life is about purifying her heart and mind with deeper mettā, deeper compassion. She said at one point she sees herself, when she gets older, doing more practice.

So we never know where it's going to go. But it's having that moment-to-moment relationship to what's happening now, inspired and viewed through what's really important to us in our lives. It's not simple or easy, but it gives us enormous strength—courage, really, resolution to keep going, to meet this next moment with kindness, with awakeness, or whatever your deepest purpose is.

A big support in this—this second aspect of broadening out from the microscopic view of mindfulness—is having a sense of clear comprehension of the suitability or appropriateness of our actions and speech in the particular situation in which we find ourselves. This is very much what we've been pointing to, perhaps not quite so explicitly, when we try to talk about skillful means in meditation and having to make decisions—for example, whether to go to the breath or whether to open up. We keep saying, "Well, sometimes it's this and sometimes it's that." That's because it depends on what's appropriate to the situation.

This brings in the understanding that we're never isolated in any situation. Whatever situation we find ourselves in, we're connected to all others, affected by circumstances. We can't act in isolation.

I don't know if any of you have felt this at any time during your retreat here. Often people at different points in their practice will express this—they feel they're actually practicing very sincerely, mindfulness and concentration are good, whatever the heck that means. But there's some way they begin to feel really self-centered in their practice. I've experienced that myself. Or sort of myopic, where you really feel you're concentrated and mindful, but it's like it stops here. And you find yourself going through the food line doing something totally thoughtless.

This is embarrassing. I wasn't going to say it, but it came into my mind. One year, many years ago, I was one of those people who think they're so incredibly mindful. I'm really just walking through this room so mindfully. I was walking through the coat room with my zafu—that's how long ago it was, when people still sat on zafus. I got to the top of the stairs, put down my zafu, noting every moment, took off my shoes, so aware, picked up my zafu, and just walked off the top step. I totally forgot where I was. Lifting, moving, placing—wham. Fell into the upper walking room. Luckily, only a few people were walking.

Very embarrassing. A certain lack of broader perspective. That would seem useful in bringing mindfulness into the bigger picture—bringing awareness, broadening the awareness to the whole situation, or to quote Joko Beck, moving our practice from a self-centered view of practice to a life-centered view of practice. We're part of life, but we're not the center of it. We're only part of it.

So this is clear comprehension of situation appropriateness. Let me give you a retreat example of how we can work with this and notice the difference.

One year I was on an Upandita retreat here, and several of us friends signed up together to be veggie choppers in the morning. We figured it was a control thing—if six of us all signed up together, we could control that we wouldn't talk and that we were all in the same rhythm. And it was fun. It was really fun.

And it was a great practice experience for me in this clear comprehension, bringing clear comprehension to the precision of mindfulness and concentration.

This was a very strict retreat, very much noting every moment from the moment you wake up until the moment you go to bed. And we could see how when we have that myopic view, you could be cutting a carrot incredibly mindfully, but you take fifteen minutes to cut a carrot, and there are giant tubs of carrots. You just can't do that.

So it's really about how to be mindful in the bigger perspective. You still feel your body. It's not like, "Oh my God, I've got to hurry, I'm going to cut the carrots," and you're completely disconnected. Very much in the body, but bigger. Knowing standing, knowing movement, but also seeing the whole flow. If someone finishes their task and someone else needs help, you help them. Or if someone else finishes, they see what you're doing and they help you. Very much a sense that it doesn't work if I don't see that it's not me—it's the whole situation.

Every time I would go in thinking, "Well, today, this is what I want to do"—having a preference or having decided before I walked in—it always was an obstacle. It always got in the way. If I tried to get this cutting board or get that vegetable, it would never work, and it would just be going against the flow. Even in the short space of picking up my cutting board at the end, thinking, "Now I'm going to go wash it at the sink"—something would happen before I could get to the sink, and it's only three steps. Someone else would get to the sink first, or something else would need to be done. Just seeing: give up any sense of me-me, any sense of limiting my awareness, of trying to build my concentration, or being afraid I'm going to lose it if I'm not noting precisely every moment. Just open into the entirety of the situation. I can't decide ahead of time what's appropriate, because I don't know the situation until I get there.

It was a great learning. Really wonderful. And it's not like that's lesser mindfulness. It's not like, "Okay, that was the best way to get through it, so then I could go back and practice." That was some of the deepest periods of practice, really letting go of that neater self of practice.

This aspect of suitability of mindfulness—of seeing that we're not separate, of seeing that things are always changing, that what's appropriate one day is totally not appropriate the next day—that is a really powerful aspect of mindfulness and clear comprehension that's very useful, need I say, in our daily lives. It comes in so often. Really seeing how the situation is always changing.

You've seen that here, right? When you see what really works in one sitting doesn't work in the next sitting. Or how nice the open awareness was, and you just can't get there for love or money the next day and you have to go back to the breath. You have to go down a step and go back to the breath. All these crazy ideas we get. Or seeing that when your energy is low, you relate to physical pain very differently from when the energy is strong and balanced, and one isn't right or wrong. Seeing how we're absolutely interconnected with each other, that how we are affects how the others are.

There's a great story about this that Daniel Goleman has in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, about how much our energy, our mental state, our mere presence affects one another—part of the whole situation.

The story takes place during the Vietnam War. An American platoon was hunkered down in rice paddies in the heat of a firefight with Viet Cong. Suddenly, a line of six Buddhist monks started walking along the elevated berms that separate rice paddies from each other. Perfectly calm and poised, the monks walked directly toward the line of fire. They didn't look right. They didn't look left. They walked straight through, recalls David Bush, one of the American soldiers.

It was really strange because nobody shot at them. And after they walked over the berm, suddenly all the fight was out of me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore. At least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody because everybody quit. We just stopped fighting.

Now, in a small way, we all have that effect on each other. I was just talking to someone today who's visiting for a few days. He sat a three-month course a few years ago. He said he just walked in here, walked to his old walking space and walked along it once, and he immediately felt like he'd been sitting for two months. It's not just the walking space, you know. It's the energy of all of you here. You catch it from each other. We catch it from you. And as you see toward the end of the retreat, if there starts to be a little anxiety, you catch that from each other too. It's not bad or good. It's just how it is. We're all part of the same situation, and we can't act in isolation. We don't act in isolation.

So when we're bringing in this aspect of broader mindfulness, it's to look at the whole situation. What's appropriate, given my mental state, given your mental state, given what's going on in this situation right here? We all affect each other. This is a really big piece of broadening mindfulness—seeing interrelatedness, impermanence, no separate self, and cause and effect. You don't outline it like that, of course, in every situation, but you're really seeing that the wisdom factor, non-delusion, is present. As soon as you really look at what's going on and expand your mindfulness, you get an intuitive sense of what's appropriate. And it takes us out of feeling so self-sufficient, but also out of taking so much unnecessary responsibility for everything that happens.

I don't mean we're not responsible for our actions. Of course we are, in terms of our intentions. But for example, I love seeing on a retreat—especially when I see a lot of people—how much the weather actually affects our mental states. And we often don't realize it. So we teach in Yucca Valley in the desert every year, and there's usually a period of at least two or three days when this wind starts to blow. It's strong and gusty. At first it's okay, but by the second or third day, all the yogis are cranky and irritable, not to mention the teachers and staff. But people are taking it on themselves: "What's the matter with my practice? How come this hindrance of impatience and irritability and restlessness is here?" And I say, well, look around. The whole world is restless right now, and we're just part of it. I really like that. It takes the personal out of it, but it allows us to respond more appropriately.

So seeing the whole situation allows us the flexibility and adaptability—not always doing the same thing

at the same time in the same way, but really responding intuitively and flexibly to what's appropriate. And then with the clear comprehension of broader purpose, that gives us the resolution, the sense of remaining flexible in relationship to what's really important.

In these two ways, as we move out of just being able to explore our lives and our moment-to-moment experience in such a subtle way, we can begin to get the sense that we won't always have the samādhi, we won't always have the subtlety, but every act of our life can become a vehicle for waking up, can become a vehicle for learning how to respond with kindness and mettā. Every moment, every activity—it doesn't matter how mundane. We don't have to be Aung San Suu Kyi; it can just be washing the dishes. But every activity can really become the vehicle, the doorway to awakening.

This happens when we really embody, really inhabit life—this body, this mind, exactly what's happening—being fully present within it, without defining ourselves by it. I don't know if that makes sense. We're really here, but we're not saying, "This is who I am, and this is where I'm at right now in my practice."

I say that because for years, I think, I really somewhere thought that freedom was going to somehow be about lifting me out of all the grit and the hullabaloo and the mundanity, and somehow everything was going to be light-filled and special and glistening. You know how it is at the end of a retreat.

So I always thought I'd lost it when the retreat was over and it was back to the grit and the mundane life. And really, something that has served as a metaphor for me—because I see now it's not like that, it's really about getting more and more ordinary, fully embodying freedom in the midst of what's happening—has been the village of Bodh Gaya in India.

As I'm sure you know, that's the village where the Buddha supposedly sat under the Bodhi tree and came to his full awakening. It's really the peak pilgrimage spot for Buddhists. And it's actually the place where I did my first Vipassana retreat, in 1971. So in some ways it's been a very special place for me. I didn't go back there again until 1989.

How it served as a metaphor for me is this: when I went back in '89, I had much more of a sense of what Buddhism is, of the practice and freedom and how important it is to me. I'm not really a devotional type, in case you hadn't noticed—that's not really my nature. But going there and sitting... you can't actually sit under the Bodhi tree anymore, the descendant of the Bodhi tree, because there's a gate around it. But you can sit near it, on the wall, inside this park. There's a big temple and a park around it.

So I was sitting there and, really unexpectedly, I was filled with such joy, such inspiration, such devotion. Because sitting there in that real place, near that real tree, it brought home to me the fact that the Buddha was really a person—sort of just like us. A person, not a god, not someone from outside our realm. He really sat in this dusty little village and came to awakening. It's really true. And when he said that he wouldn't tell us to do it if it wasn't possible—it really is possible. It just brought home to me the human

reality of the potential, for me and for all of us. It really brought tears to my eyes.

And then, looking around... if you've been to Bodh Gaya recently, you know what I mean. If you haven't—it's India. It's gotten very busy. It's still a dusty village. But sitting there, even within the park, never mind outside, there are pilgrims from all the different Buddhist countries coming in buses. Japanese people walking around in groups, someone talking through a megaphone to guide them. Tibetans sitting on the side, blowing their horns and chanting for three days straight. Hindus walking around talking at the top of their voices. Dogs wandering around starving. Cows wandering around. A mad woman kind of wandering about, talking to everybody. It's a zoo. And that's just inside the park.

Just outside the park, there are buses going by blaring and all the life of India. And as you walk down the road to get inside the gates of the park, it's lined with beggars, of course. Some of them come in rickshaws from the nearby town because that's their work for the day, and they line up there. And before you get to the line of beggars, there are little tables where guys are selling ten-paisa coins. Now, a hundred paisa make up a rupee. Currently there are about thirty rupees to the dollar. So you can imagine how much ten paisa is worth—nothing. You buy nine ten-paisa pieces for a rupee. And these guys are making ten paisa for each rupee you spend. Then you take these little nothing coins and give them out to the beggars. It's all a business. It's great.

And the thing I liked best was this: there were guys selling little plastic bags filled with water, filled with fish. You buy these because it's really good karma to take the fish and set them loose in the little pond inside the temple. So you do that. Of course, where do you think these guys got those fish to begin with? It's like a recycling operation. It's India. It's great.

You can't get upset about it. It's just how it is. It's crazy. And it's one thing to look around and think, "Oh, this is awful. All this is happening in the midst of this sacred shrine." But that's not really the feeling. The feeling is, "Oh, this really is it. This is spirituality." It's in the middle of all of it. You don't get out of it—you get into it much more fully.

And so to me, I really think more and more that awakening is about embodying our freedom in the midst of it all. How do we meet this moment? And the moment can be pretty crazy. Or sometimes it's really beautiful. But it's the habits we're cultivating of awakening—no matter how we're suffering or how joyful it is, here and now—that's what we can take with us. No memories, no experiences, but how can I meet this moment? How can I be in the middle of the grit and the craziness and still awaken with joy, with compassion, with connectedness?

It gets more and more ordinary and more and more wonderful.

Geshe Rapton says something that I really love. He says that for himself, all actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings. I love that. All actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening

mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings.

To bring that attitude to washing the dishes, to changing the diapers, to working on the stock market if that's what you do—to whatever we do. Nothing doesn't count. Nothing in our life is too ordinary or too complicated or too painful or too joyful to be excluded from the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion. Anything we do, we can meet it that way. We won't always be successful, but we can bring that intention. And every moment here that you've been present, that's what's being cultivated. It's really powerful. It's tendencies. Remember last time we talked about these underlying tendencies? Well, we've been cultivating wholesome underlying tendencies this whole three months, and in your lives previous to these three months, and we continue cultivating those when we're not in deep retreat, when we don't have deep samādhi. And that's what's really important. It doesn't, I think, matter so much how it manifests, as long as it's wholesome.

You know that poem by Rumi? I'm sure you've heard it: "Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." I love that. Whatever you do, let it be the way that you kneel and kiss the ground. Let it be the way that you manifest your awakening mind and heart of wisdom and compassion—vacuuming the floor.

This is the last talk I'll give, and I just want to express my deep gratitude to all of you. It's been a profound honor to share this time with all of you, to be with so many people—no matter what you think of yourself—to be with so many people who are so deeply committed to awakening and compassion. It's really extraordinary for all of us, all of us teachers and staff, just to know there are people dedicated to this on this planet, and that we can all spend this time together. It's an enormous blessing. I thank you all.

And I just want to close with this from Nyoshul Khenpo: "Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who overlook or ignore it are deluded. This recognition, the stability of it, is the borderline between Buddhas and other beings, and this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives."

Every moment. So if you missed this last moment, here's this moment. We're always at the great crossroads.

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