Suffering, Impermanence and Freedom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:11

A few weeks ago I was asked to give a public talk and given the title "The Possibility of Inner Contentment," which I thought is a nice title. If you think about that for yourself—the possibility of inner contentment—it sounds good, and I would imagine in some way it could cover most of the reasons most of us would come on retreat.

I'd ask you to reflect for a moment: when you personally think about what inner contentment would be, or freedom, or enlightenment, or peace, do you have some clear sense of what it is you're looking for? Or perhaps some not-so-clear, subversive notions that can actually be driving us in the wrong direction? Just begin to have a sense for yourself. What is the mind actually thinking of in terms of contentment?

There's a passage from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Meditation is to be aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our mind, and the world. Each day, 40,000 children die of hunger. The former superpowers still have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads, enough to destroy the Earth many times. Yet the sunrise is beautiful, and the rose that bloomed this morning along the wall is a miracle. Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both these aspects."

To live an awakened life is to be awake to both these aspects—here on the cushion and in our life. As a friend of mine said when we were talking about this talk, "Well, when things are going smoothly in life, anyone can experience inner contentment." So it's worth looking and seeing how much of our unspoken idea is that things are going to get better, and that this somehow is going to be a manifestation of our awakening.

Look at the Buddha's life after he was awakened. The supremely enlightened one, free of all suffering—his life wasn't that nothing happened. As Guy mentioned, he had plenty of physical problems. His back ached, he had headaches. Sometimes he'd say to Ananda, "You give a talk, I have to go rest my back." His clan, from both his mother and father's side, included people who were often at war with each other. Many people would be killed. He'd go and try to mediate. There was a lot of quarreling from time to time within the Sangha—I know, hard to believe, but even then.

Actually, if you read a lot of the Vinaya, the rules governing how the monks and nuns' rules came to be, much of it arose from monks going to the Buddha and saying, "So-and-so did such and such. What should we do about that?" It would be conduct that really wasn't so great. He'd say, "Okay, we need to make a rule." But there was this real sense of sniping. In fact, one of his cousins, Devadatta, was so jealous of him that he tried to divide the Sangha and get people to follow himself. He actually tried to kill the Buddha. The Buddha's two main disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana—Moggallana supposedly being the strongest

in psychic power—was actually murdered in old age. Sariputta also died before the Buddha, and the Buddha experienced their loss. And in the end, they all died. They've all been dead for a long time, including the Buddha. All through his life, stuff happened.

Clearly the freedom and inner contentment the Buddha is talking about is something else. It's of another order altogether. And it begins by our being willing, learning how to stay awake, connected, and intimately present in the midst of the beautiful and the horrific. Both of which are difficult, actually. But the horrible stuff, the painful stuff, is generally more difficult for us to be open and present with.

This is why, when the Buddha was formulating his succinct way of describing how to awaken, what it is that keeps us caught in suffering, when he delineated his Four Noble Truths—which is what I'm talking about tonight—the first one is the truth that basically stuff happens. And it doesn't stop happening just because our hearts and minds are awakened.

I find it really interesting that of all the things the Buddha knew he could talk about, all the things he thought would free our hearts from confusion and suffering, the first thing he chooses to discuss, of only four things, is that there's a lot of anguish in this world. That our experience—our body, our mind, our feelings, other people, all experience—is basically inherently unreliable if you're looking to it for any security, any lasting happiness, any resting place whatsoever. No aspect of our experience can give us that. None. This is the first thing he chooses to tell us to free our hearts.

It's one of the reasons Buddhism sometimes superficially gets the reputation of being about suffering. But it's not—it's acknowledging the reality of things. And I think it's fascinating to look at this truth, this fact that the Buddha lays out, not conceptually or intellectually, but as a living question: how am I relating to this as a fact in my life? Never mind your whole life.

How about today? How about all those moments of sitting and walking and eating and everything that's going on today? Has anyone noticed any moments that were less than satisfying? A couple, one or two moments here and there that didn't quite meet the grade of what's expected, of the direction your practice should be going if you were making progress, of what would be possible, what is allowed within the field of experience of contentment and happiness.

If you have taken anything and put it outside of what's acceptable in the field of experience of contentment and happiness, that's the place you're lost in confusion and suffering. That's the place we're not opening to the truth. And I imagine most of us have one or two little places like that. Starting from sleepiness. We're not even talking about the big things. Starting from your knee hurting a little bit five minutes into the sitting, or a little pain in your back, or feeling kind of fearful. Not even a big thing.

So it's looking at this: even though we all know that there's disease, old age, sickness, that we die, we all know that we're going to be separated from those that we love, that we're going to be united with those that we do not love, or with experiences that we do not love—intellectually we know it. But really, just

look over the days and yourself: how do you relate when that happens?

Let's just stick to the simplicity of the retreat format, because it's the same way we relate here as how we relate in our life. But the experiences are generally easier. They're a bit smaller or a bit simpler, although just as intense. I'm not saying they're not intense, but they don't tend to have the complexity of having to decide whether to keep your job or take another one. It's more, should I move or not in the sitting? Should I go to the walking or should I have a cup of tea? The amount of energy that goes into relating to those is just the same. So it's a little easier to notice: oh, maybe it's not the situation. Maybe it's how I'm relating. That could have something to do with the discomfort here, just possibly.

So look at when something difficult, even a little difficult, happens. How strong our tendency can be in many ways to deny it or to feel that it's a mistake, a sign of failure. I mean, do you usually say when you're really suffering in a sitting, "This is a good sitting because I'm paying attention to it"? If you've been practicing for years, you might. But rarely do people come out of a sitting where they're restless and sleepy and their back hurts and they can't stay present and say, "Well, that was a really good sitting." Now, if it's pleasant, it's probably a good sitting, you know, because something nice is happening.

And we tend to internalize our suffering or deny it. We had a conversation in one of the interviews today about the many different ways we try to pretend we're being mindful of suffering—whether it's pain or grief or fear—but really we're saying, "Okay, I'll be with you as long as you go away." A kind of bargaining, a kind of basic denial, a kind of superficial mindfulness, or "I look at you but not really completely open to you." All these different things.

And I think a lot of it is because we haven't quite accepted that the difficult and the beautiful are both just constantly changing parts of life. It's not a personal failure when we get sick, or when the breath gets choppy, or when we have a fantasy. It's just what's happening in that moment. The tendency to deny, to deny by trying to shut out suffering—our own or another's—is so deep that it's actually quite amazing.

I'll tell you a little story that happened to me. Some years ago, I was in the hospital, had been for a few days, and I was on IVs. You know how over time your veins kind of collapse, and so they were trying to put in a new IV and couldn't quite get it. So it's painful. You're not going to die from it, but it's not so pleasant. The nurses couldn't do it—two, three, four times they couldn't do it. So this nurse was dripping sweat, and she ran out in the hall and grabbed the doctor and brought him in to do it. And I was sort of out of it, but enough to think, "Now I'm really in trouble." Because who does the IVs? The nurses. Doctors don't do IVs. So if they're bringing in the doctor, I'm really in trouble.

So this guy was jabbing around, trying to do it. It wasn't a good scene. And I was a bit afraid. And I didn't say anything, but little tears just kind of rolled down. And he looked at me—it was so amazing—and he said, "What's the matter with you? It doesn't hurt."

I remember that because it's classic. If he let in—now let's say this is my projection, right? Maybe he

thought it didn't hurt. But if he let in that in his good intention, trying to help me, he was clearly not doing a good job of it, knowing that, seeing my pain—if he let that in, it's so painful to feel that. So really his own pain couldn't do it. It's not okay. We're afraid of it, and that fear can bring down such a barrier that we become completely out of touch with ourselves, with another.

You see how, if we want to talk about living an awake life, we can't shut down to the pain, just like we don't shut down to the joy either. But we somehow aren't allowed to shut down selectively. We shut down to one, we shut down to all.

A lot of people have mentioned that wanting really to open their heart is part of the sense of this retreat. And the corollary, which people have also mentioned—opening your heart, you're much more vulnerable. That's right. There is no way around that one. There is no way around that one. And freedom isn't a way around it either. Freedom gives us the courage and the understanding that we don't need to fear or deny or even react so much to the difficult, because we don't take it so personally and we don't take it so tragically because we know it's part of life and it isn't going to last. Nothing lasts.

That's sort of the other aspect of this First Noble Truth. Not only that there's physical pain, disease, death—there's also beauty, happiness, joy, and love. But another aspect of the dukkha, the unreliability, the unsatisfactory quality, is that nothing really lasts very long.

When I first heard the Four Noble Truths many years ago, when I first started practicing, so that I could understand what was being said—I know I didn't really get it the first time I heard it. I started practicing at about nineteen. And I had had a life that was basically kind of average, middle-class, suburban, no great suffering or trauma in my personal life. But there was that fifties culture, you know, the Donna Reed show and such, where everything was sort of nicey-nicey and you just didn't really talk about other things. The mother of my friend down the street who committed suicide—we sort of knew that happened, but it wasn't really brought out in the open.

So when I first started practicing, it was out of this deep sense of, really it was understanding on some cellular level, dukkha—that things were unreliable, that just going after some kind of sense of pleasure or status or whatever didn't quite make sense because it all just vanished. And that I was truly not happy. But I couldn't look at anything in my life to complain about. You know what I mean?

So when I first heard this truth, it wasn't depressing. It was like, ah, what a relief. I'm not crazy. It's not that one has to be miserable, but that there's an inherent unreliability in experience. As long as I'm depending on my physical health, on the health or presence of my friends and family, on other people doing what I want them to do, behaving the way I think they should behave in order to keep things copacetic, in order for there to be happiness—somehow they always fail to do that. There was this sense of things falling through, and I didn't know why.

So hearing this first truth took a real burden off my heart. It's like, oh, let's just look at things the way they

really are instead of pretending that if you just live your life right, everything will be good. It's that book, *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* As if underlying that is the assumption that if I do everything right, nothing bad's going to happen. I don't think so. And it doesn't mean you're bad or you did something wrong. Things are going to happen. How we meet it is the point of freedom.

So there's this sense of noticing when we're in denial, seeing how that shuts down our heart to presence with ourself, to compassion for others, to connectedness, to appreciation of life. Just noticing it, not judging it. Noticing when it's too much and we can't open to it.

The second aspect of the First Noble Truth I want to talk about is impermanence, which in itself is neither good nor bad, just how things are. And I think it's a really interesting truth because, again, conceptually it's a pretty easy one to get—that everything's changing, that nothing really stays the same. You don't find too many people who argue with that on a conceptual level. And I know for me, I know it's true on a conceptual level. But is that how we really relate to things in our life that we like when they change? When something that's really lovely, a relationship, somehow changes and falls apart—do we say, "Well, the conditions that led to the coming together of this relationship have changed. All meetings end in partings"?

Probably not. Maybe somewhere down the road we might arrive at that understanding. But in the moment, it's much easier to see what went wrong, who's to blame, what did I do wrong. And I'm not saying there aren't things to work on. But this sense that nothing should ever change, and when it does, I blew it somehow—that sense of self-judgment, or the fear of the sadness.

I find it even poignant, the fact that beautiful things end. Also, really unbeautiful things end too. But there's a kind of poignancy, a feeling of loss, and even the Buddha spoke to that. After his two main disciples died in his old age—Moggallāna and Sāriputta—he said something to the effect that it's as if the moon and the stars have gone out of the sky. A sense of loss. It's just how it is. He didn't then go away and berate himself and beat his breast and throw the second arrow at himself and wail, "What did I do wrong? Why did they have to die?" Yes, they're here, now they're gone. It's a fact of life.

And learning to really open into this flowing, changing nature, instead of holding ourselves away from it, is actually an opening into real intimacy, joy, deep appreciation of what's happening right now. Because we're not saying, "Oh no, this is happening, I have to hold on. This is good, but how can I keep it?"—in which case, we're already away from appreciating it. But rather a sense of: yes, right now, this moment, this is what there is.

There's a good friend of ours who comes to retreats often, though I haven't seen him for a couple of years. He tells a wonderful story from his life about having had open heart surgery. He must be in his sixties. They replaced a valve in his heart, and he came out of it and was in intensive care. A day or two after the surgery, something went wrong. And I don't know if you know how it is in intensive care, where all the bells and whistles are going off, you've got a tube in every opening. It seemed really serious, and he was

about to lose consciousness, and he thought, "This really might be it. I might be about to die." Fear and panic arose. "This could be it. I might be about to die."

Now, this is a man who didn't consider himself an ace yogi, not someone who would come out of retreats saying, "Wow, I had this incredible, blissful, fantastic experience"—which you can then make yourself miserable for the next ten years trying to repeat. But who would come out of retreat saying, "You know, I'm just plodding along, just doing my work."

So he said to himself, "I'm about to die right now." Fear came pouring up. "Oh my God, what do I do?" And he said, "Well, if this is your last breath, why not be here for it?" And he just dropped into that breath. The fear went, and he was just fully present for that breath. And then he went unconscious. And he woke up.

I love that story. Ultimately, what else can we do? All experience—wonderful, awful—it's going to be gone. But the habits of mind, the tendency that we've learned, that all there really can be is fullness of presence, wholehearted intimacy in this moment, and the next moment will arise in its own time. You can take care of being present with that then.

That's really what we're practicing here. This is a laboratory for that. And I think the awareness of impermanence, rather than leading us to panic, depression, and despair, can actually free us to open into our life, into each moment of our life, with this attitude of wholehearted presence.

I've noticed in myself that one of the automatic or habitual responses of our heart and mind—we're not even aware of it—to the unreliability, to the fact that anywhere I try to put down my claim is a little bit shaky, isn't going to last, is at times almost like a panic. A kind of looking in different places for something that will be reliable, that will be trustworthy, that isn't going to change, in a maybe subtle, not quite conscious way. And I, and certainly many people I've talked to—look in yourself and see if it's true for you—also bring this mindset unconsciously to our meditation practice.

For years—and it's probably still lurking there unconsciously at times—but for years I was really conscious of this: I thought that if I practiced hard enough and long enough, what freedom meant was really some place where all the hoo-ha stopped. It was either a place of constant pleasant experience, because really, when I thought about living an enlightened life, I didn't think about having backaches and arthritic joints and having wars and such. You just kind of imagine living in a cloud of compassion and love. I didn't think about struggle. There was always some kind of ending point, I thought, where I'd finally understand everything and it would all be over.

Notice as you go through the day here, when something happens, how the mind responds—usually in a very subtle way. The mind doesn't say, "Aha, this is it! Now I've got it, and it's going to be this way forever." That would be too easy. You'd notice if the mind said that. But in a slightly more subtle way, it's: "Oh, now I get what mindfulness is supposed to feel like." Or: "Now I know what concentration is." Or: "I'm finally making progress. I've finally settled in, and now it's going along the way it should." Or even more subtle

than that. Watch out. Just be aware of that, because the heart and mind are trying to land somewhere. This sense of being on shaky ground because everything's dissolving—the thinking mind doesn't like that too much.

We like to analyze, have you noticed? We like to analyze and figure out why, and if this happens then that'll happen, and that happened last time so I can assume it's going to happen this time. And then it's all nice and neat and tidy—finished with that one. We don't like it when we hear: "You've had the same pain in your back for five days? Every time it arises, it's new. Meet it fresh."

No, we don't want to meet it fresh. "I've been looking at this for four years. I don't want to meet it fresh. I know it. I know everything about it."

We know nothing. We need to meet it as it's arising in that moment, for the first time ever. And it's passing. And another experience is arising for the first and last time ever. And it's passing. Can we bring that quality of freshness? Then we're really alive. Then there's not that clinging, not that trying to find a resting place.

There's a lovely statement by the Buddha: "He or she abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." And in another place he says it's the search for abiding that's burning and restless. Giving up of that search is cool and freeing. To search for somewhere to take a stand, for something to hold on to—that's our lack of understanding of the First Noble Truth. And that's where the suffering, the anguish, the confusion that the Buddha is speaking to comes in.

Change is just how it is. It's not good or bad. It's just how things are. Our lack of understanding, of really living from that place—that is where we truly suffer. That second dart, that second arrow. Something happens, and then we shoot another arrow at ourselves and say, "No."

Pema Chödrön, the wonderful Tibetan teacher with quite a sense of humor, once said: "Remember, whether or not you go with the flow, the flow always goes with you." We really can't step out of it.

So while the fact of change and loss, of things going away, can be truly poignant, opening to it opens us to love, to presence. This is part of a favorite poem of mine by Galway Kinnell that speaks to that. It's called "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard, as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.

I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars, even as my broken arms heal themselves around you. I've heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down." I've stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old.

Don't die." Little Maud, and yet perhaps this is the reason you cry. This the nightmare you wake crying from—being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. You cling to me hard as if clinging could save us.

And that to me is what's poignant about our understanding of impermanence. It's what's poignant to me about our whole human condition of confusion and delusion, of ignorance. It's said that what prompted the Buddha to teach after his awakening was compassion, because he could look around—and with his great psychic powers could see what was going on in everybody in the world. And seeing that the deepest wish of each human being is to truly be happy. But in our efforts to be happy, and our lack of understanding of things as they are, of just seeing things how they are, our lack of ability to do that—the things we do to try and be happy are the very things that keep us from seeing the truth, that keep us from relaxing into things as they are.

It's so poignant because things as they are—you can't change it. It's right here. There's nowhere to go. It's always accessible. And we're so busy clinging. As if clinging could save us. And it's clinging that keeps us from noticing that we could live in peace in any moment. That to me is what's so poignant. That to me is the whole point of our practice, in all the different ways we talk about it—to really recognize cellularly the facts of life. And when we recognize it, clinging doesn't make sense anymore. We don't have to uproot every moment of clinging. When you see, "Oh yeah, this is going to go. In fact, it's already going. Before I can even enunciate what it is, it's gone"—you just open up and appreciate. Clinging stops making sense.

But we cling because we think it will make us happy. Look in your experience over the days when you find yourself suffering, frustrated, somehow unhappy. Look and see—sometimes it's clinging, sometimes it's the flip side, pushing something away, wanting it to be different. But look and see then: Do I really believe in this moment what the Buddha is teaching? That if something is impermanent, it can never give me lasting happiness? It can only give transitory pleasure, the pleasure of being with something pleasant. No, it makes sense, but when I look and see, do I really believe that? When I'm clinging, no, I don't believe it. I think if I can have this—anything from another rice cake up to something really important and beautiful, my idea of an enlightenment experience, whatever it is, a child, a grandchild, a beautiful relationship, it doesn't matter what. That claim is somewhere that arises then. Nothing else did it. But *this thing* will really bring me happiness.

So we need to look and see what our mind is doing, how we're getting caught in investing somewhere, in landing in this experience.

And this brings us to the second piece, which is, again, that the cause of this anguish, this confusion, is clinging—or really, our deeply ingrained habits of mind. Both clinging and pushing away, and confusion, basically not even noticing what's happening.

But as someone said to me on the last retreat, "So let's face it, I've noticed that I'm never clinging to an unpleasant experience when it leaves." When your knee pain goes away, you probably don't experience

massive clinging and suffering about that. So it's a clue that part of our lack of understanding is rooted not just in not seeing impermanence, but also in the first aspect of the First Noble Truth—that pleasant experience is basically good, and unpleasant experience is wrong or bad or a mistake, and neutral experience, well, it doesn't even exist.

In our not noticing that, and the way the Buddha describes experience—experience just meaning our sense experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling sensations of the body, and the whole mental realm, thoughts, emotions. The mind is considered the sixth sense. And that's all that's happening. Those sense experiences, over and over and over. And they're just changing really rapidly, and they're moving back and forth between pleasant and unpleasant and neutral. When you break it down like that, things stop seeming quite so exciting.

Like Sayadaw U Pandita said to me, "What do you want? Something else to note?" Because I was complaining about what was happening. "You can note this, or you can note that. What's the difference?" When I heard that, I thought, sharing things, it really doesn't matter what's happening. That's what you need. If it's not this, it's that. And this is going to change anyway.

And it'll turn to that. And if it's pleasant now, it's going to change to unpleasant. And then it'll change to pleasant. And then it'll be neutral. And then it'll be pleasant. And then it'll be neutral. And then it'll be unpleasant. Really pay attention moment to moment—that's all that's going on.

You really stop getting quite so reactive to things when you begin to notice how fast they're changing, that how much I prefer pleasant really doesn't matter, because you're going to get pleasant, you're going to get unpleasant. I can fight it or not. Those are our basic choices.

It's interesting to begin to look and see how deeply ingrained the habit of our mind is to evaluate experience in terms of how pleasant or unpleasant it is. So again, just noticing. When something's pleasant, we usually don't think there's a mistake, or that we've stopped, or started going backwards in our practice or in our life.

In a subtle way—and I see this going on more and more subtly in my practice, in my life—this whole process where I think I'm just noticing things, letting it be, it comes, it goes, I like it, I don't like it, letting it be. But then I'll notice something very, very subtle: I've started trying to aim my experience towards having some pleasant meditation experience arise. It's so subtle, this habit, to think somehow that's better.

And really, freedom is about just being aware—without identifying, without getting lost in this reactivity to whatever's happening. But if you look at it, we aim so much of our life... how many of our decisions have we made on the basis of pleasant experience, or of hoping to have more pleasant experience? It's a little shocking sometimes if you look at it.

I'll read you this story about the Buddha's attendant, Ananda. You've probably heard of Ananda. He was the Buddha's cousin, and for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life, he was his main attendant.

He's a great character in all the Buddhist texts because he comes across as being very human. He's partially awakened, but not completely awakened. He's a totally generous, loving, compassionate man, and he's always the one interceding for people who come, trying to get them in to see the Buddha, trying to help people. And he's always the one who says, "I don't quite get it." There are many suttas where Ananda will say something and the Buddha will say, "Not so, Ananda," and then correct it a little bit. So one warms to Ananda.

Anyway, this is just a nice story about him. He was sent by the Buddha on a mission, and he passed by a well near a village and saw Pakati, a young outcast woman, and asked her for water to drink. Now, some background: in India at that time the caste system was very strong, and there were very strict rules about outcasts. They weren't supposed to touch people of higher castes. You couldn't even give water to someone of a higher caste. And a monk isn't allowed to ask for anything except water—that's the only thing he could ask for.

Pakati said, "O monk, I am too humbly born to give you water. Do not ask any service of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste"—meaning contaminated just because she handed him water.

And Ananda replied, "I ask not for caste but for water."

And the woman's heart leapt joyfully, and she gave Ananda water. She thanked him, and he went away, but she followed him at a distance. Having heard that Ananda was a disciple of the Buddha, the woman went to the Buddha and said, "O 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, for I love Ananda."

So you see how easily some pleasant experience could completely guide a person's life. He was nice to me for one minute—I love him. I want to devote the rest of my life to him.

And the Buddha, being wise, understood the emotions of her heart, and he said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you don't 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."

That's a nice story. But the message I get out of it is how easily we misplace our pleasure and pleasant feeling and build a whole life story around it. We think, "Oh, that's really nice."

He's kind. That feels really good. And then go and act like that to someone else. But no—I'll follow him for the rest of my life.

So noticing pleasant feeling is wonderful. Appreciate it. But it's going to go. It's nothing to build a life around. It's nothing to build a meditation around. It's just as much a part of life as unpleasant or neutral.

See if you notice anything neutral. It's getting really hard in this culture to find anything neutral. The breath once in a while, your steps—they're much more neutral than the beauty of the environment. Just

see if you can notice it occasionally. That's all.

So our awareness practice is to begin noticing these habits of our mind, not with judgment. It's just how we've been conditioned. But in the noticing of them, we don't have to be like robots, driven by craving for the pleasant, driven by moving away from the unpleasant, judging our experience and our life in those terms, spacing out and looking for intensity when something neutral happens.

It's been an interesting phenomenon for me to notice over the years of teaching retreats and talking with people in the middle of them. Often on long retreats—I teach a three-month retreat every year—the same dynamics unfold, only stretched across three months. On the second day, people feel exactly how you do: "Oh my God, three months." But it changes.

There come places where the mind gets more quiet, more neutral. It's not always huge highs and lows. People come in saying, "My God, nothing's happening. I'm so bored," or "I'm afraid." Then they return the next week saying, "Oh, I get it—it's calm. I get it—it's peace." But we almost can't recognize or appreciate it when we're so hyper-stimulated. That's part of the dullness of the first couple of days of retreat. The mind is either stimulated or it's bedtime. After a while, the energy returns and we can engage with more subtlety, actually coming to love the calmness and peace. But at first we don't even recognize it, because we're oriented toward pleasure. That's how we've been trained. That's what our culture constantly tells us—though not just our culture. The Buddha was teaching about this same tendency thousands of years ago.

When we don't examine our habits, we tend to think it's the change that causes our anger. Something pleasant goes away and we're stuck with something we don't like. We believe it's the pain causing our anger. But actually, when we begin to pay attention, we see that it's our misunderstanding of the way things are that creates the anger. It's our reactions to what's happening. What's happening isn't really that important.

In terms of freedom, of course, how we act and respond in our lives matters. I'm not suggesting we fall into some emptiness where nothing we do has significance. But in terms of freedom, getting what we want and getting rid of what we don't want is not the path. Being able to be really present without getting lost in reactivity—that is the place of real, intimate connection with ourselves and with life. That is the real opening into peace. A peace that's always available, but which we ignore because we're so entranced by our reactions to experience.

Really look at the stuff that goes on throughout the day—the sensations and the thoughts about them, the emotions, the future projections, the past memories. Sometimes, when I'm in a humorous mood with myself, I notice: no matter what happens, within two seconds it's turned into "How does this affect me?" Me, the center of every single thing. How everybody walks by, whether someone flushes the toilet, how everyone eats in the dining room—everything that happens all day is assessed and reacted to in terms of how it affects me. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. I like it, I don't like it.

It's really quite something when you look at it closely. But you can't take it personally.

It's just our habit.

There's an image I really like about how we're so involved in our reactions that it keeps us from recognizing the peace that's here when we stop getting so involved and just land in openness. It's as if we're in prison, and we're trying to make ourselves as comfortable as possible. You might find some relations to how it's been the last couple of days here. You're in this room and you're doing everything you can to get comfortable—fixing the furniture, turning up the heat, working out your little routines, straightening the pictures on the wall, writing notes to Lynn, finding the right time to go up to the lunch table, early, late, middle, how to avoid the lines. Believe me, I've spent a lot of time in retreats and really have seen all the angles.

We spend so much time with that, that we fail to notice that the door is wide open and we could walk out any time. We just don't even notice because the picture's a little askew and maybe there's some way I could get a more comfortable blanket and maybe I could just adjust the heat a little bit. And this big empty space—there isn't anything really gripping to notice about it. I mean, there's nothing really there, is there? It's just space. We're more pulled to things we can react to.

So what goes on as we begin to see that everything changes? Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral are going to come and go. We don't have to fight the unpleasant. We don't have to hold on to the pleasant. Just let go. The space becomes more and more inviting—whether we experience it as space or silence, or ease, or quietness, or love, or connectedness, or unity.

There's a lovely phrase from the Buddha: "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by me, namely liberation of the heart from clinging." Just letting go of being so involved in all our assessments and reactions and interpretations and analyses and likes and dislikes. Letting go and then learning how to really be intimately present, wholly present. Not letting go and spacing out somewhere, but really being here.

It doesn't matter then if there's a headache, if your back hurts, that there's deep suffering in this world. Sometimes it's me, sometimes it's others, sometimes it's all the different kinds. It doesn't change any of that. But this peace, this heart of non-clinging, is always accessible. And it's not like we have to have some amazing meditation state. It's just those moments when we're really present and awake and the heart and mind are strong for a minute. Just stop trying to fix everything, to manipulate everything, to control everything—which doesn't work anyway, but somehow we don't get it.

A Tibetan text speaks about this peace. It's not really a state, even. If you look for a state, it's so hard to talk about, because then you look for some state and we're back on the wheel again.

"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 this state—the Buddha mind, Buddha heart—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."

That's a mindfulness practice: liberated by resting at ease in whatever happens. We're practicing how to do that. And that's the Fourth Noble Truth, the path—really, the Eightfold Path. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, the core of it is mindfulness, the ability to be fully present, connected, resting at ease in whatever happens, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

Without mindfulness, we're just drawn by the habits of mind. With mindfulness, there's the potential to let go and really appreciate the beauty, appreciate the unity we have with others in our suffering. Just appreciate the beauty of this fleeting moment, and then be just as present for this next moment.

Without mindfulness, we're like this: There's a great sutta from the Buddha where he describes what we're like with and without mindfulness. He says, imagine six different types of animals all tied together—a snake, a crocodile, a bird like an eagle, a dog, a hyena, and a monkey. They're each tied on a rope, and then it's all tied in one big knot in the middle. You can imagine—they're all just pulling in every direction. Each tries to pull toward their own habitat. The snake pulls to the ground, the crocodile pulls to the water, the monkey pulls to the tree, and they're just being pulled in this mass back and forth. The strongest one at the moment will win.

Probably the crocodile drags them all into the water.

The Buddha is saying that for a person whose mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of the mind, mindfulness of the six senses is undeveloped and unpracticed, life is just like that. Our six senses are like those six animals. The eye struggles to reach pleasing forms, and unpleasing forms are considered repulsive. The nose struggles to reach pleasing odors, and unpleasing odors are considered repulsive. The tongue struggles for pleasing flavors, the body struggles for pleasing sensations, the mind struggles for pleasing mental states—and the unpleasant ones are considered repulsive.

Without mindfulness, that's how we're living our lives. The six senses just running after pleasant and away from unpleasant, one after the other after the other. It's exhausting.

But the Buddha says that one who has established mindfulness of the body dwells with a mind and heart unlimited. Such a one understands as it really is the liberation of the heart, the liberation of mind, the liberation by wisdom. You dwell with a heart and mind unlimited.

Mindfulness is like a stake that you put in the ground. The animals can't go anywhere—they just quiet down, lie down, and come to rest. I like that image.

So that's a practice. And it is a practice—to learn how to be that presence, just for a moment, without getting so entranced by our reactions, by our fears, by being pulled hither and thither by pleasant and

unpleasant. To find that place of ease and freedom, resting at ease in whatever arises.

We have some more days ahead, with many, many moments each day. And no matter what's happening—no matter what's happening—it doesn't matter. It's an opportunity to find that place of resting at ease. Really, no matter what's happening at any moment of the day. And if you miss it in this moment, that's okay. Because now there's this moment. It's always available to you.

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