The Facts of Life

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:28

It came up in some of the discussions today, and I think it's by no means an unusual discovery—being a little bemused upon realizing that we come to retreat, especially if it's your first retreat, thinking we're going to get away from the hustle and bustle and pain of our lives. And as you've discovered, guess what comes with us? That's not a mistake.

What I want to talk about tonight is really the way the Buddha described the facts of life and the potential for our freedom. I think a lot of our confusion and struggle comes from our ideas—perhaps unformed even in our own minds—of what we're actually expecting freedom or happiness, inner contentment, peace, whatever word you use, to feel like, to look like, to be like. Because if you're looking for a different reality from this one, a nice, happy, safe, secure place, you're not going to find it.

When we look at the Buddha's life after he was awakened—the supremely awakened one, free from anguish, free from confusion and suffering—he spent forty-five years teaching. But if you look at his life, stuff happened. He wasn't just drifting on a cloud for forty-five years. He was walking barefoot all around northern India, begging for food.

In terms of things that happened, he had physical problems. He had headaches. He had backaches. There are suttas where he says, "Ananda, you give the talk. I have to go lie down and rest my back." He didn't give him a day's warning either.

There were wars going on between clansmen—his own clansmen from his father's and his mother's clans—and they would be killing each other over water rights. How would you like it if all your in-laws were killing each other and you had to go and try to stop it? Everything wasn't groovy.

There was quarreling within the Sangha. There are many suttas, and a lot of the monks' and nuns' rules come about from times when one of the monastics would see another one doing something and run to the Buddha and tell on them, basically. "So-and-so is doing thus and so. It doesn't seem good." Often it was appropriate, but there's definitely this little element of envy and all of that.

His two main disciples, Mahamoggalana and Mahasariputta—next to him, I guess, the most awakened, the wisest—Mahamoggalana, in his old age, was murdered. And both Sariputta and Moggallana died before the Buddha did. There's a lovely sutta where he's saying it was as if the sun and the moon had fallen out of the sky when they died. So he noticed that they were gone.

And his cousin Devadatta, who was very jealous of him, continually tried to sow seeds of discord in the Sangha and divide it, and actually tried to kill the Buddha. The Buddha's life was attempted to be taken. So

it's not as if everything pleasant was in his life. And in the end, he died. They all died. Everybody died. That's what happens.

Looking to the Buddha's life—the supremely awakened, peaceful one, which he was—we have to see that inner contentment, true liberation of heart, must be about something else than having the perfect life, than having everything be the way we want it to be.

So what could that be?

The way the Buddha introduces what it could be is by having us let our hearts and minds, our vision, open to be able to live face to face with things as they are, rather than as we might wish them to be or think they ought to be if we did things right.

When he lays out his Four Noble Truths, the basic facts of life, the first one, as most of you are very familiar with, is that there is unsatisfactoriness in this world, in our bodies, in our minds. There's birth, which is suffering if you think about it. There's decay. Old age, sickness, death. There's separation from those we love and from things we like. There's having to be brought together with those we don't love and things we don't like. This is what happens.

It's not the only thing that happens. Luckily, there's beauty and joy and love and happiness within this realm of form.

But there is not a way of not having unpleasant experience arise. And if you stop and think about it—which obviously I have, a lot—you need to consider: okay, we all nod, sure, there's birth and death, we get sick, we have to be with things we don't like. But is that the way we really meet these experiences when they arise?

You don't have to think far. Just cast your mind back over today. That's as far as most of us need to go. If you're one of those for whom today was a good day, you can look at yesterday. We really don't have to go far to see that we're going to come face to face with difficult, painful, unliked experiences. And how did we relate to them?

I think the Buddha's not saying this in order to bring us down, not in order to say life is miserable, suffer. It's really to wake us up to see: how do we relate to this? The fact that things are unreliable, that they're in constant change, that there is difficulty—we think we accept it, but do we?

The denial is so amazing. Just the denial of the fact of pain, of suffering, that things happen that we don't like. How much of the unpleasantness that has come up in your body or mind or in the surroundings today has your mind greeted as a mistake, or your fault because you're not mindful enough? If you were more mindful, this unpleasant thing wouldn't be happening. Well, I've got news for you. As we get more mindful, we actually begin to notice not only more joy, but also more of the unpleasant things that we've been in total denial about. Our denial mechanism is huge. Witness Michelle's story with her ice cake the

other night. It's amazing.

I'll tell you another one. I really like this story because it's just so flat-out denial. Quite some years ago, maybe twelve years ago, I was in the hospital for some days and I was on an IV. I had some big infection. And you know how after a few days, the veins sort of collapse and it gets harder and harder to keep putting in the IV. So this one time, the nurse was trying repeatedly and failing, and she's sweating. It hurts. It's not a pleasant experience—you wouldn't call it that. And I could tell she started, in a little way, to panic. It's hard to know you're hurting someone, especially when your intention—her intention—is to help.

She finally kind of gave up and ran out in the hall and grabbed the nearest doctor who was passing by. And I wasn't completely cogent, but I was cogent enough to know that now I was really in trouble. Because who practices and puts in the IVs, huh? Have you ever had the doctor, the surgeon, come in and put in your IV? Not too often. So I was like, okay, right, just be cool, be calm.

And the doctor had the same problem. I wasn't my most equanimous. I didn't say anything, but just little tears trickled down. And he looked at me with such an expression and goes, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

It's just so amazing. And I could understand how hard it is to let in—if you really let in that it was hurting me—the pain of knowing that with really kind intentions, you're hurting somebody. That's so hard. It's hard for us to be connected and open-hearted in the face of painful experience, physical or emotional. It is hard for us. And so a lot of the time, we don't even know that we're blocking it out.

And that's just flat-out obvious pain. I mean, that's the most obvious, and we can deny it. So not to get down on ourselves about it, but I really think that this first truth of the Buddha's that he enunciated—certainly how it works for me—is as an invitation into my own experience. Not a philosophical point of debate. I mean, we can debate that, but for me, the point is that it brings our awareness in to look and see.

And when I first heard this years and years ago, when I first began to sort of understand—oh, like stuff happens, it's not my fault—

When I was first introduced to the Dharma, I was about nineteen, and up until that time I had lived what you might call the 1950s storybook picture of America—the middle-class, suburban, happy life. My family stayed together. My parents weren't abusive. You just didn't talk about certain things: our friend's mother who committed suicide down the road, or the divorce up the street, or my friend whose father had left when she was a kid and she never met him, or the fact that my mother never even met her own father. You didn't talk about it. Everything was happy, happy.

I actually couldn't point to anything that was really bad in my own life. And I had imbibed the idea that you grow up, do whatever you do, get a career, and then you have this happily-ever-after life—like the

Donna Reed show on television, or the way all the movies end, going off into this happy cloud where nothing bad ever happens again.

I don't know if this will resonate—I'm really showing my age here—but when I was young, there was this sense that everything's good, nothing's bad. We don't talk about unhappiness. And my mother took me to see this Walt Disney movie called *Old Yeller*. I don't know if you remember it. It traumatized me for years.

It's this loving family with their golden lab, this wonderful, perfect dog. Everybody loves everybody. And in the end, the dog saves the little boy from getting attacked by a rabid squirrel. Then the father has to shoot the dog because he has rabies. Walt Disney traumatized me! Because I thought everything ends happy all the time if people are nice. And it just didn't fit with my worldview.

So when I heard about the First Noble Truth—oh yes, this is part of the facts of life: there's unhappiness, there's death, things you love go away, sometimes you have to be with things you don't like, and everything is changing all the time—I felt this huge sense of relief. *Oh, I'm not crazy.* It's okay that I'm not happy every minute, and I don't have to keep pretending. For me, being an aversive-type personality, this was an enormous relief.

So that really, I think, is the beginning of freedom—just to see, to come face to face with the truth that things aren't always the way we want them. Then it becomes a question of how do we relate, rather than *what's wrong with me? What's wrong with things? Am I crazy?* We begin to stop our lifelong habit of running and hiding from pain, or from the unpleasant, or hating ourselves when something happens that we think we should have been able to avoid.

On one retreat, a man was telling me in an interview how he'd been seeing aversion in his mind all day—aversion to experiences he was having, to feelings in his body, to thoughts. Just aversion to so many things. And he was labeling everything he was aversive to as "bad." *This is bad, this is good.* Suddenly he stopped and said, "Wow. So much of my experience has been bad today. So what I'm saying is that much of my life is bad." And then he said, "No, that just isn't true. It's just part of how it is. Sometimes unpleasant, sometimes pleasant." That realization took a huge burden of judgment and negativity off the way he was relating to his life. It's just part of life.

Someone told me—this is apocryphal, I don't know if it's true, but she said it was—that Robin Williams, the comedian, has already had his tombstone engraved, and on it it says, "I knew this was going to happen." He's a step ahead of us. When we know it, we can stop being afraid. We can start to actually live each moment as it presents itself, instead of holding on, planning for the next moment.

So there's this dimension of being together with what we don't like, and there's also the quality of unreliability, the changing nature, the fact of impermanence—which is also included in this First Noble Truth. Again, we all know everything changes. But if we really knew that, how would we live? I think we would live very differently.

On a retreat we were doing together, focused on this subject of impermanence for a week, someone said on reflection—when I asked her, "How would you live if you really understood and accepted impermanence?"—she said, "You know, I would stop being afraid." Because when we know it's going to change, while we don't fear it, we can relax into here and now. Sure, there's a poignancy to change. That's okay. But we don't have to grip so blindly.

I think one of the reasons for the denial of change on a deep level is this very poignancy, this sadness—which maybe doesn't feel quite okay to feel. But it's fine. Let the poignancy in.

This is my favorite part of a poem I love, because it touches for me that place of love and knowing things change, and the poignancy of clinging. It's by Galway Kinnell. I'm just going to read part of it. The poem is 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 have 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.

We are forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. It's poignant. It doesn't have to be awful.

When we can relax into that moment just as it is, without needing to cling or change or look back at the last moment—there's a kind of peace there. But I think, at least I certainly notice in myself, one response to this constant change, this unreliability, these shifting sands, is to look quietly but frantically, moment after moment, for some steady, unchanging place to abide. Whether it's a physical experience, an emotional experience—how much do we try to manage and control our lives so we get everything just so? Ah, finally!

In a small way, it's like when you finally get the house all clean. How long does it last? This used to drive me crazy. It lasts two seconds, and then it starts getting dirty again. That's a small example, but I think we're doing that all the time—always looking for some place to abide, to rest and say, "Here." And it's that very looking for an abiding place that keeps us suffering, off balance, and fearful.

The Buddha said once, "He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." It might not be what we had in

mind, because our minds only know what they already know. You know Krishnamurti's famous book, *Fre edom from the Known*. We can only imagine what we already know in some way. So to rest in peace—"he abides in peace who does not abide anywhere"—it really is the peace of letting go of that frantic searching.

But we won't, and we can't, let go. We can't even have a concept of it until our heart begins to understand through experience how much the searching itself is creating the suffering, the anguish, that feeling of being off balance. Because it's not the fact that things change. It's our resistance to that fact that's actually so poignant and scary and awkward.

Nyoshul Khenpo, a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said once, "Remember, whether or not you go with the flow, the flow always goes with you." We can't actually step outside of that. But we can start to just look and see, "Oh yes, that's what's happening." We can feel the poignancy. We don't have to fear it. As someone said, "Let's face it, I don't fear it when unpleasant experience is going away. It's only the pleasant ones that I'm holding on to." There's something important to notice about that.

So you might be thinking, who wants to look this closely? Maybe denial is ignorance, but it was working okay in a lot of situations. And often, on our journey, on our spiritual path, we hit moments where we say, "Oh God, I wish I could go back to not seeing quite so clearly." Because I meant it—even though you laughed and I sort of said it in a joking way—as mindfulness strengthens, as our ability to be present for whatever is strengthens, we will be so much more at ease and happy, but we will also be much more aware of the unpleasant and the changing nature. That actually brings us to freedom, believe it or not.

Knowing things the way they are is what releases our heart and mind from this fruitless clinging, this fruitless searching for steady state in a world that is totally unsteady state. But the way out is in, and we go in kicking and screaming most of the time.

So looking at this first truth, it's a wake-up call—really a wake-up call—not just something to be demoralized about. As Ajahn Chah said, "There's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering." The difference is in the way we relate to the difficult, the painful, the poignant experience.

And that's the second truth, the second fact that the Buddha describes. What is it that's the cause of the suffering? The anguish? Not the fact that there's unpleasant experience, but how our hearts and minds relate to experience—this is the place of bondage or freedom. It's the place where understanding can really begin to flower.

So how is the Buddha different from us?

He went through experiences after his awakening, and if you believe that he was a human being, then his awakening holds the same potential for us to awaken. He wasn't some kind of divine being with different factors making up his mind and body.

So in his awakening, in going through these difficult experiences, what would be a way of describing how he was different from us? Or different from me—I don't want to project onto all of you.

One simple way I want to talk about it is in how he related his understanding: that it's the clinging, the aversions, the longing for things to be different, the denial—all these reactions to the bare facts of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral experience—and then our total entrancement with those reactions. Look at it: we're completely entranced with how much we don't like something, or how much we like something, how involved we get. We go from an unpleasant sound to the history of our life in two seconds. Completely involved. So entranced that we don't even know it's happening—which I'll go into in detail.

So it's our reactions, our identification with them, and the total entrancement that sends us off and running with them—this is what hides the way things are from us and obscures the potential for really living in contentment, in peace, with things as they are. It obscures the potential for rediscovering, resting in, and trusting the radiant mind, our basic goodness, as Chögyam Trungpa calls it.

This is not a state that you can get and hold on to and rest in. There is no steady state of heart and mind. Rather, it's an attitude that can arise no matter what state is coming in our body or in our mind.

The peace, the freedom, the happiness of the Buddha has nothing to do with what's arising in your experience right now. Freedom has nothing to do with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience. It really doesn't matter. And it's the hardest thing for us to really believe. When you come in and you've had one of these crummy sittings, and all this stuff is coming up, and yesterday it was so clear—we say, "Oh yeah, fine. Yesterday was clear. Now it's really painful. Those are both good. Just pay attention." And you think, "Yeah, right." We don't really believe that very well. But the fact is, it's true. Freedom has nothing to do with the particular experience that's happening. It's everything to do with the relationship to it.

Someone came in and said—I think it was this retreat—she was really getting at the understanding that pleasure, the experiencing of pleasant feeling, is not the same as happiness. Pleasure is pleasure. Sure, it's nice. If we had a choice, we'd probably take pleasure over displeasure. We can tell the difference. The Buddha could tell the difference too, I think. We're not heading toward some dull neutrality. But we're also not getting into all those reactions.

And that allows us to turn away from our entrancement with our reactions and ourselves and our stories—everything—and actually come to live in this moment with total intimacy, wakefulness, a loving, awake presence that can allow us again and again to glimpse, with more or less depth, the true radiant nature of our mind, our heart. Big mind-heart, not this little heart. The radiant nature of what we truly are.

In the process of this shift from our habitual reactive mind to opening into whatever is happening this moment with totality of presence and intimacy—yes, we are more aware of the unpleasant and more aware of the beautiful, the joyful. As someone was saying today, it was really beautiful: in the midst of a

very difficult day, one little experience that we normally would completely overlook—in the middle of all the difficulty she said, "You know, this doesn't seem like much of an experience," but it was giving her so much joy.

Like the flowers. Franz and I planted a couple of peony bushes last year, little new ones. Two days ago, Monday, one of them bloomed for the first time. Now, for some reason, that day hadn't been a particularly joyful day. It was really hot, I forget what was going on. But I wasn't dancing in joy through the day. And just seeing that flower open over the course of a couple of hours brought so much happiness and joy.

When we're more present, it doesn't take winning the lottery to feel joy. We can be really present for suffering and then something just lovely happens and we're really present for that. There's this immediacy, this vitality of presence—all of life becomes so much richer in the little things. In the little things.

When we're not afraid of impermanence, we're really here.

This is called "Living" by Denise Levertov:

The fire in leaf and grass, so green it seems each summer the last summer. The wind blowing, the leaves shivering in the sun, each day the last day. A red salamander, so cold and so easy to catch, dreamily moves his delicate feet and long tail. I hold my hand open for him to go, each minute the last minute.

You get a feeling of the presence in that poem. She's not saying, "Oh my God, each minute the last minute!" with panic. It's more like: if this is the last minute, let me really be here for it.

I have a story about a friend of mine, a man who's been coming to retreats on the West Coast for some years. He told us this a couple of years ago. He must be in his mid to late sixties, very hardworking. He said he'd had open heart surgery—he had to have a valve replaced. And he's one of these people, which I'm sure many of you can relate to, who felt that his practice was never going anywhere. No incredible bliss experiences, no wonderful jhanic concentrations, just kind of slogging through the days and the nights, year after year of meditation, trying to be mindful and getting nowhere. You can relate.

So he woke up in intensive care after the operation, which apparently had gone fine. His family was there telling him everything was okay. And then something went wrong. He said he was hooked up to machines from every orifice, and all of a sudden they all started blinking, sirens going off—which must be quite scary—nurses running. He didn't know what was wrong, but something serious was happening.

He said he noticed his mind start to go into total panic. "Oh my God, I'm going to die. This is really it"—which it very well could have been. And he saw his mind going into panic, his breathing got tight, and he said he doesn't know where it came from, but the thought arose: "Well, if this is going to be my last breath, I might as well be present for it." And he just came totally into that breath. The panic went away. He said he must have gone unconscious after that, and then he woke up and things were fine.

But you never know. We can't evaluate what's going on in our practice, but that's the quality of real presence. And each moment as the last moment isn't a scary thing—it's an invitation into being alive in this moment, because this moment is really all we have. We can plan a lot about all the next moments, but who knows what's going to happen? We really don't know what's going to arise in this next instant. Like that other night when the low water alarm went off in the middle of the sitting—no one knew that a moment before. We never know.

This moving out of our reactivity into open-hearted presence does not hide life situations. It allows us to live them more fully.

How do we get so sidetracked? Why is it that we get so caught in this clinging, which is so poignant? One way—we've touched on it, and Stephen and Susan spoke about it—is a habitual pattern so deep we mostly don't notice it: the habit of how our heart-mind relates when confronted with pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experience.

The way the Buddha described our experience is that there are six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and mind. So we can have any of those six sense experiences—thoughts and emotions, any of the five physical senses. And that's really all that's happening. Keep looking in your experience. As Jack Kornfield likes to say, just these six things are happening over and over. And if one of you experiences something else, please let us know.

First of all, just by beginning to reduce it to that, it takes a lot of the hoo-ha out, doesn't it? Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, thinking, emotion, thinking, emotion, seeing, hearing, smelling, touching. Oh, what's the big deal?

And then each of those arising one after the other, really quickly, we experience—like a sound, for example—as being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Same with touch, emotions, thoughts.

And we don't all experience things the same way, given our past conditioning and our karma. So say the sound of a crow—someone could hear it and it's pleasant for them, while it's unpleasant for me, or neutral to somebody else. And that could even be different for the same person at different times.

Now this is a relatively subtle thing, this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, and it's very fast. The habit of our mind—and in the dependent origination, the place where we can explore how suffering arises, how confusion arises—is that there's the sense contact, so there's the hearing, it's pleasant, and without awareness, immediately there's that movement: "Oh yeah, I like that, that's good," or "I want more," or "Let's keep it going." If it's unpleasant: "Oh, bad. Get away. Not good. How can we fix this?"

If it's neutral—well, have you noticed many neutral experiences? That's what happens. Neutral? Huh? I'm bored. Nothing's happening. Let's think about a really unpleasant fantasy because that's better than being neutral. God forbid. It's actually quite interesting to see how often our mind does that. I'll suffer rather than be calm and neutral.

So it happens so quickly that often we don't even know there's a difference between unpleasant and aversion. But those are two different experiences—between pleasant and clinging, between neutral and spacing out. The second is a reaction to just the bare fact of an unpleasant experience or a pleasant experience. But it's so deeply habitual in most of our minds, without mindfulness, that we not only often don't recognize it, but we can easily evaluate our whole experience, the whole tenor of our life, on the basis of how pleasant or unpleasant or neutral it is. And this is where we really get off into being entranced.

So for example, when you're evaluating your meditation so much, the good ones are the pleasant ones, the bad ones are the unpleasant ones. And when you're having pleasant ones, not too many people come in and say, "I'm useless, I'm worthless, I can't do this." But when it's unpleasant, it jumps from unpleasant to "I'm the worst yogi, I can't do this, I'm filled with doubt, this is stupid"—and self-hatred, and all this really painful stuff, just in a moment from an unpleasant experience. Neutral, we don't even notice.

We get so entranced, and we can actually act on and base our whole life on wanting pleasant and going away from unpleasant, without seeing what we're doing. Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a wonderful Thai teacher, talks a lot about pleasant feelings. He says it's so fast, it just comes and goes so quick. And he says almost everything you do in your life, the choices you make—if you really look at it, the choices you make without awareness—we do for the sake of pleasant sensation. And how long does it really last? It's a little scary when we look at how long it really lasts.

There's a story I love from the Buddha, really about Ananda, his attendant. Ananda is a really very personable character. He's the one who's very compassionate, he's the one who's always saying things, and the Buddha's kind of going, "Not so, Ananda. It's really like this." You can really empathize with him. And he was very kind.

So in this story, he was off on a mission for the Buddha, and he passed a village well, and he was very thirsty. At the well was Pakati, a young outcast woman, and he asked her for water to drink—one of the few things a monk was allowed to ask for was water. You must remember that in India at that time, the caste system was really strong. An outcast couldn't even touch something and hand it to someone of higher caste. It was that strong.

So Pakati said, "Oh monk, I am too humbly born to give you water to drink. Do not ask any service of me lest your holiness be contaminated, for I am of low caste." She had so thoroughly bought into this system. And Ananda replied, "I ask not for your caste, but for water." And the woman's heart leapt joyfully and she gave Ananda water. He thanked her and went away, but she followed him at a distance.

She found out he was the Buddha's attendant, and she went to the Buddha and said, "Oh Lord, help me. Let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells so that I may see him and minister unto him for my life, because I love Ananda." And the Buddha—he could understand her emotions and her heart—said, "Pakati, your heart is full of love, but you don't understand your own emotions. It's not

Ananda that you love, but his kindness."

Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice toward you and practice it towards others.

Sweet, isn't it? But mistaking that pleasant feeling she associated with Ananda, she was ready to follow him and take care of him for her whole life for the sake of that pleasant feeling, without being able to understand exactly what was going on. We do that from time to time, and in ways sometimes far more confusing and destructive than that.

Or with unpleasant. Again, sometimes in the whole field of experience the mind can get so fixated on the unpleasant, and so lost in aversion to it, that we build up a whole world based on reactivity rather than clear seeing.

Have you ever had a time when part of your tooth breaks off inside? It happened to me last year while I was traveling, and I had to go for a few weeks with it just broken. You notice how the tongue cannot stay away from that place. You're sitting perfectly happy, and the tongue just has to go over there, feel how rough it is, feel how unpleasant it is, get upset. What am I going to do? My teeth are falling apart. I'm getting old. A million times a day.

Now, all the rest of my teeth didn't hurt. That's neutral. Did I notice that? No. We have one thing that's wrong and a million things that are neutral, and we don't notice those at all when we get completely fixated on the negativity. Frustration, self-doubt, judgment. And neutral? We just don't notice.

So often, actually, the entrée into calm—a kind of radiant, connected peace—begins by seeming neutral. And we so much don't know what to do with that, we bounce away, fall asleep, or create a diversion.

This is from the Buddha, really describing what we do with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Someone asks him what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person—an untaught worldling, as he says. And he's very straightforward. He says, okay, here's the difference: An unawakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, worries and grieves, laments, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught. He thus experiences two kinds of unpleasant feelings—a physical unpleasant feeling and a mental unpleasant feeling. It's as if, being shot with an arrow, he shoots himself with a second arrow.

Sound familiar? That's what an untaught, unawakened person does. You experience pain from two arrows whenever you have an unpleasant feeling.

Now, it actually goes deeper than that, into how it becomes habitual. He says that when touched by painful feeling, we develop an underlying tendency to resist that—push it away, don't feel it, resist. A lot of people have talked about seeming to come up against a wall of resistance, subtle or not so subtle, in the practice. And you're right. We've cultivated an underlying tendency to resistance to the unpleasant for most of our life. And we've got to begin to see it. That's why it's coming up. It's great that it's coming up.

So what do we do? Unpleasant? No, this is bad. We shoot ourselves with another arrow again. And the

Buddha goes on to say that unawakened people do not know of any other escape from painful feelings than to go after a pleasant sense experience. Isn't that right? And so they also inculcate the underlying tendency to crave the pleasant.

So we've cultivated these two habits—this ongoing resistance to unpleasant, and as soon as there's something unpleasant, leaping after something pleasant, lusting, wanting the pleasant, because that's the only way we know to bring us happiness. The only trouble is it doesn't work for more than the lasting time of the pleasant feeling.

The difference with an awakened person? When an awakened person experiences an unpleasant feeling, that's it. They don't create anything around it, to paraphrase Ajahn Sumedho. They don't get into resistance, and they don't go lusting after something pleasant to hide from it. Same with pleasant. Experience a pleasant feeling, that's it. Experience a pleasant feeling. The mind is calm, creating nothing around it. It's not that you don't know the difference. We just don't get into these reactions, being so entranced by them, with this ongoing tendency to move away from the present moment.

And that's what's so poignant. Our underlying tendency of resisting the unpleasant and moving towards the pleasant, totally ignoring the neutral—we're doing it without knowing we're doing it. But it's all in the service of our own real happiness and peace. None of us would do that if we really, really knew it was keeping us confused and suffering. But we don't. And I'm saying it, but I find myself doing this in subtle ways all the time. It's so ingrained when we're not paying attention to go after what's pleasant.

And the poignancy of it is that it's just this clinging and craving. It's just this pushing away, this checking out that hides from us our true potential. It's just this looking in the other direction that keeps us obscured from recognizing that freedom is right here. In fact, it's so right here that we're not usually right here enough to recognize it. We're always just a little bit leaning away.

The Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata"—meaning himself—"namely, liberation through non-clinging."

Now see, that doesn't sound so exciting, does it? Liberation through non-clinging. I want bells and whistles. I want some fireworks going off. Liberation through non-clinging? But that's the way into recognizing our potential for awakening. Non-clinging allows totality, intimacy of total presence.

Otherwise, the way we live our life is as this description from the Buddha of someone who does not have mindfulness established—because mindfulness is our way in to see what's really happening. In a moment of mindfulness, pure non-judging presence, there's no clinging, there's no aversion, there's no delusion, because it's connected. Just a quick moment. Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it "a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom." Not total absolute liberation where confusion never arises, but it's a moment of clarity. And that moment is what allows any experience to become a gateway into really recognizing our true potential.

Without that, a person without mindfulness established lives their life in this simile the Buddha offers. As if a person catches six creatures from different parts of life. Get it? Six. The six senses. Everything always matches. Eye, ear, nose, touch, taste, and mind. So as if you took a snake, a crocodile, a bird, a dog, a hyena, and a monkey. And you tied a rope around each of them, and then you tied a knot of all those ropes together. So these six animals are all tied together with a rope in the middle. And then what do they do? They all start struggling to go to where they want to go. The crocodile wants to go to the water. The bird tries to fly up. The dog tries to go to the village. The snake tries to go into the garden. And they're just all pulling any which way. And the strongest one pulls all the rest along after. So probably the crocodile takes them all down to the water.

You get the simile? He spells it out, don't worry about it. He says that is just like a person whose mindfulness is undeveloped and unpracticed. Each of those animals is like one of the six senses—the eye, the ear, the nose, the mind, the body, the taste—and they're all struggling to go after pleasant experience and all struggling to run away from unpleasant experience. And whichever one's the strongest wins. Moment after moment after moment. So eyes are often really strong. That's why when you're out doing walking meditation and that chipmunk runs across the path, seeing pleasant, boom—everything else is gone. It's like the crocodile running to the water.

Okay, so that's kind of an exhausting way to live, I would say.

But for one who has cultivated mindfulness and presence, when seeing a form with the eye, that mind is not attached to pleasing forms and is not repelled by unpleasing forms.

And the same with all the other senses. It knows pleasant from unpleasant, but it's just not attached to the pleasant, not repelled by the unpleasant. And so she is one who has established mindfulness of the body and dwells with an unlimited mind and heart. Unlimited mind and heart.

So mindfulness is really our tool. It's like a rattle, one of my teachers says. We're like two-year-olds just going after "I want this, I want that, take me over here, I want to do this." And he says, "I just shake the rattle and say, turn around, look back here. It's right here. Come home."

And that's all we're doing with our mindfulness. What's happening? Knee pain? Fine. Come home. What's happening? Sadness? Great. Come home. What's happening? Bliss? Fine. Come home.

Mindfulness doesn't say this is good, this is bad. It doesn't think this is more important to pay attention to than that. It doesn't say, "I've seen this before, therefore I don't need to pay attention to it again—I'd rather pay attention to that." Just noticing what's arising with a quality, as we talked about, of non-judging, total, kind attention. Coming back to the bare experience, not the reaction and the story and the hoo-ha we create around it. Not all the story about why that sound is so unpleasant, but coming back to the sound itself.

Ajahn Chah says the sound doesn't disturb us—it's we who go out and disturb the sound. Just stay with the

pure hearing. And bringing to it this quality of no preconceptions, a kind of wonder, such curiosity, such willingness to discover something new instead of thinking we already know. Not "I already know what the breath is like, but I'll go to it," or "I've experienced these cramps before, I know all about them, but alright, cramping, cramping." Not that. This newness, open to discovery each moment.

I'll leave you with an image that really helps me get the feeling of this quality of open-hearted attention. In Germany, I saw a documentary about Yo-Yo Ma, the famous world cellist. He has such a lovely attitude of openness. In this documentary, he was flying to Africa with his really fancy cello—I don't know how much it would cost—going to visit a tribe of Bushmen, to share music with them.

So here he is with these Bush people, and they bring out the old man who's kind of like the village shaman musician. He brings out his instrument, and Yo-Yo Ma brings out his incredible cello, and they start trading music. Now, this man's instrument was literally a round oil can with a stick coming out of it and one string or line of some kind. And he's playing along, and Yo-Yo Ma is saying, "Wow, this is so incredible. It's so beautiful, the sounds he gets, the music he gets out of this." And he was totally sincere.

Then he says, "Let's trade instruments." So he gives this old musician his million-dollar cello or whatever it is, and he, Yo-Yo Ma, tries to play on the old man's instrument. He's going, "I can't play this nearly as beautifully as he can."

And he had such a childlike, open-hearted sense of discovery and wonder and appreciation and newness. Meanwhile, we watching were sitting there thinking, "Oh yeah, an oil can with a string coming out of it." And he's saying, "Wow, what an instrument! What sounds he can get out of it! What beautiful music!"

It's really a different way to live with the same facts, with the same circumstances. It's just a difference in how we relate to them.

So that's really what we're practicing here. And it's okay that we blow it a lot of times, because every moment we have another opportunity to meet what's happening with the simplicity of open-hearted attention and wonder.

It's really a different way to live with the same facts, with the same circumstances. It's just a difference in how we relate to them.

So that's really what we're practicing here. And it's okay that we blow it a lot of times, because every moment we have another opportunity to meet what's happening with the simplicity of open-hearted attention and wonder.

Let's sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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