The Possibility of Inner Contentment

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 49:26

Tonight I wanted to offer a general overview of the possibility of inner contentment, of living in peace—the potential that was promised to us by the Buddha from his own experience, actualized by many people over the centuries, and which we can discover for ourselves over and over in a moment-to-moment way.

This contentment is a way of living in this world as it is. The Buddha once said there is no higher happiness than peace. It's not a kind of constant ecstasy or always being filled with joy, not the bubbly happiness we might think of. That happens, and it's great—it comes and goes like everything comes and goes. But the peace, the deep contentment, is a way of living as we are right now in this world as it is, highly imperfect as it is.

What the Buddha holds out to us, and what we can explore through the simplicity of this practice, is the possibility of waking up to living our lives in a different way—relating to ourselves, our experience, and the world from a different place. Living from a contentment, an ease, a harmony with ourselves and with what's arising actually allows us to act more effectively, to be more present and more responsive. This is not at all the peace of dissociation, of needing to shut oneself away forever.

I read a quotation recently from St. Augustine: "The reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home." I love that. We are not living in our true home. And what this practice is about is helping us to rediscover it. We're not creating something new. It's not that our true home or inner peace—or what Chögyam Trungpa used to call our basic goodness, a phrase I like very much—is something non-present, something we must irrevocably alter ourselves to create, or that we must somehow leave this world in order to get elsewhere. It's not so.

Rather, through shifting the way we relate, the way we understand our experience, ourselves, and the world, we live and move and trust in a different way. We come from a different place—from our basic goodness, our true home.

This is not discoverable by going elsewhere. Somewhat paradoxically, given that this world can be so troubling and painful and unsatisfying at times—our inner world, our outer world, what's going on in the world—paradoxically, we can only rediscover and reconnect with our true home by sinking totally into whatever's presenting itself here and now, but with an open, non-judging quality of heart, of attention. By really coming alive in life, in this moment, the natural radiance of who we really are is again recognizable.

It's hard to talk about, actually, true home. It's not something tangible. It's other than thoughts. It's not our

emotions. It's not our sensations, although all of that can bring us into recognition. It's indescribable, yet when you are aware of, conscious of your basic goodness—all of our basic goodness, not just mine or yours separate—it's so familiar, so simple, so obvious. Like, "Oh yeah, right." You know those moments when you think, "What's the problem? Why can't it always be like this? What was I so upset about before?" And then, of course, the next moment it's gone again.

It's so familiar that I think sometimes, especially in a meditation retreat, we're looking for something a little more far out, a little more altered, a little more fantastic, a little more definable—something you can talk about and take home and say, "This really happened and I'm advancing on my spiritual path." Rather than just this: yesterday I was walking quickly through the desert, hurrying to get to the phone to answer emails—very important stuff—and suddenly I realized I was missing the whole desert. Just a sense of presence. So simple. But in that moment there's no sense of dividedness, no me or desert, no "I should do this" or "I was being a jerk before." Just this. Not even "this moment"—just being this.

We all experience that a lot. And then it's gone. If you try to say, "Wow, this is a moment of living in my true home, of beingness," it's gone. There's nothing to make a big deal out of. But it's helpful to know it, to recognize it, and to know that it's totally trustworthy.

So a lot of our practice here is a microcosm—how many moments are there in a day? Each moment is an opportunity to again connect with fullness of presence with whatever's happening. And it doesn't matter what's happening. It doesn't matter. We don't have to like it or dislike it.

Whatever's arising can be, in that moment, the avenue to again be fully present, to recognize what another friend of mine calls "a place of no problem." Where you're just—oh, my knee is killing me, and my breath is no good, and I'm falling asleep—and there's just a moment where you stop fighting, but you're still awake. Oh, place of no problem. Then it's gone again.

So, living from our basic goodness in this world as it is. And it's hard, isn't it? I mean, this world is really painful. There's so much in our own particular lives. I talk with many, many people, and even those whose lives you could say are very fortunate—everyone has their own suffering, a lot of difficulty. And in this country, in every place I've ever been, in everything I've ever read, we don't have to say it: the injustice, the poverty, the economic imbalance, the greed, the confusion, the violence, the hatred. How can we really live with contentment and still stay open to this?

Again, it's not easy. And it comes from beginning to understand that we're defining peace and contentment in a slightly different way from our cultural norms.

A friend of mine, when I told her I was talking about inner contentment, said, "Well, anyone can have inner contentment when conditions are calm and peaceful." Think about it. That's not even true. Have you ever had a time when you went on vacation, or you finally were doing something you'd really been looking forward to, and you weren't happy? Something happened, or you had a fight with your partner, or

you get there and it's too hot, or you come here and it's too cold. All the conditions seem good, but you're still miserable. So even that you can't rely on.

But our tendency, the way one generally tends to think about contentment, is to first relate it to outer conditions. We're contented if we can somehow control our environment. That's what's great about retreats—it's a microcosm of your whole life. Often people find themselves in the first day or two, if that's your particular tendency, trying to control the environment. If that's not your tendency, believe me, you have other ones. We all do. But some people find themselves really trying to control the room, control the hall, control what they're going to wear, find their little schedule so they can walk in this way at this time to this place, and then it'll really be okay.

Controlling the environment is also a way of trying to block out the difficulty, the suffering. Some people, in living their lives and looking for happiness or contentment, are always going after pleasure and somehow avoiding—just saying, "It's too painful what's going on in this world. I don't want to know about it." Every now and then I'll talk to someone who says, "I just never read the newspapers because it's too painful." That's not what we're talking about either.

And then one can take the flip side of that, where we really are very involved in the suffering in the world, in whatever arena particularly calls us, working actively to help effect a change, but getting so involved, so over-identified, that we really start to drown in despair, in anger, in frustration—because no one can fix it all. From that place, it's really a challenge to imagine how one could live with real peace and contentment while people are still going hungry, while children are still not being educated, whatever the particular issue is that's closest to your heart.

But we're talking about something completely different. That's one of the reasons I think Buddhism has sometimes gotten the reputation of being very quiescent, very pulled back. That we go off into caves, we go off into meditation retreats, completely removed from our lives in nice places, meditate on our own for ten days, but that the peace acquired by setting up those conditions doesn't have very much to do with the rest of life. That we're just the lucky few who can do that. That Buddhism requires a removal from day-to-day suffering and is really about that removal.

It's not that either. It's true that the conditions of a retreat give us the opportunity to investigate in a much clearer way than is possible when our minds are so busy, so cluttered as they are in our daily lives. Well, I'll speak for myself. Maybe the rest of you have very quiet lives where you just do one thing at a time with a lot of space. Maybe that's possible. It's not true in mine, or anyone I know. I just read an advertisement from HBO—I didn't quite get the technicalities of it, but the drift was that they had some new thing you could get that would enable you to watch two different movies at once on two different TVs. As if this was something we should want. God forbid we should miss anything.

The Buddha's understanding of the inner contentment we're talking about here—it's very different from escapism, from avoidance. It's much more radical than what we would normally think, because this inner

contentment is always available.

It's who we are. It's our birthright, and it has nothing to do with conditions—either outer or inner. Ultimately, contentment isn't dependent on our body feeling good, or on being in a good mood, or on having people love us, or on being able to effect wholesome change where we work, in our families, in our communities. All of that is important to do, but that's not the basis for the peace of the Buddha.

The shift that allows us to recognize our true home and live from peace is exactly a shift of attitude, not a shift of conditions. And oddly enough, the attitude shift isn't one of pulling away from conditions, but of opening into, sinking deeply into what's happening. It's the shift of attitude that allows us to see things as they are rather than how we think they are. And this actually is huge. It's an immediacy of presence, a wakeful intimacy that actually allows this shift of perception, this shift of attitude that opens us into a different way of being.

Let me read you this poem because I love it. It's a little long, but to me it really speaks to our tendency to pull away from the painful, the unpleasant, our wanting to change things—and how the simple immediacy of presence, loving acceptance of what is without any dialogue about it, just as it is, opens us to a whole new way of being in that moment.

It's by Mary Oliver:

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it. Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem. But first, we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She is washing the tops of airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life, and I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen, but maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. And neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for

my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So our human potential for connectedness, for harmony, for happiness, for being able to meet ourselves and the world as it is with love and compassion—it's so close. And it can seem so far in a moment when we're having difficulty with what's happening. But the shift is just one of attitude, of how we meet what's happening in that moment.

And so in this retreat, what we're doing is having many moments where we can simply practice that wholehearted meeting—and explore as well the times when we just can't do that, when we're suffering, when we're caught, when we're reactive, when we're frustrated, whether it's with ourselves, with others, with situations. When we're longing for something. When we want things to be different.

We start out with ourselves, but it isn't a self-involved, separating practice. Because as we explore our own reactivity, our own ability to open to truth, to love, to peace, that automatically takes us out into the whole world. We see that we are the world.

This is how Thich Nhat Hanh describes the four foundations of mindfulness:

Meditation is to be aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and the world. Each day, 40,000 children die of hunger. The former superpowers still have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads. 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 of these aspects.

And it's often quite challenging. It can take a lot of courage to keep being in touch with both of these aspects. You might find you have a tendency more for one than the other. No one really likes to be with difficult stuff—but some people really notice the difficult a lot and just don't quite see that there's also a lot that's pleasant, a lot of beauty. For others, it's more the reverse. They notice their happy states, they notice the beauty in the desert, and they try to shut off the difficult. Somehow it can seem hard for us to recognize that both can be true in alternation.

If we're lucky, it's in alternation.

So we begin to cultivate a recognition of this place of no problem, of our basic goodness, this sense of ease in the moment. I've tried to describe a few such moments. Again, it's nothing special. Right now, just right now, quit trying to do anything and simply feel your body sitting there. Just notice it. Without any judgment, without any story—you're just sitting there.

Now, is that so hard? Does it take a lot of time? Does it require any great skill? No, I hope the answer is no. It's not a big deal. All we're doing is remembering to do that, to appreciate the simplicity of being present.

Yet to do that moment to moment is really hard.

I want to talk a little about the way the Buddha tried to lay out the facts to help us understand why it's so

hard. What I tend to notice is that if I just sit—okay, I'm sitting here, fine—pretty soon the mind goes off. Either it hits something painful or unpleasant: right now my back's hurting a little bit, it's so cold, I didn't like that noise, I don't like my breath, I'm feeling sleepy—and we're off in reactivity. Or we have a memory of something difficult, or we start to feel sad, and we have a difficult emotion. Or we go off just distracted. The mind simply doesn't quite know how to settle into a steady focus.

Again, it's what I was saying about how busy our lives are, this thirty-second attention span that seems to be cultivated by the media. Like it or not, it's so prevalent that it's easy to fall into it. Even with the best intentions, when things are relatively pleasant and there's no big problem, the mind is hopping off here and there. How many of your thoughts today have seemed totally useless? You know—why am I thinking this? It's not even interesting. It's not going anywhere. And then when that same thought comes up again for the fiftieth time: what is going on? Nothing. It's just the mind looking for distraction. It's not used to focusing.

So the Buddha talked a lot about this, and he gave us the Four Noble Truths. I'm going to speak about them briefly as the four facts of how things are. Not recognizing them, not accepting things as they are, keeps us in this mode of reactivity to what's arising rather than being able to land with full presence in the moment. When we meet a moment without reactivity, we can respond appropriately. We can respond from connectedness, from compassion.

The first truth is that life experience—everything that comes into our life, our body, our mind, other people—is basically unreliable. Unreliable in terms of being in constant change, in constant flux. We never really know what's going to happen in the next moment. Even with all of our plans, as carefully laid as they are, we never really know. Jack had been planning to come here for a year, and the night before he got really sick. We never know. Is he going to get better tomorrow? Is he going to get sicker? Who knows? All of us sitting here—who knows how we're going to feel tomorrow? One time here, quite some years ago, in the middle of a talk, we had a big earthquake. You never really know what's going to happen in the next moment.

That level of unreliability—we really mostly don't like to live with that too much. That's not something that makes us perk up our ears and say, "Yeah, great, that really brings me a sense of peace, a sense of rest." It's much more like, "Why is she talking about that? Okay, unreliable, sure, I know. We get sick, we die, yeah, yeah, yeah. Bad things are going to happen, yeah, yeah, yeah."

That's sort of what the Buddha's saying in this first truth. He's saying: this is how things are. It's not good or bad.

It's not your fault. It's not someone else's fault. We're not talking about blame. We're simply saying, this is how things are. Everything is constantly changing. There's no state of mind you can hold onto, no state of body. We're all going to have to deal with loss, with things not being the way we want them to be, with having to be with things we'd rather not be with—situations and people both.

Watching my parents getting old and getting sick, I notice how my mind thinks, *No, not them.* And then I think, *Hey, my dad's eighty-two. What do you expect?* It's going to happen. But still, there's the resistance.

And what's our relationship to this? Without really paying attention, our knee-jerk habitual relationship is just what keeps us suffering. The first, most obvious pattern—but one we can get caught in—is just outright denial. *I'm not sick. You're not suffering. Just pull yourself together and get over it.*

You know how it is when you're really grief-stricken, or you've been sick a long time, or something really hard is happening in your family. After a while, your friends seem to only want to hear so much. And you kind of get the feeling, *Okay, better talk about something else. I'm going to spoil the luncheon.* You don't want to talk about it on vacation because it'll bring people down—as if we could somehow hold ourselves separate.

I read this article from the Associated Press. To my mind, this is the ultimate example of trying to control and deny. The mayor of a small southern city in Spain banned death. He felt the local cemetery was too crowded for a soul to get decent eternal rest. So the four thousand residents of this village in the Granada province should "remain alive" while municipal officials shop for land to build a new graveyard. Mayor Jose Rubio, age fifty-eight, issued an edict last week ordering people—and I quote—"to take utmost care of their health so they do not die until Town Hall takes the necessary steps to acquire land suitable for our deceased to rest in glory."

Now, maybe we don't go that far. But there's something in it I could really relate to. When I have something I really want to do, I'll think, *Okay, I'll get sick later, but I can't get sick this month.* Or if I'm worried about my parents: *Okay, in November it's fine if something happens because then I can go home, but not in August because I have to be in Europe.* There's an element of denial.

Once I was in the hospital quite some years ago. I'd been there a while, and if you've ever been in the hospital getting intravenous fluids, you know that sometimes after a while the veins collapse and it gets harder to put the IV in. The nurse that particular morning was having problems. She tried it a few times, and by that point we were both stressed. She was actually more stressed than me because she hated to cause pain.

So she ran out into the corridor and collared the first doctor walking by. I thought, *Man, I'm really in trouble now,* because the nurses are the ones who put in the IVs, not the doctors. So he came in and was jabbing away. I wasn't at my most balanced, and little tears were coming down. I didn't say much, but there were tears. He looks at me and says, "What's the matter? This doesn't hurt."

And really, I could understand that. It was too painful for him to let it in—that he was hurting me, even though his intention was wholesome. He wasn't trying to hurt me; he was trying to help me. But it's so hard for us to be present and open, fully intimate with the experience of the unpleasant.

That holding ourselves away—whether through denial, through trying to change things, or through

completely going after pleasure—is what keeps us confused and suffering.

So what the Buddha's saying is not that we have to live with passive resignation: *Okay, whatever bad happens, I'm a doormat. There's nothing I can do to change things.* Not at all. But simply, in the moment, if something difficult, painful, or lost is happening—that it's happening. That's all. To be able to acknowledge with an open heart: *Yes, this is happening.* From that, we might be able to respond with a lot more wisdom, with a lot more appropriateness.

So seeing the constant change, the flux—it's actually a seeing of wisdom that brings not the kind of despair that cries, *Oh my God, there's nowhere to rest, everything's changing.* What it really brings is peace.

Because if I know this beautiful thing is going to change, I actually can appreciate it more fully rather than worrying about whether it will change. I know it will change, so I can be present. When something difficult is happening, rather than blaming myself, rather than blaming others, rather than taking it really personally, it's just: okay, this is what's happening. It's a fact of life. Can I be with the bare experience rather than all my reactions?

And notice—this is one of the ways we don't quite see change clearly—that we tend sometimes to take it personally. In myself, I feel like it's an obsessive self-referencing about everything.

For example, the weather here in the desert. I love doing retreats here because the desert is such a teacher in this regard. You never know. I've been here fifteen or sixteen springs now, and you never know how the weather's going to be. But every time—sixteen years—I never pack enough warm clothes. I always remember the first year I came when it was really warm and we were sunning ourselves. Sixteen years, and I don't get it. Franz keeps saying to me, "What's the matter with you? Pack more warm clothes." Two years ago I had to go buy a down coat at a thrift store here because it was freezing.

But it's constantly changing. You can't come here and really settle into "this is how the weather is going to be." Two days ago—we got here Tuesday night—it was really pristine. It was warm. It was beautiful. The wind wasn't blowing. And even though we could say, "Oh, we know the wind's going to start blowing sometime," we didn't really mean it. When the wind started blowing, I could see my mind going, "Oh, wouldn't you know it. Just when I come to the desert, the wind starts to blow."

That's what I mean about this obsessive self-referencing. Constant change—and how does it affect me? That's all I care about. How does it affect me? That's the source of the suffering. Take the me out of it, and it's just what it is. There's no real problem. I can walk outside, and instead of pretending it's warm because I want it to be, I can notice it's cold and put on the appropriate clothes. It took me until this afternoon to put on this jacket. So yes, it really is cold and it's staying cold—put on the jacket. Just to be really present. It's out of our control.

So how much of our suffering is about trying to control what's uncontrollable? I came here to sit with Jack and he's sick. That's just a fact. What does the mind do with that? That's the suffering—if the mind does

something with it.

And so the second fact that the Buddha talked about: the cause, really the cause of our discontent, of our dissatisfaction, of our dis-ease in this world, is not that difficult stuff happens—because it's going to—but it's the reactivity of our heart and mind to both the difficult and the beautiful. We hold on to what we like. We want it to stay, knowing it can't. We push away, we hate, we react, we blame ourselves, we blame each other, we try to control. All the permutations. And you have ten days to explore those permutations. That's an important part of the practice.

It really is. How do we react to the simple fact of what's arising? How do our reactions cause us suffering in this moment?

So often we're entranced by our reactions, by the cycling stories that we tell from our reactions, and we aren't even aware of what actually started off that reaction in the first place. We're long gone into reaction on top of reaction on top of reaction.

For example, this is a very simple thing, but pleasant. You could be sitting in the hall, getting a little bored with what's going on, and some pleasant smell comes by. You don't even really consciously recognize it. From that pleasant smell, you kind of get a nice feeling. There's a thought: "Ah, I wonder what's for lunch." And then you go back to that wonderful meal you had two weeks ago with so-and-so, and maybe you can do it again. And what are you doing sitting here? Because you could be having that wonderful meal with so-and-so, and actually it's freezing here. And you're completely gone—wanting and aversion and spacing out. You never even noticed just a simple nice smell coming through. And you're in worlds of discontent. Because wanting the pleasant that isn't here is also discontent. It keeps us from landing in our true home.

Just to connect with what is, recognizing it, the simplicity of a moment's experience for what it is—that's the place where our peace can begin.

This is from the great Buddhist teacher Phil Jackson. His book is actually quite good. I don't know if you've read it—*Sacred Hoops*, about his time training the Bulls. It's really quite good. He said: "In Zen it's said that the gap between accepting things the way they are and wishing them to be otherwise is the tenth of an inch of difference between heaven and hell. If we can accept whatever hand we've been dealt, no matter how unwelcome, the way to proceed eventually becomes clear. This is what is meant by right action: the capacity to observe what's happening and act appropriately without being distracted by our self-centered thoughts. If we rage and resist, our angry, fearful minds have trouble quieting down sufficiently to allow us to act in the most beneficial way for ourselves and for others."

That's really it in a nutshell: learning how to connect with the simplicity of our experience, using just the sensations of breath for the beginning. How much more simple could we get? And we'll move to sensations in the body and include our emotions and our thoughts and sounds and senses and everything that's happening in our experience—everything. Learning how to quiet the mind enough to connect with

the simplicity of experience and learn how to tell the difference between what's actually happening and all our interpretations and reactions. And from that place, true compassion and peace and right action become really possible.

The end of suffering that the Buddha speaks of—we can experience it in moments. It's not by separating ourselves from life. It's not by achieving some very high state of concentration or an altered state. I mean, those are nice. Those are momentary, you could call them worldly pleasure. But it's not the end of suffering the Buddha's talking about. The end of suffering is really when we have a moment where we can experience what's happening—internal, external, whatever it is—fully, openly, without resistance, without clinging, without this self-referencing of "what does it mean to me?" Simple, total presence. Here, now, this moment. That's all. Just this moment. Free of clinging and self-referencing.

And in that moment, we see how much energy in our lives goes into resistance. How much energy is caught up in wanting things to be different, in holding on to or chasing after the pleasant, in trying to arrange things so we don't experience what we don't like. It's huge. And we recognize that when there's a moment when none of that is present. There's this vivid, wakeful totality of presence—just what is—that lets us begin to trust that maybe we really are other than this mass of emotions and reactions and thoughts and body sensations. I mean, if I'm really my emotions and my thoughts, that's a really depressing thought. If we pay attention, how many emotions and thoughts have gone through today? How can we really think we're any of them? It always amazes me that I keep thinking this emotion is *me* when I know it wasn't here five minutes ago and it's going to be gone in another half hour.

But this sense of presence, of not being so self-absorbed, is not like a grim, disconnected kind of life. That's another misconception of a mind and heart that's free from clinging, of the peace of the Buddha, so to speak—that it's somehow ethereal, floating along, disconnected, dispassionate, meaning indifferent, "who cares."

But the people that I've read about or the people I meet—I can't say someone's completely awakened, I don't know that—but you know when you're with someone who seems more free, more alive, less self-obsessed. Someone who is compassionate, who is really able to roll with what's happening in life without getting so thrown by it. The people like that that I know or that I read about, they're actually some of the most joyful, alive people I've ever met.

I saw this one photograph—I don't know if I have it somewhere here. Oh yes, you probably can't see it, but it's the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They were at a conference in Virginia, University of Virginia I think, a couple of years ago, for Nobel Peace laureates. Seven or eight of the Nobel Peace laureates had been invited to this conference to try and jolt the students at this college into some sense of caring about the world outside of themselves, basically. That was the point of the conference.

But what I love is this: I think of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu as two men who have probably come face to face with more suffering in their respective lives than almost anyone. All the people that they

work with or listen to in South Africa or among the Tibetan refugees—I can hear just one or two stories and it's unbearable suffering. And for these men, it's their whole lives. Yet in this photo, they're just clowning around, completely laughing and joking. The Dalai Lama is behind Archbishop Tutu, and he's trying to pull off his cap, like little kids. Archbishop Tutu is holding it on, and they're both just cracking up. This is obviously in front of everybody, a photo opportunity, and that's how they're acting—innocent and joyful, not weighed down with the troubles of the world.

So when we begin to explore opening here and now, meeting what's happening rather than avoiding it, it might seem counterintuitive. We think, "I don't want to dive into this. This is what's causing me problems. I want to get away from it." But the actual meeting face to face with bare attention—that's what brings us into real trust, into our true home, into the ability to meet ourselves and life with much greater compassion and kindness and connectedness. To really trust that that's who we are. And that it's possible in this confused and painful world to live from a truer, more connected place that lets us actually be more present for one another. More present for ourselves.

Our practice here may not seem like it's connecting to that, especially in the beginning. Feeling your knee pain, feeling your shoulder tension, watching your breath, falling asleep, hating it. "Don't give me that. What's that got to do with living in your true home and compassion? It's just torture." But the way our mind responds to the neck pain is the way we're going to respond to something bigger in the world.

The only other concept I want to mention is that of bare attention. In other words, use that neck pain, use the coldness of the wind to begin to see how to bring our attention into the actual experience and learn to tell the difference between that and our ideas and interpretations. Sometimes we don't even know that we're mistaking our interpretation for the actual experience.

Pain in the body is a good example. Your knee starts to hurt. Do you just notice dullness or throbbing or sharpness? Do you even have a moment of that, or is it immediately, "Oh my God, here it goes. This is bad. I'm going to have to have arthroscopic surgery. These people are nuts. They're all sitting in chairs. What happened to them? I bet they really damaged themselves somewhere down the line." You don't even get to, "Oh, it's throbbing. It's actually not even that bad." When you look at it, it isn't even hurting yet, but you're already out of here.

Or the tension in the neck—is it just tightness? Or is it a sign of your high-stress, type-A personality? A sign that you're out of control in your life? That you're driven? That you've never been able to express love to anybody?

That you're doing way too much. That you yelled at your kids before you came. That everything's wrong in life. That this whole society, this whole culture is completely messed up. And in fact, you've got that guy you met who moved to Ireland and has finally found peace—that's what you need to do.

It goes pretty far pretty quickly, doesn't it?

Can you even get out of that back to simple throbbing without it meaning anything about who you are as a person? Sometimes we can, but sometimes we really can't. And in fact, we get angry at someone who tells us that it's just throbbing. Don't tell me that. I know.

So this is our practice. Just feel the bare sensation of breath without it meaning anything. It's just a sensation. It's our avenue in that moment to awareness. Whether the sensation is beautiful or ugly or tight or loose or you can't feel it or whatever—it doesn't matter. In that sensation, in the feeling of it, we're in awareness. The sensation comes and goes, but awareness is here no matter what's happening. And sensation—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, the coldness of the wind, whatever's happening—is simply our key to open into awareness again.

And in that simplicity of awareness is where we re-recognize and learn to trust what St. Augustine called our true home.

I urge you to try to be non-judgmental about whatever's going on. Just recognize that every moment is an opportunity to dwell in peace, in contentment, in really participatory intimacy with life. This moment is all the life we've got. Let's be really here with it.

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