Freedom From Conflict

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:07

Last night James talked about the power and the possibility of cultivating our sincere intention to live in a contented, happy way. And we come really to practice, I would imagine most of us, with the intention to cultivate the wholesome, really delighting in the wholesome. Why else would we do this? And yet, with our sincerest intentions, wholeheartedly, it's so common, isn't it, that we still find ourselves living in confusion, dissatisfaction, with anger, discontented. So what's going on?

This is a sutta from the Buddha that I've recently been reading and really liking. He's describing here, somewhat poetically, his own experience of dismay at seeing how humans are living. He says: "Just look at how people quarrel and fight. Let me tell you now of the kind of dismay and terror that I have felt. Seeing people struggling like fish, writhing in shallow water, in competition against one another, I became afraid. At one time, I had wanted to find some place where I could take shelter, but I never saw any such place. There is nothing in this world that is solid at base, and not a part of this world that is changeless. I have seen people trapped in mutual competition, and that is why I had felt so discontent. But then I noticed something buried deep in their hearts. I could just make it out. It's a dart. It is a dart, an arrow, that makes its victims run all over the place." He's referring to the running after sensual pleasure, the running after happiness. "But once that dart has been pulled out, all that running is finished. And so is the exhaustion that comes with it."

I really like that, first because I get a sense somehow of him as a person just really feeling this dismay at looking at all of us. I say us—we weren't around 2,500, 2,600 years ago. But it doesn't sound too different, does it? And I just like that feeling of seeing the dismay at the competition, the running around, the exhaustion that comes from that running around. And what he points to is pulling out that dart, understanding that dart.

What he's talking about here, of course, with the dart, is our old friends of confusion—of not understanding ourselves and the world as it is, as we are, of misperceiving and misconstruing what we do perceive. And that misperceiving and misconstruing is strengthened by greed and hatred, anger, wanting.

The Buddha was part of the warrior caste, brought up as a warrior and a king, and so a lot of his images are warlike images. But also, if you read the suttas, the Buddha's time had a lot of war, a lot of violence in the world. As today, there's a lot of war, a lot of violence in the world. Not only that, of course—there's also great beauty and love and compassion. But what he's pointing to is that the place to look to free ourselves from conflict, the way that we can bring freedom from conflict into the world, is by looking inside, looking into this arrow, this dart in our own hearts.

Maha Ghosananda, a Cambodian monk and peace activist who is sort of the spiritual leader of the Cambodian people, once spoke at a rally in Washington, D.C., for banning landmines. A friend told me what he said—I didn't hear it directly. He got up and said, "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts." So if we want to eradicate the landmines in the world, we must first understand, change, remove the landmines in our hearts. It's exactly the same thing that the Buddha was talking about when he's talking about these darts, these arrows.

Another sutta I like addresses this very question: if we're so seriously wanting to live in freedom, why do we keep doing stupid things, basically? It's put a little more elegantly than that, but that's what it boils down to. This is Sakka, who often appears in the suttas. He's the ruler of one of the heaven realms. In the Buddhist cosmology, there are many different realms of being—humans are only one of thirty-one or thirty-two, I forget the number. We're six from the bottom, by the way. So Sakka is the ruler of the gods, but even he's often coming down to the Buddha for teachings. And he says to the Buddha, basically: "Dear sir, what are we chained with? Even though we—humans, gods, devas—even though we think really wholeheartedly, 'May we live free from hostility, free from violence, free from rivalry, free from ill will, free from those who are hostile,' yet still, why do we continue to live in hostility, with violence, with rivalry, with ill will?"

"What are we fettered by? What is chaining our hearts?"

And the Buddha answers, and there are many different ways that he arrives at the same answer in different suttas. He says that basically we're fettered by envy and stinginess—that's his way into it here. But that's just the surface. That envy and stinginess is caused by, and this is interesting, holding to preferences. And that holding to preferences is basically caused by craving, wanting, thirsting. This is one of these darts: I want what I want. That's holding to preferences—the cause of our continuing to act in ways that bring us into conflict with ourselves and with others, into suffering.

Now I think that's a very powerful statement, and for many of us at times an unsettling one—that holding to preferences can ultimately bring us into acting from ill will and hostility, into continuing in competition and rivalry, into continuing our inner suffering. Because most people—I don't know about you, but when I was starting my practice, if someone had said, "It's about coming to let go of all your preferences," I wouldn't have been lining up at the door. "Oh yeah, let me really get rid of all my preferences!"

But remember: he's not saying we don't have preferences, that we can't tell the difference between anything. It's that *holding* to it—"I have to have this or else everything's not okay. I'm bad, you're bad, the world is bad, whatever"—that's the cause of our suffering. That's the cause of our not perceiving ourselves and the world clearly on a very deep level.

Here on retreat, what we can practice, what we can begin to see and learn, is in small ways how we get attached to preferences. Mostly we don't even recognize that they're preferences. We think it's true, that's how it should be. We get attached to it, and then we notice the suffering inherent in that in many different

ways. Because how we relate to our experience here in retreat is a microcosm of exactly how our hearts and minds relate in bigger circumstances in our life. There is absolutely no difference. You're not experiencing different conditioning, a different mind and heart here than the one you have when you're going through your daily life. Fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know, but that's the way it is.

What I really love about the retreat format is that things that in the picture of our big life are pretty minor can bring up an intensity of reaction and emotion and grief and desire—the whole show. We stand back and say, "Wait, because I didn't get an orange at breakfast, I'm a complete wreck?" But it's true. It's not about the orange. But we can explore what this holding to preferences is.

Something that I think is important to understand, so we don't fall into judging right away—"Oh, I'm so stupid"—is that even our misunderstandings, the desire, the hatred, the holding to preferences, whatever, are really arising from our deep yearning for freedom, for peace, for real happiness. In some way. And the Buddha in another place spoke about how all the foolish things we do come, in some way, out of a perhaps unconscious or misguided sense that "this is going to make me happy."

What we learn through mindfulness—mindfulness in itself is the way to begin to perceive in a different way—is not how to change the world, but how to re-understand what the possibility of living in freedom from conflict and in peace and happiness is, what peace is really about. It's really to come home to ourselves, to our truest selves. When I look at my practice, all my life, I feel that everything I've been doing has been in a way a yearning to live at home with myself, with what is really true. And not knowing what that is, we keep looking in the wrong direction—to passing experiences, to things, to objects, to moods, to people, to whatever. What our practice does is turn us back to look in another direction.

One very common misconception that I've certainly held for years and years about what happiness or freedom or awakening or enlightenment is or will be, is that in some way—it seems naive, but if I look closely I see I keep falling into this trap—full enlightenment would be about everything being basically nice all the time. No more unpleasantness. Without getting down on yourself, just examine what images or ideas or conceptions your mind is holding about what practice or freedom is going to be like. Few of us include sickness, old age, loss, dismay, unpleasant things happening. Mostly it's that our whole personality just gets better and better and nicer and nicer, and we love everybody and everybody loves us, and we're able to really effect great change in the world, and basically there's this peace that somehow is still looking outward more than inward. Everything gets better.

But if you look, even very briefly—this has been instructive to me, and it took me years to notice—look at the Buddha's life after he became the Buddha, the peaceful one, the all-awakened one, no more suffering. He said over and over, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering. That's all I teach." Yet his life had plenty of difficult things going on. He was sick at times. He had headaches and backaches. Sometimes he'd tell Ananda, his attendant, "You give the talk. I have to go lie down. I have a headache." They didn't have Excedrin then—that's our wonderful new discovery.

He actually died from eating poisoned meat. It wasn't deliberately poisoned, but he knew it was tainted and wouldn't let anyone else eat it. He lived in a very warlike time, and there are different suttas where his clansmen on his father's side and his mother's side were at war with one another over water rights. Many, many people in his clan on both sides would be killed, and he would be called in to mediate.

He also had to mediate a lot within his own nun and monk sangha. It's kind of funny if you read all the suttas, or the Vinaya, where a lot of the rules for the monks and nuns come out of, because there's a lot of monks running to the Buddha and saying, "Well, he did this and he did that, and I don't think that's really such a good thing to do," or "He's talking to the nuns too much," or "He's hanging out and socializing too much." A lot was going on between the monks. There was a lot of competition. There was actually his cousin, Devadatta, who was extremely jealous of the Buddha. He was a monk, and he was often trying to split the Sangha, to turn them against the Buddha. He even tried to kill the Buddha at one point by throwing a huge boulder down on him, and it just grazed his heel. But there was a lot going on. It wasn't all peaches and cream. It wasn't just floating on a cloud.

The Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, both died before the Buddha died. And while he said he was the peaceful one—he didn't experience grief, he didn't wail and beat his breast, that's a common way they describe it—he did experience loss. There's somewhere in the suttas, and don't ask me where because I can't find it, but it's there somewhere. There's a lovely phrase where the Buddha describes, after the death of his two disciples, that it's as if the sun and the moon had fallen out of the heavens. He noticed they were gone. And Moggallana, who was considered the most spiritually adept of all the Buddha's disciples, was actually murdered by a gang of bandits in his old age.

So awakening doesn't mean freedom from pain, or freedom from loss, or freedom from all the dukkha that goes on with living in a group, working with a group, working with people. But how was the Buddha different from us? In that he didn't cling to preferences. He really was able to live and move in deep harmony with things as they are. Because he understood so clearly how things are, he wouldn't get caught in this holding, in this wanting things to be different.

It's not that he didn't have preferences. It's often said that if he didn't have anything else he had to do, he didn't just kind of wander around. His preference was to go off in the forest and abide in the bliss of Nibbana. He could do that at will. Clearly that was his preference. But if anybody needed anything, if anyone came calling, he would come out and be there for them. Not like, "Oh God, another wandering disciple wanting to plague me with questions." He would just come out and be there. Not clinging to preferences, not out of a "should," but as the natural response from deep understanding of oneself and of life as it is.

So how does he describe what he understood, briefly? How do we remove that dart, so to speak, of confusion, of clinging, of hatred? It's really removed by clear seeing. And Vipassana really means seeing clearly, seeing into. Just being with things as they are. It's so simple we can't stand it. We always want to

figure it out and add something on top of it. That's why we have this practice, practice, practice. Practice just to be with things as they are.

What do we begin to notice? I'm not going to go through everything the Buddha said, but just a couple of things. When he came out of his awakening and began to teach, the first thing he talked to the five friends he had been practicing with about—as he sat down, out of all the things that he understood, the first thing he chooses to say is: there is change; dissatisfaction, unreliability, is a fact of life. That's the first thing he chooses to say. I think that's really interesting. It's not the only thing he chooses to say. When Buddhism gets the rap that it's really negative because it just says life is suffering—that's if you just hear this First Noble Truth and stop. "Oh yeah, things change. It hurts us. Everything's unreliable."

Difficult things happen. That's life. If you stop there, okay, it's a pretty downer of a message. But he's not saying it to take us down. He's saying it to free us.

Because what frees us is living open-hearted, fully present in life, with reality as it is. This is what frees us. Our meditation isn't going to change who we are, change the facts of life, change this whole world. What it does is free us from misconceptions and allow us to rest at ease in whatever's arising—to live wholeheartedly, open-heartedly, fully present, at peace with things as they are, and from that place be able to affect change.

So to really be willing to learn to open, just to stop resisting that difficult things happen, that there's an inherent unreliability to experience, to things, to people, if we're looking to them for permanent happiness. And the anguish or dissatisfaction or real suffering isn't because things change, or because difficult things happen and pleasant things go away. The suffering is because of our not understanding that, and so getting caught in reaction—in wanting and in pushing away, getting caught in our reactions to what's happening. But that's the glitch, the little glitch, the place that we can learn to see through.

So I want to talk just a little bit about that.

This aspect of things changing, of unreliability—it doesn't mean that there's no pleasure in life. Of course there is. It doesn't mean that if we say "having no preferences," we don't love our families. We can probably have a slightly different feeling about our own child and someone we've never met, that we read about. Of course we do.

But it's knowing that you can't rely on anybody to do what you want—although God knows we try—to do what you want, to make you happy, or what you think will make them happy and then that'll make you happy, or to always be there for you. You can't rely on anything, you can't rely on any experience to do it for us. Although in the moment, it might be quite pleasant.

Now what's so interesting to me when I look at my own experience, my own mind and heart? Intellectually, I don't have a big argument with that, that things change. I mean, it's not really a secret, is it? But look at when we're struggling. Just look back on your experience today or yesterday or in the next

hour. How do we actually relate to our experiences?

Just to come into this little mini world of the retreat: How do we tend to evaluate ourselves, to assess whether things are going well? How the meditation is going? I'm sure there are lots of different ways, but quite often I find in myself it's in terms of how much pleasantness there is and how long it lasts. And when something pleasant goes away and something difficult arises—it might be an unpleasant sensation, or it just might be that it doesn't meet our expectations. And that's very unpleasant. We like our expectations to be met.

When that's not happening, how often the assessment becomes: "Well, everything's gone wrong now. Meditation's gone to hell. I better try and get it back." How often people come and say, "Well, thank God the sloth and torpor is over. Now I can begin to meditate." Or, "Okay, the mind's not wandering so much. The breath has finally gotten nice and smooth and relaxed. Now I can really meditate."

We get so fixated on what's happening as the way to evaluate, and when it changes, something's wrong. Or something's right—finally I got it right. If the unpleasant goes away, that's okay. That change we don't mind; we finally got it right. When the pleasant goes away, something we haven't gotten right.

Now to me, this gives a slight hint that there's something that doesn't quite totally get it—that everything changes, and that it's not all about being pleasant. The pleasant is going to change and the unpleasant is going to come, and there is nothing we can do about it. What our choice is: do I want to suffer from this or not? But mostly we don't notice that that's our choice, that that's the place of awareness.

So mindfulness practice, sati—the word that we translate as mindfulness—it really is closer to "remembering" in literal translation. It's not about taking us away from this world, stopping this constant flow of experience, finding some experience that'll last, somehow managing to manipulate things so that the balance is more on the pleasant and less on the unpleasant.

Sati is about allowing us to recognize and experience ourselves and the world as it is in this moment. No exceptions, no pulling away, no clinging—to live in the world more wholeheartedly, more completely than we are now.

It's somewhat paradoxical, because sati is really the practice of meeting each moment of experience with clear-eyed, open-hearted recognition of things as they are right now. Living in fullness of presence in the world, with ourselves as we are. And it's a little paradoxical because retreat really looks like—and people often think a retreat is about—escaping from the world. But the truth is, with mindfulness we're diving more deeply into the reality of ourselves and the reality of the world than we ever do. Unless we're truly committed and have a lot of practice out in our daily life, there are countless ways to distract ourselves when we don't really like what's happening. Here, there aren't many. And we set it up deliberately. Even today, now you're not allowed to distract yourself at mealtime, because now we're doing mindful eating, mindful working, mindful showering, mindful going to the toilet. It's about really waking up in our life.

And that's not to suffer more. That's not the point. It's interesting, because paradoxically, what I'm saying is that really opening to the fact that unreliability and change is a fact of life—to open to that, to not let ourselves deny it so much—that's not to suffer more. Paradoxically, that opening is what allows us to let go. To really, like the Buddha, live so in harmony with how things are that we're not in this constant conflict with our experience, with what we want to happen, with not getting our preferences. So that we can really live clear-eyed, kind-hearted, and engaged with ourselves and with life.

So this truth, this fact—the word dukkha is usually translated as suffering, but it's more unsatisfactory, unreliable—this fact, rather than being something alienating or depressing, is actually one of many things that unifies us as human beings. It's one of the threads of our common experience. So also is love. So also is compassion. Dukkha isn't the only thread; I don't want to give that impression.

But when we really look at it—I heard a talk by Ajahn Sumedho that was quite lovely. He was describing how many of the abbots in Thailand would come in and begin a talk not by saying, "Dear yogis," but rather, "Dear brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." Not as a downer, but doesn't it kind of level things? It's really true, isn't it? Nobody gets away from old age, disease, and death. Well, the only way you get away from old age, of course, is if disease and death come earlier. I'm not trying to be funny. It's a leveler.

When we look through that lens, it unifies us as human beings. Instead of getting caught in seeing our differences—whether cultural or economic or societal or whatever—where we can get so caught up in seeing how we're different from each other, and difference often breeds fear and protection, this view unifies us. When we're seeing one another through this lens of being brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death, if you really think about it, it just naturally elicits the heart of compassion. Compassion being that openness to each other, that connectedness to one another in our suffering. Any suffering—the suffering of disease, the suffering of rage and anger, the suffering of loss.

And when I look around the world, I can see how a sudden natural disaster will often spontaneously bring about this sense of connectedness, this natural response of compassion. Just last week we were in Durango, Colorado, which is close to New Mexico, and those huge fires were raging in Los Alamos. Durango, which has a similar climate and topography—they were saying in the papers that it was quite possible the same conditions could easily ignite a fire there too. There was a natural, really spontaneous outpouring of compassion and support for Los Alamos. There were stations all around Durango where people could bring food and money and blankets and whatever was needed. People were just spontaneously setting this up, collecting it, and bringing it down to Los Alamos. You often read about this with earthquakes and floods, whether in Venezuela or Turkey or wherever. Our connectedness as human beings—for a while, it often brings out the best in us. We forget, of course; we go back to our lives. But that's really what I mean by this opening to our common thread of loss, of old age, of suffering. It brings out our natural humanity, the heart of compassion.

And so, paradoxically, rather than fearing or being afraid to really open to this when we notice it—to open to change, to open to pain—the recognition of it is what matters. You don't have to rip your heart open and go around drowning in suffering, but just here, notice when you're in conflict. Is there some way you're fighting with something unpleasant? Is there some way you're fighting with change? Rather than simply acknowledging, "Oh yes, that's what's happening. Things are changing."

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche said once, "Whether or not you go with the flow, remember: the flow always goes with you."

We don't really get a choice.

And again, on a personal level, bringing it down to the personal, it's really very deeply ingrained in many of us, I think, to keep looking for the thing that doesn't change—the circumstance, the situation, the person that's going to give us this sense of security, this place of rest. Whether it's a relationship, or how we grew up, or our job, or our house. The way you finally found the right way to sit in the hall so pain doesn't come. Whatever it is. Deeply ingrained. And I think that's quite natural, again—a natural effect of our yearning for happiness. And again, just not quite totally getting it: that we can't keep trying to look to something for reliability. That's going to change. And then not to get down on ourselves when we find ourselves doing it.

So, for example, my father the last three or four years has been developing Parkinson's disease. I mean, he's eighty-three. You know, something's going to happen. I say that, right? But when it's happening, do I go home and say, "Well, the conditions that allowed for a healthy and young body to be here have changed, and now disease is coming. That's just the way it is"? Maybe I can get there, but first I have to go through denial and impatience and this kind of edge of panic, seeing what's going on with someone who's always been so athletic and so bright and so strong—to see how the whole mind and body can start to break down, and it's so out of control.

I mean, we all know it, right? But just to see how—no, this can't be happening. There must be something we can do to keep this from happening. And if we don't, we've somehow failed. It's just so interesting to me. And when I can really see that and stop beating myself up, and just open to—oh, yeah, things are changing. There's a sense of loss and sadness. Totally normal. Both the change and the loss. It's fine to feel it all.

And then what had been actually a distancing from my father as I got into my franticness and trying to change everything—again, there's connection. Connection, because one can only connect with a person as they are in the moment. Not as I wish he was ten years ago, or I wish he would be tomorrow. Only as he is right now. And only by accepting this is the fact of how things are is that connection, that openheartedness, that flowing with life as it is, really possible. And in that, just for a moment, there's living in peace. There's living in contentment.

The happiness, the contentment of the Buddha isn't about having things the way we want them or the way we think they should be. It's being able to really be present and open wholeheartedly, not fighting with things as they are. That doesn't mean we can't act appropriately—of course we can. And we can act much more appropriately when we're not fighting the facts, when we're really present. We can act from love instead of fear.

So when we notice our response to unreliability is this frantic searching for something, you might appreciate that that comes from our deep yearning for peace, but recognize we're looking in the wrong direction. The Buddha said once that the search for a resting place is burning. Not to need a resting place is cool and peaceful. He also said, "He abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." In other words, who does not grasp to any "this is where I am, this is where I'm staying, this is how it is." That's what he means by abiding. Abides in peace—just present in the moment, it changes, that's fine. Present in this moment.

But the really interesting piece of this, again, is not the difficult, the unpleasant, the change that's the point of confusion, the point where we misperceive. Where we get caught is in our reactions to difficult experience or to change. It's our reactions that blind us to peace, to the potential for peace, to our truest nature. Because it really, ultimately, doesn't matter what's happening. We're not here to have a certain experience. We're here to become friends with, to trust in, awareness itself.

And awareness doesn't care how the breath is, or whether the breath is, or how much you're thinking, or whether you like what's happening, or how much your knee hurts, or how good your sitting was. Awareness can be with anything. But we tend to look past awareness and get completely involved in assessing and reacting to whatever it is that's arising.

Because we're so entranced—really entranced—by what this knee pain means, and is it going to continue into the future, and how was it yesterday, and what can I do about it, and how do I feel about it, and what's going to happen, and what is the other person experiencing, and what's the best way to be mindful... We're so entranced with our reactions that half the time—frankly, I think it's more than half the time—we don't even have a clue what's really going on. We're just completely caught up in assessing and judgment and liking and disliking.

And it all has to do ultimately with me, me, me. How does this affect me? What does this mean about me? Is this mine? Is this other person having the same experience as me? It's this continual self-referencing. Look at it. If you're caught in reaction, if you're really assessing, just see if it happens much without this little core of me, me, me. It's so fascinating to us, but I tell you, it is so exhausting. When the Buddha talks about being free from the running around and the exhaustion of it—that's the exhaustion.

We can't just experience sensation in the knee. No, it's my knee, my sensation, my yesterdays, my tomorrows, my trip to the hospital, my mother, my father, my dog. It's on and on and on. And what's really happening? Oh, some twinging or some throbbing. Maybe there's a little tick in the shoulder, a little twitch. Maybe we're having a really difficult memory. Unpleasant things do happen. But just what's

happening now—that's what's happening. Everything else is our reactions, and we're so entranced by that. That's where we go off into worlds and worlds of thinking. That's where we don't recognize that peace, our true home, is right here, right now, no matter what's happening. It doesn't matter—if we can learn to look through the reactions and just land and rest with ease in whatever's arising.

Saint Augustine said once, "The reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home." Our true home. There aren't many words to say about it. But on a deep level, we know when we're recognizing, when we're touching our true home. And it doesn't have anything to do with what phenomenal experience is coming and going.

The Buddha taught that one must look for peace within oneself and not in any other place. When a person is inwardly quiet, then there is no self to be found. Inwardly quiet doesn't necessarily mean no thoughts, which is what we often think. Inwardly quiet means we're not entranced by these reactions to experience and whipping up a whole story. Just what is, coming and going. What is can be thoughts, as well as sensations, as well as sounds. Inwardly quiet means calm, present, non-reactive. That's our practice.

Now, one place where this habit—and it really is a habit—shows itself... It's not like we're deliberately trying to be foolish. It's not like we're deliberately setting out to suffer. Everyone in the world, the Buddha said this often, deeply wants to be happy. But I've come to have a very healthy respect for the strength of habits of reaction of heart and mind. You know how hard a really strong habit is to break. I think our habits of reaction to experience when we're not paying attention are perhaps the most deeply rooted habits we have, because we're not even aware we're doing it much of the time.

So just to mention briefly: one of the very simple but not always easy to notice dynamics, cause and effect relationships that the Buddha pointed out, where we get so easily caught in reaction, where we get so easily distracted from the bare experience—whatever it is—is in our habit of how the mind and heart relate to pleasant experience, unpleasant experience, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant, or neutral experience.

We don't usually think in those terms so much. We know we like something or we don't like it, or it hurts, or it feels good. Well, that's basically pleasant and unpleasant, but within a whole range. Physical sensation is pleasant or unpleasant or sort of neutral—we don't even notice it. Emotions, sounds, smells, tastes, even thoughts become pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. And the deep, deep habit—not only of reaction, but of assessing our whole life—is to move towards the pleasant.

Moving towards the pleasant seems not only a habit but logical, doesn't it? You think, well, who wouldn't move towards the pleasant? Who wouldn't move away from the unpleasant? That's just common sense.

And neutral? A lot of people say, "Neutral? I don't have any neutral experience." That's our relationship to neutral. "What? I've never seen a neutral thought." We're just gone. In this culture especially—everything is so intense, so fast. God forbid you should go to a movie and have one neutral second. It's just got to be

pounding, pounding, pounding.

This is one of the reasons a retreat can seem so uncomfortable—because we're not just letting ourselves flow with this habit of whenever it's pleasant, hold on to it; whenever it's unpleasant, get up and leave; when it's neutral, bring in something else. Here, you have to sit there. If it's unpleasant, you just have to sit there with it. The most you can do is shift your knee a little bit or something. If it's pleasant, you sit there, but then it goes away and you can't go get something else pleasant. You have to notice that it went away. You can't go to the refrigerator or turn on the radio, make a phone call. If it's neutral, we tell you to keep paying attention until you finally notice something's happening.

Calm, you know, is very neutral. Sometimes it takes ages to recognize that calm is present. "Oh, calm!" And then you realize, this isn't neutral—it's actually really nice. You just had to notice it first.

This is a very deeply ingrained habit of mind. And we assess, we evaluate our whole life, often, in terms of: it's good if it's pleasant, it's bad if it's unpleasant.

There's a nice story in the suttas about the Buddha's attendant Ānanda, who was a very kind man. Many stories that are kind of very human are about Ānanda. He was walking past a well where there was a woman from the untouchable caste at that time in India—someone from whom a person of different caste wasn't allowed to take anything, any food or anything. And Ānanda asked her to give him some water from the well. Monks were allowed to ask for water.

She said, "Oh no, sir, I'm untouchable. I can't give you water."

And being very kind, he said, "I'm not really interested in your caste. I'm just asking for some water."

So she gave him the water, and she was so touched by his kindness that she secretly followed him back to where the Buddha was. She waited until Ānanda wasn't around, went up to the Buddha, and said, "Oh please, I know he's your follower. Tell me where he is because I love Ānanda and I want to follow him and serve him."

And the Buddha, who could tell what was going on with people, luckily said, "It's not Ānanda you love. It's his kindness. You don't need to follow him around. Just go back into your life and do likewise. Spread the kindness."

So that's lovely in itself. But what I like is the fact that somebody does one pleasant thing and we're ready to follow them around for the rest of our life. There's a certain lack of discrimination about what's really going on, right? And we do that. Just look and see.

With the unpleasant, we can get really fixated on what's unpleasant when everything else is fine. The mind can—have you ever had, you know, like a little chipped tooth? All your other teeth are fine.

You're sitting there feeling good, but the tongue just can't stay away from that little chipped tooth. And

then the mind doesn't simply note, "Oh yes, chipped tooth"—it gets tight. "Oh no, I have to go to the dentist. Oh no, I can't afford it. This is ridiculous. I just went last week." And pretty soon you're into everything that's wrong with your whole life, just from rubbing the tongue on this little unpleasant sensation. We can get completely fixated on the unpleasant. That's being caught in reactions.

With the neutral, as I said, we zone out, space out, try to make something else happen. It's really interesting. Very often, especially in long retreats—I teach a three-month retreat every year—people will come in after a few weeks and say, "You know, I've noticed that things have been pretty calm and neutral, and my mind doesn't like it." The mind sits there and makes up really difficult suffering scenarios and gets caught in them rather than resting in calmness. It's really amazing to see.

The Buddha described this way we react to experience. The going after pleasant—that's craving, desire. The reaction to the unpleasant—that's the second root of hatred, fear, aversion. The totally missing the neutral—that's what leads to confusion, delusion, misperception.

He talked about it in terms of an arrow—again, a warlike image, but it's very to the point, and I like it. He asks, what's the difference between a completely awakened, free person and us ordinary worldlings? And he said, this is the difference: An ordinary worldling experiences a painful, unpleasant sensation—say a physical sensation, it hurts. And when he experiences that sensation, he grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he gets caught in judgment, he carries on a whole hoo-ha. So it's as if being shot with an arrow, he then shoots himself with another arrow as a way of relating to that first arrow. An awakened being experiences a really difficult, unpleasant sensation or emotion or whatever, and that's just what they experience. They don't add anything extra on top of it.

So just noticing through the day: how much of our real conflict and suffering comes from the first arrow—just an arising unpleasant experience—and how much is because we're blaming ourselves, or wanting it different, or blaming someone else, or trying to manipulate, or wanting to know what it means, or trying to understand it, or all the different ways that we shoot ourselves with that second dart?

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, "We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." I love that. Just take a look: How much are we missing the real by lack of attention, and creating the unreal by excess of imagination? If you can remember that, explore over the next days.

And of all the darts we shoot ourselves with—the second dart—the biggest one, the strongest confusion, the one that's really at the root of all of it, is this dart of me, me, me. I, I, I. The Buddha again: "With what manner of insight does a person become calm, cool, and no longer grasping at experience?" He accomplishes this, replied the Buddha, by seeing through the root obstacle, the root delusion—the thought of "I am." Just seeing through it. By being mindful all the time, he trains himself to let go of, to not get caught in attachment to all the preferences, all the desires. They can still come. But not getting so entranced by this constant self-referencing of me, me, me. The thoughts can still be there—"How does this affect me?"—just let them be there. We don't have to build a whole world around it.

And that's what our mindfulness practice is really a practice in doing. One of my teachers said mindfulness is like a rattle. It's as if we're two-year-olds—and really, if you look at our minds, two-year-old is sort of like a compliment, actually, half the time. It's as if a two-year-old is running along: "I want this, I don't want that, no, no, no, no, no!" And mindfulness is like the rattle. You shake it and go, "Okay, pay attention over here for a minute. Just feel the sensation, just notice the thought, just notice the emotion. What's actually happening here?"

That's what mindfulness is about. That by landing in the present moment with kindness, with honesty, we can re-recognize, remember our innate composure, our natural ease, our really natural peace. It's not about changing experience, but finding that even in the midst of what we like and don't like, when we're not so entranced by reactions, we can rest in the peace of things as they are—looking through the reaction to what is true.

An experiential example from that famous dharma teacher, Phil Jackson: "Little by little, with regular practice, you start to discriminate raw sensory events from your reactions to them. Eventually you can begin to experience a point of stillness within. As the stillness becomes more stable, you tend to identify less with fleeting thoughts and feelings such as fear, anger, pain, wanting, and you experience more inner harmony regardless of changing circumstances. For me, meditation is a tool that allows me to stay calm and centered—well, most of the time—during the stressful highs and lows of basketball and life outside the arena."

Learning to discriminate raw sensory events from our reactions to them. And even the reactions are simply raw sensory events—they're just different events from what elicits them. They're nothing to hate, just the next thing to notice.

This practice brings us not into another place, another way away from life, but into intimacy, a closeness, meeting our life with clear-eyed, kind-hearted honesty. Not with harshness. Respecting whatever arises. Because in this moment, whatever arises is our avenue to recognize truth.

The Dalai Lama said: Why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it is the only place that we can know love.

Whatever is happening in the present moment, as soon as we want it different, we've missed the whole possibility of natural peace, of our natural great mind and heart.

I'd like to close with a poem that expresses this sense. You might be quite familiar with it, from Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I awake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake

rests in his beauty on the water,
and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.
I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light.
For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

That is actually always available to us—to rest in the grace of the world and be free.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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