Closing Talk - Motivating Our Practice In Daily Life

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:47

Well, here we are with the perennial question for long-time practitioners, the so-called practice in daily life question.

It's actually interesting to me that quite a few people, starting at the beginning of this retreat, came and the first thing they were saying was about their daily life practice—either "I'm not sitting every day" or "I'm losing my juice for it." Already it's implying that daily life practice is about sitting every day. That's the focus, which is already where we start to go astray. But really worrying about it, feeling the losing the juice, how to keep it fresh, how not to have it get stale, as if there's some magic answer.

So I want to talk a little tonight, not about tricks to keep our sitting interesting. Forget about that. But just how we can approach our commitment to awakening. Just maybe a couple of things that might help us to care enough to keep paying attention in our daily life. Because I think that's what it really comes down to. We have to care enough. No little trick's going to do it for us.

If this is your first retreat, maybe not, but those of you who've been on retreats before, doing mindfulness practice in this form for some time—it's no big secret that we can easily begin to think of practice in terms of our experiences on retreat. Either when we think of practice we think of the sittings on a retreat, or the particular states of mind that we might have experienced: some kind of concentration or peace or ease or silence, not so many thoughts, or some deep understanding you had. Whatever. And without even quite realizing it, that kind of search to either hold on to or repeat experience, or using experience as a reference point to evaluate whether our so-called practice in daily life is going somewhere—which is already, right, where has it got to go?—we so easily transfer this to the way we meet our daily life, to the way we "practice." I'm even not so crazy about that word as far as daily life is concerned.

So we end up relating to our spiritual life, our spiritual path, in our daily life easily as simply transferring our gaining mode from one thing to another. You know, we go from wanting to earn a lot of money or having a nice house or the best relationship to having a better practice or being more compassionate or something. A lot of what Howie was talking about, the time-bound thing.

But really, the word *sati* in Pali, which we usually translate as mindfulness, is much closer in meaning to remembering. Now, it doesn't mean to remember the great state that you had on retreat and try to repeat it. That's not the kind of remember that it means. Really what it means to remember is our ineffable pure nature. Not to remember it conceptually, because you can't remember something you don't know, can

you? So mindfulness isn't about—remember doesn't mean create. It means remember that which we already know, that which we have experienced, that which we actually are.

And what the formal meditation practice of sitting and walking and formal mindfulness on retreat or in daily life—what we do in retreat—the thing that it most deeply serves is to deepen in us our trust, our faith, our recognition of what that ineffable nature is, that remembering, what it is that we're remembering, so that we can learn to trust that. It's not a state, really. It's not even an experience. It's just that which we are.

So in those moments—which many people have reported, they don't have to be anything special, and sometimes they feel special—but those times, take a pretty mundane one: suddenly getting it, so to speak, that the knee pain is killing. It's been there for the last seven days. And suddenly there's a pristine presence. There's no more sense of aversion, no more sense of me and that, something to fix, something to manipulate, something to even do anything about. And whether the person describes it as spaciousness or peace or coming home or ease or whatever—there are all different words, the way we describe it. But realizing that that is present and accessible, even in the middle of the ache, the pain, the striving mind, or in just a little normal moment. You're walking out and you see a bird fly by, or nothing special, drinking your tea.

But what the practice does is just kind of strip away for a moment—it might only be for a moment—strip away all the gaining, all the comparing, all the aversion, all the clinging, and it's just: home. Coming home. That's the whole point.

And because it's not a state of mind that you can create and hold on to—sometimes we don't like that—but really, that's what opens us to freedom. It's nothing we can create and hold on to, and therefore it doesn't matter what situation we happen to be in; it can't get in the way.

So to me, our life practice is about remembering this ineffable essence that we are, much more truly than our aches and pains, like Ajahn Chah was talking about. He was so clear he wasn't his chicken pox. That's great. That's the perfect example.

You know, there's this emptiness and compassion—"I'm not the chicken pox. The heart isn't itching." That's such a classic, perfect example of what I'm talking about. It doesn't matter what's happening.

So if we want to talk about daily life practice, it's about—and this is all my opinions—it's about learning, having the commitment to relate to our experience moment by moment. To relate to it as: this is the moment in which I can really open, can come home again. Only this moment. Exactly this moment. Nowhere else.

And that is not easy, is it? When it happens, it's so obvious. You think, "Well, sure." And it's so easy to leave a retreat and think, "That was so clear." Either sitting was so easy—"I'm going to sit four times a day, that's no problem"—or there's just ease. "What was the problem? I just sit and whatever comes up, that's the

meditation. There's no sense of struggle, there's no sense of strife. I got it." And we walk out and we go into Walmart, and that's the end of it, right there. Where did it go? I thought it was so obvious.

So the trick is knowing we don't have to leave life behind to walk on the path of awakening. We don't have to retreat for the rest of our life to a cave—although that's a viable option for some people. But it's not the only option. We don't have to leave life behind. On the other hand, we also don't have to leave our commitment to awakening behind in order to live an active, normal life.

I've said before that in my opinion, retreat is just a microcosm of our life. It's the same mind, the same reactions. You recognize that by now. And it's fascinating. The way we relate to a sense of trying to control the breathing just reverberates into seeing how we relate to everything in our life.

In the same way, if we look at our life, as complex as any activity might be, or as many things as we're doing in a day, it's still only moments. A day is made up of moment and moment and moment. Moments don't go away and suddenly there's a solid hour. As he was talking about last night, there's no past and future—there's only this moment. That's true when you walk out of here, just the same as it's true here. The laws of nature didn't change when you came through that gate and into the silent retreat.

So the trick isn't to figure out how to get really good practice from now on. It's much more: How can I awaken in this moment? This moment? How can I awaken with compassion? How can I awaken with clarity into this moment? How can I meet this moment with kindness? And if we blow it in this moment, that's okay, because now there's this moment. And it's endless, as long as we're alive. There's nothing but moments in which we can practice to awaken with clarity, with compassion.

I think it's almost a mantra sometimes, at least in the Vipassana scene: "My life is my practice." And ultimately, I think that can be true. But I actually think it's—personally speaking—extremely necessary and extremely difficult. As much energy and motivation and commitment as you put out to come and be on this retreat, to be with whatever experience is coming up, all the stuff you've gone through—I know that an intensive retreat can at times be one of the most difficult and challenging experiences in our life.

What makes us think, as I did for years, that that's all the time I had to put in? That if I then go out, it's just going to carry me on a cloud of bodhisattva-hood and love and compassion, and I don't have to keep up that same quality of willingness to awaken in the moment?

I mean, really, it's a little embarrassing, but I would say it took me close to twenty years to really understand—I probably still don't really understand—but to begin to think that maybe I could understand someday how much depth of motivation and commitment is required.

Because as I was talking some nights ago, what we're really dealing with here and in our daily life is the deeply ingrained habits of our mind. There's that famous quotation of the Buddha: "What the mind thinks upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." Now this is not to inspire fear, but to inspire a healthy respect. What does my mind think about frequently? Then why am I surprised if in a moment of

inattention that's the way the mind moves?

I think seven days of a retreat, or seven years of a retreat, will counteract it, will have an effect—but completely end it? No. It's moment to moment to moment. I'm not saying this to be discouraging; I'm saying it to be realistic. Because I actually feel that one of the things that really brings discouragement to people's keeping a committed practice going in their daily life is an unrealistic expectation. "More should have happened," we think. "Here I really saw through this stuff"—yet the habits of greed, the habits of self-judgment, the habits of aversion or fear still keep coming up. So what's the point? Forget about it.

We're an impatient culture. We're an instant culture. I don't know if you caught it when listening to Ajahn Jumnian talking about how for the last six years he's really just been in emptiness. I thought, wow. This guy, how old is he? Close to sixty or more? He's been practicing really intensively—more than probably most of us could imagine—since he was seven years old, maybe five. And it's not to be discouraging; it's to be realistic. We're talking about a lifetime here, not a couple of years.

Habits are just really hard to break. Recently someone told me that she'd quit smoking twelve years ago and just recently picked it up again. It was right back, just no problem—like she'd never stopped. Well, craving in the mind, aversion and fear in the mind, spacing out when we don't like what's going on—these are really deep habits that, before we pay attention, we're unaware of.

So I want to talk about a couple of things that I think are helpful, because we need to have the interest and the energy to keep paying attention. If we're paying attention in a moment, it's really often quite easy not to get caught up in those habits. It's not always that hard. Sometimes it is, but not always. It's not always that hard to awaken into what's happening in the moment with some clarity, to meet it with some kindness. Remembering is the tricky part.

And what helps us remember, what helps us want to sit every day, what helps us want to really investigate in our life, is to consciously—this might sound obvious, but I think it's important—consciously have the motivation, the intention to do so. It has to be really important to us. Not just intellectually, but cellularly. The kind of important that if you have children, your children are important. You don't have to stop and think, "What's more important—my kids, or this movie I want to see, or maybe I want to go out for brunch? Which is more important? I don't know." You know it. It's there. It's in your cells.

That's the kind of commitment of knowing that our spiritual awakening, understanding and freeing ourselves from suffering, living a life of compassion, of understanding how things are—whichever phraseology resonates with your motivation—we have to really know that and get it. That's what's going to keep us, for example, sitting in the morning when we're tired. That's what's going to give us the confidence and the energy to bring our attention into our experience when we're feeling really scared, or blamed, or afraid, or angry, or embarrassed, or self-conscious—any of the things that we're not comfortable feeling. Underneath, there has to be the intention to care enough to want to be present, to want to come home to our true self.

So I want to talk about two ways that can be helpful for keeping in touch, for strengthening, refreshing, reawakening, enlivening your motivation, your commitment. You'll find other ones for yourself, but really to look from this level—the underlying motivation—so that it comes back up rather than from above.

The first way is getting in touch with what you might call the overarching purpose or motivation in your life. There may be more than one, but what really matters—in your heart of hearts, in your guts, in your cells—what is truly important to you? I'm not here to say what that should be. There's no should. But to really take some time to reflect on it.

Wise reflection means using the thought process to see what's important. For me, it's often been a process of just sitting quietly with vipassana, feeling into it over some days or weeks. I hold that question in the back of my mind, let it go, and just be with myself. Sometimes things will come up. And when whatever is really important to you arises, don't denigrate it or say it's not good enough or that it should be more spiritual. Just let it be what it is. Let it resonate around in you for a while and see if it's really true.

I'm talking here about what's really spiritually important—what we have in common in this room. But you might look and find that actually that's not so important to you, that what's really important is being as comfortable as possible. I'm not trying to be dismissive—that's pretty high on my list of things that are important too. But when I really look, it's not the most important. What's interesting is that if I don't really look, something like being as comfortable as possible actually assumes primary importance. Without a sense of reference to what truly matters—not just what you intellectually think you want your life to be about, but what it really is about—comfort can quietly take over.

When I first ever did this reflection, something came up sort of out of nowhere: I want to serve the Dharma. And then the mind came in: "Oh, you stupid, what do you think you could ever do? That's so egocentric." Don't listen to all that, because that's just the habits again. It's not about knowing how you're going to achieve this purpose. It's not even about achieving. It's more about resonating with what's really alive and powerful for you.

Then it becomes useful to make it conscious, to really honor it, whatever it is, to value it in yourself. Don't get into those denigrating thoughts—"it's impossible, I could never do that." You don't know what it means. You don't know where it's going to go. You don't need to. But in times of choice, either big choices in our life or smaller ones, this can be a reference point, a kind of beacon. A sense of, "Oh yes, what's really important here?"

To use my example of wanting to be comfortable: if I'm not paying attention, if I don't sometimes consciously bring up the question of whether that's really the deepest thing in my life, a lot of my decisions—even more than already are—would incline toward what makes me comfortable. That would become almost the most important thing. It's easy to fall into patterns like that.

But when I'm faced with a difficult choice and I can't make up my mind, and I'm in my head weighing pros

and cons, writing out all the considerations—that's helpful in a small way, but really, I'm disconnected when I'm doing that. Then I sit and I go, "Wait a minute, what's really going on?" And I realize, "Oh, I think if I pick the right thing, I'll be really happy and comfortable and at ease. I'm looking for the one way that's going to give me that." And then I know: forget about it. That's the wrong way to make the decision. And then the obvious thing can arise.

It's a different process for each of us. But perhaps you get a sense of what I mean—to begin to connect with this motivation, this purpose, and then do it consciously from time to time. Really feel it and honor it. It will help you make decisions. It doesn't make anything magic or easy. It's just another help. It'll keep you from mindlessly falling back into old habits. And it'll support your motivation to keep doing whatever particular activities help you stay awake in daily life—whether it's sitting every day, going to sitting groups, listening to talks, whatever works for you.

Getting in touch with your deepest purpose again and again gives us the juice to make those small choices about what's really useful. It's about looking at what our life is really about. I had an experience recently—it's funny, but it inspired me. Funny strange, not funny amusing. It wasn't what you'd call an inspiring experience, but it really touched me on this level and made me look at this question yet again.

Because your purpose can keep changing, keep renewing itself, keep shifting. A couple of years ago, we went to visit Ruth Dennison in Yucca Valley—every year I teach in Southern California, and I usually go to visit Ruth, who probably a lot of you know. She's an old teacher of mine, and she has a center about a half an hour away.

I think it was two or three years ago. I went with Jack and Guy Armstrong, and we went to visit her. She was taking care of her husband, Henry, who has Alzheimer's—very severe at that time. He's pretty sick right now. She had sold her house in Hollywood and fixed up a house out in her desert enclave and was taking care of him, along with running the retreat center, traveling around the world, teaching retreats, taking care of six little dogs and various other responsibilities. She's an amazing bundle of energy.

So we went to visit her, and she had us come in and have tea with her and Henry. What was interesting to me, in terms of this sense of really looking more carefully at what I think I'm doing with my life, what I'm trying to hold on to—here was a man who I didn't really know well, but who had apparently lived a fascinating life. Long years of practice. He and Ruth were in Burma practicing, I think in the late 50s, early 60s, then in Japan practicing, hanging out with Alan Watts and that whole group. He was in the Ramakrishna order for a while. A really intellectually fascinating life, a deeply spiritual life, all kinds of experiences, all kinds of practice, all kinds of stories.

And what's left? What are we left with at the end of our life? We can't even try to have experiences, store up experiences—for what? What good are they when we can't even remember them? We can't even remember our own stories. What's left?

And then it's like, is there any point in my trying to achieve or hang on to anything for achievement's sake? There's plenty of point in doing things when you do it out of compassion, out of love, when it's just the obvious thing to do. You do it for the moment, for the motivation. But doing something to have or achieve or be known or think better of myself—it's like, leveled, gone. What if I don't even remember who I am? What's left?

And you can see, to some extent, if there's not really a lot of physical brain damage, what's left is our habits—how we respond in the moment. We came in, and he didn't have a clue. He had a vague sense that Jack was somebody he knew. Me and Guy—not a clue. But very courtly, very gentlemanly, very polite. "Sit down." You could tell it was just a habit. And then the mind would wander off and it wasn't there anymore. And I know there are other habits too, not always such wholesome ones.

But it really gave me pause to think: all that I feel I can cultivate most deeply is how I meet this moment. That's the habits of mine that are being formed. How can I awaken in this moment with compassion, with kindness, with clear seeing? This is just personal. I'm not saying this is what anyone else should draw from this. I'm saying this is the effect it had on me. And it was very much: what is life about except cultivating awakening, cultivating compassion, and only in this moment? First, because there is only this moment—it's the only place to do it. But that's what we're left with: our habits.

"What the mind inclines toward, what the mind dwells upon frequently, toward that it will naturally incline."

In fact, even karma—the whole round of cause and effect, birth and death—karma just means action. And action, the seed of action in Buddhist psychology, is all in the intention. The motivation with which we think, speak, and act—and that's only here, only now. So it really comes down to that's what we're left with.

You know the saying from Chögyam Trungpa, when someone was asking about rebirth and karma, and he says, "If there's no person, what's reborn?" And he said, "Your bad habits."

So the fewer bad habits we have left when we go out, the better off we are—in that frame of looking at things.

So sati is about remembering—just remembering. Not all our stories, but remembering: Can I bring presence? Can I bring acceptance and awakeness into this moment?

And holding lightly to this larger sense of purpose—to me, even though it's just momentary, it's actually a larger sense of purpose because it permeates everything for me. That's very helpful, to give us the courage to keep going, because sometimes it's really hard. And you never know where it's going to take us.

I was reading a book of interviews with Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the democracy movement in Burma. Under house arrest for all those years. And she was saying at one point that it was never her

intention or her idea to go be the leader of the democracy movement in Burma and to be such a famous person. She said it just all kind of happened. And she said, "I'm just a very simple person. I'm so simple, people probably can't believe it because I'm so simple." This is, to me, like an enunciation of her simplicity of purpose.

And you never know where it's going to take you. She said, "I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it. The motivation is its own reward." I just love that. She didn't say, "In the name of justice, I'm going to go to Burma, I'm going to take over." Decision after decision, out of justice or love, out of simplicity, she finds herself in this whole scene she's in.

We don't know. That's not in our control. I mean, I do have friends—it amazes me—they decide what they're going to do for the next five years, and by and large, they do it. That amazes me. I think that's actually a good quality of mind. I don't have it. But in the long run, we really don't know. We take our purpose, we try to live from as deep to what is true as we can. But if we have it too much set on where it should be going, we're out of touch with how we meet the moment.

So for me, one thing that's sort of changed—I've noticed over the years—in maybe the subtext of purpose or my understanding of daily practice, is that somehow there was some sense that spiritual awakening is really about getting myself a bit out of the grit and the hullabaloo and the craziness of everyday life. Almost physically removing myself, as if I wanted to live about a foot away from everything that was happening because it's just too intense. Never go into Walmart again, or whatever. Which, I mean, there might be a little aversion in that. I wouldn't say no. But really, the idea that spiritual awakening is some kind of Shangri-La somewhere else.

And for me personally—and this is how my trips had to go, yours might be different—it's becoming more and more about recognizing it's all right here. Awakening in the middle of everything that's going on. It's got nothing to do with the outer circumstances. This is really what Ajahn was saying today. The outer circumstances have nothing to do with the space of emptiness and the expression of compassion. I actually loved it when he said it's been six years he's been in this emptiness and it really doesn't make any difference to him if he's in the city or he's here talking to yogis or he's back in the monastery or whatever. And I really understand that not as an indifference, not as a shutting off—I don't care because I'm so in my own little world—but as an awakening in the midst of everything. So that things aren't in our way, but we don't have to get rid of them. We can be really awake and in touch with the truth, no matter what's going on.

Okay, we're not there yet, but we can have moments of it. And for me, that's really shifted from floating up somewhere and then I'd be awakened, to awakening in this life, to fully inhabiting each moment of life. Or never mind each moment—just this moment. To live this moment with wholehearted presence of heart, of mind, and freedom in the middle of it all, in the midst of life.

Each moment, any moment offers us the doorway. Some moments are a lot easier than others, you know, to go through the doorway. No blame. Of course they are.

That's why we come on retreat. It makes the moments a lot easier. It's a lot easier to do this here, isn't it, than in the middle of a traffic jam on the Bay Bridge? It's a lot easier than when you're in the middle of a major fight with your partner. So that's okay. We use the easier moments so that we can then begin to access presence in the more difficult moments.

And it is difficult. Our lives are so complex, we get so busy. As Howie was reading about last night, we go so quickly from one thing to the next to the next and fill up our attention and fill up our energy so that actually, you see, remembering just to be present is often the most difficult thing. If you remember, well, how long does it take to feel your breath? How long does it take, even in the middle of a really tense board meeting, to feel your body? It doesn't take any time. It takes almost minimal effort. It just takes that moment of, "Oh yeah, presence." That's what's tricky. And it takes real courage, because so often the presence is unpleasant or scary or difficult. And it takes great motivation to keep trying to do it.

So one other group of things that can be very helpful as a way to keep helping us remember, to re-motivate, are some traditional contemplations from the Tibetan tradition called the Four Mind-Turnings. Now by contemplation I mean really using wise reflection. This is a place where we appreciate and use the process of thinking. We never said to hate thinking. Thinking can be really useful.

The Four Mind-Turnings are just four conscious reflections that you begin by thinking about and then move more deeply into. They're nothing you haven't heard before. But they are ways to remember, when you're really feeling like, "What do I want to do this for? Why did I go to that retreat? Why do I want to pay attention?" They help when you really need to remember why it matters to pay attention. Have you ever had moments like that? It happens on retreat a lot. "Why am I lifting this foot? Remind me again, what's the point of this? The breath? Okay, already." We really lose it—never mind in life when there's so much else. "Why should I sit down when I'm so busy?"

So the four traditional contemplations, the mind-turnings, help us turn our heart towards the Dharma. Very stuff you know, but to consciously think about it.

The first one is our fortunate birth, the preciousness of our human life. To put it in very common terms, not into the Buddhist background: to appreciate all the factors that we have in our life—and everyone here has to some extent—that allow us to meet the Dharma in this life. There are so many people on this planet who don't have the physical time, who don't have the health to even pay attention at all, who don't have the opportunity or availability to hear some spiritual practice. There are those who have to work so hard all their life just to support their family, just to get enough food to eat, who are in the middle of wars, who are in places where they're not allowed freedom to do such things. There are so many places on this planet, in this country, where life is just about barely surviving, never mind really having what seems like a luxury to sit down and explore the nature of the mind and heart.

Technically, sure. Technically it's possible no matter what you're doing. But if you don't have the teaching or some way to really access it, and you're so overwhelmed in your life, it's pretty impossible.

It's so easy for me to forget how fortunate I am, how fortunate the people I meet are. Because we all have our stories of difficulty and suffering and poor health—I mean, really serious suffering. I'm not saying this means our life is easy. But the suffering is actually part of what is considered the preciousness of our human birth, seriously. Because it's said in the God realms, in the deva realms, there is so much sensual pleasure that there's not much motivation for investigation. It's just too nice. So aren't you lucky that it's not so nice? And actually we are.

And even that we're interested—because there are many people who have plenty of opportunity and luxury and leisure and just really aren't that interested. Think of your families if you've been trying to bring them along, you know? "Yeah, thanks a lot. That's really nice."

Even when I was in Thailand as a nun, people were wonderful to me. As Mark, the translator, was explaining today, a lot of the practice of basic everyday Buddhism in Thailand is of dana, of generosity. And it's beautiful—incredibly generous, supporting the monasteries, the monks, the nuns. But when I went there to meditate for a year, people would come up to me and say, really so happy, "Oh, it's so great you're here. You meditate for me. I can't do it." It wasn't that they didn't have time or anything, but they just thought they couldn't do it, weren't interested in doing it, and were quite happy being generous and making merit. "But I can't do that. You go do it." Just really not that same interest in investigation.

So take some time to reflect when you're really getting lost in a negative whinge about how bad life is and it's impossible to practice because of X, Y, and Z. Just stop a minute and reflect on your own particular fortunate circumstances that allow investigation, that allow development of compassion and love and clear seeing, and that you care enough to even try to do it.

And then, of course, there's the suffering aspect, which is never left out for very long of any Buddhist list of contemplations. But it does start with appreciation. I want to point that out.

The next two, which I'll mix together just for purposes of time, are reflection on the ever-presence of impermanence and death, which Howie talked about a little. If you really reflect on it—not as a panic attack but as a motivator—it works. It's not like, "Well, okay, next year," which is so easy. "Next year I'm really going to put in some good practice time. I can't really deal with being awake in this particular situation because right now it's just too intense. I'll wait until it cools off a little bit and then I'll pay attention." That kind of thing. We never know. We never know. Our ability for denial is great.

I thought of this little article last night when Howie was reading one of his, the one about human growth hormone. This is from a newspaper about a small town in Spain. The mayor of this city has banned death. He feels the local cemetery is too crowded for a soul to get decent rest. So the four thousand residents of this village in Granada province have to remain alive while municipal officials shop for land for a new

graveyard. The mayor, Jose Rubio, issued an edict that said people should 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 there's a certain level of disconnect going on, I would say.

The ever-presence of impermanence and death. And the third contemplation is to really use the suffering, the frustration that comes with basically our day-to-day life in samsara—the unreliability of experience, the unholdability, the fact of change. The difficulties that come in this human birth are not seen as impediments. Rather, reflection on the ever-presence of impermanence and death, and being willing to meet our difficult circumstances as avenues for understanding, as motivators to pay attention—these are actually very deep contemplations.

And they work. I talked to a couple of people where it came out as we were talking that they weren't practicing so much daily anymore, and when I asked about it they said, "Well, actually things have been going pretty good, you know?" One person even said to me, "I'll probably have to start really suffering before I get back into a daily practice." And we do this, don't we? It's easier if you just contemplate on impermanence and suffering and let that motivate you, rather than waiting until it gets really bad. But waiting is pretty common.

I'm sure you've heard of the work that Jon Kabat-Zinn and the people in Worcester are doing with mindfulness-based stress reduction. Basically it's a program where people are referred by doctors because the medical community can't really do anything else for them. It might be that they have terminal diagnoses, are really sick, or it might be just a lot of pain or migraines—situations where they're in a lot of pain and suffering presently and may have a terminal diagnosis. Of course, mostly they come to this program thinking they're going to find some cure. It takes a few weeks, because all they're teaching them is just straight mindfulness meditation.

I can tell you, it's really quite amazing. Some years ago, when I was managing the meditation center in Barre at IMS, several of us went to become interns in this program. They allow a few people in each class who aren't referred by doctors to sit in, participate, and really learn and see how teaching mindfulness works with strong pain and disease. So I went with two good friends. We were all working at the meditation center, and it was an extremely busy time—we were majorly stressed out. You'd think it would be a good time for us to go to stress reduction, but we'd hop in the car in the morning, drive like an hour really fast, get to this program, stuffing down some breakfast in the cafeteria as we ran in. Then they'd start teaching mindfulness by having us lie down on the floor and do a body scan. One or another of us would invariably fall asleep.

We never really made it through the body scan. But after two or three weeks, other people in the class were saying, "I've had four migraines a week and I'm not having them anymore."

Meanwhile, the three of us would have to leave at two in the afternoon whenever the session ended, driving like mad through terrible lunch-hour traffic because we had our weekly staff meeting—which was never the most enjoyable experience. We'd arrive at our staff meeting completely fried, our heads splitting. "I can't take this meeting. I'm so stressed out from my day."

Somehow, we were supposed to be the meditators. But because we already knew how to do it, we didn't really have the motivation. We went to learn something, but we weren't at our wit's end. We weren't facing a terminal diagnosis. When I think back on it now, it was kind of pathetic.

And yet to see the effect on people in that class—not everybody clicked, of course, and that's fine—but there were really some huge transformations. It wasn't that mindfulness was some magic cure. It was just shifting the relationship, being able to actually be with the actual experience instead of hating it and fearing it and blaming whatever happened and reliving all the past. Learning how to be with pain just as it is, without adding the extra. The results were really amazing. And we just got stressed out.

But thinking about it later, I realized it was a perfect example of how the imminence of death, the constancy of impermanence, the suffering we face in our lives can really serve as a motivator to wake up. And why should we think we can wait until we really do have a terminal diagnosis? That's even a luxury—to know you have time. We don't know. We all have suffering. Instead of just kvetching about it, we could really say, "Okay, this is the moment to wake up. How am I meeting this difficult circumstance? Can I, just for a fraction of a second, awaken with clarity, meet it with compassion?"

No, it isn't easy. It takes enormous motivation. A little reflection can sometimes help to re-inspire that motivation.

The last reflection, which I'll just touch on briefly, is on karma. Karma means basically action—cause and effect, the whole chain of cause and effect, the inevitability of karma. Action, in the way the Buddha looked at it, really has its seed in the intention, the motivation behind why we do a particular action. Speech, thought, action—but really we can look at our actions in our life. Even if something comes out looking like a great action, if what motivated us is total pettiness, that's the seed of karma. That's the effect that will at some point bloom.

Now, where karma gets very complicated—and I don't want to go into it tonight—is that it's not so linear. That's why it's very confusing. You see people having all these good things happen, and you know they're really rotten to the core, and you think, "I don't get this karma." But if we don't worry about other people and we pay attention to ourselves—which is really where the healing is and the freedom is—we have our work cut out for us. None of us are going to get too free by analyzing other people's intentions and what's happening to them.

To bring attention back and pay attention to why we're doing what we're doing, what happens—and this is where I'm skipping all the details—what you begin to notice is that when we can meet and awaken in

the moment with clarity, just meet what's happening, notice why we're doing what we're doing, and pay attention to what happens after we do something out of anger, or after we do something out of love, or after we do something out of total obliviousness, or after we do something out of compassion—when we keep paying attention, the feedback we get, our own internal feedback, our experience, is that really we're so much happier when we act from our interconnectedness, when we act from compassion or friendliness, when we act from seeing clearly rather than from all our preconceptions.

Thinking about this is useful. Paying attention is where we really learn it.

So what begins to happen—it's already happening for all of us, and you see it often on retreat—is that our habits of mind, right here in intention, start to shift. This is where you can notice habits beginning to change. Not overnight, but we do notice it. Acting from greed isn't so satisfying anymore. In little things you start to notice: "Oh, I got that fifth chocolate chip cookie. It didn't really do it. And first of all, I guess I need a sixth."

Maybe it's because it's never going to do it. You can put it down. I'm making it small, but it really begins to shift.

And if you caught what Ajahn Jimnean was talking about—how his emptiness is even bigger this year—and how even when he had chicken pox, he kept just doing for people, doing for people, that actually that compassionate action is what made the emptiness seem to get bigger, is what actually gave him strength. In his way of talking, I loved it, because what I got was the sense of the emptiness, the wisdom, and the compassion as natural interplays together—the two wings of our practice of wisdom and compassion. They can't be separated.

When we're seeing clearly, our natural response in a situation is going to be more from our interrelatedness and less from our sense of small separate me that has to be totally protected, with everything else kept at bay and manipulated so that somehow I can be happy if I can control everything. It's just not even, as he was saying, this idea of being so compassionate—not that we have to be the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa—but it becomes what one teacher called "doing the obvious." You don't even think about it. But in a situation, rather than always self-referencing, we just respond by doing what's obvious. And often what's obvious is going to be the response of caring, of friendliness, of compassion.

And we start, as I said, not by some grandiose idea or service project, but by starting where we are. How do I meet this moment? Starting with ourselves, from Pema Chödrön: "When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart?" Next time you get a chance, experiment with this.

Start where we are. You don't have to have some big thing going on. You just wake up feeling crappy. We

all get to do that. That's a great place to cultivate compassion and clarity. No one can say they don't have an opportunity.

And so the moments of our lives—that's plenty to start with. When you're caught in traffic, when the baby's crying and you're changing the diaper, when you're having a horrible time with your landlord, when you've been working in real estate for six months and never made any money—no matter what it is that's happening, right here. It can be mundane. Mundane's fine. Mundane's great. It's easy with mundane. Practice with the mundane so that for the really big difficult ones, we have a sense that we can trust. That if I'm really willing to meet it wholeheartedly, doing the obvious, meeting it with compassion, responding appropriately will be more natural. We don't have to figure it out all the time.

And so it's not just self-serving either—just meeting our own circumstances and somehow it doesn't affect how we meet everyone else. How we meet ourselves, how we meet each experience, it really seeps out into our relationships with everybody. And really what happens is, over time, what makes us happy really changes. Generosity makes us happy. We don't have to think about it. Kindness, friendliness, open-heartedness makes us happy. And when I get snippy, when I get impatient, when I get aversive, it's more noticeable because it's really so obviously suffering.

And the suffering is really in the sense of separation. I think in some ways the deepest suffering is our sense of separation—separation from others, and really, deeply, our sense of separation from our true home. We're not really separated, but because we're so caught in reactivity, we don't notice that we're not separated. So just the expression of kindness becomes our real, deepest happiness.

I want to read this article because I've liked it and I never have a chance to read it. So I'm reading it. It fits in.

It's an article about a man named Matt Dawson who's worked for Ford Company for fifty-nine years in Detroit. He could have retired a long time ago. He's seventy-eight years old. But he's still at it, driving a forklift, working as much overtime as possible, making about $100,000 a year. And he keeps doing it just so he can give most of it away. He first gave $50,000 to the United Negro College Fund in 1994. Since then, he's given them $180,000 more. He gave $200,000 to Louisiana State University, $112,000 to churches in Detroit and Louisiana, $20,000 to the NAACP, and $10,000 to community colleges. And he just gave $200,000 to Wayne State University.

He says, "I get joy and happiness out of this. I can go home and sleep good." And he just lives in a little apartment, drives a 1985 Ford Escort, and works constantly, doesn't take vacations, because it makes him really happy to give this money away.

Isn't that nice? Real happiness. That's real happiness. Not just saving it all so you can maybe make a hundred dollars on the stock market if the NASDAQ goes up and you sell at the right time. That's not happiness. I've been watching my friends—I cannot say that's happiness. But this is. And that comes to be

happy for us.

Shantideva, the great Indian teacher, said, "When I've done something for others, no amazement or conceit arises. It's like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return." It's like having fed myself. That sense of separation, that sense of isolation isn't there. We're really happy.

And to come back to this practice, which can seem so isolating—sitting here, being with what's happening, being in silence, removing ourselves from the world to do a retreat. But really, as I know you know, it's about opening to the whole world.

I want to close with this from Pema Chödrön:

"Fundamentally, when we look into our own hearts and begin to discover what is confused and what is brilliant, what is bitter and what is sweet, it is not just ourselves that we're discovering—we're discovering the universe. When we discover the Buddha that we are, we realize that everything and everyone is Buddha. When we regard thoughts and emotions with humor and openness, that's how we perceive the universe. We're not just talking about our individual liberation, but how to help the community we live in, how to help our families, our country, the whole continent, not to mention the world and the galaxy and as far as we want to go. There is an interesting transition that occurs naturally and spontaneously. We begin to find that, to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves—the willingness to look, to point directly at our own hearts—and to the degree that there is kindness towards ourselves, there is confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world."

So that's our practice. Here, in daily life—no difference.

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