Wise Attention (Yoniso Manasikāra)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:07:25

Sometimes I know when I'm deep in practice and getting very involved in how the practice is going—the different techniques and the subtleties of the meditation—it can be easy to forget that even the intensive depth of meditation itself is only a tool, one of many tools, to enable our heart and mind to open to the liberation of heart and mind through non-clinging. In other words, the meditation isn't an end in itself. Hopefully we're not here only to become ace meditators, which may or may not happen. It's not in the Olympics yet as an event. We're here to bring all the conditions together to allow our hearts and minds to open to truth.

Of course the meditation is our most powerful and useful tool, but even here the work is happening on many levels in all of the things that we do throughout the day. Our journey of awakening is not a linear process on a scale, going up, up, up until it reaches some point of peak experience and that's it. It's really a constant balancing act—expansion, contraction, falling out of balance, coming back into balance. But the balance is balancing the awareness, balancing the state of our attention, of our mind and heart, so that it's exquisitely, delicately balanced, vividly awake, present, no holding back, yet at the same time not involved in any to-ing and fro-ing, any pushing and pulling, any manipulating. This delicate balance.

What I want to talk about tonight is a particular factor—it's a mental factor, a particular aspect of our experience. It's a factor that the Buddha spoke about a lot that's extremely useful, I find, and interesting to be aware of. It helps us look at all different aspects of our experience with an eye of awakening, with how to pay attention in order to awaken, how to use the experience. This aspect is called wise attention. That's the usual translation. Sometimes I've seen it translated as appropriate attention.

To give an example of one conceptual framework showing the different levels and how the way we pay attention in different areas of our experience can serve to awaken us, there's one called the three vattas, or the three rounds of saṃsāra. You thought there was only one round of saṃsāra, but in this framework there are three. I find it interesting.

The first round is that of deeds or speech. When we are not mindful—and in all of these, of course, mindfulness is always our protection—but in this first round, it's called the round of transgression. When we're unmindful and some of the torments of mind spring up—greed, hatred, confusion—in this round it's called transgression because we actually speak or act out of that unmindfulness in an unwholesome or harmful way.

To give a simple example: you go to your walking meditation spot, and everyone knows it's your walking meditation spot, but somebody got there before you. They had the nerve—after three weeks they took it.

In the round of transgression, without mindfulness, we'd actually say or do something. We're protected from this by sīla. Have there been times when you can just thank the Lord for having taken the precept of noble silence? That's the thing that keeps our mouth shut. That's nothing to sneer at. That's really useful. So that's on the level of transgression.

The second, more subtle level is called the obsessive level, which we're probably also quite familiar with from time to time. This is on the level of thoughts. You go to the walking place, the person's there. It doesn't even occur to you that you're going to say or do something, but the mind just picks at that and worries at that and gets lost in thoughts of revenge and what you're going to do, how you have to write a note. When you find yourself writing a note to the staff about twenty-five times in your mind, there's a good chance you're hanging out at this level in that moment.

That's actually how I check myself for yogi mind when I'm on retreat. I find myself thinking, "Well, the cooks just really need to know this. It's for the benefit of all beings. It's not for me. I only care about the other yogis—for myself, it doesn't matter." And I just watch. If that comes up for three days running, I go, "Uh-huh." Never write the note right away. That's my advice. Because they can read your handwriting, even if you don't sign it. They know who it's from.

On this level of obsession—the repetitive, compulsive thought—it's said that samādhi, concentration, protects us. And you can see that. As the mind gets more focused, we're not as liable to get so sucked in to these obsessive thoughts. They may come up, but it's easier to come back to the breath or to the changing objects, and the obsession doesn't take hold. That's our protection.

And then the most subtle level is called the latent level.

And this is the one that I think can give rise at times to a sense of discouragement if we're not quite paying attention.

Now this is the level where the mind can be really quite focused. The greed or the hatred, the confusion isn't really coming up, but there just needs to be a little space where the conditions come together that would allow that to arise. And if there's that tendency, sort of like a seed resting in the mind stream, well then given the conditions, it could sprout.

So again, taking the example of the walking: you're going to your walking place, you're really quite mindful, you're not in obsessive thoughts. And if you stayed really present, you'd notice the person there, you'd just say okay and walk away. You may have done that and really seen that it was no effort, that was just how it happened. And another day you go, just as mindful, but just when you get there you get a little bit distracted by something, and whoosh—in rushes desire or aversion or confusion.

Quite a few people have been reporting something like this in interviews. As I say, it can seem discouraging because you think, "I'm so present and I just have one little pleasant thought that I don't pay much attention to, and the next thing I know I'm in some incredible fantasy—making up dinner parties

and building houses and constructing retreat centers, or whatever your fantasy is. How did I get there? My practice was really good."

And it is. It's just that it doesn't take much space for these underlying tendencies to shoot up. Don't be discouraged by this. It's just kind of interesting to see it. It doesn't mean you're doing something wrong. It means the practice is quite subtle. There's that sense of being really present, and all of a sudden, boom—out from the depths comes greed or aversion.

What really helps us move out of this is wise seeing, paññā, wisdom. In other words, understanding. The understanding that arrives at that place of non-clinging where the mind and heart naturally let go.

So in all three of these levels, in the way we're working in our practice, wise attention is a very useful and important tool. It's a concept, but we can turn to it as a tool.

"This was said by the Blessed One, so I have heard: With regard to internal factors, I don't see any other factor like wise attention that can do so much for a bhikkhu"—or a person in training. That's us. "A person who attends wisely abandons what is unskillful and develops what is skillful."

This is what the Buddha says: no other single internal factor can be so helpful to us. There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about several different ways—all using wise attention in one form or another—that can help us, if we pay attention, to abandon, to see wisely in such a way that these underlying tendencies, these latent seeds, begin to be abandoned, begin to lose their power. And all of these are based in wise attention.

So let me actually define what wise attention is, according to the Buddha. It's very pragmatic, as the Buddha so often was. He says that wise attention is understanding what is fit for attention and what is not fit for attention. That's how to pay attention wisely.

Now to us that can sound like a value judgment, the kind of value judgment we often put in our practice: "This particular pain is not fit for attention. This bliss state is fit for attention." Guess what? He's not talking about that. It's got nothing to do with pleasant and unpleasant. It's very practical.

Unfit for attention means that when we pay attention in a steady way to this particular experience, whatever it is, the underlying tendencies of craving, of becoming, and of ignorance arise if they're not already arisen, and get stronger if they are arisen. It's just really basic. You keep paying attention in this particular way, and craving gets stronger, becoming gets stronger, delusion and confusion get stronger.

And what is fit for attention is, of course, just the opposite: when you're paying attention, meeting with awareness, with kind awareness, this particular thing, whatever's arising, then maybe not in the first second but over some time, these three—craving, becoming (which is like grasping), and ignorance—either get less if they're already present in the mind stream, or they don't arise.

Now, our mindfulness practice is, of course, the perfect pure example of this. Do you understand that?

How we've been going on and on about how a moment of mindfulness, of pure connection to the bare experience, whatever it is—how in a moment of that connected mindfulness there's no wanting it to change, there's no aversion, there's no delusion making up some story. Just meeting what is, in that moment of mindfulness—that's wise attention. The torments of mind are not increasing and they're not even arising in that moment.

So that's the basic description of wise attention. And it's at the root, the Buddha says, of wise view, of seeing things clearly, of liberation.

And so then he goes through these different areas and how we can use wise attention. I'm going to talk about some of those tonight.

The first one is really our basic mindfulness practice, never to be neglected. Sati, mindfulness, is always our protection, always our ally. So he talks about ways to abandon these tendencies, these torments of mind, the craving. And you've got to realize that within craving is also included the flip side, aversion. Because when we're wanting something, we're also wanting something to be different. So it's in a way a shorthand for both.

The first way is to abandon by seeing. That's really our mindfulness practice, seeing things as they are. And again, remembering that the fitness of what's appropriate to pay attention to is not inherent in the object and whether the object itself seems skillful or unskillful, but in how we pay attention to it.

So a simple example, the kind we always give, about where to place attention can make the difference. This is a story someone really told me a couple of years ago here. She was sitting in this hall day after day, close to the front, and some very subtle, repetitive noise began to bother her. She told me this after having gone through the whole process over a few days. But this repetitive noise—which I'm thinking might have been the ticking of the clock up here, something really soft you don't hear until your mind gets pretty quiet—she said she started to go through all kinds of aversion and anger and resentment, just really trying to focus. "This sound is ruining my samādhi. This sound is ruining my concentration."

You might be able to relate to how we do that. It seems we're paying attention to what's happening, but we're really paying attention to how annoying and inappropriate this particular sound is. And it just kept spiraling and spiraling until she was really, you know, in a state.

And then one day it struck her: "Oh, let me pay attention to the sound itself. I think I've heard that somewhere." Which she did—just went right to hearing, hearing, unpleasant—and was like, "Oh, I see. The sound wasn't bothering my concentration. My mind was bothering my concentration."

So that's a very obvious example, isn't it, of unwise attention and wise attention. Would that it were always so obvious and so easy, and even then it takes us sometimes days to get it because we get so caught up.

But sometimes we're attending to the wrong object, so to speak. Sometimes we're attending to the right object, the sound, but in a really harsh way. You're listening to the sound, but in it is thinking, "May it stop, may it go away, if I pay attention to this correctly." We do that with pain. We know sound won't stop, but "May it go away."

Another aspect of wise attention is the quality of the attention, which is what we always say with mindfulness—that quality of mettā in the mindfulness.

The Pāli term for wise attention, two words, is yoniso manasikāra. Andy gave me his own idiosyncratic translation of what this means, but I really like it, so I'm going to use it because I think it gives the sense of the quality of wise attention. Yoniso, which is usually translated as wise or appropriate, actually comes from the word for womb, yoni. So he translates that as womb-like nurturing or held in protection, which I very much like if you remember that mindfulness is our strong protection. And then manasikāra—mana is the word usually for mind, kāra comes from the verb from which kamma also comes, which means action. So it's a nurturing, protecting action of mind, the directing of the mind in a way that protects. You could put it that way.

So wise attention is directing the awareness to what's arising in a way that protects us from increasing the torments of mind, from suffering. And so obviously we can't do that by hating what we're paying attention to. We can try, but it won't work.

So this one, again, about wise seeing—something that I found very interesting is how with four of the five hindrances, the hindrances can strengthen and increase if we have slightly unwise attention. We don't quite pay attention to the right aspect.

So I'll give you these examples. With sense desire, the first hindrance, the way that the sense desire increases is if we pay attention to the experience of the sense desire—not just on the bare experience, but our emphasis is really on the gratification that we're experiencing in that particular sense pleasure. So for example, if I'm eating a piece of very tasty bread, and I'm just noting tasty, pleasant, nice, that's fine. But if there's that little bit of "Mmm, this is really tasty"—and you're noticing tasty, but the real emphasis is on the gratification, it's sort of how tasty it is for me—I get in there, definitely. And as we're paying attention to that gratification more than the bare experience, the sense desire increases, gets stronger and stronger. This might be a little subtle, but play with it.

With aversion, it's the same thing.

How we pay attention matters deeply. Like that woman with the clock, you might be sort of being with the sound, practicing what seems like wise attention, but really the attention is a little more with the repugnant nature of that unpleasant experience. "This is really so unpleasant. This really shouldn't be allowed to happen in a retreat center like this. I really shouldn't have to deal with such an unpleasant physical experience." You know, just that little tinge of "this is really disgusting." That's the place where,

even though we can fool ourselves that we're being mindful, the unpleasantness feeds the aversion because we're not quite present with wise attention.

Sloth and torpor, I hate to tell you, isn't quite like that. It's more that we get overwhelmed and the energy can't match the heaviness. Or we get into boredom.

But with the other two hindrances—with restlessness and remorse, particularly the mental part—it's that we give unwise attention to spinning reflections, to painful or difficult or sorrowful reflections, and the attention really goes into thinking about them. And with doubt, that's more obvious: the attention goes to getting lost in thinking about speculative matters.

In the beginning of a retreat, doubt is a little more obvious because it can just be like, "This is stupid, I can't do it, worst practice I ever heard of," or "I'm hopeless." That you can kind of recognize. But as practice goes on, and your attention is getting more subtle, and you've also heard already so many dharma talks—you know, that one didn't match this one, and what about that other practice I did—and we're all getting so much more refined, doubt can take quite another turn. We actually think we're having profound Dhamma thoughts. And maybe we are, but with unwise attention, we're just going from this to that. "How was it? How did it used to be? What would this practice lead to? How can I really understand not-self? What did she say about wise attention? Where am I paying attention now? Should I pay attention to this? Should I..." You know, that's doubt. Unwise attention to speculative matters, as the Buddha put it: reflecting unwisely on dubious matters. Just drop it.

Now, the way the Buddha describes the second tendency—of becoming or being—that's a little different from sense desire, and how that gets fueled is interesting. This is more when we're in exalted, or just say nice, meditative states—it doesn't have to be exalted. And we really pay attention to how nice they are, how exalted they are, how *I* am having an exalted meditative state. Now let's face it, we all do that, don't we? Especially the first few times. It's really rare to go, "Oh yes, comes and goes, nothing to do with me." Pretty hard to really believe that, though we may try. But all we need to do is see that arising—"Ah, my exalted meditative state, isn't this nice?"—just notice that, otherwise we get lost into unwise attention.

And ignorance, of course, increases through unwise attention. As the Buddha described it, ignorance arises whenever we pay attention to any aspect of experience, any mundane thing—meaning not particularly meditative states—in the wrong way, meaning through any of the inverted or incorrect perceptions. This is a whole other talk, so I could just mention them. But whenever we perceive what is impermanent as permanent, in that moment, ignorance is arising, and the more we do it, the more it increases. How often do we do that?

Or whenever we see what is painful, or what is dukkha, as pleasurable. You may think we don't do that so much, but I've observed that often when I'm not paying attention, I experience craving and even clinging as pleasurable. If I really look, of course, it's clearly dukkha. But that's wise attention—you really look. When we're kind of half looking or not quite looking, we may see what's impermanent as permanent,

what's dukkha or unreliable as pleasurable, and what's not-self, which is everything, as self.

So again, not to get discouraged, just to notice that when we do that, we can redirect the attention to the bare perception. And that's really what the mindfulness practice, moment to moment, is helping us see.

I don't know if this example is helpful. I'm trying to illustrate the subtlety of how this can be—not in a discouraging way. It's actually quite interesting, I think, because it helps answer the question of why, when we've really had insights on quite deep levels into impermanence, or insights into not-self, or the suffering and futility of clinging, how does it keep happening? And it's a lot on these subtle levels of tendency that we don't quite recognize when it's happening.

So this example is just one time I was on retreat. Pretty mindful, you know, the times when you're really noticing pretty much what's going on. You're not getting caught in big stories, big reactions or anything. And I was sitting eating one day. Present, present, present—and then I would notice I'd get into a little short thought train. Like an image and a thought and an image and a thought, maybe four or five or six little quick images and thoughts. Then I'd see it and I'd come back. Eating, eating.

After a few times, I noticed there was nothing compelling or even interesting about the images and thoughts. They weren't particularly pleasant or unpleasant. And I was thinking, well, what's the hook here? What is it that kind of sucks the attention away and gets it going? Because I knew it was one of these tendencies. So I started looking really closely when the first image would arise and it would go into the next thought. And what I noticed—this is just particular for me—was that even though the image and the thoughts themselves were nothing special, something about it in the seeing, when not quite being mindful... there was a sense of me. Big surprise. Just a little subtle sense of me. And it's so familiar, you know. It has kind of the comfort of familiarity.

And I experienced that as pleasant in a very quick kind of way. Because that was pleasant and I didn't notice either the image or the pleasantness, then it would go into another thought, another thought. Each one building a little stronger sense of me, a little stronger sense of me. And then we get to the point where the sense of me is far from pleasant anymore—but we wonder how we got there. It's just all these little familiarities, building one upon another.

Okay, that's for seeing, and that's a lot of our practice that we've talked of often. I want to move to the other areas.

The second one the Buddha speaks about is abandoning these tendencies to suffering through restraining—restraint at the sense doors, restraint of our awareness at the sense doors. Now that's really... if you were in the hall this morning, this is exactly what we were speaking of. Someone asked the question or just pointed out how we talk about noticing seeing, but how quickly from seeing the mind has completely gone off into seeing and wanting and comparing and judging and me and a whole story. It happens so fast. And it's hard to just go around noting "seeing, seeing, seeing." How does it happen so

quickly?

This is exactly what this area of restraint at the sense doors is talking about. It doesn't mean that we have to stop up our ears, wear a blindfold, and never let anything in through the sense doors. That doesn't exactly do it. Real restraint at the sense doors, when the mindfulness is strong enough, balanced enough, is exactly what we're talking about when we talk about being with seeing at the point of seeing. We bring in what Ajahn Buddhadasa would call *sati-pañña*—mindfulness-wisdom—right at that moment of seeing, or of hearing, or of smelling.

So for example, there's a really pleasant smell. You recognize that the perception is, "Oh, that's pizza, maybe we're having pizza for lunch"—and you're gone, right? *Sati-pañña* would be at the moment of smelling, of recognizing pizza even, noticing: okay, smelling, pleasant, pizza. Smelling, pleasant, pizza. And that's all. Just keeping mindfulness-wisdom right there at the sense contact. As Ajahn Chah would say sometimes, when you smell an odor with the nose, let it be—just leave it at the nose.

So that's what we do. We leave our mindfulness-wisdom here at the nose, at the eye, at the ear, at the touch, at the mind. Otherwise, we're off in whirls of *papañca*, that proliferation that Steve talked about last night. And *papañca* is pretty much fed by—guess what? Clinging, sense of self, confusion, becoming. So come back to the nose, come back to the ear, come back to the eye. This doesn't have to be a struggle or a judgment, just seeing what's what.

But the other aspect of restraint, and this leads a little into the next ones as well, is that *papañca* is so quick. That was what the question was pointing to. Who has time to notice seeing? I'm already off in Bali and I don't even know I saw anything. It's so fast that restraint at the sense door actually requires a sense of not leaving all the windows and doors open, to paraphrase Thich Nhat Hanh. Give it a chance.

That's one of the reasons we come on retreat, and this gets into one of the later ones anyway—we set up certain conditions to make it a little bit easier to see what goes on, to see how fast the greed goes out through the eye door, the aversion goes out through the ear door, so to speak. I mean, it's not really—you know that, right? It's not really that there's greed and aversion inside of you shooting out your eyes or shooting out your ears. They feel like that sometimes, I know. But just so you know, it's a figure of speech. That's not who we are.

But it happens so quickly that we can give ourselves a break once in a while by, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, not sitting in the living room with all the windows open to the traffic and the neighbors yelling outside, the TV on one side and the stereo behind you, and then saying, "How come there's no quiet?" We can give ourselves a chance by restraining how much we, for example, look around.

A lot of people have been telling me—and this they've discovered on their own, I think; I don't know, maybe someone said it in a talk, but it really felt like they were discovering it on their own—that as much as they love being outside, sometimes they're finding it very helpful to walk inside, just because there was

less pull to get lost through the eyes, lost through the ears, lost through smelling.

But it's important to recognize this is not from aversion. If you walk inside thinking, "I have to fear smelling the wind or seeing the leaves," and you get into some kind of aversive, fearful state—this is not wise attention. It's not sense restraint. It's just feeding aversion.

So remember in all of these that we look at what is helping to reduce in the mind stream clinging and aversion, confusion and becoming. What's helping reduce it? If you're walking inside to keep your senses restrained and over the days you turn into one tight knot of suffering, please go outside. But if you're outside or walking around the dining room and your eyes are just wide open, just greed looking for something to land on, then do yourself a favor and look down a little bit. Don't look around so much.

You can tell. We all take turns being sort of walking mental states. And we can see it in each other. It's too bad we have trouble seeing it in ourselves. But we can see when someone's the walking craving state. You just can't walk by the bulletin board. You can't walk by the toilet cleaner in the bathroom. You can't walk by anything. You just need some stimulation.

So I find it really helpful just not to look around. Feet are bad enough. You can tell a lot about everybody just from their feet, but at least it limits it a little bit. So keep it simple, but not out of tightness, not out of a should—out of what decreases suffering, what helps you be present with an open mind, with an open heart.

The third protection is called wise attention to the attitude with which we use things. And this really, as in all of these, it's not just about being on retreat. It's an attitude of wise attention that we can bring to our life. It expands the idea that cultivating freedom from clinging, freedom from confusion, freedom from sense of self doesn't have to be dependent only on deep meditation. We can pay attention.

Just like with the sense doors I was just talking about, this doesn't just have to be on retreat. Look in your life. Look when you're home. What increases your sense of desire, your sense of wanting, your sense of discontent? If I start going to movies a lot and I find I'm wanting more and feeling disconnected, guess what? I don't need to do that. We can just pay attention. So it's really a very useful thing.

Wise attention to the attitude with which we use things means paying attention to how we're relating to the basic necessities of our life—how we use our food, how we use our clothing, how we use the requisites that we have here: our room, our seat in the hall, the necessities. We all need things to be healthy. We need to eat. We need to be protected from the elements. We need to have a modicum of comfort and ease so that we can practice. But look at how we're relating to each of these things. Are we relating in a way that increases our fear and anxiety, that increases our craving and clinging? Or are we relating in a way that brings a kind of ease, a peace in the world?

I notice for myself, both on retreat and off—but we can stick to retreat since it's a microcosm for the rest of our life—I have a sense of ease, a sense of trust, a sense of peace in the environment when I know I'm

using just what I need. I take what I need within a sense of how much there is for everyone else and just leave it there. But when I'm operating from a sense of fear or that scarcity model—what if there's not more later?—how does that feel? What does that engender in the heart and the mind? What is one's relationship to oneself, to the other people?

I know when I'm in scarcity model, everyone else is my competitor for whatever it is that's scarce. And what it breeds in my mind is a quality of fear and clinging that is quite a lot of suffering. It's burdensome.

Just a very simple example. When I get into saving food on a retreat—for instance, I'll be at breakfast and I'll think, "Oh, I really would like to have a banana for tea instead of an apple." And they usually don't serve bananas, so I'll take two bananas, if there's one left at the end—at least I do that—and then save it for tea. So already I'm in this clinging mode. I'm anxious. I have to kind of hang around and wait and see: when do I think everyone's done? When is it too soon to take the banana? If you take it too soon, then you feel really bad for the rest of the day. Who saw me? Can I get away with it?

You sneak back at noon and put it out on that table and write "Donna" on it, because you can't stand yourself anymore. It's so much suffering. And even if you save it and it was extra and all, then when you get it, what do you do with it? You put it back there on the shelves where there's no room, or you take it to your room, and then at tea time—do I go to my room first and get the banana, or do I take the tea and then go to the room? It's just torment. Just take the apple and forget about it. It's so much more peaceful, so much more at ease.

So you get the drift—it's really a drag. Watch what increases in the mind. If, as sometimes happens, there really is a need, a physical need, you know whether it's a physical need or you're rationalizing. If you're rationalizing for half an hour about why you really need it, forget about it. If it's a real need, you don't have to rationalize. You know you need it. And so then it's just something you do, and you might see how this is a drag, but then you let go of it. You do it because you need to do it. It's also wise attention. You're not engendering that wanting, that anxiety, that fear. You're just doing what needs to be done.

So you notice if you're hoarding blankets, if you need two or three seats in the hall just in case. That just-in-case mind is always a sign. But don't do it out of judgment. Look and see what leads to an ease of being, what leads to freedom of heart and mind, what leads to non-clinging, and what leads to suffering. That's what's at the root of it—not what anyone else thinks about you, not who saw you take the fifth orange—just what leads to more ease, what leads to freedom.

I know a lot of you listened to that tape of Ajahn Sumedho, which I listened to before we played it, and this really quite amused me. I know it amused you. Toward the end—that was a talk given at Spirit Rock last year—do you remember toward the end when he was talking about being on eight precepts? Up until then, everyone was laughing along with him. And then he said, "All the food in the yogi fridge should be donated to the homeless." Did you notice that kind of dead silence? There was a little panicky titter and then dead silence. I thought it was a riot—like, "Oh my God, could he really do that?" So that's really

noticing our attitude with which we use things for our own freedom.

Often, this is a translation of a chant that monks and nuns do before they eat, a kind of reflection. It's from some things the Buddha said, but it's a way of reminding oneself of this attitude: "May I eat this meal with mindfulness, not for pleasure nor for beautification, only for the nourishment and continuation of this body, to keep it from harm, to avoid hunger and overeating. Thus I will be free from bodily suffering and living at ease." So we're allowed to live at ease and be comfortable, free from hunger, free from overeating—just what we need to live at peace.

The next aspect is abandoning these tendencies by what is usually translated as *enduring*—enduring what is difficult. I like *patience* better, because at least for me, when I hear "enduring"—and again, I know Ajahn Sumedho used that word a lot—but for me, enduring has the connotation of a passive aversion. When I'm enduring something, I'm thinking, "Okay, I'm here, I'm enduring, knowing it'll go away." I'm sure in the way Ajahn Sumedho is using it, and also in this translation, it doesn't have that connotation. It has the connotation of patience, which is actually an aspect of mettā—that ability to simply be with what is difficult, with a mind and heart that is non-reactive, that is present, neither pushing away nor trying to control, but really at ease. Reflecting wisely to be with difficult experience without getting caught.

This is really the heart of equanimity—the peace of equanimity leading directly into the mind of non-clinging. That we can be with what is without reacting, without needing to change it.

I don't think I need to say a whole lot about this, because we have talked about it a lot before, and it's obviously a big aspect of practice here. But it's important. It's one of the reasons there is this emphasis, when you're sitting, of not moving the first second that the sensations get unpleasant or difficult. And I know it's a delicate balance—not to get into a kind of masochistic sitting with it, or locked in aversion sitting with it, or the idea of "I have to be kind to myself" so you move immediately. But to really learn to cultivate this, the aspect of developing a mind that's like the earth, as vast as the earth and as unmoving. No matter what we put on it—something beautiful, something ugly—if we spit on the earth, if we plant a flower, the earth doesn't say, "No, I won't take this, send it away." It doesn't say, "Yes, this is nice." It accepts us all. It doesn't say, "You can stay here, you have to go." It just accepts us all.

Developing a mind with that vastness and spacious acceptance is really what this long-enduring mind, as Suzuki Roshi used to say, is about. Both to external situations—such as the noisy neighbor, the weather when you're feeling too cold and you don't have the right clothes, the bell ringing for sitting when you really could use another half hour of sleep, whatever it might be externally—and also the internal: the unpleasant mental state, the meditation that isn't going the way you like it, the unpleasant sensation in the body. Just the mind and heart that's vast enough to be with it all.

Practicing in Asia gives everybody great stories about the long-enduring mind. Like sweating through three robes while going out for alms round. You can just feel how completely grimy and wet and uncomfortable it is, and you have to do it day after day after day. A friend of mine who was a monk would

wash his robes every day, but after a while he said, "I don't need to wash the robes, I'll just wear them." And one other monk finally said to him, "Are you deliberately trying to make your robes stink?" It just builds up.

But you don't have to go to Asia. I'm going to spare you Asian stories because you can start to think one has to go to a really extremely difficult situation in order to develop the heart of patience, the long-enduring mind. And you don't. Sometimes what's helpful about going to a really difficult situation is it's so difficult, you're just so up against it that you have to find a way. There's nowhere else to go. You went to all the trouble to go to this place, and so you have this motivation to somehow find a way to be there in it. That's a lot of what practicing in Burma or Thailand or India can really do.

But guess what, folks? The same mind is going on here. Even if externally it may seem like a silly difficulty, in your experience it's really hard, isn't it? Even if it's sleepiness, or some noise, or construction workers scraping outside for days. And what is really useful—why we tell these stories, always after you've come out the other end—is discovering that after we go through the aversion and all the "how can I fix it," when we finally give up and say, "Okay, I'm really here, let me be here," you discover that you can be tremendously at peace and happy, even blissful, so happy, and the circumstances haven't changed. Really haven't changed.

When that happens and you let yourself see it, something in you just can't believe anymore that you can't bear it. It just can't believe it anymore.

When I was a nun in Thailand, from the beginning to the end was like a world of difference. I hated everything for two months. And at the end of the year, I was so happy. What changed? Well, I don't think the climate changed. I don't think any of the circumstances changed. Just the mind and heart's ability to be there and really see how superficial our preferences and our likings and dislikings are on so many levels.

So when you find yourself in a real struggle with something that you just think you cannot endure—and it's not that sometimes it isn't too much to endure, because sometimes it is, and that's the next thing. That's what's so tricky. But don't let yourself go there too soon.

When your mind is first thinking, "I can't bear this another second," two things. One, see if you can expand into the bigger picture and see: Oh really, somebody's snoring in the next room. Do I really think that this is something unendurable in this life? That I can't practice anymore because of this? Even though in the moment it feels so overwhelming, you can get bigger and go, "Okay, maybe there's a way. Maybe I can come back and try again."

And the other is to remember, when the mind's going, "Okay, that's it, I'm out of here"—as you hit that place of "if this happens one more time, I'm leaving at six weeks, I'm leaving at four weeks, I'm never coming back again"—see how much of the unbearableness is actually arising from being present with this moment's experience, and how much of it is the mind imagining into the interminable future: moment

after moment after moment of this unbearable grating experience, and how it's going to be forever this way.

Is it really what's happening that you can't bear, or is it that thought you can't bear?

And a lot of times—I wouldn't say always, but a lot of times—it's that thought. Which means... oh, that's a thought. Maybe if I just come back to here... ah.

So what is it that's really causing the effect of increased clinging and aversion and confusion in that moment? Is it the presence of that difficult thing? Or is it the unwise attention to the aversion, to that thought: "If only this would stop, I would be an arahat by now"? Just notice: where's the attention? What's increasing the suffering?

And then, what I was going to say is this: when you actually come through one of these difficult things—even if it's a little thing—but you come through and you see that the thing's still happening, and you're really okay with it, really at peace, don't just go, "Oh, I was so stupid, what was that all about?" Notice the difference. Notice the peace and the spaciousness that comes from that cultivation of acceptance, from that cultivation of mindful presence, that real equanimity. That's the real power of mind and heart. Don't belittle it and think, "Oh, I was just in yogi mind." Let yourself draw confidence from that.

The next factor is avoiding. And this is what's really interesting: the Buddha actually said that through wise attention, through wise reflection, there are some things we need to avoid. Which doesn't sound like—you know, acceptance is the one we always hammer on. So it's very tricky. I see why avoidance was listed second, after acceptance, after patience.

The things the Buddha describes avoiding are what is dangerous—like a savage elephant, or a poisonous snake, or a cesspit, or a sewer. Okay, that's like a no-brainer. We would avoid those things. That's sensible. But also, we can learn to avoid what's internally dangerous—what will internally bring us to confusion and suffering.

Now, this is where we look at the motivation really carefully. That doesn't mean we avoid whatever we don't like. Not: "Oh, if I hear this unpleasant thing again I might get angry, so I better just avoid it and take a walk." Not that. Not: "If I stay on eight precepts I might experience some hunger and that would be unpleasant for me, so I better avoid that." Not that. But really looking with wise attention at what truly prevents or does not support our developing awareness, our developing mindfulness.

This is one aspect of renunciation. In fact, look at the setup of this whole retreat. We've structured it so that quite a lot of things you're having to avoid—we're avoiding them for you. And that's really as a way to support the developing awareness, as a way to increase wise attention. So we don't have TVs in the lobby with CNN on every half hour. There's a reason for that. It's not just by chance. We're here in the middle of the country and not in Times Square. It makes it a little bit easier. We ask you not to get your mail. Those of you who are getting your mail know why we ask you not to get it—because it makes it more difficult to

really just notice what's going on.

So we can avoid not only what's dangerous, but what really does not support our developing practice, our developing awareness. And I just want to point that out because sometimes we can get quite idealistic. This ties into the next factor, which is actually removing—redirecting the attention when you're really caught in something. I'll talk about these together.

We can get quite idealistic about not avoiding anything or not removing. "I should be able to be with anything, right? I should be able to be mindful in the middle of any activity in my daily life. Therefore, avoidance is the baby way out. Or avoidance is not going to support me. It's just—okay, I can be mindful if I avoid these things, but what good is that if I can't be mindful in Times Square?"

This is idealistic. What's so interesting about the Buddha is he was so practical. Look at what's true. If you can be totally mindful with CNN on every half hour in the middle of Times Square, that's great. If you can't, let's get real and do what helps us to cultivate a stronger mindfulness—to see what really increases our craving and our sense of self and our confusion, and what helps it to go away.

So the Buddha talked about, for instance, in life, avoiding unwise or unskillful companions. Now that's interesting.

It's not saying they're bad people, but just knowing that you can hang out with certain people and you end up doing things that you really don't feel good about. And if you stay alone or hang out with other people, you don't do those things. Just the power of suggestion, the power of just doing what people are doing. The Buddha saw this as a very strong influence and said, okay, avoid those unwise people for your own well-being. So that kind of avoidance—not out of aversion, but out of skillfulness.

The actual avoidance, the renunciation itself, may in the beginning be unpleasant. And actually some aversion may come up. So it's not that the first second there's aversion, that means we should avoid it because the torments are coming up. That's a trick. Just like talking about patient endurance—if you stay with something and there's a lot of aversion in that renunciation, but after a while you see that really craving is getting less, serenity is getting stronger, the heart is opening—if you can see that, then that's a sign of wise attention. But if you're paying attention, being with something, and the longer you're with it the stronger the greed gets or the fear gets or the terror gets or the sense of self gets, then that's a sign it may be something to avoid.

The last way I'll quickly mention, which goes with avoiding, is what the Buddha described as removing. This means that in reflecting wisely, a bhikkhu sees that there's an arisen thought affected by sense desire, or by ill will, or by cruelty—you see that there's any kind of arisen unwholesome, unskillful state—and you don't endure it. In other words, you don't say, "Oh, well, so what? They come, they go. I'll just let it take me until it's over." You say, "No, okay, I'm not putting up with it."

On the most obvious level, when attention is strong and balanced and the energy is balanced, that's really

a point of resolution—what Joseph likes to call the sword of wisdom. When you start off in that fantasy for the tenth time and you go, "No, I don't need to do this. Not now." And you just come back. Resolution, not aversion. That's pretty clear cut. I'm just not enduring this anymore. I'm not feeding it.

But there are times, both with this removal and avoidance that kind of go together, when the arisen unskillful dhamma—whether it's a strong emotion like fear or terror or rage—is so strong you can't just go to the sense door and notice it and have it go away. You can't just say, "Okay, terror, not now," and come back to the breath. It's not possible.

So with wise attention, this is the example for removal the Buddha gives. We can actually redirect our awareness, not out of fear or running away, but in order to bring a balance, a spaciousness, a brightness back to the mind.

This is an example from the Buddha. He says, "In this, Ananda, a monk dwells contemplating"—now monk means nun, it means all of us—"dwells contemplating the body, ardent, clearly aware, and mindful, putting aside worldly desire and dejection." That is the classic way he describes the foundations of mindfulness, being aware of the body. So he's doing basically mindfulness practice on the body. "And as he dwells contemplating the body, some bodily object arises, or a physical discomfort, or a mental drowsiness, causes his mind to wander to external things." In other words, he gets completely distracted.

"Then, Ananda, that bhikkhu's attention could be directed to some inspiring object of thought." What is usually meant by an inspiring object of thought is one of the reflections on the qualities of a Buddha, on the qualities of Dhamma or Sangha. But it could also be your own virtues, whatever inspires your faith. It's the deliberate redirection of attention.

"As he thus directs his mind to an inspiring object of thought, delight springs up in him." Now these are translations of specific Pali mental states. That's *pamoja*—delight springs up in him. "When he is delighted, rapture arises"—that's *pīti*. "When he experiences rapture, his body is calmed down"—tranquility. "With his body calmed, he experiences joy"—or *sukha*. "Being joyful, his mind is concentrated."

And that's a classic delineation of some of the order of how this unfolds—going from a kind of joy in the mind, the mind gets calm, piti arises, then the mind gets calmer still, then there's sukha, then there's concentration.

At that point, the Buddha says, one reflects: "My mind is concentrated. The reason I was reflecting on this has been achieved." And then one withdraws the mind from that conscious reflection and returns to mindfulness of body.

So that's a very deliberate—you could say it's removal or avoidance—but it's a very deliberate cultivation of wise attention. Just staying lost in the thing is only increasing confusion. So you consciously reflect on some inspiring theme, just until the mind is spacious, bright, gladdened, calm, concentrated a bit, and then come back to the meditation.

Another example—not from the Buddha, this is just as we see in our practice—when you're overcome by a very strong mental state, rage or fear or anxiety, you know it, you're trying to be aware, but the energy of the mental state is just stronger than the energy of the mindfulness. They're simply out of balance at that time. You try to come to the body, but even touching with awareness the sensations of the body only highlights the anxiety. It only feeds back into the fear.

And you see, it's not so much an aversion of "I don't like this," but a recognition that this is just increasing the suffering. It's increasing the confusion. So with wise attention, we place the awareness elsewhere. You may first try going to hearing or seeing, completely out of the body. If that's not strong enough, you may then reflect on an inspiring theme. If that's not strong enough, then at that point we tell you to actually break the meditation—go outside and take your mind off it completely, go for a walk or go into the woods.

It's not out of running away. It's out of wise attention to rebalance and focus the mind and heart.

I talked last time about that idea of diving into the wave when it's difficult. But sometimes the waves are so big that all we can really do is put our toe in the water. We have no business being out there in the waves in the first place. And it's wise attention to simply recognize that and redirect rather than just get lost and overwhelmed. That's an important part of the practice.

I'll just end with a very short poem. This is from Lala, a Kashmiri mystic, a woman poet:

Some people abandon their homes.
Others abandon hermitages.
All this renunciation does nothing if you're not deeply conscious.
Day and night, be aware with each breath and live there.

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