Acceptance

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:07

Since it's really the first full day of suffering, I'd like to talk about acceptance.

We've said a few times, different ones of us in different circumstances, that we are really engaged here in a practice of liberation, whatever form or particular activity might take in a moment.

I'd like to ask you just for a moment to reflect right now on what liberation—that word, or freedom, or whatever word you use—just for a moment, please reflect on what that actually means to you. Either what your deepest motivation is, and also what concepts, what connections come up in your mind around this word of liberation.

I ask you to do that for two reasons. One, of course, as we get in touch with our deepest motivation, this is a wellspring of commitment, a wellspring of energy that we need to touch in with over and over again throughout this retreat, throughout our life, to keep us practicing, to keep us on the path. Because things do get difficult, and we need to really honor our deepest motivation.

But I also ask for another reason: to see in yourself, and to continue to explore over the time here, what concepts come up, what ideas do we hold of what liberation might feel like or look like, what that experience is or will be. It really comes down to what our expectation or idea is that we're holding, perhaps not so consciously, of happiness, of peace.

I think our ideas of liberation, happiness, and peace bear continual examination, because I've found that mostly our unexamined ideas tend to spring from not looking clearly and tend to get in our way.

I'm sure many of you have heard this famous teaching about what the Buddha saw when he was first awakened, how he could look with his all-seeing mind through the world. What aroused his compassion for beings like us was seeing that while everyone's deepest desire is to be truly happy, in our confusion—because we haven't changed much since he was around, it doesn't sound like anyway—in our confusion, in trying to be happy, we keep doing just the things that continue us in this cycle of suffering. And we bring the same confusion as to what happiness is or liberation is into our practice. Of course, it's the same mind.

I'll tell you a little story about this that to me really illustrates how we bring more suffering on ourselves by trying to be happy when we don't really pay attention.

Two friends of mine who live around here told me this. They live in a house, and in this area, as in most country areas, in the winter or summer, mice can easily get into houses. They get into the cupboards, they

eat the flour and so forth. So my friends had a mouse, and being good caring beings, they got one of these have-a-heart traps that catches the mouse without hurting it, because they didn't want to hurt it.

So my friend, the woman, was telling me this story. They got up one morning, of course very rushed to go to work, and heard that there was a mouse in the trap but said, "Well, okay, it'll be okay until the evening, and then we'll take care of it," because they were rushed.

She came home in the evening, very tired, and could hear from the other room the mouse just going bonkers, going nuts in this trap—which has a lot of room, but I guess it was just sort of bouncing off the walls and sounding really frantic. Somehow the sound disturbed her so much that she didn't want to deal with it. So she thought, "Well, my husband will take care of it when he comes home," and went to bed.

He came home very late, wasn't of course thinking about the mouse, didn't hear anything, went to bed. And in the morning when they got up, the mouse had died. She felt awful, just awful—like a hundred times worse than she would have felt had she just gone and dealt with the mouse when it was kind of upset.

That's what we do. Without really paying attention, on some level, for most of us, our concept of happiness is linked to pleasant feeling. And our idea of suffering, unhappiness, things being wrong, is connected to unpleasant feeling. This is so basic, but it is so easy for us to bring this interpretation of experience into our practice, so that our commitment to liberation—which is deep, which is genuine, which is why we're here doing this peculiar thing together for three months—it becomes so limited. It becomes so conditional on having the correct circumstances, whether they're the correct external circumstances.

How many of you have already found yourself in deep manipulation, trying to organize your sitting cushion or your room or your food or something about being here so that everything is going to be just right so you can have a good retreat?

How many of you, when you think about a good retreat, does that include a lot of physical pain? Does that include your mind wandering all over? "Yeah, I really hope my mind wanders like crazy this next sitting. I hope my knees hurt like hell." Probably not.

Mostly when we think of a good retreat, we think of—we each have our own story—but some transcendent state of samādhi, some deep state of bliss, no more thoughts from tomorrow noontime until November 15th. Or if we suffer, then we really suffer in a way that is clearly purifying, getting to the bottom of our deepest wellspring of grief. How many of you are thinking, "Okay, I'll battle with sleepiness for a month, and that'll really be an enlightening experience"? Probably not.

This is from Joko Beck. I really like the way she puts this:

"What do we actually honor and pay attention to moment by moment? We might call it the god of comfort and pleasantness and security. Until we honestly see that this is what our lives are about, we will be

unable to discover who we really are."

And then she gives a whole list of examples about how we do this in our lives:

"We have many ways to cope with life, many ways we worship comfort and pleasantness. All are based on the same thing: the fear of encountering any kind of unpleasantness. If we must have absolute order and control, it's because we're trying to avoid any unpleasantness. If we have to have things our way and get angry if they're not, then we think we can survive and shut out our anxiety about death. If we pursue life madly, going after any pleasant sensation, any excitement, any entertainment, perhaps we won't have to feel any pain. If we can bliss out, if we can be a mindless Buddha, we don't have to assume any responsibility for the world's unpleasantness. We can just be happy. All of these are versions of the God we actually worship: the God of no discomfort and no unpleasantness."

As we pursue it, we lose touch with what really is, and the very unpleasantness that we sought to avoid can overwhelm us.

I find it fascinating to keep exploring in my practice how, in more and more subtle ways, I find my mind inclining in the same direction. Oh, a little more pleasantness. Unpleasant—I must be doing it wrong. Let's change things around and get back to that pleasant state.

This chase after pleasantness in our life here in retreat brings up an image for me. You know when you have a pet hamster, those wheels in the cage where it just runs and runs and runs endlessly? It's like that. We get on this wheel of running after pleasantness or away from unpleasantness, and the faster we go, the faster the wheel spins, and it just seems more and more oppressive. Until we really stop and look, we don't see that all we have to do is stop. Just stop running. Get off the wheel. And that whole sense of oppressiveness vanishes.

So just to pay attention: do we bring that same mind, the same expectations—subtle expectations of a world heading towards more and more pleasant experience, less and less unpleasant experience—until we finally hit the pinnacle where pleasantness never stops and unpleasantness never raises its head in any of our sixth sense experiences? Which sounds ridiculous. But when I really look, I find that somewhere back there, there's this little unspoken belief that that's really what's going to happen. That's what liberation is.

Well, we can forget it. If we could forget it, it would save us a lot of trouble. The real happiness, the real peace is far more radical and so simple, so immediate, so continuously accessible to us that we just totally overlook it and jump back on that wheel with gay abandon, running after some pleasant experience rather than stopping and looking.

The potential for real peace—happiness that is not dependent on internal or external experience—is our natural state. It is our inherent potential to rest in this peace, in this ease with whatever is arising.

The real secret—I'll tell you this now and then maybe it'll last for the whole retreat—the secret of this whole practice is it doesn't make any difference what's happening in your experience. It makes absolutely no difference. When you come in and tell us in interviews this is going on and that's going on, and we say good, or try this or try that, we're all playing a little game in a way. We keep getting caught in thinking that it really matters what's happening in your experience. Actually, the only thing that contributes to our recognizing peace or our spinning on that wheel is how we're relating to our experience, not what the experience is.

When we really know this—and we might know it just for an instant and then forget it again; that's mostly what we do—but when we really are touching that deep knowing that it doesn't matter what's happening now, we stop all the fighting, the manipulating, the trying to hold on, the interpreting, the reactivity of mind. We let go and just totally accept this moment as it is, with wakefulness, with open-hearted connection. In that moment of resting at ease, of full presence, there is no problem. There is no further something to look for to make ourselves happy. It's possible to just stop running and open to peace and happiness.

The Buddha said that the supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata—which means himself—which is namely liberation through non-clinging. Liberation through non-clinging. Our natural state: the mind, the heart that is fully connected with whatever is arising without clinging or pushing away or reacting. Whether your knee hurts, whether you're sleepy, whether you have a headache, whether you're deeply connected to the breath, whether there's a lot of rapture, whether you're lost in discursive thought—none of these are what freedom is about. Rather, it is the liberation of the heart and mind through non-clinging. And this is accessible in any moment, no matter what our experience is. That's really the way we practice.

So in that case, it really doesn't matter what's arising. No matter what it is, we have the opportunity to meet this moment fully with a heart and mind of non-clinging. And in that is the possibility to recognize, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, our capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love. In other words, our Buddha nature is always here. Our only problem is that for some reason we don't know how to recognize this.

It's to me the great mystery of our life, of why we practice—that this, whatever you want to call Buddha nature, just the capacity to recognize peace, is always here, always accessible. And we touch it from moment to moment. In the moments we touch it, it's so obvious, so simple. So how come the next moment it's completely gone?

I remember I was sitting this winter for a few weeks—I wish it was a few months—and I had one moment like that, just sitting and looking out my window at the snow, the endless snow.

It just snowed, it seemed like, every day for weeks. And a little bird landed on a branch of the tree, which is really all I could see out of this window. And in that moment, my heart and mind was just very awake and connected—not lost in all my ruminations about how much I hate the cold and the snow and when

would it end, or how gray it was, or anything. Just present.

And in that moment of seeing the bird, there was such a sense of joy, of peace, of simplicity. And it was so obvious that nothing special was happening. I wasn't in some deep jhanic state of absorption. I was just very clear and present and awake. How simple, how accessible that is. It doesn't take some fantastic experience. This is our potential to rest at ease in whatever's arising.

The great paradox and mystery to me is the next moment. The next moment some stupid thought comes up in the mind and there's immediate grasping. "Wow, I wonder what's for tea." I know what's for tea—rice cakes, crackers, and peanut butter. That's been tea every tea time for the last ten years. It probably didn't change. But that thought comes up. What's for tea? Yeah, what's for tea? And grasping—gone, gone. And it could be, you know, another lifetime before that moment of peace and simplicity returns. That's what's so amazing. Not that it's so accessible, yet we go to such lengths to keep ourselves spinning on that hamster wheel.

This is from a Tibetan text: "Not knowing that this state is within oneself, how amazing that one searches for it elsewhere. Although it is clearly manifest, like the radiance of the sun, how amazing that so few see it. No matter how much happiness and sorrow is experienced, how amazing that this Buddha nature is never impaired or improved on in the slightest. This self-awareness is naturally free from the very beginning. How amazing that it is liberated by simply resting at ease in whatever happens."

That's my favorite line. How amazing that it is liberated by simply resting at ease in whatever happens. How rare it is that we simply rest at ease in whatever happens—and how immediate, how close that possibility is.

In fact, this liberation of resting at ease in whatever happens requires such an immediacy of connection to experience. There's no room for the slightest moving away out of craving or aversion. Immediate deep intimacy with whatever's arising—that's all that's required. Like when I was so present noticing that bird. Just seeing. And the immediacy with all of life that can bring.

So please notice. Bring it into your conscious awareness whenever you experience this, because we all do, and I really believe we experience this many, many times in a day—this immediacy, this simplicity of wakeful resting at ease in whatever's arising. But when we don't notice the power of that, it's because we're looking for something a little more spectacular than just seeing a bird land on a branch, or just smelling the scent of fall when you walk outside, or tasting the warmth of tea, or just feeling the pressure on your foot when you take a step, or the sound of a bell, or the chill of coldness, or whatever it happens to be.

And often when we even do recognize that purity, that sense of completeness in a moment like that—we think, "Nothing more could possibly be needed. There's nothing to push away." Sometimes we'll recognize that's happening, but even so, we'll misinterpret. We're so conditioned to look outside for completion or to

attribute that sense of completion to something outside. So, for example, we'll say, "Ah, the crispness of fall—it's such a perfect day." Because of this crispness, I'm experiencing this sense of presence and deep happiness. Or because I'm at the meditation center. Or because this is a very special moment with Oolong Kuan Yin tea that I brought with me, and when it runs out I'm really going to have a hard time the rest of the retreat—or whatever our story is.

Notice. Just notice that exquisiteness of presence, and then something else arises, and that's fine. But just begin to tune in when we have these moments.

And the question that keeps arising, of course, is: why? Why do we keep getting lost?

Why do we not recognize what is happening? Why, even knowing this—and I really know this on some level—why then, a minute later, am I so engrossed in the pleasantness of a thought about what's for tea? If we pull back and look, the mind says, give me a break. I don't even care about this. How do we get so seduced?

One way—the way I began with tonight—is by not seeing clearly the actuality of these experiences of pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality. As most of you know, the way the Buddha describes our experience is that moment to moment there are simply six sense experiences arising over and over: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, sensing with the body, and then mental experience—thoughts, emotions, images—just happening rapidly over and over. That's it. There's nothing else.

First, if we could just see that, things lose a lot of their glamour. It's much easier to rest at ease when it's simply a sight, instead of "Wow, what incredible thing might we have for tea?" Oh, it's just a thought.

Secondly, whenever we experience any of these sense experiences, it comes together with what we call a feeling tone—the Pali word *vedana*—of being either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Very basic, just what it is. But what's so intriguing is that when we don't notice this pleasantness, unpleasantness, or neutrality—which very often we don't, because it's quick, subtle—we interpret pleasant as being good, right, the way things should be. Why? Because of course it's pleasant; we like it. The mind immediately moves into clinging, holding on. Unpleasant, of course, the mind immediately moves into pushing away, aversion, fear. And the interpretation we put on unpleasant experience is generally that this is a mistake—something to be fixed, something to be gotten rid of, or that I'm doing something wrong in meditation if this is arising.

And neutral? Well, basically we don't even notice that neutral is happening. And if we do notice, we get bored. In fact, I've often noticed in meditation that when there's a period of calm—which actually happens to be one of the seven factors of enlightenment—very often the mind will actually whip up a huge suffering scenario rather than just sit and be calm. Just watch and see: getting completely into something that never even happened but that might happen if certain conditions came together, and if it did happen, I would be really angry. We spend an hour on that rather than be with the calmness of the breath.

Just notice in your meditation today, in your meditation tomorrow: do these interpretations of pleasant as right, unpleasant as wrong, neutral as basically not existing or boring—do these become how we evaluate our practice, how we evaluate our life? We get so involved in these evaluations, these reactions. This is how we're running on the wheel, instead of just noticing the bare sense experience itself.

It's hard to see through this habit. One reason is that it's so deeply conditioned we often don't even notice it. This is what I meant by seeing for myself more and more subtly how I get caught in trying to manipulate my practice to get back to some quietly pleasant state I was experiencing. And the more you know about practice, the more you can find a really good interpretation of why that's the appropriate thing to do.

I know that when mindfulness is strong, the sense of choiceless awareness is really open and flowing—there's no constriction, everything's expanded—which of course feels a lot better than when there's contraction, when we're caught in some kind of fear. So we try to subtly push back to that open space of choiceless awareness. And besides, that fits the instructions better, so that must be what's supposed to happen. This constriction, this tightness, is clearly wrong, and I've got to get back to the other. In some form or other. Just keep watching how we do that. It's really tricky.

The pleasant-unpleasant-neutral happens quickly. We're so used to believing the interpretation that we often don't notice we're even doing it. And another thing that makes it hard to see through is that this habit of running after pleasant and fearing unpleasant very strongly conditions and strengthens the sense of self. Because what does it all refer back to? Who is experiencing pleasant or unpleasant? Who cares? Only one person cares. Me. And when we look at our life or our practice, when I look at myself trying to manipulate in some subtle way, this sense of Carol who wants to have good practice, or Carol needs to be liberated, or whatever it is—

Carol is really a strong, separate, solid concept at that moment. We take it all so personally when we're running on this hamster wheel. My sitting, my unpleasant experience, my bliss, my enlightenment—whatever it is.

And because the sense of separate self is really our baseline, solid delusion, it's the hardest one to see through. So you put these two together—our interpretation of pleasant and unpleasant, not seeing that clearly, and the fact that this strengthens our sense of separate self—well, you see how they feed each other. Just pay attention and watch that.

It's hard from this state to touch that place where we can really trust that the way to open our hearts, to rest at ease, to touch peace, is not to get rid of what we don't like in ourselves or in our surroundings. It's much more radical, because the path of freedom is to meet whatever's arising full-heartedly. Full openness of attention, total connection, just as it is. To be with things just as they are is the path of freedom. And that's what we practice moment to moment.

This is from the Buddha. He says, "When someone sees objects with the eye and is attracted, is drawn into the things that are pleasing and is repelled, pushed away from the things that are not pleasing, that are unpleasant, that person dwells without mindfulness and her mind, her heart, is restricted. She does not experience the emancipation of heart through wisdom. But in the case when a person sees objects with the eye and is not attracted, is not pulled to things that are pleasing and is not repelled by things that are not pleasing, she dwells with mindfulness present and her mind is unbounded. Thus she experiences the emancipation of heart through wisdom." And he goes, of course, through all the six senses.

It sounds so simple, but it also doesn't sound that exciting. And if you think about it, there's not much sense of "me" in it. It's not so juicy. Just seeing a sight, and the mind and heart are not attracted to the pleasant and not repelled by the unpleasant. And thus we dwell with mind unbounded, and the heart experiences emancipation through wisdom. Simply through being able to see through this attraction to the pleasant and fear of the unpleasant.

It's an extremely powerful place to investigate. There's a reason why the Buddha, when he described the four foundations of mindfulness, only picking four, made this aspect of vedana, of feeling tone, the second one. Because by exploring our confusion around happiness, we can really experience the mind and heart that is unbounded—unbounded, connected, a life that is at peace, that's joyful.

Joko Beck puts it in a lovely way: it's the movement from a self-centered view of life to a life-centered view of life. When we're caught in going for comfort, everything refers back to me, me, me. I'm the center of everything. When we can let go of that, when the mind is unbounded, our view of life becomes life-centered, which includes us. We're part of life. But our decisions, our choices, come from what is most nurturing to life, to all beings, to whatever surrounds us as a whole—not just what can bring me pleasantness. It's quite radical.

When we describe this, perhaps you can see why meditation practice, why a three-month retreat, can at times be so difficult. Because these habits—just the habit of preferring the pleasant, our fear of what's difficult—this habit is so strong. And the way we set up our meditation is specifically to keep us from being able to indulge this habit on a moment-to-moment basis.

Just the fact that we all sit in a room together and we tell you that you can't leave until the bell rings. And there's eighty other people who'll notice if you do. I mean, we don't say that, but you all know it. How many of us would get up and leave when we get sleepy, or our foot falls asleep, or we just get really restless? But no, because of the setup, we sit here. Just that is a really strong way that we begin to break this habit of avoiding the unpleasant and to see that we can come to a deep peace even though my foot hurts or I'm restless.

So meditation can be quite difficult because we are confronting these habits of mind over and over and over—not only the habit itself, but the interpretation that something's wrong because we're not feeling blissful and pleasant all the time.

This is Joko Beck again. She's talking about teaching in her center. She says, "The function of teaching in a center like this is to help us see the alternative and to disturb us in our selfishness. So long as we are caught in the self-centered viewpoint of life, governed by wanting to feel good or blissful or enlightened, we need to be disturbed. We need to be upset. A good center and a good teacher assist that." You thought we were here to make you feel good.

"Enlightenment is, after all, simply an absence of any concern for self. Don't come to this center to feel better. That's not what this place is about. What I want," Joko Beck says, "are lives that get bigger so that they can take care of more things and more people."

I love it.

She's so direct. It's like, let's not fool around.

So we're not here specifically to make you feel miserable either. That's not what I'm trying to say. We need to open to the difficult as well as opening and being fully present for the beautiful, for the pleasant, without clinging or pushing away either one.

But the practice is about shaking us up—shaking us up in our self-centered view of the world, shaking up any remnant you may have. Maybe you're all beyond this, but if you find anywhere in a corner of your mind any remnant of going after pleasant as the way to freedom, we're here to shake you up. The practice itself, that's what it does. It shakes us up. And the shake-up is the gift of the Dharma. It's the gift of our practice.

If we could manipulate life in a way that we could make it all comfortable and secure and happy, well, none of us would be here, that's for sure. Clearly it doesn't work. What we can also do is begin to appreciate the shaking up process.

And my friend with the mouse—the last little part of that story is that as she was telling me how badly she felt when she realized that mouse had died because she didn't want to deal with some unpleasantness, the additional anguish of that actually shook her up to the point where she became really connected again. Whereas before it was just, "This is unpleasant, push it away"—not even another living being. She really thought, "God, this mouse was a living being. It was hungry, it was thirsty, it was scared."

And although she was opening much more deeply to her own pain, again she was connected through herself and her pain and that mouse to all of life. She was, in telling me this story, very deeply awake again and connected and flowing.

Sometimes our shaking up, at least here mostly, will only affect ourselves. Sometimes in life, when we shut ourselves off out of fear of unpleasantness, it does affect other beings as well.

So our practice here is giving us the tools to meet this challenge, because it's not easy. We will be shaken up over and over, or we will be seduced by the beautiful and the lovely over and over—but then we'll get

shaken up when it changes, because it will.

And the tools that our practice gives us, as we've mentioned and as we will continue to mention, are the tools of mindfulness and concentration. Not to change experience, because no amount of meditation will take away the potential for unpleasant experience. No amount of meditation saves us from loss or sickness or death. There's no way we can get out of that.

But mindfulness and concentration and our practice—our continual meeting of experience as it is—can completely transform our attitude to these experiences, and that changes everything.

So mindfulness, as Michelle mentioned very briefly last night, and of course we'll talk about this over and over, is a quality of very awake, connected attention meeting whatever's arising in a moment—a sound, a sight, a physical feeling, a thought—very directly, without reactivity, without judgment, without interpretation.

And this is the trick that I want to talk about at the moment: to be able to be with the bare experience, what we call bare attention, without confusing the bare experience with our interpretation of experience. And in this the concentration is very helpful because it helps us have a steady enough mind to go right to the sense experience.

So for example, if I ring the bell, the bare experience is just hearing. The interpretation is even "bell," what you think about the bell, how loud it is, whether you like it or not, comparing it with other bells, does it mean the end of a sitting, how many times you ring the bell, thinking about when you're going to have to ring the bell when you're a practice leader, and on and on and on. The bare experience, mindfulness, is just hearing.

And we need to practice this over and over because so easily we confuse the bare experience with our interpretation. And it's in the interpretation that we get lost in reactivity and jump back on that wheel.

An example: in a retreat this summer here, a woman told us after it was over that she'd been spending days here in the hall—she was sitting in the front row—and she said there was a sound in the hall that was completely ruining her concentration. She didn't say what this sound was, but it was very continuous. I don't know if it was another yogi or maybe this clock that you can hear ticking if you're close when it gets very quiet.

But she said this sound was ruining her concentration, really ruining her sitting, and she was getting really aggravated, really angry. Apparently she went through this for some days, until it occurred to her—or she heard one of us say, I mean we say it every day about ten times, but we hear it when we're ready—something about, "Oh, why don't you just be with the bare experience of hearing?"

And so she did that. And she said, "You know what? It was just hearing. It was just a sound. It wasn't disturbing my concentration. My mind, my reactivity—that was disturbing my concentration. The sound is

just what it is." Hearing—maybe pleasant, maybe unpleasant, maybe neutral.

This is really radical, because when we can meet experience with this connected quality, this is mindfulness—connected and open, free of interpretation. It opens us to a whole different relationship with the moment, and thus the potential for resting at ease in whatever it is that's arising. We need to practice it because we're so easily confused.

We often don't even know what's an interpretation. This is one of the reasons we cultivate some samādhi, some steadiness of mind during the retreat, especially in the first days. Because without that steadiness, when there's a sound that's really bothering you, it's hard to even realize that all the thoughts and anger and "it's ruining my concentration"—that those are thoughts. It just seems like a whole gestalt. And it's hard to have the steadiness to get through to the bare experience.

So the concentration really gives us this steadiness. The mindfulness gives us the power of seeing things as they are, to then rest at ease. We can do this with sounds. We can do it with physical sensations. We can do it with emotions. And sometimes it seems counterintuitive, especially when we're in a situation of suffering, because the mindfulness says go right into the experience that seems to be the cause of the suffering rather than move away from it. That going into the experience is where peace is found. So we need to practice, so that we believe it because we know it from our own experience—not because I'm telling you, but because you really experienced it yourself.

An example: sometimes when I sleep a little bit wrong, or my pillow's a little too high, my vertebrae get thrown off, and I can have a really pounding headache that lasts a few days. Once, during a retreat I was doing this summer, I'd had that headache all day. On one level, I was sort of working at acceptance—what I call the appearance of acceptance: "Okay, here's the headache. I can live with the headache. It's okay." But that's appearances, because I'm saying the right things, trying to pretend it isn't bothering me. My attention is really not going anywhere close to the headache. It's as far out of my body as I could possibly get. And the way I was feeling was, not surprisingly, very disconnected, very cut off, not at all at ease with what was happening. Some aversion, some negativity.

Finally—and this is what's so amazing, why does it take us so long?—finally it dawned on me: why don't you try bringing attention fully into the actual physical experience itself, what I'm calling "headache"? Just move right into it. Which I did. And it's immediate, just like that. The headache—no, the headache didn't go away. The headache stayed there. It was still unpleasant. It wasn't like, "Oh, I'm so glad, I can't tell if it's pleasant or unpleasant." It was unpleasant. But the whole sense of separation, this whole sense of constriction and suffering, vanished. And in fact, you can experience that sense of the heart and the mind as unbounded. Because the boundedness is the constriction of fear, of separation, of trying to control. As soon as I was fully present with the unpleasant physical sensation, the mind and heart were unbounded. There was again a sense of appreciation. I was in a very beautiful place. The weather was beautiful. The people in the retreat were wonderful. And a great sense of happiness began to come in. I still had a

headache. And I didn't like it any better. But that sense of separation and boundedness was gone.

This is the power of mindfulness. The power of acceptance, of clear seeing, of being fully present. Mindfulness is participatory. Often we get the sense that to be mindful, because it's non-reactive, it's sort of objective—that it means we're looking at something from a distance, as it were. Looking at the headache from over here—that was what I was calling a kind of false acceptance. It seemed like acceptance because I wasn't in a big reaction, but it wasn't true acceptance because there was no connecting with the experience. True mindfulness, true acceptance is a deep connection. Seeing something, being with something just as it is, right in the middle of it. And the mind, the heart, is non-reactive. The mind and the heart are unbounded. This is really the function of our practice.

This mindfulness, samadhi, and all of our practice gives us the tools to recognize this potential over and over. The only other attitude that we need is infinite patience. Infinite patience. One step at a time, over and over and over.

Because as much as we will experience the potential of liberation, when we can rest at ease, just as often again we'll lose that sense and get caught up in some reaction, some interpretation, some wanting things to be different, some trying to move away from our knee pain, some thinking, "I've been doing this long enough already—three months, three weeks, twenty-five years, isn't it enough? Don't we ever see it and just rest there?"

So we come back to this infinite patience, one step at a time.

Here is an example of infinite patience. In the middle of the 1800s, the English, who at that time were in India, felt they needed, for security reasons, to have a map of Tibet. But they weren't allowed into Tibet. No Westerners were allowed into Tibet to map it. So they devised a plan where they hired some Indian civil servants that they called pundits. They paid these men something like twenty rupees a month. They trained them for months so that no matter how they walked—uphill, downhill, any direction—the length of their stride would always be exactly the same.

Then they sent these men into Tibet to measure and map the country by counting their footsteps. They had rosaries like the Tibetan monks used, but with one hundred beads instead of one hundred and eight because they had to be in disguise. They were risking their lives to do this for twenty rupees a month. They would count on this rosary—every little bead was one hundred steps, so one round of the rosary was 5.2 miles.

One man whose name I think we should know—his name was Kishan Singh—did this for four and a half years. He walked 5.5 million steps to map out the perimeter of East Tibet. So when we say one step at a time, just think of that. And since he didn't know where he was going—there was no map, there was no way to know when he reached some goal—it was just this step, this step, this step. That's our practice here.

And to know that patience is not a form of weakness or a form of subtle aversion, of denial, of "the best I

can do is grit my teeth, take one step at a time, because basically I'm a failure as a yogi, so I'll just take this next breath." Patience actually is an aspect of metta, of loving-kindness, of open-hearted connectedness, and it arises from seeing things as they truly are—knowing that life is in constant flux, that as soon as something pleasant arises it will pass and something unpleasant will come, and as soon as something unpleasant is here it will last a while and go away and something pleasant will come. All of our attempts at manipulation and controlling and self-referenced activity arise from our confusion, from not seeing things as they really are.

This deep patience, open-hearted acceptance, is not weakness. It's the incredible strength of the heart of wisdom, the heart of compassion, that sees that life is made up of the incredibly beautiful and of suffering and horror that we can hardly imagine sometimes. Our challenge is not to deny the horror and hold on to the pleasant, or to be afraid of the pleasant and think we need to dive into horror, but to find that we can hold both in our heart, hold both in our experience.

With this clear seeing comes a strength of heart and mind that allows us to know—acceptance doesn't mean you never change anything, it doesn't mean being victims. But with the strength of heart, of clear seeing, we can see which things can be changed and change them out of compassion, not out of reactivity. We can see which things cannot be changed and meet that with the great-hearted courage of mindfulness, of clear seeing, of resting at ease in whatever happens, opening to all aspects. This is really what our practice is about.

And out of this, it's really not dismal. An incredible connectedness and joy and aliveness comes from this, which I know you all know or you wouldn't be here.

I want to close with a poem. It's strong, but I love it because to me it expresses how out of the depth of suffering, when we meet it with full-heartedness, the beauty and joy and mystery of life is present. This is from Anna Akhmatova, the Russian poet, and she wrote this in 1921, in the middle of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, when there was immense death, starvation, poverty, fear:

Everything is plundered, betrayed, sold.
Death's great black wing scrapes the air.
Misery gnaws to the bone.
Why then do we not despair?

By day, from the surrounding woods,
cherries blow summer into town.
At night, the deep transparent skies
glitter with new galaxies.

And the miraculous comes so close
to the ruined dirty houses—

something not known to anyone at all,
but wild in our breast for centuries.

The miraculous comes so close to the ruined dirty houses.

Let's just sit for a moment.

This article is based on a dharma talk given by the teacher.

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