Contentment With Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 51:29

Greetings to you all after your first full day of practice.

I suppose the first full day of a three-month retreat isn't really that different from the first full day of a nine-day or a weekend. The body still has to go through what it has to go through. The mind has to go through what it has to go through. And you've got three more months of it. Luckily, it keeps changing.

Tonight I want to talk in a general way about motivation—about developing a contentment with awareness.

In our retreat practice, our meditation practice, we bring the same mindset that we bring to our lives. What else could we bring? And just as in life, I'm sure you've heard the phrase from the Tibetan tradition that everything rests on the tip of motivation—that the heart, the core of our spiritual development, of our practice, rests in the motivation.

This is somewhat contrary to the way our normal mind and the everyday world tends to view and evaluate experience, isn't it? I know for me, I mostly evaluate whether something is useful or beneficial or whether I want to do it by whatever results I get, or the results that I think I'm going to get. It may be by whether they're pleasant, or it may be by whether it's something I want or something I value. But usually we're looking for a particular experience, a particular result.

I don't think for most of us it's so different when we come to a meditation retreat or even when approaching the whole path of our spiritual practice. I think it's very helpful for each of us from time to time to reflect a bit on what mindset we're bringing to our practice. What are you evaluating it by? What are you looking for? And to be really honest with oneself, because to highlight this can be really helpful—without judgment, of course.

Easily one can find oneself somehow looking for a particular set of experiences in your whole practice, or in the three months that you've come here. It might not be something that you've enunciated to yourself very clearly, but some particular thing should happen—whether it's deep practice, whatever that means; whether you suddenly become more compassionate; whether your anger goes away; you feel more at ease with yourself; you go through some particular set of stages; or your teacher finally tells you, "You've really got it, now you're enlightened." Whatever it is, there's often lurking back in our mind streams somewhere something that we're looking for, that we evaluate our practice by.

It's normal. It's the way we think. As Ajahn Chah says, the worldly way is to do things for a reason, to get some return. And it's normal. How many of you came here thinking, "Absolutely nothing is going to

happen. I'm not going to get anything out of this. I just can't think of anything better to do for the next six weeks or three months, and I've got nowhere to go"? Probably not. I hope not, really. It's normal. That's how we think of things.

But Ajahn Chah goes on: in Buddhism we do things without any gaining idea.

So it's a shift that we slowly begin to discover over time, and I keep discovering new layers of subtlety in this shift—that the path, that awakening, isn't so much about what happens, about what experiences I have, even though experiences might arise in a way that helps me see more clearly. The path isn't about getting somewhere, achieving something. The path itself, the heart of it, is rooted in our motivation. Awakening itself flowers out of our motivation, not so much out of experience.

So when we look to our motivation, how does it shift? What I've noticed for myself is that it shifts from this idea of wanting, getting, gaining something, to a contentment with awareness—to a love, really, of the truth of life as it's showing itself right here and now, without my interference, having nothing to do with whether it's what I think should happen or I want to happen.

This comes about only through the letting go of all of our preferences, our notions, our ideas, how we evaluate things—all of them. The giving up of all our preferences is the opening into a contentment with truth, contentment with awareness. And obviously, it's not easy.

There's one sutta, one discourse of the Buddha, that I quite like, where Sakka, who was the ruler of the whole realm of the gods, came down to talk to the Buddha. One thing is interesting: here's the ruler of the whole realm of the gods, and basically they sound like they're working with the same things that we are.

He comes down, and his question really is—I'll put it in my own words—"Honored Sir, what is it that's chaining us, that's holding us? Even though we want to live a life free from hostility, free from conflict, even though we want to live with loving-kindness, basically we have all good intentions, but still, even so, we find ourselves living with hostility, not free from ill-will, getting caught up in violence. What is it that's chaining us in this way?"

To me, it's really a heart-rending question. We really want to live a life of love, compassion, and goodness, and we keep getting caught up in the opposite.

In this particular sutta, the Buddha could have answered it in different ways. In this one he said: the first fetter, the first chain that keeps you in ill-will and rivalry and hostility is envy and stinginess.

But underneath what fuels the envy and stinginess is when we hold to what is dear and push away what is not dear. In other words, when we are attached to our preferences, we get caught in all this confusion and suffering and hostility and ill-will. When we're attached to our preferences, and that's fed by desire, as he says.

So that's a strong statement. If one really looks in the heart, in the mind—did I come here to free myself

from attachment to all preferences? Not intellectually. Intellectually we all go, "Yeah, yeah, right, I want to be free from attachment to preferences." I mean in the way we really live, in the way you really relate to your experience, moment to moment. How often do we find that place? "I just so love awareness. It's so much more satisfying to me than having my preferences, than having to be with something I prefer not to be with." How often is that actually the experience, actually the case?

Sometimes it is. And isn't it really a wonderfully freeing experience in that moment to see that awareness can be our refuge? We don't have to have what we want and be separated from what we don't want. But it's hard. It's not the way we normally live. It really takes some cultivation on very deep levels.

This is Ajahn Chah again. It's from the same teaching where he's saying the worldly way is to do things for a reason. But the Buddha teaches us to go above and beyond reason and evaluation. His wisdom was to go above cause, beyond effect. To go above happiness and beyond suffering. In other words, above happiness meaning getting what we want, suffering meaning being with what we don't want—to go beyond that. Think about it. In that case, there's nowhere to stay. We people live in a home. To leave home and go where there's no home, we don't know how to do it because we've always lived with becoming, with clinging, with clinging to what we want, to our preferences. If we can't cling, we don't know what to do.

It's sort of funny, but really just explore in your experience how often our reflexive or instinctual refuge in a situation is to fall back into clinging to our preferences or pushing away what we don't want. We take refuge in the belief that we're going to find happiness in controlling things, in controlling the environment and staying in our comfort zone. That's our rational, habitual mind.

But what happens—and it happens quite naturally through our mindfulness practice—is that this shift occurs. The shift from taking refuge in clinging, from taking refuge in attachment to our preferences, our ideas, our expectations, thinking we know what's what and what's going to happen. That motivation naturally begins to shift to a kind of reverence, I feel almost—a reverence for the Dhamma, meaning the truth, as Steve expressed it last night in talking about the refuges. The refuge of Dhamma is the refuge of the truth, the way things are in this moment, irrespective of my wishes and preferences. And that's not a threat—that's a refuge. That's the place of peace.

It really becomes such a sense of love of awareness that it doesn't matter what we're aware of. Our value judgment shifts from ticking off whether this is a good experience or a bad experience or the one that I want, to being able to appreciate the quality of awareness itself. And the experience is our avenue into the awareness. So this is where we begin to find the harmony, the peace that we seek. And it's in this shift of motivation, this shift of relationship.

Let me give a personal example. I hope it conveys it—I'm not sure if it does, but to me it was very powerful. I was visiting an ashram in southern India. It's an ashram where Ramana Maharshi used to live. He died fifty years ago. This ashram is very well known, very well run, a very nice place, and many, many people come from all over India as well as from all over the world. There's no particular teacher there

now. People come not so much to honor Ramana Maharshi's memory as to use the place to activate this inner seeking, which is really about opening to awareness and past our own personal preferences.

One of the activities that happens there—there's a big hall bigger than this, and in it is what's called a samadhi. It's different from how we use that word. It's really the tomb.

Ramana Maharshi is buried there. And there's a large platform around his tomb. One of the things people do is come in and circumambulate this samadhi, as it's called. In the evening, people sit along the sides of the wall, and some of the residents of the ashram, including the president, line up in front of the tomb and do an hour of Vedic chanting.

It's really quite a trip, as all of India is a trip, to sometimes watch and sometimes take part in the people walking around the samadhi. Just to see all the different attitudes that are brought to this essentially very simple act of walking around the tomb. There are people who come in doing full prostrations, overflowing with a kind of love, crying, praying, bowing. There are people who come in and walk around chatting away a mile a minute to each other. And there are people, often Westerners in my experience, who are very grim, really determined to do it right or to get freedom or to somehow receive a message from Ramana. You can tell there's something very serious going on in the way they walk around the tomb.

And myself too. I'd walk around it—not wanting a new car or anything like that—but certainly, often, with some sense of wanting another glimpse of freedom, wanting somehow to see what Ramana saw.

One night I was sitting along the wall while the chanting was happening. At the end, the president of the ashram, who seems to be a very simple, friendly man—and the president of this ashram is a pretty prestigious position—got up. It was just before dinner, and at dinner you sit eating on the floor in the dining room while some of the men who live there, including the president, come around and serve the food. That's how it's done.

So he was getting up at the end of the chanting to go do his regular serving of the food, and somehow I just happened to notice him. He got up and very simply walked around this samadhi—no bowing, no posturing, no big anything—but it was just so simple and present. Then he walked out and went and served dinner.

Something about the space I was in allowed it to go right in so deeply. I felt—and who knows, of course, this is only what I felt, who knows what he was feeling—but what I felt and perceived was such a simple, direct love of the truth, of his service. He wasn't trying to get something. I didn't feel any wanting. I didn't see any need for posturing. Just a simple: here I am, walk around the samadhi, go to the next task of service. And this is not a one-time thing—every day of his life.

In that moment, I felt so much difference, although it might be quite subtle in our experience, between walking around wanting truth, wanting freedom, and simply loving the truth as it's expressing right now—without needing something else to confirm that, to confirm me, to make me feel better, to give me

even some proof that I'm free or that I understand the truth. Not wanting anything.

That, to me, is the movement our motivation begins to shift into. Not wanting anything, yet with full-hearted, open presence. That's the place our deepening freedom is going to open out of—is opening out of in that very moment. Freedom of non-clinging. Even to freedom. Even to liberation itself. Just the simplicity of presence.

And that's what our practice is. Moment after moment after moment. In the first days of a retreat, no matter how much we've practiced, it's hard not to have some moments of wishing we'd get a little bit of juice going. Some moments of thinking, "Well, it's worth it because I'm going to be there later. I've been there before and I'll be there again." How hard is it to have that simple directness of heart and mind that allows us to be aware, fully content to be here right now, no matter what's happening?

Of course we're not like that every moment—that's our practice. It takes a real surrender of all that we think we know, of all that we think should happen, of all of our ideas of how things should be, even if just for a moment. It takes a lot of trust.

So practically, just in a moment, what would that mean? It could look like this: when you're walking or sitting, the attention is relatively stable, the breath is flowing, the noticing is somewhat clear, there's a sense of well-being. And then in a moment, it all just falls apart. The body gets tight like a knot, the breath gets choppy, the mind's all over the place, the energy drops through the floor, and it's struggle, struggle, struggle to just even know that you're walking.

Can we be just as content to be aware with that as we were five minutes before? Really not fooling ourselves: "Oh yeah, this is really fine, I'm content." I mean really being content. Knowing that the essence of the practice is taking refuge in the awareness itself, in the mindfulness itself—not falling into evaluating what the experience is.

Of course we can't always do that. That's why we're practicing. We're learning to shift where we take refuge: from the experience into the mindfulness, into the awareness.

And the question might arise—it arises for me, even though at times I know the answer. Other times, like when everything's a knot and it's all falling apart, the question arises: well, what really is so special about this present moment anyway? I mean, why do I need to be fully present for *this*? I would be much better off to take a nap and be fully present when it's more pleasant, when it's more awake.

I read somewhere that Saint Augustine said once that the reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home. The reason we behave as we do—we're not living in our true home. And as it happens, the only place that we can reconnect with, re-recognize—because we've never really left our true home, how could we?—but the only place that we're going to recognize it is right here.

How can our true home be somewhere ten years away from now? How can our true home be only in another experience, but not here? The only place we can ever recognize our true home is right here, right now, in this moment. Whatever's happening, it's the juice, it's what we have to use. We can't be somewhere else. So can we learn to trust it enough to really be present without trying to change it, without trying to control it? And it's this trying to change, trying to control, trying to manipulate that hides the truth, that hides our true home.

Ajahn Chah again, talking about our home:

This original heart-mind shines like pure, clear water. It takes us beyond all good and bad. When we understand this, it is the teaching of every Buddha that appears in the world. This is given to us, our Buddha nature. But what is this Buddha? When we see with the eye of wisdom, we know that the Buddha is timeless, unborn, unrelated to any body or any history. Buddha is the ground of all being, the truth of the unmoving mind. And this timeless Buddha is our true home, our abiding place.

This original heart-mind shines like pure, clear water, and it's our true home, our abiding place. All of this practice is to help us learn to recognize and trust and take refuge in our true home—more than we trust and take refuge in our fears, our assumptions, our explanations, our desires, our trying to hold on, our trying to push away. Basically, our habits, our habits of mind.

So how do we shift these habits from wanting, from pushing away, from trying to control, from this constant evaluating, from this obsessive self-referencing? How does every single little experience affect me, me, me? See if you notice that arising from time to time. How do we shift that?

And it's really, I think, the miracle of the simplicity of mindfulness practice—all the instructions we're giving, all this practice laid out over the days—is to help us bring a kind, loving, clear attention to whatever's happening right here, right now.

There's a Burmese saying: to make each person we meet an object of reverence. So I like to think of mindfulness practice as making each activity an object of reverence. To make each moment of experience—whether it's a breath or a footstep, tea, hearing somebody cough, a loud car going by, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, feeling—can we make each moment in that way an object of reverence? Wouldn't we approach it, bring such a different attitude to bear, if that's how we were meeting moment after moment of life?

And in some ways, to me, when I'm practicing just that simplicity of mindfulness, it really does feel like bringing a sense of reverence, of appreciation, to each moment of experience. So whether I'm reaching for the teacup, or feeling a breath, or folding my shawl, or washing my hands—no moment is more worthy of reverence than another. No moment is holding the secret of the universe more than another.

And that's what's the beauty of a period like this, to do a long retreat where you have days and nights, you can find your own schedule, and you can really begin to explore the possibility of meeting any moment of

activity or inactivity in this way—to see that within this moment we can reconnect with our true home, this sense of awareness. This is the essence of our mindfulness practice.

And even though we say, no matter what we're doing, no matter what's going on, the essence of truth is right here in the kernel of everything—why is it necessary to come into such a secluded environment? Why is it necessary to have such a strict schedule, you might say? Why is it necessary to sit and look and walk and look?

And it's just because of the strength of our habits. The strength of our habits of avoiding, of wanting, of clinging, of taking refuge elsewhere are so strong that it takes quite some support to begin to be able to look through them. And on the other hand, even though this seems like such a renunciate, separate environment, it's all right here. We are the world. The world comes here with us.

Again from Ajahn Chah:

Let the knowing spread from within you, and you will be practicing rightly. If you want to see a train, just go to the central station. You don't have to go to the northern line and the southern line and go all over Thailand. Just go to the central station.

Now, some people say to me, "I want to practice, but I really don't have time to study. I don't know how to practice right. My memory is not so good anymore. I can't remember things." He says, I just tell them, look right here. Look in your heart. This is central station. Greed arises here, anger arises here, delusion arises here. Just sit here and you can watch all these things arise. Practice right here because right here is where you're stuck.

And as you look here, right here is where all our expectations arise, it's where our ideas about things arise, and it's also where the Dhamma is arising. Just right here.

So we have six weeks or three months to explore Central Station. It's a wonderful opportunity. The whole world really does arise as we sit, as we walk. There's nothing we're lacking. The chance to see everything. It all unfolds in this simplicity. It's amazing. It's really amazing.

So our job, no matter what's arising, is to stay really simple with it. Okay, Central Station. Can I meet this moment of experience with fresh eyes? Whether it's the breath, whether it's the pain in your knee, whether it's that same old impatient irritation that you've been sitting with year after year, hour after hour, whether it's sleepiness, whether it's ecstasy, whether it's bliss, whether it's boredom—whatever it is, our job is simply to meet it with open, kind, fresh attention. And we'll be saying a lot more about the specifics of it. This is kind of a general overview.

Can we bring that reverence to let the moment unfold itself without our jumping in and trying to evaluate, interpret, and control before we even know what's happening? This is where we get caught in our expectations if we're not aware of what they are. Where we get caught in our habit, our motivational habit

of thinking experience has to mean a certain thing, go in a certain way. So when something unpleasant starts to happen—or didn't even start to happen, but there's a possibility that maybe something unpleasant is about to start to happen in your sitting—before we even get there, before we even know it, before we've even met the experience with freshness, already our habits are in there trying to fix it. Well, let me switch how I sit and make sure this doesn't happen. If I sit up straight, if I take a couple of deep breaths, maybe if I go and do some yoga in the yoga room, I can prevent this possible pain from coming.

How can we ever see what's true if that's how we're meeting our experience? The only way that we can come to take refuge in the truth is to stop trying to change everything all the time and really surrender, let go, jump in. It's hard. It's often scary. It's not what we're used to. And it's wonderful. It changes everything.

But it's important to have a sense of appreciation and respect for yourself, for how deeply ingrained is our fear of the unknown and our sense that somehow we can control things. It's actually one of the big mysteries to me why we think we can control things when it is so clear that life is completely out of our control. We can't even control what sensation will arise in the next moment or what thought's going to come into our head. But somehow we think we can control life so that we only have pleasant experience, so that unpleasant experience stops altogether, so that things go just the way we want—flying completely in the face of all the evidence of however long we've lived. Every day has proven to us that we are not in control, and completely flying in the face of that, we keep on trying.

Well, it's exhausting. You wonder why we're tired all the time, why we're stressed? We're living completely out of touch with reality. And when we stop and surrender into the moment, it really is a huge relief.

And still, it's difficult, isn't it? We'll surrender to a point, but it's so easy to have limits—up to this point. But then I need some sign that I'm going to get what I want in order to really surrender.

A friend sent me this story, a story of a man who went for a hike. While he was walking along a steep path, he slipped and started to tumble down the mountainside. At the last moment, he grabbed a branch that was growing from the side of the mountain, but he could not get a foothold to climb back up.

So he was hanging there, really frightened, and he pleaded, "Lord, please help me. If you get me out of this predicament, I'll do anything you say. Please help me."

Just then the clouds parted and a voice said, "Did you say you'll do anything?"

The man answered, "Yes, yes, Lord, I'll do anything."

The voice said, "Okay, let go."

The man said, "What, are you crazy? I'll be killed."

Up to a point. We can go along up to a point. But we will all hit that point over and over in our practice

where we think, "Oh no, this is going too far. Opening to this is not what I bargained for. Letting go of this—uh-uh. If freedom means I have to give up this, I don't want any part of it." Have you ever found your mind going there? I do. And sometimes it's just wanting another muffin or something. Sometimes it's something much more intrinsic to my sense of who I am.

But I think these are very important moments. We're all going to hit those moments when it's not easy, it's not simple to keep opening into the unknown without a safety net. We want some little safety net. Even though when we really let go without one, the experience is a tremendous relief, even exhilaration, a real aliveness that's quite unlike our sense of trying to control.

A friend told me this image. I've used it before, but I love it—the mountain monkeys at the top of Mount Arunachala, which is a mountain in India at Ramana Maharshi's ashram. There are monkeys that live down in the ashram part, and they're very much what you'd expect—very greedy. They're always coming and attacking you if you dare go outside with food in your hands. You're a target.

But these monkeys up above on the mountaintop are quite different, these mountain monkeys. My friend said he was sitting up on the top of the mountain just as dawn was beginning. It's very rocky with a few little trees and shrubs and big rocks, but not much. And he said these monkeys will stand on the edge of the rock at the top of the mountain and just launch themselves out into space. They always land somewhere—on some shrub or some branch or some rock. But the feeling as they launch is just go and let go and see what happens next.

I love that image. I really feel that is how we can practice. You sit down, you open the attention and open up. What's going to happen next? We never know. You always land somewhere. It's very different from the monkey standing there thinking, "Could I reach that branch? Maybe I should hop there and then there and then there"—thinking about it for five or ten minutes before taking a little tentative step off the mountain. No. Launch into space. It's wonderful.

And of course, we can't always do it. We want a safety net, and that safety net is a really interesting place to explore in our practice. A lot of the time, we don't know what we're relying on to be our safety net until it starts to unravel a little bit. And then you know, because you either get really resistant or kind of scared or have some sense of, "No, this is really not okay. I've had enough."

The safety net can simply be our ideas about practice, our ideas about what should be happening. It can be a sense of comfort, the habits and patterns of behavior, the comfort zone that we create around how we practice. And that can be continually changing, but most of us have, consciously or unconsciously, a comfort zone—how much we can sleep, how much we can eat, how much we can sit or walk. We can have ideas about ourselves that may not even be conscious, that completely limit us, put us in a little box.

I remember the first time I sat a long retreat, about three months. I used to be able to sit cross-legged then, and I thought, "Never in my life could I ever sit an hour without moving."

It was just this idea I couldn't do it, and I wasn't going to try, because that was an impossibility for this body and this person. And I remember when it first happened that I sat an hour and a half or two hours or something. I wasn't even thinking about it anymore. It became a completely meaningless concept—sit an hour without moving or however long. It just completely went away.

But as long as I was holding on to this idea of "this is what is possible for this body, for this mind, and there's no point even looking beyond it"—I mean, that's almost a trite example, but it sets a limitation. The safety net, the comfort zone, becomes our prison. It in itself becomes what gets in the way, what obscures our recognizing our true home.

So just notice for yourself. The comfort zone, the safety net can be an ease of familiarity with your environment. It can be having a sense of needing a certain amount of pleasant experience, or a fear of something unpleasant. "There's no way I can deal with..."—fill in the blanks, you know—that noise in the hall, this coldness in the atmosphere, not having whatever it is I like to eat, having to share a room with anybody, whatever it is. It can be ideas we have about ourselves, familiarity with certain of our own personality patterns. "Who would I be without this impatience?" Even if it's a suffering personality pattern, it's comfortable. So there's a sense of "this is who I am and I don't want to look beyond it."

And then there's how we relate to our history. I've often had people talking in interviews about almost holding themselves back from giving themselves to the practice fully because—what about my relationship? If I let go of everything, that means my relationship has to go. Or my children, or my parents, or this particular situation in my life. Or if I'm no longer identified with a sense of self, what about my memories? And none of this is what actually happens, but these are the thoughts that we're comfortable with. "I don't want to lose this. Therefore, if I let go, that means it really goes away." And we hold back from practice. We don't surrender into the moment.

And this safety net, the familiarity, what we're used to, what we're afraid to feel or what we're afraid to let go of, what we're afraid to have go away even for a moment—this is what limits us, is what keeps us from really opening into and taking refuge in the truth. Because one way of describing the truth is that we can never, with our concepts, accurately describe the facts of things. So any ideas we have of what awakening would mean, or what enlightenment is, or what letting go means—you know, "my relationship ends" or whatever—our ideas, our conceptions can't accurately convey the truth. There are even places in the suttas where the Buddha says, and I'm paraphrasing, "whatever ideas you have about it can't accurately describe the fact."

So if we're letting ourselves get caught in holding to our ideas, or fearing because of our ideas, and holding back from just surrendering into this moment, we're creating a prison for ourselves, keeping ourselves in limitation. And if we're willing to just simply keep bringing kind, full, fresh awareness to whatever the moment's presenting—you don't have to figure it all out, you don't have to evaluate what that means in terms of your concepts about yourself, just meet this moment as it is—then what happens is the safety

nets begin to fray.

And we all, at different times, will hit what I call the wall. I don't know what you call it. It's like a wall where either the mind says, "That's it"—what I said before—"I can't keep going if it means getting rid of this. I didn't come in for that to go away. I didn't come into practice to lose that." That's hitting the wall.

Or it can be another kind of wall where things have gotten good enough. "This is nice. This is good enough. I'm not suffering so much anymore." This is actually a very interesting wall because it can take a while before you recognize it. You think, "Well, okay, I'm a little more compassionate. I can sit more easily. Anger doesn't come up so much. That really deep suffering from the past that I was dealing with, I'm more at ease with it. Okay, good enough."

I learned—I was just teaching a retreat in Italy, and really, there are some great gestures with the hands that have meaning. And what we learned was like, *ciao*.

"Ciao" with the suffering, and I've done enough practice. This is another comfort zone. Can we keep looking? Never be content with less than freedom.

And these are not mistakes or bad points in practice. These are great, insightful, important times—when you feel, not just that moment of "Oh, I'm so tired, I don't want to do it anymore." We all have that. I'm talking about the moment that's a little deeper. It's got... what? Really letting go of that sense of myself? Can't do it. Don't want to do it. This whatever is more important than freedom.

I really like it if I can actually put it in that phrase in my mind—that wakes me up. Oh, I'm saying that getting to go to sleep at ten o'clock at night is more important than freedom. I'm saying that being able to still be grouchy is more important than freedom, whatever it is. Then it becomes a very interesting place where the safety net's fraying, and that's going to open us to deeper levels of trust, deeper levels of taking refuge in our true home.

In fact, for me, I would say all of my practice, all my significant moments, have been like a series of small deaths. Which, if you told me when I started that's what I was getting in for, I don't think it would have really inspired me. So I hope it doesn't have that effect on you. But a series of small deaths of who I thought I was. I didn't even know that's who I thought I was until it started to die. And I would experience it as a kind of anguish, a real sense of loss. And on the other side of that, a great relief—like a burden being lifted, a sense of aliveness more intense—until the next small death or big death.

For each of us, there might be a different story about what that death is, a personality of what I'm holding on to. I keep saying relationship—that's just a big one people hold to. But the holding is what goes. It doesn't mean the relationship goes, or whatever we're holding to. It's the holding that goes. We experience it as a loss, as a death, and then that loss of attachment opens us up to connectedness with everything. It's so wonderful. We see how limiting that attachment was, that idea of ourselves, that concept of what is possible.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together."

If I'm really honest and I'm not feeling particularly connected, that's how I think of my idea of enlightenment. I'm going to get enlightened. I'm going to feel confirmed and congratulated and really together. But freedom is not a self-improvement project. We want to be perfect, but we just keep seeing our imperfections, and there's no room to get away from that—no exit, nowhere to run. That is when the sword turns into a flower. When we stick with what we see, when we feel what we feel, from that we begin to connect with our own wisdom mind.

That is really our practice—to stick with what's happening, to feel what we feel. There's nowhere to run and no need to run. And by not running, we really deeply connect, over and over, with our own wisdom mind. Grounded in our motivation not to get, not to be something special, but simply to love awareness. A motivation to be content with awareness, with presence, with this moment—to be fully present and accepting of it just as it is.

Even when it's really hard, when we really hate this moment, when we think, "How can my true home possibly be in this moment? I don't think so. It has to be somewhere else"—can we find in ourselves enough motivation simply to take refuge again in the possibility of this wisdom mind being present here and now?

I just want to end with the close of that poem from Ajahn Chah:

Buddha is the ground of all being, the truth of the unmoving mind. So the Buddha was not enlightened in India. In fact, he was never enlightened, never born and never died. And this timeless Buddha is our true home, our abiding place. When we take refuge in this Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, all things in the world become free for us. All things in the world become our teacher, proclaiming the true nature of life.

So can we take refuge in this Buddha, this Dharma, this Sangha, this moment?

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