Awareness Is Our Refuge

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:01

So we come to the latter part of the first hot day together. Sometimes this is a real valley period in the retreat. Sometimes the first day is really a struggle. If that's been the case for you, just know that everything's changing and it doesn't stay like this for eight days. If this has been a sublime day, unfortunately the same holds true. Things are always changing.

What I want to try to do tonight is give a context for what we're doing here. I can imagine some of you might well be thinking, "Please give me a good reason to stay here for another day." That's common, and not just on your first retreat. At the end of a long, hot day—and I've been doing this for thirty years—the mind will still think, "I need a really good reason to do this for one more day. I'm out of here."

So what I want to try and do is give the context that keeps me there. Because I stay for a good reason, not to prove something, not because I'm ashamed to leave. I mean, all those things come up because I'm recognizable, right? If I leave a retreat, there's enough people who know me—can't get away with it. But I want to put this in the context of the bigger picture, why we're doing it.

As most of you know, if you've read anything about Buddhism or what the Buddha taught, the purpose of his teaching is really very pragmatic and mundane. He says it over and over in the different texts: he's teaching suffering and the end of suffering. Basically the whole reason he devoted the last forty-five years of his life to trying to help people understand what he had discovered was simply to help us live a fuller, happier, more contented life. That's all, really basic. And at the heart of that, I would imagine that whatever specific reasons each of us might put on it, that basic wish to be happy is what draws us—not only to this, but to actually almost everything we do.

The context of our particular meditation practice, of the understanding that begins to come through from this practice, even if you don't understand it, is that for most of us, in the common way of the world, we actually misunderstand what it means to be happy and why we're suffering. So all the different things we'll talk about in this retreat are trying to come at this basic misperception, this misapprehension of who we are and what allows us to be happy, what keeps us in struggle, what keeps us suffering. We come at this misapprehension from different angles.

Of course, basically, I would say suffering is having to be with experiences that we don't like, that are unpleasant. I mean, that's a no-brainer. And happiness is not having to do that and getting to be with things we like. Makes sense. Not hurting, not being sick, having our friends and loved ones be happy, not being hot when we want to be cold, whatever it is. And because on some level that's our belief system, we can spend our whole life trying to organize and make that happen.

I would imagine many of us have devoted a great deal of our life to that pursuit. If we could arrange and manipulate and control external experience so that everything's the way we like it, then we'd be happy. And then we turn that around and do the same with internal experience—how the body feels, what emotions come up, how we react to situations. This is normal and natural. It's certainly what I learned. It's what we're taught.

So what I want to talk about tonight is that our practice isn't so much about creating a certain state or set of conditions that are going to do it for us finally, and make us happy. And then we can live happily in that state for the rest of our lives. I thought this, really. It sounds rather obviously stupid when I say it, but check out underneath what you sort of unconsciously believe.

I will just shamelessly say that for myself, I even now keep finding myself coming back to some subtle way of believing that if I do this practice or any other spiritual practice long enough and finally figure out the correct way to do it, then suddenly the world, the inner and outer world, are going to finally fall into line and I'm going to reach that final understanding, that bliss of enlightenment, that lasting peace—which I visualize as a particular state that I've created through my efforts at practice.

What we're doing here is actually not that at all, which might seem discouraging, but actually as we begin to understand it, it's a huge relief. Because what this practice is about is not so much about trying to achieve any particular state. The practice is all about attitude, about our motivation, about how we understand and relate to whatever it is that's arising—so-called internally or externally—in a moment. It's not about getting to a place where we can actually control what's arising internally or externally.

In Buddhism, the way we see things... although I'm quoting Buddhism, really whatever I'm saying comes from having discovered it's true in my own experience, or I wouldn't say it.

Everything rests on the tip of motivation.

If you look at how we tend to evaluate our successes, our failures, whether what we're doing is worthwhile, what we're trying to achieve—just keeping it to this meditation retreat—we tend to be rather result-oriented, don't we? We evaluate whether something's any good by whether we get the results we want. I evaluate my own worth, whether I'm doing well, my sense of who I am, often by the results that particular actions achieve. We evaluate ourselves by the experiences that we have.

So, for example, to stay within the meditation retreat, a sense of success might be—and look in yourselves for which ones your mind is attaching to—it could be finally getting calm, the body stops hurting, or you're able to be with ten breaths in a row. Or if you're being really unrealistic, your idea of success is that you'll be completely present with the breath for the whole sitting without your mind wandering. I just want to put out: for the first few days, completely, totally unrealistic. You could drop it and you'd be a lot freer. Or maybe you came here to open your heart, to be more compassionate, to work on your sadness—you make the list. All of which are very fine aspirations. It's not that there's something wrong

about having a higher aspiration. Of course, if we didn't, why would we be here anyway? If we thought absolutely nothing whatsoever would happen or change from being here, how many people would still be here? Certainly if it's all the same, well, let's go to the beach.

So there's nothing wrong with having a goal, an aspiration. But what's tricky, what we learn from the moment-to-momentariness of being present in this practice, is that once we have the aspiration, we let it set our path and then we really just let go of it. All of our understanding, the place of peace, the place of freedom and ease that the Buddha spoke of—that we do discover over and over and over, not a one-time thing, over and over and over in our experience on or off retreat—a place of ease actually opens up from within our attitude. The place of ease comes about from a shift in how we're relating to experience, not from making a particular experience happen.

This is so counter to our normal way of relating that it's really hard for us to get it. I never mean believing it. It's not about believing me. It's about seeing in our own experience. Because what this path is about is a shift of motivation, a shift of intention. And it comes about naturally through the mindfulness—from our motivation of trying to get something, however noble the thing we're trying to get may be, or ignoble, whatever it is. But when you come in and you sit down and in your mind is, "This time I am going to be with the breath for fifteen minutes or else," what does that set up? How is peace possible in a mind that's on that track? "I either do this or I'm a failure." That's suffering. That is the suffering. Whether you're with the breath or not is immaterial. The suffering is that setting up of leaning into, striving, trying to make something happen, looking away with all our energy from right here and now, this moment, whatever it may be that's happening.

The shift of motivation is from this comparing, striving, wanting, yearning, leaning forward—and then hating and judging and comparing and blaming when it doesn't happen. The shift is to a sense of really loving and appreciating awareness for itself. So that what begins to be generated is what Ajahn Buddhadasa—who was a wonderful Thai monk, a meditation master who ran a forest monastery for many years before he died—talked about: what we're learning is to generate a contentment with awareness.

I keep talking about it because at first I don't know if it even makes sense to us. We're so used to involving ourselves in the experience—I like this, I don't like this, what does this mean about me, how can I get this to be different, this is so difficult, how can I stand it—rather than resting in a contentment with the awareness itself. And awareness is here and can be with us no matter what the experience is. This contentment with awareness manifests as a kind of love, a devotion almost, a reverence for wakefulness, for really being wholeheartedly present here and now.

Our mindfulness practice is what leads us into it, but it manifests really with a kind of reverence for life. Rather than feeling in struggle so often with whatever it is that's going on, this sense of contentment with awareness, with wakefulness here and now—it's a sense really that we've come home. There's not really

another way to say it. It's not some flashy, firecrackers-going-off kind of experience. It's so normal, so everyday. It's not something we have to create. I mean, awareness—do you have to do anything to hear me talking? Other than not be in a coma.

But to really hear me, you don't have to do much. To feel your hands touching each other, it's not a huge effort. That's awareness. It's so much who we are. It's so normal, really, that mostly we don't even notice it.

And that's what's such a mystery, such a wonder to me about our whole spiritual path and about all the difficulties that we go through in meditation—because God knows, I know, it isn't easy. We talk about how normal and natural awareness is, then we sit down and just go through torment, trying to feel the breath, trying to feel the footsteps. Why the heck do we do that if it's so normal and natural and with us all the time? There's some disconnect going on here.

And that's exactly right. There is a disconnect going on here. We basically overlook awareness itself. We overlook the really freeing, easeful, happy potential of having confidence, of taking refuge in awareness itself. When Guy was speaking about the three refuges last night—we took refuge in Buddha and Dharma and Sangha—they're all different aspects of this pure awareness, which is really who we are. You're not going to find yourself ever separated from that. But what we do is ignore it. In fact, the very word *ignoran ce*, when we speak about the suffering and confusion that we go through around experience, we always say that at the root of it is ignorance. And ignorance is really this ignoring of the freeing potential of taking refuge in awareness.

So that's what I want to talk more about, because I know it might not make really any sense yet what I'm saying. And all I'm trying to do in this whole talk is point you back to your own experience over these next few days, to play with this, to explore.

This awareness that is our refuge, that is always available when we can remember to notice it—it's like the big open secret of spiritual life, of our whole life, not to separate spiritual out. It's not somewhere else we have to go. It's discoverable, and we build up confidence in it only and always by bringing ourselves fully here right now. Because it can only be here right now. Where else are we going to discover our true home?

And so all of our practices—being with the breath, coming back from thinking and whatever's going on, using the breath and the sensations of the foot and leg in walking—we're using those as tools. Not that the breath is some fantastic thing. I mean, breath is great. Yeah, we'd be really in trouble if we didn't have breath, so in that case, yes, it's fantastic. So also is being able to walk—it's wonderful. But we're using those specific experiences as tools, so that when we feel a breath, when we feel a footstep, the victory, you could say, the point of practice isn't the quality of the breath or footstep. It's that we're awake again. That again we can notice that awareness. Only when we're aware can we feel the breath, can we know if it's an in or an out breath, can we feel the footstep.

I talk about this in the beginning of retreat to set the attitude with which we actually embrace all techniques of spiritual practice. The technique is embedded within the attitude or motivation of contentment, of reverence for the sense of being present itself. And we're using all our techniques to help us reconnect with that over and over. Without that understanding, we really get easily caught in our habits of doing activity for result. Breathing in order to have more breaths, or to get more quiet, or to stop thinking, or to have the breath be finer, or to get to some juicy emotion—whatever the thing is you want to happen.

It's paradoxical to us, because mostly, certainly for me, I was trained to put out tremendous effort in order to make something specific happen or to get something. I didn't really know how to be really totally present, wholeheartedly committed to being present. Not to be somewhere else, but just to be here. Just to be with this breath. Just to feel this sadness, just to feel the sensation as my foot touches the ground, or this niggling pain in my back. It's antithetical to what we're used to doing.

And the reason we practice so much is because each moment that we wake up—ah, thinking is happening—you're here, right here.

You don't have to go anywhere else for awareness. It's right here. The breath—it's right here. Each moment. You don't even have to consciously or intellectually recognize, "Oh, this is what's happening. I'm countering the habit of striving to make something happen by being present in the moment." You don't need to think that every moment. Please don't think it every moment. It happens by itself, which is what's so nice.

So all of our practice is to help us recognize and trust and have confidence in the power of awareness itself.

The Buddha, right after he awoke, after his awakening, his enlightenment, was sitting around for seven weeks, really happy, basically, seeing how he'd really freed his mind from getting caught in reactivity and suffering. And he wasn't too motivated to teach, actually. He thought, you know, the truth is so subtle and it would be hard for people to see. I don't know if I should bother. That's basically what they say he was thinking. And then a divine being, so to speak, came down and said, "No, no, there are people who can really see. Please, teach."

And there's a line he said afterwards when he decided to teach, which I really love. He said, "Okay, the doors to the deathless are open for those who hear, for those who see." The doors to the deathless. It doesn't mean this body isn't going to die. It's really speaking about the deathless quality of awareness itself. And not that we have to go somewhere else to go through those doors and be home. They're open now. We just need to see, to hear in a different way—to see what's really happening in this moment, as opposed to our habits of mind, which tend to concoct a whole lot of extra stuff on top of what's actually happening.

So having confidence in awareness—to me that's like this amazing gift that somehow has been opened up in my life. Having confidence in awareness, what does that mean? It hinges on the fact, and again, please explore this in your experience, that whatever is happening—whether it's as mundane as your breath, or lifting your foot, or a difficult emotion coming up, or you're caught in a stream of planning thoughts, or you're just feeling incredibly reactive and hot and restless and your back hurts and you just want to get the heck out of here—whatever it is that's happening, there are the physical sensations or the emotional mood or the thought in your mind. It's pleasant or it's unpleasant or it's neutral. And there can be awareness of it, can't there? You can be really angry and you can know that you're angry. You can know that anger's happening. You can be aware of what anger feels like. That makes sense?

And because that's possible, you can see that awareness, while it comes out of the anger—it's not like it's over there and the anger's over here, you're really feeling anger or tiredness or restlessness—but the awareness is not the same thing as the anger. They come together.

Mostly we look through the awareness and just get involved in the anger, or what we think about ourselves because we're angry, or how justified we are because we're angry, or how it makes us feel. We completely get involved in what that other person did that made us angry and what's the matter with them. We get completely involved in all of that, almost entranced, so that a lot of the time all we recognize that's happening is that particular thing—the anger, the story about it, how we feel about it. We project it into the future. We go back to our third grade class. This person's just like my teacher. I can't believe it. What's my karma? She sounds just like my third grade teacher, Mrs. Jubinville. See, she just popped into my mind. She had blue hair, Mrs. Jubinville.

She sounds just like my third grade teacher. And we're like, is any of that happening? Really? Other than as a thought in the mind? But we get so involved in all of that, we don't notice the awareness.

What this practice helps us do is make a subtle foreground-background shift—from being completely submerged, immersed in whatever's going on, to coming home and relaxing into the awareness of what's going on. I know it's subtle to talk about. Play with it. It's not some fancy thing. It's simply recognizing that awareness is actually stronger, ultimately, than any experience that comes and goes.

Not always. There are moments, of course, when we really are submerged in experience and you think, "What the heck is she talking about? This is what it is and I'm really in it." But there will be other moments, and that's why we pick relatively neutral things—like breath, like walking—to start with. We don't say, "Sit down, think of the worst trauma in your life, and now notice awareness of it." That would be hard. We start where it's easy, practicing over and over and over until we start to notice: there's breath, there's sensations, there's the awareness of it. They're right like this, intimate. But we can begin to generate a sense of coming home.

Being in the awareness, trusting that, taking refuge in it—this actually allows us to be fully present with just about anything. I read somewhere that St. Augustine said the reason humans behave as we do is

because we're not living in our true home. That completely resonates with me. And our true home isn't the house we're hoping to build on Maui. Our true home is awareness. It's already here. We don't have to go somewhere else. We just have to turn around our field of attention and come back into what's seeing, what's hearing, what's knowing, what's wishing it could get the heck out of here. Turn back around and notice that.

This brings, over time—recognizing over and over and over—a sense of real freedom and confidence. Confidence. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Pandita, a Burmese meditation teacher, really tough, from the school of heroic, courageous effort. That's the good way to put it. From the school of "you sit and you don't move, and if you die while practicing, well, that's a good way to die." He's not exaggerating. That's the school. But he said this to me once in an interview, and it was really helpful: when you can truly contact awareness with confidence, you don't have to be afraid of anything.

And I've really felt that. The whole show keeps coming and going. It's the internal show that actually traps us, often much more than the external one. But we don't have to be afraid of it when awareness becomes our refuge. Our practice is learning how to trust that—learning how to recognize it first, and then trust it.

So let's try a little experiment. If you would be willing, put your hand out and just move it back and forth. Don't pay any attention to it. Think about something else. Think about what you want to have for lunch tomorrow. Think about that house on Maui. Think about how hot it was. Okay, now stop a minute. Do the same thing again, but this time really let yourself wholeheartedly feel the movement. That's all.

Now first, the second one—was that hard to do? To just for that little short time feel the movement? If I kept on doing it, I know the mind would go off because that's its habituated pattern. But just in that moment of feeling it, was that too hard? Nothing really esoteric, was it? In the moment. And even in that short time, I know it could well be that your mind went off a few times. But during that time of just feeling it, was there really any big problem? Just in that moment. And it's just a little brief moment, I know. It doesn't seem like much.

But what I'd like to suggest is that you keep noticing moments like that throughout your time here—in the being with the breath, being with the walking, when you're eating, when you're taking a shower. A friend of mine calls it, and it's her word, the place of no problem. It's not really a place. But it's when we're just for that moment single-heartedly with awareness. Whatever it is that's happening is happening. It's pleasant or it's unpleasant. It's intense or it's mild. But the awareness gives us a spaciousness and a wholeheartedness of attention that ultimately, within any experience, we really can find a peace, an ease, a way of being in that moment, in that experience, where we're not in struggle or self-hatred or other-hatred or fear.

And we tend to want to project that long term and say, "I can't do that, you know. I experienced it for a second but that's meaningless. I need it for my whole life." Come back. Just be in this moment. All of our life is moment, moment, moment. As hard as we try, you can't be anywhere other than this moment. Even

when all this stuff about the future and how hard it is—that's just thoughts happening right now.

So this is a second huge relief. It's been like an incredible burden lifted from me in my life. When through my practice I realized: Oh, it's always only this moment. And even when I've been in really paralyzing grief and fear, if I can get to, "Okay, can I be with it this moment?"—in this moment, I always can.

True, we forget that the next moment. We think, "I can't bear this another moment. I can't bear it." And sometimes the awareness of awareness, the mindfulness, just isn't strong enough. The energy of that isn't as strong as the energy of the difficult state or our fear or our sadness. And that's okay. So at that time we feel like we're drowning a little bit. You need a break. That's when we'd say, go take a walk. But then there's the next moment. And again, we don't say, "I couldn't be with it the last moment, so forget about it." No, now there's this moment. Again, awareness is here. Can we remember? So that's our practice, moment by moment by moment, relaxing into awareness and finding that it really is a refuge. It's a home, the place of no problem.

But our habits of looking to experience, looking to make something happen, looking basically to have things be pleasant and to get rid of what's painful and difficult—these are so strong. Our habits of interpreting almost every experience in terms of what it means about me. This can be really fun, actually. It can be amusing if you would just put that flavor on it. Notice as you go through the day how much of what happens—sound, or it's hot, or somebody burps sitting near you in the hall—how much becomes about what does that mean for me? That makes me feel like this. That makes me feel like that. It's like me, me, me, the little center of the universe. It is exhausting. It's the most exhausting, limiting thing.

Just to notice it and laugh at it is helpful. But the habit of extrapolating on experience from this point of view—how can I organize experience to make me feel better, basically—is so strong that we're gone from present moment experience just like that, without even noticing it.

So our practice is about shifting those habits. Mindfulness, this quality of just being present with experience as it is, very simply—feeling the sensations of the breath, the sensations of walking, a feeling of sadness, very simply. That's really what cuts through, what helps us recognize there's another way to be with experience: the simple presence, mindful presence.

There's a Burmese saying that brings home to me the sense of mindfulness. The saying is: make each person we meet an object of reverence. From mindfulness I extrapolate to that—can we just make each activity we meet, can we make each experience that arises in our mind, in our heart, in hearing and seeing, just for that moment an object of reverence, an object of respect? What that does isn't so much to make that experience be something special as to bring the attitude of being willing to just be fully here for it.

Someone asked about the bowing—what's the bowing about? That's not anything you need to take on, but it comes from the Asian tradition: Thailand and Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Burma, where these particular

forms of practice have been passed down, and where we've all practiced at different times. It's just an expression of reverence. When I bow to the Buddha statue, I know it's a statue—I mean, I know it's just a statue. But what I'm bowing to is the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. What I'm bowing to is really the power of awareness in me and all of us. And when I do this, I'm kind of just bowing as a sense of reverence to all of you.

Bringing that sense of reverence to whatever we do—to drinking your tea, to washing the dishes when you're finished with your meal. Reverence to just do it with our full attention, wholeheartedly, not split off in ten different places, not hurrying up to get through this in order to go meditate. It doesn't matter what you're doing. Making an object of reverence is to just be wholeheartedly present without preconceptions, without a lot of assumptions. What does this mean? What's going to happen? Just wholeheartedly here. Play with this. This is really the essence of our practice.

In this wholeheartedness, this bringing a sense of reverence to whatever we're doing, that's the place where awareness becomes accessible to us, where we begin to recognize—and not only recognize, but cherish, really—to see that our refuge is this total presence, rather than feeling our refuge is somewhere out there, getting away from something unpleasant, holding onto what's pleasant.

This essence of mindfulness, sati—often we use Suzuki Roshi's phrase. He was the famous Zen master in San Francisco from Japan. He has a wonderful book, if you haven't read it: *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. It's just very pithy, to the point, just brings up this sense of presence and acceptance of things as they are in this moment, simply because in this moment that's how they are. Out of this total presence, intelligent response is possible, and it actually arises quite spontaneously.

Bringing beginner's mind—that's Suzuki Roshi's phrase—can we meet this sensation in the back, this feeling of sadness, this next breath, with beginner's mind? That means not, "Oh no, this cramp again. It's another forty-five minutes of hell I'm going to have to go through." There's no freshness in there. There's no beginner's mind. You don't even know what that feels like once we've met it like that. "Oh, this anger. I can't believe it. I'm going to be in this for the rest of the ten days." Be in what? Do we even know? We're not even touching what's happening. We're off in our reactions.

So beginner's mind is, can we just bring a freshness, here and now, meet it without bringing in all of our cultural and personal overlays? They can be there, but they're different from the experience.

My favorite example of this—I've used it before, but it fits, so I'll use it again. It's from a documentary I saw on German TV. I don't speak German, but friends were translating. It was about Yo-Yo Ma, the classical cellist. He seems like a really open, lovely guy, at least through this documentary. In the film, he was going around to different cultures just to compare music—not even compare, just to play musically with cultures that were very different. In the part that I saw, he was flying to the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa, to a tribe of what they called themselves bush people.

So they show him getting out of this little helicopter with his beautiful cello. I read later that he has a cello worth about two million dollars, so I'm thinking maybe he brought his second-string cello—but it looked really nice.

He gets down and he's meeting with the headman of the group and their head musician. The musician brought out his instrument and was singing and playing, and then Yo-Yo Ma would play on his cello. Then they showed us up close the instrument that the head musician was using, and it was literally a big oil tin. It had been a large oil can, like motor oil or something, with a strut—a pole in it—and a couple of strings. And then Yo-Yo Ma had his cello.

I saw my mind completely making comparisons, you know, evaluating what really sounds good. And then we heard them both. I could see that just because I'm attuned to that Western style of music, that's what I'm used to thinking is beautiful.

But Yo-Yo Ma was completely open. He's going, "Wow, you really—that's great! Let's trade instruments." So he gives the head musician his cello, and the musician is playing around on that. And Yo-Yo Ma is plunking on the other one, saying, "Man, I can't play this nearly as good as you can." He gives it back and was just so into it.

And I could see my mind going, "Oh, that's an oil can with a pole and some strings." My mind couldn't get past that. But Yo-Yo Ma was really seeing it for what it was—an instrument of music, and the person playing it was a master of it. Yo-Yo Ma wasn't a master of it. And he was so enthusiastic, so open, so present.

That was a huge lesson to me about the power of my preconceptions, the power of conditioning that keeps me from just meeting an experience freshly.

What our practice here is doing, and the reason the schedule is a bit stringent—sit for forty-five minutes, walk for forty-five minutes—is because all of our experience is going to come up. It's not going to be nicey-nice all the time. That's important, that it's not always nice, so we can bring a freshness and see what's really the point of difficulty, the point of real suffering here. Can I meet this experience freshly without all my preconceptions?

And maybe for a moment we can. You might discover in that moment that there's a huge shift in how difficult it is to be with something that we thought was just unbearable. Or how it's really okay that something we love changes and goes away—that that's okay too. This is really what we see: to bring a freshness rather than our overlay.

When we have our overlay, if we don't know it—and often we don't know it—we're seeing everything through that filter.

A Zen story a friend told me: A really fierce samurai warrior went to see a Zen master in ancient Japan.

Really fierce, really angry. He went wanting teachings, but he was just cussing the Zen master out, calling him a pig. "You're just a pig. And everybody here is a pig." Just really out there.

The Zen master just let him go on. Then he looked at him and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

That stopped even the samurai for a moment. He said, "I? A Buddha?"

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

So part of what we see in the practice is: what veils are we looking through? And as soon as you see the veil, you don't have to go anywhere. As soon as you see, "Ah, I've got pig veil on"—in that moment, we're in awareness. You're not caught in it anymore. You don't have to go somewhere else. We just have to see it.

The Buddha gave a lovely teaching that I'll share very quickly because I think it really helps us see the difference between just what's happening and all the extra reactivity and story and wanting we put on top of it. Very simple. Someone came to him and said, "Hey, listen—what's the difference between someone who's really awakened, what you call free from suffering, and a normal, ordinary person?"

The Buddha said, "Well, a normal person experiences pleasant feelings in body and mind, unpleasant feelings in body and mind, and neutral ones." We don't often think in those terms, but if you consider it, that's what we have: things that are nice, things that aren't, and neutral. And so does an awakened person. That doesn't change.

For years, somewhere in my subconscious, I thought that if I could finally get enlightened, I wouldn't have anything unpleasant happen anymore. You don't get sick. Nobody you love gets sick. Things you don't like simply don't occur. I'm sorry to tell you, it isn't like that. Even the Buddha went through lots of grief in his life. Stuff happens. That's not what changes. That happens to an awakened person too.

But normal, ordinary people like most of us, when we experience an unpleasant physical or mental thing—an emotion we don't like, or you're sitting here and your knee hurts, your back hurts, it's way too hot—the Buddha's words are that we then "lament, we cry, we moan, we beat our breast, we complain, and we fall into despair."

Does that sound familiar? Does it sound exaggerated? No, it really isn't. What we don't do is see that we're doing this.

So he says it's like that first physical thing—your knee has a little twinge, it doesn't even hurt badly yet, just a little twinge—that's like getting shot with an arrow. But then what we do on top of it: "Oh my God, it's only ten minutes into the sitting. It's only the 2:15 sitting. This is unbearable. I can't believe they expect us to sit here for this long in this heat and they're not turning on the air conditioning. What the heck is the matter with them? I'm going to just stand up. I'm going to tell them what for. I'm going to write a note. As soon as I get out of here, I'm writing a note." Then you spend ten minutes composing the note. Then you spend the next ten minutes wondering where the closest hospital is because you're going to need

arthroscopic surgery if this keeps up. "I thought I came here for freedom and instead I'm hurting myself. I'm going to get up. I'm not going to let them intimidate me. I'm getting up and leaving." Then you spend ten minutes hating yourself because you're such a wuss, so intimidated that you won't get up and leave until they ring the bell. Then you hate James, who's here for the 2:15 sitting—I'm sure he's not paying attention.

That's the beating. That's what the Buddha said: we shoot ourselves with a second arrow. Or in this case, a whole quiver of arrows. And he says that's completely extra. We really don't need to do that.

What's the difference with an awakened person? They experience an unpleasant physical or mental experience. And that's all that happens. They experience it and leave it there.

Ajahn Sumedho, a Thai-American monk, has a wonderful description of loving-kindness. He says you experience something unpleasant and you don't create anything around it. You just give it space to be. That's what we're actually cultivating with mindfulness. There's a twinge in the knee. Can you meet that with fresh eyes? Twinge in the knee. What does it feel like?

And when the second arrow comes—*oh my god*—then we notice that. Ah, okay, fear, aversion. And that's like a new first arrow, but you don't have to create anything around that. Awareness can know fear. Awareness can know pain. Awareness can know self-hatred. Awareness can know anger. The awareness is always available to us, and we don't have to get so engrossed in this second arrow, in this story about basically me, me, me, me, me.

We feel that this is going to help us out of our suffering, but really, it increases our suffering. I don't think I'm exaggerating to say a hundredfold sometimes.

And this is what you'll discover from time to time, not always. That twinge in the knee—you can come back and meet it fresh. Just for a moment, it's like moving your hand. It's just twinge. And it's like, *oh, what was all that about?* And then we forget. We get caught again. That's okay. We can notice again.

The habit of really getting entranced, seduced by all our reactions and our stories is so, so strong that we can only have compassion and patience for ourselves—and for everyone else—when we see ourselves shooting ourselves with the arrow over and over again. But that recognition, and it really helps a lot of people, *oh, second arrow*—it changes the whole dynamic. Just notice that in yourself. With that tone of voice. Not "Second arrow, you stupid jerk!" No. Ah, second arrow. All right, that's what's happening. And in that moment, you're not in the second arrow anymore. Awareness is here. Awareness is our refuge. That's what we really learn to trust.

Just one more point I want to make, a short one. When I say awareness is our refuge and we can really bring this freshness, this beginner's mind, to whatever's happening and find whatever's arising in that moment—because it's our avenue to awareness—you could say whatever's happening can be a doorway to the deathless. Really.

But—and this is going to happen over and over on retreat and in our life—sometimes what's coming up, whether it's the twinge in the knee or deep sadness or aversion or just sleepiness... sleepiness can be a real torment, can't it? There are times when we think, *take refuge in being present in this moment? This is my true home? I don't think so.* And it's just beyond the imagination. Why would I want to be wholeheartedly present for this, you know, if I have an option?

Well, that's basically what we've spent our life doing. If we have an option to be present or not for something unpleasant, we will take that option. One of the things we're doing here is taking away some of your options, you may have noticed. That's one of the reasons the first day can be really tough. Whatever our particular options are, our multiple distractions, a lot of them we don't have. Just by dint of sitting for forty-five minutes, stuff's going to come up. By dint of walking. By dint of not talking.

What becomes hard to remember and to trust is that it's not the experience we're taking refuge in—the unpleasant or difficult experience. It's the awareness. But the awareness—we can only see it, recognize it, when we're willing to be fully here. We can't be in awareness if we're zoning out, spacing out, turning on the TV just not to know what's going on. Sure, sometimes those will work. But sooner or later in all of our lives, we're going to hit the thing—not necessarily here, but in our regular life—that we can't move away from. The distractions don't work. Other, again, than being in a coma, self-induced or otherwise. But even that you're going to have to come out of.

So what we're practicing here is to cultivate trust in awareness, the confidence that awareness really can be a refuge. And to do that, we have to do the counter-intuitive thing of being willing to bring beginner's mind open into the feeling, the difficult thing that's arising.

Pick your battles. Start with the little difficult thing, not the most overwhelming one, because we won't have strong enough trust at first. But what we discover—and this is the point I want to make—is that when we begin to, just for a moment, bring this openness, this freshness to our difficulty, whether it's knee pain, back pain, sadness, or fear, we find that this refuge in awareness manifests in its other form, its two-sides-of-a-coin form. The other form is compassion, connectedness.

Really seeing that in this, through this willingness to be present for this difficult thing—and it can be a minor difficult thing—we are somehow contacting the fact of our connection with all life, with all beings. Even in this silence, in this lovely protected space, in this seeming introspection and self-involvement, which meditation can certainly seem like at times—we can even get down on ourselves for being so reactive to some little pain when there's so much suffering in the world—but the amazing thing is we begin to notice that the other side of refuge in awareness is this compassion, this tenderness for life, starting with tenderness for ourselves in this moment.

I want to end by reading a few statements about this from Pema Chödrön, who's a nun in the Tibetan tradition. In the Tibetan tradition, they talk about the heart of bodhicitta, the heart of compassion, the noble or awakened heart, the heart that's really the manifestation of this tenderness for life, this

connection with beings. And again, it's simply a manifestation of our basic pure awareness of who we are. It's not that we have to create this in some intellectual way. When we're willing to just open into presence, this begins to show itself, as if the obscurations that keep us from noticing it begin to be seen through.

So she says: "We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of our existence." In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world, the pain of yourself, touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

"We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering, we're being kind to ourselves. But the truth is, we become more fearful that way, more hardened, more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. And that separateness becomes like a prison for us, a prison that restricts us so that we're just involved in our personal hopes and fears and caring only for the people nearest to us. It's a narrow, limited kind of consciousness, kind of existence. Yet when we don't close off and we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings."

"Awakened heart is discovered by going into our own pain. It manifests as basic tenderness, basic compassionate warmth. When we walk around like we're expecting to be attacked, we block it." And remember, we walk around expecting to be attacked. Sometimes we're expecting to be attacked from inside. It's not always from outside, right? Just let that thing not arise. We block it.

"When we release this tension between this and that, between me and other, the struggle between us and them, that's when bodhicitta will emerge. On our relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. On the absolute level, we experience it as openness, as awareness, as groundless space." Two sides of the same coin.

"Experiencing the soft spot of bodhicitta is like returning home, as if we had had amnesia for a very long time and we awaken to remember who we really are."

The poet Rumi writes of night travelers who search the darkness instead of running from it, a companionship of people willing to know their own fear, pain, and sadness.

Bodhicitta is also available in moments of caring for things, that kind of reverence for experience I was talking about—like when we clean our glasses or brush our hair. It's available in moments of appreciation, when we notice the blue sky or pause and listen to the rain. It's available in moments of gratitude, when we recall a kindness or recognize another person's courage, another person's beauty. It's available in music and dance, in art, in poetry.

Whenever we let go of holding onto ourselves and our views and look at the world around us, whenever we connect with sorrow, whenever we connect with joy, whenever we drop our resentment and complaint—in those moments, bodhicitta is here.

So that's really the essence of our practice. Can we meet each moment of our life with reverence?

Thank you all for your attention on this long, hot night.

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