Not Fearing Freedom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:51

The subject tonight is Undaunted Courage, or Not Fearing Freedom.

I want to frame this talk, and also frame your experience—each of our experiences—using the framework of the Four Noble Truths. This isn't exactly a Four Noble Truths talk, but I want to hold what I'm discussing within that framework as a conceptual way of understanding our experience.

I'm assuming you're familiar with the Four Noble Truths. Joseph spoke about the first one last night: that painful, difficult things happen. Old age, sickness, disease, death, loss—all of that. Impermanence, the unsatisfactory nature of experience. If we try to hold on to anything to make us happy, there's the no-self of it all. But basically, it's simply getting it—that this is part of the human condition. It's not a mistake, and it's not something that's specifically only happening to you because you messed up. The first noble truth is the framework to hold what's happening.

The second truth, of course, is the cause of suffering. Not the cause of pain, but the cause of our suffering, our confusion—that we relate to experience with clinging and aversion out of not understanding experience accurately. In other words, if we really understood the first noble truth, we would stop clinging, because it just doesn't make sense. The second noble truth tells us that the cause of our suffering, our anguish, is our clinging, our confused response or reaction to situations. It's really ignorance.

The third truth is that there is an ending of clinging, an ending of suffering. This is where I want to start broadening out a little bit tonight, because this is where it gets interesting. I mean, if there were no third truth, the first two would be a little dismal.

So the third truth—what does it mean for us? What does it mean for you experientially, not just conceptually? Do you even go there in your mind? Other than "Oh no, that's impossible for me." Other than that, or "I've got to get enlightened or I'm going to die." Other than those two extremes, how do you hold or even think about or relate to this third truth?

I want to read you a few descriptions from the Buddha, from various places—his definitions of nibbāna.

"That which is the exhaustion of greed, of hate, and of delusion is called nibbāna." The exhaustion of greed, of hate, of delusion.

"It's hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna."

And then one other, a different way he defines it: "There is an ultimate reality, unborn, uncreated, unconditioned, and unformed. If there were not, there would be no escape possible here for one who is born, created, conditioned, and formed. But since there is this ultimate reality, unborn, uncreated, unconditioned, and unformed, escape is possible for one who is born, created, conditioned, and formed."

These are different ways the Buddha described nibbāna.

There are two other ways we could think about it, describe it, or experience nibbāna. One is the idea of a moment of freedom, or momentary freedom. Sayadaw U Pandita often describes it this way: a moment of pure mindfulness, a moment of sati, is a moment of freedom. Because in that moment of pure attention, there is no kilesa present. There is no greed, hatred, or delusion arising or being held to in a moment of mindfulness. So this is one way of describing what you could call temporary nirvana.

And then there's the arahat model, which is when the roots of greed, hatred, and delusion are completely abandoned, cut off at the root like a dead stump.

I'm not trying to feed your conceptual mind here. I just want to frame what we're talking about in terms of the Four Noble Truths without stopping at the first two. I'm not trying to get your greed going or stimulate thinking, but rather to challenge you to be conscious of what ideas or attitudes you may or may not be holding to—what expectations or descriptions you may consciously or unconsciously be trying to get to about your ideas of what freedom is. Sometimes that can get in the way.

This idea of momentary and more permanent freedom—a very famous quotation from the Buddha speaks to both, I think. You've probably heard it already ten times just this retreat; everyone always reads it, it's the favorite one: "The mind is naturally radiant and pure, but it is colored or obscured by the kilesas that visit it. The mind is radiant and free of the kilesas that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands. And so, for the noble follower, there is cultivation of the mind." Understanding that the mind is naturally radiant and pure, and that this radiance, this purity, is obscured.

It's obscured, it's colored by the defilements that visit. And when we understand that, that's why we then cultivate development of the mind. That's the fourth noble truth, right? The eightfold noble path.

And so, in a way, it's saying that because of the natural radiance—and this is my interpretation now—and our ability to touch that, to recognize it just for a moment, that is what allows us to set out on the path and to continue to cultivate awareness.

So however you're holding freedom for yourself, whether that's a deep motivation for you, whether that's your inspiration, if that's what keeps you going, it really does require of us total commitment to this path. It's not a half-hearted thing.

And at the same time—as it's not half-hearted, I'm going to be going back and forth with two sides the whole night, probably—as Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote in a great article, a talk called "Nibbana for

Everyone": at the same time that the cultivation of our heart and mind to really recognize and trust that recognition of the innate purity of heart and mind, at the same time that that requires total commitment, it is the natural possibility for everyone. Nibbana for everyone.

It's a long talk, so I'll just say a little bit of what he's talking about. Ajahn Buddhadasa was very famous in Thailand. He died not quite ten years ago—a very well-respected Theravada forest monk. But at the same time, he was, for Theravada in Thailand, quite radical. Now, that's not radical by our standards, maybe, but for Theravada in Thailand, he was quite radical.

In this talk, "Nibbana for Everyone," he starts out by talking about how basically in Thailand in these days, nibbana is something, the idea of it, that's been shoved aside. And he gives a bunch of examples. He says, you know, laypeople in general have been informed that nibbana is some special place without suffering, where you can just be happy and have everything you want, and you usually get there after death. The developers of the generation view nibbana as a hindrance to economic and social development, something that should not be studied or even mentioned. Students generally put nibbana in a category for old, devout Buddhists, so they don't need to pay attention to it themselves. Young people see nibbana as something bland, with no taste, something truly awful and undesirable. And he just keeps going with different examples.

But then he goes on to say: nibbana is a natural condition. And he's very straightforward and simple sometimes in the way he describes things. He says nibbana is the cool state of mind without any kilesa. The cool state of mind without defilements present in that moment.

He goes on to differentiate between the sense of momentary or temporary coolness, which we all experience a great deal of the time, and what he calls a more permanent nibbana—when the defilements are really uprooted, when the underlying tendencies for them to arise aren't there. The permanent coolness. But he talks a lot about really recognizing that there are many moments of this natural state of coolness when defilements are not occurring.

Coolness is almost a literal translation of the word nibbana. That's what it means: cool. They use the word in Thai to say when rice, for example, has cooled. The rice has nibbana-ed, so to speak. It's just the fire going out. So it doesn't have to be something so incredibly esoteric that you can reach after ten thousand eons and not before.

I like this—he's saying anyone can see that if defilements were with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could stand them? I know some of you are thinking that's how it is, every second without ceasing. But he's saying, really look: under such conditions, living things would either die or become insane and then die anyway. So let us consider well the fact that we survive because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. Why can't we notice and appreciate these times? We're all surviving because of the nourishment from this type of nibbana.

I just like that. It's so down to earth and straightforward.

But if you think of it another way, the fact of the essential radiance and purity of mind-heart is a fact. And that is true—not ten thousand eons from now when we wake up, but it's true now. That's what nourishes us. That's what can keep us practicing. That's what allows for escape from the born and the conditioned and suffering, as the Buddha said. If there were no unborn, escape would not be possible. Now, unborn is true now, not in some other reality in some other lifetime.

So nibbana for everyone—including you, including me.

So that's the preamble.

What I want to talk about is a point that has been at times a fascination for me in my own practice and in talking with people—with some of you and with people on other retreats as well. It's how we can reach, at various times, certain points in our practice. We may reach them again and again, different points on our individual journey, where perhaps we've come up against something. It may be a point of difficulty, but it's not necessarily so.

We've come up against possibly some idea we didn't even know we had—an idea of what freedom or liberation is or should be. Or we run into some notion of what it might entail. Or we encounter something we hadn't really thought about that it does seem to entail.

And people will come in and say, with a sort of surprised or rueful or self-judging quality, on some level they say, "Oh, I'm thinking maybe I don't really want liberation. Maybe I'm not really quite practicing for that uncompromising, radical freedom from clinging. So far, and maybe that's far enough for now."

Have you ever noticed feeling like that?

That, I think, is a really fascinating and juicy and important point when we reach it in practice. There can be various reasons, and I want to talk about some of them, and about ways of reconnecting with our inspiration. Where can we find that undaunted courage that keeps us going when we've hit a place where, for any of various reasons, we're saying, "Okay, good enough. I'm out of here now." Or, "More than enough." Or, "I know this isn't freedom, but if freedom means X, Y, Z, I don't want it."

So really looking and seeing what that's about.

I think it's a rare person who doesn't come up against this. Because being the analyzing, thinking, conceptual beings that we are, you'd be pretty rare if you didn't have some conceptualization of what freedom is, or what our path is, or what it's going to feel like. And when we suddenly run into the sense, the experience—"Oh, freedom from clinging also means *that*"—I'll give some examples of what I mean—that didn't fit into our ideas of what freedom is. Or freedom from suffering means opening to some of the things Joseph talked about last night. It means really facing this stuff, not avoiding it permanently. "That's what I thought freedom was—that this stuff didn't come up anymore. Not that I have to open to it

and feel it more than before I came here."

So I think it's normal that this comes up. With the best intentions and with all that we read and study and all that we've practiced, whatever we think freedom's going to be, it can't be what we think. We can only think what we know.

Krishnamurti's famous saying, "freedom from the known"—that's a really profound statement, in my humble opinion. And there's a saying from the Buddha: "In whatever way people conceive, the fact is ever other than that." Do you get that? That's one of his radical statements. Give it up. Whatever you're thinking, the fact is other than that. It just cuts through.

And now I'm going to blab all night about...

So partly we run up against this wall of, "No, either it's not what I want, or I can't do it"—which is really a common wall for us here. "It's too big a task. Me, with my particular impurities and defilements, whatever they are—I can't liberate myself. Even if there's another ten thousand incalculables and eons, I could never do it. Maybe these other people, everyone else here, but not me. Enlightenment's not for me."

How do we find the total commitment to keep practicing and not have our motivation completely deflated and ebb away in the face of this?

And by the way, this thing about "I couldn't do it with my defilements"—as if it's *me* that's getting enlightened, as if enlightenment is some kind of self-improvement project that makes me better. As if I needed a better sense of "me" that could get enlightened—when it's the whole standpoint of "me" that we see through in the first place. So your crummy, caught up, kilesa-ridden "me" is as good a one to see through as a purer one. That excuse doesn't wash. You have to keep practicing.

Joseph talked a lot last night about running up against the place of fear when we're coming into the uncomfortable, the difficult, the painful. And I'll again talk about the difficult and how that can make us think, "I can't do this. Enlightenment's not for me."

But first I want to talk about how sometimes it's not always confronting the difficult or the painful that brings us to one of these crises of motivation, one of these places where our willingness just ebbs away.

Fear of freedom—sometimes it's seeing really how subtly we delight in the pleasant, how subtly we really like craving. We really like pleasure. People talk about this often, and there's a kind of fear.

This is what Ajahn Buddhadasa was talking about—the young people say it's just this drab, gray, really boring thing. I can't tell you how many times people have said, "Who wants to give up wanting and fear?" Someone said to me once, "What am I going to do, just sit in my room all day?" As if these are the only options open to us: wanting, fear, or sitting in our room doing nothing.

But the mind can really get caught on that. One person—I hope you don't mind my using this example, it's

a perfect very small example—but you can really see how if we're not paying attention, we can just hit that wall and not look more carefully.

She was talking about a bagel day, which I understand again today was a bagel day. It's a big day in the yogi world, I understand that. She was talking about seeing just how much she was loving the bagels and the taste of bagels. And then she started noting "pleasant, pleasant." And it was as if the whole taste of the bagel just turned to sawdust. Isn't that the fear? It says, "Oh..."

I remember one time I was deep in retreat and something very pleasant was going on in the walking, and Sharon said, "Well, you know you've got to know pleasant." And I went back, and the mind had a little temper tantrum. Because I knew very well—not that it would turn to sawdust, but what goes away when we're noting, just noting "pleasant, pleasant," is that subtle identification with the gratification of the pleasure. Gratification meaning "I'm really liking this bagel." And I'm even exaggerating. There's not even maybe the word "I," but the awareness or the energy is kind of coming back to me. Nice taste, mmm. Swallowing, mmm. Do you know what I mean?

The Buddha even said that unwise attention to the gratification of the pleasant is what leads to the hindrance of sense desire. So noticing pleasant—fine. What goes away is that extra "mmm, I'm liking this taste."

Now, it doesn't necessarily follow that if we notice pleasant, the actual experience of pleasant goes away. That's not necessarily true. Maybe that taste of bagel turned to sawdust, but it doesn't mean everything's just bland gray. But seeing how subtly attached we can be to that gratification of pleasure, and thinking, "No. I didn't sign up for this. I want to fill in the blanks..."

And it goes from something as simple as enjoying the taste of a bagel to my relationship. I have to give up my family. I have to give up my home. I have to give up everyone I've ever loved. I have to give up whatever. And then the mind really can go into aversion, fear, a pulling back. "No. If it means this, I don't want freedom."

And again, it's as if in that way the mind is projecting what it can't know. It's giving up the attachment. It doesn't mean we have to go out and throw away everything.

I remember for years when I'd be on long retreats, a long time ago—I don't like to say how long ago, longer ago than I wish—but at one period when I was in a relationship for a few years with someone, we were doing a lot of sitting together, and I could see the place where my mind would, just in the stillness, very quiet, there would just be a little movement of attachment towards the image or thought of that person. I mean, I wasn't talking to the person. Just this little movement of attachment. And as if, "But that's not so big. It's not really disturbing my samādhi. I don't need to really look at it. It doesn't count."

It counts.

And I could see that the fear was this: if I were to look at the attachment, that means the whole relationship has to end. You see what I mean? If I see the attachment—and often people will talk about this—"I'm so attached to my children, how can I not be?" As if by even looking at the suffering of attachment, we're somehow disowning our children, or our partner, or our family. As if we're somehow throwing these things out. And we don't even get close to simply looking at that moment of attachment to pleasure, to wanting in the mind.

That's where Munindra's famous line becomes so important: a thought of your mother is not your mother. You're sitting here feeling attached to your partner or your children, and for most of you, they're not here. It's a thought arising in the mind. And we can be afraid to even feel and look at the attachment to a thought—which is what? Nothing. The thought is gone.

So it's just finding that willingness to look without buying into our idea that it means everything goes, but also the willingness to look without trying to hold on, thinking, "Oh, but Carol said I can look and still have it all too." Just really look. Not think "this doesn't count."

Another aspect that can often bring us to that place of "not this too"—because I've seen it in myself a lot—is a feeling of familiarity with our habits. Our habits of personality, our habits of relating to life, our comfortable ways of inhabiting a sense of who I am—or uncomfortable, they're not even always comfortable, but our familiar ways. It's like, "I like life this way. I don't want to change it."

Really, what I'm talking about here is personality beliefs, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Even our suffering, uncomfortable personality beliefs—sometimes we can just run up against a point: well, who would I be if I didn't think of myself as low energy? I'm picking really simple examples here. "I'm a person who has to go to bed at ten and get up at five, otherwise I wouldn't be able to practice. It's always been that way. That's just who I am. That's just acceptance. I'm just accepting myself."

Who would I be without impatience? Who would I be if I didn't have a snippy, aversive mind? That moment of compassion—well, that wasn't me. That was just a momentary fluke coming through.

The idea of what's possible for us, our creativity, our personal memories, our whole felt sense of familiar physical, energetic, psychological presence—just noticing that sometimes a moment of experience can directly challenge that. And even the suffering ones, we tend to just stay with them because it's more comfortable, it's easier. There's a kind of fear of freedom from that, even though intellectually we all know that putting that stuff down is nothing but a relief. But that's just thinking about the thought of putting it down, the thought of even looking.

Who would I be without these precious memories of whatever happened? Without knowing my energy system? I know what I'm capable of. And that's the end of it.

Entering into, moment after moment after moment, the sense of real unknowing. Instead of coagulating a sense of mental, physical, psychic identity—a real unknowing. Okay, yesterday I fell asleep at nine o'clock

p.m., just as I have every night I've ever been on retreat in twenty years. But tonight, maybe it's different. I don't know. Can I meet it fresh without holding on to the ideas of the past?

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."

Sound familiar?

So even though we say the yama mara is fear of death, it's actually fear of life. That's just so familiar to me, that sense of wanting every experience to confirm, congratulate, and make you feel completely together. And somehow, at times, it's quite easy to have translated our sense of practicing for freedom into: we're practicing to get to that point where we feel totally and finally completely together. Right?

Instead, it's just the reverse. There's no us here to feel completely anything. Always new, radical non-clinging. The actual dissolving of this holding to experience to confirm us—it's freedom. It's a huge relief.

But the process that we can go through, that we do go through, of coming up to these moments over and over again—in myself it's really felt over the years that practice is a series of small deaths. Psychological deaths, emotional deaths. Just kind of dying. And with all the sense of loss and grief and sadness and clinging that goes along with a sense of death.

I don't mean, "Oh yes, death of that person—isn't that freeing?" No. I mean really the sense of grieving that goes along with that. Even if I had to put it in words, it would sound really stupid, because I'm grieving some really unhelpful, limiting idea I've had about who Carol is anyway. What's to grieve? But it doesn't make sense on that level. It's really a sense of grieving some sense of who I am. And it just keeps on going like that.

But it's always moving through to a broader, more alive, more connected and vibrant place of being. Along with it also goes—I feel like I'm losing more and more a sense of what freedom could actually mean, which seems to be a good thing. Because as soon as I have some idea of freedom, it's a box. It's a limitation. One starts trying for that, and already everything freezes.

So that's on the side of where we run up against this—where we really don't want to be liberated from our attachments to pleasure, to our ideas of happiness, our sense of ourselves. And I want to talk a little more on the side of the more difficult aspects as well.

There are a few different ways that I've noticed—and I'm sure you'll notice your own ways—particular experiences where we come to a place where the motivation just drops through the floor. I don't mean

just for a moment. We all have these moments of "I'm out of here, this isn't for me, I can't do this." I don't mean the passing thought that comes and goes, even if not so quickly. I mean a much more pervasive sense that I've really hit a place where I don't know any more reason to keep doing this.

Sometimes it's a little humbling when we get to where we see what's been our driving motivation and we see how limited or self-serving it was. But I think for most of us, we're going to start with some kind of limited motivation. We want to suffer less. Nothing wrong with that.

Often what can happen is there's a particular suffering—maybe a personality pattern, or a knot of physical pain, or a critical mind, or so much anger—that you really are practicing to alleviate, to see through. And I have friends, I know plenty of people who, after very sincere practice over years, get to a place of more equanimity, or that particular pattern becomes much less troublesome. And actually, their motivation to practice kind of disintegrates.

I'm thinking of one very good friend at the moment. It was really a revelation to him—it was the middle of a three-month course, and suddenly the reason he'd been practicing, this particular suffering, just went away. He's going, "Well, now what do I do? Here I am on this three-month course—now what do I do?" And he kept on practicing. Of course, if you can keep on practicing in these times, our understanding opens and broadens and we find other motivations, so our motivation keeps changing. But this can be a very confusing and trying phase of practice when our limited aspiration is fulfilled. And you go, "Oh no."

I think that's one of the reasons there are a lot of people who begin practice—in this form of practice or any—but there are far, far fewer who show up at a retreat like this for three months. That's already a very deep commitment, rare in this world. Partly it's because of limited aspiration: "Okay, I'm feeling better. That's good enough."

Or—and this is what Joseph was more talking about last night—there are the times when it's just too much pain, physical or mental. You all know that. Just a grind. It's just too much. You think, "I can't face this anymore." Or it hasn't even come up yet, but there's the intimation. You have this lurking sense of something really big and unbearable that's going to come. You can just feel it's going to come, and suddenly it's enough—I'm out of here. I don't mean just the moment of "I cannot bear it anymore." Freedom from suffering is opening to *this*? I don't think so.

These are profound moments. I mean, we're laughing a little.

It's nothing to judge oneself about or get critical about or think there's something wrong with us. But it is important to treat these moments as very important times in practice. Because, as Joseph was talking about with fear, these places where motivation drops out are bringing us right up to the edge of our understanding of what's possible, of freedom. And that's our limitation—our understanding of what's possible. That's what we don't know beyond. And that's where we have to find the place of trust and faith that simply keeps us looking. I don't mean striving or pushing. I don't even mean that we're staying steady

in any particular form. I'm not talking about technique or skillful means here. Just that willingness to keep showing up. Whether the showing up means a skillful backing off—that's still showing up. It's finding what helps us be present.

But I think because this is the first noble truth—opening to how things are and discovering that heart and mind, that radiant peace that is possible for us no matter what's happening—it necessitates our being willing and able to be there no matter what's happening. And it seems like on this planet there are relatively few people who somehow have that faith, or the courage, and the time and the conditions to do what you're all doing, which means to keep showing up. And not, when it's a really nice day, think, "Well, okay, but today's nice. It would be better if I went off on a picnic."

I remember Myoshin telling me once, a few years ago, she was invited to teach at a daylong somewhere in Connecticut. The kind of thing where they beg you to come, they set it up long ahead—"Oh, we really want you to come." And then she went and it was this beautiful day, and hardly anyone showed up. They really wanted her to come, but it should rain, otherwise they'd miss something. And so where's the real commitment?

Ultimately, awakening—freedom and the compassion that comes with it—becomes more important to us than any particular aspect of our experience. More important than any aspect of our experience: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; terrifying, ecstatic, or boring. Simply the love of awakening, of freedom itself, becomes the compelling force. And we stop being so drawn and fascinated by experience itself.

So what can help us when we hit these moments of non-negotiable experience? Non-negotiable—this attachment is not negotiated, I don't give it up. Or this particular pain, this particular fear, this particular thing—it's not negotiable, I'm not going there. How can we keep going?

The suggestions I want to offer—and there are many—this is what I want to offer tonight. When we are really struggling—and again, I'm not talking about moments when it's just a little hard. I'm talking about when we've really hit that wall and we think, "I just can't muster it up again. I can't, I don't want to, and I won't." And as we know, this can last longer than a whole retreat. It can last years. But the staying with it—it changes, as does everything.

So what I want to offer: if it helps you on this retreat, use it. If not, let it go.

Generally, when we're hitting these places, as with everything, when we're really suffering, we tend to be drawn into our particulars—our particular story, our particular suffering, the particular attachment we don't want to let go, our particular feebleness and inability to ever be awakened, whatever. But it's our story, usually.

So here are a couple of ways of expanding the frame. And this is where thinking of your experience as part of the Dhamma, part of the Four Noble Truths, can really help.

First, when you realize it's hard—I mean really hard, not just a little hard, really hard, the hard of "I can never do this," and you really believe that—expand the picture beyond yourself and realize it's hard for everyone. It's not just you it's hard for. Yeah, it is hard. That's part of it, because of attachments. Even though Ajahn Buddhadasa says nibbāna is for everyone, he didn't say it's easy for everyone. It's still hard.

And even teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, who often gives a message of "peace is every step," just open to peace, notice peace even in suffering—he's not a mushy softy. He said at one point, "We're not determined enough to liberate ourselves from our deepest suffering. It takes huge determination."

Or—I've been waiting ages to use this one—from Suzuki Roshi. This is typical of how you often read Suzuki Roshi, where he's talking about zazen: "Leave your front door and your back door open. Let thoughts come and go, just don't serve them tea." That's great, isn't it? That's nice.

And you feel, yes, it's easy. It's heartwarming. Plus, I like the reference to tea. It's very *gemütlich*, very homey.

But this is also Suzuki Roshi—this comes from the biography *Crooked Cucumber*. He just suddenly seems like he lost it in this quotation. He starts saying to all his long-term followers: "Spineless! You only want a sweet pill. You never want the bitter pill. Spineless! You say you want the truth. None of you want the truth. If I told you the truth, I'd be left sitting here alone, listening to the sounds of your cars driving up the road."

I love that. You just get a sense—there are moments where that's so true for me. I see it. I sort of want the truth, to some extent. I like the tea and the open door. But that's not always how it is. So it's hard for everyone. Don't take it so personally when it's hard for you. Don't get so wrapped up in the story, and don't take it as the finality of things. It is, of course, another mental state. Maybe it seems to last for two years, but it's still a mental state.

And again, whether it's the suffering aspect that's putting us off—where we're just feeling lost in too much suffering—or we've hit that really comfortable plateau where we think, "Well, this is good enough. This must be equanimity. Great. I'm going to live the rest of my life like this"—either way, this wretched lifting, moving, placing, dragging through the day, reaching, intention to turn, touching... it's like, "Okay, enough of that." We just want to go back to the pleasure garden.

Like in the story of the Buddha before he left home as the Bodhisattva, where his father kept everything so perfect so he should never see even a dead flower. Every night he'd have servants go out and cut all the wilted flowers so the Buddha-to-be should never even see wilting, never mind old age, disease, and death. Some part of us hits a place—either from too much pain or from "okay, no pain, good enough"—where we think we can go back to the pleasure garden and just hang out there.

But there never was a pleasure garden. Even in that story—was it Joseph or Myoshin who told about Dipa Ma saying that as beautiful as the fall colors are on the lake, it's nothing compared to the deva realms? But

even there, they don't get to hang out forever. They die out of there too. There is no permanent pleasure garden anywhere.

One of my very first teachers used to say—he was a little rough—"Once you've really started seeing, you can't just shut down and go back to ignorance." Even if you wanted to, we have moments, but we don't really. The teacher would say, "The velvet-gloved iron fist of the Dhamma has got you." You can't really just shut down and go back to the pleasure garden.

But what can help when you're really feeling like this pain of mine—emotional, psychic, memories, physical, or just the angst of moment after moment of samsara—is just unbearable? What I find really helpful is to move from the particular feeling to the general, to see that this isn't just my pain. This is the condition of the world. This is the Four Noble Truths. Widen the scope. Widen the lens.

You might be saying, "You mean I can't bear my own pain and I should widen the lens to see that this is part of all the suffering in the world?" But actually, that makes a huge difference, because it's the *mine* of my pain that actually makes it more unbearable.

When we see that our particular suffering—whether it's a sore toe or hunger or grief or illness or fear or trauma—whatever our suffering is, it's a representative of the suffering of the world. We are the Dhamma. We're part of it. It's not that somehow we have to try and connect ourselves. This is an example of the Four Noble Truths. This is the condition of beings in this realm, on this world.

So not only is it something we can't bypass, but also by widening the scope, what happens for me at times is it kind of busts me out of my "Oh, poor Carol," or whatever the particular way you say it to yourself is. And it's quite natural, not even looking for it. What naturally happens is it becomes this expansive link of compassion to the state of beings.

I remember one time—I think I've told this before—I was in a hospital. You can definitely get into that "oh, poor me" state. But I looked around. I was in a room with three other women. Somehow I'd been placed on the elderly women's orthopedic floor—that was the only place they had a bed. So it was really elderly women with two broken legs and arms up in traction, and I just looked around. I thought, "Oh, that's really suffering."

And it just expanded out. I wasn't trying to do a thing. It just happened. Wow, everybody—this hospital has five, six floors. There's people in all these rooms. There's so much suffering here. And all the hospitals just in this area. And you just keep going. It's unthinkable.

But it's also completely connecting, unseparating. I am the Dhamma. All of these people, all of these women are the Dhamma. And as much as it's poignant and painful and at times unbearable, there's also right with it the immense beauty of compassion—compassion that's not only just for ourselves, but that turns into the really ennobling state of heart and mind of bodhicitta, the motivation of awakening not just for myself, but for all beings.

And I find that whenever I can expand the lens, widen the focus, take the highlighting off of my own suffering—not denying or belittling one's suffering at all. It's not a matter of "oh, there's so much suffering, so I have no right to complain." That's also a denial. It's more like, "Oh, yes, this illness is a representative of all the illness in the world. We're all in this together. This is the first noble truth." And the suffering of it is about the relationship to it. It's not about somehow going back to the pleasure garden and not experiencing this anymore. This particular difficulty I might get rid of, but something else is going to come.

I remember once I was invited to talk with some women in a prison, a minimum security prison. It was just an informal talk in a room. And one of the women said something that's really stuck with me. She was talking about how in this prison it was fairly comfortable. They had a fair amount of freedom—they could do things and had activities. And she said it was easy to forget sometimes that she was in prison. She would get so comfortable that she would forget. But then always she'd bump up against some regulation or some restriction or some painful thing, and that would remind her, "Oh yeah, I'm in prison."

That getting so comfortable we forget—she was saying that's not something she ever really wanted to do. And I think it's the same for us. That prison door is really always open. Seeing the freedom from bondage is always accessible, but we have to be willing to recognize the bondage. And the bondage isn't the fact that we're experiencing the first noble truth. That's part of our common humanity. Our bondage is thinking we can jump out of it and get back to the pleasure garden and stay there.

And so I actually find—I know this is a real Vipassana thing, and it would sound totally weird in the world—but I actually find it really deepens and inspires my motivation. It strengthens my motivation when I'm face-to-face with suffering I feel like I can't bear, to widen the scope, widen the lens, and really see, really hear, open one's heart.

The first noble truth and the second are all around us all the time. Life is always showing us difficulty, pain, loss. It's always showing us beauty, love, and happiness. Every day, every minute, just sitting here in this room—even without talking to each other. I know from things people have said, you can sense the suffering of someone else or the peace and happiness of someone else.

Just walk outside and look at the fall, which to me is such a poignant time, because there's this incredible beauty and crispness and freshness and vitality, while meanwhile everything's dying.

And the chipmunks are going wild this year—there's so many of them. I was walking down the road and could see them running on both sides, so full of life. And you know how many will make it through the winter? How many will even make it across the road? That's another question.

I make it a part of my daily practice, a few times a week, to listen to the BBC news, because it really tunes me in—not just to the big news that we all hear everywhere, but to all kinds of little pieces of news, usually of suffering but not always, from all different parts of the world. Places I just hadn't even thought

about. Or just in the last two days—a man was here yesterday from Africa, describing the starvation happening right now in Zimbabwe. Just a couple of hours ago, talking with a friend who has MS. Or just going outside and hearing the stillness and the silence and the beauty of simply being awake, of being alive on this earth. Coming here to this room of people so dedicated to awakening, to goodness, to non-harming. It's a palpable force when you walk in this building.

It's all around us, all the time. If we open our eyes and our ears and our hearts, right there we're connected. And I find what happens right then is that the motivation just to stay with it—it's not just for my own sake anymore. It's awakening really for the benefit of beings. It's a much more strengthening motivation. And it's not something you have to think about. It just happens when we broaden the scope. It gives us stability. Moments of beauty, of coolness, moments of suffering, and the connectedness of all of us in this.

The Four Noble Truths are how things are. And we are the Dhamma, you know. We don't have to practice it. We are it. We're just trying to recognize what's already happening by itself.

I want to offer one other thing that has personally helped me in this same way, when the sense of suffering seems unbearable. I was doing a retreat this past winter, several weeks, and it was just one of those Maha Dukkha retreats. Some retreats are simply like that. This is something from Patrul Rinpoche, talking about cultivating patience—which Susan spoke about—patience as an enormous support for being able to come back and stay with what is, in the face of seeming unbearableness. He's talking about patience as arousing bodhicitta. Three types of transcendent patience. And this would go through my mind and give me such fortitude, such courage, really.

The first is patience when wronged. But the second is the patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma—internal hardships and external hardships. So one might say, "Grant me the patience to bear hardships for the Dhamma." And the third is granting the patience to face the profound truth without fear. I would say that over and over, and each time I'd say it, something would just stop. Just grant me the patience to face the profound truth without fear. And let it go.

I want to end with this from the Buddha—just not to be satisfied with less. He says:

"So this holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, nor the attainment of virtue for its benefit, nor the attainment of concentration for its benefit, nor knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its essence and its end."

Let's just sit quietly.

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