# Self-Judgement and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:56

There's a beautiful view of Mount Wachusett, and the moon, which looked full, was rising. It just rested me for a moment. In that moment of standing there looking at the moon and the view, which was beautiful, there was a sense of silence—though it wasn't really silence. A plane was going overhead. My body felt cold, a little tired. I was still in talk bardo. It was both beautiful and just stuff happening. But such a sense of the is-ness of things. Now that's a moment of perfection—not that anything in particular happening is perfect, but the perfection of total presence, total isness. A "what's the problem?" kind of moment.

So the question, of course, is how do we get so far from that so fast? That's what we're exploring together all these weeks and in all these talks. What I want to talk about tonight is one of our strategies for causing ourselves immense suffering, which is aversion—in particular, a form it takes occasionally of judging, especially self-judging. I know for some of you this is a foreign concept. But to others of you, there might be moments when you can relate.

Really, it's similar to how I started my talk last week. Personally, I feel that the dilemma of aversion itself, of understanding how we get into aversion, is basically that we get into aversion by not deeply, cellularly knowing the first noble truth.

You remember the first noble truth? Just in case, this is from the Buddha:

"Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of dukkha." I'm going to say dukkha instead of suffering. "Birth is dukkha. Aging is dukkha. Illness is dukkha. Death is dukkha. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are dukkha. Separation from what is pleasing is dukkha. Union with what is displeasing is dukkha. Not to get what one wants is dukkha." He's very precise—really quite precise. "And then in brief, the five aggregates when subject to clinging, the five khandas when subject to clinging, are dukkha."

It covers a broad range. He doesn't say some people get out of here without experiencing that. It's a noble truth, the understanding of which, the clear seeing of which, is the beginning of the road to liberation. That's the whole point of it.

I really feel personally that the struggle with aversion—and self-judging being a subset of aversion—is, on a very deep level, not getting it. That this stuff happens. And there's no way in this mind and body on this planet we're going to have a life where it doesn't happen. And it's not your fault. Get it? That's the basic drift. At least in the beginning, it's not your fault. But we add in quite a little dash of extra along with that.

We've talked often about how the first noble truth seems obvious. We've talked about impermanence as

one aspect of this first truth, and I don't want to belabor this point—although I actually think it couldn't be belabored too much, because our habit, our tendency, our deep-rooted habits of somehow thinking we can figure it out, how to avoid, deny, or get away from the first noble truth. It's not really a conscious thought, but that's why I think it can't be talked about enough. Because somewhere deep down we keep hitting that place where, "If I can just somehow get around it, I'm not going to have to go through this. If I can just somehow hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience, then I should be able to." That's sort of where aversion and self-judging comes from.

I don't want to belabor it, but you can see that it's not only our personal tendency—it's in our whole society, the way that we keep the really suffering elements of society, if we can, segregated in their little private place. Nursing homes, hospitals, insane asylums, places for people who are really sick. Keep all the really poor people in the inner city or way out in the mountains, so you don't have to run into them in the nice sections. The effects of famine or war or poverty or earthquakes—we look at it for a little while, if it's not immediately affecting us, on the news, and that's good. We need to open to it. But I can see, I've been watching in my own mind lately, because there's always something new on the news to open to, how my mind can really be with it for a minute.

And then if it feels like it might be getting too close to home—in other words, an earthquake in Gujarat, that's really intense. But after all, it is in Gujarat, and after a day or two, it can kind of recede into the background, except for the people who live in Gujarat, where it's still going on even years later.

But when it feels like something might be happening that might actually be coming too close to home, that I can't just dismiss—well, you know, it's a natural thing. We get caught up in our day-to-day. I was noticing the other day how my mind would be right with some fear of suffering. Nothing horrible is happening yet. Nothing horrible is happening. Just the day-to-day stuff, okay? So don't worry—I just thought I should reassure you. Just the Congress is bad enough.

So seeing how my mind could get caught up in things of the future—this is affecting me, what can I do—and then watching how it would hit a place where: *but it's really a beautiful fall, and it's not happening now, so let's just be here now.* You see what I mean? It's not exactly "be here now." It's "let's be here now and not think about that." It was actually a very interesting moment. It's the first time I could really feel how it happens, how I was projecting, how one could be in the midst of something really terrible.

I've been reading a biography of Anna Akhmatova, a Russian poet who lived from the early 1900s to the 1960s, through all those phases of tremendous suffering in Russia and the Soviet Union—the times of Stalinist terror—and how it affected so many people, and how the people it doesn't affect carry on. I really saw in that moment how it's possible to just keep going with your day-to-day life, not really letting in what's going on around you, because it just feels too unbearable. It was an interesting moment to see how the mind can do that.

In some ways, that's a protection. I'm not trying to put that down or criticize it. I just think it's interesting

to see the powers of denial and avoidance, the patterns that are deeply ingrained in us—on a societal level, and on a personal level.

And that's what we can explore here together in our practice. Our practice is a microcosm of our whole life, of the whole society's life. So the stuff that goes on here in our mind is a great place to explore the nature of aversion—and particularly self-judgment.

Even when intellectually we agree, "Oh yeah, we know that difficult stuff happens," and we see there's a tendency to avoid and deny, and that's not so helpful—still, I think it's a deeply ingrained habit. When I look at it, it seems almost biological in its source. For example, if we don't know the stove is on and we put our hand on the burner and burn it, we don't have to think, "Unpleasant, unpleasant, the wise thing would be to remove my hand." It's just away. And if we're mindful, we just do that. It's a natural, intelligent response—a reflex really—and that's the end of it.

So that's what I mean by biological. We pull back from pain, from suffering, and that's quite useful. But what I've noticed in my own mind is that this reflex can come into play whenever attention or consciousness comes into contact with any unpleasant sense experience. And in that pulling back—which often doesn't particularly solve anything, because often the unpleasant experience just keeps on going. It's an unpleasant sound, or you're feeling physically ill, or you're feeling pain or hopelessness or boredom or whatever.

When we pull back with just that reflex action, instead of everything going away and being hunky-dory again, which is what we would like to have happen, what tends to happen is a gap—a disconnect. It's a moment when consciousness and attention are not connecting with what's happening. And in that moment, rushing in come our old friends, the *kilesas* of *dosa*, aversion. Just *boom*, it comes springing up. It can manifest, as Myoshin was talking about last night, as blame, as anger.

If it was with the stove, for example—because that makes it so obvious—it would be: "That stupid stove, I can't believe it! Who left that stove on?" And it gets going and going. Or it can manifest as anger turned toward ourselves: "You stupid jerk. What are you putting your hand on the stove for? Don't you know any better?"

Or it can turn into fear, spiraling into: the stove's on now, and what if the stove was left on for a long time? The whole house could have caught on fire. What if I'm beginning to get Alzheimer's and I'm leaving the stove on? And it goes on and on and on.

But that becomes a habit. And in that pulling back, that moment of aversion, when we're not mindful, when we don't notice it, the reaction spirals out of control. It has a life of its own, whether it's aversion, blaming—inner or outer—or fear. To the point that the fear or the aversion takes over. And it in itself is so unpleasant that it gives rise to more of the same, until we're kind of lost in either a hysterical state of fear or aversion, but in either case almost afraid to look at what's actually happening.

For example, you know the feeling—and this is a little bit exaggerated, though I know it happens to people—where all of a sudden you feel some lump somewhere on your body, and this is a really yogi mind thing. Immediately the mind jumps to cancer or melanoma or something, and then it starts getting more and more afraid to the point where people will say, "Well, I don't want to go to the doctor because what if I find out it's cancer?" So rather than looking... and the fear just keeps on spiraling and spiraling. But when we're looking, just meeting what's happening, a wise response is possible. Plus, all that extra fear is gone. You see what I mean?

Mark Epstein puts it that it's our fear of experiencing ourselves directly—our fear of experiencing the moment directly—that actually creates the suffering. We get lost in the reaction and forget that we actually have the capability to look at the moment directly. And that's really what our practice is about. Recognizing that opening to truth, to things as they are—that's what I mean by truth, just the simple things as they are in this moment—this opening is what frees our heart from fear and selfishness.

Just like looking at the moon, it's not like it has to be some transcendent experience. It's just that moment of opening to what is, without comparison, without judgment. In that moment, the heart is freed from fear, from selfishness, from judgment, from separation. Resting at ease in whatever arises.

And so, in some ways, with aversion—and I'll get to the self-judging part—our task, if you could put it that way, that comes to us through the practice, through our devotion to wakefulness, to our devotion to presence, is to find that capacity of what you could call bearing witness to suffering. Bearing witness to dukkha in whatever aspect it's presenting itself, in the moment it's presenting itself.

I'm talking about aversion. There are many moments when dukkha is not the main thing presenting itself. Notice those too, right? That's not what I'm talking about tonight, but I just need to put it in. Dukkha, the unpleasant, arises a lot of the time. Pleasant arises a lot of the time, as does neutral. I'm just talking about aversion and self-judging tonight. It's not the whole picture, okay? Just remember that when you start to sink into a slough of despair. It's just one side of the picture.

But really that capacity, the greatness of heart that is displayed when we, or anyone, is willing—just for a moment, for a period of time—to bear witness to whatever aspect of suffering is arising, to me is, I find over history, incredibly inspiring.

The reason I'm reading that biography of Anna Akhmatova is because some of her poems have touched me very deeply, and there's this sense—she's very famous in Russia, really for being a person who was willing to stay through all the suffering and starvation and war and purges. Husbands and sons and friends were arrested and shot and starved to death and committed suicide. She could have left, along with many of the intelligentsia and the literary people at the time of the revolution or the Civil War in the late teens or early twenties. And she always chose to stay out of love for Russia, love for the Russian people, and a sense that this was her calling—to bear witness. Her life was hell in many ways. But that power, that purity of presence that lights us up to a possibility of freedom, a greatness, an ennobling

aspect of heart and mind, also can shine through.

I've found that those are the people who always inspire me—in literature, in history. Things I've read about Dr. Martin Luther King. I remember one place I read a statement he made after one of the times in Birmingham when a church was bombed, if you remember that, and four young girls were killed in the bombing. It was pretty horrible. And he said—let me get this right—in the face of this, he said, "I refuse to become bitter. Hatred must never be our motive." And then with that ability to keep meeting the suffering day after day.

It doesn't necessarily mean being an activist. It might mean being a poet. It might mean just being a silent witness. And it doesn't mean we have to be the witness of the great historical movements of an age. Bearing witness to your own suffering here on this retreat, with that quality of steadfast presence, is just as ennobling, is just as freeing, because it frees us from the limitations of our small sense of separate self—holding myself separate, me, me, me. And it opens us again to the vastness of things as they are, of non-distinction, of equanimity, really.

Equanimity being that quality of mind that can simply be with, touch, not having to pull away from the unpleasant, the pleasant, the neutral, and see it clearly. It's like Myoshin was saying last night: not the deluded equanimity that's touching but doesn't really have a clue what it's touching, but one that's really there, seeing clearly, and can just hold it. A steadfastness. It really inspires me.

And I see, when I look to the people I read about, or that you meet or hear of, or the people you know in your own life, or yourself—I see that the quality we can really explore here that allows for this bearing witness, this steadfastness of heart and mind, is that we also have to be able to turn that same kind, steadfast presence back onto ourselves. Because the suffering we can't bear out there, so to speak—it's really what we're feeling in here that's so hard. So it's always bearing witness to ourselves.

And I've noticed in myself, over and over—as long as it takes me to remember—that whenever I'm going through a period in daily life, not just on retreat, where I'm feeling more alienated or dissociated somehow, disconnected, dissatisfied, that sense of something's off, something's wrong—it can be minor, it can be really major—I've always found, finally, that what's going on really deeply is that on some level I'm trying to avoid or deny or get away from something painful or something unpleasant.

It might be some difficult situation in my family that keeps coming up in my mind, and I wake up in the middle of the night anxious and worried, and the mind says, "Can't they just sort themselves out and quit bothering me?" They're fine. They're doing their thing. I'm the one waking up in the middle of the night. Where's the suffering?

And whenever I come home to, "Oh yeah, this is anxiety, this is fear, this is guilt," whatever it is, there's a sense really of coming home. I've found the refuge of the Dharma again. Because, as I said the other night, we are the Dharma. Unpleasant suffering, birth, loss, death—it all occurs in us and outside of us, no

difference. So when I can come and open into it, sure I feel the sadness or the fear, whatever it is, more fully. But in that moment, there's a sense of the vitality, the beauty, the intensity of life again. There's not that separation anymore. It's just the isness. In this moment, isness happens to be grief. But there's no problem with that, really, in the moment.

And I know a lot of you have experienced this because you talk about it in the interviews. We fight, we fight, we struggle, we hit our head against the wall, and finally, because there's no other option, we surrender. "All right, I'll just feel it." And it's like, "Oh. Oh yeah." Somehow it's a relief. How could that be? Because we're so deeply ingrained to do otherwise. But opening to how it is, it ennobles us.

But the habits, the denial systems—it feels to me almost biological. It's strong. We each have our own particular flavor, our own particular personality view and personality structure, our own way of denying and avoiding dukkha. The one I want to point to tonight is this one of judging, or self-judging. It's a very prevalent system, at least in this Western culture.

You might ask, "That's a denial system? To avoid unpleasantness, to avoid suffering? It seems to create more." Well, yes, it does. It's a rather flawed denial system. Which is all the more amazing that we so stubbornly keep holding on to it, giving it so much belief and so much energy. At least I do. I speak for myself.

So one thing I've seen—there are lots of different things one could say about judging and how we get caught in it, particularly self-judging. One thing I've been noticing a lot in recent years in my own experience is that coming from the unconscious belief or ideal, basically the denial of the validity in some way of the first noble truth, there arises this sense that sorrow, suffering, grief, loss is wrong. Wrong in the sense that it should not be happening.

I'm not here to say that we're in favor of famine or war or anything like that. Of course not. And we're here trying to purify ourselves of greed and hatred and confusion. We don't want to be a party to creating suffering in ourselves or in others. Absolutely. We're not talking moralistically here of good or bad, right or wrong. We're talking about what arises in experience. That's all.

And so if somehow we hold the belief that in the world none of this stuff should or is going to arise, then it's as if in ourselves, whenever some aspect of things that "shouldn't be out there" arises in ourselves, it also shouldn't be happening, should it? And either we should be able to control it, manipulate it, make it go away, or hold on to the right conditions so it doesn't come up anymore. Or we should just hold ourselves separate from it, not feel it.

What I've noticed this coming from a lot is the sense we can get into of the ideal of perfection. Not the perfection of just the isness of things, but our ideals of how something should be to be perfect. You know what I mean. You all do that about practice all the time. There's some idea of perfect practice. Just what Myoshin said today in the questions and answers—that someone had said to her they felt funny standing

up in the hall when they were sleepy because somehow that was an admission they weren't a good yogi. If you follow that through, somewhere in there is the thread that there's such a thing as a perfect kind of yogi who either never gets sleepy or whose mindfulness is always stronger than the sleepiness. As if sleepiness shouldn't exist in the yogi universe. It's a simple example, but notice how often we're caught in that, and what's the response? Self-judging. "I am not a good yogi because some aspect of dukkha has visited my experience, and I should be able to be perfect." As if there were such a thing.

So how we get into this belief, this unconscious holding to an ideal of perfection—and then you notice, I know this is something that's often talked about, something should be perfect, and as soon as there's one flaw, the whole thing's thrown out. That's why we have that expression, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater." But that's what we do.

I read quite some years ago an article I cut out of USA Today, some not particularly literary newspaper, but it was about the prevalence of road rage. For those people from overseas—because I talked about this in Switzerland and they were saying "road rage?" Not that they don't have it there; they have it there, just not that phrase. Just that getting so angry. You know what road rage is. Losing it, basically.

It was a whole long article about the psychology of it, and this is the part I wanted to quote. That if someone on the road upsets you, that individual's whole identity is encapsulated in this bad thing he did. He's not seen as a whole person. He just becomes all of it—that bad person who cut in front of you. That encapsulates their whole identity. And then there's an urge to express your aggression on this anonymous other, to think "I can't let him get away with this." The thin veneer of civilization is removed.

With self-judging, we're doing that same thing to ourselves. "I wasn't mindful in that whole lap of walking. I can't let myself get away with this."

And then the psychologist goes on to say that in a car you feel like you're invincible because in a way you're separated. It provides a buffer zone that makes it easier to dehumanize the other driver, easier than it would be, for instance, if you were walking down a crowded hallway. Face-to-face contact with others acts as a restraint, and people are much more polite.

I read that part because Sayadaw U Pandita likes to describe mindfulness as coming face to face with the moment of experience. So in a way, when there's something in your experience arising that you don't like—that suffering—there's that immediate sense of pulling back. You're not meeting it face to face at all. And in that pulling back, it's like on the road: the thin veneer of civilization—or moment-to-moment mindfulness—is removed, and all the aggression and the fear or the aversion, the judging, can come out in response to that unpleasant experience. But the only person you have to take it out on is guess who.

So it just comes right back at yourself as further proof that you're not perfect. And guess what? You're not. It's really amazing how we do this to ourselves. We do it to ourselves, to spiritual scenes, to perfect practice, to other people, to teachers, to you name it. So just beginning to notice this idea of "it should be

perfect" and how judging arises when we notice that ideal isn't being met, when it's crumbling.

This denial system of whatever forms of aversion—but in particular judgment, self-judgment—will tend to arise most strongly in us when what isn't deeply accepted, either as being part of the world, arises in us. Whether it's unreliability, uncontrollability, the flux and unstoppability of constant change, or when particular aspects of our mind-body patterns arise that are most deeply painful and unacceptable to us. Sort of like the inner corollary to famine or war, you could say. On the level of mentally thinking, "It's totally unacceptable that I could be feeling this." When that level of dukkha arises, that's when our denial systems kick in most strongly.

Just noticing—probably you already have quite a list—but just noticing what those particular experiences are in you, because it can help you be aware. It can be a little flag to notice what reaction is going on.

It can be in the body. If the body is sick, or tired, or old, or painful, or weak. Or you have some mental image of the unacceptability of how you look—that's really painful. Or emotions. It could be that your emotions are volatile, or you're feeling vulnerable, or you're not feeling any emotions, or you're feeling sadness, or you're feeling self-hatred. Whatever emotions are coming are not just mentally unacceptable, but it's so deeply ingrained that it's unacceptable that somehow your attention can't even quite go there. Remorse over past actions—sometimes you get floods of memories of things you've done that were unskillful, and it can be so hard to be with it. Self-hatred, feelings of helplessness, feelings of worthlessness. The list could go on and on, whatever your particular flavor is.

And seeing that we can't control this—when our deepest, most unacceptable aspects arise in our experience, that habit, that knee-jerk reaction of pulling back, it tends to happen so quickly and feel so natural that often we don't even recognize that that's what's happened. And then the denial system, in this case the self-judging, comes in right away.

Say there's a feeling of helplessness or a feeling of self-hatred, not even quite consciously noticed, but suddenly you notice that as you're walking or eating or sitting, everything you do is followed by a vitriolic kind of self-judgment. And you may not even notice that for a while because that's also so familiar, but it keeps feeding on itself and spiraling.

In a weird way, these self-judgments—or if you're a different type, then the judgments go outward, like Joseph sitting there judging everybody else—but either way, there's judging coming. It's detracting, distracting from whatever the particular suffering was. As I said, it's a weird denial system because it's a suffering one, but the function it's serving is keeping our face-to-face attention well away from just dropping into the self-hatred or the helplessness or the sense of being a total klutz or whatever your particular thing is at that time.

Usually I've found that when it's some particular personal suffering arising on that level, that depth, the thought is "as if I would die if I had to feel this." It has that quality of intensity. And so rather than feel this,

I'll just sit here and tell myself: you're lifting your fork wrong, you're chewing too noisily, you're taking too much food, you're breathing too loud, you're sitting like a schlump, you're standing up too quickly, you made a noise with your chair, you bumped into—and that's in two seconds. By the time you get to your room after lunch, no wonder it's unbearable. And that's our way of not just feeling uncomfortable, hopeless. It's a lot easier, I tell you, to just feel totally worthless and land in the middle of it than to go through even half an hour of all that judgment. Or just to feel the judgment.

So let me suggest another alternative. I don't know if it's possible for us, but it's another way of viewing our non-perfection, even just in the meditation, even just that you didn't get up from lunch perfectly and mindfully.

I was teaching in Burma, in Chazwa, this last year. It's a retreat for Westerners with Sayadaw Lakhanah. Sayadaw Lakhanah would give a talk one day, and then Michelle or Stephen Smith usually teach it—I was teaching it with Stephen this last year—and one of us would talk the next day. When Sayadaw talks, after he gives a talk, very much a straight Burmese talk, he'll leave and we'll just take any questions or confusions or clarifications.

He'd been talking about very strict noting practice—noting if anger arises, noting "anger, anger," and then it goes away and then you come back to the breath. Someone raised his hand later and said, "I note it two or three times. It doesn't go away. I can't... I don't know what to do. What do you do?" And then we just gave the whole instructions we give here—feel it in your body and notice the sensations and how to be with it further.

After that, one of the men who was translating, a good friend, a very well-educated Burmese man, was talking to me and he said, "I never heard instructions like that. It was really so helpful." I said, "Oh, really?" He said, "Well, you know, for us, it doesn't go away in two notes either." Which actually surprised me. I said, "Oh, really? So then what?"

He said, "Well, then we say... oh, well, never mind."

I would like to suggest that as a possibility. When it doesn't go away, when the difficult experience persists, and the mind starts in: "I can't do it right. I'm not the perfect yogi. I am so riddled with anger. I am so..." — on and on it goes. And then simply: "Oh, well, never mind."

Just try to imagine how that might feel the next time you catch yourself in heavy self-judging, because of whatever it is. "Oh, this is arising. Never mind." See how much space that leaves.

Ajahn Sumedho says that one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, in a person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. This is what he calls metta. Just witnessing, feeling, being with it — not from ten miles away, but face to face — without creating anything around it. You can call it metta, you can call it compassion, you can call it mindfulness, pure awareness, whichever flavor it has.

It's very much like the two darts that I read the other night, where the Buddha talks about the difference between an awakened and an unawakened person. The unawakened person feels an unpleasant physical sensation and then berates and laments and carries on and shoots themselves with a second arrow. An awakened person feels the first arrow and doesn't create anything around it. This is really the shifting of our patterns.

So whatever arises in our experience — whatever it is you're lost in judgment or self-judgment about, or not lost in but noting, "judging, judging, judging," 7,312 times — noticing it, feeling it, what's arising? Our personality patterns, the physical sensations, our loneliness, whatever it is — the self-hatred, the anger, the sleepiness. In this moment, what's arising is simply arising due to previous conditions. It's the vipaka, the result of previous kamma. It's not in our control. It's not our fault in the sense that if we could do something right, this shouldn't have happened. It is happening, and nothing can change that fact. Nothing needs to.

The question is: how is consciousness, how is awareness meeting this moment of arising experience? That's the creation of new kamma in the moment, and that's what really is changing everything. That's what's reconditioning our patterns, our habits of mind, so to speak.

So anger is arising. We're really feeling it, but we can just be there without creating anything around it. That's developing compassion. That's developing mindfulness. That's shifting the pattern from aversion and judgment to freedom. It doesn't necessarily feel good, because the thing you're feeling is still anger or unpleasantness or sorrow. And we tend to be so focused on the thing that we don't notice the response. But notice the space around it, the not creating anything around it. That's key. That's really important.

One of my favorite lines from the Buddha is: "Where the mind dwells frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." So if self-judging comes up a lot in our experience, it's because in the past our mind has dwelt there frequently. Hating it — well, somehow you think that helps. But hating it doesn't make the mind have dwelt less there in the past, does it? All it does is keep that going into the future.

Seeing it: "Oh, self-judging feels like this. Oh, worthlessness feels like this. I can't do this right. I'll never be able to do this right. I can't even feel this worthlessness. I can't do it." It feels like this. Just move into the space around it. You don't have to fix or manipulate or stop or change. Just that switch — from aversive reactivity, avoiding, denying, to being there — that is the switch. And that is actually the cultivation of compassion, or freedom.

Joko Beck asks, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness? Well, sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't, and that's okay. But just to have that possibility—oh, can I find the willingness, just for this moment, not into the endless future, just for this moment, can I find the willingness to rest in the confusion and the uncertainty? That's the dhamma. That's peace.

And it's also a crack up sometimes to see how much trouble we'll go to in order to avoid even the projected

idea of how suffering something might be. We'll go to endless trouble to avoid just turning around and facing it. Have you ever noticed that?

I remember one time a friend was wanting me to go teach a retreat with them. We had to organize our schedules—I know it's in the moment, we're organizing in the moment, but for two years ahead. So you have to imagine how you're going to feel in two years. I mean, who knows? Anyway, this friend wanted me to teach this retreat with them. It would have been very crowded, really crowded my schedule. I knew physically it was too much, and there was a lot of traveling. But it was someone I hadn't taught with much, a good friend. And I could feel the fear come up that in saying no, it would be so unpleasant. They would be hurt. I would feel bad. I'd lose the friendship and all this stuff.

I went through weeks of trying to talk myself into going to do this retreat, which would have been endless suffering. And the weeks when I was trying to talk myself into it, when I was afraid to make the phone call to say no—that was also a huge amount of suffering because of imagining how unpleasant it would be to make the phone call. Which in the event, when I did it, of course it was fine. The person understood, it was no problem. To go to all these machinations not to feel something, instead of just: Oh, okay, I can't do it. I'm disappointing you. It feels like this. Nothing created around it. It's so much simpler.

That's kind of the perfection of isness—just what is. But when we're caught in the aversion, the self-judgment, the fear, we can't see clearly. We can't evaluate clearly. In fact, our whole perception is distorted.

When Joseph was talking about perception the other night, some of you even mentioned perception. A good place to observe this is with the radiator sounds here, and quite a few people have mentioned noticing the overlay—the mood the mind puts on the perception of the radiator sounds. I've noticed this. When there's real aversion in the mind, fear, and the radiator starts, someone once told me it feels like explosions going off, little harsh things. Other times I'm in some kind of peaceful place and it sounds like Russian choral music. It's really funny to watch how the mind does that.

But when we're in self-judgment, you cannot evaluate clearly. And if you hear nothing else in this talk, get this: if you recognize self-judging is happening, really not just a thought but you can tell you're really in it—you're mindful of it but you're really in it—you cannot trust any perception or evaluation that you make of your practice. Because it won't be based on seeing clearly, believe me. "I'm really in self-judging, but I can tell I'm just being lazy and I need to push a little harder"—that's the classical one. You just don't know. You have no clue.

If you can just know that, it's been a huge relief to me. I recognize self-judging coming in. I feel it as a certain physical feeling. And I say, "Okay, now I know I can't trust any of my perceptions about myself." That's a huge relief. I'll still have them: "They're angry at me. Look at how they're looking at me. I'm doing my practice wrong. What did they say? They're directing it at me."

Forget it. You just don't have a clue. Can you just be willing to rest in not knowing, as Joko Beck said? It will come and go like a cloud, as all states of mind do.

When we're in that reaction, that disconnect of aversion and self-judgment, we can't make clear decisions because we can't see clearly. So coming back and just meeting the experience—it's not about passive submission. It's about this: when we meet experience face to face—worthlessness, physical pain, sleepiness, whatever it is—we see it clearly. And when we see clearly, we can respond with discriminating wisdom. It becomes much more obvious then.

An example I often use is from quite some years ago, when I was developing what turned into an autoimmune disease that affected my joints and tissues. It was much worse years ago—that's still why I don't sit cross-legged. But when it was coming on and the doctors didn't know what it was, there was a lot more physical pain and discomfort and all kinds of weird symptoms. I could see my mind getting into all kinds of fear of the future: I'll never be able to do this again, I'll never be able to do that. At that point, I was so grateful for practice, because I could see the mind going into the future very clearly and say, "But that's not happening. Just come back." That I could do. I noticed it right away.

But for quite some time, I didn't notice a certain quality of self-blame or self-judgment—the kind of thing we can thank New Age spirituality for, which is: if you really had the proper thoughts and you were really spiritual, you wouldn't get sick. Now I can think, well, Ramana Maharshi died of cancer. I really don't aspire to be more spiritual than he was. But at the time, I didn't really notice how that belief would creep in. There was this sense—subtle, or actually not so subtle, to tell you the truth—that somehow I was a failure. I'd been meditating all my life, and now I was even teaching, and here I was sick. Pathetic. A real failure.

This stuff caused quite a lot of suffering, a heaviness, until finally I noticed—sitting, sitting, sitting—what was going on. Whenever I would touch and just feel my body, the physical pain or the tightness, it was all bound up with judgment. As soon as I felt the uncomfortableness, right away would come this judgment of spiritual failure. Never mind "what if I die from it"—just the spiritual failure. This whole spiral of negativity and self-judgment. And as a result, the attention was just never connecting with the body.

Meanwhile, people were saying, "You should just go somewhere else." Cold affects me, and this climate isn't great for that. So people were saying, "You should just go live in Arizona. Take it easy. Live a quiet life. Don't teach. Take care of yourself." I also tried a really severe diet—no wheat, no dairy, no sugar, no caffeine. That really cheered me up for a few months.

And then finally, sometime during a sitting—I remember I was over there—suddenly, for whatever reason, I just saw: Oh, I'm hating this body as if it failed me, as if it betrayed me. Let me just feel it. And there was a whole sense of compassion, as if cradling this body. It wasn't personal at all. Just: Wow, you're really suffering, and I'm sitting here hating you. That's really useful. And it didn't even have a cynical edge. It was just, "Oh wow. That hurts. May you be happy. May you be peaceful."

And then healing had nothing to do anymore with getting better or not dying or anything. It was just being with what is, and the whole dynamic changed. Out of that, I found I made much more intelligent decisions—to me, intelligent—about how to live my life, rather than acting out of fear. They may not have looked intelligent to the world at large, because the first thing I did was this: some friends were going to India, and they said, "Why don't you come?"

I said, "Oh, great. I'll go to India." And instead of a diet, I started drinking a lot of chai and eating a lot of chapatis and a lot of dairy and yogurt. And I got really happy again. And I felt better, too, to tell you the truth.

But it was really a sense of just saying, "Oh, yeah, this is possible. I can do this." I don't really know what's going to happen in the future, but I don't have to live as if three feet away from my body, in fear and self-blame. And that whole thing kind of cut. Really, it's that willingness to just dive into the wave instead of running from it—not in order to make something happen, but just to see what's what. That's the place of peace, of ease. Being with the dukkha without creating anything around it is not at all passive submission. It's the place from which discriminating wisdom and appropriate compassionate response arises.

Just one more thing I want to point out about judging, and particularly self-judging. We've talked about it before, so you know it, but I want to point to it in these terms. That's the deeply ingrained habit of comparing—*mana* in Pali, often translated as conceit. I know you all know it because you all talk about it a lot: that endless comparing. They're better than me, they're worse than me, they're the same as me. Or comparing to yourself in the past: I'm worse now than I was last year, I'm doing better now than I did three days ago. Or comparing ourselves to some made-up ideal about the future—back to that comparison. And that's never a good comparison. Or even "I'm doing the same." It's very deeply ingrained and subtle.

Of the ten fetters, the different shackles that are abandoned through the four stages of awakening, conceit is the last one to go. So you can drop judging yourself because you notice it's arising. You know, you're not an arahant. Can you live with that? And drop judging yourself about it. But notice how suffering comes whenever there's comparing. Besides the fact that it's so exhausting, isn't it? You can't just walk from here to the dining room. You've got to assess every pair of feet that goes by. And if you're trying not to look, you can't even bear not to look. You want to look so you can compare, so you can feel crappy about yourself—or good about yourself because you're better, and then you feel crappy because you were feeling like you were better and you were being conceited. There's no way out. It's a suffering state.

And the real suffering about it, if you look at it, is that it's all about me, isn't it? The root delusion of all self-judgment, of all aversion and comparing, is this incessant referencing of every single experience back to me. Even if you're judging yourself negatively—you're the worst being here—it's completely self-centered, isn't it? Totally self-cherishing in a weird kind of way.

It's also like an upside-down way of experiencing interconnectedness. It is. Every single thing that

happens somehow refers back to you. So you're connected to everything. You're the center of everything. Everything everybody does is either to make you feel bad about yourself or annoy you. But the interconnectedness is there. Nothing doesn't affect us.

So you might just notice that. You can't get away from being part of everything. But just to notice how often comparing arises, how often it leads to self-judging. And then rather than get into trying to stop it, bring your attention back to just feel the suffering aspect of that. Oh, comparing feels like this. Judging feels like this.

Just with that compassionate attention that doesn't have to create anything else around it.

And then maybe, even from a moment of being totally caught in it, it can switch to a moment like when I was looking at the moon tonight. Because it could be anything. Just that there's a moment where there's no comparing whatsoever, but real presence. You're not comparing to your past. You're not comparing yourself to someone outside. You're not comparing this moment to any other moment or thought that's ever been. In fact, it's timeless.

And in that not reaching out to anything else—for good or bad, comparing or judging—there's no self, because there's no creation of other. It just doesn't apply. There's no self to get rid of. There's no special experience you have to have. It's just what it is. Simply the mind released into fullness of presence, without needing to compare to anything else.

That's all. Just that piece of is-ness.

Just for a moment, can that be enough?

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*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*