Pursuit of Happiness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:47

The attraction for me in the early days of my practice to Buddhism and meditation specifically was the philosophy of what the Buddha spoke of. He was always so clear that what he was teaching was the highest happiness—the ending of suffering, the sure heart's release.

In a way, and this sounds kind of crass, I didn't put it to myself that way at the time, but the sense was: well, that's what to go for in life, the highest sense of happiness, whatever will make me truly, lastingly happy. And I feel, talking to people who come on retreat, that in one way or another, this tends to be what draws us to go through this rather difficult and sometimes strange process—a kind of hope or faith, or whatever word is suitable for you, of some higher happiness, some greater sense of serenity or ease in one's life.

In first practicing, in my first retreat, and in many people's, you might touch moments of what seems like a higher happiness, or a sense that we're somehow heading in the right direction. It could be the momentary peace of concentration, that bliss of a unified mind. It might be an ecstatic sense of interconnection. It might just be the simplicity of peace, of being fully present. There's a whole range of things it can be.

For some time in my practice, it was experiences like that which kept me coming back, thinking, "Oh yes, this shows I'm heading in the right direction." And it really took a while before I began to get it on some deep level that all this was is a continuation of the search for pleasure. I was taking pleasant experience—maybe a little more transcendent, maybe a little more subtle than I experienced in my daily life—and equating that with true happiness.

What the Buddha is talking about, and what our meditation practice here is about, is finding that the true happiness the Buddha was speaking about is of a whole other order. What most of us think of as happiness is not what the Buddha was speaking about as the true source of happiness, the true heart's release. We mostly don't know what true happiness is.

A lot of what I think our practice here is about is finding out what we're doing wrong, so to speak—how we're relating to our lives and the world in a way that rather than furthering our happiness, keeps us spinning in confusion. What is it that the Buddha is talking about? What is it we're doing here that can open us into experience of real happiness?

It's a common misconception, and I find myself, when I'm not really being aware, falling into it often, that meditation practice or this process of purification is somehow going to create in ourselves or in our minds

a subtler, more eternal kind of state. We're going to create some transcendent other reality in which we will live, from which we will relate to this mundane world of affairs and somehow float on a cloud somewhere, or be the serene Buddha in the midst of it. We think we've got to create something different, get away from who we are, from what we are, from what's happening now.

What we begin to awaken to—and this is a practice of awakening, Buddha really means one who is awakened—is that this is a much more radical proposition. We're not trying to get out of this reality or create some other reality from which we look back. We discover that that which we're seeking, whatever way you describe it to yourself, maybe you don't even describe it to yourself, but somehow there's an impulse for happiness or unity or completion or something that drives us on. And what's so radical about this practice of awareness is that it allows us to begin to awaken to the fact that that which we seek is always and only accessible in the immediacy of the here and now—whatever experience happens to be represented as here and now.

We're awakening into fullness of presence, to full aliveness, connection, and acceptance of this moment. Fully, totally this moment—and in that is where true peace and happiness can be found. Never by looking to something else to somehow create another reality.

So whether it's an itch that's arising, sadness, total boredom or doubt, just the pure breath or ecstasy, pain, a footstep—it doesn't matter what. Each experience, as it arises, is like a messenger. It's like a calling to say: awaken now. I'm your gateway in this moment to the possibility to awaken to my essential inner completion. In moving away from this pain, in moving away from this happiness, in any way trying to construct something other, we're effectively bringing down the blinders and not noticing what is always accessible to us.

And that's the paradox of spiritual practice: if our truest nature, this pure awareness—as Joseph spoke about last night—a pure awareness that is absolutely untouched by any arising experience, if this pure awareness is always present and accessible to us, why don't we notice it? If it's so obvious—and this is the paradox of practice—it's said this way in one Tibetan text. I just love this little poem:

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

Just resting at ease in whatever happens. It's so simple. Why do we have so much trouble doing this? Just resting at ease with awake intelligence and quite accepting open awareness within whatever happens. Not our natural inclination, is it?

Yet we all have moments of it. Joseph referred to a moment like that in his talk last night, and someone

mentioned it to me today—a moment where there's just a sense of ease, of presence. It might be, as Joseph was talking about, when you feel so vividly awake and connected, and somehow the shimmering leaves of the tree seem so exquisite. Or someone mentioned today just really being present for eating, being with one's meal, maybe for the first time. Or it can happen just taking a footstep—there's just this sense of such peace, such ease, such presence. It can happen no matter what we're doing. And if you're paying attention, we all experience moments of this, more or less frequently.

What these moments are pointing to is that it has nothing to do with what's actually happening in that moment. The leaves of the tree aren't suddenly more vivid. The breakfast wasn't suddenly a superior breakfast to any we've ever had in our life. That footstep wasn't somehow different from other footsteps. But we tend to take that moment, and instead of noticing just that ease, that awakeness, that vivid awareness that has nothing to do with what's happening but knows what's happening, we instead fixate on the wrong thing. We tend to keep looking to changing conditions.

So if the leaves were beautiful and it was two in the afternoon, we'll try again at two in the afternoon when the sun's a certain way, and we've had a cup of tea, to go look and see if we can hit that space again—without realizing that it's got nothing to do with those external or internal conditions. It's only that in that moment there was an awakeness, a heart and mind that was free of resistance, free of grasping or clinging, that was in no way reacting or trying to change or resist what was happening. Just total awakeness and presence. That's really what allows us to rest at ease in what is happening and to notice the potential for serenity and peace within whatever is happening.

So if you have a moment like that, see if you can just notice the whole show and not fixate on the changing conditions. Because that's our tendency, whether it's so-called external conditions—the weather, the way we're sitting, the clothes we brought, the way other people behave, the food we're eating, the schedule, whatever. We tend to focus on those conditions as what can make ease and peace possible or not. They might be more or less pleasant, and again we're confusing pleasant with true happiness, with peace. We do the same with internal conditions: our state of mind, our thoughts, the absence or presence of physical discomfort. We try to somehow arrange and manipulate these conditions, and if we can get them in the right order, in the right coming together, then—ah, this is peace, this is happiness.

And all the while we're not noticing, although it's so obvious we would all agree when it's pointed out, that there is no condition, so-called external or internal, that lasts. Everything is changing. If we're positing any sense of happiness, any sense of true peace on any changing condition whatsoever, we're in trouble. But because things change so fast, it's always easy to say, "Well, this one didn't do it," and somehow our mind leaps to the next one, or thinks we can get this one back again when it changes. We somehow don't stop and look at what's really going on.

And that's the whole purpose of our meditation. It gives us the clarity, the focus, and the tools to actually begin to look inward and see what's going on. It's said that the Buddha said upon his enlightenment that

he felt so much compassion for all of us in our human state because he could feel, he could see, that most deeply at the core, every person, every one of us—and this sounds simplistic, but I really believe it's true—at our deepest core each of us truly wants to be happy. But through our not seeing what is so about ourselves, about the nature of the world, through not really understanding what is so, many of our efforts to bring happiness to ourselves and others actually only succeed in increasing our confusion, in increasing our sense of struggle, because we don't know what true happiness is.

Mark Epstein is a psychiatrist who has also been a practicing Buddhist meditator for a long time, and he writes about happiness: "My experience as a psychiatrist trained in Western medicine and in the philosophy and practice of Buddhism has given me a unique perspective. I have come to see that our problem is that we don't know what happiness is. We confuse happiness with a life uncluttered by feelings of anxiety, rage, doubt, and sadness. But happiness is something entirely different. It's the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning."

He's saying happiness is the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning. And I would actually go a step further: that non-reactivity of mind—in any one moment, we're not talking about every moment of life, just take one moment—when there's this total receptivity, non-reactivity of mind to whatever's arising, in that moment of alertness and stillness, that gives the potential, the possibility to recognize something much more true than our passing reactions. A place of awareness from which whatever arises is not a problem.

So I want to talk a little bit about this habit of grasping at the pleasant and condemning the unpleasant—a very strong and subtle habit of our mind. What we can begin to notice, using our tools of mindfulness and concentration, is how these habits of conditioning are working on a moment-to-moment basis. We can see how they arise, how they lead us to certain forms of mental, physical, and vocal behavior.

And by paying attention, we can see how those behaviors don't really work, how these habits of mind aren't actually serving us. So a great deal of our practice is beginning to observe this.

Taking it on a real moment-to-moment basis—not theoretically—you can begin to notice how this happens. When we pay attention to what we're experiencing on the basic level of bare attention, Buddhist psychology reveals six different types of experience that arise over and over: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensation, and then the whole field of mental experience—thinking, emotions, mental images. These are what Buddhist terminology calls the six senses, with mind being the sixth sense. All that's really happening is these six things arising over and over and over. And then we make up story, which is just another mental experience arising.

As each experience comes—say a sight arises—we experience it as being either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. But when we're not really looking, this seems somehow intrinsic to the experience itself. I look out and there's seeing, and it's just this pleasant feeling. Without paying attention, the habit of mind moves to "Oh, that's nice, I like it." And it could stop there, or it could become "I really like it, I'd like to go

out and really be with it and see it more"—this grasping at the pleasant. If it's unpleasant, the rain comes and it's cold, the body shrinks away, the mind contracts: "I don't like that, I don't want to feel this, let's do something to change it." And when it's neutral, most of the time we tend not to even notice it. We ignore it. And often—notice this in your own experience—we almost experience the neutral as unpleasant, and our mind will create something more stimulating to wake us up.

These are what the Buddha called the three unwholesome roots of mind that lead to suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion or confusion—based on reactions to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. This is so important because it's happening almost every moment, and we're so accustomed to it, and it happens so fast, that we don't notice it's a habit of mind. The reactivity to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral becomes like a filter through which we judge and evaluate experience. Without paying attention, when you're sitting here and you have a pleasant sitting or pleasant conversation, it translates almost as: "This is right, this is good, this is how it's supposed to be. I've got to make it happen more." When it's unpleasant—we're restless, there's pain in the knee—it's not only unpleasant, it's wrong. It's a mistake. Something isn't happening the right way and we've got to do something to change it. And when it's neutral, forget it. We go off into daydreams. Sometimes we'll actually find our mind creating whole scenarios that are quite unpleasant, as a reaction to hanging out with neutral.

In fact, often on retreats people come in to talk about their experience and they'll say, "Oh, nothing's happening and I don't like it." "So there's calmness?" "Oh yeah," they'll say, "I guess that's calm. I don't know what to do with calm." The mind starts creating suffering scenarios. We don't know how to be with neutral. And in a way, neutral can be so pleasant, so wonderful.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about this. One example he gives: when we have a toothache, it's so painful, so unpleasant. When it stops, it's like, "Ah, how wonderful—no toothache!" But when we don't have a toothache—and most of the time we don't—do we even notice? Tune into your teeth right now. It's really quite nice if they're just neutral. It's actually quite pleasant, quite peaceful. But we don't notice that.

I was at a movie a few weeks ago—I don't even remember which one—but the coming attraction was for *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. It starts with this humongous explosion that practically blows you three feet back in your seat, and it just gets worse from there, so intense. I was thinking, "My God, that's our culture." No wonder we don't know what to do with calmness or neutral experience. We're so hyped up in this culture that everything has to keep getting more and more intense just to get our attention. That's a little aside.

But anyway, really begin noticing your experience. Have you found that this sense of pleasant becomes a basis for your whole evaluation of how your practice is going? Does it become a filter for your self-judgment? You have a really "good" sitting, meaning basically it's pleasant. How many of you have had a sitting where you were restless, where there was pain in your knee, where your mind was wandering, and you came away saying, "That was a really good sitting"? But we have to have sittings like

that. There's no such thing as only pleasant. I don't know if you've noticed this in life, but there's no such thing as only pleasant. Yet somehow we tend to operate from the assumption that unpleasantness is a mistake, and we're going to fix it.

Well, a retreat is just the same way. There's no such thing as only pleasant.

When you have a sitting like the unpleasant one I described, the evaluation is so common: "This is wrong, I'm not doing it right, I'm a bad meditator." Or we reverse it outward: "This is the stupidest practice I ever heard of, and clearly they don't know what they're talking about. It's a waste of time." Either way, there's no sense of equanimity. There's no sense of peace, of spaciousness. We're making our happiness, we're making our rightness, we're making truth dependent on things being pleasant, meeting our expectations, being how we want them. That's a setup, definitely, for deep suffering.

Our practice lets us begin to see these patterns. Without the awareness, it's like we're living blindly, following these habits of mind. It's like we're in the ruts on the road here.

It makes me think of when we drove in. Joseph and I and Grove and some friends drove in two cars on Friday. It was really raining that day, and the roads were muddy and soupy. Franz and I were in a car with two friends—just a rental car, some Ford. It wasn't four-wheel drive, and it had very low clearance. We're driving behind Grove's big Suburban, sliding all over, really muddy. The friend who was driving was really good, but he was going all over. It was tough. Each corner we'd come around would be harder than the next. And Grove kept calling back, "Get in the ruts, get in the ruts, you've got to get in the ruts!" He finally stopped us and came back and said, "Wes, you've got to get in the ruts."

So it was really funny—Wes was going, "Get in the ruts, get in the ruts, get in the ruts," and finally, bang, in the ruts. And then you're really stuck in them.

I felt like that's how we are when we're blindly following these tendencies. Because for our car, the ruts didn't necessarily work. They'd work for a little while, and then suddenly there'd be this huge hump and the whole bottom of the car felt like it was scraping off. "Oh no, the oil pan, the oil pan! Get out of the ruts, get out of the ruts!" The whole thing was just this dance. And once you're in the ruts, you can't get out of them anymore.

What our practice really lets us do is begin to see the ruts and how they're working—this rut of blindly following pleasure, of blindly moving away from the unpleasant, of totally spacing out when it's neutral. When you can see the rut, sometimes it works. As Joseph said, if your hand's in a fire, it's a good idea to follow the moving away from the unpleasant. But there are plenty of times that it just doesn't work. There are plenty of unpleasant experiences that we're not going to be able to move away from.

When we can see how those ruts work, we can also see when it's helpful to move out of the ruts. Then we have the whole field of experience available, and we can act and respond appropriately—not out of blind reactivity.

If you reflect on it, watch over these days: how much of our physical and mental activity is just to forget ourselves? How much of the time are we physically or mentally just blindly trying to move away from discomfort, trying to get away from something unpleasant?

There's a whole little practice in Vipassana that one teacher in Thailand used to teach, which is just this: every time you move throughout the day, watch why you move. Notice how much of our movement happens as a slight discomfort comes up and we move. Not that we have to stay and hurt—I'm not saying that—but just begin to see how much of our activity is a mask for slight discomfort, how much is trying to move towards pleasure.

If this scenario worked—if chasing pleasure and avoiding pain actually led to lasting happiness—none of us would be here. So it's about finding, within all of that, how we don't have to be so driven, how we don't have to be caught by this dualism.

This is where our mindfulness and concentration begin to serve us, begin to help us learn how to see through this conditioning over and over. And that seeing through gives us the space to respond appropriately.

Regarding mindfulness, there are a couple of aspects I want to emphasize. The first is this quality of attention—bringing the attention into the actual experience that's arising, whether it's a physical sensation or a sound or a sight or a thought or an emotion. Bringing the attention into the actual experience rather than confusing the interpretation with the experience. The only way we can come into the experience is when the mindfulness is held in an air of kindness, of softness, of loving-kindness and acceptance toward whatever is arising.

An experience comes up—say it's a physical sensation of pain in the knee, as Joseph was talking about in the instructions today. Mindfulness is non-discriminating. It doesn't say, "Hmm, should I pay attention to this? Should I pay attention to that?" As soon as something arises, the mindfulness moves directly to it in a non-discriminating way, meeting it with an attitude of real softness and openness.

You could say an affectionate curiosity. Just feeling: what is this? Just being with it without any preconceived notions.

And the concentration gives us the focus to stay with the actual experience—the twinging or the burning or the twisting—as distinct from, "Oh my God, I don't know how I'm going to get to a hospital in time, and what if it rains? It takes hours to get out of here." That's not the experience. It's just a twinge. It's amazing, the transformation that can happen when we use our mindfulness to be with the experience itself. It changes our whole relationship, not only to it, but to everything else.

I'll give you a little example. A couple of weeks ago I was teaching a retreat in Barre. And for some reason I was very physically tired and heavy, quite exhausted, but I couldn't find any reason for it. I wasn't particularly overworked or anything. And I lived just about two minutes down the road by car, so I was

driving home. I was aware of being tired and feeling the physical heaviness, but it wasn't mindfulness. The difference being: "Oh, I'm so tired, I'm so heavy. I wonder what's going on. Maybe I must be getting sick. There must be some resurgence of disease. There's something really serious going on. I really hate it. I feel so horrible. There's eight more days of teaching. I'm so heavy." This is not mindfulness. This is really aversion and resistance.

But often we can fool ourselves, because there was also a knowing of the fact that I was heavy and I was feeling the heaviness—but not with the bare attention that just feels the heaviness alone, and not with the attitude of affectionate caring, of open patience and acceptance of what is. It's a total interpretation.

And I caught it, what I was doing. All it took was just a minute, just to say, "Oh, be with heaviness." I mean, that wasn't like, "You stupid jerk, be with heaviness." That's also not mindfulness. It was just, "Oh, right, I'm thinking about it." And it was as if I let my attention just gently drop into feeling heavy and tired in my body. That's all. I just kept driving.

And I saw that in that moment, although before I knew there was heaviness, the aversion—the way aversion works in the mind is it will keep your attention a little bit away from the experience. Like, I know it's heavy, but let's just hold it over there and not quite really sink into it. Notice that when you have a pain, you kind of hover around it. We sort of look at it, but we don't want to quite go there.

So I just dropped into it. Full surrender. Just feeling heavy and aversive and tired and fearful. No expectation of anything. It's amazing—the whole response to that changed. I just thought, "Oh yeah, heaviness, tiredness, that's okay." It was really okay. It didn't feel any different, but it was really okay, and all the other story went away. I was just being heavy and tired.

And all of a sudden, without any kind of conscious volition—and this is what happens when you really are mindfully open to what's happening, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant—the whole field opened up. My heart just opened up. It was such a beautiful day. The spring was coming out, the trees were budding, and I suddenly had this burst of joy and connection with the environment, with what else was going on. That's really what happens when we open fully to whatever's presenting itself as truth in that moment.

It's just the opposite of what we might think if we don't pay attention. It seems that if I don't really let myself feel the aversion or feel the pain, if I can just a little bit keep it in the background, then things will be okay and I can kind of appreciate life more. And it's just the reverse. If we try to hold away the unpleasant, we can't open selectively. We can't ignore the unpleasant and open to beauty and connection. We need to be connected with whatever's happening. And when we soften into—"Oh yeah, unpleasantness, tiredness"—boom, the beautiful day is also suddenly apparent. A sense of self-acceptance can also be there.

It's just a moment. It's just a little thing. But that's what our life is made up of—just these little moments. And that's really what we're learning how to do: hold our attention in this attitude of open-hearted

acceptance. It cuts through these deeply conditioned habits of running away from the unpleasant and our ceaseless pursuit of happiness through pleasure, which ultimately doesn't work.

So the patience, the kindness, the acceptance is what lets us come back over and over when there's a difficult experience. We also come back over and over when there's a pleasant experience too. We're not only going to the difficult. But it's important, and one of the reasons we tend to emphasize the difficult more is because our habit is much more ingrained to try to avoid it. And it's this avoidance that keeps us closed to truth, that keeps us closed to true connection with our own self, with our own hearts, and with that of all others.

There's a saying from Rumi: "Paradise is surrounded by what we dislike, and the fires of hell are surrounded by what we desire." So we tend to go towards what we desire and land in hell. And if we can just open to what we dislike, we land in paradise. It's somehow the opposite of the way we might think it is.

The more we can practice this, it's not like all of a sudden everything changes. But even one moment of coming out of the rut of following habit and just opening into what is—you can begin to see how transforming it is. It opens us into another possibility altogether for how we relate to ourselves and to life. And this is really the intimation of the potential for true serenity and peace: the possibility to be with things just as they are, to meet ourselves and our experience and others with a true kindness. Not the kindness of a kind of idiocy—idiot compassion—but the true kindness that, by being with things in totality as they are, opens our hearts and our minds to the potential for liberating understanding.

It absolutely transforms our life because we meet things with a peace that is not dependent on having a situation be a certain way—because there's no way we can control that. And it might seem like a long way to come from just noticing our reactions to pleasant and unpleasant, but this is very profound, as subtle as it is.

This is from the Buddha. It might sound a little archaic, but see if it makes sense. He says: "Someone seeing objects with the eye"—and then he goes through all the different senses, so we'll just talk about seeing—"someone who is attracted to things that are pleasing and repelled by things that are unpleasing," stuck in these ruts, "that person dwells without mindfulness and her mind is restricted. She does not experience the emancipation of heart through wisdom. But another person, seeing objects with the eye, is not attracted to things that are pleasant and is not repelled by things that are unpleasing. So she dwells with mindfulness present and her mind is unbounded. Thus she experiences the emancipation of heart through wisdom."

Simply by being able to be so equanimous that we're not drawn helplessly into the pleasant and repelled by the unpleasant, our mind is unbounded and we experience emancipation of heart through wisdom. To me that's a really profound statement. And it's also very immediate. It's not like some impossible ideal a million years down the road. In any one moment, it's possible to see the difference between the

restrictedness of heart and mind by being caught in desire and aversion, and a moment of that boundlessness of heart and mind when we're just present without needing things to change, really awake.

This is not a kind of equanimity of indifference, a kind of gray "who can tell the difference, it's pleasant, it's unpleasant, who cares, I'll take whatever comes, I can't change what happens in life, this person's mistreating me, that's okay because it's all the same anyway, there's nothing I can do." I'm not talking about a kind of acceptance of resignation or defeatism or fear, but really that sense of unbounded serenity that arises from seeing things as they are.

Actually, acceptance and patience—clearly meeting what happens—arises because of seeing things as they are. And so when we're seeing something clearly, if something is abusive or needs to change and it can be changed, there's the spaciousness in that clear seeing to know what can be done and the energy to do it. But it can come out of the intention of clarity and of caring about the whole situation, not out of just some knee-jerk reaction of fear or aversion.

So this unboundedness of heart is not just some mishmash of grayness, of dullness, of who cares. It's so connected. It's much more alive and connected in life.

The mindfulness allows us to see things as they are. On a moment-to-moment level—like, for example, seeing the way I saw the tiredness, rather than seeing this whole immensity of some horrible illness coming on that I didn't know what to do about. It's simply heaviness and aversion. And that's okay. It's just what it is. Seeing things as they are on that level, you can see how that loosens the restrictions of heart and mind.

But it's also seeing things as they are on a much deeper level: the sense of the nature of how things are in this world, of what we really are, the nature of existence. The Buddha often referred to it as the three marks of existence. But basically it can come down to the uncontrollability of things in our life, the uncontrollability of experience, the fact that everything is constantly changing.

As long as something is pleasant—something we're happy with—it's going to go away. The unpleasant is going to come, and we can't change that. We keep trying to keep things the same, and it's all totally out of our control. As long as we're not really deeply living from that understanding, as long as we're caught in some sense of trying to keep things from changing, of trying to have some kind of control, of this almost obsessive self-referencing where every experience somehow refers back to me and how it affects me—as long as we're not living from understanding the uncontrollability, we're going to be caught in suffering, in confusion.

But true acceptance comes as we begin to see this. The easiest one to talk about, and the only aspect I want to address tonight, is this fact of constant change. Which, again, we all say is obvious. I know things are changing. But looking at our experiences, do we deeply, genuinely live and respond from that knowledge? And much of the time, for many of us, probably not.

Because if you look, this wanting pleasant experience, the shying away from the unpleasant, in any way trying to manipulate and control experience—it basically arises from not deeply recognizing impermanence. When we really, really know that however wonderful this is, at some point conditions will change and it will go away, that doesn't decrease our appreciation. In fact, the appreciation is all the more poignant. We can be all the more present with it because we're not somehow grasping, trying to make it stay.

When really unpleasant, painful, sad, grief-stricken experiences arise, no matter how hard they are, often somewhere in there is the feeling that this is never going to change and I can't bear to be with this for the next forty minutes, for the next year, for the rest of my life. Again, that's not being with bare experience, but it's also not really moving from the fact that everything is changing and it's all out of our control. And we take it personally—we refer it all back to ourselves.

So, for example, the weather. Obvious. And in a place like this, it's so wonderful because the scope is so vast. Just the other day, I think it was the day before you all came, it was a pretty day, really bright and beautiful. Then suddenly, like this afternoon, rain clouds came just in a moment. It started pouring. And then just like that, it turned to hail. There was this really vicious, wild hailstorm for a while, and then just like that it stopped, the clouds cleared, and it was so silent. It was amazing. There are moments like that where you go, "Gosh, totally out of control, always changing—that's so obvious." We can just see that's how things are, and it seems absurd to try and change the weather.

But as a friend said to me last year—she's been really looking at this for years and years—she said, "You know, it's just coming as a revelation to me. All this time I'm watching everything in the world changing. The whole world is changing. And suddenly I realized: oh, it's happening to me too. It's not me here watching everything else change. What I'm calling 'me' is also a process of constant change."

And that somehow, for many of us, is the sticking point where we don't really quite open to this fact. Even with other meditation teachers who've been doing this stuff for twenty, thirty years—we sit around going, "Oh my God, my hair is getting gray! Look at my wrinkles! I have to wear reading glasses." Big surprise. You go into your forties and fifties and your body starts to decay. What else did you expect? But somehow it's amazing—it's a surprise. All of a sudden our parents are getting older and they're dying, and somehow we're the first generation this ever happened to. It's totally amazing how hard it is to really take this in.

I heard this interview on the BBC last year, very serious. They were interviewing a man who had invested, I think, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in a company in Greece that will freeze you when you die and then hold your body until they can cure whatever you died from and bring you back to life. You have the option of either freezing your whole body, or you can just have your brain frozen—that's cheaper. This is very serious. People do this. They were interviewing an English man who had done it, very serious.

But I wrote this down. This is what he said: "It seems quite a sensible idea. There's no guarantee, of course, but there's a reasonable expectation."

It's amazing. A reasonable expectation of what? You know, living forever. And it's our culture, but it's not just this time. It's the world.

In opening to the constant changing, there are times—both in formal practice and also as it goes into our lives—where as we open to it more and more, it's hard sometimes. You see why there's a resistance in our hearts and minds to really live from that, because then there really is this sense of things ending so much. And you can go through what's sort of like a phase of practice that can last a more or less amount of time, where there's a real sadness about it, a real sense of loss. And in a way that's true, but it's not the whole picture. But I see why, when I go through those times, why there's this resistance. It's because it's the not wanting to feel sadness. It's just back to the same not wanting to be with what's unpleasant, being afraid of it.

So there are times it's sad. But I know for myself that what's even more sad and more fearful is to live in that denial. Because again, we're denying ourselves the opportunity for a much deeper connection with ourselves and with all life. Because even knowing something's changing, well then I'm so much more present for it. And the opening to change is our opening to connection and real tenderness and caring for other beings too. Sometimes it's our tenderness that opens us to the truth of change.

I just want to read you part of one poem. It's by Galway Kinnell, called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down."
I've stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die,"
little Maude.
And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

Forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

But it doesn't just have to be sad and scary, because when we truly, truly see this—moment to moment in meditation practice, moment to moment in our life—when we truly see it, the clinging, the aversion to unpleasant, the trying to keep things, is so patently useless and so obviously increasing our suffering that it's not like we have to talk ourselves out of it. It just stops making sense. It opens up.

Again, this is the boundlessness of heart, the boundlessness of mind that can really be fully present for what is and can still be fully present when that changes. It gives us such a serenity and a sense of happiness and peace, and also a much deeper connection. So opening to impermanence can also be opening into great joy, a great kind of dancing, a playing in life.

There's a story—maybe you've heard it—of a Hasidic rabbi in Eastern Europe, early in the century, who was very renowned for his scholarship and his wisdom. A young student from another country came to visit him, and they were sitting in the rabbi's house talking. The student was quite astounded by how simply the rabbi was living. He was looking around and saying, "But you've lived here so long, and you're so renowned. Where are all your things? Where are your books? Where's your furniture? Where are your clothes?"

And the rabbi said to the student, "Well, where are all yours?"

The student said, "Well, I'm just passing through."

And the rabbi said, "Well, so am I."

That kind of lightness with life.

Our practice here—even the little nudgy stuff that happens, the little twinges, the boredom, the restlessness, not to mention the obvious sadnesses and pains and difficulties we go through, or the happiness, or the boredom—it's all microcosm for what's happening in life. It *is* our life.

And the way our heart and mind is relating to these little things is exactly the way we're relating to the bigger, more complex issues in our life. This kind of tears it down and lets us begin to cut through the complexity and come into the bare experience and see the conditioning, and to give us moments of potential to move out of that conditioning, to respond in another way altogether.

So even when you think your practice is so-called bad, because nothing that you want to happen is what's happening, not only is that good practice—sometimes we say that's the *best* practice—because that's where we're going to be able to break these chains of getting lost in pleasant and unpleasant and constructing a sense of who we are out of that.

In a way, each time that you just open for a moment into a pain in your knee—you get too intense and you move, fine—but in the moment that you're just with it as it is, that's the moment where we're coming out of confusion, where we're learning not to be deluded by changing conditions, where we're learning that even for that moment, oh, there's a possibility of real ease and freedom even when something unpleasant is happening, even when something pleasant is happening, even when nothing particular is happening.

And again, this acceptance is not that of blind dullness.

It comes from clear seeing, and it gives such courage, such strength of understanding. You'll find even

here that it gives us not only the courage of clear seeing but also the compassionate heart to soften into what is—not to be hard about it, not to try and push it away. It gives us the energy of compassion to respond in a way that's appropriate.

And whether it's a pain in the knee or whether it's later in our lives, some situation that comes up that we can't change, that seems beyond the bounds of endurance—whatever that is for each one of us—there might be a moment where, with the courage of clear seeing and the kindness of compassion, we'll find that even the unendurable is possible. Not only possible to endure, but to have some moment, maybe, of serenity within it. We discover that ultimately our true happiness and peace has absolutely nothing to do with what is happening internally or externally.

And all our efforts to change things—they can be useful in the world of cause and effect. They can be useful in the functional world. I'm not saying give up our work, but understand where it's coming from. It can come from the compassion that arises out of knowing that as much as we do to help people, to help the earth, to make things better—and we can have some real effect—at bottom, the true peace is going to come from being able to rest at ease in how things are. So that when we can't make a difference, when we can't change things, we don't have to give in to despair. We don't have to give in to frustration and come back to anger and confusion and pain.

When we can meet life with the serenity that that rabbi was meeting it with, then all the energy that previously goes into struggle and fear and confusion and rage—all that energy can go into action, into relating to the world, into relating to ourselves, into really dancing with whatever's happening. So much more energy is available to us from the space of wisdom and compassion.

So hang with it when your knee hurts and you're bored and you're sleepy. It's not really just a stupid, boring exercise. It has much more impact than might be apparent.

So let's just sit for a moment.

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