Habits of Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:01

One of the nice things for me personally about practicing meditation in Burma, and also assisting with teaching there, is that I feel held in a sense of the tradition, a sense of the culture where in that same place, meditation—just like we're doing here—has been going on for hundreds and hundreds of years. It's a culture that, for whatever its faults (and there are many), really supports and venerates the Dhamma, the Dharma, meditation practice.

It's so different, really, to be putting out this courageous effort, this sincere work—it takes a lot of effort doing what you're doing here. It's really different to be doing it in a culture where the chance cab driver you meet, when they ask, "Why are you here?" and you say, "I come to meditate," they respond, "Wow, that's so wonderful. I really want to meditate, but I'm having to take care of my mother. But it's really what I want to do." That's more the normal response.

I don't even realize how much of what we're doing is, in some ways, going against the stream of the main culture here. Even now it's a lot different from thirty years ago, but we're still going against the mainstream. In Burma, that sense of cultural support has the effect of allowing me—and I know it's not only me—to relax into practice with a sense of greater faith, faith in terms of confidence. This isn't just some new age, airy-fairy thing. People have been doing it for ages, and somehow it works. So it just gives a little more sense of, "Okay, let me keep going," on those rare occasions when it gets a little tough.

I want to talk tonight about right attitude, or wise attitude, in practice. In the last year, I had the chance to sit two short retreats—just ten-day retreats—with two different teachers. One was Ajahn Sumedho here; one was a Burmese teacher in Burma. Very different teachers, very different techniques. But both of them, their main emphasis in how they talked about practice was to start with right attitude, before you even worry about the technique.

So what does that mean? I'll give you my spin on it. In talking about right attitude, what I'm really mixing together is our sincere motivation—the attitude is kind of the intention, our motivation, our willingness—supported by wise discernment, supported by wisdom. The right attitude we bring to our practice, whatever aspect of practice, whatever technique we're doing, is this sincere motivation held in the crucible of wisdom. Not total wisdom, certainly, but at least some beginning wisdom.

Because with all the will in the world, with total sincerity of motivation, if we don't know what we're doing and we don't really understand things as they are, the choices we make may not be grounded in reality and may not serve us so well. Our choices, our intentions, need to be guided by some wise discernment—seeing clearly things as they are, ourselves as we are, the world as it is.

This is really the beginning and the ending of our whole path of practice. Seeing things as they are with open-hearted, total presence and acceptance enables us to live in harmony with things as they are.

I'm sure most of you know the story of the Buddha when he first became the Buddha. After all his hard practice, when he awoke under the Bodhi tree, he was disinclined to teach. In a way, he said, "People aren't going to understand, and it would really be worrisome and bothersome to go around when nobody's going to get it anyway." But when he was persuaded to survey the world—all the people in the world—with his eye of wisdom, when he could read what was in all of the people's minds, what moved him to the compassion to spend his life teaching was really seeing this one thing I'm speaking about: that deep in our hearts, everybody wants to be happy. That's our unifying motivation as human beings. We want to be happy.

What moved him to compassion, so it's said in the texts, was seeing how, with the best will in the world, most everyone goes about their whole life trying to be happy doing just the things that keep them spinning in confusion and suffering. Because we don't really understand the nature of suffering, the nature of confusion, and the nature of peace or happiness as the Buddha spoke about happiness. And so he was motivated to teach.

When I'm talking about bringing this wise attitude, some understanding to our practice, to our lives, I'm directly speaking to this: to our really sincere intentions to do what's good for our own happiness. And probably most if not everyone here is also, in some way, deeply committed to the happiness of others, or at least to not causing unhappiness to others. But without understanding ourselves, without understanding what's true, we're going to keep getting caught in confusion and suffering.

Basically, the habits of our mind that we think are going to bring us happiness don't work. It's not that they're bad. They just don't work. And don't believe me that they don't work—check and see for yourselves. I'm sure you already know, or you wouldn't be here sitting for a month, for two months, if our other ways of bringing ease and happiness to ourselves worked. Unless you just love it, which some people do. Really, some people do just love to come here and sit and watch their minds. There are some people like that. Most of us ended up here because we discovered we liked it so much that we keep coming back.

An example from the world around us. I read a small article in the International Herald Tribune about Russia, where the writer was reporting on opinion polls about forms of government—democracy versus totalitarianism, or perhaps they didn't use that word, but versus more control. The article suggested that Russians didn't necessarily want democracy. And that's okay, whatever.

But what was interesting to me was that among the questions asked was: if Stalin were running for president again, would you vote for him? Now, it's no longer a secret in Russia about how Stalin threw twenty million Russian people into prison camps. A great many of those were murdered or died in those camps. This is no longer a secret. So even knowing that, twenty-six percent of people said yes, they would vote for Stalin if he were running again. And another nineteen percent or something said they weren't

sure, but probably wouldn't.

It's amazing to me. Just a sense of—and here I'm projecting—but somehow the sense of security and order would bring more happiness than terror. It's okay if there's mass terror, as long as there's order. That's an extreme example. But it's not that extreme. It's not that extreme. It's the same way our minds are working.

So remember last night how we were talking about the habits of our mind and going against the stream? What is it that we need to know, really need to know, to begin to bring wise attitude to our practice, to our life, to begin to move out of this endless cycle of trying to make ourselves happy by increasing our confusion?

That's samsara, basically—the cycle of wanting and getting and wanting and getting and wanting and not getting and wanting and not getting, on and on, and becoming. It's exhausting. And even if we only think of one life, it's exhausting. Never mind if we go into the Buddhist cosmology of eons.

Once I was talking to my aunt, many years ago. She's been dead a long time, and we were close. She was a Christian, not fundamentalist but a real Christian, and she had been unhappy for maybe the last twenty years of her life, since my uncle died. Somehow we got into the topic of rebirth, and she was asking me to explain it. So I was explaining how it worked. And she just had this huge sigh and said, "If I thought that were true, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear to think of keeping going like this." It was so poignant.

The thing is, really the thing is, the shift from samsara to freedom is just like that. Just for a moment, not forever, but just for a moment. Just a foreground-background shift. It's not about eons and eons and eons of dreadful going like that. That's what our practice is about. That's what wise attitude serves to help our awareness open into.

So what do we need to know? What are the habits that we get lost in?

Bhikkhu Bodhi, the American Theravada monk who is probably one of the foremost translators of the Pali texts into English these days, said: "Remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes." Go back to what was said about this flow going against the current. "After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

I want to read that again. And I just want you to notice over the next days if this is true or not for you: Most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self.

And if that's true for you, the question then becomes: so what? What's wrong with that?

Again, the Buddha wasn't—and we're not—up here to say this is right, this is wrong, this is shameful. It's simply asking: what brings suffering? And what ends suffering? What works? Do these habits work?

Of course, I'm going to say no. That's what I'm here to say. And to explain why, to some extent. But really, everything I'm saying, any of us are saying, is hopefully just to point you back to your own experience and see what's really true.

Because none of this works as an intellectual concept. It might be nice or not, whatever, but that's not going to free us. It's really when we so deeply recognize, "Oh, this really isn't working"—when it doesn't make sense anymore—that something lets go. That's when right attitude begins to come in.

So what is it we need to know to shift this? The Buddha famously said, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering, or dukkha, and its end." We have a friend who says that's really two things. But anyway, that's one. He wouldn't get into metaphysical questions. He said, "I'm teaching suffering and the end of suffering." Dukkha—a better word. Suffering is too limited.

And you might wonder, why does he have to teach dukkha? You'd think we know dukkha. That's why we're here practicing. We want to know about the end of it. But in my experience, if we really knew the ramifications of dukkha and its end, if we really understood dukkha, there would be no clinging. We wouldn't keep on in this cycle.

So the Buddha's little shorthand of his teaching is, of course, our friends the Four Noble Truths. And dukkha in this case has three aspects. First, understanding in our cells, in our bones, the impermanence of all conditioned things—physical, mental, any experience, anything internally, externally—it changes. When the conditions that bring it together go away, it falls apart. That's just how it is.

Then there's dukkha dukkha—there's just pain. If you have a body, sometime, somewhere, it's going to hurt. It seems obvious. How much of our time do we spend fighting that? If we have a body, it's not only going to hurt, it's going to get sick, it's going to get old. We all know that. But we don't really. It's amazing how much we don't.

The second truth is that the cause of our anguish, our discontent, our dis-ease, isn't the fact that difficult things happen, that the body starts hurting, that everything falls apart, that there's nothing we can rely on. None of that's the reason for our suffering. It's because of the way our hearts and minds react, respond to the first truth. Basically, the word they use is clinging. We cling. But I find it more helpful to think that the real anguish, the cause of our dis-ease and what brings us to practice, is the way the mind and heart reacts or responds in the face of things not being the way we want them to be or the way we think they should be. We hold on, we get aversive, we just deny anything's going on at all, we stick our head in the sand, we distract ourselves. That's what the Buddha saw when he said everyone wants to be happy but does just the things that keep them suffering—the way we respond to the first noble truth.

And the third truth, of course, is that with wise discernment, seeing things the way they are, clear seeing, there's an ending to this anguish of heart and mind. The craving, the clinging, the trying to make things different or hold on or deny—it just lets go. Not as an act of will, but because clinging, when we see things

the way they are, just doesn't make sense. And we don't have to talk ourselves out of it. That doesn't work, does it? Have you tried to talk yourself out of wanting, or talk yourself out of aversion? "I'm not really upset. It's really okay." It just doesn't work. It slips around from behind and clobbers you.

But in the moment when we really see, "Oh, it's just going away," the clinging also just evaporates. And in that moment, there's a moment of peace. Ah, just this. That's a moment of freedom.

It's a moment of cessation—cessation of suffering, cessation of clinging. That's the moment of turning, just like this. It's not so far away.

But mostly, we're so entranced by our habits, so habituated to responding in these familiar ways, that we're looking through those habits, through those colorings of mind, at whatever's happening. We don't even know what's going on. Struggle, struggle, struggle.

And so that's why there's a path. That's why there's the fourth truth, which is the path of practice—the path of non-harming conduct, of samādhi, concentration and mindfulness and effort, and of wisdom, of clear seeing. But I really like the way Ajahn Sumedho described it. He kind of summed the whole path, the whole Eightfold Path, up in one word: awareness.

And that's the way I'd like to suggest we can approach this path throughout our practice here, whatever particular technique each of you may be cultivating. Whether we're staying really closely with the breath at the nostrils, whether you're working with the breath at the abdomen, whether you're open in choiceless awareness, whether you're doing walking meditation, whether you're doing mettā meditation—all the techniques are useful in terms of recognizing the truth of things when held in the crucible of wise attitude.

So that's what I want to talk about: what that is.

It begins by seeing these habits of our mind and heart without judgment, without criticism. That's wise attitude. Just seeing what is, in the space of awareness, without adding anything extra—without adding criticism, without adding blame, without adding me, me, me. Just like this.

So it begins by seeing, recognizing the habits. And it'll be more than once or twice. In that moment of recognizing, we've stepped out of identifying and stepped into: oh, greed is like this. Aversion is like this. In that moment, what's being fed in the mind stream is the mindfulness, the awareness—awareness of greed.

When we don't notice that, when it's "Oh my God, I'm so greedy. I don't know what's the matter with me. I'm the most greedy person who ever lived"—what's being fed is aversion to the greed, identification. You don't have to get rid of the greed. It's just: oh, greed is like this. That's all.

That's the movement from identification, from being lost in the delusion of the habit, to awareness, to mindfulness, to clear seeing. Just for a moment, just for a second. That's okay. That's a moment of purification of mind and heart. That's really what the practice is about.

Once we're able to be present—just momentarily, but more and more moments in that way—all the techniques are useful to us. Without that sense of just clear seeing, accepting, we can take any technique, turn it on its head, and turn it into a complete ego trip, and suffer. And you'll know you're doing that, you'll know your mind's doing that, because you'll be suffering. That's always the tip-off. It's very useful in that way.

This is the way Ayya Khema describes dukkha: "We're looking for something other than what we have. This alone is dukkha. It means there's an emptiness within which wants to be filled. Unless we see this quite clearly, we always try to fill this void from outside through our sense contacts. But it can't be done this way. Only when we realize we must fulfill ourselves from within can we really begin to take the spiritual path."

I would say that sense of filling the void—what tricks us is that it feels like the sense contact fills it, but it's just for such a quick second. And then we don't notice that it didn't really do it because we can move to another and move to another and move to another, and that's saṃsāra. When we turn around and go, "Oh, what's going on here?"—that's the movement from saṃsāra to taking up the spiritual path in the way Ayya Khema talks about it.

And the other interesting thing about the Buddha's awakening, about the way he talks about it—and this is how Ayya Khema puts it—in that moment of freedom, suffering isn't going to go away. The dukkha doesn't go away. The one who suffers is going to go away. Just for a moment.

And don't think about that. The more we think about it, we just get all knotted up in our mind, and me, me, me gets really strong. Just let it go. But notice those moments when there's just: oh, it's like this. Later, you can say, "Oh, there was no me there then." Yes, there was no me there. Now there is. But in the moment, you don't really notice anything. It's just this—a step, a sound, feeling of greed, heat, whatever it is. Just simple, basic.

That's a moment of real purity of consciousness. It's no big fireworks. It's mostly not what we think we're looking for, because these habits of our mind are so ingrained in most of us—I wouldn't speak for everybody, but in most of us they're so ingrained. This wanting to enjoy the pleasant, avoid the difficult, the painful, the unpleasant, and to think that everything revolves around me. It's so ingrained that without even knowing these patterns are there, that's how we assess the world, and that's often the motivation behind our actions.

And we come to practice—I mean, it's not a different mind, is it? It's the same. So we can get so caught up in looking to sense contact, as I've said, to fill that seeming void, that feeling of emptiness. Without realizing we're even doing it, very subtly, it can transfer to our practice. When that's happening, you'll know it sooner or later because there'll be that sense of glitch—the sense of, "What's wrong with my practice? It isn't working." We're either looking, very subtly and sometimes not so subtly, for the pleasant experience, for the experience that matches something we've heard or read or experienced before. Or we

think it'll be cool, because then not only is it pleasant, but it fills my sense of finally getting somewhere on this endless path. We're avoiding the unpleasant, or evaluating the worth of almost all of our experience by whether it's pleasant or unpleasant.

Just notice how much we do this. I talk about this all the time. There's no way my conscious mind can say it doesn't know this. But over and over, when I get quiet and I'm going through practice—or in daily life too, of course, but in practice where you can really notice more minutely the workings of the mind—I'll find that it's somehow slipped in, that I started to very subliminally assess what's going on. "Well, this can't be right because it doesn't feel good."

It's rare that someone who's had a sitting that really feels good comes in and says, "You know, my practice isn't going well." It's more common when you've had an experience that just feels like crap, and your mind was reactive. But you were aware. You were really aware of all of this. Yet it's still much more common to come in and report on that and go, "After all this time, I should be past this. It's going nowhere."

And we'll say, "Yeah, but you're really describing it well. It shows you were mindful." And you go out thinking, "Oh my God, they're just giving me a sop. Can't they see? They train them to say this." That's garbage. You don't believe it, do you, for a minute? We're so caught in this.

But you know, the Buddha's awakening—his awakening didn't change his world. When he spent those forty-five years teaching, he still had a body. There are places in the suttas where he had backaches, where he had headaches. He died from eating bad food. His kinspeople went to war over water rights. One of his cousins tried to split the sangha and kill him. He had endless dukkha with all the monks and nuns, trying to organize an organization. We all know how that is. And he had to spend forty-five years like this, when all he wanted to do, really, was just go off and hang out in the bliss of Nibbana. He could have done that. Instead, he's walking up and down India barefoot, dealing with all these people. That was his life. It didn't change the world.

So what do we expect? What do we think is going to happen? I'm kind of joking, but I ask myself that sometimes, because there's always something lurking back there, subliminal, that I really think it's going to be like. And it rarely includes pain or people not liking me or my personality. Somehow my personality should completely morph into something beatific.

Not beatific, no. I've sort of given that one up. Ajahn Sumedho had a great line. He said, you know, it's consciousness that's pure. We're not here to purify our personalities. That's like a sideline, but that's not what we're here for.

So these reactions have us. It's not that we're stupid. It's not that if we just paid a little bit of attention we could see through them. They're so ingrained.

As most of you know, the way the Buddha described our moment-to-moment experience of consciousness is very precise. In any moment of sense awareness—take seeing, for instance—you need an eye organ

that's working and a visual object. When they come together and there's a moment of consciousness, there's a moment of seeing. If my eyes are closed, there wouldn't be seeing. If I'm asleep or consciousness has completely gone somewhere else, there's no seeing. When those three come together, that's called contact—a moment of seeing or hearing or feeling with the body, thinking in the mind, anything.

In that moment, it arises together with a subtle sensation, which is really mental, of its being pleasant or unpleasant or neither one. Mostly we don't notice that. And when we don't notice, the tendency, the habit, is that the pleasant we start leaning into, wanting—and that's where that evaluation comes: "Yeah, this is good, this is right, give me more." The unpleasant, we may not notice it's unpleasant, but ever so slightly or not so slightly, we lean away. That can turn into aversion: "I don't want this, this is wrong, this is bad"—the whole nine yards—and then wanting something else.

And underlying all of that, and frankly, in my experience by far the most seductive and entrancing and engaging of all the habits of mind, is that it's all about me. Me, me. I'm the center of all of it.

Sogyal Rinpoche gave a great example in one of his books about this. He said in Tibet, when they're building a house, before they lay the foundation, they start with a center point where it's going to be. They take a rope the length of the frame of the house and measure from that point out all around to get the footprint for the foundation. And he said that's what it's like—this sense of me. We start from the sense of me, not an idea but this felt sense of me here now, and from that we measure everything. I like that a lot.

Just notice, not with judgment. Just notice. In the noticing is the wise discernment, the clear seeing. But if you can do it with a sense of humor, it's a riot. It just cracks me up. Watch the mind. You're going somewhere and somebody walks by way down there and they trip. First thought: "Glad that wasn't me." There's a loud sound somewhere: "Well, don't they know that's ruining—how could they let that happen here when I came all this way to meditate?" Just anything—bird call, the deer over there—there's a moment of pure appreciation and then: "Wow, I'm seeing these deer. Maybe it'll be like Bambi and one will come over and I'm really nature girl..." Just watch it.

It really, really helps to laugh, because if you're going to get reactive to it, you're going to be suffering a lot. The moment we're watching it, we're not being it anymore. Again, it's this sense of "Oh, I'm nature girl"—notice what that feels like. Try it. We can do that with anything, anything. Awareness can be aware, mindfulness can be mindful of anything.

Sometimes the energy of mindfulness isn't as strong as the energy of the habit. True. So we don't even recognize, say, that aversion is going on for a while. But at any point: "Oh, aversion. That's why everybody looks so horribly, dreadfully ugly today. Oh, they didn't all get up and decide to look their worst. It could possibly be aversion." Yeah.

Turn around. Aversion is like this. Oh, that's aversion. Okay, the object of mindfulness at that moment has moved from breath or walking or whatever to aversion. And awareness doesn't care what the object is.

Any object—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, mind—any object is a doorway to mindfulness, to the purity of consciousness, of awareness.

Mostly, our habit is focusing on objects for gratification, and we take that same habit into practice. We end up focusing on the breath—because we're supposed to focus on the breath—but we do it in a way that isn't imbued with wise attitude. We do it with wanting, with wanting practice to fulfill us in some way.

We get so focused on getting it right. How many breaths? How precise is the breath? How many sensations in the lifting? If I get more, I'm doing it better. We do that. We're so focused on the object that we don't notice the mind that's noticing the object. And this is the place of potential ease and freedom—turning around and noticing the mind that's noticing.

But these habits happen so fast that we get really entranced by them. So practice is here to help us shift the habit, shift our interest from object and self-referencing to the mind itself, to mindfulness itself, to awareness itself. Basically, we're moving toward getting more interested in the mindfulness—just in knowing what's happening and being with what's happening, whatever it is. That becomes more interesting to us, more fulfilling, more peaceful than owning or disliking or what we think about anything, all our reactions.

Doesn't it start to get boring? No? It's not boring yet? I mean, I'm really sick of myself. I don't know about you, but how many new thoughts? And if you're still having new thoughts, check in in a week. How many really useful, new, and important thoughts are coming up? How many new reactions? Is it fulfilling, really, when we look at it? I'm not advocating aversion. I'm just advocating noticing that it's not doing it. Our habitual reactions aren't bringing fulfillment.

Now, knowing whatever's happening—that is fantastic. Knowing. You don't get tired of knowing, of awareness. It's pure, it's clean, it's not colored by whatever we're aware of. It doesn't care. And that is so liberating. Just for a moment.

Remember Howie's quotation? It's the famous quotation—everyone always uses this quotation—but it fits what I'm saying. He read it last night: "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it." The attachments, the aversions, the sense of self. "This the unlearned people"—those who haven't practiced or looked at the mind—"do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands, so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

This isn't sequential. This is both at the same time. Luminous is the mind, brightly shining, and it's colored by the attachments that visit it. At the same time, it is free of the attachments that visit it. When we're focused in on the attachments, our observations, our sense of self, that's what we notice, that's what we're entranced by. And we don't notice the luminous quality—just that pure clarity, the ability to know. We don't notice that because it's not a thing.

We're much more entranced by: "I don't like that tree. It's a little crooked. I don't like the way he walks. I don't like. I want this. Oh, wouldn't that be great if I could just really get into that third jhāna? I'd really be getting somewhere." But luminous, pure, empty awareness? That's not so exciting, is it?

When the Buddha said, "This sublime peace has been discovered by me, the Tathāgata, namely liberation through non-clinging"—

Can you even imagine that? Is that a state you can imagine—liberation through non-clinging? I can't. Because it's not a thing. It's not a state. It's not some end state we can reach and hold on to.

It's just this—moment by moment, one moment at a time, the mind that doesn't grip around or become entranced by our reactions. In that openness, that non-clinging, just for that moment, the purity of consciousness is recognizable.

And so when we talk about cultivation of the mind, it's not that consciousness gets more pure. It's more that we recognize more and more. It's not even a quality—just that. We simply recognize more and more. And mindfulness is our tool. Mindfulness is our vehicle, and mindfulness in each moment that mindfulness is present is actually a manifestation of that luminous purity of consciousness. We don't have to get somewhere else. We just turn our attention back into the mindfulness itself.

Ajahn Sumedho said that consciousness is the doorway to liberation. Don't think about it. Because as soon as we think, it's limited by our mind, which can only think of things and spaces and experiences we've had and things we've read—it's just thoughts. But you don't have to stop thinking either.

What could that mean? Consciousness is the doorway to liberation. "I want to understand that"—wanting is like this. That's all. Wanting. That's what's coloring the attention right now. Wanting.

So we learn to do our practice with sincerity, with commitment, feeling the sensations of the breath at the rise and fall or at the nose. Wholeheartedly, with full commitment, just in this moment. And from time to time, we turn around and simply notice the quality of what's going on in the mind that's observing.

This is where we begin to bring in right attitude. Right attitude allows us to notice things as they are. And as soon as we're noticing things as they are, even in just a moment, that purity of consciousness is noticeable again. Because it's only hidden from us when we're caught up in the wanting, in the aversion, in the self-referencing. It's not that it went anywhere—we just don't notice it.

One teacher said, in terms of right attitude, in terms of how we practice: you're not trying to make things turn out the way you want them to happen. You're trying to know what is happening as it is. Whether that's this half breath, whether it's the step, whether it's the sense of frustration, whether it's confusion—you're just trying to know what's happening as it is. When we want this or that to happen, thinking things should be this way or that way, that's expectation. And expectations create anxiety and can lead to aversion and wanting.

Now, if we think, "Okay, how can I not have expectation?"—you don't have to do that. "Oh, expectation is like this." And right there, there's the movement from expectation to mindfulness. That purity of mindfulness. Sayadaw U Pandita used to say that a moment of mindfulness is a moment of freedom. Because mindfulness is that simple attention, knowing what is, without adding wanting, without adding aversion, without adding stories.

Just: "Oh, aversion is like this. Expectation is like this. Grief feels like this. Vibrating—you don't even know the word for it—is like this. The breath in this moment is like this. Wanting it better is like this. Sleepiness is like this. Hating everything and everybody is like this."

There's nothing mindfulness can't know. A moment of freedom—because whatever the object or subject of the mindfulness is doesn't matter. That moment of pure mindfulness is free from attachment, free from the delusion of aversion, free from the delusion of self-referencing, of identification. That's really the moment of peace and freedom. It's not the final liberation, the sure heart's release. But it's a moment, an intimation, and it's real, it's true.

I think it's really important that we begin to notice—I want to say *value*. I don't mean hold on to. I don't mean build a story of "I'm doing really great" around it. But to pay more attention when these moments of simple presence happen. All you have to do is notice, "Oh, like that." Not go build a whole story across five pages in your journal. Just notice what it feels like. Notice how it changes. Notice how wanting or aversion or self-story comes back in—not with judgment, just to see how it happens. What's the trigger? What starts the pattern up again? And then, "Oh, yeah, it's like this."

What happens is that we really begin to deepen—and I think our whole life can be a deepening—in confidence in the power of mindfulness, in the purity and ubiquitous availability of pure consciousness. It's always available. Sometimes we can't get there. We can't find it, we can't think of it, we can't even remember it, we think we made the whole thing up.

And often that's what people experience in turning to this mindfulness, just this awareness of whatever: "Oh, it's like this." Whether practicing with your breath, with mettā, with choiceless awareness—whatever way you're practicing—just noticing the attitude of the mind that's observing. Something shifts. I don't know what exactly. I don't want to say you're free forever, you're liberated—not that. But something really shifts. And it's so unmeasurable. It's not measurable on a chart of stages of insight. It's not measurable on anything.

So it's really easy, then or later, for the doubting mind to come in: "No, I made that up. I was making it all up. I couldn't hold on to it. It's not bells and whistles. I didn't get a certificate. Nobody verified. I must have been making it up. It's not here now."

And so I really urge you to find that place of sincere motivation and a sense of trust and faith in your own experience—not in anything I said, not even in anything the Buddha said or that you've read, but just

seeing for yourself with interest, with honesty, with the real purity of your intention to practice for your own liberation, for your own happiness, for the happiness and well-being of others. Trust that motivation. Yes, we won't always do the wise thing because it's not always supported by wise attitude and wisdom. But it is, a lot.

And every time—every time there's just a moment of that purity of mindfulness—not only do we have a sense of being able to recognize it again, to have faith in it more, but it's also a moment of purifying our old habits. Because when we're really mindful, just for that moment, mindful of greed, greed is not being fed in the mind at that moment.

The Buddha talks a lot in terms of looking at your mind, looking at what you say and do and think, your actions—and not so much looking at the actions themselves, but at what's being fed, what qualities are being fed in the mind, what qualities are being increased, what qualities are being starved. I like that because to me it's very pragmatic and very helpful.

So take an example of working with the breath here. Very sincere. You're really dedicated. You're really trying to cultivate right effort. When you notice you're off, you come back. You're trying not to judge.

You come back. You're really trying to be precise. You're working, working, working, working. And slowly that's how it starts to feel. But we don't turn to look back at the mind. It's like, "Let me see the breath more clearly. It was clearer yesterday. Let me get it clearer." We think we're really working with clear motivation and wise intention. But what's being fed?

If you turn around and look, it's not a big secret. What's being fed is either incredible tension, frustration, self-hatred—take your pick, whatever your particular pattern is. And then on top of that, we go, "Oh my God, I'm really not doing it right. Because you're supposed to be relaxed. And if I was concentrated, I'd be happy. I am not happy. So I'm really doing it wrong." Then you're really feeding aversion even more.

Wise attitude is, "Oh, aversion is like this." Who cares if you're feeling the breath? You're noticing aversion. That's the practice. That's mindfulness. It takes a huge burden off, doesn't it? All you have to do is notice what's happening. You don't have to get it right. "Oh, aversion, like this."

Now in that moment of mindfulness, aversion is no longer being fed. Mindfulness is being fed. Aversion is being starved, to use the Buddha's terminology. And as Howie said, how much time we've practiced our habits over just one lifetime. But how many moments of mindfulness are there? I mean, it's not like one-to-one, okay? You don't even go there. We couldn't count it up anyway.

But it's really purifying our habits of mind, that ability to say, "Oh, look at that—me, me, me. Ha! Isn't that something? Me feels like this." Nowhere to go. Just like this. It's so simple that we can't really believe it. We tend not to trust it. I just want to beg you to let yourself trust it. That's all.

And then from that attitude, we can do any form of practice. Come back and be with the breath—not to get

somewhere, not to get concentrated, not to be a better meditator, but simply to notice what's happening right now in this breath. Why? Just because it's so much happier to simply be with knowing what's happening than caught up in all this other stuff. We get that. We like it. We like to come back. It becomes our refuge.

And as that happens more and more, the trust naturally grows more and more. And whatever goes on in our practice—it may be easier, harder, whatever—but on some level it just doesn't matter. Because awareness becomes our refuge. More and more and more, deeper and deeper. On retreat, off retreat.

And this is really what wise attitude is about.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. Thank you for listening.

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