Happiness and Harmlessness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:35

I'm Carol Wilson, and it's nice to be back. A couple of you have come quite recently, some of you have been here for months, and some for a few weeks. I probably say this sometimes, but it's really remarkable walking in here. I go to lots of retreats and I'm rather blasé about walking into retreat environments because I do it all the time, but this is lovely. It feels like you're really doing it. It's palpable. Very inspiring. Thank you all for being here. And I know that as pleasant and comfortable a place as this has been created to be, there is no escape.

Coming out of the interviews today, and also an article that a friend sent me yesterday, brought up what I want to talk about. It's really basic Dharma 101, but as far as I can see, it never stops being relevant. This article was a long piece in the New York Times called "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." Hopefully we're not going to agree in the end that our pursuit of happiness is futile. But in terms of how we usually pursue happiness, the way of the world of pursuing happiness—that is futile, useless, leading onward to more suffering and more confusion. So that's what I want to talk about.

There are a couple of different suttas, or discourses of the Buddha, and I'll quote from the beginning of one of them. To me, it really speaks to the fact that with our best intentions, we want to live in this world. Not only do we want to be happy, of course, but we also—and I'm assuming those of us here would agree—really want to live in a way that's harmless, in a way that brings about more peace, more connectedness. We don't want to create more suffering and hostility in the world or in ourselves. I think I could safely say that for people here.

But even with our best intentions, even if we just don't want to create more conflict in ourselves, even going around here with your mouths closed and hardly interacting with people, still hostility, aversion, and conflict arise in the mind. At least, please God, you don't act it out. But it does arise, despite our best intentions.

In this discourse, Sakka, the deva king, came down and was talking with the Buddha. He asked, "What are we fettered with? What are we chained with? Even though we humans, as well as devas, think: may we live free from hostility, may we live free from violence, free from rivalry, free from ill will, free from those who are hostile or from being hostile ourselves—even though we deeply think this, why is it that we keep ending up living in hostility, with violence, with rivalry, with ill will? What is it that fetters us? What is it that chains us?"

This is just one of the ways the Buddha outlines things, nothing you haven't heard before. But he begins by saying that beings are fettered by the bonds of envy and stinginess—envy, wanting what others have, and

stinginess, trying to hold on to what we have, not wanting to share. And this is caused by holding tight to preferences, by creating in our minds and hearts what is dear to us and what is not dear to us, and then holding tightly to that.

He doesn't stop there, and I'll go on. But I find this particular description both very useful and also unsettling. It shakes up the not-so-comfortable-but-we-think-it's-comfortable world, the description or way of being that we have. How can we not have preferences? How can we live without preferences? Right away the mind can start to jump into reaction: even the Buddha had preferences, even the Buddha chose how he wanted to live. Can't you hear how the mind is justifying ourselves somehow?

But he says this is caused by holding to preferences, creating what is dear and not dear and holding on to that, which of course is caused by desire, which is fed and increased by thinking about our preferences and by the ensuing papañca—the proliferation that comes around that.

So I want to talk about this holding to preferences, this dear and not dear. Why does that create this ongoing inability to live in a way that brings happiness and peace to ourselves and others, even though that's what we want?

I would think, at least in my own experience, that holding onto preferences—of course we have preferences—holding onto what is dear, trying to get rid of what is not dear, likes and dislikes, really arises from our deep, truly deep yearning to be happy.

And as you know, the Buddha often said that everyone wants to be happy. We just—he didn't put it quite this way—but we just don't really get how to do it. We're lost in delusion and not seeing clearly. Our holding to preferences arises from our misguided attempts to find some way to really be happy in this life, to find some way to bring happiness to others. But what it comes down to is that we really don't know what true happiness is. We not only don't know how to go about living in happiness, but we don't really know what it is.

And that brings me to this article, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," which is really very fascinating. I'll spare you—it's quite long—I'll spare you all of it. But it's an article about some very serious scientific research that's been going on in recent years. A group of four professors: one who's a professor of psychology at Harvard, one's a psychologist at the University of Virginia, one's an economist at Carnegie Mellon, and one's a psychologist and Nobel laureate in economics at Princeton. So we're talking serious research, not some loopy fringe thing.

These researchers, especially the lead one, Gilbert, started basically looking at what it is that we do to be happy—studying the question of what it takes to be happy and the decisions we make trying to bring about happiness in our lives, all very scientific with scientific method and lots of tests and studies.

In a series of studies, they made a slew of observations and conclusions that undermine a number of fundamental assumptions—namely that we humans understand what we want and are any good at

improving our well-being. The studies undermine that assumption. Basically, as he termed these studies, it is to wonder if everything you have ever thought about life choices and about happiness has been at the least somewhat naive and at worst greatly mistaken.

Now, these are scientific studies, and they're basically saying that we base our decisions on what will make us happy, on how we think we'll feel when a certain event happens, when we get a certain thing. And he goes on to show that basically we have no clue. We completely underestimate and overestimate how happy something will make us and how unhappy something will make us. And then we make our life decisions based on these assumptions, which turn out often—usually—to be not accurate at all.

An example: most people, if given the choice—which would you rather have, a broken leg or a trick knee?—people think a broken leg causes much more suffering. I'd rather have a trick knee. But over time, it turns out that a trick knee, a bad knee, although the immediate suffering in each moment is less, the amount of suffering over time is much, much more than a one-time intense experience like a broken leg.

And so he says, in general, we overestimate both how happy having something pleasant will make us and how long it will last. It doesn't make us as happy as we think, and it doesn't last very long. This isn't news to us, right? And the same for difficult things. We overestimate how horrible something will be and how much it's going to ruin our life. And it also isn't nearly as intense as we imagine and it doesn't last as long as we imagine. Sure, it still hurts. It's still sad. But it doesn't have the effect we think. And this is what we base our life choices on.

So that's just a real short beginning of what they're talking about. And essentially, I think that's what the Buddha's talking about. We base our sense of preference, of liking and disliking, of dear and not dear, on what makes us feel good in the moment—generally, what's pleasant. And what we think is going to make us feel bad, or it does make us feel bad, or even getting in the neighborhood of it makes us feel bad, and we run in the other direction. And we keep cycling our life like this.

And I know I've said this often, and I keep finding it in my practice on more and more subtle levels. Talking to people today, I can see how in real subtle levels it keeps coming in—that somehow this misunderstanding of what the happiness and peace the Buddha is talking about is, of what the happiness that's really available to us right now is—our misunderstanding of that, based on our not seeing ourselves and the nature of life clearly, keeps us looking in practice, in life, ultimately for things to finally get okay.

And it gets more and more subtle. But it's so easy that it creeps in—that somehow what we're practicing for, what we're living for, or the unspoken idea of enlightenment somehow carries the flavor of pleasantness, of happiness in the terms of we have what we like and what we don't like goes away. Or of somehow finally being in control and not being the so-called victim of all these unexpected, unpleasant, really crazy things that happen. Or at least—at least—even if a lot of unpleasant stuff happens, we're going to really understand it all. And so in that way, we're in control. That one really—I still fall into that one—but that one hooked me for a long time. It's okay, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, but I'm going to

really understand what's going on.

A sense of control, a sense of knowing, a sense of having.

To really turn around and look at what the Buddha was talking about when he says, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering"—the enlightened one, the peaceful one. He says he does not suffer.

It took me years to really consciously look at his life after he was enlightened and think, "Oh, his life actually doesn't sound like it was any more pleasant in the experiencing of it than most of our lives." He didn't particularly have good health. He had backaches. He had headaches. As you know, he had all kinds of sorrows and aggravations and the loss of people close to him—both family and his chief disciples. He spent forty-five years of his life in tireless service to other beings. His sangha of monks was split. One of his cousins tried to kill him. His clansmen on his mother's and father's side went to war over water rights and killed many of each other, and he had to go and mediate. He chose a very simple life, so he certainly didn't have much physical comfort.

And yet, and yet, he made it very clear to us that he no longer suffered.

So I need, in myself, to keep coming back and reminding myself: oh, having no preferences. You can look at it the other way and say, well, of course he had preferences. He chose to live as a monk. He chose to live a renunciate wandering life. He's always talking about—as Marcia mentioned in her talk—choosing wisely the people that you spend time with. He's not saying do whatever you want, it doesn't make any difference. He laid out a very strict, very comprehensive path of how to live.

So having no preferences doesn't mean, "Ah, what the hell? I don't know the difference. Liking, disliking, pleasant, unpleasant—who knows?" Not that at all. It means paying very careful attention, being fully present for all of it, the whole show. And within the field of experiencing really difficult life stuff, as the Buddha did, within the field of choosing to live as a renunciate, having no preferences means not being attached to having it any particular way.

So when there was suffering going on in his life, how is the Buddha different from us in that way? I mean, I can only project. I'm certainly not speaking from my own personal experience, so I don't know what the Buddha's mind was like. But it seems to me that the difference, based on his talking about not clinging to preferences, would be that he could flow with, be with, wide awake in the midst of all of it. The difficulty, the beauty, the frustration, the exhaustion, the discomfort of the way he lived—because he could just be in harmony with whatever is arising.

Not holding to preferences means ultimately: in this moment, whatever's arising is arising, and I don't need to make it different. I can't anyway. You can't change this moment, can you? I know we try. We spend a lot of our practice—really a lot—trying to change this moment. And it's such a ridiculous and impossible thing to even try to do, because the moment's already over before we've even been able to notice what it is. And then we get engaged in throwing it into the future and trying to change it, but it's

long gone.

But not clinging to preferences—the Buddha didn't awaken into some other life somewhere else. He lived a very engaged, connected, awakened life in this world as it is. And as he often said, without suffering.

So the suffering isn't about being able to change the external world. It's not about being able to have a better body. It's not about being able to manipulate and control our friends or the people that we're teaching. Liberation is really awakening fully into this moment without clinging to any preference whatsoever.

And I feel our whole practice is around allowing us to see and understand our moment-to-moment experience so accurately, so clearly, that our habitual or almost unconscious need to keep trying to manipulate and control and get it how we like it and avoid what scares us—that this drops away. Not because it should, not "I should get rid of this so I can finally be happy," but because it doesn't make sense anymore.

When we really experience with sati-pañña, with mindfulness wisdom, at a moment of sense contact, when we experience in that moment things just as they are, then the need—even just for a moment—the need for our ongoing construction of self and other, of trying to explain and assess and compare and give meaning to every sense contact that comes, in a way of trying to figure things out and control the world, that just falls away.

The need to grasp at the pleasant, the need to push away the unpleasant, the tendency to just space out and get deluded and ignore whatever isn't sufficiently intense to pull us in and say, "Hey, pay attention"—that drops away. We don't have to think about how we should be. It happens naturally, spontaneously, out of clear seeing.

The Buddha talked about cultivating unshakable deliverance of mind. That phrase really inspires me, because I feel that all of us here know the taste of freedom of mind. Really, it's moment to moment. It's not as if we have to experience either no freedom of mind at all or total absolute arahantship, with nothing in between. We all know a moment of freedom of mind where there's just being fully present, knowing a sight, a sound, a taste, a smell, and the knowing of it. And there's no adding of story onto it. There's no referencing it back to me. There's no clinging or pushing away. There's nothing. It's just this. There's no mind going, "Oh, now I'm experiencing a moment of freedom of mind." It's just this. It's so natural. It's so simple.

In that moment, the need to cling, to make dear or not dear, to manipulate, just doesn't arise, does it? It doesn't make any sense. You don't even think about it. And it's so normal and natural that we often don't even notice it—just, oh yeah, this is going on fine, fine, fine. But then this thing happened, and now I've got to fix it. And it's as if all that other stuff doesn't matter, because we get so caught, so entranced with our reactions to particular experiences.

This, of course, is where the Buddha was so brilliant and so clear in his precision in the way of talking about it. Here we have to mention the Four Noble Truths, which I'm not going to go into in depth. When the Buddha tried to teach us just what we need to free our hearts and minds—not to know everything he knew, but just to free us from our propensity to create suffering where it's unnecessary—the first thing he thought he needed to tell us was these facts of life. The first being, of course, dukkha: the fact that difficult, unpleasant things happen, that everything we experience is impermanent, is fleeting. And not just that it's going to go away at some point, but that even now, in this very moment, it is dissolving and changing. There is nothing reliable we can hold to. That's dukkha.

The second truth is that the cause of our anguish, of our ongoing suffering in our lives, is not the dukkha itself, but the habituated reactions and responses of our mind and heart to moment-to-moment experience—the clinging and the aversion to the fact that things are constantly changing, unreliable, and sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant.

The third truth is that when we really, even just for a moment, clearly recognize things as they are, there is both momentary and, at some point altogether, a real liberation of heart and mind. A cessation of the clinging, a cessation of the aversion, a cessation of this creation of unnecessary anguish and suffering. And that can be touched by us here and now, in any moment, no matter what the particular experience is.

Our practice here is one aspect of the fourth truth, the path that the Buddha laid out: purification of heart, of mind, of cultivation; clear seeing; insight; a heart and mind that in a moment is free of clinging, and that freedom allows us to see clearly. And then that clear seeing further frees the heart and mind from the tendency to cling.

I mention these not as an intellectual concept—"Oh yeah, the Four Noble Truths, yada yada"—but to really take it as a call to inquire into your own experience, moment by moment. I was really struck today in talking with people. I talked to ten or eleven people, and in very different ways—each person in his or her own practice, each practice going on its own trajectory, which is appropriate for that person, with nothing to compare to somebody else—I was struck by how this theme of dukkha, of difficulty, of unpleasantness, and of our reactions to it, continues to be a significant thread through all levels, all aspects of our practice.

And not a thread like a mistake. Not thinking, "Oh yeah, even though I'm doing subtle practice, I still have dukkha—what's wrong?" That's exactly why it's a theme. Nothing's wrong. The first truth is: dukkha happens. If you think something's wrong because there's something unpleasant or difficult in your practice—well, as we were teaching Dhamma Ruh, the Sri Lankan guy, some American slang, he's got this one down. He said the other day: "Duh!"

Dukkha's coming up. Nothing's wrong. It's part of life in this body on this planet.

The difficulty is that reaction—"What's wrong?"—it's so instinctive to us to somehow flinch back. And on all the levels that we experience the unsatisfactoriness and suffering of this world on retreat, on all

different levels... Talking to people today, the macro level, you could say, of the vastness and the unbearableness of how much suffering and cruelty and pain there is in this world—to start thinking about it is unbearable. To say, "Well, I'm just thinking, that's a thought arising now," the mind comes in and goes, "Well, you're selfish," and then you want to get lost in it again.

The sort of mid-level of something coming up in our practice, in our personality pattern, in our deep emotional, physical pain body—whether it's deep feelings of worthlessness or old traumatic memories or some deep loneliness or anger. Not just passing through, but the times when it comes up on retreat viscerally, in your cells and your practice. The mind says, "Why can't I just be back with lifting, moving, placing like it was yesterday? What's going wrong now? I've got to be with these waves of unpleasant emotion. I blew it." It's like, no. What's happening? What's happening now? No holding to preferences. That's another aspect of dukkha.

And then on seemingly very subtle levels where there's no big thing going on, but just in a moment where the steadiness of awareness disconnects, so to speak, from present moment experience. You're just there, there, there, and it just disconnects. And in that can come aversion or a kind of subtle restlessness, a subtle dissatisfaction—really the subtle element of samsaric unreliability. And you connect and it's gone again.

When it's gone, it's important to notice it's really gone. Because another thing we do is we hate the dukkha, and then when the unpleasantness is gone, we carry it around with us. Like one of my teachers used to say, it's like dragging a corpse around with you. "This was there when I wasn't paying attention, and as soon as I don't pay attention, it's going to come back." And then—what's happening now?

So the thread of how our heart and mind relates to both unpleasant and pleasant, but particularly the dukkha, because it's so ingrained to flinch away, to turn away, to think something else should be happening. It's really rare, really rare when things have been going the way you like them—which is "oh, good practice"—and suddenly it changes and it gets really difficult in whatever way, gross or subtle, it doesn't matter. It's really rare for the mind to just not have any quiver of preference, not have any quiver of "What did I do wrong and how can I get it back?"

And of course, everything we say, any instructions that are given, always tend in the direction of what seems like good practice. "And by the way, there'll be fear and there'll be aversion and you'll get caught." But when it's really going subtle, it's just note, note, note, note, note. Everything goes away really quickly. And then we think, "Yeah, that's what I'm heading towards—a world of no suffering, things just the way I want them."

But the second truth—again, it's not that the difficult stuff happens or that things change or that the way we think it should be isn't the way it is. I mean, really, how often in your life is the way you think it should be? How often does that actually happen at the same time that you still think it's the way it should be? Not very often, and it doesn't last very long. Then finally it gets to the way you thought it should be three years ago, but now you know it shouldn't be that way anymore. It should be some other way. It's hopeless. It is.

That is the futile pursuit of happiness. That's what they're talking about.

But we can only recognize the truth of this—of the fact that the freedom, the peace, the happiness the Buddha is talking about is completely not dependent on having any particular experience be present or absent. That it's absolutely about the relationship, about the clear seeing and the openheartedness that lets this mind and body just be completely open, awake, non-judging, non-resistant, non-clinging, in the midst of whatever experience arises.

That's not something we can arrive at experientially by thinking about it or by listening to it, by reading about it. All of that can help us begin to look. But we only recognize the truth of this for ourselves when we, even for a moment or so, stop our habit of running from the unpleasant and towards the pleasant. When we stop our habit of averting our attention and pretending to be here in this unpleasant thing, but really waiting for it to go away and for practice to start up again and get better. And I'm talking about practice, but I mean, this is the way we live our lives.

When we are able to be as open and present in the midst of the beautiful, in the midst of the boring—unbearably boring—in the midst of the painful. And this arises by our simple willingness to look, to just stop our habit of running and turn around and look and see what's actually going on.

And this, of course, as you know, is the whole thrust, the whole point of mindfulness and samadhi, the whole point of our practice—to give us the tools of how to look, how to stop and look, and also to help us recognize what's actually happening. Because as you know, we're so entranced by our reactions to present moment experience: liking the pleasant, disliking the unpleasant, ignoring the neutral. And then building—I don't know if you've noticed this, I hope you have—building incredible stories about ourselves around any stupid little pleasant or unpleasant or neutral sense contact.

It's really quite astounding, the creativity and fertility of the mind, of thought process, of papañca, to be able to create a whole world. And if you're in worthlessness, just hearing a sound and having a moment of aversion can lead you in no time at all to a complete assessment of what a rotten, negative, hostile person you are—totally believed. No clue in awareness of seeing that what actually happened was just hearing and the knowing of it, unpleasantness and the knowing of it. Well, we weren't aware of the knowing of it, were we? We were just aware of—boom—down the road.

Pleasantness works the same way. We're so entranced by these reactions and the stories we tell ourselves about them. What this means about me, what this means about practice, what this unpleasant feeling in the breath means about my practice—so I have to do this and change that and make something else happen so that my practice can get back on an even keel heading in the direction of Nibbana. Which God knows isn't here and can't ever be in that direction as long as my breath has this heavy tightness in it. So let's fix that and then the goal is around the corner.

And we believe this crap over and over and over, sense contact after sense contact after sense contact.

And we wonder why we're so exhausted. Why we're so lost. Why practice is so hard. Why life is so hard. We just really don't have a clue. We don't even know what's really happening.

And this is from that article again. Gilbert, the main researcher doing this investigation, says we don't even know what makes us happy. If it's difficult to figure out what makes us happy in this moment, how can we predict what will make us happy in the future? But how much of our practice, how much of our life is about trying to figure out what's going to make us happy or free or liberated? And how often is liberation just another way of saying happy—getting what I want?

So it's learning to see how we get so involved in our interpretations, our assessments of moment-to-moment simple experience. How so often the biggest enticement, the most seductive entrancement of all—and watch this in your practice, maybe I'm the only one—is that most of those assessments and interpretations somehow make every sense experience come back to revolving around me. Me, me, me. What it means about me, what my reaction to it means about me, what it's going to feel like for me in the future, how it's always been like this for me in the past. We're just the center of everything, the center of the whole world. Every sense experience is just happening to show us something about ourselves.

And because we get so enticed, it's hard to just see clearly enough to recognize: oh, that's just hearing and the knowing of it. That's just smelling and smelling consciousness. It's not quite juicy enough. If it's smelling and smelling consciousness, then yeah, that really makes me hungry. Then I can really get down on myself for being hungry because I had enough to eat and I want to keep the precepts and I shouldn't be hungry, and then I can get into a whole thing about how I can't even practice renunciation. That is much more suffering, but in a very weird way we find it more satisfying—because we're not looking carefully enough.

And I think we don't look carefully enough partly because we need some concentration and some mindfulness, and partly because of this ingrained, instinctive pulling away from dukkha, from the unpleasant, from suffering. Because looking carefully—the part that's so hard, the reason I think dukkha runs as a thread through all of our practice—is that to really open, to see things as they are, means finding the vision, the courage, even the interest, the resolution to stay here with as calm a mind and heart as possible in the midst of difficulty, as well as in the midst of beauty.

It's hard at first because we don't know any other way. The Buddha said—and I know this by heart—when he was talking about our habit, he says: "An untaught worldling, O monks, does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness."

That's basic. And I find it very profound, actually. The basic untaught person not exposed to the Dharma—the only escape they know from unpleasant experience, from painful feelings, is the enjoyment of sense happiness. So then in that person there becomes the underlying tendency, that subtle bias, that habit of mind to lust after sense pleasure. A lust for pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind. And

that's where we spend so much of our life—in an underlying subtle tendency to lust for pleasant feelings.

When we turn around then and look at the essence of a pleasant feeling when it's here, it's like so nothing, isn't it? Mostly in the world we never even hear about looking at pleasant or unpleasant or neutral feelings. And so mostly, as the Buddha said, we spend our lives trying to avoid the unpleasant ones and inculcating this lust for the pleasant and this fear of the unpleasant. Just feelings.

So when we start, and continue here, to have the steadiness of mindfulness—but also the resolution and the courage to just kind of stop running and turn around and really bring awareness to a pleasant feeling, to an unpleasant feeling, to a neutral feeling, should you ever notice one—what is a pleasant feeling, really?

It's like it's nothing. It's so short. It's so amazing that we spend our lives in driven pursuit of more of these fleeting moments.

I remember reading Ajahn Buddhadasa where he says, look at your life and see how—in his opinion—ninety percent of all the decisions you've ever made have been in pursuit of pleasant feeling. And when you really look at pleasant feeling, it's just so short. It's so ephemeral. It just comes and goes like a wave.

But when we stop and really look at this, the first moments of seeing it, there might be a moment of ease—but somehow it's not like, "Oh great, thank God, now I'm done with that, let's move on." There's some way it shakes up our world. Because we're basing our life, basing our understanding of happiness, basing our explanations of who we are and what's valuable so much on this pursuit of pleasant and avoidance of unpleasant—really unconsciously, when we don't pay attention.

And to turn around and just open to, "Okay, I can just be here with this fearful, unpleasant thing"—it's hard sometimes because it really means finding the stability and the greatness of heart to be present when all the suffering of the world is flashing before our eyes. Or when really strong, painful, grief-stricken memories are coming up and we're experiencing them with the intensity we felt when we were six months old. Or even the really subtle, seemingly subtle suffering of just that not-fitting discontent. Sometimes that's the worst of all because you can't even have the satisfaction in your mind of saying, "Yeah, that's really wrong, there's something horrible." It's just like, "Where can I go to get away from this?"

And the untaught worldling, as the Buddha calls them, doesn't know any other way. We're so fortunate that we have a path, that we have a refuge, because without that there is nowhere else to go.

This is what this man Gilbert is saying at the end, and he's light about it. He's saying that from all his studying, he really knows intellectually that what he thinks is going to make him happy isn't going to deliver in any way the way he thinks it can. But he's laughing as he says it. He says, "I really should have learned more than I have. For instance, I'm getting married in the spring because this woman is going to

make me happy forever and I know it." And he really laughs. You can laugh at it. It's good. He says he finds it funny, not because it's untrue, but because nothing could be more true. That is really how he feels. She's going to make me happy forever and I know it. And so he says, "I don't think I want to give up all these motivations."

So something about the belief that there's the good and there's the bad and that this is a contest to try to get one and avoid the other—he says, "I don't think I want to learn too much from my research in that sense."

Isn't that amazing? He's been doing this for years. This isn't like a one-off test he's been doing. It sounds like it's actually made him really very honest in looking at himself. But without a sense of the peace of the Buddha, of a path and a refuge in awareness—without a sense that real happiness expands beyond and doesn't depend on nāma-rūpa, on sense experience, on mental experience at all—without that, when we're just caught in the world of sense pleasures and experience, there's nowhere else to go for happiness. Of course people don't want to stop and turn around and look and see that it all just vanishes the moment you touch it. Because the mind thinks, "How can I bear that?" And if there were no other happiness, how could we bear it?

This is why I say it takes courage—talking to all of you and seeing it in myself. It's easier for me to see courage in others than in myself, of course. But it takes enormous courage because it's not like we just get to look once and go, "Oh yeah, that's right. Pleasant feeling vanishes. Unpleasant feeling vanishes. So no problem, I can be with this. I can just tune into the refuge in awareness and no problem."

No. It takes us at times into really deep experiences of grief, of fear, of all the deep and strongly habituated defenses of the mind against having to feel certain depths of suffering—mental, physical, emotional—because we think we'll die, because we think there's nothing else there if we feel this. How can I keep going?

And of course, you all know, you've all experienced—but we have to keep learning it more and more—that the actual opening to the suffering in the particular moment is the way into that release, that peace, that refuge in awareness. Because awareness is unaffected, unbothered, by whether it's a wonderful, incredible experience, by whether it's painful, by whether it's mundane. When we can take refuge in the knowing, in the awareness, it allows anything—whatever sense experience is arising, internal, external, mental or physical—it allows that in that moment to be a gateway to liberation, a gateway to peace, a gateway to waking up. When we can just notice what's arising and the awareness of it. When we become more interested in the awareness rather than assessing and trying to take refuge in the experience.

And how often are we trying to take refuge in the experience? "Finally that horrible thing stopped and I can just relax into this peaceful breath." And ever so subtly—ah, yes—we're taking refuge in the experience.

We think, "Now I've found the peace." But we're still ever so subtly holding on to experience. We don't have to flee from pleasant either. There's calm, and there's the knowing of it. Then out of nowhere comes this surge of energy and the mind is talking a mile a minute. "What's going on? I have to figure it out." No, I don't. There's just the mind going a mile a minute and the knowing of it. We don't need to refer it back to me and make up an assessment of what it means or an evaluation. Just in that moment—what's happening and the knowing of it.

But it takes a great deal of courage, because this real letting go of the clinging, of the trying to use experience for refuge, for safety, for something comfortable, for something familiar—the real liberation from clinging of heart and mind comes about when we understand, not intellectually but in ourselves, when we've seen so clearly, so thoroughly, the ephemeral, unreliable nature of the pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, of any sense experience, of the fact that there's just sense experience and contact and the knowing of it and nothing else there. When we really get that more and more, then quite naturally the tendency to clinging, the tendency to aversion, the holding to preferences doesn't arise—it falls away.

But this takes a willingness, an ability, the courage to let down our defenses against the fearsomeness and the unreliability of the world. This is the way Pema Chödrön describes it: "When we protect ourselves so we won't feel pain, that protection becomes like armor—armor that imprisons the softness of the heart. We do everything we can think of not to feel anything threatening." I actually think, and I know for me, a lot of my early years of practice was about that—somehow finding a way in practice not to feel anything threatening. We try to prolong feeling good about ourselves. Looking at color pictures in magazines of people having fun on the beach, many of us wish that life could be that good. "When we breathe in pain, somehow it penetrates that armor. The way we guard ourselves is being softened up. This heavy, rusty, creaking armor begins to seem not so solid after all. With the in-breath, the armor begins to fall apart and we find we can breathe deeply and relax. Kindness and tenderness begin to emerge. We don't have to tense up as if our whole life were being spent in the dentist's chair."

I can quite relate to that at times—that sense of just keeping the suffering a little bit at bay. And this tensing up, psychically tensing up, takes a huge amount of energy, psychic and even physical energy. We don't even know we're walking around so exhausted. There's so much energy available. People wonder why sometimes in concentration and mindfulness, as your practice deepens, there can be so much energy available. Maybe not this time of night—it's not steady state—but it does come. It's because that armor, that walking around tensed up like we're in a dentist's chair, starts to dissolve. And the energy is available for this simplicity of total presence, of pure seeing, of pure being—of simply allowing the mystery of life to present itself without having to know ahead of time or assess or refer it back or somehow control or be ready for it before it happens.

When we can just open fully into the mystery of this next moment, of this moment, without any reference point at all—not referencing it to good practice, not referencing it to what happened yesterday or what I think should happen or what this might mean, not referencing it even back to a sense of self, not making

any assessment whatsoever, but just total open presence with sati and samādhi, with concentration, with the unification of mind in that moment, and mindfulness—that's really taking refuge in awareness.

And in that moment, just for that moment, we're getting an inkling, we're getting a doorway into the peace of the Buddha, into the peace that's accessible to us all the time. We are so fortunate to even have a path laid out for us and a sense that this is true and possible and available. It gives us the courage and the faith to not cling so desperately to our search for fulfillment and sense of self in pleasant feeling, to release our desperate fear of the unpleasant as a sign that we're failing, as a sign that something is inherently and desperately wrong with us or the world.

We are as we are. The world is as it is. And actually, when we give up needing to understand how that is—much less explaining it to ourselves—and we give up needing to protect ourselves against how it is, but just have this trust, this willingness to just be here totally for this arising moment, no more, no less, then we begin to really touch the peace of the Buddha. We begin to understand what he means when he says the doors of the deathless are open for those who see, for those who hear—now, in this moment.

And it doesn't mean we're fleeing from the world of the senses. It doesn't mean we want to hate sense pleasure, or say, "Yes, let's have some more suffering because that's my way to freedom." It doesn't mean we're trying to surmount living in a mind and body. It just means understanding more accurately where the chains are.

I want to end by reading two things about this—one from the Buddha, one from a kind of New Age guy.

So Eckhart Tolle, the New Age guy, says it's not that we should no longer appreciate pleasant or beautiful things or conditions. Of course we do. But to seek something through these beautiful conditions that they cannot give—an identity, a sense of permanency and fulfillment—this is a recipe for frustration and suffering.

And from the Buddha: "The eye is not the fetter of forms. Forms are not the fetter of the eye." In other words, the eye isn't the problem. Forms aren't the problem. But whatever desire and passion arise in dependence on the two of them—on the eye, forms, and contact—whatever desire or passion or aversion arises in dependence on that contact, this is the fetter.

If the sense door or the sense object, the eye or the form, were the fetter, if those things were inherently what was keeping us in suffering, then the Buddha said this holy life for the ending of dukkha would not be proclaimed. In other words, if the eye and forms were the problem, there's nothing you could do about it. So the holy life would not be proclaimed.

"There is an eye in the Blessed One. The Blessed One sees forms with the eye. Yet no desire or passion is in the Blessed One. So the Blessed One is well released in mind."

I really like that. We don't want to hate the eye. We don't need to get rid of forms. We don't have to run

from contact. There is an eye in the Blessed One. He sees forms with the eye. But no passion or desire arises, and he is well released in mind.

Just opening to the mystery of whatever this next moment brings—without needing to run from it, hold on to it, make up a story about it. Just there is the door to the deathless.

So let's sit quietly for a moment.

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