Seeing Through Our Mental Habits

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:26

So you're still here after the first day. Sometimes, not always, but sometimes the first day can be a little bit arduous, a little bit fatiguing. Sometimes it's not. Nothing's always one way.

Tonight I want to talk about the essence, the attitude we need to support our practice. Really, in a way, the most important aspect of our whole meditation practice is not the technique or what's happening, but the attitude—supported by wise discernment, supported by right understanding—with which we do our meditation practice, with which we live our life. It's really right attitude and wise discernment.

There's a Tibetan saying that everything rests on the tip of motivation. So rather than looking towards external results, experience, what's happening, or how we like what's happening, or what we think should be happening, or what we want to be happening, the essence is really in the motivation, in the attitude.

Certainly, a sense for each of us in our life, in our spiritual path, and in our meditation practice here—a sense of internal connection with our deepest motivation, with why we're doing it, with our intention—is really essential. Otherwise you're not going to get through a day, you're not going to get through a sitting, never mind nine days, never mind our life. When things are going easy, it's fine, but when things get difficult or not the way we like them or we're confused, rather than fighting with what's happening, to turn our attention back inward and reconnect with the sincerity of our motivation is really what can give us the courage, the confidence, the trust to just be here for the next breath, to be here for the next step. We realign with our sincerity, with our intention when things are difficult—and when things are good also.

Part of what I want to talk about is wise attitude and sincere motivation, but also that by itself might get us going, might get us here, might keep us going, but it's not enough in isolation. Because with the most sincere motivation and intention in the world, if we don't have the right information, if we don't understand accurately, we can really be meaning to do good for ourselves and others and just not possess accurate information. We basically don't know what the heck we're doing. We get ourselves in all kinds of messes. So the wise intention and attitude needs to be supported by wise discernment, by clear understanding, by having the right information.

This is just for beginning the practice—the overview I want to talk about tonight. With the best will in the world, if we don't understand accurately, our choices may not serve us well, even if we're meaning the choice to be good for ourselves, good for others, to be for our own happiness.

The Dalai Lama said once that the purpose of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace, and that we are all equal in wishing to be happy, to be free of our suffering. He says that we all

share the right and the potential to fulfill this aspiration. That makes sense to me. Of course I practice to be more happy, whether it's the meditation practice or how I live my life, and we all share in that aspiration and the potential to be happy.

But here is the rub. Here is the nub. Without accurate information, the things we do, the choices we might make in our sincere desire to be happy, could be the very habits, the very way we look at life, that keep us spinning in confusion and suffering. Without wise understanding—hence why we practice.

You can see this everywhere. For example, I read a couple of years ago in a newspaper about an opinion poll that was done in Russia in the early 1990s, a few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As you know, Russia has been in quite difficult circumstances politically and economically. Life is hard for people. In this poll—I don't have the exact figures in front of me—one of the questions was: if Stalin was running for president, would people vote for him?

Now, by the point this poll was done, remember, Stalin was basically responsible for the murder of 20 million Russians in the Gulag. And this was no longer a secret. Before, people didn't really know, but it was out in public. So would people vote for Stalin? I think it was 19% or 20% who said yes, they would vote for Stalin if he were running for president. And another hefty percentage, over 20%, said they weren't sure but they might. Because basically they were wanting some kind of security. The sense that, you know, who cares if you kill 20 million people, my life might be more secure. Some sense of going for what we think will make us happy—comfort or ease or whatever it might be.

That's a bit of an extreme example, but in a way, it's what the Buddha is said to have seen when he first awakened under the Bodhi tree, when he came to his full understanding of the causes of our suffering and how we can live, how we can relate to life through wise understanding in a way that allows us to be free from dis-ease, dissatisfaction, confusion.

After he realized this—and saw that it's possible for all of us—he also thought, you know, it's so much trouble. People aren't going to really get it. And it would be so much dukkha for me, suffering for me, discomfort for me, to be constantly trying to explain this to people, and they're not going to get it. It's said in the suttas, in the texts, that he was inclined not to teach, not to share, because he thought it's just too subtle and people won't get it.

But luckily, he was moved by compassion. He could read people's minds and survey the world of human beings and other beings with his psychic powers and see people's minds.

And what he saw moved him to compassion—to teach. What he saw was just this, what the Dalai Lama said: that everyone wants to be happy, that the choices we all make in our lives are in some way, twisted or otherwise, coming out of our motivation to be happy. But because we don't understand accurately, because we're trapped in habits of mind that we don't recognize, habits that drive our choices, the very choices we make in our desire to be happy are the things that keep us spinning in confusion, in delusion,

in this sense of dissatisfaction and things just not working. This is what moved the Buddha to compassion, to share what he had recognized.

So with the best will in the world, without the right information, we fall back into these habits of mind. They're not bad. It's not like we're saying this is bad and you should change and do the right thing. It's just that they don't work. In terms of our own happiness, in terms of bringing ease and compassion and comfort to the world, these habits don't work.

So what habits do I mean? Very basic ones. This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi. Do you know who Bhikkhu Bodhi is? He's an American from Brooklyn who's been a Theravada Buddhist monk for many years in Sri Lanka and now lives back in the States. At this point, he's probably one of the two foremost translators into English of the Buddhist texts from Pali. Here's something he said: "Remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of our habitual assumptions and attitudes. 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."

These are the habits I'm talking about. Let me read it again: Most of our habits—and these are our mental habits, how we view our world and what guides our choices—revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. Does that sound familiar? Can you relate to those?

Now, I'm not saying that these are evils. And you may think, well, of course, of course I want to enjoy pleasure. Of course I want to avoid pain. Is the Buddha saying no, you should go out and look for pain and avoid pleasure at all costs? No. But these habits are so strong that they come to be the lens through which we evaluate experience. And that's what doesn't work. All pleasant experience comes to be good through that lens. Unpleasant comes to be bad. It leads to the reactions of wanting and aversion, and to the sense that everything centers around me. I'll say more about that later. It seems obvious, but it really doesn't work. These become the lens through which we view things, through which we make decisions. We don't realize those habits. It's like wearing pink glasses—we don't even see that we're wearing them. And then the choices we make don't necessarily work.

I just read this week a review of a book called *How Doctors Think* by Jerome Groopman. I haven't read the book itself, but there was one little point worth sharing. The review discussed how many misdiagnoses there are—which of course is understandable, we're all human. They said about twenty percent of misdiagnoses are technical errors or wrong readings of a CT scan or something like that. But according to this book, many more of doctors' misdiagnoses are based on how they're thinking, and how they think colors the decisions and diagnoses they make.

Here are a couple of examples. Emotions can interfere. A doctor may like a patient too much—there's a sense of liking, of pleasant—and they can't consider a worst-case scenario because it would be too unpleasant. Or they don't like a patient, and that patient is complaining, and they just have aversion to

that patient's complaining, so they don't really listen. They don't really take it seriously. Interesting, isn't it? Or the kind of stereotypes doctors have about age, about gender, about race, about socioeconomic class—whatever they hold that isn't even seen—can color the diagnosis. I remember reading in the past how for a long time, many women's heart disease and heart attacks were misdiagnosed and overlooked because the common thinking was that men are the ones who are stressed and have heart attacks, not women so much.

So these are just little examples. But you see, this is how it works for us all the time when we don't recognize that these habits are present and operating. They're not bad. And we don't even have to get rid of them. We just learn to recognize that they're operating, to let our attention be more with awareness rather than so caught up in trying to feed these habits.

The habits are the stream. Without recognizing them, we just jump in. We just say it makes total sense. But with the willingness to simply notice what's happening, we can step outside of that habit and go, "Oh, maybe there's another way."

A little example: just the other day, I was having to have a blood test read, so I was going to a medical lab to give my specimen. I went into the waiting room, and there was another older man there. One of the women who was working there—the door was open into where she was working—kind of came out and looked at us. The man started to say something, I started to say something, and she just slammed the door in our faces and went away.

I was like, "Whoa, clearly not in a good mood."

And it's interesting, because I was just there. I didn't have any particular thing going on. But as soon as she did that, I noticed irritation come up, aversion. It's like, "Someone's going to act like that to me? Well, the appropriate response is to act like that back." You know, that seems to make sense. Something unpleasant happens, right away something unpleasant goes back.

The man who was there said to me—very friendly, not angry—"Yeah, she's the one. Last time I was here, she really messed up my blood test." And he went on and on. It was really interesting just to see that's sort of the way the world works. Something unpleasant happens, then we respond with more unpleasant, and it just keeps escalating.

Then I thought, what could her day be like? She's working in a lab. She's basically examining blood specimens, urine specimens, and stool specimens. That's her day. Probably when we come walking in, we're like another walking specimen to her. That's probably how she sees us. And it could be easy to just move into this feeling of "this isn't so pleasant" and "your day isn't so pleasant" and the people and—you know—just a kind of aversion coloring everything.

That's projection, right? Maybe she just had a bad morning at home before she came. But either way, that response just seems reasonable to us. Something's unpleasant, we're going to be in a bad mood—that's

normal. Then we just throw that bad mood onto someone else.

But it is not inevitable. It is not necessary. We do not have to live by these habits. These habits of mind do not have to color our experience, do not have to define our life at all. And that's really what meditation, what mindfulness, can begin to help us see through, move out of, be free from. When we have the right information, we don't have to keep suffering from these habits of mind.

Another example: the first day of a retreat—and not only the first day. One of the reasons that a meditation retreat like this can be fatiguing, can be difficult... part of it is just the physical adjustment. We come from a really busy daily life, a lot of sensory input, a lot of doing, a lot of energy, maybe a lot of stress. We come here and sit down and either we're really physically fatigued and exhausted and it's just going to take a couple of days of rest—more rest—to catch up. Or we're used to a lot more sensory stimulation, and when that's taken away from the outside, the mind doesn't know what to do with itself. It kind of checks out. We're not used to sitting and walking so long. We're used to expending the body in different ways. And so just on that level, it can be uncomfortable.

But none of that has to be a problem. The level at which it becomes a problem is the level of how the mind and heart are responding, reacting to these particular circumstances. And that's the place that the meditation brings us to—to see that freedom is possible, as we said, here and now.

It doesn't mean you have to get rid of this body. It doesn't mean it'll never hurt. It doesn't mean you have to never be sleepy again. It doesn't mean you have to like what's happening.

That's a big secret you should know. We don't care if you like what's happening. And it doesn't matter one iota if you like what's happening. It doesn't matter even to you. In terms of the practice, it's not about getting better experience—that's not what's going to illumine us. That's not what's going to allow us to open to freedom. It's not about that.

It's about stepping out of believing, being driven by these habits of evaluating everything by whether it's pleasant, whether it's unpleasant, what it means about me. Those habits are what keep us spinning in samsara, in the cycle of birth and death, of suffering in a moment. Those are the habits that keep us confused.

And so when you're sitting here today or next week or next year and your back hurts a little bit, and you think, "This is useless, I'm out of here, I can't do this anymore"—that's getting caught in that pattern of "it's a little bit unpleasant, so it's bad." When you're sitting and the body doesn't hurt and the breath is light and subtle, you think, "Now I've got it. Now it's right. Now I'm doing it. I understand how to meditate. I'm doing so well." Same pattern. It's all about me. How am I doing? Is my breath getting better? Is my concentration getting better? Is my mindfulness getting better? It's all about me.

I'm not saying these are bad. I'm just saying they're ubiquitous. They are really the way we tend to look at ourselves and life. And they don't work. That's why we're here.

So what is the right information that informs our attitude, that informs our practice? The Buddha, as those of you who have practiced a lot before know, distilled what we need to know to begin to see through these habits, to be able to step aside and watch them running but not be run by them. What's the information we need that helps us meet our life, meet experience, meet ourselves and one another in a different way—in a way that's more harmonious, in a way that allows for compassion and connectedness?

As you know, he distilled this in his first teaching. When he did finally decide to teach, after his awakening, he still spent seven weeks hanging out in the bliss of Nibbana. But then he spent forty-five years teaching. So when he finally stopped this and went to teach his first teaching—the one that he repeated over and over, the really elegant distillation of what we need to know—it was the Four Noble Truths.

I'm just going to say these very simply. The first truth: the word in Pali is dukkha, which I like to translate as unreliability, unsatisfactoriness. It doesn't mean that all life is suffering and only bad things happen. That is not what it means. It means that stuff happens. When we're born into a body, there are going to be times when this body hurts. We're all either going to die young or experience sickness, old age, and disease. We're all going to experience really beautiful things, and then we're going to be separated from those things. We're all going to have to be united with things and people that we would much rather not be united with.

There is a part of life that is what you would call unsatisfactory, unreliable. We can't depend on it for happiness in any lasting way. This seems obvious, right? It's not like he's proclaiming something we don't know. But in another way, how much of our mental energy—our psychic heart and mind energy—is spent in resisting this? Or blaming ourselves? We get sick, something goes wrong, we lose our job, someone makes a face at us, and we think, "Oh, they don't like me. I'm such a bad person."

How much of our mental energy is spent either blaming ourselves for not being perfect, or trying somehow to deny, to hide, to fix things?

Really, when you explore deeply your own ideas about what freedom would mean, what happiness would mean, what peace would mean—does it include that pain in your back? Does it mean that your migraines go away and never come back again? Does freedom include losing your job? Does it mean getting divorced? Does it mean having your friends suddenly move into some other life and losing connection with them?

When I think about happiness without being careful about it, when I notice what I'm actually imagining as ease, as freedom, as nirvana, it usually revolves around everything being really nice and pleasant—floating on a cloud with nothing bad happening anymore. It's really deeply ingrained, this sense that the bad stuff, the difficult stuff, isn't supposed to happen. But the Buddha is saying no, it's just part of life.

Another aspect is the fact that yes, beautiful things happen. There is pleasure. There is love. There are wonderful things. And it all changes. We can't keep anything constant. It's going to change. That's just another fact of life. So that's the first truth he calls dukkha—to be understood.

The second truth is that the cause of our suffering, our anguish, is not the fact of the first truth. That's just how life is. Rather, the cause of our anguish is the way our hearts and minds respond in the face of the difficult, in the face of losing what we love, in the face of having what's pleasant go away. It's not that these things happen, but the reactions, the habits of our hearts and minds in the face of this first truth—that is what really causes us the dis-ease, the sense of real suffering, of anguish, of life not working.

The Buddha uses craving as shorthand: the fact of wanting things we like to stay, wanting things we don't like to go away, wanting to be something or to be other. But really, these reactions, these responses, are the habits that Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about—those three habits. Wanting what we like, leading to aversion toward what we don't like, and thinking everything is all about me and what's going to make me feel good. So that's really the cause of the dis-ease in the face of things not being the way we want them to be.

The first two truths are simply stating how things seem to be. The third and fourth truths are that it doesn't have to be that way. The anguish described in the second truth exists simply because we misunderstand the way things are. It's not that we have to become a different person. We can simply learn to perceive ourselves and the world more accurately. And when there's accurate perception, when we have the right information even just in a moment, then the habits of mind—the clinging, the aversion—stop making sense, even just for a moment. They let go. With wise discernment, with a relaxed and really full presence, the clinging lets go.

And there can be a moment. It can be just momentary. You don't have to think about some end state that never changes, one we're never going to reach. That's just an idea that doesn't really relate to anything. But we all experience, over and over, moments when the clinging and aversion just let go. And it's possible to recognize the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of this mind and body, of life.

Take Guy's example from last night when he talked about getting on the plane. A simple example like that. As long as he was wanting to be in first class and disgruntled about not getting it—it's not huge suffering, it's little—but the way the mind works is the same whether it's something small or something enormous. He was in dis-ease, out of harmony, not happy. Suffering. Not huge suffering, but definitely not happy. And you can imagine how something little like that could work you into quite a state of aversion and negativity. And then if you really lose control, you mouth off at the flight attendant, and it just keeps escalating.

But as soon as that other person said, "Oh, I'm quite happy here," Guy's mind was open enough to recognize, "Oh yeah, right, this isn't so bad." In that moment, letting go of the wanting, letting go of the aversion—not as an act of will, because that's just more "me" wanting something—but simply recognizing, "Oh yeah, this is just what it is. What's the problem?" In that moment, there is no problem. The situation

doesn't have to change. The mind that was caught in wanting, in aversion, in reactivity, simply sees: this doesn't make sense.

It lets go. We're in peace and ease, just as it is. This is really the cessation of clinging. In that moment, the cessation of suffering.

Today someone asked in the questions, you know, part of our practice seems—as Guy was talking about last night—really meeting the difficulties that arise in our mind, in our body, really meeting them with full, kind, non-judging attention, being there for them. We really learn from this. And on the other hand, there's the silence, the stillness, the peace in the room. How do these come together?

At times it really seems like we're struggling with a difficulty, then the difficulty's gone, and we can appreciate the peace, really feel what peace feels like. Because at first—and not even at first, but often—the difficulty, the reaction of our mind, which is what the difficulty actually is, not what's happening, seems so real. It so colors our perception that we know of no other way to be with it. We can only recognize peace and ease when that reaction's gone. That's right.

But what happens as we go on and on in practice is that the two come together. The thing that seems to be difficult—having to sit in steerage, or having your knee really killing you, or sitting here and having a really difficult memory come up with a lot of sadness, your mind just in chatter—you have to get rid of that to appreciate the stillness, the ease, the peace.

What happens with this third truth is that we start to begin to recognize, through the simple knowing of what's happening, through shifting our interest from what's happening or the experience and what I think about it to just the simple knowing of whatever's happening. In that knowing, we're touching. Pain is like this. Sadness is like this. Thinking is like this. None of it's a problem. None of it's a problem.

And when the reactions of mind to whatever's happening really let go, just for a moment—oh. Knee hurting, at ease. They come together. Natural peace and ease of mind and body doesn't mean the body never hurts. It doesn't mean we don't have difficult emotions. It doesn't mean that everything starts to be the way we want it to be. It means we realize more and more: hey, it's out of control. And the problem isn't that things aren't the way I want them to be. The problem is I want.

Oh, this is how it is in this moment. It doesn't mean we can't move from how it is. We can respond appropriately. It doesn't mean a kind of passive giving up, but it means a waking up with full presence. Oh, this moment is like this. Total presence. A friend of mine calls it the place of no problem. Just for a moment. That's a moment of cessation of clinging, what the Buddha called liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. That's really the freedom. That's accessible here and now and always, just for a moment. It's not a state. And it's not some incredible, blissful experience. Just, oh.

But notice, as you go through the days here—they happen all the time, and in our daily life too, but one of the lovely things about a retreat is we have more space, we have more time, the little things you can really

notice. So notice when there's a moment of that natural peace and ease. It might be that we notice it early first when nothing particular is happening. You're just sitting and drinking a sip of tea and you're really present and it's just this. Ah.

Our tendency can be to think, oh, it was the perfect cup of tea. If tomorrow at exactly the same time I make exactly the same tea, that's going to do it. And it'll take us the nine days to realize it wasn't about that.

So let's short-circuit that. When you notice that perfect moment of looking at the moon out there in the crystal air, when you notice that peace, that ease, that cessation of suffering, that wakeful presence—instead of focusing the attention out there on what the experience is, just notice that freedom from clinging, that liberation through non-clinging. Just kind of recognize what that peace and ease is like. And then we start to recognize that it's possible throughout all experience.

Not every moment, God knows. I mean, that's a possibility, I'm not saying that's what it's going to be like. It certainly isn't like that for me. But you'll find it can be accessible when you're sitting there and the person next to you is snoring and you think you just want to throttle them. Their snoring is ruining my... and suddenly it's just hearing, and there's no problem. Next minute, a problem. Moments like that are great because then you can see—wait a minute, it can't be the external experience that's the problem. It's the wanting it to be different.

Wow, isn't that fascinating? It's not bad. It's not like we're bad because we want, but it's fascinating. And it shows that peace and ease is much more accessible than we might normally think. You don't have to get to some incredibly rarefied state. So just notice as you go through the days—the sitting, the walking, the eating, taking your shower, going to the bathroom—it doesn't matter what we're doing.

And the fourth truth that the Buddha talked about is that there's a path. There's a path because mostly we don't notice that the habits are operating. Mostly when there are these moments of peace and ease, rather than seeing that it is the absence of wanting, the absence of believing in aversion, the absence of thinking it's all about me—we tend to focus outward, you know, trying to get back that perfect cup of tea. And so there's a path so that we can practice in all aspects of our life, seeing how these habits of mind keep us spinning in confusion, recognizing over and over how when the habit just for a moment goes away, there's no problem. We can learn to shift where we take refuge. We can shift what we trust.

Ajahn Sumedho—he's an American who's been a monk in the Thai tradition for over thirty years, really quite wise, I love doing retreats with him—he says a shorthand for the whole eightfold path, which includes wise understanding leading to our motivations, our attitudes, how we speak and act in the world, how we meditate, mindfulness, energy, and concentration—a shorthand for all of that would be awareness. The whole eightfold path could be awareness. And Thich Nhat Hanh says a similar thing: mindfulness. Same thing, really.

So there's that path. We can learn to shift our refuge. The reason these habits are so strong, the reason we tend not to recognize them, is because we're believing them. We're trusting them. It's our refuge. So, for example, when that lab lady slammed the door in our face and the first thing that came up was annoyance at her—a kind of sense of "can't treat me like that," even though that wasn't the thought—that's where the habit of taking refuge is, in that aversion. The safe place is to answer it with aggression, with aversion. That's the habit.

When something really pleasant is dangled in front of us, or when you're in pain here, the deep habit that we believe is: if I can get rid of this pain, if I can go have something pleasant, I'm going to be happy. That's what we trust. That's where we place our refuge. And as long as we keep doing that, that's where we're going to stay.

So in taking awareness as the path, it's shifting our interest, shifting our refuge from what's happening to trusting that we can simply be in the knowing of what's happening. And that's actually a place of freedom. Just in a moment. And it doesn't take huge effort or huge energy.

So, for example, right now, just humor me—feel your hands, whether they're touching each other, whether they're touching your knees. Can you just feel your hands?

Just notice the sensations. Is that pretty easy to do? Can you do that? Doesn't take a lot of effort, does it? Not too hard. That's all. That's awareness. Just feeling those sensations. That's pretty accessible, isn't it? Not too esoteric.

Now, to stay just on that level of simplicity and not—"Oh, they're just sensations." Does the mind then go into, "Well, my hands are kind of warm. They're feeling kind of tight. Maybe I shouldn't have them in this position. They're kind of tense. Maybe I should change it. What's the matter?" That's like we're off of simple awareness. Then you might notice, "Oh, that's thinking," and that's awareness again.

So awareness doesn't take a huge amount of effort or energy, but it takes a steadiness through the day. Our whole practice here is really that simple quality of awareness throughout the whole day. Just coming back, coming back, coming back.

Our tendency, when we give instructions in the sitting to feel the sensations of breath, in the walking to feel the sensations of feet—our tendency from our habits is to get into evaluating what the sensations of breath are like, evaluating how clearly we're feeling the sensations when we're walking, getting really tense, trying to do it better, trying to feel them longer, trying to feel it more subtly. But none of that makes any difference. We're just setting ourselves a very simple task so that we can keep coming back to the awareness, the awareness, the awareness.

As Ajahn Sumedho says, the wonderful thing about awareness in terms of what we're aware of—awareness, he calls it the point that includes—it can be aware of anything, everything. There's nothing that awareness can't be aware of. And this is the other thing: awareness doesn't care what it's aware of.

It's not like if your awareness feels a really refined, subtle breath, that's a better, cleaner, purer awareness than awareness of a rough, tight breath. It doesn't make any difference.

It's about beginning to trust, to recognize, to take refuge in just that simple knowing—the sensations as your hands touch. That's all. We hear a sound, just the awareness of hearing it. It's so simple, so nothing. There's nothing to hold, there's nothing to point to, there's not a state you can name—so we overlook it. But awareness is always available as long as we're conscious.

In a way, our practice is really to shift our interest and our evaluations from what's happening to the awareness itself. Moment after moment after moment.

It's like a Tai Chi move, I like to think. So we're sitting here fighting with sleepiness. "Oh, sleepiness is like this." That's Ajahn Sumedho's language. Nothing else to do. Let go of trying to get rid of the sleep. "Oh, sleepiness is like this." That's awareness. Trying to feel the breath and the mind's going off into past and future, thinking it shouldn't be thinking. "Oh, thinking is like this." You're sitting and your back's hurting. "Oh, tightness is like this." "Boredom is like this." "Being all caught up in thinking I should be doing something better is like this."

There's really nothing that's outside of awareness. But we keep overlooking that and getting back involved again in these habits. They're just so deeply rutted in the way we view experience.

You know how the Buddha describes our moment-to-moment experience in terms of the six sense experiences? That would be seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—physical experience, physical sensations—and mental. That's the sixth sense door.

So mental experiences—emotions, thoughts. And the way the Buddha describes experience is again very, very elegant and simple.

Take any one moment: just those sixth sense experiences happening over and over and over, out of which we construct all kinds of fabulous stories and explanations. Take a physical sensation, or take a sight. If there's an eye that works—a working eye—and a form comes in front of it, and there's consciousness, when those three come together, he calls that contact. That's a moment of seeing. And every moment that there's contact, whether it's seeing or hearing or sensing, along with it there's a subtle mental experience of it being either pleasant or unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant—neutral.

This is fast, fleeting, happening every time there's contact, which is basically every moment. But we mostly don't notice it; we're busy, it's happening a lot. And from that, when we're not really noticing, what's common is: it's pleasant, so right away there's the "oh yeah, more of that"—a leaning into, a wanting. Unpleasant, like that lady slamming the door in our face, and right away there's a pulling back, a "no," a not-liking, which can go all the way to aversion, to murderous rage, or to fear. The wanting could be just a little "oh, I want it," or it can lead us into years of our life trying to get something. And then neither pleasant nor unpleasant—we often don't notice it at all. We often get bored at this point.

The other habit is that we think it's all about me. And this is really, I would say, at the bottom of all of it—the thing that we don't see. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—there's a reaction of mind, and that reaction of liking, of not liking, of being bored, we're completely entranced by it. It's all about me.

Notice this. I love noticing this. You have to have a sense of humor; it helps. It's all about me. At the same time, don't take it personally that your mind makes everything about you. But notice it.

You're sitting in the dining room and somebody walks by at the far side, really slowly, looking really mindful. And you notice that, and immediately: "They're better than me." Somebody drops a fork, and right away you think, "Oh, glad that wasn't me." Somebody is sitting next to you making noise. "How can they do that? Don't they know it's bothering me?" It can be anything. There can be just a birdsong outside, and at first it's just a moment of hearing, and then: "Ah, I'm really having a peaceful moment enjoying this birdsong. I'm really so peaceful." Or your back hurts: "I'm not doing well." Your breath is heavy: "I really can't meditate because I have such a heavy breath. I'm so stressed, I'm so self-involved." Or you start noticing how every thought's all about me, every second thought, and you think, "Well, I'm really a completely self-centered jerk. Nobody else is having thoughts like this."

I'll just tell you now: we all are. We all are. It's just what happens. It isn't personal. That's what I mean by "it isn't personal." But it's fascinating.

Mingyur Rinpoche, who is quite a fun and lively, humorous Tibetan teacher, describes how we make this all about me, making ourselves the center of the universe. He says this fascination with me, this felt sense of "me here now," he calls it the original measuring point for samsara, or the cycle of suffering.

And he uses an example. He says in Tibet, when we're going to build a house, the way we measure out the foundation is we start from a place in the middle and we get a long rope, sort of like a measuring tape. From the point in the middle, we measure out to the end and all the way around until you have the footprint for the house. And he says, in that same way, everything is measured from that felt sense of me here now. That's how we measure everything that's going on. It's our biggest entrancement.

When we're so entranced in that way, that's what keeps us spinning in these habits of mine. It's all about me, and this is unpleasant, so we've got to get rid of it. It's all about me, and this is pleasant, so we've got to have more. Until we stop taking refuge in these habits and are willing to just experiment with taking refuge in the awareness itself, we're not going to see through it.

But when we're willing to just stop a minute and say, "Oh, right—feeling like I'm so important is like this. Embarrassment that I dropped the fork is like this." You don't have to fix anything. It's just this step into awareness of it is like this. It's really very accessible.

When we have this attitude, this willingness to just step into the awareness—not to evaluate everything that's happening by whether we like it or don't like it, whether it feels good or doesn't feel good, what it means about me—not to evaluate at all. Mindfulness, awareness, is just this simple meeting of experience.

Whatever is happening, just as it is. Relaxed, without a lot of story about it, not judging. Just being here for this moment. And then this moment changes, being here for this moment. Over and over and over.

When we're able to do that, just willing to do that, our refuge begins to shift. We begin to see that there is really a possibility for a kind of ease and peace in relationship to this life, to ourselves, that we might not have expected, that we certainly didn't experience before. And it doesn't mean that the situations of our life necessarily have to change.

The Buddha, when he awoke—his awakening didn't change his world. It didn't mean that difficult stuff didn't happen. He lived a life where he had all kinds of suffering: the suffering of war, the suffering of illness, the suffering of friends dying, the suffering of relatives trying to kill him, trying to split the monks, trying to make him look bad so they could be in charge. Organizational dukkha, power politics. Monks and nuns breaking all kinds of rules, causing all kinds of trouble. All he wanted to do was go sit under the tree in the bliss of nirvana, but he had to deal with all of this because he chose to, out of compassion for the world.

His awakening didn't change that. He had headaches. He had backaches. His most beloved disciples died before him. Yet he was the peaceful one. He said he was free—free from suffering, free from confusion.

We don't have to have a different body or different circumstances in our life. It's really accessible to all of us, moment by moment. Don't look for some big blowout where everything's going to change, it's all going to be light and glitz and free from now on. You're just setting yourself up. But notice these moments when we shift from being caught in our habits, seeing the world through these habits, to the potential for simple awareness. Oh, it's like this.

Mindfulness—when we're mindful, any experience is a doorway to freedom. It doesn't matter what's happening. Without mindfulness, without the refuge in awareness, the most blissful, beatific experience just keeps feeding that sense of it's all about me.

So this is our practice here: just to learn, moment after moment, that we can really trust awareness. We can really make it our home, our true home.

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