# The Jewel of Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:26

So what I hope to talk about tonight is falling in love with awareness, recognizing our true home. Essentially, what's the point of what we're doing here, in and out, in and out? What's the breath got to do with it?

This is from Sogyal Rinpoche: "The purpose of meditation is to introduce us to that which we really are, our pure awareness, which underlies the whole of life and death. In the stillness and silence of meditation, we glimpse and return to that deep inner nature that we have so long ago lost sight of amidst the busyness and distraction of our minds. Meditation then is bringing the mind home."

I'd like to say it's not so much bringing the mind home as if it were ever somewhere else, but simply learning to recognize more frequently and trust the recognition of pure awareness as our true home.

Why? Because essentially, that's the path of happiness. That's the moment—a moment of what Mark talked about last night—the ending of suffering. Not some place in the future at the end of some long stream that we get to, but right now in this moment. When we recognize true awareness rather than getting lost in the habits that Mark spoke about last night—the habits of wanting, of aversion, of me, me, me. When we shift our attention from objects and experience, from "what am I going to get" and "what does this mean," back to the simplicity of awareness in this moment. That's essentially what I want to talk about.

I wish I could just share with you the simplicity and the amazingness of this—the sense of the simplicity of consciousness, of knowing. It's like a radiant jewel sitting here that we hold in our hands, that shines in every single moment of conscious experience. And we're so busy looking for something to make us happy, so busy trying to get rid of the things we don't like, that we miss it, miss it, miss it. And when we don't miss it, it's not fancy enough, so we don't trust it. We don't recognize it.

You don't have to be in deep absorption, in samadhi, in silence, in order to recognize this. It helps, just because part of why retreats are so difficult sometimes is because the practice goes against the habits of our mind, as Mark talked about. It really is turning around and recognizing, just resting, just trusting in the simplicity of mindfulness, of awareness, of knowing.

It's so simple, but as the Buddha said, the path of his teachings, of his practice, goes against the current of daily society. That was true 2,600 years ago, and it's true now. It goes against the current of what external society feeds us.

And then as we sit here and get quiet—well, you found out, right, in these three days, those of you for

whom this is your first retreat. The others of you maybe forgot and re-remembered that somehow it isn't just this smooth trajectory. We come and sit down and think, "Awareness, whatever's happening, there's peace." It's like, I don't think so. And the habits that we've imbibed from the culture externally are also the ones that we either don't see or deeply trust internally. So the practice is really just to help us shift where we place our trust, how we can recognize our true home. It's really about what do we really trust? Where do we really go for refuge in default mode or when things are tough?

This is from the Dalai Lama on why we practice. He says the purpose of spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace. We are all equal in wishing to be happy and to overcome our suffering. And he believes that we all share the right and the potential to fulfill this aspiration.

It came up in one of the groups—what brings us all here. On some level, however we might express it differently for ourselves, there is this deep, really deep wish for happiness or peace or a more connected life, to live with compassion, whatever words you use for yourself. And this is, for each of us, valid. And true, as the Dalai Lama is saying. It's really an expression of something we already know, what we so long ago lost sight of but have never really completely forgotten—this really deep essence of just the potential of awakening. Something pulls us to it.

But when we don't recognize how deeply conditioned we are by these habits of mind—by how we relate to experience—the very things we do in our commitment, in our efforts to bring happiness, peace, ease, love, whatever you say, to ourselves and to others, if we don't understand accurately, if we don't perceive ourselves and experience accurately, then the things we do in the service of happiness actually just keep us spinning in confusion. It's very poignant.

In a way, this is what the Buddha saw. It is said that after his years of practice, when he first awoke under the Bodhi tree and really understood as a human being the end of suffering for himself—and through himself, the potential for everybody—at first he wasn't very inclined to teach. First of all, he was just happy in the bliss of Nibbana. That was one thing. Another thing, he thought, "This is subtle. It's hard for people to see. And it will be wearisome for me to be teaching this."

But he was prevailed upon, and because he had these great psychic powers from his awakening, it is said he could survey with his mind the minds and hearts of all beings in the world. The thing that moved him to spend the rest of his life—forty-five years—just sharing what he had learned was the great compassion of seeing just this: that everyone deeply wants happiness.

And due to our confusion, our misunderstanding, our ignorance—ignorance not in a pejorative sense, just the ignorance of not knowing accurately—due to this ignorance, even in our acts of trying to bring happiness to ourselves and to others, we're doing it from confusion, and it just keeps us spinning in cycles of confusion. That is what moved his heart to compassion. And it's really very poignant to see that.

What's also important is the fact that at any moment—just for a moment—we can step right out of that

cycle of wanting and suffering and spinning and confusion. It's not like you step out of it forever, but there's only this moment, only this moment. In any moment when we turn around and look back at awareness, look back at the knowing itself, we step out of that cycle of confusion. This is not only possible; we actually experience it many, many times in a day. Often we don't notice. Maybe some of you have noticed. Sometimes we notice and attribute it to the wrong thing.

For example, you're just sitting, having a cup of tea. Nothing special. But it's one of those moments where suddenly it is special. Just peaceful, no problem. It's not like fireworks going off, not like some incredibly ecstatic experience—that's too obvious. Just that sense of peace and ease. Ajahn Amaro says that peace and ease, that is the natural peace and ease of body and mind. We just experience it. Or walking in the desert. Or suddenly in the struggle of a sitting, there's one perfect, peaceful breath.

And our tendency then is to think, "Wow, that time I had that tea yesterday, that was so perfect. What time of day was it? Let's see, it was about right after the qigong. So maybe it was the qigong. And then if I go in and walk in just the same way and have the same kind of tea and sit in the same place with the sun coming in the same way, I'll have the same experience again." Or when we have that peaceful breath, we think, "Ah, finally I got it right. Not too short, not too long, just right. How can I get the breath to be like that again?" Because we're looking outward to experience, to objects, and we're missing that simple knowing, the simple awareness itself.

But the habits of mind are so tricky. If we're not aware of them, we can have the most deep intention in the world—really sincere, really pure, just like the Dalai Lama was saying, just like His Holiness, just like the Buddha saw—that we really want happiness. And that's the sincere, appropriate intention. But the intention itself—and it really helps us to connect with our intention every day, over and over, to connect with your aspiration—we need to find that. It gives us a sense of confidence, of willingness, the energy to show up again when things get hard. Really honor that. But the intention also needs to be balanced with what we call intelligent awareness, with discerning wisdom. Not complete wisdom, but the wisdom of just recognizing how these habits, when they're present in the awareness, color our perception, our assessments, our choices—when we don't recognize them. And this is really a huge aspect of practice.

This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi. He's an American monk, one of the two most—I would say—foremost translators into English of the Pali texts, the original Buddhist texts that are alive today. He says, again, remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes. 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.

Do you recognize any of those three? Any of those come up today?

Now, he's not saying that enjoying pleasure is bad. He's not saying that avoiding pain is wrong. To preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self—he's pretty much saying that's impossible, but we give it a heck of a good try. What he is saying is that those are the habits that, if we

really look deeply, I'd say most of us—certainly me, and I know I'm not alone—when I look deeply at how I react, how my mind reacts to situations when I'm not balanced and present, that's where my mind goes for refuge. I'm not happy, something's unpleasant, when it was so cold and raining. When my mind wasn't balanced and I didn't notice, I would go for getting comfortable—that's going to make me happy. There's nothing wrong with getting comfortable. It's the thinking that that's where happiness lies.

If I'm suffering in the cold, there's the aversion to avoid discomfort, and beneath that, a deep belief—not just that I should get warm if I can, but the deep belief that my unhappiness in this moment, my separation, my discontent is *due* to the cold. It's due to exactly what Mark was talking about last night in terms of aversion. The deeply held belief that that's where freedom is going to be found—like rearranging the furniture in prison to make it more comfortable. So engaged in doing that, we don't even notice the door is open and we can walk out.

Mark talked extensively about the first two habits. The third one, which I want to explore a bit, is the sense that everything revolves around my individual self. My shorthand for that is simply: *it's all about me* . Just notice that.

But first, let me say something about how these habits, when we don't notice they're present, really color our perception, our recognition of what's happening, the choices we make.

I just read a review of a book called *How Doctors Think* by Dr. Jerome Groopman. He's talking about misdiagnoses that doctors make and what factors, based on extensive research, lead to these misdiagnoses. He says technical mistakes account for only about twenty percent of misdiagnoses. The majority result from habits of mind that cause doctors to make snap judgments and heedlessly overlook alternative possibilities. In other words, bad thinking.

Here's the example, and this is exactly what I'm talking about. First, a doctor rarely revises their initial diagnosis, and then all the specialists that diagnosis is handed to down the line tend to accept that first diagnosis simply because it comes with authority. The guess may be wrong because the doctor stereotypes—paying more attention to a patient's age or gender or race or living habits than actually being able to look freshly at the symptoms being presented.

This is precisely the quality of mindfulness: the ability to bring beginner's mind, free from assumptions, free from thinking we know. It's really hard because we don't even know the assumptions we're carrying.

A doctor may like a patient too much to consider a worst-case scenario, while dislike may cause the doctor not to listen to important complaints. It's interesting, isn't it? We're in a state of aversion, and that colors how we assess what comes in. We're in a state of liking, of wanting, and that colors what we even let in.

You can notice these are really deep habits. Notice, for example, how it is when we have something we want, some expectation. Go walking out in the desert and you want something. You want a nice walk—that could be all you want, just a nice walk. Or you want some thinking to stop. Or you want to see

some wildlife. Or, like some people say, "You all keep talking about how beautiful the desert is. I'm waiting to see how beautiful it is. I don't think it's beautiful." Anyway, you go out: *Where is this damn beauty they're all talking about?*

In any way we're going out wanting. The attention is all turned outward. Let me see this, let me have this, *t hen* I'll be happy. Turn your attention back while that's happening and recognize, as Mark said, the wanting mind. Recognize the effect. How open are we actually to receive what's arising in this moment? How open are we to the unknown, to the mystery, to something not expected?

Not very much. Not very much unless it comes and hits us over the head.

How are we with expectation if we meet a friend and we want something from them? How open are we to see them fresh, with beginner's mind—or a stranger? When you come and sit down in the sitting, are you wanting something? How open are you to just sit and feel the first sensation that arises of breath? It's jagged. It's tight. It's constricted. You don't like it. Can it just be that that's what it is? How much does wanting color our openness to experience?

Same with aversion, only the reverse.

Really, the mindfulness practice is to turn the attention around and notice what qualities of heart and mind are coloring the consciousness in this moment, are coloring the knowing, the awareness. Not hating it—just knowing.

And it's really interesting because as soon as we move from "I want to see this, I want to have this" to "Oh, wanting is like this" - it stops being a problem. We stop being so closed in, so tunnel-visioned. "Wanting is like this. Aversion is like this." It's just the next object of awareness. It stops being a problem. We stop getting so caught up with trying to rearrange everything. We're just here. No problem. Just for that moment. It doesn't have to take a long time.

And the third hindrance - I want to talk about this more because Mark didn't explore it as much - is preserving the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. This is really, if we can not take it personally, it's actually a lot of fun. Let me say what I mean.

Sogyal Rinpoche has a great way of describing it. He talks about this fascination with "me, me, me." He's talking about the felt sense of "me here now" - not so much an idea, but you know what I mean. Just here. Close your eyes a minute. Do you have a felt sense of "me"? Just "me"? Can you feel that? It's no big deal, right? It feels like it's here all the time. It's not some big esoteric thing.

He calls it the original measuring point for samsara, for the cycle of suffering. He talks about how in Tibet, when they're starting to build a house to get the footprint, they start from a point in the middle - this felt sense of "me." Then they take a measuring rope, a measuring tape, and from that point in the middle they measure out to all the different places to get the footprint of the house. The footprint of life. The footprint

of *my* life and what everything means. It all starts from this reference point right here - just the felt sense of me.

Now there's nothing wrong with this felt sense. It's just that we interpret it as being me - solid, ongoing, the center of the universe. And we don't recognize that interpretation. We misconstrue it and measure everything from that.

So for example, just notice if you see this happening in your experience. Check it out. You're just standing there and someone walks by really slowly in the distance. How soon does the thought come back to me? "Look at them walking so slow. Should I be walking slow like that?" It doesn't take long. Try it. With people - but it doesn't even have to be people.

Like today, I was walking out in the desert. Just walking. I wasn't looking for anything. I was just kind of in a state of being, really. And I had this moment of feeling really connected - a sense of rapture. And just at that moment, that exact moment, there was a tortoise. I really just... I don't know, there was something about it. I felt really happy.

And then two beats later - two beats - and the mind said, "That's the universe confirming my sense of being open."

Right? It's like that. It's like that. Everything is all about what it means about me - good, bad. You notice that in our sitting.

You know, my breath is like this. It's all about "I'm not doing it right." If it feels good, "I am doing it right." If someone else is making a noise, "They're messing up my meditation." The lights aren't right. "How can I listen to the talk with these lights? How can I give the talk with these lights?"

Just notice—it's actually hysterical. It's hysterical to see how any little thing, any little thing, a little rabbit runs by, and it's about me within a second. Within a second. Notice that.

And I say it's not personal because you notice how people are laughing? So somehow each of us is the center of the universe. Everything's all about each one of us. And how much energy goes into—not so much preserving that, I would say, because we believe it so strongly—but reacting from that. This is what makes us go after pleasure, avoid pain, think that's what happiness is.

The next thing is we think, "Okay, then I have to get rid of this, right? That's what meditation is about. That's the path of the Dharma. Get rid of the ego. Take out the pickaxe, start chipping it away. Get your notebook. Every time you have a moment that isn't about me, make a little mark and see how many. Maybe there's a couple more every day."

No. See, we don't have to do all of that. We don't. Already laughing at it—that's the shift. From "oh, it's all about me," which feels like this, to something lighter.

You see, awareness is always available, always accessible. It's not somewhere else. Nothing actually stains or colors or makes awareness inaccessible. It's just that our practice, our moment-by-moment mindfulness practice, is simply a practice of recognizing the awareness.

Awareness can be aware of anything, everything. Our job, as one of my teachers says, is shifting the direction of recognition. We're turning the direction of our recognition. Mostly we're recognizing objects—the five sense objects or mental objects. We're recognizing experience. That's fine to recognize, but that's where we're putting our sense of well-being, of organizing the world.

Turn around, like that cup of tea I was talking about. That's just so peaceful, so exquisite. We're out looking at what are all the conditions that made this happen and how can I get it back. You just turn around and go, "Oh, cup of tea, peaceful. It's like this." And it's turning around and seeing just in this moment: there's sipping and the knowing of it. Calmness and the knowing of it. Hot on the tongue and the knowing of it. Silence and the knowing of it. Raucous, loud, incredible noise, trucks going down the highway—and the knowing of it.

Does it matter? It doesn't matter one iota what's happening in terms of awareness. Of course, we don't believe that. That's our problem.

So our mindfulness practice is learning moment after moment to bring that innocence, that freshness, that beginner's mind to meet experience. And at first we're talking about experience, right? We're saying sit down and feel the breath. A lot of the questions arise: "Oh, the breath—is the breath going to get better?" And at that point, really what we need to say is forget the damn breath, because now you've just taken the breath and made it the thing we've got to fix to make us happy.

It doesn't matter about the breath. The breath is just a way to bring in enough calmness that we can actually turn around and notice: oh, awareness of breath. Awareness colored with wanting. "Get my breath." Oh, wanting. It's like this.

You know, today with Diana doing the different sensations—notice how deeply ingrained it is that unpleasant means it's a bad sensation. Pleasant or even neutral means, oh, it's going in the right direction. It's so ingrained.

When you think about really awakening, when you think about it—maybe some people don't even let themselves think because obviously, really, for them that's not possible, so don't even think about it—but let yourself think about it. Let it bring up in your mind: What would freedom from suffering look like? What would awakening be like?

I know when I'm really honest with myself, it doesn't usually include my headaches. It doesn't usually include people not liking me. It doesn't usually include the body really getting old and crapping out and decrepit. It usually doesn't include it. The freezing here—you know, I came down to the desert for the sunshine. Then the sun comes out. How many of you felt so much happier when the sun came out? I

mean, I was too. I hate the cold. But how easy it is to think, "Oh, *now*. Now it's peaceful. Now the meditation's beginning to flower." Just because it's pleasant.

But the Buddha's awakening—he awoke into *this* world, not into a different world. He spent forty-five years walking around India barefoot with a begging bowl, eating one meal a day. He had headaches. He had backaches. He had all kinds of difficulties. His kinfolk and the lay people he dealt with—there were all kinds of wars and strife and dissension that he had to address. He had people in his sangha. In fact, his cousin, who wanted to take power from him, tried to kill him. He had stuff. Organizational dukkha—it's the worst. He had it. He just wanted to go sit under a tree in the bliss of nibbāna for forty-five years, but out of great compassion, he taught instead. So that was his awakening.

So what are we looking for? The jewel of mindfulness, of awareness, is that it's already here. It's right under our nose. Our practice is just hopefully helping us learn to keep recognizing this.

One of the reasons I love the desert here—it's the same reason I love being by the ocean, or why I think a lot of practitioners, or the ultimate practitioners, would go and practice in the mountains. It's the sense of space. It's metaphorical, but I also kind of literally feel it inside if I stand over at the edge and just look out. There's this vast sense of space, and there's all kinds of objects, all kinds of stuff in the space. But the sense of spaciousness—Ajahn Sumedho talks about it a lot—the way we recognize space is by not fixating, not clinging to the objects in the space.

So if I go out and there's just the spaciousness of the desert, it kind of evokes a spaciousness of heart, of mind. A spaciousness that doesn't have that moment of reference point back to me. I'm not trying to get rid of it. Just in that moment, it's not the reference point. Then it becomes me looking out at the space, and "isn't this cool," and the reference point's back again. But just play with it. Just the space.

And then notice how, just like that, you see something moving, and the mind goes right to the little thing. Then open up again. Sumedho has a way of putting it that I love: we notice space when we stop clinging to forms in the space. But the space is already here.

Silence is another way, another metaphorical way of talking about it. Not the silence of no sound. Not the silence of no thought. Not the space that needs to get rid of things. Just the letting go of the clinging. Things are all here—there's sounds, there's people, there's sensations, there's thoughts. Even wanting can arise. But when we shift from the wanting to the awareness, wanting is just another thing arising in the space.

So when we withdraw our obsession with conditions—and obsession is really a good word here, obsession with conditions—and we just notice the space, just the space of receiving whatever's arising, awareness receiving experience, receiving whatever's coming up. Just this. Just this. There's no reference point back to me, past, future. What does it mean about me? And if I can really feel it like this, then this is going to happen. Just this. Just that silence.

This is really just something to play with. Sumedho calls this consciousness, this recognition of just the

presence, the doorway to liberation. It's always available.

One of my teachers says that this knowing, the simple quality of knowing, recognizing, is always happening. It's not something we do. It's not something we create. We don't have to strive.

So humor me a minute. Just put your two hands together if you don't mind. Do you feel that? Can you feel those sensations? It's not too hard, is it? Didn't really take a lot of effort. You didn't really do much of anything, did you? Except have the intention just to have awareness there. The awareness—did you make awareness happen? Could you make awareness happen if you wanted to? It's just like we noticed. Oh yeah, it's the knowing. That simple. That's mindfulness. It's not a huge, concerted effort. It's that simplicity of knowing, free in that moment.

There's no big deal going on. There probably wasn't a lot of wanting in your mind—"Oh God, I hope I can feel it right." Just, okay, I can feel it. Probably wasn't a lot of aversion, maybe a little to me telling you to do something, but just the actual sensation—probably not a lot of aversion, right? The purity. Not a lot of me. There's not a lot to say about those sensations, not a big story to make about that. I mean, we could, but you didn't have enough time.

And so in that moment, that knowing—as my teacher said, knowing is always happening. Our habit is just to keep turning around moment after moment after moment and recognizing it. That's the mindfulness. And the moment after moment part is really the key. Again, it doesn't have to be stressful or exhausting, but that's why we're sitting, sitting, sitting, and then we say notice the transition when you stand up, and then walking, walking, walking, and then we say notice when you sit down, and then we say notice when you eat. And the mind throws that ahead and it's all about me, and it's exhausting.

But it's only ever about just this moment. Touching. Just this moment, sensation. Just this moment, hearing. Just this moment, anger. Just this moment, "I am so bored," you know. Boredom's like this. Anger's like this. Sensation's like this. Raggedy breath is like this. Falling asleep on my face is like this. Aversion is like this. Hunger is like this, bubbling, bubbling. Enormous fear is like this, tightness. One, one, one, one—it's always available.

Now, if we're looking for some experience in meditation, as in life, we bring in our same habits. We're looking for a particular experience to fulfill me, to confirm me. An exaggerated way of saying it is you can go home and tell people you had this really incredible experience and feel good about yourself. But that's gross. On a really subtle level, even the littlest bit, if we're looking for the experience to confirm me, that wanting—we've moved out of noticing that simplicity of awareness.

But then, and this is what I love about the way Sayadaw talks about awareness, *is like this* applies to anything. It's like a Tai Chi move, or a Qigong move. You don't have to get rid of, "Oh, I want this sitting to be really good. I want a good experience. Oh no, I'm wanting, and it's all about me, and how can I get..." No. Wanting is like this. You don't have to get rid of anything. We don't have to bring in something else.

The awareness is already here. We don't have to create it. We simply shift our refuge, our trust, our home from "Oh my God, this experience has to change" to "Wanting is like this." I am completely caught up. I'm completely confused. I have no clue what I'm doing. It's hopeless. I'm filled with doubt. Doubt is like this.

I know, it seems too easy. And then we want something a little more juicy, something a little more flashy, something a little more confirming of me, me, me. But really, where's the room in that for the wonder, for the mystery? Where's the space in that for the incredible beauty and unknown quality of each moment of life to arise? We have no idea what's going to happen. And that is what really allows us to meet each moment with this sensitivity, this care, this innocence.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no man's land, to experience each moment as completely new and fresh. To live is to be willing to die over and over again. From the awakened point of view, that's life. Death is wanting to hold on to what you have and to have every experience confirm you and congratulate you and make you feel completely together."

How many of us—and I'm including me—meditate to confirm ourselves and congratulate ourselves and feel completely together? Did you come here to fall apart? Did you come here to realize you don't have a clue, and that's really fine? We want to be perfect, but we just keep seeing our imperfections, and there's no room to get away from that. No exit, nowhere to run. This is when the sword turns into a flower. We stay with what we see. We feel what we feel. And from that, we begin to connect with our own wisdom mind.

Another way of saying it is every experience, every object of experience—mental, physical—is a doorway to awareness, a doorway to freedom in that moment. There's nothing we need to change. It's always available. It's just if we remember to notice. It takes, at first, an enormous trust. And it takes support.

That's really why we have this set up the way we do now. That's why we're up here talking every night, just trying to encourage you to keep on meeting in this moment, in this moment, in this moment. Because if we do that often enough, and with this quality of mindfulness—this simplicity, this innocence, this willingness to explore, to bring a freshness without all our conceptions and ideas—well, the jewel of awareness gets more and more obvious. At some point we just recognize it more and more. At some point we start getting it on a subliminal level, and then it becomes more obvious that it's not about what's happening.

And so we emphasize in the mindfulness just practicing bringing this quality of simplicity, of openness, of interest to discover, to whatever arises.

My model for this is the cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He's one of my heroes. I really just love to listen to him play. But I also love, in anything I've read—I don't know him personally, but anything I've read—his whole attitude of openness to discover, of inclusivity, of meeting people in the musical world with this real freshness.

I saw a documentary on television once about him. I just got a little bit of it. It was in Germany, so it was in German, which I don't speak, so my friends were translating it. I just got this little snippet, but it has stayed with me as a real model of the wonder of awareness through mindfulness.

He was exploring different musics of different peoples. And at this part of the special I remember, he flew in by helicopter to a tribe of bush people in Africa. So he comes in, he gets out of the helicopter with his million-dollar cello, and he meets the man who's the head musician of this tribe, an old man. And this man has his instrument, which was kind of like a round, empty tin oil can with a long strut made out of a stick and a couple of strings—and that was his instrument.

So he's playing his instrument and singing, and Yo-Yo Ma is just completely enthralled, so open. And I could see my own cultural bias as I was watching. Then Yo-Yo Ma plays his cello, and I hear the rich tones of the cello, the beautiful sound, and this man's plunking on his thing. And then Yo-Yo Ma says, "Let's trade." So they trade instruments. And then Yo-Yo Ma is trying to play the man's instrument and he says, "I can't play this nearly as well as you. You show me." And he was just so fresh and present and free from dragging in the past and assumptions—really there. This sense of joy and wonder and connectedness.

To me, that's the quality we practice with mindfulness. Mindfulness of breath, mindfulness of anger, mindfulness of pain in your rear end, mindfulness of wanting, mindfulness of the space, of the desert. And eventually we see it's not about what's happening—it's about the mindfulness itself.

And then our refuge point, our trust, begins to shift. And we still call on the mindfulness. We'll lose it over and over and over. We'll find ourselves putting all our eggs into the basket of "if I could only get this situation to change, then everything would be okay." We'll all do that over and over. Beat our heads against the wall. Do that bargaining. Pretend we're being mindful, really open and fresh, but really so it'll go away. All of that stuff. Until finally something in us just surrenders. Okay, let me die. I'll just be with this. And then the jewel of awareness is recognizable again. Oh, it's like this. And then we see the potential in that moment for real freedom.

It's not freedom from the world. It's not freedom from unpleasant. It's not freedom from pain. But it's freedom from confusion, from separation, from unnecessary suffering, from dis-ease. Just in a moment. Just in a moment. But that moment is available in every moment, in every experience, to every one of us. It's already here. It's always here.

So we just use this practice and find those moments when we trust enough to just never mind the wanting, never mind the aversion, never mind the me.

It's all here. It doesn't even have to go away. But it's just not where we put our trust.

In those moments—that's actually what I was feeling when I saw the tortoise. The mystery opened. And then it was the me, me, me. And then I just laughed, because it's going to come back. And it doesn't matter. None of it mattered. It really doesn't matter what's happening. Awareness is the point that includes

everything, as Nisargadatta says.

And in that not mattering, the other side reveals itself: if nothing matters, everything matters. It's not like who cares. It's that each moment is equally valuable as a doorway to freedom.

This is what really opens up the possibility for—and I'm an aversive type, so I'm not a gushy, lovey type—but it really opens up the possibility of moments of life that are just so filled with beauty, with love, with appreciation. And all those are words for just the isness of things. Just the isness of the ordinary.

I want to end with a poem by Billy Collins that I love, because it expresses this to me. It's interesting because it's called "Aimless Love." A friend, maybe one of the most aversive people I know, sent me this poem. It's really touching.

*This morning, as I walked along the lake shore, I fell in love with a wren. And later in the day with a mouse the cat had dropped under the dining room table.*

*In the shadows of an autumn evening, I fell for a seamstress still at her machine in the tailor's window, and later for a bowl of broth, steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.*

*This is the best kind of love, I thought, without recompense, without gifts or unkind words, without suspicion or silence on the telephone.*

*The love of the chestnut, the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel. No lust, no slam of the door. The love of the miniature orange tree, the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower, the highway that cuts across Florida.*

*No waiting, no huffiness or rancor, just a twinge every now and then for the wren who had built her nest on a low branch overhanging the water, and for the dead mouse still dressed in its light brown suit.*

*But my heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod, ready for the next arrow.*

*After I carried the mouse by the tail to a pile of leaves in the woods, I found myself standing at the bathroom sink, gazing down affectionately at the soap, so patient and soluble, so at home in its pale green soap dish.*

*I could feel myself falling again as I felt its turning in my wet hands and caught the scent of lavender and stone.*

Can we just sit quietly for a minute?

From Nisargadatta: *Be quiet, free from the obsession with what next. And in the silence, something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception.*

Free from the obsession with what next.

Thank you.

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