Working With Difficult Situations

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 50:33

Something that comes up quite often in interviews is, what's the point of sitting with all this pain? What's the point of bringing my attention back to restlessness, to boredom, to negativity? It can start to seem like a long, difficult struggle, and it's easy to lose sight of why it's worth paying attention to these things.

There's a Tibetan teaching that talks about turning adverse circumstances or difficult circumstances into a path of liberation. And so that's what I want to talk about tonight—working with our relationship to what is difficult and painful in our life, in our sitting here, in our life at large. How to relate to what's going on so that we come to realize that situations that seem extremely adverse, extremely like obstacles, are actually, in fact, a very intrinsic and necessary part of our path of understanding. Coming to understand that freedom, understanding, is attached to what is right here. Whatever is arising in the moment is a part of that, and there are no exceptions to this.

We get into so much conflict when we sit and in our lives because—well, this is rather simplistic, but largely because we're so conditioned to interpret anything that comes up that's unpleasant as meaning that it's wrong. Unpleasant equals wrong and pleasant equals right. And so when something unpleasant starts to happen, either it's wrong or I'm wrong. Here on retreat it means I'm doing something wrong, and I have to figure out what it is and change it so that things can get right, which usually means pleasant.

What's really vital for us to understand is that this perception, this interpretation, is completely inaccurate. What we're talking about is actually a radical shift in our relationship to life. Our relationship is what's coming up in this moment. Our retreat or even one sitting is a microcosm for the way that we relate in our whole life.

A difficult or painful experience arises here. It doesn't have to be anything super intense or deep. It can be a back pain, or maybe you get a cold, or maybe you're allergic to the food, or a lot of restlessness is coming up, or a lot of anger, negativity. Maybe it's simply that the breath isn't clear enough, and you know other times it's been a lot clearer. It's unpleasant because we don't like it.

Our tendency is, with any of these things—or anything else that you've probably experienced at least once today—to interpret it as an obstacle. If this would only go away, if I could only fix this, then I could really start meditating. Then I could really get into this retreat. It shows us that at some level there's an idea of what "good practice" means, and whatever it means, it definitely doesn't include this. So if this could go away, then maybe good practice could begin.

When we're involved in this—often it's quite conscious, but sometimes it's quite subtle and unconscious,

and we don't realize we're making that comparison and assessment—we get involved in striving to change what's happening. In doing that, in trying to change what's happening and pulling away from it and denying it, we're denying what's true in this moment. We're moving out of the truth of this moment, trying to get somewhere else that matches some concept we have of what the truth is. A movement away from truth.

One of the things that's been most profound for me as my practice continues is that I keep understanding more and more that we grow in understanding, we grow in love and compassion, not in spite of all the difficulties and painful experiences that come our way, but we grow through them in a way that they're almost necessary. I don't want to get into this kind of Pollyanna attitude of "Oh, I'm so glad I'm sick, it's such a gift." But really, we do grow through the difficulties when our relationship to what is coming is one of understanding and acceptance.

In the Buddhist cosmology, there are many different planes of existence, from hell realms up to these really high god realms. It's said that being born as a human is a very fortunate and rare birth, a very fortunate opportunity—and this is what's important, not whether you want to believe in the cosmology—because in our human realm, for most of us, there is a proper balance of pain and pleasure. In other words, there's certainly plenty of difficulty in our lives, but for most of us, it's not so much that we're completely overwhelmed. There certainly are humans in this world who are completely ground down by the amount of suffering, but most of us here—I would actually say all of us—that's not the case. And there's enough pleasure that we can open and be nourished and grow in understanding.

It's said that in some of the higher deva realms there's too much pleasure. Beings just kind of get into hanging out in these pleasure gardens and lose all their motivation—no desire to practice or be motivated to investigate. One teacher says that pleasure puts you to sleep and pain wakes you up. We wish it were the other way around, but it's not.

I want to acknowledge that certainly in my own life, and in this world, there are definitely times when the amount of suffering, the amount of pain, can seem quite overwhelming. Whether it's in our own being as we're practicing and we find some deeper levels of physical pain, deeper levels of emotional pain, some strong grief in our life. Maybe sometimes, as at this period in world history with all the conflict in the Middle East—how we're all involved in that and how it impacts us—sometimes the suffering that's going on, when you really open and turn into it, can seem unbearable and overwhelming. There are times when you think, how can I possibly begin to open to this suffering? It's too much; I just want to turn away.

But how can we begin to change our relationship to the unpleasant, to the difficult?

I want to share something that has been and continues to be really vital for me in working in this area, in giving me the energy to keep investigating, to keep meeting and opening to what is difficult. And that is really finding what inspires me to want to know the truth—what arises in me as a sense of commitment, a sense of urgency to really turn my energy toward facing what's true in this moment.

It might be different for each of us. For me, something that does this is a deep appreciation of the favorableness of my situation, often through an incredibly deep gratitude for the fortunate aspects of my life. This gets triggered when I open my eyes and start looking around at what's going on in the world.

For example, just last week I came back from India. Whenever I leave this so-called third world country, it really wakes me up to the amazing possibilities and opportunities I have in my life—seeing the grinding poverty, people working from morning to night under really horrible conditions just to get enough food to eat for that day, if they're lucky. There's no way to take a day off. To take a day off means you don't eat, you don't have anywhere to live.

Two years ago when I was in India, I went to Bodh Gaya, which is the spot where the Buddha was enlightened. It's a shrine now, with the descendant of the original Bodhi tree that he sat under. It's a real pilgrimage spot for Buddhists who come from all over the world, and I found it very inspiring—there's a real energy, a real power in that place.

I was struck by how many people live right there, making their living running tea shops and selling things to the tourists. But there's really no interest—not that there should be interest indeed at this moment—but there's just really no interest in awakening. They're simply living their lives.

And so there's the good fortune to have enough health to practice, enough leisure time, enough to eat, the opportunity to practice, and also the interest, which is really rather rare in the world. When I'm in a situation like that, when it awakens my sense of gratitude, it gives me the energy to inquire of myself: All right, I have this incredibly fortunate life—what's really important? What really matters to me? What do I want to do with my energy?

When that question comes up, for me the answer is really clear: to know the truth, to know love and compassion, to share the truth, to know peace. Really acknowledging that in one's heart, I find to be a very powerful force. It arouses, quite of itself, this sense of commitment, this sense of urgency, and a real willingness to open to and face whatever arises right now, because this is the way I can come to understand what freedom is, what peace is.

Sometimes it feels to me, and in talking with friends, that some people are almost afraid to really let that acknowledgment in—of what's really important to them. Almost as if they might be disappointed. They think, "Well, I really want to come to see the truth, but that might be for the Buddha, it might be for someone sitting in a cave in the Himalayas. But I'm just an ordinary person trying to live my life. I'm not good enough for that." There's a fear of really letting it in, of really acknowledging the strength of one's purpose.

But I think it's important to realize that as human beings, we all have the potential for freedom. We all have the potential to be liberated. That's what's so inspiring to me, actually, when I reflect on the Buddha. When we took refuge the first night of the retreat, taking refuge in the Buddha to me was not refuge in the

idea of him as a historical person, but in what he represents as a human being—same as me, same as you. That's our heritage as human beings. That's all of our potential.

Being at the Bodhi Tree somehow humanized it for me. I thought, "Oh, this is just a real place, a dusty little village, nothing so special." The Buddha might have been a special human being, but still he was a human being. And we're all special too.

Letting in that acknowledgment of that potential for ourselves, not holding back out of some idea we have of our limitations—this inspiration really gives me the courage, the conviction, to open to what's true right now, a willingness to face the moment, a commitment to simply bring full presence of mind, presence of being, to this moment. And that's all.

The Buddha said quite often, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so." He's very pragmatic. And it is possible. For me, being willing to open to the possibility, to really acknowledge it to myself, inspires deep energy, a sense of urgency, and the willingness to meet whatever's arising.

This is a quote from Nisargadatta, an Indian wise man: "Because nothing physical or mental can give you freedom, you are free once you understand that your bondage is of your own making and you cease forging the chains that bind you."

And so we give our hearts and minds to this exploration, not binding ourselves with thoughts that it's too hard, that we could never do it, that this suffering is too much, let's just forget it.

Stop forging the chains that keep us limited.

One can have a moment, or even an hour, maybe even a day, of this really renewed openness and commitment—a courage that lets us come back to a difficult situation and be there in a new way, with openness, with mindfulness, with spaciousness. But still, a half an hour later, a day later, a minute later, everything clamps down again. It seems so continuously difficult. Drum up the inspiration again. Why? I keep asking myself this: why?

Joseph spoke last night about desire, about the power of that tendency in the mind. That's really what I want to speak to now, because it's such a deeply conditioned habit of mind that when a pleasant experience comes, the mind, the body even, leans into it. When an unpleasant experience comes, just the reverse—aversion, which is just the flip side of desire. Away, move away, block it out, deny it, change it. And when something neutral comes, you don't even notice it. You're bored and you space out and you look for something else.

This is really what the Buddha spoke to in his first and core teaching, the Four Noble Truths. Just this tendency of mind, grasping and pushing away, which can be so subtle, but it has such a profound effect on the way that we relate to our lives, on the way that we experience our lives.

I want to talk a little bit about it again, especially the first two of these noble truths, because they're really

quite observable in action, even just in a few moments of sitting or walking here.

This first truth, this first teacher—the teacher of dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness—encompasses the whole range: from obvious deep pain and grief and sadness, unbearableness, to the unsatisfactoriness, the insecurity of impermanence, the fact that nothing lasts, that everything is transient, that no matter how pleasant something is, it's always fleeting. There's no resting place. There's nothing that can give us permanent pleasure. This is actually a very deep experience of unsatisfactoriness.

And it seems really obvious. When I think about it, I wonder, well, why do we have to make this grand proclamation—the first noble truth? It's not like it's a secret. But when you look, you don't really believe it. I saw this ad in the New York Times Magazine. It was for a top that said, "Permanent Pleasure." I thought, yeah, right, this is permanent pleasure. I'll buy some clothes. Anything can give us permanent pleasure! But we keep thinking we're going to find it somewhere out there in some experience.

This movement of the mind towards pleasure and away from the unpleasant is so deeply conditioned. And our ability to deny that it's happening, and our ability to deny the truth of painful or unsatisfactory experiences, is truly amazing to me.

A couple of examples. One was shocking to me in its obviousness. One time I was in a hospital and a doctor was doing some usual but fairly painful procedure and having a hard time doing it. It was really hurting. At some point, tears started coming out of my eyes. He just stopped and looked at me and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt." You can understand—it's too hard to let in pain. It's just steadier to deny what is even happening.

Or I watch myself when I'm traveling through India. There's so much pain and suffering, all right out on the street. In five minutes walking through a village in India, I see more physical pain and suffering than I see in ten years in this country. And I watch: how long can I stay open to all the starving people, people with just skin and bones, to the beggars, to the lepers without any fingers on their hands sometimes? Maybe five minutes, maybe ten minutes—it's overwhelming. And I just watch. I want to shut down, look straight ahead, not look around, not feel it. It's really quite an amazing thing to watch. I was watching that a lot this time.

On a more mundane, much more day-to-day ordinary level, I see how, from not really noticing what's going on, we keep grasping at ordinary experiences and then wonder why it doesn't satisfy us, why life still doesn't seem quite fulfilling.

This example I've used before. I belong to a health club near here, and one time in the fall I was with a friend. It was at the end of a long day, we were really tired, we needed to refresh ourselves and get out, and we said, "Well, we'll go swim in the pool together, and that'll be really refreshing." And it should have been.

And we thought it was. But then we got together and reconstructed what actually happened. It's quite

illuminating.

We drive there—first it's a half-hour drive, and the whole time it's looking forward: "Okay, we'll get there, it'll be nice." We get there, I run into the women's dressing room, which they kept quite chilly, and I'm very sensitive to cold. So I was hurrying up, getting on my bathing suit, had to take a shower before I went in, it made me even colder, so this was extremely unpleasant. And I was hurrying through it to jump in the pool, which also was quite scary.

So I got in the pool, and I had goosebumps, but well, I'll start swimming. I'm swimming, swimming, swimming. After two laps, I finally got warm, and I thought, "Oh, this is nice." I got half a lap, maybe. Then my arms started hurting, and I started getting bored. I thought, "Oh, well, I'll hurry up and finish this, then I can go get in the sauna."

So I hurried up and finished that, and I got in the sauna, which was really nice. Well, you know, two minutes, three minutes. Then the bench started to hurt my sacrum because I can't really lie on hard wood. Then I'm really sweaty, really hot. "Oh, I feel really dizzy. I've got to get out of here." Went out, stood outside for about two minutes. "Oh, it's really cold. Now I'm okay. Now I can go back in the sauna." Went back in, came back out, got dressed, went upstairs, and my friend goes, "That was great."

And this is life. Which is nothing unusual.

The question might come up: who wants to look at life this closely? It's too depressing. You know, "I thought I was having a good time. Let's keep it that way." But I actually know none of you would be here going through this if you really thought that everything went hunky-dory. And I also really want to point out that that's not my experience. I don't think that's the experience at all—that looking this closely, that really acknowledging the extent of unsatisfactoriness, is depressing or oppressive. Quite the reverse.

In our daily lives, for instance when I was going swimming at this place, because we can keep moving—as soon as something unpleasant, even slightly unpleasant, not even a lot unpleasant, just a little unpleasant comes—we can immediately move, go to the next thing. We sort of mask the fact that things are so unsatisfactory, and so we don't understand why we're not feeling fulfilled. We don't really get it. What is this nagging feeling that something's out of sync?

But when you really open up and begin to look and acknowledge what's actually going on moment to moment, far from there being a sense of "Oh no, I can't bear it"—for me, it's quite the reverse. It's a huge release. It's like there's no more need for pretense. Sharon uses a quotation a lot from Miss America from 1950 or something, where they interviewed her twenty or thirty years later, and she said, "I'm just so tired of being tomorrow." And it's like that—there's no need for pretense. It doesn't mean complaining. It's just knowing what's really going on.

And I find this over and over. You have the same insight over and over and over, and sometimes it goes deeper and deeper. Each time I find suddenly in my life I feel caught up in some kind of struggle and I

realize... well, I have to get to enough suffering that I'm actually driven to investigate. You know, if I think I can actually fix it, then I keep trying to fix it. But when that stops working and I'm actually driven to investigate, invariably I see that somewhere I'm still thinking there's some payoff. Somehow I'm still thinking I can arrange my external situation and my internal situation so that everything will be all right and I'll be happy.

And as soon as I see I'm doing this—and that's right, that's absolutely impossible; there's nothing, no experience internally or externally that's going to last, that can make me lastingly happy—knowing that is incredibly liberating. It just frees up this whole struggle, and there's actually a huge sense of joy and happiness arising. And this has happened to me over and over and over.

Another quotation from Reginald Perrin—when she had grasped the truth that the world is full of suffering,

You'll find the urge and the energy to go beyond it. Really seeing the calamity is the strong force of liberation. Really seeing what's going on.

This acknowledgement of suffering moves us from a relationship to our life of fear or blame or self-judgment or aversion to one of clarity, of the possibility of acceptance, of clear action instead of reaction, of joy. It allows for the clear stream that opens up into the true nature of reality. So the First Noble Truth is actually a very profound teaching. It has so much beneath its surface.

The second truth the Buddha spoke of: the cause of this unsatisfactoriness begins not in the difficult situations themselves, but in that movement of mind towards the pleasant—craving, clinging. The word actually translates as thirst, that yearning for the pleasant. And this also includes the movement of mind away from the unpleasant, that aversion.

This movement towards and away, this deeply ingrained, almost unconscious reaction to stimuli—this is what distorts our perception of reality. It's why we don't know and live in truth, because we're caught in this moving to and fro. And out of that we keep forging the chains that bind us. We keep looking for that permanent pleasant.

An example often used in the scriptures is of someone holding onto an iron ball that's red hot and burning, but somehow afraid to put it down. The very thing causing the suffering, and yet afraid to let go of it.

Mindfulness—the quality of clear, non-judging attention that we're cultivating here—is our very strong ally in waking up to and being free from this tendency of mind of clinging and aversion.

Using this example of the ball again: at first there's incredible suffering. One doesn't even know what's going on. You might not even acknowledge that pain is happening. It's assumed that we need that ball. It's just taken as a given.

With increasing attention, with mindfulness, we start to really notice the pain. And we know we could put the ball down, but we're not sure that we don't need it. We're really afraid to let go. Somehow we think it'll bring us happiness. Or maybe it's just so familiar, and we'd much rather have something familiar and painful than let go and move into the unknown. That's really scary. So we hold on.

With continuing mindfulness, we start to see that actually all that's binding us to that suffering is our desire and our fear. And at some point we really get the senselessness of it, and we can just let go.

Seeing the reality is the power that can free us from the burden. Understanding what's really going on is so powerful. We don't need someone to come from the outside and wash us all away. We really need continued presence of attention, and the truth reveals itself. We put down the burden.

That middle portion can be a hard time—the time when we know it's just because we're holding on that it hurts so much, but somehow we can't put it down. That can be really hard, and sometimes it can seem to last a really long time. We don't need to think of it in terms of time, because any moment is a moment that could be clear enough to let go. But even so, hard as it is, this is the suffering that wakes us up. Because in there is the right attitude, the willingness to be with it, open to it, and understand what's going on.

The Buddha said once that suffering either ripens as confusion or it ripens as wisdom. I really love that, because it's just so obvious—the two different ways we can relate to the same experience.

Take something really simple, not too complex seemingly: you're sitting here and there's a pain in the knee. What happens with confusion? There's a pain in the knee. We notice it. There's a lot of annoyance. "If I was only being mindful, then it wouldn't hurt so much. If I was relating to it correctly, I wouldn't be suffering. Why is this here anyway?" We get into self-judgment. We get into judgment about meditation. We get into a real struggle with ourselves. Then we say, "Okay, forget it."

I'm just going back to the breath, which seems to be impossible. And then we get into a whole other string of self-judgment. This is pain that is ripening as confusion. It's just getting into more and more of that—somehow confusing because there's a sense that the pain and the dissatisfaction have to be fixed, that it's a sign I'm doing something wrong.

The same suffering can ripen as strength. Because again, it exists in the attitude, not in the physical sensation. It's really important to remember that while mindfulness is a very penetrating awareness, a real clear knowing of what's happening in the moment, the reason we can know what's happening is because the energy of mindfulness is also totally non-violent. It's totally non-discriminating. With mindfulness, there's no imperative to be with pleasant experience and ignore unpleasant experience. When an experience or sensation arises, mindfulness doesn't say, "Well, I don't really want to look at that anymore. Let's wait until something more pleasant comes along." That's just the tendency of mind again—the craving and the aversion. Mindfulness is a very focused but totally non-violent quality, very interested but spacious.

And so when pain arises with that quality of mindfulness, we're simply noting, noticing, investigating the sensations. Simply noticing and noting the unpleasantness, and also any aversion or dislike or fear that arises in the mind—that's all fine. Just allowing it to be as it is and noticing it clearly. And whenever that whole whirl of thoughts and confusion starts, seeing that as thinking and gently coming back to the actual experience. Not to change anything. That's what's so important: to know for oneself what's really happening, because that's the truth of the moment.

We do this over and over, and we'll often find there might be just one moment when we experience quite deeply that suddenly what was so excruciating and unbearable and so aversive is suddenly—oh, it's just sensation, and that's all. It's totally okay. That's a difficult moment, but it's an incredibly illuminating moment. It's like suddenly, oh, right. It really is in the relationship that the suffering lies, not in the physical sensation. This is the movement from confusion to truth.

I think it was Ajahn Buddhadasa, a Thai meditation master, who said that there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering. And so that means that mindfulness, an opening to whatever is arising, is essential. Sometimes what's arising is suffering, but it's the suffering that leads to the end of suffering.

I do want to emphasize, though, that the end of suffering does not mean the end of unpleasant experience. The two are not equated. Again, the suffering is in the relationship, not in the pleasantness or unpleasantness of experience. In that moment when one was clearly with the sensation and suddenly it was just sensation—no aversion, no problem—that's when we really see that the suffering is in the resistance, in the denial of the situation, not in the situation itself.

This is what I call using adverse circumstances as the path, as a doorway into understanding what the truth of the moment is, into understanding that peace is beyond the presence or absence of pleasant and unpleasant.

As long as we're unaware of these tendencies of mind—of avoidance, of clinging—so long will our perception of reality continue to be distorted. An image that I like a lot, that speaks to me: it's as if, when we're unaware of these movements of mind, we're in a room and we think it's a prison. Although the door is wide open, we don't see it. Because we're so busy thinking, "Somehow if I can get the furniture all arranged right, then it'll be more pleasant." We're so busy rearranging the furniture to try and make it more livable that we never think to just stop a minute and open up. And then we see—oh, the door's wide open. There's no problem.

It's almost inconceivable, though, that the real suffering is in our need to make the situation more pleasant rather than just stop and be with what's there.

So in our practice here, know that any time there's a sense of struggle, a sense of conflict, it signals that there's something happening in that moment that's not being accepted, that somehow is not okay. It

signals that in that moment there's a movement away from the truth of what's happening into some idea of what we wish was happening. We can use struggle as a signal to come home, as a signal to just come back to rest in what's happening right now. And knowing that that takes practice, that we can do that—we don't need to be afraid of this moment.

Nisargadatta again: "What the mind knows is restlessness, with all its many modes and grades. The pleasant are considered superior and the painful are discounted. What we usually call progress is merely a changeover from the unpleasant to the pleasant. Changes can't bring us to the changeless."

I feel like that's really profound. We could spend our whole lives trying to change all the unpleasant to the pleasant—because changes can't bring us to the changeless.

Let's stop rearranging the painful and just settle into being here in the truth of this moment.

I obviously don't mean to imply that this is easy, or always easy. It might be easy in one moment. But again, this movement of clinging and aversion is so strong and so often unconscious that it can be quite subtle and very hard to be aware of. I also want to say that even when we are aware of it, there are times for many of us when we don't become balanced and spacious all at once, and it doesn't just stay that way. Nothing just stays that way.

And so sometimes the suffering that we run into, as I said earlier, can seem in that moment to be stronger than the balance of mind that's there to meet it. I find for myself, and for most people I know, we all have moments or hours or days where we really feel like we're drowning—that we're overwhelmed with suffering. As I know now, with the war that's going on and just the constant influx of information and all the mists of our emotions and reactions, at least my own, it can be excruciatingly painful. There are certainly times when it seems like my clarity and the balance in my mind is not equal to the amount of suffering that seems to be coming in. That can even happen off and on in a sitting when you have that one particular pain that returns every sitting and gets worse and worse and just seems to be excruciating.

I could say that often, especially as we practice for a while, we can sometimes turn the concept of opening to pain against ourselves and use it as another way to beat ourselves up. "I should be able to face this. I should be able to stay without moving no matter how much it hurts. I should be able to stay open and loving in the face of huge conflict going on in the world. I should be able not to be drowning in grief even though someone I really love has died or gone away."

Sometimes in a sitting you can force yourself to stay in the pain, and sometimes this works—we come back to a place of balance and equanimity of mind. But sometimes we end up in a super struggle of willpower and self-judgment and forcing, and the conflict gets even stronger.

We need to remember that mindfulness is never strident. Mindfulness is not forcing. We can't force mindfulness. We can't force openness. We can't force acceptance—these are kinds of contradictions. Mindfulness is allowing.

And so from time to time, in retreat or in our life, we might find that there's a point where we're just feeling completely submerged, and opening is out of the question. We hardly even know who we are and what's going on. The Buddha spoke of what he called skillful avoidance, and it's important. Not the avoidance of aversion—this is not a concept to say, "Oh, it's skillful avoidance, I don't have to sit the rest of the day because I'm kind of tired." That's not it. But it's avoidance when you realize mindfulness isn't happening, when what's happening is we're getting overwhelmed.

And so we can move in gently, move in slowly. When there's really excruciating pain, it doesn't mean turn the attention there and stay for the hour until you feel like you're made out of concrete and you're going to crack from the tension. It's moving slowly, and when you really feel no more mindfulness is happening and you're just going to snap, open up the attention. Come back to the breath. Feel the whole body. Have a wideness of attention. This is skillful avoidance. It's not spacing out, but it's skillfully bringing some nutrients to the spirit, to the mind. And then again, gently move back in to what's happening. Never from forcing does the truth open up.

I also feel it's very important, as we begin to think about or reflect on opening to the difficult, to realize that difficult and unpleasant is part of our experience—it's not all of our experience. Sometimes people tend to get unbalanced on that side. They kind of discount or ignore or avoid anything pleasant that's happening. This is also aversion. If in the moment there is a sense of joy, that's fine—acknowledge it. Again, we don't want to cling, but we need to acknowledge that that's what's happening, not get imbalanced in the other direction.

By themselves, neither pleasure nor pain enlightens one. Only understanding enlightens us. Only understanding.

So don't undervalue a moment where you're present with whatever's happening with a clarity of attention—one of those moments where your mindfulness is non-judging, where you're seeing and feeling clearly, so you know there's no problem. Don't undervalue it, even if the next moment things seem like a total struggle. Because that one moment of real mindfulness, presence, clarity, and non-judging is very powerful.

When we know for ourselves what the true relationship is—that's the true understanding of the heart and mind. Not understanding through the intellect, but understanding from what we've seen and known for ourselves. And that's the understanding that can lead to liberation.

This is the understanding that gives us the courage, the conviction, to know that we can be with whatever arises from our past. We don't have to be afraid of facing whatever's arising in this moment. It's not like we have a choice as to what arises from our path anyway. Really, the only choice is how we meet it.

I want to close with a quotation from the Third Zen Patriarch. It's a long poem—this is just a small piece—but it's one of my favorite writings:

When love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. Make the smallest distinction, however, and heaven and earth are set infinitely apart. If you wish to see the truth, then hold no opinion for or against anything. To set up what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things.

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