Balance of Perception

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:07

Tonight I want to talk about another aspect of balance in practice. This is the balancing of perception so that we have an evenness of perception—balancing our opening to the painful and difficult while also opening to the incredible beauty and perfection of the Dhamma.

It seems to me this is one of the great paradoxes, the great mysteries of our practice, of life on this earth, of life in this body. As we go deeper and deeper in our practice and investigation, we find that we open more and more to what is painful and difficult. At the same time, we're opening to the sublime, to the incredibly wondrous. It seems to happen together.

What is very difficult for many of us is to be able to hold both with an evenness of perception—not to get lost in the unsatisfactoriness and pain, and not to get lost in ecstasy and beauty. That might not be your problem so far, so I'll probably focus more on the former. But it's hard to hold both without denying either.

Let me offer some examples of how both aspects are present when I start looking around in almost any experience. Walking outside a week or so ago, on one of those really beautiful golden days where the trees were on fire and it was warm, just incredibly beautiful—being in the woods, my heart felt uplifted. I really felt at one with things. Very inspiring. And then the wind blows, some leaves flutter down, and there's this shift. Right, all this beauty is the prelude to the death of all these flowers and trees. It's winter coming on. It holds both at the same time.

Another example: a very good friend of mine who is HIV positive, not really sick, but there's all the possibility, the fear and the pain and the oppressive, wearing nature of that, the fear that comes with any small thing that goes wrong. It's really heart-rending. And at the same time, this person is becoming more and more radiant, more and more able to share and express love of the Dharma, just love in general, more and more glowing as a person. People just want to be around this person. How can you separate the two? They're both happening together.

Or on a bigger scale in the world, take the events in the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe, and how there's this sense of the Cold War ending and tyrannies breaking down. Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize for, they said, his part in ending the Cold War. And then you read about or hear about what's happening in Russia. Actually, there's a huge increase in crime of all sorts, violence of all sorts. They have like now a Russian mafia starting to come up. Anti-Semitism is getting really strong. We met some friends from the Soviet Union a few weeks ago. They said it's really quite scary. And this also is happening at the same time as the ending of this tyranny. How can you separate the two? And why do we need to?

So part of our practice—and you can see it in your experience here—is to learn to hold both, to acknowledge whichever aspect of experience is emerging into our awareness at the present time without needing to deny or repress. We can have compassion, metta, for the pain and suffering, our own and others, and at the same time, appreciation for the mystery, for the wonder, for the beauty.

It's true that for many of us at different times, the painful unsatisfying aspect of our practice, of our mind, of our life, or sometimes of the pain in the world, can really start to seem unbearable or overwhelming. As we go deeper in practice, we begin to open to see more deeply the nature of the kilesas, the power of greed and hatred and confusion in our mind. We open to depths of pain and difficulty that we've been so conditioned to avoid in our lives that we've just never really been able to muster the attention to look at it.

This is a necessary and vital part of our practice. We're so conditioned to move away from the difficult and unpleasant and painful and scary that we have to learn how to see it and open to it with mindfulness. That's what the Buddha talked about in his Four Noble Truths, and there's a reason for that. To know the nature of our disease—our disease being how suffering is created and how we can come to freedom from it—it's necessary to meet and investigate and thus understand the disease itself.

To do this, in some ways it seems like we plunge into seeing the kilesas, the torments in our mind, the suffering in our psyche, in our body, on a deeper and deeper level. And it's hard. I would venture to say that everyone here, in your own uniquely personal way, is meeting your own personal pains and torments—physical, emotional, spiritual, psychic, confusion. You're meeting it all, in whatever manner it's manifesting in your experience. You're meeting it, and it takes great courage. It takes a lot of honesty and humility, over and over and over, to come face to face with this. I wish that you could each acknowledge this for yourself.

This part of the practice is necessary. But what is also necessary is to meet our experience with an evenness of mindfulness. In other words, we can get so focused on the afflictions, so focused on seeing greed, hatred, delusion, pain, suffering, the whole gamut, that we start to think that's all we see.

And when this happens—and this is what I mean by not having an evenness of mindfulness—we're just focused on the painful, the scary, the negative. We can get very discouraged. When this happens, we really lose energy to be present, to meet what's happening in the moment. It gets really hard to practice.

Again, it's like the afflictions seeping in in a new way, coloring our perception of what's going on the way dye colors water. If we don't see it, it's like the plug comes out of our energy, and everything just starts on this downhill spiral.

Just for an example, look in your own mind. How many people, when I spoke of meeting your difficulties with courage and humility, said, "Yeah, right, that's everyone else but not me"? Or, "I don't really have that much pain." Or the reverse: "My pain is so much worse than everybody else's, but I don't have the courage to greet it." Just these little twists of how we relate to experience are the blinders, the filters that keep our

mindfulness and perceptions skewed, that keep us out of balance.

I just want to remind us that greed, hatred, delusion, confusion—these are not our intrinsic nature. They're not intrinsic, inseparable qualities of the mind and heart. They seep in; they color our experience. They color the pure nature of our mind the way that clouds cover the sun. And we need to see and know the clouds. We need to recognize and acknowledge them, not run from them. But we need to know that they're impermanent and not mistake them for the sun. Not identify with the clouds. And we also need to learn to recognize the sun—to know when it's shining, instead of just thinking, "Oh well, there are no defilements present. Let me go look for some." Let's stop and acknowledge the sun when it comes out.

So our practice is about being clearly mindful, knowing for ourselves the unbearably painful, the exquisitely sublime, and everything in between—with evenness of mind, non-reactivity of attention. Neither avoiding the one nor clinging to the other, but just being present with a direct, unflinching openness of being, an energy of mindfulness.

So how can we work with developing this evenness? Chögyam Trungpa said something once that I like a lot—I'm paraphrasing a bit—because it's actually the experience of falling out of balance that wakes us up and enables us to come to balance. So rather than thinking when we're out of balance, "Oh God, I blew it again," that's the trigger to wake us up, to come back into balance.

When we're in a difficult, painful time, just when things are getting the most oppressive, the most unbearable, the most negative—when someone goes, "This is too much, I can't handle it anymore, and this can't be the whole show"—we realize, yeah, it's not. It's just at that point that things shift, that our mind opens into another perception, another possibility.

But we're so conditioned to view life through the veil of confusion, of negativity, of wanting, that we're used to looking at life as if it's a series of polarities. This duality. There's right and wrong. My practice is good or it's bad. I'm progressing or I'm going backwards. And we really take that to be the way things are.

Thich Nhat Hanh was talking about this once, and he said: really realize you can't have right without left. It's the same thing. It's part of the same piece. It's the same with good and evil, pleasant and unpleasant, positive and negative. It's completely interdependent. The polarity is just an idea that we have in our mind. We set these two sides of the same whole as polar opposites. We want one, we deny the other. We make one good, we want to get rid of ever hearing about the other. And then we really suffer.

Thich Nhat Hanh again: seeing how in ourselves, as in society, we only want to be with the good. So if that's so, and we've set up these polar opposites, that means we can't identify with the evil or bad. So we have to throw it out there, project it out onto the world. We need an enemy. And this is how we've been conditioned for a large part of our lives. Of course we bring that in here.

I noticed some time ago, right after I'd been thinking about this, I was reading a newspaper. Just with nothing particular in my mind, I started to notice the tenor of most of the main articles. They were about

crimes, and the way that one dealt with them was courts and juries and punishment and prisons and executions.

There's a war on drugs, a war in Iraq—all this punitive, separated way of working with things.

I read something the other day that was just horrible. In Guatemala, there are more and more young teenage kids who are abandoned and living on the streets of Guatemala City. They're starving, and they sniff glue just to mask the hunger. And the army's way of dealing with this—what's considered a horrible blight on society—is to kidnap and kill them. If there's something bad, we don't want to see it. Get rid of it, annihilate it, so it doesn't exist. It's horrible, this sense of polarity taken to the extreme.

I used to work in a state hospital for severely mentally handicapped people—really severely handicapped. And it's amazing how many people live there, yet I never run into anybody like that in the course of my daily life. Again, it's this sense of getting it out there, extirpating it so I don't have to face it in myself.

We're so caught in this sense of opposites and duality that we don't know how to hold them both, to see that they're two sides of the same coin, to hold the mystery of it.

So what happens? We come here to practice, and in doing so we really begin to be more evenly aware of what's going on. Of course, the shadow side of ourselves begins to come up into consciousness—which is great. That's the practice. We begin to really experience the power of these torments of mind: greed, hatred, and delusion. We really come to know the power these have for confusing us.

But we still tend to be caught in this sense of duality, of opposites. And so we just turn it back in on ourselves. Suddenly we are seeing only the torments, only the so-called bad. "God, anyone with this much greed, hatred, and delusion doesn't deserve to live. How can I be with other people?"

My favorite example—a friend told me this last year, and he's given me permission to share it. He was on retreat, doing walking meditation, and the thought arose: "I felt I was not being respectful to the trees because I'm such an unmindful, deluded person." We're like this, you know. We just turn it in on ourselves and get really caught.

From the Third Zen Patriarch: "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 opinions 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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So our practice is not to cling to and not to reject anything that comes up in this moment of awareness—no matter what it is, and that has no exceptions whatsoever. But to meet everything with this mindfulness, this power of acknowledgment and attention, whether it's unbearable distress and suffering, whether it's

an exquisitely beautiful moment, whether it's something mundane—the whole range.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about how we take our garbage, throw it out into the compost, then use that compost to plant flowers. We grow roses, and the roses go back into the compost. So when you look at a rose, you can't separate it. Compost, or garbage, is rose, and the rose is garbage. They're not two separate opposing things. They are each other.

The pain in us and the beauty in us is the same as the pain outside and the beauty outside. They are each other. This is what the world is. We can't separate it, make this wall.

We're not all horrendously evil beings. And we are also experiencing a lot of greed, hatred, and delusion in our moment-to-moment experience. Both are true.

In working with balancing my perception—especially when I'm caught in a round of really recognizing the painful, afflictive aspects while not really recognizing the more uplifting aspects—one of the most powerful aids is simply learning to recognize these helpful, uplifting states of mind when they're present.

These are qualities of the luminous mind. They're classically described in Theravada in typically bland terms as non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion. But really, these are not passive, bland qualities at all. They are very active, uplifting qualities of mind. I'm going to describe just a few.

Non-greed includes generosity, thoughts and actions of sharing, non-attachment, renunciation, simplicity. Non-hatred includes mettā, loving-kindness, compassion, forgiveness, patience, acceptance. Non-delusion brings real brightness of mind, clarity of perception. It can lead to equanimity, to insight, to understanding with clarity of perception.

These are all also mental states. They come and go. But pay attention, because we do experience them, all of us, in differing degrees at various times. There are times when confusion, greed, and hatred are not arising, when mindfulness is strong. And these really uplifting qualities are accessible to all of us. We don't have to be a Buddha to experience moments of these. It's very important to recognize them, note them, notice them, give them full acknowledgment and attention when they're arising in our experience.

Sometimes, even in just talking about these uplifting qualities, it can lead one to feel even more discouraged. We can really do a number on ourselves. "Okay, well, a mind of mettā, boundless equanimity—right, sure. That might be for somebody else, but I have a mind of boundless aversion and self-contempt. Don't talk about it, you know, it just makes me feel even worse." We get more caught in self-judgment, in comparison. You start looking around and go, "God, look how equanimous everybody looks, and I'm the only one fidgeting." And it just gets into more comparison. There's always someone better. I just want to say that. If you're in a judging mode, there's always going to be someone that looks better. It never ends.

But what's really more important than that is this: from this place where the mind is

comparing—"compassion, equanimity, not possible for me"—the mind can't imagine at this point being brighter, being freer, because it's stuck in what it knows. The mind only knows what it's already experienced. It can't know a greater capacity than it's experienced. But that doesn't mean it's not possible. The mind doesn't know, but the heart can trust. And this experience, this opening to really positive qualities of our experience, is beyond the mind knowing. It's beyond thoughts. So it doesn't matter that the mind is filled with thoughts about, "Not for me, I'm not good enough, you have to be a bodhisattva," blah, blah, blah. That's just thoughts. It has no bearing on the reality of what is possible—except in that we choose to believe them and get caught there.

It's a lot about trust. Again, the Third Zen Patriarch: the non-dual is one with the trusting mind. It's about trust, not about figuring it out or holding on.

To help with recognizing more supportive and onward-leading experiences or mental states, I want to list some more, because I think it is helpful to begin to get familiar with them. Often we just kind of think, "Well, nothing's happening," as I mentioned the other night. And what's happening is calm, which is actually one of the seven factors of enlightenment. But we can get so focused on wanting sati, mindfulness, wanting concentration and not having it, that we completely overlook calm, which is a very important quality that needs to be developed and balanced.

In working with the seven factors of enlightenment, yes, we've talked a lot about mindfulness, which is one, and we've talked a lot about samādhi, concentration. But there are also five others that are equally important to develop and bring into balance. On the calming side, there's concentration. There's also calm. There's also equanimity, this non-reactive quality of mind. Very important qualities. On the energetic side, there's energy or effort. Again, we've talked a lot about that. There's also this quality of investigation of states—interest, really interested in investigating what's happening. Very important. Also, the quality of rapture or joy, pīti in Pali.

All of these seven factors are developing and coming into balance. At different times, different ones will be more obvious, will be stronger, and other ones will be weaker. If we just focus on a couple, we tend to ignore all the others and really downplay what's going on in our experience. So for example, you may feel no mindfulness whatsoever, but investigation is actually coming up quite strongly. Or you have no energy, but calm is being developed.

A second list, and a whole other way of working with qualities in our mind, is called the ten pāramīs, or ten perfections.

These ten qualities are described as the supreme noble qualities of character or conduct. In the Theravada tradition there are ten; in the Mahayana there are six. These ten qualities are also considered contributory conditions to enlightenment. Traditionally it was taught that the bodhisattva, before becoming a Buddha, spent eons of lifetimes, in each life working to develop to perfection these ten powerful qualities of being. Each of them is very important in our growing into the openness that leads to understanding.

There is generosity. There is virtue, or sila. You can see that we're all developing all of these in different degrees at different times. The third is renunciation—just by being here, you're renouncing a tremendous amount, even if all you're seeing is what you still want. The fourth is wisdom. The fifth is energy. The sixth is patience or perseverance. The seventh is truthfulness. The eighth is resolution or determination. The ninth is metta, loving-kindness. The tenth is equanimity.

So when we're feeling really lost in a difficult, confused space—nothing but fear, nothing but aversion, nothing but clinging or depression—it seems so solid and unending and so useless when we want to be in a different space. It can be helpful to either actually reflect on, or just tune into in yourself, that this particular experience might be the ground for really developing the power of patience, or of resolution, or of equanimity. Our willingness to just gently come back and meet it, and meet it again, could really be significant. This could be the lifetime that's devoted to the development of patience. Who knows?

It really helps me sometimes to step back and look at the bigger picture. I don't know which particular part of the path really needs to be developed in me in this lifetime. You're really looking at a big picture, I know. But maybe it is just patience. And that's not a bad use of a life, to really perfect the power of patience.

When we begin to work with this evenness of mindfulness, acknowledging what's present for just what it is, we stop discounting what we're experiencing just because it doesn't meet our idea of what good mindfulness and good concentration should look like. We think it should look like something else, not this, so this is out and I've got to change. Instead, you much more start to be able to fully meet what's happening. And in that meeting, the equanimity, the patience, all the paramis and all the seven factors of enlightenment actually get strengthened and developed from our simple meeting what's happening.

Sometimes I've noticed in myself, and in talking with other people, that when we do actually experience in our practice, in our life, some of these very powerful, uplifting qualities—like real rapture, love of the Dhamma, joy, metta, compassion—sometimes people talk about, in a subtle way, being almost afraid to really open to and acknowledge that experience. There's a slight hesitancy, a slight holding back, almost as if we're more hesitant to fully open and acknowledge joy, love of the Dhamma, real love of another person, or truly unbounded metta than we are to open to pain sometimes.

I'm not completely sure why. Some of the things that I've experienced are a sense of not trusting that it's real. "Oh, this is another false state. This is just going to lead me into more suffering, so let me pull back a little bit." It's kind of unconscious. Or, "This feels like real rapture, but it's not possible for me to be experiencing that. It's just some delusion." So we veer our attention away from that in a subtle way. Or, "I'm not pure enough. It couldn't possibly be happening to me." We don't trust it. Or it's not ecstatic enough—my idea of rapture is that it should really be this incredibly ecstatic experience, you know, it blows me out. And that's not what's happening, so it's nothing.

Or sometimes there's such a sense of the poignancy of the beauty of something. Poignancy because of its

impermanent nature—there can be this subtle fear of opening to it because I'll just get attached and it's going to go away and I'll suffer. So what's the point of even opening to the beauty? It's just more suffering.

Can we learn to trust that we can fully open to what's happening without the need for fear, without the need for hesitation, that kind of bargaining? The Buddha said once that through dispassion the mind is freed. But dispassion doesn't mean grayness. It doesn't mean that we don't appreciate and fully experience these wondrous, uplifting states of mind or the beautiful in life. The Buddha also said that what is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one does not strive after it.

So we don't block it out, and everything doesn't turn into this muddle of grayness—no beauty, no pain. We really appreciate, we fully open to and appreciate the wonder, in a way even more deeply, because we know it will pass. There's no sense in clinging, and so there's no need to hold back either. It's actually a purer appreciation, a purer experience.

But I don't want to underplay the power of conditioning. Yes, I know, we have to come back to suffering. Even with deep experiences of these powerful states of mind or heart, when we really know that the kilesas—the torments of mind, the disturbances—are not our intrinsic nature, we know that they're impermanent. We know that in a moment of mindfulness they don't arise, and we might have a choice of how to act or react in our life. And then we wake up five minutes later and find we're again caught in wanting, in confusion, in aversion. It's like, "Oh, the clouds are all there is. What happened to the sun?" We forget there ever was a sun. We're just back in the clouds. How did I get here? Why does this keep happening?

We might have really gotten it. There's absolutely nothing to want—that was completely crystal clear. We've all had moments in different ways where we think, "I really know this." I don't know how many times I've really known that there's no self. I absolutely know it. And then I turn around and I'm acting as if I'm the most solid being that ever existed, going through all kinds of machinations and plans to get something that I really need that's going to make me happy.

The conditioning is strong. When there's a moment of unawareness, it's as if the old conditioning—the habit of mind to move towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant—just springs in and fills up that space. The mind rushes towards the pleasant.

We said it before, but I want to say it again: this is why mindfulness is so powerful. When we're present with mindfulness, it does counteract these habits of mind. That moment of attention where the attentive mind, the mindfulness, really meets the arising object—it connects with the pleasant thought, connects with the pleasant experience. In that moment, the greed isn't fed. This is the purification of a moment of mindfulness, and it's really powerful. Through this shining the light of mindfulness on whatever arises, our evenness of perception develops and gets stronger—shining the light of mindfulness on whatever comes up in this moment without any hesitation, without any discrimination. This is what Bhante Bodhirakkhita was talking about the other night: not waiting and thinking, "Should I go look at this object

or not?" No discrimination.

So each one of these moments of pure mindfulness is a moment of purification, and the habits of the afflictions are weakened, become less strong. We begin to see these torments of mind, these habits, much more clearly. They start to move from being unseen filters on our experience that we're not even aware of to being really observable—as someone said in an interview, palpable experiences. We really feel greed when it's arising, where before we just thought that's the way things are.

This stage, this part of our practice—which is actually due to the increasing mindfulness and the stronger purification—can be a very discouraging and painful time. It's like greed is just here everywhere, or aversion is just so experienced, and it really can be quite discouraging. So often people say, "Well, now that I'm aware of self-judgment or lust or aversion or whatever, that's all I see. I'm so much more neurotic than when I came." It can seem overwhelming.

Again, this is another filter, moving out of evenness of perception. So often we can have this tendency to accent the so-called negative and discount the so-called positive. This can happen on very subtle levels, when we move away again from bare mindfulness and start to put our energy into the interpretations and the identification.

It's a simple experience. I noticed this: I was driving yesterday and passing a place where I knew in advance there's a huge stand of trees on the side of the road. I know that they always lose all their leaves really early because they're in water. So I was ready for this before I even came up, because I really don't like it when winter comes. So I have this mindset.

So I came up and there was this whole huge expanse of totally gray trees, not a leaf left, on the left. And I was noticing this—oh, it's all gray. I feel so sad. Winter's coming. Autumn's over. It's getting cold. It's kind of depressing. I was just really caught in this. And then I happened to notice that on the other side, it was beautiful. All the leaves were gold. There was still a lot of green. I hadn't even noticed that—caught in the interpretations, identified with this feeling of sadness and "oh, poor me, it's winter and I get cold."

This perception is what prevents evenness. Instead of simply noticing, "Oh, there's gray over here—winter's coming. Oh, there's beautiful gold and green over here—isn't that lovely?" I was caught in all the story.

It's helpful at these times when we notice we're doing this. Thich Nhat Hanh asks, "Most of us ask the question, what is wrong? We forget to ask what is right." The example he gives, which I really love—it's so simple—talks about how it is when we have a toothache. We're really aware of it, aware of the pain, and it's quite excruciating, very painful. When something happens and the pain stops, oh, it's so pleasant, so nice. We really appreciate it and it's so peaceful. Now, most of the time we don't have a toothache and we don't even notice it, much less appreciate the pleasantness. It's really pleasant not having a toothache.

So we begin to notice in our practice here, as we're sitting—rising and falling, in and out, lifting, moving,

placing, moving through the day—there's a fairly steady flow of changing objects, of experience arising, persisting, passing away. Emotion, sensation, sound, sight, thought, sensation—coming and going. Notice how many of them come, they're here, they go. There's mindfulness, there's recognition, there's no big fuss. Then notice how some of this flow of objects arises and somehow there's this lurch in the mind. The mind isolates particular experience from the flow, identifies with it. "Oh, this one's real. This is permanent. This is me. This one isn't okay. It's got to go."

Notice the difference. Begin to notice which ones get isolated and grabbed onto or pushed away, which get really identified with. When we're not in this evenness of perception, when the mindfulness is selective, we isolate the particular experiences that fit the particular filter we're seeing through at that time. And those are the experiences we believe.

For example, we're in the filter of "I'm so greedy." Every experience, every thought, every feeling of greed that comes up—that's what we pull out, that gets identified with, that one's solid. All the objects that came that we didn't feel greed about are completely ignored. And there are probably many more times that greed wasn't felt, but that's completely ignored.

Or "my concentration's no good." Just the sight of somebody walking past slowly is pulled out, isolated. "Oh my God, they're so concentrated. My concentration—I'll never be able to do that." Every experience through the day that's pulled out and isolated is the one that fits that filter. Whatever it is. "I can never do the practice. I'm stupid. I'm the best yogi that ever lived. I'm incredibly beautiful. I'm ugly." Whatever it is. All the experiences to the contrary that don't fit—they're just discounted or ignored or not given much attention.

Just begin to become aware of this. Just reflect at some point today on how many thoughts, how many emotions, how many experiences came and went. Impossible to count in one hour.

Which ones did the mind hook onto? Which experiences are defining your perception of today's reality? Which experiences are defining your perception of yourself?

Just becoming aware of this. And when we become aware of some such self-definition of the moment, whatever it is, we can begin to look very carefully at each moment—not only at the moments when that experience is present, but at the moments when it's not. And you can't help but begin to see that no self-definition is solid. It doesn't matter what it is.

"I'm angry. I'm such an angry person." There might be several isolated angry moments. There might be really a lot of isolated angry moments. But it will not be every single arising object of experience that happens in the day. There will be many where anger just isn't there at all—there's happiness or hunger or joy or sleepiness or neutrality or calm or concentration. And we isolate those moments that fit the filter: "I'm angry."

I think of it in my mind when I'm sitting, watching this happen—it's like my thought makes a bridge

between several experiences or moments that happen minutes or hours apart. My thought holds them together and creates this narrative: "Oh, I've been angry all day." Just begin to notice. No self-definition is solid.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh talking again about noticing what is right. He's speaking about the Vietnam War, when he was working with a group of people at great risk to themselves:

"During the war, we were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage. So I would mention these herbs to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

Just notice what else is present.

Mindfulness—this magic power of mindfulness—really is the key to clear perception. Pleasant and neutral objects that arise in our experience are equally valid objects of meditation as the difficult and the painful. Mindfulness is a non-discriminating awareness. In a way, it's almost like meeting whatever arises in the moment with this active quality of attention and also with loving-kindness, with gentleness, with acceptance—whatever it is.

Real peace, real freedom, comes from meeting the excruciatingly painful, the sublime, and everything in between equally. No distinctions. We appreciate the beauty. We open to and understand the suffering through our own experience, and through this opening discover new depths of compassion and love. This really is possible through the power of our continuing development of mindfulness.

I want to end with a quotation that shows how even great suffering can open into great beauty of spirit. It's from Alexander Solzhenitsyn, writing in his trilogy *The Gulag Archipelago*—people enduring the unendurable in all the different prison camps through Stalinist Russia, really appalling suffering, unimaginable pain and cruelty. He talks about how many people—not everyone, but many—grew tremendously spiritually through this, really seeing the incredible beauty that can emerge in the human heart through being involved in such unbearable suffering. That's the only way someone could emerge from ten years in the camps as he did and then write something like this:

"Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states nor between classes nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains a small unuprooted corner of evil. Since then, I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world. They struggle with the evil inside a human being, inside every human being. It may be impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to transcend it within each person."

So let's sit for a few minutes.

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