Nature of Thought

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:33

I want to speak about something that I personally find fascinating. I want to talk about thought—about the power of thought, and how we get so confused by it.

These are the first two verses of the Dhammapada, which is one of the books of the Buddhist suttas, translated in various ways. This is one translation:

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind and suffering will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable.

That speaks to how powerful thoughts can be. Thought is amazing. It's amazing that I can sit here and make these noises and it vibrates in your eardrum and we understand each other—that these sounds in our mind turn into coherent thoughts. It's an amazing tool, and in a way it really does construct the world. When we understand it, it's such a powerful ally.

But how much in our practice, in our lives, do we find ourselves struggling with thought? Countless times people come in for interviews and it kind of slips out somewhere: "I'm trying to get rid of these thoughts," or "I'm still having thoughts. When will I get to the point where there's no more thoughts?"—as if that's what the practice is about. The reason we want to get rid of thoughts is because somehow we know we're suffering tremendously from what we perceive as the presence of the thought.

So really I'd like to suggest that instead of fighting with thoughts, we can turn our attention to seeing them for what they are, understanding how we can get so confused, so caught up, how they can seem so powerful.

If we really look as we sit here and just look at thoughts, what is a thought? It just comes, it goes, it's nothing. It's so ephemeral. "The sky is blue." "The sun just set." "How long will this talk be?" "My hand hurts." A thought is just nothing.

Kalu Rinpoche said—and I think Jack read this quotation from the last retreat, a very powerful one: "We live in illusion and the appearance of things. There is a reality. You are that reality. But we live in illusion and the appearance of things."

So much of that illusion, so much of that appearance of things, is created through thought, through our

misperception of thought. We live in illusion through not seeing what's really happening. We live in a dream that we're just making up every moment as we go along, and then we start suffering from it because we believe it's real. Thought is a big contributing factor to this—not thought per se, but our misapprehension of thought.

It seems to be true that we in the West, in our culture, are really a thinking culture. Whenever I've sat a retreat with an Asian teacher, they tend to be really amazed at how much Westerners—or Americans anyway—think. They say, "Ah, you're always thinking." We can't just come in with an experience. We analyze and interpret and compare and try to figure out our motivation and connect it to what happened in our childhood. We can't just sit and feel pressure. We're tortured, and I really have sensed this sometimes in Asian teachers, this sense of real bewilderment at how agonized we can be about simple experiences.

So we try to get rid of the thoughts, but that's not really the source of the suffering. Nisargadatta Maharaj talked once about how if we examine our mind closely, we see that it's seething with thoughts. We don't have to look that closely to see that it's seething with thoughts. And it may go blank occasionally, but as he says, a becalmed mind is not a peaceful mind.

So often we mistake that for peace. The exact quotation is: "This peace is very brittle. What you're calling peace is only the absence of disturbance, temporary absence. Real peace cannot be disturbed."

Real peace is not about the absence of thoughts, necessarily. If that's all that peace was about, we could just have lobotomies and go home. It's true, right? That's all we needed to do. So real peace, as we've said ten million times, and we all need to keep reminding ourselves, comes when we know and understand what's really true in this moment.

So how do we get so caught up in creating this dream world out of misperception and thought? I want to talk about just a few ways, because obviously it can be quite a complex topic.

One of the ways we get confused, which leads to further confusion, is on the basic level of perception itself. Perception, as defined in Buddhist psychological terminology, is a quality that's present in every moment. It's the quality of recognition. It involves memory. It's like a quality of discernment. For example, you recognize warm or cold or blue. This is perception—just seeing what's there.

The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. In a nutshell, that's our whole practice. Mindfulness practice is about direct experience, which allows for the arising of true knowledge.

So what's this mistaken perception? Why does this happen? How do we misperceive? Some of this I've spoken about before. When in a moment there's present in the mind, unseen, our old friends—and you can guess what old friends they are: craving, aversion or anger, confusion or delusion, or you could call it blindness, really—they actually can affect how we perceive. So we don't perceive accurately.

I've given some examples before. I want to use one that someone told me in an interview, and I hope this person doesn't mind because it's a perfect example. Being in a state of aversion, walking in here, and reading "perceptory" as "purgatory"—but really reading that, you know. The mind does that. And then when you flip back and see what's really true: "Oh, how could I have ever done that?" But in the moment, you totally believe that perception is accurate. And it leads to a whole constellation of more thoughts, more emotions, more feelings, a really solid construct of what's going on.

So as we said before, that first mistaken perception arises because there's aversion or greed in the mind. And that arises when there's pleasant and unpleasant feeling that we're not aware of, and the mind just naturally moves into craving, aversion, confusion. Even closer to home is what really comes from confusion: not even noticing the feeling, or seeing how one thing is leading to the next. This is happening on a very fine level, but perception is happening in every moment. And so a lot of the time we get really far, far away from what's actually happening. Then we wonder why we feel so out of touch and confused.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When you look at a pencil"—or you look at this, you perceive it, say "okay, gong, bell ringer, whatever," I don't even know what you call this thing—"but the stick itself may be different from the stick in your mind." And that's really how it is.

One example I've used other times in talking about mindfulness, in seeing how the presence of wanting in the mind can distort what we see, was a scientific experiment, a psychological experiment, where the subjects were instructed to watch a video. Given some reward, it was about four or five minutes of a very fast basketball game, and they were instructed to count how many times the ball was passed. So they were really focused—just seeing that tunnel vision you get when there's grasping, when there's wanting in the mind. That was their task.

At the end of the experiment, as they turned in their thing, the experimenter said, "Well, what about that woman in white?"

They said, "What?"

The experimenter said, "Oh yeah, in the middle of the video, this woman dressed all in white with a white parasol kind of sauntered through the middle of the basketball court, in one side and out the other."

Nobody had seen this. Nobody could believe it. You totally trust what your perception is. So they showed them the video again, and there was this woman in white. From then on, you could never see the video and not see the woman in white. But before that, there's no way they could have been convinced that had happened.

Just examples of how perception can be so mistaken. Wow, that's interesting.

[An earthquake occurs during the talk]

There's no reason to go anywhere. Just sit down and relax. Stay right here. Just stay with what is. There's

nowhere to go anyway. That was interesting. We're a few miles from the San Andreas Fault actually—it slips once in a while. Just sit down and ground where you are now. Just feel yourself sitting here.

May we be peaceful. May we be present with equanimity and clarity. May we feel our connection with all other beings. We retouch that place of trust in the Dharma where there's nothing to fear. We send love to all beings in this area, wishing for all beings freedom from fear, freedom from danger, freedom from confusion.

Just let your attention come to rest in this present moment. Can we be right here, right now, in this moment?

It's interesting—I was never in an earthquake before. I thought it was kind of interesting. See, we never know. We construct all these ideas out of thought about how things are and what's going to happen. We plan, and you never know.

Not knowing can be like trust in the unknown. It's freedom.

So, where were we? The basketball video, that's right. Anyway, when there is craving or aversion in the mind that goes unseen, it can so color how we perceive that we just don't know what's really happening.

In a way, the root—the even more basic quality in our experience that leads to misperception—is that of ignorance. Perhaps blindness is a better word.

Sometimes when we talk about ignorance, I know I tend to have the feeling that it's this solid thing—something we're born with that we can never escape. But it's really just another experience that arises and passes, same as craving, same as joy. And we can actually begin to feel and experience the qualities of it. In a way, you can sort of recognize sometimes when this blindness is present in your experience.

One way it manifests is simply as confusion, dullness, heaviness—like a fog. Or I think of it like those times when you've slept too long or too warmly, and in your dreams you're trying to wake up and there's this kind of struggle. For me, I'll try to see and everything's upside down, and I just can't come out of it. I can't see clearly, though I know I'm not seeing clearly. That's the quality of fogginess, cloudiness, that this blindness or ignorance can introduce into our experience.

When this is present in a moment, what arises out of it is what's often called wrong view, or a basic distortion of perceiving what's happening due to the cloudiness and fogginess. There's a classic example given in the Buddhist sutras of walking in a forest, although actually here walking in the desert is just as good. If you're walking at night without a flashlight and you really can't see stuff clearly at all—you can kind of tell the trees, you can kind of tell the big cactuses, but everything is really not clear—as you're out walking, you see a really big snake. And it scares you. "What am I doing out here at night? There's snakes all over." You get scared and hurry out, thinking it's dangerous. "I'm out of here." Then if you go back in

the daytime, you see it was just a big piece of dead cholla lying on the ground.

So that basic misperception coming about through the cloudiness or confusion—you see how that misperception gives rise to a whole series of assumptions. First there's an unpleasant feeling and fear, and we act on that fear, and we draw assumptions about the desert at night, and it just proliferates. You go back and see it's nothing, and you think, "Oh, how obvious." That's how it is when ignorance, this blindness, is active in our experience. We recognize in a mistaken way, and then that mistaken recognition defines how we relate to the experience, and all our actions are based on this mistake.

Once I was in Thailand walking in the forest, where there are lots of cobras and poisonous snakes. I was walking along in the daytime with my glasses on, so I wasn't worried. I saw what looked like vines hanging all over, and I walked up and almost brushed into one—then I saw it was a green snake hanging down. I had thought it was a vine. So it works both ways.

This is what's happening often, a great deal of the time, in our basic perception of who and what we are. We perceive what we are as humans in this mind-body process in an inaccurate, mistaken way. We organize our basic perceptory input—the sense data that we're experiencing moment after moment after moment in our practice here—we organize and construct it in our minds inaccurately. And then our actions and assumptions and how we live come out of that mistaken perception.

They talk about three inverted, upside-down perceptions that we have: seeing permanence in what is constantly changing and in flux; seeing satisfaction, or rather the possibility of satisfaction, in this changing flux, which can never give lasting satisfaction; and then in a way the root one—seeing a solid self-existence, an unchanging self-nature, a person, where there isn't such a thing. This leads to our confusion, our sense of separation, and a great deal of our suffering.

As we continue to be here, to pay attention in our practice, we see over and over and over that what we call "me"—generally this mind-body process—is a series of constantly shifting physical and mental experience. Sensation, sensation, feeling, thought, sound, smell, sensation, sensation—constantly changing. It never stops for a moment. It's not static. There's no place where everything stops and rests in this mind-body process. But they say, because it happens so fast and because often we don't really look, it seems really solid and unchanging and permanent to us. Like if you take a lit torch and twirl it around really fast, it looks like a solid circle.

And it's sort of like that with us. Everything is always coming and going so fast that it seems really solid.

Some misperceptions are easy to see through. You come back and look at the sign and you really see, "Oh yes, it says 'directory.'" You go back and look at the cholla and realize, "Oh yes, that's really not a snake." And once we've seen through it, there's no way we could ever mistake it again.

But others, like this basic misperception of what's going on in this mind-body process, are much harder to see through—partially because of the quickness of its happening, but also because we don't really

examine very carefully. We're so used to it that we take it for granted. And in the taking for granted, we don't really look. We just assume this is how it is, and we act from that. We build our thoughts from that, and we don't really stop to look.

This is the power, really, of this meditation, this process of mindfulness. At times when we do look, we all have little glimpses where this veil is lifted and we realize, "Oh, yeah, it's so obvious." But then suddenly we get lost again. The blindness arises once more. We stop looking so carefully because it does take a willingness to keep looking.

But in those moments when the veil is lifted, it's so simple. And what's interesting is that before such a moment, we're afraid. "What about me? I'm going to lose who I am." But we don't lose anything, because there's nothing there in the first place. You can't lose what's never been here.

One of our teachers once said: when you look, you don't see anything—there's nothing solid or permanent there. When you don't look, you see samsara. Samsara is just the endless cycle of suffering and birth and death that seems to be our experience of life. So all that changes is our relationship to what we experience. We don't lose anything.

But another reason that it's so difficult to shift these inverted perceptions, to shift our perception of who we are—and this is coming back to the thought process—is because we describe our experience and who we are with our thoughts, and then we take that description to be true. This is something that really fascinates me. We take that description to be true without really examining it, and then any perceptions that arise that don't fit into that description, we just completely discount. We don't even notice them, or we find some reason to think they're not true.

Here's an example. Sometimes when people in meditation are just sitting very mindfully, noting, and things are coming and going, they come in and say, "I can't sustain attention on an object for very long. As soon as I know it, as soon as I'm mindful of it, it goes away. I can't do it. I can't be concentrated." And we say, "Right, that's because things arise and pass very quickly. You can't sustain attention for long because nothing's lasting very long." But people don't want to let that perception in. Instead, they turn it around to say, "I should be able to sustain attention." We don't want to let in the perception of how quickly everything's arising and passing.

On a larger scale, I see it in myself and I see it in friends and in people I speak with on retreat. We'll have some self-description that we're currently caught in: "I'm so morbid." "I'm never happy." "I'm a really selfish person." "I can't meditate." "I'm lazy." Whatever your particular self-description—it might be one you've carried with you all your life, or it might be one that's gotten locked in really solid in the last couple of days. And you come and talk about that self-definition, that self-description, and I'll ask, "Well, was that what you experienced every moment?" "Well, no. There were times of joy, and there were times of peace, and there were moments of hunger, and there were lots of neutralities." "Well, what about this solid self-description you're talking about?"

And the other experiences are just ignored, forgotten, discounted. In fact, something that fascinates me is how often the negative self-definition is really bought into. People say, "Well, sometimes there are moments of joy, but that's just kind of a mistake, or it's grace, or it's not really my experience. This morbidity is my true experience, my true nature. This other stuff happened by mistake, and it'll probably never happen again, so don't count it."

This is how we take thoughts, string them together, make them solid, and then ignore everything else that doesn't fit into them. We give thought an amazing power to define us, to limit our perception, to keep us from seeing what is actually happening, because we try to fit our experience into our thoughts.

So our challenge here is this: can we let go of self-definition? Can we be with the bare perception of what's happening right now? Just let it in. Just notice how it is—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Craving arises. Aversion arises. Thoughts and interpretations arise from that. That's okay, but know that for what it is. Can we just come back and be with the bare experience?

in an unbiased way, not choosing some and discarding others. This is really the function of mindfulness—to be with what is, without discrimination. And this is what begins to open up to us the possibility to perceive accurately the truth of who we are.

And then, just to have a moment of clear perception of what's happening—pressure in the body, whatever—as we watch, we can see how quickly the whole thing flowers into a story, into a description, into a really solid reality.

For example, just walking here and some person walks by, somebody you don't know. The actuality of that experience is seeing form and color. It's unpleasant. We don't really quite notice that. Aversion arises. And then the whole thing: "Ah, they look so sloppy. Look how they dress." The association with being really judged and criticized all one's life by one's parents for being sloppy. A real negativity, a real judgment of that person. Not only that, they're dirty. They probably can't meditate. I know I don't want to be near that person in the hall. I'm sure I couldn't stand to eat across from them. It reminds me of this guy in sixth grade I had to eat across from who made me nauseous. And pretty soon this solid reality has developed around what was basically a perception of form and color and that it was unpleasant.

And that can turn into a Vipassana vendetta. It goes on the whole retreat. I'm really solid then in that definition of me as opposed to that person. And this can happen in that amount of time. It's really fascinating.

This process is one of my favorite words. It's called papañca. It means proliferation. And you can really see how it is. There's form. There's color. There's unpleasant. There's aversion. And suddenly, boom—there's proliferation of thoughts and more unpleasant feelings and association and memories and more thoughts and pleasantness about feeling "I'm so good and they're so bad," on and on and on. Papañca is how we get so far away from what is true, when we don't see it happening.

So there are a couple of strong ways that papañca is fueled. I've already talked about a couple of them. The first is this: proliferation is fueled by that basic wrong view I spoke of—the sense of a solid, separate entity of myself. This is really what gives rise to the desire for pleasure and the fear of pain. If I'm really in a space of knowing there's no separation, that what is is just what is, that it's all connected, this fear of pain and desire for pleasure just doesn't make much sense. But it makes total sense if I think this is solid and real. And so this is one of the basic fuelings of this proliferation.

Another way that this really takes off—and again, we've spoken of this a lot—is through the energy of craving. Just notice: you're sitting, having a fairly mindful sitting, and just a little thought comes up. "Gee, I wonder if I got that call from home." And then that's pleasant, and a little craving comes up, and it's not really noticed. And suddenly that thought has huge power. "I really want to get that call, because if I get it, then I can do this, and then that means that, and I'd better not have to make that other call, and I have to plan on this, and what am I going to do on Sunday, and I wonder what happened to this." And it's just this blossoming up of thoughts, getting stronger and stronger and stronger. And maybe you make it through the sitting, but you beeline for the bulletin board the second the bell rings.

This is the strength that comes from this proliferation of thought fueled by craving. What happens is we start to think the thoughts are an accurate reflection of reality, which they may or may not be. But in not seeing the thought for what it is and letting it be fueled by that craving and just taking off, we've lost all touchstone with what's actually happening in the moment.

It's interesting to see on a small scale like that here. It's scary for me to see it on a large scale. For example, with countries. The whole war in the Middle East that we were in last year could basically—and this is rather simplistic—but it could basically come down to craving for oil, craving for comfort, for power, and then all the proliferation of thoughts that arise from that. The thoughts are basically a justification of the craving. And then the thoughts become real in themselves, and further actions to support and justify the thoughts. The whole source of all this confusion is usually lost by the time all the justifications have gotten really solid.

of proliferation that happens is this craving for becoming. Becoming is an interesting one. It's really a sense of how we describe and define ourselves, how we become moment by moment through the energy of craving and grasping and identification. We keep creating a new becoming, a new identity, a new self-definition.

This is really, again, I find this fascinating to just watch the process when you're aware of it. Say you're doing your yogi meditation, your yogi job, doing the dishes, and suddenly there are a few more thoughts, but you're present, and then: "Oh, I'm so mindful." That's pleasant. And that leads to more thoughts. "Yes, I'm so mindful. I'm sure I'm the best yogi here. I've always been really good at whatever I did. I remember when I was in college, I was such a good student, and I went to law school, and I won these awards..." This whole solid sense of who I am, becoming this really good yogi, good lawyer, whatever. Solid.

And the next moment: "Oh, I really spaced out." Back to the dishes. "God, you're so unmindful." Unpleasant, leading to aversion. Leading to memories: "Yeah, you did really well when you started school, but did you ever finish? You dropped out. You never finished anything you started, and you probably won't finish this either. You might get to the end of the retreat, but you'll never get any further. You're just wasting your time." Another solid self-definition.

And both are believed in the moment, because unquestioned, because unseen. We take that thought to be an accurate description of reality. When we watch this and can just see it happening over and over, sometimes it's really funny if you can have that little space of not quite believing it. But it's also amazing to see. The Buddha talked about looking at impermanence, how fast these things come and go. He said the tendency is to take your body to be permanent, but the mind is changing so much quicker than the body. Just to be aware of that. And to see, through these self-definitions, how the thought leads to the feeling, leads to the emotion, and we've created a whole gestalt.

When I was on a retreat last summer for a couple of months, one day this was just so amazing to me—to really see how we're making up the world in each moment. I was sitting in my room, and the thought came up, "God, I'm really alone here." It was kind of a neutral thought. And then I went, "Yeah, I'm really alone." This sense of sadness came up, and that was unpleasant. "I'm so alone in my life. I live alone. I could die in this room, and no one would know for two days." It was unpleasant. I felt the sadness. I was on the verge of tears.

And suddenly it came to me: "Yeah, but you're making this all up." I said, "All right, let's just try changing it." "It's really great to be alone," I said. And all the emotions changed. "Yeah, it's so beautiful to have this time alone. And look at the tree outside. It's just glistening. I'm so blessed to have two months alone." And the emotions went along with it just as real as literally thirty seconds before. I thought, "Whoa. This is it, folks. This is what I'm doing moment to moment in my whole life." And it's really true that we're doing that.

So in some ways you could say, well, we might as well make up a nice dream, as long as we're going to make up a dream. But we should still know what's actually really happening. Again, from an Indian teacher: "If you become something, death awaits you. If you don't become something, there is neither birth nor death." Moment to moment, just noticing what we're becoming.

And in that clear seeing of it, there is no birth or death, because in the seeing of it, there's no longer the believing and the becoming.

Just one last way I want to mention that gives rise again to this proliferation of thought, and that is what is called in Buddhist terminology *mana*, or conceit. But what conceit really means is comparing: I'm better than, I'm worse than, I'm equal to—any of those. And I'm sure you've all experienced one or another of those in some rare moment. But notice just how quickly it comes up and how it leads again to such a strong sense of self-definition.

Someone walks by slowly. "They're better than me. I'm no good." The whole story unfolds. Half an hour later, you're slower than someone else. "I'm so much better than they are." Or: "We're just equal. We're just the same." This whole sense of comparing, of having to find one's place, of having to define oneself in terms of some idea—again, it totally takes us out of perceiving what's actually true.

Because what are we comparing ourselves to? There is no solid, unchanging thing to compare ourselves to. Is there some unchanging speed of walking that's the right speed, some base we can always refer back to? There's nothing solid. There's nothing to refer back to in the comparison. It's just a movement of proliferating thought away from the truth of what's happening in this moment.

In talking about how thoughts proliferate, how they define ourselves, how we get lost in that and confused, I want to again emphasize that thought is not the enemy. The way that thought can construct and communicate and build things is amazing. And some of the definitions, some of the constructs that we put on experience are really useful. It mostly works when we all agree on the same definition.

Like, we all agree that this is a meditation retreat. And we agree that I'm talking and you're listening. Now, if we didn't all have that same shared understanding—if just whoever felt like talking talked, whoever felt like listening listened—if you didn't agree it was a meditation retreat but thought maybe you could dance in here, or maybe you want to build a bonfire in the middle of the room—if we didn't all have the same kind of agreement of thoughts, it would be quite chaotic.

But the thing to be aware of is to know that it's an agreement, and just because we all seem to agree doesn't necessarily mean that it's true. In our relative relating, we all act as if we're separate, as if we're unchanging. We recognize each other, and we unconsciously reinforce our misperception in the first place. So we can use thought, we can use our constructions—and we need to—but we must see them for what they are, so they don't have to blind us.

The Buddha told a story once about a widower who had a small son living in a village. One day he was away working, and some bandits came and burned down his house along with some other houses in the village, and kidnapped his son. When the man came back, he found his house burned down, and he also found a small body that he assumed was his son. That was his understanding, his perception. Those were the thoughts and the description he built around it, and that was it—solid, he believed it.

Sometime later, his son escaped from the kidnappers, found his way home at midnight, and started banging on his father's door. The doors were locked, and the father called out, "Who's there? Who's there? Go away."

"It's me, Dad. It's your son. I found my way home."

"Go away. My son is dead. I carry his ashes with me in this little bag. I don't want you coming and trying to prey on my emotions like that. Go away."

The boy kept banging. The father said go away, wouldn't come down. Eventually the boy left, and he never saw him again.

Just because all the facts fit the interpretation we've made up, and we're sure that it's true, we still need to come back and be willing to be with the bare experience. We must be willing to be open to perceptions that don't fit what we've decided is true, or we're locked in a self-definition that might not be accurate.

The Buddha said, "Sometime, somewhere, you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you won't open it."

So our practice here—the key to coming out of clinging to our idea of truth so much—is just this key of mindfulness or wise attention: the willingness to open our attention to the bare experience of what's happening, without any preconceived ideas or notions about it.

With thought, there's an example often given for how to use wise attention. Thought is like throwing a rock. Unwise attention is like a dog—if you throw a rock and hit the dog, it gets all excited, runs all around, and goes chasing after the rock. If you throw that rock at a lion, it just sits there and stares straight at the thing that threw the rock. That's wise attention. Go back to the source. Don't just go running after the thought.

Some thought comes and we go running after it, like Jack talked about those trains the other day, and you wake up in Bali or wherever. We don't have to go running after it.

That's unwise attention. Just come back to the source of the thought, the source of the experience—from where did it arise?

A simple example in practice, one that we all experience often: there's some unpleasant sensation, or more likely a whole constellation of unpleasant sensations. Perhaps there's pressure, perhaps there's tingling, perhaps there's an ache and a kind of sleepiness. It's generally unpleasant, there's aversion, and it keeps cycling over and over. That's the bare experience—it's unpleasant, and aversion happens.

But by the time we talk to somebody, this has proliferated into a whole series of interpretations and explanations: "Well, this is happening because it's a kind of release," or "I'm building up too much energy, and if I could just find some way to shift the energy and release this and let it go and bring in more energy and sit in the right way, if I could bring up my faith, if I could find the right effort..." And then it goes into a whole complicated story of what to do and what this means and what kind of a yogi I am.

Can we just bring the attention with wise attention back to the experience? We say, "Okay, what's happening?" Well, there's pressure and there's tingling and there's unpleasantness. Okay, that's what's happening. All the rest is interpretation and aversion and confusion and fear and desire and remembering how good it was last retreat and remembering what we heard our friends say and what we've read and what the teachers have said and what it should be like and what we've made up about

what it should be like.

What's happening? That's all that matters. That's all that there is. So our practice with wise attention is simply quit following the rock and come back to the source.

The thing is, we can't just do that once. It's an ongoing willingness to meet the bare experience in the moment, over and over.

Once a friend had me do "drawing on the right side of the brain," where you sit down and the premise is that we don't so much need to learn how to draw as we need to learn how to see. So he sat me down and said, "Okay, this is the task—you've got to draw me."

It was really fascinating because immediately I was assaulted by all my self-definitions and memories from back in the third grade when the teacher told me I couldn't draw, and I always did poorly in art, and I can't draw now. It was so strong that I literally couldn't move through that and actually begin to draw. It was really fascinating how solid that self-definition was. I was looking at him and saying, "Draw you? That's really complicated. Drawing a person? I can't do that." Real bondage.

And then I kind of said, "Okay, just sit down and look." And to really look at an eye—not my concept of what an eye was and what it meant to draw an eye, but just really see what was there. Just little flecks of form and color and shape, and then starting to draw that. It was fascinating to cut through all that idea about myself and what it meant to draw and what he was and what I was, and just be with the bare experience. I could actually sort of draw the eye and draw him.

But it also took a willingness moment after moment to keep coming back to the bare experience. Because as soon as I would space out a little, in would come rushing all the thoughts and all the self-definition. "You can't draw. What are you doing? Who are you kidding?" Oh, what am I seeing? Little flecks of gold, little flecks of brown. It was a very interesting experience.

So with wise attention, we see the power of thoughts and learn that we can use thought. They're our friends. We like them. They'll always be with us. But we don't have to be confused by them. We don't have to be afraid of them. We can use them but not get lost in thought—to understand thought for what it is, and to direct our attention back to the source, the source of the thought in this moment, the source of who and what we truly are and always are.

The more we can do that, in a moment of coming back to the source of experience, that's a moment where this blindness is not coloring our perception, where greed and confusion and anger are not coloring our perception. Just being with pressure, just being with sadness—this can be the opening to really touching the source of all that we are, to really touching the possibility of true peace. Peace that is not just the absence of thoughts, but the peace that comes from really knowing the truth of who we are.

Our life seems so complicated, so complex, when we don't see a thought as a thought. But in reality, it's so

simple it's awesome. It's so simple we can't believe it.

This is my favorite stanza from the Buddha. Really, just let this sink in. Just kind of feel it:

In the seen, there is only the seen. In the heard, there is only the heard. In the smelled, there is only the smelled. In the tasted, there is only the tasted.

In the cognized, there's only the cognized. In the sensed and what is felt, there's only what is felt. That is all. That is all. Everything else is interpretation.

Can we live that simply?

I'll close with one stanza from the Tao Te Ching. I think James read it before, but I really like it:

Empty your mind of thoughts. Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings, but contemplate their return. Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity. If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you. And when death comes, you are ready.

Let's sit for a couple of minutes.

May all beings everywhere live in the peace of their true nature.

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