Arousing and Stabilizing Interest

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:20

It's really nice to see you all. It feels like so long, as Sharon said the other night—it feels so long in between times of connection and seeing old friends, the people I don't work with. I feel like saying hi, hi. You're not supposed to. Sometimes we forget it's supposed to be in silence.

What I want to talk about tonight is interest—the quality of interest.

We've been speaking often in interviews and in the instructions about relaxing into this natural open space of awareness in which appearances arise spontaneously and effortlessly. The knowing of appearances also arises instantly and effortlessly—a kind of vividly awake awareness, as somebody describes it. And it sounds wonderful. The times that this is our experience, vividly awake awareness, we really know what it means: there's this bright connection and it's effortless.

But at least speaking for myself, perhaps more often than I care to admit, the experience of this open space of awareness is more like one of being lost in space. So what I want to talk about is how we can learn to stabilize this vividly awake awareness—just one aspect that might be helpful.

Because it has these qualities, this instantaneous knowing, this clear seeing. It has the elements of energy, of mindfulness, of concentration. And then we turn around and say, well, but it's relaxed. It's effortless. The question comes up in my mind: how to be in this non-distracted open state and at the same time be relaxed? It comes up a lot in interviews.

For many of us, what we've learned as a way to cultivate concentration and effort and mindfulness is a real striving, pushing kind of effort—a kind of clutching at the appearances, desperation in case we don't see them clearly enough before they go away. God forbid we should miss something. For many of us, this sense of striving, of pushing, is exhausting. Our whole practice is really an ongoing dance of learning what it means to be relaxed and at the same time vividly awake and energized.

I only want to speak to one hopefully helpful aspect of that tonight. I have no idea that I'm going to be covering this whole thing, but the aspect that to me has been very helpful, even essential, in getting a feeling for this is that of interest.

Now, I'm using the word interest rather broadly. What I'd like to talk about tonight under this heading of interest is first to describe an experiential sense of some aspects or factors making up what I'm calling interest—which surprisingly enough, and it was surprising to me, turned out to be the three factors of the Eightfold Path: energy, concentration, and mindfulness. I want to describe some of those as aspects of interest, and then also talk about two particular mental factors that we experience in our practice, factors

that we can at times cultivate, that feed and help strengthen interest. These are the factors of spiritual urgency and investigation.

So the three qualities of interest first, just broadly describing it.

I was just told yesterday that there are different ways you can describe how people take in information. Many different ways you could organize it. But anyway, I was told by someone who was listening to me talk that I'm kinesthetic. I never thought about that. But in putting this together tonight, I realized it was true, because I was just feeling my way into what interest feels like in my experience. What are the essential qualities?

In doing that, I realized that there's a lively, energetic quality of attention. Interest is very awake, very present, very alive.

The second quality is that not only is it lively and awake, but interest also has a focused, steady quality of energy—non-distracted. If you're really interested in something, the mind isn't just flittering all over the place with restlessness. It's steady and focused.

The third quality is that with interest, when it's lively and focused like this, it allows us to know, to see what is, what we're interested in, as it is—without the bias of interpretation or preference, without a filter, but to know the truth without distorted perception.

And then I looked at these three and I said, oh, well that's wise effort, wise concentration, and wise mindfulness. Very interesting.

But a lot of times in thinking about—intellectually or imagining—being interested, staying interested over a period of time, this alert, focused quality of energy, we tend to think, oh, I can't sustain that. It's really tiring. It's draining. I can do it for a little while, but I just get burned out after some time of it.

But with a balanced interest, this isn't so at all. When we're truly interested in something, it brings energy. It's actually a delight to be fully present with whatever it is that the interest is connecting with. And we all have this experience. This quality arises quite naturally and spontaneously in our lives outside of here as well as in practice.

My favorite example of this—because it shows how universal and spontaneous this sustained quality of vibrant interest is—comes from two or three years ago when I was in California in January during the time of the Super Bowl. For those of you who are not from this country, this is the big playoff game of American football. The San Francisco team, the 49ers, was in this playoff—I think it was their second year in a row.

The quality of interest this generated was amazing. I know a lot of people in that area, and every single person I knew—that's all they were going to do that day. I was with a group of friends, and I mean, it's sort of a nice thing to watch, but I don't really care very much about football. Without exception, when the

game was on, every single person was completely focused and attentive and filled with interest for every little nuance of movement of anybody on those teams.

And I realized it wasn't just my friends, because traffic stopped. During halftime, traffic started up again. Then it stopped again when the game started. And this was not a tiring experience. People at the end of the game didn't say, "Oh, I'm so exhausted from being so interested in the football game." They were much more energized, really taking a delight in everything that happened.

You can see that this quality of interest—and this is the energy and the focused part of it—arises quite spontaneously in our lives. And when it's like that, it's not tiring. We don't think, "I have to take a break now from being interested." It's really when we feel most alive. So I've been calling this quality in my mind "Super Bowl Mind."

But Super Bowl Mind is not really a balanced interest because it lacks mindfulness. It lacks mindfulness because, with perhaps rare exception, this is a quality of consciousness that is definitely colored with greed. I mean, there were few people, I would imagine, watching that game purely for the delight of each movement. There was a definite desire for a certain result, and everything that happened was judged or evaluated by how it related to that result.

If we can put so much interest into a game like football—and ultimately, how meaningful is that for our life? Some people, and I have a friend whose voice I can hear now, to him it's very meaningful. But for many of us it's not all that meaningful. Yet that same vibrant energy is accessible for the whole dance of our life. It's always accessible if we can but open to it.

This is where the quality of mindfulness comes in—bringing that interest to know the dance of life just as it's happening right now, without looking for a particular result, without needing for some particular thing to happen, but simply bringing this full force of energetic attention and steadiness to whatever is happening right now. This is the quality of mindfulness, or *sati*—to know things in themselves just as they are, without expectation, without looking for any kind of payoff. This nondiscriminating awareness, awareness of just what is without preferences, is a very essential quality of the factor of mindfulness. And it's this, coupled with the energy and the steady focus of mind, these coming together, that allows for interest in whatever it is that's happening.

I want to say a bit about this essential aspect of nondiscriminating awareness. Because our habit, as I'm sure you've noticed here—the habit, both conscious and unconscious, of our minds—is to evaluate, to judge our experience or any particular aspect of experience as either good or bad, positive or negative, based on whether we experience it as pleasant or unpleasant. Neutral experiences we just tend not to even notice.

This is an amazingly subtle tendency. It causes us to value some aspects of life, of our mind-body process, any particular experience—it causes us to value some more than others, to give interest and attention

more to some aspects of our experience than to others. And this tendency to judge things according to pleasant and unpleasant is so subtle that it can even affect what we consciously perceive.

I've used this example other times. I got it out of a book called *Vital Lies, Simple Truths* about the psychology of self-deception—a very interesting book. In it, the author, Daniel Goleman, talks about one particular psychological experiment testing what people were conscious of perceiving, of noticing.

There were two aspects to this experiment. The first involved setting the mind to want a particular thing, making that thing pleasant. There's a short video, four or five minutes, of a fast basketball game—I guess this is sports night—and the subjects were ordered to count how many times the ball was passed, which was a lot. So they were very focused; that was the object of attention, what was wanted. And in the middle of that, a woman in white with a white parasol strolled through the middle of the basketball court, in one side and out the other.

What was so interesting was that the people in the experiment didn't notice this.

And when they were asked about it later—you know how when you just can't believe something, absolutely no way, I was watching every second, that couldn't have happened. And then they showed the video again and of course it was blatantly obvious.

That's how this fixation of the mind, this preference towards a particular thing, can completely distort what we consciously perceive.

They did another experiment, this one geared to stimulus that was frightening or threatening—just drawings. Subjects had to look at different drawings and then later remember what they'd seen and describe them. Certain aspects of experience that were particularly fearful or threatening to some of the subjects' psyches would be included in some of the drawings. They would not remember that part of the drawing.

For instance, say one part of the drawing was just an innocuous person reading a newspaper. Perhaps the other part was some scary, violent thing that was particularly threatening to that person. They wouldn't remember that part. And somehow—this I don't remember too clearly—they had some way of measuring where the people's eyes actually looked when they were looking at the drawing. They saw that in some subliminal way, people managed to know where not to look. They picked up some kind of preconscious signal and consciously didn't even look at the threatening part of the picture.

Very interesting, this predilection to value our experience by pleasant or unpleasant.

Mindfulness is completely non-discriminating. Equal interest, equal willingness to be fully present with whatever aspect of experience is arising right now, without valuing or interpretation or judgment. This is what cuts through our confusion, allows us to know just what is, without filters, without interpretation. It allows a balance of perception, not leaning towards one side or the other.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks about this quite often. He talks about the need to be mindful of both great beauty and great suffering. I myself find it one of the paradoxes of my practice that as I open more, I open to both—much more depth of appreciation and joy and beauty, and simultaneously to deeper experiences of anguish and pain, both my own and the world's.

You can see it in your own experience, over and over and over. Can we hold both experiences, allow both experiences without judgment, without choosing one over the other? It doesn't even sound right to us. How could we possibly say that you can't choose what is good and beautiful over what is ugly and distorted and violent? It doesn't make sense in our world. But in the space of non-discriminating mindfulness, it is just that—allowing what is, without the judgments.

Just a couple of personal examples that to me show how it's hard to say what is good, what is bad, what is positive or negative.

A simple one, given how beautiful the leaves have been this fall. I just look out the window of where I live and it's like the woods are on fire. It's incredibly beautiful. I have a moment of deep opening to this, really deep appreciation. So far, the last week, I've been watching this. Every single time, almost immediately, there's been an uprising of deep sadness, a kind of poignancy, a sorrow. It's like they kind of go together—personal sorrow, a sense of poignancy at the ending of things, sometimes a more universal sorrow, sometimes no thought at all.

When I find myself contracting around, trying to shut away the sorrow—thinking this is in the way of my appreciating the leaves, go away and let me just see how beautiful it is—as soon as I contract around the sorrow, there's no more appreciation of the beauty going on. There's been the sense of a barrier coming down, and it's just seeing, seeing, very pretty.

It's really interesting. How can I say the sadness is bad and the appreciation is good?

In a bigger scope, in the world—thinking back to when the Berlin Wall first came down, there was a sense of euphoria. When some of the countries in Eastern Europe first became free to self-determine their own government and way of living, there was such a sense of how wonderful this is, how positive, how thrilling and exciting.

And now, from that same situation—that's still true, all of that. And there's also so much confusion now. The freedom to self-determine in some places has turned into the freedom to hate and actively act that out against peoples who are somehow perceived as different. It's turned into wars. It's turned into real conservative, anti-foreigner violence. It's really painful and scary.

How can one be separated from the other? How can one say, well, they should have just stayed how they were and then all this wouldn't be happening? Who knows?

One more example: I have two friends, different people, who are both HIV positive. Watching them over

the years—neither of them is particularly sick—watching them over the years as the diagnosis and the implications and the various things that come up have been sinking into them, I've seen the fear and the ongoing physical discomfort, the suffering of that. And at the same time, both of them in their different ways are just radiating light and love. People more and more just want to be around them. They're opening up and filling the people who come around them with metta. They're really deepening their understanding and their wisdom. It's very obvious when I'm around them. It's beautiful. How can I separate one from the other, or say this is bad and shouldn't be happening while this should be?

So with mindfulness, there's an equally vivid interest in whatever it is that's happening, without knowing—no way of knowing—what effect, what result might come from that. And knowing that we can see, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, the profound nature of reality in anything, who are we to say which appearance is going to open up the nature of reality to us and which one is a waste of time?

Again, Thich Nhat Hanh talks about this a lot—how we value a rose and disdain garbage. But when a rose dies, we throw it into the garbage. It becomes the garbage. And when the garbage goes into compost and we put it on the garden, that garbage itself becomes the rose. There's not any separation.

This sense of balance of perception—nothing unduly going towards the pleasant or pushing away the unpleasant—because that's just how appearances present themselves. And it continues to be fascinating to me in my own inquiry, as it keeps on going, to keep seeing more and more the subtle levels of this tendency of the mind to somehow value the pleasant as more true than the unpleasant. I mean, it's certainly more pleasant. It's more desirable. We're not arguing about that. We're not saying we can't tell the difference. It's just that subtle valuing of it. And if I'm not really awake, it's easy for practice to drift into a subtle pursuit of the pleasant without really knowing it.

Just one example, if this ever happens in your own practice. You're feeling pretty clear and aware. You're noticing whatever appears. If you're noting it, you notice it as soon as it comes. It's pleasant, it's unpleasant, it's neutral. It comes, it goes. You know, just—I'm really here. And suddenly, a new kind of state comes up, really light or really peaceful or really spacious. It's like, "Ah! I'm so clear now. There's no need to note this. It just gets in the way. I'm so vividly awake I can just hang out with this."

That is a red flag, because usually what the noting is getting in the way of is not the experience. The noting is getting in the way of seeing our attachment to what is very pleasant. And so as soon as I notice I'm drifting into this—"I'm so clear, I don't really need that noting anymore"—just check it out. What's really going on?

Some people, of course, do this in the reverse, where the mind gets so hooked into noticing the painful or the unpleasant. This is often the case when we're in a state of strong self-judgment or self-hatred or self-doubt. You might be quite clear but seeing through this filter, and then the pains are really noticed, all the fear is noticed, all the stupid thoughts that come up are noticed, all the patterns that you've seen a million times are noticed. Then there's a moment of real clarity—it's not noticed. It's discounted. It was a

mistake. It came in here by mistake.

Or often people come into interviews and describe really being filled with something pleasant, perhaps love or compassion. And so often there's this disclaimer: "Well, I'm probably not remembering it right." Or, "It felt like compassion, but it probably really wasn't compassion. It's just, you know, I'm mistaking pity or something else for compassion." There's this sense of—and this is just as much identification as being identified with the pleasant—"It's not possible that I could experience a pleasant one of the Brahma-viharas, or some concentration, or whatever experience."

Both of these, Upandita calls these

getting attached to the pleasant or the unpleasant—stopping within. It's like in the space of clarity, of awareness, appearances come and go, and there's one that the mind clutches around. Even if so subtly, you're not quite aware of the clutching, it's like we stop. The mind stops within and hangs out there, either in this pleasant open space or sometimes we stop within the most painful, excruciating experience. Simply to notice that all of this is coming from our interpreting experience through the quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and putting some kind of value judgment on it.

This is a question for me—I don't know if it's true. Sometimes I wonder, is there any interpretation of experience that is not based on valuing pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? I'm really curious, so if you notice an interpretation that's not based on that, I'd like to hear about it.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian man who certainly from his writing seems to have been quite awake, said: "The mind is restless. All it knows is restlessness with its many modes, its many varieties. The pleasant are considered superior and the painful are discounted. What we call progress is merely a changeover from the unpleasant to the pleasant. Changes can't bring us to the changeless." And then he goes on to say from his own experience: "I experience pleasure and pain in consciousness, but I am neither consciousness nor its content. I am neither consciousness nor its content."

This is, to me, a really powerful expression of knowing things just as they are, without interpretation, without judgment. And this is the quality of mindfulness, clear knowing, non-discriminating awareness. This clear knowing together with energy and focused, non-distracted attention—these taken all together is what I'm calling interest. It's vivid, alert awareness that can sustain itself in a non-distracted way.

Here is a description of that from Krishnamurti: "You will discover for yourself that the only way to look at yourself is totally, immediately, without time. And you can see the totality of yourself only when the mind is not fragmented. What you see in totality is the truth. So when you look totally, you will give your whole attention, your whole being, everything of yourself—your eyes, your ears, your nerves. You will attend with complete self-abandonment. And then there's no room for fear, no room for contradiction, and therefore no conflict."

This totality of interest and attention, and therefore no fear and no conflict—this leads into what I want to

talk about next: How do we wake up this quality of total interest, complete self-abandonment? How do we keep renewing it, keep it alive?

There are two mental factors that I've personally found very helpful. The first is spiritual urgency, called in Pali *samvega*. The second is investigation.

Krishnamurti's description of this total quality of attention is in a way a good description of the quality of interest that's aroused through this mental factor of spiritual urgency. It's a powerful and compelling state, often arising—although not always—after awakening to our own suffering and confusion, or to the world's suffering and confusion. It's this urgency to be free from this, to know the truth. And in this state of spiritual urgency, this becomes more compelling than any other condition in our lives. It's that complete self-abandonment that Krishnamurti talks about.

Here is a short description of how this urgency can feel, from Chinul, who brought Zen to Korea. And this is strong, but this is how urgency feels: "The triple world is blazing in torments as if it were a house on fire. How can you bear to linger here and complacently undergo such long suffering? If you wish to avoid wandering in samsara, there's no better way than to seek Buddhahood."

And that's the energy: How can you want to keep lingering here? So seek Buddhahood. You can see it takes us right into interest, inquiry, investigation. For me, all these questions come up: What is Buddhahood? What is suffering? What did the Buddha discover that put an end to this feeling of being in a house on fire? How can I discover it? It becomes compelling. It wakes us up. When urgency is awakened in us, interest isn't a problem—it quite spontaneously arises.

Also, we're not easily distracted. The classical example is given: if you're away from home and someone comes running to tell you that your house is on fire, you start going home immediately. You're not going to be distracted by friends coming up and saying, "Let's go have a cup of tea, let's stop and have a chat." It's not even a question. The urgency of wanting to see what's happening, to get out of that suffering, is so compelling.

I do think that urgency needs the balance of sati, of mindfulness, because I can imagine it turning into a blind kind of expectation or efforting, or even despair at the depth or quality of suffering. But this is shading into something else entirely. That is not urgency. Samvega is this energy, this deep interest to inquire, to come to freedom, to understand the nature of suffering and how to be free of it. It's not about feeling sorry for ourselves or getting lost in despair. And it's not about looking for a particular result or how things should be. It gives us the energy to stay very present and focused, to inquire into what is in order to understand it.

As I mentioned, this urgency is often aroused through suffering, either our own or that of others. The classical example is that of the Buddha before he was the Buddha, when he was the Prince Siddhartha. I'm not going to go into the whole story, but as most of you probably know, he was this very wealthy prince

protected by his family from any signs of sickness or death or decay. They even snipped off the flowers before they wilted, so he would have no intimation of impermanence.

What aroused his urgency was going outside his palace walls and seeing what are often called the four heavenly messengers: an old person, a sick person, a dead person, and then a monk, a renunciate. Upon inquiry, on realizing that old age, sickness, and death would inevitably happen to him and to everyone else in the world, and seeing the impermanent, unsatisfactory nature of his experience, it just became impossible for him to any longer enjoy his life, to go back and become complacent again with his comforts. This urgency to be free, to understand, to know truth outweighed everything else at that time.

I wanted to read something I really like as a statement of urgency. This is not from the suttas but from some commentarial material, purporting to be what the Buddha was speaking to his charioteer, who was going back to his father who was grieving. This is right as Prince Siddhartha had left, the night he departed:

"So that my father's grief may be dispelled, tell him that I have gone to this penance for the purpose of putting an end to old age and death. And by no means because I yearn for heaven, and not because I feel no affection for him, or from resentment. Since I have left for the homeless life with this end in view, there's no reason why he should grieve for me. Someday, in any case, all unions must come to an end. It is just because we must reckon with perpetual separation that I am determined to win salvation. For then I shall no more be born away from my kindred. There's no reason to grieve for me who has left for the homeless life so as to end all grief. Rather grieve over those who greedily cling to the passions in which all grief is rooted. My father will perhaps say that it was too early for me to leave for the forest. But there's no such thing as a wrong season for Dhamma. Our hold on life is so uncertain. Death confronts me all the time. How do I know how much of life is still at my disposal?"

This is the sense of urgency. It might not always be so dramatic. The Buddha is clearly our most shining example. But I remember in my own case, it wasn't so much some kind of clear-cut suffering as an undercurrent of something just not being quite right—an undercurrent of the unsatisfactory nature of things that awoke the sense of urgency to know, to be free.

I was in college, just starting, and I remember really clearly I started to have this sense of: what's the purpose of this? I go and I learn these things, and what can I do with it? I was studying literature. Then I can teach it to other people. And what will they do with it? They'll teach it to other people. And it just keeps going around in this circle. I felt so strongly the meaninglessness of it all, with no understanding of it. But I see now that's really part of the cycle of samsara.

It drove me to quit college in my first year, and then the next year to go to India—not having a clue what I was looking for, traveling alone and scared to death, really miserable actually. But this urgency, this compelling need to understand, to be at peace, gives us strength and courage, a kind of commitment to go through obstacles and fears that we could never go through without it.

And it was there that I ended up doing my first ten-day meditation course that year. It was much as Steve Armstrong described his—not understanding a thing about what was going on, going through ten days of physical pain and torment, and walking out of there with my life completely changed. I knew when I walked out that it really did change my life.

That urgency enables us to go through all kinds of difficult things and lets us put down, move away from what we hold as dear, what we think we need in order to live. Urgency feeds this interest, this inquiry, and that in turn can continually reawaken the sense of urgency. Because like everything, urgency is a mental factor. It arises due to conditions and it passes away when those conditions fade away.

And so easily—sometimes I feel that the whole last twenty years of my life since that first course has been a struggle against complacency. It's so easy to get comfortable and think, "Oh well, just now I've got it. It's peaceful. I know this is good enough. I'll float along." But when we're really wanting to wake up, everything in life kind of conspires to reawaken the interest, to reawaken the urgency.

Our culture here does a good job of hiding those four heavenly messengers. Old people, by and large, aren't so mingled with the families anymore and live in the same housing or apartment developments. Sick people are put away in hospitals. Dying people—you never see a dead person lying on the street. You hardly ever see a dead person. In Asia, you don't see monks very much or nuns either; they're put away in cloisters. In Asia, it's all just part of life.

But still here, if we just are interested, even for a moment, again it wakes us up. The other day, I spent the afternoon in a big hospital in Worcester. And just for a little while, I kind of came out of my self-involvement, started looking around. And just seeing the pain and fear in people's faces—people of all ages from the very old to young children with chronic diseases walking around or on stretchers—it really hits. What am I waiting for? What makes me think I have time to be complacent?

And this one image that's with me so clearly: a woman in the elevator clutching her overcoat, her clothes, in desperation, and there was so much anguish in her body language and her face. I have no idea what her story was, but it just zapped me really strongly. Again, it reawakened my sense of urgency—of I don't have time to fool around. I can't take it for granted.

So you can see how urgency is a very strong factor in awakening and keeping interest alive. Interest arises quite spontaneously.

The last quality of mind I want to speak about just briefly is this factor of investigation. Investigation is one of the seven factors of enlightenment—seven mental factors, qualities of energy that when balanced allow the mind to open spontaneously to what is true. They'll be talked about a lot more over the course of the three months.

Investigation is this non-thinking, non-thought-based inquiry. It's described as the ability to know by non-intellectual discernment, to know the true nature of our mental and physical experience. When

investigation is present, they describe it as lighting up the field of awareness. Investigation lights up whatever appearance is arising as the object of awareness, and so the mind can penetrate into the true nature of whatever is arising.

You could kind of feel how when there's this lit-up quality to the awareness, to whatever is arising, there's quite naturally an interest. Oh, what is this coming? How is it acting? How does it disappear? What is it actually? And you could feel how investigation is one of the three energetic factors of enlightenment because it brings energy.

While they say that the immediate cause of investigation arising is insight—and you can see how that's so, when you have a strong insight everything lights up, the awareness lights up, the mind lights up, there's lots of interest, there's really this close investigation of what's going on, things are energized—this is how insight brings about investigation.

But also, it's classically spoken of that there are seven conditions that are conducive to the arising of investigation. In other words, we don't have to just sit there and hope that an insight will arise so that we can have some investigation be present. These are interesting, these seven factors. The first one is questioning.

Questions related to Dhamma, related to practice, simply questioning what has happened now, what is happening right now. Nisargadatta again: "In its own place and time, nothing is wrong. But when you are concerned with truth, with reality, you must question everything, your very life." That quality of questioning clearly would arouse interest.

The second condition, and I think this one's quite interesting and unexpected, is cleanliness and neatness of our own body and of our surroundings. They call it cleanliness of the inner and outer sense spaces. It says that when things are clean, when things are neat and tidy, it helps brightness and clarity of mind. So I started paying attention. It's true—when things are dirty and untidy, the tendency of the mind is to be confused. I started to notice this: if I walk into my room, whether I'm on retreat or not, and everything's thrown all over, my mind kind of gets scattered. It starts here and it goes there and can't quite decide which thing to do first, or it just feels oppressed, not very light. That was quite an interesting observation.

The third quality conducive to the arising of investigation is the balancing of the five spiritual faculties or powers that Stephen Smith talked about the other night—faith balanced with wisdom, concentration balanced with energy, and mindfulness as the overall balancing. I would think this would be conducive to the arising of almost any of the seven factors of enlightenment, because when the five powers are balanced, we're energized, we're seeing clearly, mindfulness is strong, we're not unbalanced. Kind of an obvious one.

The fourth and fifth conducive conditions are avoiding foolish people and associating with wise people. If you think about it for a minute, it's pretty obvious. When we hang out with people who are foolish, often

our behavior kind of sinks down to the lowest common denominator. Spending time with really wise people lights us up. When I go to hear the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh, I come away really energized. What do they know? How did they get like that? What do they know that I don't know? And how can I find out? It happens quite naturally. It's not effortful.

Being here with each other, we all serve in that way for one another here in the Sangha. Yes, at moments, each of you is the wise person that everyone else is admonished to spend time with. None of you is the foolish person—I hope you're thinking that. But you can see when your energy lags, you're tired, you feel like you can't do it anymore, and then you see someone who's so steady it really brings up the inspiration: "Oh, I'll just look a little harder." Or if you see someone who's clearly suffering a lot, that will also often arouse us out of complacency and say, "Well, how do I know I don't have another minute, another hour before that's what's going on for me? Let me really pay attention. Let me investigate." Listening to each other's really sincere questions can light up a whole area of investigation. The Sangha is such an invaluable support. You're all such an invaluable support to one another in this field of investigation.

The sixth conducive condition, also sort of obvious: wise reflection, used in moderation. Reflection on any insights you might have had on impermanence, on the preciousness of our human life, on the unknown time of the ending of our human life, the shortness of time. Sometimes I reflect on the three refuges, on just what it is I can really take refuge in—in truth, in the Dhamma, in the Sangha. That will also arouse my interest in investigation.

And the last one is interesting too: real commitment to cultivation of investigation. Actually the notes I had said *total* commitment to cultivation of investigation. Nisargadatta again—this is an expression of total commitment: "The desire to discover the truth will be surely fulfilled, providing you want nothing else. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else."

There are moments when that might be true for each of us. Simply reflecting on what I really want all those other moments—that in itself arouses investigation again. It's quite fascinating. What do I really want right now more than truth?

It's kind of embarrassing sometimes. Luckily you don't have to tell anybody else.

So you can see how these factors of investigation and urgency contribute quite strongly to this interest in recognizing and stabilizing the non-distracted quality of this vividly awake awareness—this effortless noticing of appearances as they arise and pass.

And in that awareness, there's no question. We know that any activity, any appearance whatsoever can show us the profound nature of reality. There's no choice. We don't need to pick and choose.

I want to close with one short poem, showing how any activity can open us to the truth. This is from one of the first women who ordained as a nun during the time of the Buddha. Her name was Patachara. An interesting story, but I don't have time to tell it—that's just a lead for you to follow. She went through

immense suffering, lost her mind, was really quite lost. She came to the Buddha, and he basically said, "I can't take away your suffering. You've cried mountains of tears in all your lives." And she came back to her senses and ordained as a nun.

This poem was written sometime later, describing her moment of awakening. You can also hear the suffering in it:

I've done everything right and followed the rule of my teacher.
I'm not lazy or proud.
Why haven't I found peace?
Bathing my feet, I watched the bath water spill down the slope.

We never know when or where.

Just sit for a minute.

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