The Possibility of Inner Contentment

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 50:56

Tonight I want to speak about the possibility of opening to inner contentment.

Last night I mentioned that this practice has come to us from Buddhism of Asia and that the word Buddha actually translates as "one who is awakened." To me, that speaks to the whole purpose, the whole reason that I—and hopefully all of us—engage in this form of practice at all: in order for ourselves to awaken. To awaken to the fact that deep, lasting inner contentment, peace, and happiness is available to us here and now, in whatever particular situation we might find ourselves. The possibility exists in any moment that we can awaken to our true nature, come to recognize it more fully, and rest here more completely.

I'm sure that's what your experience today has been like. And that's what the mind tends to throw up: "How, for God's sake, does sitting here and trying to find one breath in a hundred and feeling pain—what has that got to do with contentment or peace?"

Vipassana, which is what we call this practice, actually means "to see into," to see clearly. In the actual form, the technique that we're cultivating, we're not cultivating the technique as some end in itself—to become a perfect breather or a perfect walker, or to develop the perfect ability to label every arising experience. That's not the point. Vipassana means seeing into what is true about our experience here and now. Seeing clearly. And in seeing clearly whatever's arising, we can't help but begin to awaken to fact, to what is true.

What we begin to see is that as difficult as our experience might have been today or tomorrow or any other day, one of the main reasons we are not recognizing the potential for deep inner contentment right now, in this experience, has a lot to do with our assumptions about what happiness is, about what peace is. Until we really look, until we really see into what is true without prejudice—which is what the quality of mindfulness lets us learn how to do through inquiry—we begin to see that it's not the experience that's blocking peace. It's our assumptions that keep us looking in the wrong direction.

Our inquiry is not a thinking inquiry. The simple inquiry of mindfulness into this moment's experience will begin to let us see the assumption that is very common in our culture. I don't want to speak for everybody and say this is your assumption, but it's certainly been mine: that happiness or contentment or peace has to do with having all the circumstances in my life right. Basically, there should be no unpleasant experience going on, or at most it should be very minimal. And that to come to inner contentment is either some kind of state where everything is under control, or I'm in some altered ecstatic state of bliss. It might sound funny, but really looking at our own assumptions reveals what keeps us looking in the wrong direction.

Based on these assumptions, one of the things we begin to see about how the mind works as we sit here—and if you've heard this talked about, you've heard it talked about a lot, and if you haven't, you've seen it over and over but might not have thought of it in this way—is that based on the assumption of whatever it is that we're looking for that will mean contentment or peace or happiness or nirvana, it's often the underlying assumption that leads to a certain habit of mind, a certain way that our mind responds to situations, that keeps us confused.

And that's sort of the assumption that any pleasant experience is good and to be desired. Any unpleasant or painful experience is bad, it's a mistake—get away as fast as possible. Neutral experience? A lot of times people say, "What's a neutral experience?" Because we don't even notice it.

The habit of mind, when I talk about pleasant or unpleasant—I mean in any of our sense experiences. Seeing a pleasant sight, the lilacs that you see, and there's this "Ah, isn't that nice?" And the sense of wanting arises in response to that experience. "I don't want to go inside. I want to stay outside longer and see the beautiful lilacs, or smell the beautiful lilacs, or hear the sweetness of the birds singing, or taste some more of this lunch, or feel some more of the pleasantness of the wind on my face. I'm not going to go sit this time." Or think again this really pleasant thought—the thought of your vacation comes up, so pleasant, at least the first hundred times it's pleasant. And the tendency is to keep going. When pleasant comes up, the habit of mind is to want more, to crave, to go towards it.

When it's unpleasant, it's just the reverse. Your body's hurting in the sitting, and it's not a pain that signals that you're hurting yourself—it's just a hurt, a painful sensation. And all our training is: this is bad, this is wrong, do anything to avoid it. Similar with emotional pain. Similar with just mildly unpleasant visual experiences, or hearing someone next to you who keeps coughing, and the scenarios we can go through of how to throw them out, how to move our seat, how to write a note that this person should obviously be secluded.

Someone just called me from another retreat somewhere else in the country with some Burmese teachers, and he said, "You know, this guy came late and he was coughing and breathing loud, and he had a respiratory ailment so he couldn't be told to stop, and they literally wanted to seclude this guy away from the whole rest of the people." What is it? It's a sound. It's unpleasant. That's all.

Neutral. The breath is often neutral. Why do you think we find it so boring sometimes? Because our habit with neutral is to generate a little interest. If we can go for pleasant, that's preferable, but watch yourselves. As often as not, the mind will reach for a really unpleasant fantasy rather than be with a neutral experience. This is just our habits of mind. There's no blame about it. But it's so deeply conditioned in us that we often don't notice it.

Or if we do notice it, we might think, "Well, of course. I mean, who wouldn't want to go for what's pleasant? Who wouldn't want to avoid what's unpleasant? That's just sensible." So what's the point?

And it's true if we have the choice. But how many of you would be here if you could work it so that you only had pleasant experiences in your life? If that was happiness and you could arrange it, I bet you wouldn't be sitting and walking here for three days, fourteen hours a day or whatever it is. Something about this conditioning of the mind, this habit of how we relate to experience, doesn't work. It isn't bringing us happiness.

And this is what we begin to see when we relate to our experiences with mindfulness. What these habits tend to do is solidify our sense of separation—separation from what is true, from each other, from the world, from contentment. The habits keep us looking towards the next pleasant thing, or wondering when we can get away from this unpleasant experience. "Then I'll be happy. Then peace will be available. Then I can meditate. Then I'll be more spacious." Whatever. There's always another carrot.

And because this is endless, and because until we stop and inquire—not through thinking but through our moment-to-moment being with what is—until we stop and inquire, we don't really see what's going on. We keep thinking that peace is elsewhere, that we somehow have to be different before we can recognize true contentment, before things can change.

These habits are very deep and ingrained, very subtle. I could really talk a long time about how subtle they are. In a way, just as a simple example, they're so subtle that they can even distort what we actually perceive. When desire is very strong—say you're hungry, not just a normal hunger where you go eat, but that kind of craving for, say, a pizza—and you're walking down a street, do you notice how all your eye picks out is restaurants?

There's a saying in India that when a pickpocket meets a saint, the pickpocket only sees the saint's pockets. These habits of mind, of wanting and resisting unpleasant experience, really distort what we see. And it gets very, very subtle. Until we begin to notice this pattern in itself, we continue looking for peace in the wrong place, in the wrong way, and really don't understand why things seem so confusing.

This is from an Indian wise man, Nisargadatta Maharaj. He says, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination. What we're trying to do with our simple practice of being present is reverse that—to pay attention to what is real and learn to recognize imagination as imagination. Imagination is fine if we know it's imagination. If we think it's the truth, we're in big trouble. And a lot of the time, that's what we're doing.

A simple example comes to mind from years ago. Joseph Goldstein was teaching a retreat, and a man came in to talk to him and said, "Oh, I'm so tense. I'm just so uptight, and nothing's good in my life. I'm so striving, and I just can't conduct my life in any kind of way. My attitude in business is just off. I'm really a horrible human being."

Joseph said, "What's the experience?"

The man said, "Well, I have this tension in my jaw, and I can see from this tension that the way I relate to life is really striving, and I'm never in the present moment, and the way I conduct..."

Joseph said, "Yes, but what's your experience right now?"

"Well, I have this tension in my jaw, and I'm so bad..."

This went on back and forth until finally the man said, "Oh, you mean it's just tension in my jaw?"

That was the real—tension in the jaw. All the rest? There might be some truth in it. There might be some striving in the way he relates to life. There might be things that the tension in the jaw points to, things one can associate with it. But in the moment, the actual, the real experience is simply tension. All the rest of that association, in this moment, is imagination.

So much of the time we are living in the imagination and not really noticing or giving credence to the actual experience. It's as if we're a little bit away from what's actually going on. And so we can get so lost, so caught up in these habits, in what are sometimes called torments of the mind—or what I like to call disturbances of the heart. When we're lost and really gripped by craving or anger or aversion, or just this total dullness of confusion, it's really hard.

It's really unpleasant. It's a lot of suffering, and we really struggle with that. What we forget in the struggle is how to notice that even in that, there's a potential to touch peace and contentment.

There's an analogy that's used a lot for the way we lose sight of the radiant nature of our hearts, of our minds—a radiance that never fades or goes away, but we just don't know how to notice it. The analogy is to think of the sun as the radiant, pure nature of mind, of consciousness, of heart. Sometimes it's really clear. A lot of times it's covered with clouds—sometimes little wispy clouds that don't bother you too much, sometimes dark storm clouds. And you can get really involved in resisting them or fighting them or wishing they'd go away. We can get so involved in the clouds that we completely forget to notice that the sun never went anywhere. It's untouched by the clouds. And even though it might not be shining so clear, the evidence of it—in that everything is still radiating the light of the sun—is always here when the sun is out. We can forget that because we get so busy fighting and involved with the clouds.

So yes, clouds are clouds. We need to know them, understand what they are, not pretend they're not there. They can still pack a punch. And yet, when you're flying through them, you can never really find them. You know how it is when you fly through clouds? You never really get to the clouds somehow, but the plane's really going up and down—something's going on. It's sort of like that. You can't deny it, but it doesn't have much solidity, whether it's a strong emotion or a pain in the body. It's here, but it also goes away. And the sun, the radiance of our nature, never leaves.

That's just an analogy—not exactly accurate, but just to help us remember we don't have to stay lost in these patterns. We can wake up. And hopefully that's what mindfulness, this attentive awareness without

discrimination, without judgment, can help us do: to really learn for ourselves that we don't have to react to situations always with fear or desire or falling asleep. That there is another possibility altogether.

It's quite radical because it's so obvious. It's that we can simply be with things just as they are, knowing it clearly, accepting it without judgment, because it's what is in this moment—and you can't change this moment anyway. We're not talking about a life of passivity or not taking action, but in this exact moment, really being with what is. The real openness of heart and mind. The real fullness of attention without looking for something better.

As simple and obvious as it might sound, as I'm sure most of you have seen today, it's not easy. Our deep sense that the unpleasant cannot be borne, that separation from the pleasant cannot be borne, is so deep that just to be with what is can seem excruciatingly difficult. Yet this has the power to transform our lives in unimaginable ways.

It continues to amaze me how something so simple as being with the breath, being with sensations, just sitting and walking and being with whatever arises moment after moment, can powerfully and deeply transform our understanding of ourselves—and through that, our relationship to all aspects of our life. Because once we stop fighting what is and allow our attention to be fully with it, our heart to be fully with it, first there's the opportunity to really know what's happening for a change, because we're not so involved in our ideas of how to change it. And in knowing what's happening, there's the potential to begin to recognize something other that's always here: the radiance. We can always notice it, but when we're so busy fighting or looking for something better, we never stop to notice. We never stop to recognize.

Really, these habits of craving and pushing away—it's almost like if someone was making all this up, they couldn't have thought of a better way to keep us running around in circles and not seeing what's so obvious.

One of the things the Buddha said would drive you mad if you tried to think about it is the first beginning of things. I used to wonder: why is it like this? Why is there... And it really does make you crazy. So he would say, "Look, I know a lot more than I'm teaching you, but what I'm teaching you is all you need for peace and freedom from suffering and confusion." And basically he would say: just do it and quit asking all these questions. That works in Asia; it doesn't work so well here.

I think one of the reasons retreat is so hard—especially in the beginning, especially if you're new—is that just beginning to cultivate mindfulness, simple awareness of what is, without letting the mind just run where it will, just being with the breath, just being with whichever sensation comes up, whichever sound comes up, without choosing so much... it runs counter to all this ingrained habit of avoiding the unpleasant and being with the pleasant. We're opening to a field of choiceless awareness, equal interest in whatever arises.

You know how it is when we have a strong habit and we begin to try to break it. It's almost like the habit

rears up and does anything to pull you back into the old way of doing things. It's sort of like that. Things get magnified; difficulties get magnified. When you go home and you think about it—what was that all about? You were in such a snit because you only got one piece of cake, or you wanted oranges and they were bananas. You'll go home and think, "I don't understand what that was all about."

But in the middle of the experience, the suffering is intense—and I'm not making fun of it, it's really so. The habits of craving and aversion are really, really strong. What's more, we fully believe that's the way things are, and that makes it much harder to see through them.

It's said that when the Buddha first came to his deep and full enlightenment, when he emerged from it, he could—and this is one of the powers of a Buddha—survey the world with his Buddha eye and see what all beings were doing and what was happening with them. What he saw, and what awakened his deep compassion, was this: everybody, no matter who they are or what their conditions, everybody only wants to be happy. And in our confusion, in our wrong assumptions that we never think to question—assumptions about who we are, about what is true—in wanting to be happy, most everybody continues to do just the things that bring more suffering upon themselves. Fully convinced that what they're doing is going to bring them happiness. Seeing this is what aroused his deep compassion and brought him out to teach.

I think a lot of this energy of wanting, the wanting mind, is what engenders this confusion about what will bring us happiness. Craving blinds us. Notice it should it come up—tonight or anytime tomorrow. If you suddenly notice you're feeling a little crazed, tune in and see. There might be something you want. It doesn't matter what it is. Perhaps you suddenly decide, "If I just had one more piece of foam rubber, then I wouldn't have any pain in the sittings." And the mind just gets obsessed. What else do you see? What else can you think of? Nothing counts until you can get back there and go through looking for the foam rubber.

Or if you're hungry and just wanting to get to lunch and you're at the back of the line, how do you feel about the people ahead of you? Are you filled with the warmth of sympathetic joy? "I'm so glad they're getting to take as much food as they want, heaping it on their plates." The craving, the need to get what we want, blinds us to everything else. We think that contentment will come when we get to the front and get the food on our plate. And so in standing in line, we're completely blind to the fact that contentment is accessible right here and now.

If you can notice the craving and just tune in to standing—so often I'm just standing. Okay, there's standing. There's craving. There's thinking. And then suddenly you'll notice something completely outside of this little scenario. Perhaps a person who seems really beautiful walks past, and there's a thought: "Ah, what a nice looking person." Just a little sense of joy that is possible because we came back from trying to jump ahead to the table and just landed here, right now.

They say there are two different ways that ignorance—or really, blindness, the blindness of craving—operates in our experience. One thing it does is this: when craving is present, and I don't mean

just you're hungry and need to eat, I mean this lusting after whatever it is—you can't and don't appreciate what's here now. That's where we're blind to the truth, blind to peace. Blindness also functions by not letting us see or recognize what's here and appreciate it. And it can so distort our perception that we see what isn't there at all. Have you ever really wanted something so much that your mind creates it, even though it's not there?

I'll tell this story. A friend of mine and I were teaching in the desert in California a couple of years ago. It was a beautiful afternoon. We were sitting outside, warm, talking to some friends. One of them mentioned they'd just been down the road somewhere and had a really good milkshake. It was a hot afternoon, and somehow that just went into us. Really strong desire, craving arose. I really want to have a milkshake, and I want it now. It was instantaneous, and I was caught in it, so I didn't really notice this until later. I quit enjoying the conversation with the friends. My friend and I looked at each other and kind of said, let's go. You could tell we just pulled back from the conversation, started going "yes, no, yes, no" until they left. We ran to the car and got in it to go get this milkshake.

Craving leads you to do things that lack judgment too, because we only had about fifteen minutes until one of us had to be at the next sitting. So we went racing down to this place—and it had closed ten minutes earlier. We turned around. Did we come back? No, because craving really had a grip. We kept going way down, miles down the road in the other direction, just looking on either side for any Baskin Robbins or something that would have milkshakes.

I was driving and he was looking around. We'd both been down this road many times—I mean, we knew what was on this road. He looks over and goes, "Look, there it is! Yogurt Cafe! Quick, go in there." I looked, and I said, "That says Urgent Care. It's a hospital."

This is true.

So it's good when something like that happens. We were quite chastened. We said, "Well, I guess desire was driving this car." We turned around and went back.

That's the blinding quality of desire, of craving when it's not seen. And what's kind of interesting—one word for it is how often it's working in this way. And then we wonder how come we're not happy. We wonder why we feel disconnected. How come I can't find peace?

This is from the Tao Te Ching: "The Tao"—like another word for truth or Dharma—"never does anything, yet through it all things are done. If men and women could center themselves in it, the whole world would be transformed by itself in natural rhythms. People would be content with their simple everyday lives, in harmony and free of desire. When there is no desire, all things are at peace."

When there is no desire, all things are at peace. That's always available to us, just in a moment when we're not blinded by desire or by aversion, when we're not trying to change things. Truth reveals itself by itself in just a moment when things are at peace. And the natural expression, it seems, of understanding, of

recognizing our truth, is compassion. That's why the two wings of the Buddhist teaching are great wisdom and great compassion.

I love the way Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist, speaks about this. He has such simple examples showing how compassion is just the natural outcome of understanding. He talks about this one example of a small boy and his younger sister. She's really cranky and whining and driving him crazy. As brothers and sisters do, he's really annoyed with her and arguing back. They're really starting to get into it, and he's really aggravated. And then he learns—his mother tells him—that the sister is really sick. She has a high fever. She explains the kind of pain that the sister is in, in a way that he can understand. And as soon as he understands—oh, that's what she feels like, of course that's why she's cranky—without having to do something, a natural compassion arises. It's an understanding of the pain, an empathy, an acceptance that it's okay.

And it's the same with us. It can be the same with us towards ourselves, not just towards others. As the Dalai Lama says, our truest expression as human beings is the expression of compassion, arising out of our truest being—that of contentment, that of peace.

You can certainly see for yourself in a retreat like this, in our lives too, but retreats are really good microcosms. There's ample opportunity to begin to open towards yourself with compassion. What goes on here—just in talking to people today—what goes on here is often really difficult. There's a lot of physical pain. There's a lot of deep emotional pain. There's the pain that comes up for everyone of the emotions the Buddha called the five hindrances.

Almost nobody escapes going through these on a retreat or in our lives. There's sleepiness, or sloth and torpor—we love that word. There's restlessness of mind and of body, the mind just spinning and spinning, the body just wanting to jump out of your skin.

There's desire that's just outrageous. When you're sitting and you want this and you want that and you need a new car and you want a new job and you're changing your relationship and you're going through everything in your life that you want—and suddenly, oh, just recognizing it as desire is very helpful.

And the flip side: aversion. This often comes up on retreat, where you just hate the person next to you, you hate the food, you hate how the bulletin board looks, you hate how the hall's set up, you hate how the bell sounds. It just goes on and on until you finally realize, oh, I think it's simply the emotion of aversion arising in my experience—after we've projected it out onto every single sense object that comes our way.

And doubt, which obviously tends to come up with any or all of these.

These are very common emotional, energetic experiences. Just about everybody goes through them to some extent on retreat. And they can seem really magnified, really blown up, because—back to the quality of mindfulness—we're not trying to hide them. We're not distracting ourselves from them. We're not jumping up and going for a drive as soon as we feel restless, hopefully. We're not going out and satisfying

every desire, or at least going down to the convenience store to satisfy something. We're sitting here, we're walking here, and we're noticing it. And it's really difficult. It's painful. And mostly we're not used to being with this kind of difficulty, this kind of pain.

And it's funny, because so often the response to our situation is not one of compassion. It's either "there's something really wrong with me, I'm doing this wrong, you can never do anything right, and here you are sleeping, you're useless." Or it's the reverse: "This whole place is stupid, this whole meditation is ridiculous, I don't know what made me come, the friend who told me about this is in big trouble." One way or the other.

Does it ever occur to us to say, "Yes, this is really painful, this is really hard. And I'm really working to open to it, to soften to it, but sometimes that's just not possible"? To really begin to bring in compassion. The compassion can begin from the understanding that yes, this is part of life.

This happens to everybody. Part of why it's so difficult is that I think it shouldn't be happening. And I'm learning how to relate in a different way. So right now it's hard. And to really bring in some softness to ourselves, to really bring in some kindness.

Thich Nhat Hanh, I was just reading in a book, gives a little exercise that you could try later to just get the feeling of compassion—of just touching your one hand with your other. Often we just do it mechanically. But to do it with a real feeling of compassion: touch your left hand with your right hand, really feeling a loving, kind compassion toward your left hand from your right hand. And you see that it works both ways because both hands feel touched with compassion. We can touch all aspects of ourselves—all aspects of our body, of our emotions, of our life—in the same gentle, compassionate way if we'd only remember to do it.

Mindfulness is really this compassionate touching of whatever aspect of life is presenting itself right now. Whether it's the breath, whether it's sleepiness, whether it's sadness, whether it's boredom, whether it's joy—doesn't matter what—learning how to touch whatever is arising with mindfulness. I like to think of mindfulness as affectionate curiosity. Whatever comes up: "Oh, okay, what are you about? What's this about right now?" Not choosing this one I'll pay attention to, this one out the window. Because it doesn't work anyway.

As we learn to touch ourselves, our experience, with this compassionate mindfulness, we don't have to do a lot else. All by itself, this mindfulness that doesn't discriminate begins to broaden our experience of life, to balance our perception of who we are and what's going on in a really amazing way.

Sometimes it might seem that what we're talking about is just opening to the difficult—opening to the hindrances, to the pain—because that's what many of us are so versed at shutting out. But with the balancing perspective of mindfulness, with the opening to whatever's happening, we begin to find that we're also opening to what is beautiful, to what is very warming in our heart. Actually, we begin to open

without even realizing it to inner contentment, to peace—because it's not somewhere else we have to look for. We just have to let down our blinders and open up to what's here.

What's interesting is that in this broadening of our perspective, we begin to notice that little aspects of peace, of contentment, of joy are always available—and in a much more simple way, a much more so-called mundane way than we might have expected when we were looking for whatever we were looking for, the big bliss trip or whatever.

This is again from Thich Nhat Hanh, speaking of how he works consciously when drowning in suffering, when really caught in difficulty—to consciously balance the perspective, the perception, by noticing something that's happening right now that's beautiful, that's peaceful. He says: "Most of us ask the question, 'What is wrong?' But we forget to ask, 'What is right?' There are many things that are not wrong." During the war—he's talking about the war in Vietnam—"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. I would mention these to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

It's sometimes hard to imagine, in the midst of what was probably to most of us unbelievable horror, to actively stop and say, "Okay, smell the coriander that's growing right here." And yet that's a really important aspect of being able to be centered and open and present with unbearable suffering. Even in that unbearable suffering, there is a real peace that's possible.

It doesn't have to be the middle of war. Anytime—here on retreat, experiment. Not just as soon as something a little unpleasant comes along; that's not what I'm talking about. But when you're really feeling caught up, tight, overwhelmed—and that happens to all of us—don't think you just have to grit it out. Deliberately soften. Open your heart. Open your perspective.

I used to go in the middle of a long retreat—I was on the second floor and I hardly ever went outside—but I used to just go stand on the fire escape and look at the tree at the end for just four or five minutes. It was summer, when I was really tight and caught up. And that was enough. Just letting in the beauty of nature would bring such a spaciousness and, again, a receptivity to my heart. I could again be with whatever was going on. Look at the sky. Just take a quiet breath. Whatever touches joy, whatever touches peace for you—and there's something almost always available here and now. It doesn't have to be so fantastic.

So we can do that consciously, but it also begins to happen quite naturally as we continue to work with mindful awareness, because mindfulness includes everything and doesn't just choose one or the other. What we begin to see is that what was supposedly neutral or mundane can put us in touch with so much joy, contentment, or appreciation.

I just read an article somewhere—in a newspaper—about a young twenty-one-year-old woman who was born with cystic fibrosis, which completely clogs up your lungs; you usually don't live very long. She had

just had a partial lung transplant from each of her parents so that she could keep living. And she was saying, "It's so nice to be able to breathe like a normal person." She said, "I love air. It's so wonderful. Breathing is the most wonderful feeling I could ever imagine."

I thought, gosh, how many breaths have I been really present with? Quite a lot in twenty years of practice. But how often have I really appreciated with that depth the miracle of breathing?

It's wonderful, you know. There's so much in our life that when we simply notice it, it's that wonderful. And it's so easy to lose sight of that, to take it for granted.

Again, Thich Nhat Hanh talks about how when we have a painful toothache and it stops—ah, it's so wonderful. How much of the time do we not have a toothache? Do we ever notice, "Wow, my teeth feel really great"?

There's a lot that's available to us if we can come out of our tunnel vision of just going away from what's unpleasant or towards what's pleasant. When we get in touch with our eyes, our heart, our breathing, and our non-toothache and really enjoy them, we see that the conditions for peace and happiness are already present.

When we walk mindfully and touch the earth with our feet, when we drink tea with friends and touch the tea and our friendship, we get healed—and we can bring this healing to society. The more we have suffered in the past, the stronger a healer we can become. We can learn to transform our suffering into the kind of insight that will help our friends and society.

It's really possible, and it doesn't take all kinds of amazing circumstances. Everything that we need to awaken is right here and right now in this moment. There's nowhere else we need to go. We don't have to wait for some better experience to present itself so that then we can pay attention.

A lot of times we either think, "I have to be in a better, more spacious place, and then I can really explore." Or we think things are nice—well, what happens to me is I think I have to start suffering more to give me an oomph, a little push, because things are nice enough, so who cares? It's good enough.

That was one wonderful thing about the Buddha. It was never good enough until he really knew in his heart what was true in a way that's unshakable, so that the inner contentment that's always accessible was really always accessible to him.

And that's possible for us. At least we can touch it in moments and recognize that it isn't going anywhere else—we just lose sight of it. We just forget that it's possible here and now. Whatever situation is presenting itself is an opportunity for affectionate curiosity. Whatever situation is coming up right now is the gateway to inner contentment. Your knee pain is good enough. Sleepiness, irritability, sadness, joy—it's good enough. We never have to wait for something else to begin to open with loving attention to what's happening right now.

One teacher said, "We can't love anything till we love and appreciate what is present in each moment."

So rather than trying to create ourselves into a different, better person, can we just open to love and appreciate only this one moment? That's all. Don't worry about all the next moments. Never mind the last moments. Can we just practice a little bit loving and appreciating what's present in this moment just as it is, and recognizing it for what it is? That's the power of mindfulness.

I want to close with a paraphrase of one of my favorite quotations from Ajahn Sumedho, an American who's been a Buddhist monk in the Thai tradition for twenty or twenty-five years and has a monastery in England. He says something to the effect that you don't have to experience all sorts of extreme pain and difficulty in order to overcome suffering. The pain of your ordinary life is enough to be enlightened.

And again, from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Practicing Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life. Happiness is available. Please help yourself."

I don't mean it's simple, but it's just to open ourselves to another possibility.

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