Faith

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:51

In a very unmindful way, so please raise your hand or something if I do that.

One Tibetan teacher said once that the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is, one, to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind, as well as how the deluded mind works. It's very to the point, I think. I actually love this quotation.

So what does that mean? Discovering the nature of the non-deluded mind is, in a way, to my understanding, the ultimate, the whole point of our practice. Unfortunately, there's very little that one can say about it that makes much sense because it's beyond all concept or thought. The Buddha did say one time that the mind is naturally luminous, naturally pure. And this is a translation by the esteemed Gil Fronsdal: "Luminous is the mind, brightly shining. Yet it is colored by the attachments that visit it." Another way I've seen it said is that it is temporarily obscured by visiting torments or defilements—meaning attachments, aversions, angers. Temporarily obscured.

So the mind in its natural state is luminous, radiant, naturally peaceful. This is in a way what we could be referring to as our Buddha nature. Remember when we took refuge on the first night in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha—really in the Buddha, taking refuge in our own potential for awakening, our own enlightened Buddha nature. This luminous, radiant presence—or absence, or however you want to talk about it—is not something that we need to create. It's not something that can be changed or improved upon, and you'll be glad to hear this: there's no way, no matter what you do, that you can damage it in the slightest. And it is who we all are. It is all of our essential nature.

So that's the good news.

The other part, which is really what's easier to talk about and what a lot of our meditation practice is working with, is how the deluded mind works. The deluded mind is just that aspect of the temporary attachments, aversions, and confusions that obscure this radiant nature of peace.

An image that is often used—and it's an image, not an exact perfect way of describing—is to think of our radiant nature as the sun and the temporary passing obscurations as clouds. The clouds could be really thin and scattered, and you don't really notice them too much, and you're really in touch with the sun. Or they could be really thick and dark. What our deluded mind does is when a cloud floats by—whether it's a cloud of anger or fear or desire, restlessness, sleepiness, a lot of the things Mary spoke about last night—we get so entranced with the cloud. We get so involved in it. If it's nice, we want it to stay and get bigger. If it's not nice, we want to change it, fight with it, get rid of it. We're so involved that we completely

forget to notice the sun.

Even if it's a big dark cloud, even if it's raining and stormy all day, there's still evidence of the luminous warming nature of the sun everywhere. The fact that we can even see what's around us is evidence of the luminous nature of the sun, but we tend to forget that and get lost in fighting with and rearranging the clouds.

Because we get so involved in our moods, in our explanations, in the stories of our lives, in the fact that we have a pain in our toe, in whatever it happens to be—and these can range from really small and ludicrous to very deep and profound experiences in our life—it's not to negate our experience. But what we learn in working with the nature of the deluded mind is not to take any one experience as anything more than what it is. It's here now. It will pass. It has no self-existent, unchanging reality. Nothing that arises in our experience here of the five senses or the mind is going to stay. Nothing. There are no exceptions to that. I know we're not supposed to use absolutist language, we're supposed to temper it, but in this case, that's how it is.

So a lot of what we're doing, a lot of what we speak about in our practice, is to get more familiar with, to really understand what the deluded mind is and how it works. And this is essential.

This is not a waste of time. It's equally essential because understanding the deluded mind will help us learn to recognize what we so easily ignore. Kempo again says that the only difference between Buddhas and regular beings is that Buddhas simply know what other beings ignore—the true nature of one and all.

And this is even more interesting: this recognition of our true nature, this borderline between Buddhas and other beings, is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives. It's not that we have to practice and change and work for twenty-five years or seventy-five lifetimes to maybe have a moment where we could possibly, if we're lucky, recognize our true nature. That potential, that great crossroads, is present at every moment of our lives.

I feel that this is really the reason why we do this practice. The reason we don't recognize our potential for living in peace, for living in spaciousness, and for the natural compassion that is its expression, is simply because we are so unfamiliar with the deluded mind that we keep getting tricked by it over and over and over. Really, that's what mindfulness does. It gives us the opportunity, moment by moment, to come out of all the hullabaloo and the running after illusions, to just be with what's happening this moment, very simply. And in that, there's a possibility to see what's true, when we're not being tricked by our deluded mind.

Last night Mary spoke about several of the most common and often very difficult aspects of mind to even recognize, much less work with, much less see through as ephemeral clouds—anger, desire, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt. Tonight I want to speak a little bit about five helpful qualities of our mind and heart that are present with us from time to time throughout our life, but which can get strengthened quite

noticeably through the process of formal meditation. In learning to recognize these qualities and balance them in our experience, this balance can help us moment to moment to be so present—in a way that's not leaning forward or tilting away—that there is the possibility to suddenly just turn around and say, "Oh yeah, right. Radiant, pure, peaceful."

These five qualities of heart and mind will strengthen naturally as the retreat goes on. I want to talk about them to help us recognize them. It's not only important to be able to name and be open to the difficult aspects. Sometimes we forget that it's equally important to be able to name and recognize and open to the pleasant aspects, the helpful aspects. Mindfulness is a balanced awareness. It's not just zooming in on what we don't like, nor is it just zooming in on what we like. It's really balanced.

These five qualities are called the five spiritual faculties. And as they really strengthen in our practice, they change to the five spiritual powers. They are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. It's not so esoteric—you've all experienced all of them quite many moments of each day. I want to say something about all of them, although I think I'm going to focus more heavily on faith and energy, the first two.

Faith is an interesting quality. I read somewhere—I can't remember where—a definition of faith as the drive towards that which cannot be described. To me, it really speaks to the movement, the opening to trust in basically our true nature, that which cannot be described. It's intuitive. Faith in this way that I'm speaking about it is not a faith of surety, where if I do this, that will definitely happen.

Faith first awakens in what's called, in Buddhist terminology, bright faith—which is really quite an accurate description. It arises when one first comes in contact with someone who deeply inspires them. Maybe a teacher. Maybe it's a personage like the Dalai Lama that you might not know personally, but whose dedication and commitment really inspires one. Maybe it's a friend. Maybe it's someone whose sincere commitment to their awakening lights up that same feeling in you.

Bright faith often gets lit up in me during interviews with people. I'm just talking to someone often who's going through extreme difficulty, and it's hard, and there's no pretending it's not. But there's this simplicity and this faith and commitment to just simply be here with it, without a lot of expectation. And it often comes for me at the end of a retreat that I've been teaching. You often don't realize it yourself if you're the one sitting, but you all just light up. There is such a change in the course of ten days, such a beauty that shines out of people when they've been sitting. And I know enough now—it's not personal, it's not that you've become a more beautiful person. It's just that the inner truth is shining through more.

We get a little more out of the way, and something like that can light up this sense of bright faith. It's bright—you feel bright, you feel energized, you feel confident. It's really what motivates us in some way or another to begin or to continue on our path of awakening, whatever that particular path happens to be.

I would venture to guess that in some way each of you has felt that over and over. Something got you to

drag your body here to this retreat, and it takes some kind of awakening of bright faith, of recognition. To me it's like a recognition of something we've always known, albeit perhaps not at all consciously. It's really a recognition of our true nature. When I feel that sense of bright faith, it's like coming home to somewhere I didn't know I wasn't home. It's just, "Oh yes, this is home." And it's wonderful, that quality of faith. It could be inspired by nature, it can be inspired by anything—it can be inspired by going through a difficulty in your life with presence and seeing it open into something so wondrous and unexpected.

The thing about bright faith is that it's impermanent. It's bright, it's energizing, it's really motivating—but it flickers, it wavers, it disappears. It may come back again many, many times, but it doesn't really often have the staying power. You'll feel this in the early days of a retreat, when the going gets a little patchy, when you're hitting the skids and you think, "Why did I come?" There's this memory of what brought you here, but it just doesn't do it, that memory. It's not exactly lighting us up.

I hit that almost every retreat I've ever done. Somewhere in it, I'm dragging along. I've been up for eighteen hours. Why am I doing this? I don't exactly remember. That's not a problem really—it's just that bright faith at that moment isn't alive to energize you. And so it needs to be strengthened by the understanding, the wisdom that comes from our own experience.

The other thing about bright faith is that as we're lit up, as we're inspired by a being, another person, the environment, some experience—that's valid, extremely valid and helpful. But it's so easy for us then not to recognize that the brightness we're experiencing is actually, whether conscious or not, an intimation, a recognition of the truth of who we really are. It's easy not to notice that and to keep the attention turned outward, to think, "This is so great because of this person, because of this situation." In that case, when the person leaves, or if it's some teacher that you're putting all your need for faith into, at some point you'll likely be disappointed.

We need to use the energy, the awakening power of bright faith to turn back into our own experience and let the faith deepen into verified faith through being fully present with our experience, acknowledging what is true for us.

One of the things I love about Buddhism—what probably drew me to it in the beginning and has kept me there—is that the Buddha spoke very strongly against any kind of blind belief or blind faith. There's a line he said often: *Ehi passiko*, which means, "You too, come and see." He always said, "Don't believe what I'm saying just because I say it. Don't just take it for true because someone you respect says it. Give it a try and see for yourself what is true. See for yourself if this practice, if this path leads you to more peace and happiness, to less suffering. Only then believe it."

This is the aspect of deepening faith, verified faith. It could be verified faith in a particular teaching, faith in the Three Refuges, faith and confidence in your own ability and willingness to simply be here for whatever arises in this moment's experience. This leads me into the next aspect of faith I like to talk about, because it's been very central to my own practice and continues to be: the aspect of faith as

confidence—the confidence to trust.

Not to trust in a particular result. Not even to trust that if you do this practice, such and such will happen in a certain way. But the ability to trust that we can open into the unknown, moment by moment, that we can open into the unknown and really be present for it.

There's a quotation from a book I read long ago that embodies this aspect of trust. It was speaking about radical acceptance: "Radical acceptance is radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing—nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all forms, in all times." Meaning, whatever is happening right now, can we accept that as a manifestation of truth?

To let go, to accept—it is necessary only to give up your concerns and your fears. Only. But think about it. Just reflect for a moment. What in your experience today were you fearing? What in your experience were you not able to radically accept? What was not seen as an aspect of truth in this moment?

And reflect on that as you go through the day tomorrow. Just notice, and it can be very subtle things. I often find that it's not the big things I'm having so much trouble accepting. It's the little nudgy ones that somehow slip in, that are not okay, that are not accepted.

So this aspect of faith is the trust, the confidence, the courage to live consciously, to open to the not knowing, the unknown in this next moment. And it's uncomfortable, you know. But it's true—we really don't know. Who knows what experience is going to arise in your mind and body in the next moment?

You sit down prepared to have a really pleasant sitting. You had a great walking, you're really focused, you're just going to sit down and really be present—and twenty minutes later you wake up and wonder, how did I get here? Or just when everything's gotten cooled out, some extreme pain has the nerve to present itself out of nowhere, and that's your meditation for the next hour. You just never know. Or like that little tremor of an earthquake this morning—you couldn't predict what was going to happen in the next moment. You can't plan out your sitting. Our whole life is like that.

The thing about meditation, taking these ten days, sitting, walking, being removed from our day books and our hourly plans—it strips away what normally hides from us the fact that we never actually know what's going to happen. We think we know what's going to happen every hour of the day. And unfortunately, in this culture, it often happens that way. I don't quite get how it does it, but we tend to do every hour what we wrote in our day book, and it really hides the fact from us that we don't actually know a thing of what's going to happen next.

In meditation, sitting and walking and really being present moment to moment, we can't hide from this fact. We try really hard, and that's a lot of the reason it's so uncomfortable. But we are forced to confront the fact that we just don't know.

And because that can be scary, it's easy to fall into many forms of control—having some idea of a desired result and then trying to shape our meditation, shape our actions to make that happen. I think Mary mentioned last night how common it is, manipulating meditation. You have a certain walking and you think, that was great. Next time I'll walk in that place. I'll hold my hands in that way. I'll drink just the same thing before I did it. I'll wear the same hat. I'll look the same way. I'll always walk at this time of day in this place. And the same with the sittings. Or if we have a really terrible walking or sitting, then it's like a jinx—we'll avoid everything that had to do with that. I'll never sit next to that person again; I picked up their bad vibes and it ruined my meditation. This kind of magical thinking.

Next time you find yourself in a manipulating meditation mode, just check out for a minute what the actual quality of your heart and mind is at that moment, as you are desperately trying to recreate a pleasant sitting. Is it peaceful? Is it spacious? Do you feel like you're potentially opening to the truth of things? Or is it contracted, fearful, grasping? Just notice these things.

We can't control anything. How can we possibly recognize the radiance of peace when we're lost in trying to rearrange the clouds? No way. Nisargadatta Maharaj once said that nothing of value can happen to a mind that knows exactly what it wants. We're locked in.

He's quite uncompromising. Because nothing the mind can visualize and want is of much value. I just dropped that one in. Do with it what you will.

And what's even more fascinating is that the closer we look—as we keep coming back with our attention to this emotion, this sensation, this breath—rather than finding a kind of security, some solidity, the closer we look, the more we find space. The more we find emptiness. The more we find that there's nothing solid.

I clipped an article out of the New York Times a couple of years ago from the science section. Some astronomers were announcing that they had discovered the largest galaxy ever detected—more than 100 trillion stars, more than 6 million light years in diameter. It's 60 times the size of our galaxy, the Milky Way. And then they found that this new galaxy is located in the center of an even larger clump of a thousand other galaxies, which they call Abel 2029. It makes you wonder how many others there are.

They said they hoped that further study of this galaxy would provide clues to the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter. There doesn't seem to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would be necessary for all this clumping together of galaxies that's going on. So scientists proposed the existence of vast amounts of this invisible matter. According to the prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this missing invisible matter—which means that what is generally thought of as astronomy actually concerns only a tiny subset of particles that happens to be detectable by human nervous systems.

We're just the same as that. The closer we look, the more we find out that there's nothing solid there. And the more we want solid knowledge, the more we'll find incredible mystery.

When we can have the confidence, the trust, the faith—even for a moment—to just open into "don't know," into not knowing, then it's not so fearful, even for that moment. And in fact, it gives us great energy. It allows us to really move and dance in the beauty of the mystery of life and to respond to whatever arises out of a natural compassion and love—not from preconceived ideas of how we should be, but from what naturally springs from the source of this mystery.

It's a wonderful way to live, even for a moment. Not to set it up as an expectation. We all have the possibility to experience just this—resting with the unknown, being okay with whatever arises in this moment—at any time, in a retreat, in our life. And it happens over and over. It gives space for so much appreciation of things you wouldn't expect.

Someone said the other day that she'd spent time in another retreat just hours lying on her back watching a hummingbird. And it had seemed like such a joyous, awake, clear experience. That's what happens when we're not so focused on achieving results. Many, many moments arise like that. You notice them more in the course of a retreat in this beautiful desert. And again, it's easy to put the emphasis outward and say, "Well, it's because the desert's so quiet. It's because these animals are so cute. It's because, because, because." But just for a moment, turn the attention back and see: maybe it's just because we're not filling up the space with conclusions and results and needs and wants that we're able to just open into what's always here.

So that's an aspect of faith, trust, and confidence that I wanted to speak about in exploring these lines of faith. And this confidence, this willingness to be present, leads quite naturally into the next spiritual faculty I want to discuss: energy.

Without some faith, without some willingness, some inner inspiration, it's really hard to have the energy or the interest to do this practice. At those times when bright faith wanes and you can't quite touch your own verified faith, it's like you're dragging yourself along. The energy we're talking about here is a vital, absolutely necessary function of our practice. It's necessary for practice to continue.

I think this is one of the most delicate balancing acts in the whole practice—finding over and over the balance of wise energy, of wise effort. And again, because everything is in flux, nothing is static, it's not like you're going to work out wise effort, balanced energy, put it on cruise control, and have it stay there for the rest of the retreat. No, sorry. It means understanding how we fall out of balance, how we push too hard, how we don't try enough—what that feels like—and then we begin to intuitively know from our verified internal experience how to balance.

In speaking about energy or effort, I want to say that this energy is really the energy of enthusiasm. An energy born of interest. Not of some outer force. Not of trying to match some goal or form that you have in mind.

Because then you might push, push, push. You might think you're putting out a lot of effort, but it turns

into drudgery.

I find that when I feel most connected with my practice—really alive, really present in it, really feeling fulfilled—it's when my energy is strong and balanced. But it means the energy, the willingness to be present for whatever is, to simply meet what's happening with attention. So when I feel really there, really fulfilled or so-called happy with my practice, it has nothing to do with what's actually going on. I could be walking, I could have pain, my mind could be scattered, and I could be frustrated—but there could be the quality of energy, of effort, that's willing to simply meet each of those experiences just as it is. And that's balanced effort.

Balanced effort doesn't mean things are nice. It doesn't mean your experiences are all going to be pleasant. And that's something that really goes against our unconscious conditioning. So I want to talk a little bit about all of that.

First, the quality of effort when there isn't energy. And I actually prefer to think of it as energy rather than effort, because it's less personal that way. And by the way, none of these qualities of mind and heart are personal. They're forces that arise due to conditions, and when the conditions change, they change. The quality of energy is one of the easiest ones to see this with—to see this impersonal nature. But it's also one of the ones that we tend to identify with the most.

So if the energy is really low—and you know how it is when you're really sleepy, really tired at the beginning of a retreat—you drag yourself along and it's hard. Nothing's very interesting. You could care less about the breath or your feet or anything else, and it just becomes a drudgery that pretty soon breeds into a whole ball of doubt. You know, what's the point of this anyway? And it just kind of goes downhill from there when there's no energy.

Sometimes we try to meet that in this imbalanced way of, okay, I'm going to walk really slow, I'm going to sit really still, I'm going to do everything in the form that they tell us and try to make it match. And that's the way to have balanced effort. But that also just breeds frustration and tightness.

I remember one retreat I was doing not that long ago, a seven or eight week retreat with this Burmese teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, who's very demanding, very exacting. And there's a real form to follow. Everyone walks extremely slowly, noting. You note really every single moment that you're awake—you're noting what's happening, whether you're eating or going to the bathroom or walking or whatever.

I was doing that every moment, but there was a lot going on in my life just before I came into the retreat. I was having to call my mother every day; she had just had an operation for cancer. A lot of things were going on. And I was just making myself conform to this structure for three weeks—lifting, moving, placing, noting, noting, noting. And it was so dry and so dead. And I know from experience that this same practice could be really vital and alive and energizing and beautiful. So I had that faith, my own verified experience.

It got to the point which finally woke me up that I was really in unbalanced effort. I came upstairs to my walking place one day, and the thought in my mind was: if someone else is walking there, I'm leaving the retreat, I'm going home. And that thought can come, but I meant it. I was really going to do it. Luckily nobody was walking there.

That really was what woke me up. Something's wrong here. Three weeks of this is long enough. This is not balanced effort—although we often mistake it because we know we're putting in a lot of effort. But on the other hand, our other tendency can be, well, things are tough, this really stinks, I'm getting nowhere—so let's check out. I'll just go downtown, have a cup of coffee, maybe take in a movie. In fact, one retreat I had to beg someone not to go away for the weekend to a motel and watch videos. This was a three-month retreat. I really don't think it will help.

That's the flip side. And it can easily come up, because when things become difficult—not just that the energy is low, but when you run into quite a difficult experience, either frustration or deep grief or just physical pain or just boredom, restlessness, agitation—it doesn't have to be a life trauma, but anything that's difficult and ongoing—mostly our conditioning says, "Oh, this is wrong. I must be doing something wrong." If it's unpleasant, we tend to think we have to change it.

And so the effort that we then try to put in is usually, if we're not quite clear, somehow the effort to make it be different. Somehow the effort to get back to that clear sitting I had yesterday or last year or ten years ago. Or somehow the effort to get rid of this particular tiredness or this particular grief or this particular sensation in order to then really begin to develop and deepen in the practice.

We can put in very sincere energy and really think we're just being present, being present—but we're confusing effort with expectation. If you think you're bringing your attention just to be here, but there's this subtle edge of "in order for something to happen," it's generally unwise energy, unwise effort. Unwise, why? Because you're going to end up suffering. It usually becomes frustrating, difficult. And that's the clue. If you don't notice the expectation, you'll generally at some point notice the frustration. That's the clue that there's something we want to happen that isn't happening. And it's the clue to say, "Oh, wait a minute. The only energy or effort I need to do here is be here with what is happening." So what is happening? Just bring your attention back to the bare experience and see what it is.

It's very easy for us, without having gotten really familiar with the quality of mindfulness—which is just being with the bare experience—to confuse all our stories and interpretations with what's actually going on.

For example, this is an old story, but it's a good one. Someone came in years ago to a friend of ours, Joseph actually, in an interview and started talking about, "Oh my God, I've got so much tension in my jaw. It just shows what an uptight person I am, and I'm not able to meditate, and this runs through my whole life. I just see how everything I do is tight and controlled, and it affects my relationships." And Joseph goes, "Oh, you mean you're feeling tension in your jaw." "That's right, tension in my jaw, and it goes to show that no

matter what I do, I do in such a—" and on and on. "Wait, you mean you're experiencing some tension in your jaw." And this went back and forth and back and forth. It's so simple. It's so much simpler just to feel the tension in the jaw. But we're so used to all the elaboration that sometimes we just can't get there—just to the basic experience.

Try it here. Next time the person behind you is sneezing and sniffling and moving and clearing their throat, see if just for a moment you can get to what's the actual experience here. That's perfect. It's hearing. It's just hearing. So what? Maybe the hearing experience is pleasant, maybe it's unpleasant. All the rest—and I can't tell you how many people have described the murderous rages they've gone into on this retreat—all the rest is interpretation and elaboration and story on a simple experience of hearing. I say it's simple. We all know it's not simple to come back to that place. That's when the energy is balanced, the wise effort to simply be with what is. It's a little more possible to do that with that open receptivity to just what's happening.

Sometimes another way we can get into really unbalanced effort—usually we'll have that element of trying to change, if not giving up. But often there'll be something very difficult going on, either very difficult and chronic physically, or very deep and strong emotional pain or difficulty: terror, fear, anger, rage, grief. And our tendency, especially in our culture—the only kind of effort we seem to know is push, push, push. So often the feeling is, "If I just stick with this, stick with this... it's happening because I'm not staying with it hard enough, or I'm feeling overwhelmed because my mindfulness isn't strong enough, and so I've got to push and be here with it and be here with it and be here with it"—as if grinding is mindfulness. And it isn't.

It is quite possible through just our grim determination to go into the terror, go into the terror, go into the terror. Well, we get completely terrorized. Mindfulness is gone and we're really thrown back out of balance. It's not helpful. And one of the hardest things for most of us—not all of us, but most of us—to learn, to really begin to take in and trust, is that there are times in a very ongoing difficult and painful situation where the most skillful aspect of this practice would be to gently back away. Not forever, but for a time, before you get overwhelmed.

People always say, "No, but that's quitting. That's cheating. That's giving up. That's distracting myself." Well, gently backing away does not mean you check into a hotel and watch videos for two days. There are other ways of gently backing away. You can, for instance, if you just find terror coming up really strongly, quit trying to dive into the middle of it every single time with the hope that you're going to blast out the other side and never see it again. Back up. Move your attention to your body. Go out and walk and really feel your feet hitting the ground. Move into the body. Open up if it's a lot of pain, a lot of sadness.

There can be times when going outside and really opening up the field of awareness is what's needed. Just be with hearing. You're not spacing out—you're very mindful, very present. The hearing is the actual experience of this moment. And it brings a real spaciousness and nourishment to the heart, to the

consciousness. Then the next time grief or laziness or terror or the pain in your knee arises, there's more of a balance of consciousness, a spaciousness of heart to really be with that experience in a clear and balanced way. Again, the effort to simply be present for what is can become much more spontaneous and heartfelt.

I think this is a very important lesson to learn, and you learn it by doing it. Sometimes you might back off too early when you don't really need to. How can you tell? Because you'll end up totally zoned out, getting more distracted—you want a cup of tea, then you want more food, then you want to go for a drive, and then you think, "Wait a minute, how did I get here?" Time to come back and be a little more present.

Other times you might find you've pushed too much. How do you know? You get really grim or frustrated. You get so overwhelmed by the difficulty that you feel not just a passing feeling of wanting to give up, but you can't face another sitting. You can't face seeing the meditation hall. You can't face seeing all of Yucca Valley. It's just too much. You've pushed too hard. And it's never too late to back up, to open up, to bring some nurturance into your experience.

For me, walking out in the desert will do that. You don't try to get nurtured—you just open up and let it happen by itself. For some people, doing loving-kindness practice, whether for themselves or for someone else, is the way. For some people, just getting up and walking is enough. Sometimes you might need to just have a cup of tea, relax, and not try so hard to be mindful.

One thing I really want to emphasize is that grimness, heaviness, a kind of dead feeling—that look—is not equivalent to mindfulness. And it is not the sign of balanced effort. It doesn't mean you're doing it right if you're grim. It doesn't mean you have to smile all the time, but it doesn't mean you have to be grim if that's not how you're feeling.

One other thing that can sometimes help when you're in very deep physical or emotional pain, when turning to sounds or other objects just isn't even accessible because the pain is so strong and overwhelming—Thich Nhat Hanh talks about deliberately bringing up in your mind seeds of joy. Now, this is a little different from Vipassana because you're not just letting it arise by itself. It's a deliberate cultivation in that moment, a deliberate reflection, a deliberate noticing of what is present now that is beautiful and nurturing. This can bring a real lightness to the heart.

He talked about this in one article I read, describing how during the Vietnamese War the social workers he was working with were so busy helping the wounded, helping their friends, trying to go back and forth between sides—just enmeshed in unimaginable suffering. And he said they would forget to stop and smell the beautiful fragrance of the herbs at night, the rosemary, the thyme. He would remind them: Stop. Smell the herbs. Smell the beautiful gifts that nature is giving us. Appreciate what is beautiful in your life.

That's not some kind of Pollyanna-ish "let's pretend everything is okay." It's a deliberate balancing of perception, a deliberate balancing of mindfulness. Because that beauty is also true, here and now. And

sometimes when we really feel like we're drowning, it's extremely helpful to deliberately recognize it. Whatever is true and beautiful and nurturing for you in your life, there can be times when it's very helpful to just touch either the memory of it, if it's someone who's not here, or the beauty of nature, or the fact that we all have the capacity and the ability to practice the Dharma together—whatever it may be. Let yourself nurture and nourish your heart.

What happens is you learn to balance the energy more and more. And the only way we learn balance is by falling out of balance. So don't be discouraged. You fall out of balance and say, "Oh, I was pushing too hard. Okay, nurture a bit, come back, feel the breath, feel the sensations." Another time you're just zoned out, falling asleep, and you think, "It's not so much that I'm exhausted—it's that I just kind of quit paying attention here."

I wasn't really too interested. So try to cultivate some interest—not forcing, but genuine interest. And you just keep learning how to come back, how to come back to balance. It's no problem when we fall out. It's another chance to learn. As the steadiness of energy grows, as it becomes more balanced, we find that the quality of mindfulness grows stronger and stronger.

I have about two minutes for each of the following three factors now, so I just want to mention them briefly.

Mindfulness we've talked about a lot, and we'll continue to talk about it. In some way, it's the most balancing of all the factors. Mindfulness balances everything. You can't have too much mindfulness. Faith needs to be balanced with wisdom—they help each other. Energy and concentration need to be balanced—they help each other. Mindfulness balances them all.

By mindfulness we mean that quality of bare knowing, just what is. It can know tension as tension. It can know "Oh my God, I'm so controlling" as thinking and fear. So it's not about getting rid of everything, but knowing our experience for what it is. It's non-coercive, simply being with what is without attachment, without pulling away, without judgment.

It's sometimes said that a moment of mindfulness is like a moment of freedom. Because in a moment of pure mindfulness—just being with that tension—there's no hating it, there's no desiring it. There's not the dullness of ignorance or confusion. It's simply being with what is, without interpretation. And in that, there's the purity, the spaciousness of mind that isn't lost in the clouds. That opens the possibility in any moment of pure mindfulness to recognize something other—to recognize that there's much more, something much greater than just what we think of as our limited mind and body. In a moment of mindfulness we're not lost in the clouds, and there's the possibility of turning around and noticing the radiance that we are.

We have lots and lots of moments here, opportunities for one of these little moments of mindfulness, moments of freedom. Mindfulness is an incredibly powerful tool. And it's really amazing because it seems

so simple and unassuming. It's hard to imagine how by simply noticing our breath, noticing sensation, noticing emotion, the whole world unfolds—all our psychological processes, all our memories, and much more. Seeing deeply into the nature of our phenomenal existence, of the clouds. Seeing the impermanence, seeing the fact that nothing lasts, the ephemeral nature. Seeing that none of it is who we are, because how can it be who we are if it's coming and going, coming and going?

Somehow the balance of all five faculties, with mindfulness at the forefront, allows all of this to open up in its own way. We don't do anything. All we do is be here with what is, and everything else opens up by itself.

With the steadiness of mindfulness, the continuity of mindfulness, the willingness to come back and be present whenever you can in the sitting, whenever you can in the walking, and in the times in between—not grim, but just that willingness to be present as you stand up, as you walk to lunch, present as you eat, as you take a shower—this leads to the development of concentration. Continuity of mindfulness in practice is actually an extremely strong tool for developing concentration.

Concentration is the fourth spiritual faculty. I feel that concentration is sometimes, at least in talking to many meditators on retreat, misunderstood or becomes a sticking point. Often people say—almost out of all these qualities—concentration can become the goal. Sometimes it seems that people judge themselves or evaluate their practice or their progress, which again is a waste of time, by how concentrated they are. This leads to a lot of confusion and misunderstanding.

When we talk about concentration, it's really an observable mental quality where the mind is steady with whatever is arising—steady with this one breath, steady with a sensation, steady with an emotion. It can stay there without a lot of fluttering around, without jumping off. Concentration has a unifying quality, stability, so that all our energy, which as you may have noticed by now can get very dispersed—mental energy all over the place, one thing after another—as concentration strengthens, that dispersion comes together and the mind becomes quite unified.

Concentration can be taken to incredible depths of real absorption and one-pointedness, which is not what we're cultivating here. But it's understandable why people can get hooked on it, because that unification of mind is really lovely.

Instead of all this monkey mind jumping all over the place, all this stuff going on, you just get completely absorbed into one thing. It can lead to a lot of bliss and peace and happiness. There's one aspect of practice that just develops concentration, but that's not what we're doing here. Because what we want to do is bring in the insight aspect, the aspect leading to the development of wisdom.

And so we open up the field of awareness. We don't just stay with the breath. We open it to sensations and emotions and thinking. But that doesn't mean we're not cultivating concentration. Concentration is that quality of really being steady with whatever is arising. We're cultivating concentration on changing

appearances. It's called momentary concentration.

So it's like there's a sensation of the breath, then there's tingling, then there's burning, then there's thinking, then there's sadness, sadness, tightness, tightness, burning, rising, falling, rising, thinking, thinking. Now that can be very strong concentration on each arising thing. But it doesn't necessarily give that sense of harmony and peace, because a lot of what's arising isn't so nice.

Often when we've experienced deep concentration, which is very helpful to the practice because it helps us cut through all that telling of stories—it's the concentration that strengthens the mindfulness to come back from how controlling you are to just feeling the tension in the jaw—but sometimes when people experience a real depth of concentration, of one-pointedness, it comes to be in some way the goal of practice. To get back to that peaceful sitting. To get back to that sense of bliss. Admittedly, it's nice. But then what? It's not going to last. And it's not freedom.

What we're cultivating here is a concentration that can really strengthen the mindfulness, the energy, that can really help us see what's actually going on, feel what's actually going on, and then the mindfulness helps us let it go and be really present as the next thing arises. It's these qualities together that give rise to wisdom. Wisdom being, again, our own intuitive understanding of our own nature, of impermanence, of the fact that nothing that's arising and passing is our essential self. Wisdom can arise into our personality patterns, into deep personal insight.

And then of course we do tend to think about whatever it was that we really recognized, and that's fine. But don't confuse the thinking about for the wisdom of our own verified inner experience. It's just not the same thing. In fact, wisdom that just turns into thinking and thinking and thinking turns into skeptical doubt. Doubt can actually come about from too much thinking about an insight.

That's how wisdom is balanced with faith. If there's just wisdom, we think, we analyze, we discuss, but faith gives us the energy to just come back and do it. Just come back and feel the knee pain, instead of analyzing it endlessly. Wisdom gives faith the balance it needs not to just be blind. Someone said to me once about her teacher, "I'd jump off a cliff if he told me to." That's blind faith. Not so helpful. They balance each other.

Concentration and energy balance each other. Concentration is calming. Energy is uplifting. They give each other a balance. And mindfulness balances them all.

So those are the five qualities that are present in many moments of all of our experience. It's helpful to recognize them, notice how they balance each other. And just remember what Nyoshul Khenpo said about every moment—we're at that great crossroads. Every moment is the moment when we can recognize our essential purity, our essential peace. This moment, whatever's happening, there's nothing we need to shut out. And nothing needs to be any better or any different than it is in this moment.

Faith

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.