Abandoning the Causes That Give Rise to Ignorance

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:06:34

The longer we continue our path of practice and exploration, the more it seems to me that we begin to become aware of the vastness which Joseph spoke of this morning. Just how vast the whole journey is. How vast and mysterious the process of our mind is. Almost incomprehensible.

Sometimes that vastness is delightful—a real joy opens us into freedom, into letting go. But that's not what I'm going to talk about tonight. I talked about that last week. This week I'm going to talk about when the vastness kind of flips and we get overwhelmed by the vastness of ignorance.

As you get quieter, you're really noticing, you're really more tuned in to experience. Often people will comment—and I comment on it a lot in myself—it can sometimes seem amazing and discouraging how quickly ignorance arises, how suddenly the kilesas come shooting in when you think you've just been so present and calm. This can have its discouraging moments when we're looking under that lens.

Of course, it's not a discouraging thing ultimately, because the seeing of this subtleness of the arising of ignorance is the key to our freedom. There's a quotation from a Greek Orthodox abbot of 1000 AD, Simeon was his name: "The more a person enters the light of understanding, the more aware she is of her own ignorance." And that's really what begins to happen.

We might start on our path kind of blithely thinking we'll practice for a week or three months or a couple of years and then we'll sort of be free. We'll be happy. Things will be okay. And instead we find we're plunging into—now I'm definitely giving the downside, it's only one bias—sometimes we can feel we're plunging into this morass that we had no idea existed under the surface. But each bit of seeing, the seeming complexity of this, is actually our key into freedom and understanding. It's just that we lose sight of it from time to time.

The Buddha said quite often that ignorance is not some solid state that we're stuck with, but that ignorance is something that arises in the moment due to conditions. And when those conditions change, when those conditions cease to be, then so also the ignorance ceases to be. You can see that from both sides: ignorance can arise over and over because the conditions that cause it keep arising, but also it vanishes, it dissipates over and over and over. We're not stuck with some unchanging mess that there's no way out of.

Tonight I want to talk about a particular discourse of the Buddha, just sort of describe what he's talking

about in it. He's talking about the conditions for ignorance to arise, which he mentions briefly, and then seven ways that we can work with transcending or abandoning the causes that give rise to ignorance. None of this is going to be anything new. It's all what we've been looking at and doing already. I just like it because it shows us that there's a whole array of ways to work.

I've noticed a lot recently that many people are sort of recapping or trying to make sure they've got everything before the end of the retreat. "Now what do I do about this? How do I do this? What are these seven? What are these five?" Somehow trying to get everything and make sure it's the right way. I kind of like this sutta because he just lists out seven different ways to work, and of course there are many, many more. There's no one right way. It changes all the time depending on what's appropriate at a given time.

The cause that the Buddha gives for ignorance arising in a moment, when he's listing his chains of cause and effect, is this: ignorance arises in a particular moment of experience due to the presence or the arising in the previous moment of what he calls subtle underlying tendencies of mind. I know this gets a little subtle; I hope it's not too intellectual. Certain latent tendencies or biases of mind, when present, give rise to ignorance.

In other words, he's saying ignorance doesn't arise because there's a huge full-blown mind state, say, of sense desire. That's already after ignorance. But in a moment in the mind there can be arising the subtle tendency or bias—the conditions for sense desire to arise, if the conditions are right.

He lists four particular biases, any of which arising is the condition for ignorance to arise. Because it's so subtle, I think it's hard to see until we've been on a retreat looking at our minds this amount of time. And because it's so subtle is also one of the reasons that we find ourselves so often lost in a manifestation of ignorance—a pretty mild one—and not knowing how we got there.

These underlying biases—and the ones the Buddha lists specifically—he calls them *āsava*, that's the Pali word. And "bias" is a nice translation. Some of the other translations are "canker"—I mean, they're like nasty translations.

Anyway, I'll say what they are. The bias towards sense desire, the proclivity for sense desire to come up. The second one is towards becoming—becoming anything, something. Towards wrong view, of course, are main ones. Any view that we establish of self or a view of not-self, a view of who I am, or any underlying tendency to identify with anything.

Oh, they're broad. You see why they come up a lot. It's broad and it's subtle.

So this tendency is not the full-blown state itself—not the full-blown state of craving or identification, of being totally lost—but simply the possibility for it to arise. And not noticing that, it becomes circular. There's a proclivity, say, for sense desire. We don't notice it. It arises. We get really into a state of desire. And again, all of this without mindfulness, it strengthens the tendency for desire to arise again in the next moment. And so it just keeps going—the biases condition ignorance, which conditions the biases.

I have to say, when I look at this on paper, it's not a satisfying explanation to me because it's so circular. It's descriptive. But my mind always wants to say, well, let's get back to the very beginning one—that's the start of it all—and just get rid of that. And of course that's not how it works, because it's all conditioned. One gives rise to the next, gives rise to the next, gives rise to the next. And as the Buddha said over and over, there is no one beginning point of ignorance or anything that we can go to and look at. It's all arising due to conditions. And when they fade, it fades.

And so again, as he's so pragmatic, he's showing us how to look at, how to notice, and how to work with abandoning these underlying tendencies. Often he describes freedom or enlightenment as the total extinction of these underlying biases of mind. That's quite remarkable—not always; he describes freedom in different ways, but that's one of the ways. A mind that has become completely free of these tendencies in which there's no more bias for sense pleasure or conceit or a sense of self to arise.

We can experience that in a moment, anyway.

Again, these are subtle and quite pervasive. And I'm not trying to be depressing. I'm just trying to bring home the sense of the subtlety, and also that it's not personal. So that in fact, you don't get caught in some sense of defeat or discouragement or failure.

Why, when we see clearly some painful, unhelpful pattern of our mind and we really see it and abandon it in that moment—why isn't that it? Why does it come back later? This is something we can only wonder at: "I really saw it, and now it's back. I didn't do something right." But that's not the case. It's just that we're not appreciating the level of subtlety with which all these conditions are operating.

For me, when I begin to appreciate that level, it takes away any sense of personal blame or failure. And again, it opens up to the vastness, and to the recognition: okay, this is for the long haul. I might as well relax and settle in and just pay attention.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, this word *āsava*, these underlying tendencies—it actually means either "to flow in" or "to flow out." And so one description I like, because it gives the sense of these tendencies as if exuding, coming out from the unguarded sense doors like water from cracks in a pot—a sense of constant trickling. Trickle, trickle, trickle. I mean, that's a metaphor. It's not actually like we're sitting here and things are trickling out of our ears and our eyes.

Don't take it literally. It's a way of talking.

But it really points to something important. These biases aren't inherent in our experience. In other words, they're not there no matter what. Otherwise, there would be no point in practice, obviously. In the clear seeing, there's the abandoning of these tendencies. But in the not seeing, there's this sense of constant trickling—well, I don't like "constant," but it's trickling a lot. The sense of how easily these biases of mind can give rise to thought and speech and action is what can be so surprising when we're on retreat.

Here's a simple example that I was quite aware of at the time. A couple of years ago I was sitting some weeks, and I was very quiet and mindful and present. It wasn't a big space-out or an overwhelming or emotional time. I was just being with what is, noting quite steadily. And I remember—these moments are just so vivid—I was looking at a tree. It was summer, out the window of my room. And I was noting, "seeing, seeing." That sense of attention connecting with what's happening, this very balance. And I could just feel, it's almost as if for some reason I consciously let down the mindfulness, just kind of backed off, so to speak, and quit just meeting, quit just noticing. Okay, seeing, seeing—just kind of backed off.

Immediately—it blew me away actually—immediately there was the sense of, "Oh, isn't that a pretty leaf?" And desire just came up. I mean, about a leaf on a tree, for God's sake. The mind leaned towards the pleasant and desire came up, and memory started, and the whole story started, just fueled by sense desire. Like that. I thought, wow, that's really amazing.

That was such a clear example to me of how this tendency, if the conditions are there, how easy it is for it to give rise to ignorance. The ignorance is what clutches at a sense of pleasure to make me happy, and then just on into the whole story. The bias exerts an influence; it flows in.

In our daily life, our normal life, this is so quick and subtle we're mostly not going to notice on this level. But here, at times—not always, but at times—we can. And again I want to emphasize, rather than that being depressing, it's just that seeing is what's opening the door to our freedom from it. Normally we're so inured, so used to these biases that we don't even notice them. Again, we've talked a lot about how when a *kilesa* is present in experience, like greed, it colors our perception. This is the same dynamic on a very subtle level. Here we begin to see that, and rather than getting distressed by the seeing, it's the door to letting go, to liberating understanding.

And I know probably half of you are sitting there going, "That's all fine for her to say, but she doesn't know what my mind's like and how identified I am and how caught up I am. Forget it. I really am getting worse no matter what." So you guys have no perspective, really.

Let me share a little newspaper article. Steve Smith is actually really laughing at me because he says I talk about renunciation and then clip things out of the newspaper all the time. This is a little article about unexamined ignorance. You can see the difference. I don't think anyone here fits into this category.

A 94-year-old career criminal is heading back to prison again, this time on assault and gun possession charges. Ninety-four years old. "Pop," they call him—Pop Honeywood—was sentenced to serve seven years at 94. He pleaded guilty to armed assault and possession of a firearm for pointing a gun at a man who warned him not to eat grapes growing in the man's yard. Since 1946, Mr. Honeywood has been charged with 46 crimes and has served eight jail sentences. Under one of his sentencing options this time, Mr. Honeywood could have been sent to a nursing home. But he resisted that option, saying, "If I go to jail, I may be out in a couple of years. If I go to a nursing home, I may be there the rest of my life."

That's the difference between examining our ignorance and just living with it, not even knowing it's there.

There are three levels of experience, three levels of mind from which these biases give rise to manifestation—this might have been mentioned before. The first is the level of speech or action, clearly the strongest level. They've really come up and gotten strong and led to speech or action. Whether we speak in anger, whether we hit somebody, whether we write an angry note. Whether we point a gun—whatever it is we do. And this level is worked with or purified through *sīla*, through purification of conduct. We can really control speech and action through working with *sīla*.

The second level, in these layers of decreasing intensity—

The second, slightly less intense level is the obsessive layer, where we're fueled by the bias towards craving or anger or identification. We're really lost and spinning, feeding the thoughts and the story—that sense of really spinning in it. And each thought, each emotion strengthens the potential for it to rise again in the next moment. I'm sure you all know how that goes.

This level is really purified through samadhi, through mindfulness and concentration, where we can come out of the obsessive thinking and return to the actual experience itself.

Both of these levels—both sila and samadhi, the mindfulness and concentration—when they're functioning are in a way not giving these underlying tendencies room to expand, not giving them room to develop. And that's the third layer, the one I'm talking about tonight: underlying the latent, the potential for these obsessive or stronger acting-out defilements to arise if the appropriate conditions are there.

The example often given is that it's like a seed. In that seed—say for an oak tree—there's the latent, underlying potential for an oak tree to grow if the conditions are right. If it's watered, if it has the proper earth, if the climate is correct. But in that actual acorn, we could tear it apart and we're not going to find a tree. The tree isn't actually there. And if it's not watered, if it's not fed, it just withers and dies. It does not grow into a tree. It's not inevitable that it grow into a tree. That's an analogy for how these underlying tendencies are said to work.

While the first two levels can be purified through sila and samadhi, the third level—really the tendency for these things to arise—is abandoned by seeing clearly, by really seeing things as they are on the level of visceral understanding, and the natural letting go that happens from that.

We can see why our practice of sila and of mindfulness, concentration, wise effort, all the factors of enlightenment—they're so vital. Because in each moment that there's presence, that there's mindfulness, that we're seeing, maybe we're seeing the beginning of anger, the beginning of identification, or even further along, but we come in and we're just there with it—it's not giving it room to expand. It's setting the conditions for us not to be blinded, not to be obsessed by these potential tendencies of mind.

When the mind is not clouded by the obsessive nature of the defilements, when that's not coloring our

experience, it gives us the potential for deep seeing, for awakening to what is really true. And as we've said, when there's just a moment of touching that which we really are—whatever way you want to describe it: emptiness, interconnectedness, the ultimate true nature, inner completion, peace—in that moment of actually recognizing it, for that moment, and maybe for longer, even the underlying tendency for these confusions to arise is eradicated.

You can see that in your own experience. Often people will say, when they have a moment of just knowing impermanence—not remembering knowing it, not saying, "Oh yes, I know everything's impermanent, so I won't be bothered by this knee pain"—but in that moment of really knowing it, automatically the grasping, the wanting it to change, goes away. The grasping, the sense of self, goes away. There's no tendency for it even to arise in that moment. And so that's the way, at least momentarily—and the deeper we see, the more full it becomes—that these tendencies vanish altogether.

You can see: it might not be what your experience is a lot of the time, but every moment that we're not confused by the obsessive quality, every moment that we're simply present with what is, is setting the conditions. It's not allowing the tendencies to arise and strengthen, and is in fact opening us up to clear seeing.

Let me give an example of how, if the conditions are right and there's no mindfulness, the tendencies flower—and how, when there's really clear seeing, they don't.

Without mindfulness, without a sense of clear seeing, the tendency for grasping, the tendency for identification—just little things. You go to your walking space where you've walked every walking period since the beginning of the retreat, and someone else is there. And you know they know that you always walk there. Anger, grasping, whatever, just shoots up. You're lost in it.

Then another time, when there's not only mindfulness but there's also been that clear seeing at some point—just of interconnectedness, for example—you walk there, the same situation, and nothing happens. It's not like you're sitting on it and saying, "I will not get aversive." It just simply doesn't come up. Or even more, metta comes up instead.

Many people have mentioned this, and there's this sense of: who was that? Where did that come from? It's not what we're used to. But again, this is an example of that underlying tendency not even being there, not giving rise.

So, the seven ways—seven different ways we can work, that the Buddha spoke about. Ways to abandon, to transcend. They're all things that we're doing now, and they're not all that radically different. I just want to run through them a little bit. There's no hierarchy, no one way that's better. It's just whatever's appropriate given your situation, both internal and external, and what's accessible, what's possible in a moment.

The first one is obvious: seeing wisely, wise attention, seeing clearly. And of course, ultimately, it's what I

just spoke of—that clear seeing of our interconnected nature that just abandons quite spontaneously. But on a more prosaic, moment-to-moment level, the Buddha speaks about wise attention. He talks about this a lot. Wise attention, he says, has two components: what we pay attention to, and the way in which we pay attention.

And again, he's so practical. He says, for what we should pay attention to, wise attention is simply, quoting him, "When we're not familiar with the Dharma, or we're undisciplined in it, we don't really understand which things are fit for attention and which things are not. So we pay attention to the wrong things."

I think it's just so basic. And of course it's very obvious. The "wrong things" is simply—it's not a matter of blame—but it's simply those things that as we pay attention to them, it causes states of desire, aversion, becoming, and ignorance to either arise, or if they're already arisen, we pay attention to things that make those states get stronger. Those are the wrong things. And it's just so obvious. It's not some moralistic good or bad.

And of course the right things is just the opposite. What we pay attention to that does not cause states of greed, aversion, becoming, identification to arise. Or when those states are already present, like we're lost in anger, what we pay attention to that does not cause them to increase and causes them to fade. It's obvious. And what we've been emphasizing the whole retreat—basically paying attention to the process, to the bare experience, rather than to all the papañca and all the story about it.

So just a simple example. You're walking, someone walks past, they're walking slowly, and there's the thought, "They're a better yogi than I am." Or maybe there's the thought, "They're showing off. I know actually that they're not a better yogi than I am." Either way. And then we pay attention to the content. Are they? Aren't they? Am I? I'm being pretty picky here right now. I'm being pretty aversive. I really should be paying attention to my own feet. And the whole self-blame, judgment, whatever it goes into. And then we say, "Oh, I shouldn't be thinking these things. It's not good." And it just keeps going. Paying attention to the wrong thing. It's not that those thoughts are bad, but we're paying attention to the wrong thing. We're just feeding it and it keeps on going, sort of like inertia. Once it's set in motion, it just has a tendency to stay in motion. It's really hard to stop.

So the right thing is not, "Okay, I won't pay attention to this, I'll pay attention to my breath." It's coming back and being with the experience as it is. Whether it's the feeling of anger, whether it's the sense of shame, whether it's simply the contractions of sensations in the body—simply being with things the way they are. The bare experience, or as it's sometimes talked about, with total attention, freedom from the three times. That's how to pay attention to our experience. The three times being past, present, and future.

So how to be with that sense of contraction, of aversion, the sense of self-judgment, the sense of envy, whatever it is. Whether you feel it as a physical contraction, whether you feel it as a tone in the mind, whether it's observable as an image—doesn't matter. But that willingness to be with that experience in that moment with total attention. When we're with it with whole and total attention, the past and the

future don't come up. And if we're with total attention, we're also not analyzing, interpreting, or comparing. We're simply with contraction or seeing. Whatever it happens to be, in whatever form it's taking.

When it's not that total accepting attention, as Sayadaw U Pandita says, it's like past and future come up. Say there's a pleasant experience. It's not the total attention to it, although it's sort of there. And then he says it's like we start remembering all our past pleasant experiences that were sort of like it. As U Pandita says, we bring up past pleasures and relive them over and over like a cow chewing her cud. And then we move into the future—potentials for the future times, "I could have the same pleasant experience in the future." Or we get really into analyzing, interpreting what's happening in the present.

How did it get to be like this? What does it mean? How can I keep it going?

Total attention—this is the other aspect of wise attention—is just simply there, free of the three times. Not bringing in past or future, not analyzing the present. Just what is.

So this first of the seven ways, wise attention, this quality of wise, total attention, is what opens the door to liberating insight. It keeps us from being sidetracked by our interpretations and biases. Without it, with unwise attention, we fall into what the Buddha called the thicket of views, the wilderness of views—all those views of "I am this, I am that. I am a self, I am not-self. I've been this in the past, what will I be in the future?" He lists all these views.

You can really see how unwise attention, even if it's as simple as remembering past pleasant experiences, imagining future ones, and analyzing the present, leads us into all kinds of opinions and views about who we are, who we're going to be, who we were in the past, and what's really going on. By and large, they're a waste of time. They definitely aren't helping us to see clearly.

So that's wise attention.

Another attitude—and a lot of these are attitudes, not necessarily techniques—for understanding and abandoning some of these biases in the mind is restraint at the sense doors, guarding the sense doors. In first reading the sutta, it could be easy to think it just means real restraint of not looking around, not reaching out to sound. This can definitely be helpful. Many of us have talked about how much the desire to look around leads to so much suffering—so much wanting, comparing, negativity both inner and outer. And how just the simple act of restraint of the eyes doesn't give these tendencies room to expand.

But it could be easy to take that a little far. Actually, a friend of mine once did, going around the retreat blindfolded for several days. That's not exactly the point—to try to go around blind and deaf and not feel anything. It's not about engendering a loathing or fear of sense experience.

Rather, restraint at the sense doors is really what we've talked about regarding papañca, the proliferation of mind. It's being able to notice what's happening at the sense door. If someone walks by where we're

seeing, there might be perception of who it is, and we just keep it there. We keep the attention there. We don't have to expand it into that whole story of judgment and comparing and craving and envy.

Of course, sometimes we can't do this. Again, this is just one of many ways to work. But sometimes we can really work at restraining the proliferation at the sense door, being just as in that sutta of the Buddha I quoted earlier: "In the seen there is just what is seen. In the heard there is just what is heard. In the sensed, just what is sensed. In the cognized, simply what is cognized. That's all."

It's not like some aversive holding back, but more a relaxed settling back—simply seeing, hearing, sensing, thinking, inner seeing, emotions. Just what is, without any problem. This is really restraint at the sense doors.

When there's that simply being with what is, the tendencies for sense desire, identification, whatever, simply do not flower. They do not sprout. Without that, as we all know very well, it leads into fields of proliferation and story. And as I said before, each moment of really getting into who I am and what can I do to make myself better, to be a good yogi, to have a better sitting—each moment of that we're not aware of, that isn't met with mindfulness, is actually strengthening that bias, the tendency of the mind to move into craving in the next moment, to move into judging in the next moments. Just how it works.

Ajahn Chah said, "When the nose smells an odor, let it go. Just leave it at the nose." So that's what we do. Just leave it at the eyes. Leave it at the ear. Leave it at the nose. There's nowhere to go with it. It's just empty anyway.

The third way is interesting. I wouldn't have thought of it myself, which luckily we have the Buddha for—we don't have to think of these things ourselves. It would be a mess.

see the field of meaning out of which it comes—you know, impossible. Amazing. It was amazing the way the Buddha put all this stuff together. How many of us could sit here and come up with a theory that there are these underlying biases of mind that give rise to ignorance in a moment? I mean, it's quite amazing.

I'm saying this not to indoctrinate or suggest that this is simply how it is, but rather as a way to turn each of you, each of us, back to our own experience. Simply look at your own experience and see what is so. See what holds up. See what's true in your experience. What leads to more suffering? What leads to less suffering? And that's what you believe.

I'm so appreciative that the Buddha laid out so many maps and ways to at least begin to move into understanding our experience. This is a way to start.

So this third way of abandoning the bias for greed, bias for identification, for becoming, for wrong views, is through careful attention to the attitude with which we use things—the attitude with which we use those things which are necessary for our existence. The Buddha is talking to the monks about the attitude with which they use food and clothing and shelter. And I think it's really interesting. We can certainly see

the outer effects in the world of so many centuries of using all our resources with absolutely no care whatsoever to the attitude with which we're using them. That's the outer effect. Here we can begin to pay attention to the inner effect.

Do we use things out of an attitude of care, using just what we need to take care of ourselves? For example, however many blankets you need to keep warm. The amount of food that we need to be healthy, to be wakeful, to be strong. Where does it tip over? When we're using something out of care and respect for ourselves and others, when does it become fear that we won't have enough, or greed in case we won't be happy? When do we run around and save a few extra blankets that we don't actually ever use, just in case, even though someone else might need them?

But even leave aside that someone else might need them. Consider the way that it strengthens the bias for fear to arise. If we're using, say, more blankets than we need out of fear, holding on to them, a moment of using in that way is strengthening the tendency for fear to come up again. So we're really bringing on the potential for more suffering in ourselves.

Or when we take three extra rice cakes at tea after we've finished—what's the attitude? It might really be that you know your energy drops at nine o'clock, or when you get up in the morning you need them, and you take them out of real care and appreciation. Fine. Or is it that lurch of fear? And they're piling up on the back shelves there in the small dining room—ten rice cakes from the last week and a few old moldy bananas.

Never mind the outer effects. Okay, you're feeding the cockroaches and they're very appreciative. But what's the effect on our inner nature? This is what is really important to see: that what's happening in that moment of using resources out of an attitude of fear is we're bringing on ourselves more suffering.

And again, this isn't about looking from the outside and saying what's bad or good, or practicing out of some kind of austere asceticism. That can be done out of hatred for oneself, which is also not helpful, because then that's just propagating the tendency for hatred to come up. This is really looking at how we relate to the things that we use.

When we can just use what's needed with this sense of trust, not worrying or fearful about tomorrow—probably no one here is going to starve tomorrow. Probably there'll be breakfast. Probably there'll be lunch. Probably there'll be rice cakes and peanut butter for tea. You can probably count on that. And if not, that's something else.

You know how it just feels so free when we can let go of that fear or that greed, just in a moment, and appreciate what's here—without that scarcity model in which everyone else becomes a rival for a limited amount of resources. Instead there's a sense of just taking what we need and flowing, which is really such a lovely way to live.

Or just notice that difference between when you're appreciating the lunch—just eating, appreciating, no

problem, open, spacious—and then you hear that scraping of the spoon on the serving table. You think, "Uh-oh, there's not much left. I wonder if I should get up now and get seconds before it's gone." And that thought, unnoticed, expands, gets going. And where's the appreciation? Your plate's still half full. But where's the appreciation of the rest of the meal? Gone.

You know, it's just a struggle. Do I jump up now or do I wait? No, I'll wait. I'll just be open. I won't be craving. But we're just tight. And the difference between that appreciation and letting it go—we don't need to act out of fear. Well, sometimes we do need to act out of fear; we don't have a choice. But when we have a choice, we don't need to. And to just expand into that way of relating to resources is quite lovely.

So that's the third way. The fourth way—and this one, often people don't believe us when we try to talk them into it in interviews—the Buddha said, yes, one way of working with difficult experiences is to avoid them. Of course, he didn't say avoid means "I don't like this, so I think I'll leave the retreat." Not exactly that level of avoidance. The examples he gave were things like avoiding a savage elephant, or avoiding a poisonous snake, or avoiding unwholesome company. But it's really, I think, looking with discernment and realizing that we can't handle every experience.

Sometimes the savage elephant or the poisonous snake is a so-called internal experience in ourselves. Something's just coming up so strong and overwhelming that it's just as if we were run over by a wild elephant. And so easily, people seem to get the idea that true mindfulness means I can be with anything, every moment, and if I back off, I'm wimping out. So I think it's really important to understand that the Buddha said yes, this is one of the things to do. You avoid what is unwholesome, what is difficult, what one is unable to meet with any kind of balance at a particular time.

Now obviously this is going to vary in your own experience widely from time to time. What you might need to avoid at one time you might be quite able to be with at another time. So there's no cut and dried experience here. But you can see just in the way the retreat is set up there are a lot of experiences that we've arranged for you to avoid. We ask you not to get your mail, not to talk to each other, not to read Newsweek every week. We don't have TVs in the back dining room. There's a reason for that. We set it up so that you avoid certain situations.

We're not saying communication is a bad thing, that it's really unskillful to communicate with your family, or that hearing the news is wrong. Nothing like that. But to be inundated, to have so much contact, so much input, so much communication just makes it so much easier in a situation like this for the tendencies to come up, for sense desire to arise. All you need to do is see one commercial for something on TV and go, "Oh yeah, Jamaica"—you just see a commercial of Jamaica and that's it for the next two hours. And those who've received a letter suddenly in the middle of retreat know it can just send the mind flying with either fear or wanting or self-identification, whatever.

So it's a wise avoidance, in order to set the conditions where these tendencies don't arise so that we can then see what is so—set the conditions for knowing truth, for knowing things as they are. It's avoidance of

discernment, not of aversion. So if you find you're working with avoidance and you discover that the motivation doesn't seem to be a balanced one of seeing "I can't handle this," but rather one of total aversion to what is happening, avoidance might not be the right attitude. And it probably won't work anyway. When we're doing it from that point it usually doesn't work.

So, aside from avoidance, the next one that the Buddha spoke about is patience. In other words, the things that we cannot avoid, the difficult experiences that we cannot change, we meet with patience—which we've spoken about quite a lot. That quality of total acceptance of things just as they are, with a real equanimity that isn't flustered by whatever's happening.

You know the phrase: develop a mind that is like the earth. Whatever we throw on the earth, whatever we do to it, however ravaged it might be, it accepts all things equally. And at some point it begins again to nurture all people equally. It doesn't say, "I like you, I don't like you. You can drink the water, you can't breathe the air." It's just this sense of spacious acceptance of whatever might come.

And I really love to see how if there's just a little crack in the pavement, a flower or grass will start to grow up. However much we try to pave over the earth, whatever we do to it, somehow the life, the nurturing aspect of the planet begins to come through no matter how hard we try to suppress it. I think of that image when I try to call up in myself the attitude of patience, this open acceptance. I talked about last week this radical acceptance of the things we can't change, external or internal. Again, it's quite a discerning thing to know when to use acceptance and when avoidance.

And it's going to be changing a lot back and forth.

When I was in Thailand for a year or so during that time as a nun, I learned actually quite a lot about patience but also about avoidance—when to use each, and when I would try to avoid what was unavoidable, how much suffering comes from that.

I went there with at least a year planned, maybe a couple of years, having sat mostly here and in England, with highfalutin ideas of going off into the forest and living this life of solitude and peace and bliss, really getting deep in my practice—all these expectations and self-conceited ideas about what it would be like. Which of course, forget it.

I thought I would spend months alone in the beautiful forest, and instead I spent probably the first four months in a temple in Bangkok. Very noisy, extremely noisy, not quiet. Very hot, extremely hot. It was the hot season, and I didn't have much time to grow into it—I arrived pretty close to the hot season. Outside the walls of the monastery, there were all kinds of loudspeakers blaring rock music, Western rock music, Thai rock music. Inside, there was a plethora of animals. What I remember particularly are the roosters, because there must have been hundreds of them, and they would start maybe at three in the morning. One by one, they would all crow over and over and over. And I said, "Please, please stop. I'm not ready to get up yet." But forget it. You have to get up. And the dogs and the cats, they screech and they howl. It was

just wild.

The heat was, for me, unbearable. Very humid, probably 120 degrees, plus my little hut had a tin roof. So it was just bake, bake in there. And yet I was in a temple where the abbot was wonderful to me. I didn't know at the time how really radical he was being, because he ordained me as a nun and there were no other nuns in this temple. He ordained me, then he let me stay in a kuti. They had little kutis with grass around them, and it was very nice for Bangkok—which I didn't realize at the time. I just got into aversive mode. I was in a little kuti surrounded by kutis filled with monks, which is almost unheard of. But it basically meant I could never step outside without being completely covered. You have these long-sleeve shirts, always polyester, with a polyester undershirt. I tried to get cotton—it was really, really hard. And then you have to put this robe over, again polyester. So I would just kind of walk out and drip. Go back inside and wash and curse a little bit and say, "Oh, that's ruined speech."

I could go on and on, but it was not engendering light, blissful mind states. I was there for probably three months, and finally I went to the forest. I did have a nice kuti in the forest. Actually, I was treated wonderfully everywhere I went, and it wasn't until a month later that I could appreciate it.

The forest, I want to tell you, is not quiet. I thought the forest would be quiet. It is so noisy, it's incredible. Just the insects and the tukke lizards that go off all night in your kuti, out of your kuti, really very loud. I was under a wild mango tree, again with a tin roof, so I'd be sitting in the middle of meditation and these mangoes would drop on the roof like an explosion. Really, I'd jump, about to settle down again.

And then of course, the wats in the country are beautiful, like parks. So on weekends, tour buses of people from surrounding areas come and they all kind of troop through in front of the kutis. The women's kutis, of course, were on the side where all the people are, so it would be safe. The men are across the river, nice and quiet. That's how it always is. So they'd troop by, two tour buses of people, go off into the woods, have their picnic, troop back out. It's nice they could come and enjoy and support the temple—it's really part of the symbiotic relationship, it's lovely. But I wasn't in that mind state at the time. People would come up and look in my door: "Oh, look at the farang mae chi!" They'd just stand there and stare at me while I was sitting. Or I'd be walking and they'd come up—I'd turn around, they'd be right there with a camera to take my picture.

It was a trip. So, working between patience and avoidance.

I thought, okay, I can put up a sheet over my screen so people can't look in. And that would really help me avoid engendering a lot of unpleasant mind states. But there was a lot I couldn't avoid. And it was at least a couple of months before I saw clearly that I was so much feeding the tendency for aversion to arise that it actually got to the point where almost anything that came into my experience, aversion would arise. It didn't even have to be particularly aversive.

And I got it. Oh, I'm conditioning aversion here. I'm practicing aversion. This is not helpful. The seeing of

that really did help. That really, just the seeing was like a releasing, a letting go, an opening up. And that's the opening into patience. Wait a minute—this is how it is here. I can leave or I can stay, and if I stay, this is how it is.

That patience really broadens the experience. That's when I could start to appreciate actually how wonderfully I was being treated, and of course the many positive aspects that I talked about another time. It's really quite interesting. Patience is a wonderful tool. It's not just a way to get through something we don't like.

In a moment—just in a moment of being with what is—all the times when you're sort of present but you're not really concentrated, you don't really like what's happening, you can't say "I'm having good practice," but there's patience, there's that acceptance—in that moment, through the patience, the underlying tendencies are not being given room to flower. And that's a lot. Because each moment that these tendencies aren't flowering is a moment that's conditioning patience, metta, and clear seeing. It's letting clear seeing be possible.

So really, when we get to these subtle levels, don't undervalue patience. It's actually an amazing tool. It's not flashy, but it's really a huge aspect of allowing us to open to truth.

Now of course I have one minute to talk about the other two. The sixth method for abandoning the habits of mind—the translation I read called it "removing." What I would call it is what Joseph calls the sword of wisdom. These are the times when we're not meeting experience right at that door of perception, when we can't just guard the sense doors, but we land in the middle of an already arisen state, whatever it is—wanting, fear, greed, identification. But there's that moment of recognition when we can bring in that kind of clear seeing: okay, that's it, enough now. Don't let it expand any further.

Now, this gentle sort of wisdom—I'm not talking about a hammer, you know, "that's enough, get away." That's just more aversion. But that place where we can see, I'm really getting into aversion. Okay, so it took two months. And sometime I saw it—that's enough. There's no need for this to expand anymore. Of course we can't always do that, but there are many times when we can. I think we don't do it nearly as often as we could. Sometimes we get seduced by thinking we're being mindful, but actually we're getting sucked in. So there's this—just, okay, you think you're no good because that person walks slower? That's enough. Just come back to the experience. That's enough. Removing, not giving them a chance to expand.

And the last method is happening quite spontaneously, simply by virtue of your mindfulness practice. This is the development, the strengthening and balancing of the seven factors of enlightenment. Has anyone given a talk about all the seven factors? No one has. We've talked about each one of them separately. But one of the ways—conceptual perhaps—but one of the ways of holding a sense of what's going on in meditation practice is that each of these seven factors is being strengthened and balanced.

I'll just say what they are. There are three tranquilizing factors, three calming factors. One is calm,

tranquility.

One is equanimity—that real non-reactive space of mind. And the third calming one is concentration, focus, steadiness of mind. It just stays with what is, doesn't move around.

Then there are three energizing factors. Energy, obviously—effort or energy. The second one is rapture, pīti, which sometimes manifests as this real vivid interest in what's going on. And the third energizing factor is investigation, which I know Michelle gave a whole talk on. Investigation—not thinking about, but the investigation of being with what's happening, seeing what happens to it without interpretation.

So three energizing, three calming. And the seventh is mindfulness—what else—that balances all of them. Mindfulness can't be too out of balance. You can't have too much mindfulness.

A lot of what we do, one of the ways we look when we're talking to people in interviews, is seeing which factors are stronger, which factors could be boosted a little. These seven factors are all quite naturally being developed through the practice. It happens by itself. But sometimes people tend to get fixated—we talk a lot about mindfulness, a lot about concentration. We mention all the others, but often people just tend to focus on concentration, maybe on mindfulness, maybe on effort. We forget it's a whole range of all seven.

What happens naturally—and as you become more familiar with the energy of each—you can tune in. I'll do that sometimes when I'm sitting and things are feeling off. Not that I don't like what's happening, but it just feels not quite right. I'll tune in and see if one of these isn't quite happening. Sometimes there's maybe no investigation. I'm trying to be mindful, but there's this underlying feeling of "I don't really care what's going on." Oh, okay—let me see if I can get a little interested here. Sometimes there's not much energy; that's obvious. Sometimes we're really with it, but there's no calm, for example.

So a lot of what goes on in interviews is just steering toward whatever seems to be a little out of balance. It's a constantly evolving and shifting process. And don't get all hung up on it because it's happening by itself.

So again, that's the seventh way that he speaks of—the developing and strengthening of the seven factors of enlightenment. I don't know if you remember earlier when I read a quotation from the Buddha where he said that mindfulness of breathing, developed and practiced, perfects the four foundations of mindfulness, which developed and practiced perfects the seven factors of enlightenment, which developed and practiced perfects clear vision and deliverance.

So you see, it's a natural progression. I've talked all night and then I say it's actually happening by itself. Sometimes the noticing can be really helpful to see where we're stuck. Sometimes it can get too intellectual and you're thinking about it. In that case, forget it, because it's all happening by itself.

And again, as subtle and pervasive as the tendencies might be for confusion to arise, for wanting to arise,

for identification to arise—the seeing of it, don't let that be discouraging, because the seeing of it is the opening to freedom from it.

This is actually a quotation from Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas: "Recognize what is in your sight, and what is hidden will become clear to you."

That's what we're really doing here. Recognizing what is in our sight. By itself, what is hidden will become clear.

So let's sit for a minute.

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