I'm Right, You're Wrong: Attachment to View

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:00

Or meeting aversion with wisdom and compassion—mostly our own aversion we'll be talking about.

Of course, of the three roots of suffering—greed, hatred, and delusion—the roots of suffering that arise in our own minds, aversion is probably the easiest to recognize as a source of suffering. I don't mean that we always recognize when it's present, but we recognize that it leads to suffering, especially when it's present in other people.

Lately I've just felt bombarded, as we are sometimes, by periods where you hear of suffering in friends, the amount of hatred and wars and terrorism going on in the world. And realizing that we can't hold ourselves separate from that. When we begin to practice, to look inside our own experience with compassion and honesty, of course we see at times the same roots of suffering—of anger, of fear, of terror—in ourselves. This should actually be an awakening experience, something that we meet with compassion and gratitude to see. I feel that deeply.

But often the amount of suffering that we see in the world from aggression, from fear, rebounds onto how we meet the experience of our own fear and aggression and aversion. We think: "It's really bad. It shouldn't be happening." Or "I'm really bad. I shouldn't be happening." Or "You're really bad for making me feel this way. You shouldn't be happening." Or in fact, "None of this is happening and everything's fine." All the gradations of that just keep us in an endless cycle of not really opening to what is happening in the moment.

This makes it hard for us to really make friends with all the experiences of aversion, which to me has been one of the most freeing aspects of my practice in the last few years—making friends with aversion. And as with all friends, we don't always like them. But we are willing to be present and open with them and see what's really going on.

We can't hold aversion away by an act of will. I'm sure some of you have tried: "I will no longer get upset at this situation. It doesn't bother me." And it doesn't work.

The Buddha said—and I think this is a really important remark—that our afflictions, really our roots of suffering, are abandoned neither through speech nor through the body by actions, but only through wise seeing. So we can't decide through an act of will, "I will no longer get angry. I will no longer feel afraid." We can restrain our actions in speech, and that's a good thing. We don't want to denigrate the importance of that. But that's not freedom. It leads to freedom, because the restraint of acting allows us the space to really use our wise attention to explore what's going on in this experience that we call aversion.

I'd like to investigate together, starting tonight, and depending on how it goes this might continue into next week—I could talk a long time about aversion—to investigate, to bring wise attention and interest to this aspect of the deluded mind.

Now, aversion is a word in English that covers a wide range of mental states, states of mind and heart. Let me give you some examples: ill will, irritation, boredom, resistance, denial, impatience, annoyance, anger, rage, guilt, depression, sorrow, dislike, self-hatred, self-judgment, regret, violence, aggression, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror, holding a grudge.

What was your reaction to hearing all of that? It's like, "Oh God, give me a break." Already, all of our conditioning—partly cultural and partly personal—around the whole experience that we package up and call aversion can easily begin to seep in as soon as we even recognize some form of dislike or rage or annoyance or fear or self-judgment or whatever is present.

So I think to begin with, it's really important if we can hold this investigation—now and in your practice—of these various mental states in the frame of the non-deluded heart and mind. Not from the framework of "I'm such a bad person, I've got to uproot this, they're disgusting," but rather from the framework of: How does this state of heart and mind function to obscure the radiance of our pure nature? It's not that they're horrible. It's that these states actually function in a way that obscures our basic purity, the innate wakefulness of mind.

The image that's always given is of clouds covering the sun, and we spend our time fighting the clouds. So we can begin to investigate the clouds from the framework of knowing they're transitory visitors, rather than from the framework of thinking this isn't a transitory visitor—this is really my true nature finally coming out in the light of awareness. It feels like that sometimes, doesn't it? The more I look, the more anger and fear I see. And if I look more, I'm afraid I'm going to hit the bottomless well.

Remember, Nyoshul Khenpo, a wonderful Tibetan teacher, says that the way that conventional meditation practices work, one of the main ways they work, is to uncover our innate wisdom and purity by recognizing the obscurations that hide our innate wisdom and purity—recognizing these obscurations for the changing, insubstantial appearances that they are. And once we recognize something, in a moment, as a changing, insubstantial appearance, it no longer needs to block this innate purity. What's always been here can be revealed. This is on a moment-to-moment basis.

So not holding aversion as personal. I know this is hard sometimes to believe, but it's just arising due to ignorance present in a moment and fed by conditions, as is everything else. We can begin to look at it from this perspective—the ignorance of not knowing in a moment things as they are, thinking that somehow I am separate from experience. And so this unpleasant experience that's arising, I can hold myself separate from it, either through aversion or through fear or through anger. We don't think that so clearly, but that's the sense of delusion that aversion arises from.

Joko Beck says, "Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate." It certainly looks as though we're separate. I feel separate from you. It looks that way. And as long as we think we're separate, we're going to suffer, because we feel we have to defend ourselves, we feel we have to find something out there in the world to make us happy. Aversion arises from this misconception that if I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience that's happening right now, I can be happy. And just like desire—how the desire itself sends us on the cycle of suffering—so too does the aversion, the fear, the pulling away. It actually elicits a sense of disconnection and continues and strengthens the disconnection, because the more we pull back, the more disconnected we feel. We think, "Oh good, I'm getting away from this. This is making me feel disconnected." We pull back more, we feel more disconnected, and it just starts a whole cycle.

Before I want to go into the details of how we actually notice in a moment the experience of aversion, I want to mention that each of us might recognize the strength of whatever cultural or personal biases or beliefs we bring to the experiences of the whole range of aversion—of anger, dislike, fear, boredom. As I said, mostly unpleasant things we tend to consider as bad or wrong. Most forms of aversion are quite unpleasant, so they're bad or wrong. And societally, culturally too, because the expressions of anger and fear are so harmful, it's quite easy—without even realizing—to hold the belief that if we're really a spiritual person, we wouldn't be experiencing this anger, this fear, this murderous rage over such a petty thing as somebody breathing loud or opening a window. And then we're really disgusted at ourselves, and we can't just bring an open-hearted investigation to the experience. So there's the societal or cultural assumption we might bring, that aversion is bad.

Coupled with this, you know, the energy sometimes of anger is really kind of cool. There's a way that when we really are angry and it's so clear it's the other person's fault, it's a lot harder to just look at the anger. It's so much more fulfilling to really cruise on, "I can't believe how incredibly insensitive..." or "I feel really compassionate for that poor fool, but somehow..." We cruise on the anger, or we deny it altogether, or we suppress it. And of course, we all know how that explodes.

I heard something on the news the other day—sort of a combination of pretending we don't have anger or negative feelings, but at the same time using them in a way. They were talking about a new cosmetic treatment for wrinkles that both men and women are using. It's a facial injection, temporary, called Botox, which stands for botulism toxin. Believe it or not, people are injecting—and if you don't know from English, botulism is a food poisoning that's deadly. People are injecting botulism toxin in their face. What it does is temporarily paralyze some of the muscles. This is serious. It started just for wrinkles, for cosmetic reasons, but they found out a really good side effect is that the muscles it paralyzes are the ones that let you frown. So when you've had one of these injections, you can't really frown. High-powered lawyers and bankers and stockbrokers are taking these shots—I swear, I heard this on the radio—so they can go into high-powered meetings and their face won't give away what they're feeling if they're frowning or upset. This is our culture. We are products of this culture. So we have to take our conditioning

seriously. We do it to ourselves in a way.

Our freedom rests not in suppression or denial or acting out in order to really allow the feelings, but in bringing an open-hearted, mindful awareness to just what is happening right now, whether it's just a little annoyance or you feel swept away in rage and fear. Presence here and now is the point of freedom.

So just to begin by looking at what is going on in the moment of arising aversion, in any of those forms. It's so amazing to me—it's what I love about this practice of moment-to-moment awareness—that even the hugest patterns of our mind can be discovered in how we're relating in a moment. So starting from a moment and then expanding it.

When aversion in any form arises, it's arising as a state of mind and heart in this moment, as a response or reaction to one of the six sense experiences that's arising in this moment. Whether it's sight, sound, taste, smell, bodily feeling, or the sixth sense—the mind, a thought, another emotion—one of those arising in this moment that we experience as unpleasant, probably without really noticing the unpleasantness, maybe without even quite noticing that whole sense contact altogether.

We experience unpleasantness without real awareness, and the natural response, the conditioned response for most people in the world in a moment of unpleasantness, of dukkha, is pulling back. It's natural. We're not bad because that happens. It's just natural. That pulling back is the movement of subtle aversion.

And again, just as Michelle was talking about in the dependent origination, that moment of noticing—contact, feeling, craving; contact, feeling, aversion—it can be the case that if the sense contact is mild enough and our awareness is strong enough, and both those happen at the same time, then in noticing contact and unpleasantness, the pulling back doesn't go anywhere. It's just that.

But what often happens is in that pulling back, we don't quite notice it. And it's as if, instead of awareness connecting with what's happening, there's a little gap. Just a little gap. And into that little gap can rush all the furies. It almost doesn't matter how mundane the particular unpleasant experience might be or how really intense. In that unseen pulling back, it can go into murderous rage or total self-judgment or terror. But it's all an effect of just the continual pulling away from experience, cringing back without noticing it.

Even fury or terror at a memory of something that really happened ten years ago is still a response, a reaction to that thought arising in this moment. To me, when I remember this, it's really helpful because I know that since the initial impetus for the strength of the aversive reaction is arising in the moment, so too that's the place that I can rest with mindfulness. At least that's the place I can try to enter with mindfulness—rather than try and figure out what's going on, to bring awareness into my present moment sensory experience, any of the six senses, and see if I can just notice what's happening.

Now, it's not always easy, I acknowledge that, because it goes so fast from a subtle pulling away to a really big story. Just the sound—I'm very sensitive to cold—just the sound, if I'm sitting in a room in the winter,

of somebody opening the window. That's already an interpretation; it was just hearing. And the pulling back, and the aversion, and the thought: "Now I'm going to be freezing." Just into the whole cycle of them and me and my past. Finally, if I bring my awareness to the moment, there's just hearing. Unpleasant. Or I'm really cold. There's goosebumps. But I just bring my experience to that. It's, "Oh, cold feeling. Unpleasant."

Without bringing the awareness into the experience, I can go back and relive the past ten years and the next one hour and really get worked up. And as you know, it can really go on for a long time if we don't think to bring the mindfulness to meet what's happening at the point of contact.

This is the first ally, the first form of presence—to see if we can bring awareness to what's happening right now on the sense contact level. What's the unpleasant experience that's fueling this? It's always our way back into clarity, strength, and awakeness.

It's not always that easy. If we don't notice right away, as the disconnection increases, as the mind begins to spin, we start being aversive not to the original contact but to the experience of anger or fear or annoyance itself, which we experience as unpleasant. So then we begin to pull back from the second level of experience—from the aversion, the fear, the annoyance itself—and we pull back and that gets stronger, and we pull back and that gets stronger.

If we have no awareness at all, that's the point where we say something or do something or strike out, often reacting by this point to something that's not even happening anymore. We don't even know what started the cycle. We're responding to somebody who's walking so slowly and mindfully that it's driving us crazy, and they're going through the door slowly—and that's not what triggered it at all. But we don't know that anymore.

Dan Goleman, in his book *Emotional Intelligence*, describes various scientific psychological tests that showed that the physical reaction of anger, the physical effects of anger, lingers much longer in our experience than the mental effects. This is actually in line with what the Buddha said. He said one time, if you must identify with some part of your experience, it makes more sense to identify with the body because that doesn't change nearly as quickly as the mind. He wasn't advocating identification with the body. He was just pointing out how quickly the mind changes.

And we can see this. In a way, Sayadaw U Pandita used to call it the physical residue of anger. It feels like black ash, just dark ash lingering in our body. And the mind could have moved on and be quite okay. But there's still this physical agitation, and so the next unpleasant thing that arises doesn't need to be nearly as strong for our reaction to get kind of amped up. If there's some ongoing unpleasant experience, even as it goes away mentally, we're still with the physical residue.

If we haven't noticed that, we get into a real cycle. Have you noticed sometimes you think you're really managing your aversion, the anger, the annoyance, the fear—think it's sort of under control—and then

some little thing happens and you just go over the edge? You think, "What? Why? I've been on top of it all day." But sometimes we don't quite notice that physical residue.

A friend told me a story that was kind of funny. He was at some public place like Disneyland or Universal Studios, standing in line at a fast food place to get a soda. He had to wait and wait and wait. The man in front of him was getting more and more agitated and impatient at having to wait for his coffee. By the time he got to the clerk, he was really agitated and, I guess, unfriendly. So my friend, in the spirit of helping, tried to say something soothing to this man. You know how well that goes over in your own experience. Of course, the guy got really agitated, got his coffee, stared at my friend, and stomped out of the place.

My friend got his Coke or whatever and was walking out. Just as he came out, he saw across the whole wide area of these little tables—where you'd stand and drink your coffee—the man that had been in front of him. He was just standing there looking calm. But just seeing my friend walk out, he got so agitated again that he spilled his coffee. Just that sight got all that aversion going again.

So it's easy to bring mindfulness into the point of sense contact when it's a small thing, when it hasn't had a lot of time to expand. But a lot of the time it's going to expand. And still, what's really important is to be willing to bring our awareness into the experience—the physical-mental gestalt of the mental state of aversion or fear or whatever it is—however we're experiencing it in that moment.

A friend of mine, she's sitting here actually, told me a really great image. She describes how she has two grown sons who, whenever they go to Hawaii or someplace where there's really big surf, are always trying to explain to her how the safest way, when a huge wave comes, is to turn around and dive into it. She says, "I know intellectually that's the place of ease, of safety, but I just can't do it. So I see the wave coming and I always turn around and run, and it clobbers me."

It's the same with difficult, aversive, fearful experiences. We want to run from the aversion. We want to run from the whole experience. And that's actually what lets the wave get bigger and bigger and bigger. The place of freedom is if we can remember to just turn around and dive in. What is going on with this wave?

It's not always easy. She said once she's been able to do it. We'll be able to do it more than that when we start to learn that we don't have to be afraid of the aversion or afraid of the fear. Sometimes it's so big that we think by diving in there's no mindfulness at all. At first you can dive in and just be with the sensations. How is fear manifesting? Name and note the sensations in your body. Notice the waves in the mind. The same with aversion, the same with anger.

A lot of times, the fear in a retreat situation is, "I'll lose my mindfulness. If I really go into this, I'm just indulging, I'm just wallowing, I'm just dwelling, and it's bad karma, so it's better if I don't." It's another way we have of thinking, "I'm creating bad karma, so it's better not to feel this." Instead, it comes from

behind and knocks us over.

It can get to the point where it really feels like there's no mindfulness at all. But still, you can just let your awareness get so big that you're simply feeling and letting the waves of energy—of anger or fear—move through you.

I know for myself, I've developed what I call stomping meditation. It's hard to sit when it's that strong. I remember one time I was on retreat here when I was a manager, and we would get two or three days to sit. Very cherished, because it was hard to make the time. I began one of my little cherished three-day blocks of sitting, and somebody, who should have known better, came to me at the beginning with some big problem, something they wanted me to do during my retreat. And I got so...

I was furious to have my retreat interrupted by someone who should have known better. And I would sit with it and become more and more convinced: I'm really right. They should have known better. It really was wrong of them. I got so angry that sitting there, noting "anger, anger, anger, anger" – a lot of times, that's what people seem to think it's like to be mindful of anger. You sit: anger, anger, anger, anger. Burning, burning, burning, burning. And when it's not like that, you come and say, "You know, I'm just getting lost in it." Hey, sometimes it's really big. The mindfulness just has to get that big too. It's not going to be refined. It's not going to be precise. Sometimes you just can't sit – the energy is so big.

What I noticed with this particular time is that I was indulging. Now, indulging doesn't mean feeling the anger. It means indulging in how right I was, how justified the anger was. But I watched myself indulging, and I noticed that the more I kept on that train – I'd feel it in my stomach, all the agitation, then get into the story of "Yeah, he was really wrong, yeah, that's really..." – this sense of letting it happen but feeding it got it stronger and stronger and stronger. That's where I really learned that expressing anger isn't necessarily the key to ending it. In this case, it was the key to keeping it going for as long as I cared to.

Until it finally got to the point where I developed stomping meditation. I went way out where no one would see me and literally stomped up and down, internally yelling, "Anger! Anger! Anger!" That was as precise as I could get. But it was good enough – feeling it, really just letting that energy rip through the body, not trying to contain it, not trying to be precise. That's also mindfulness, you know. Mindfulness comes in many forms, from very micro-precise to really, really big – just knowing what's happening with a clear, open-hearted attention.

So you might stomp for a minute, you might stomp for an hour. It doesn't matter. At some point, of course, it begins to shift and I came a little bit more into balance, seeing what was going on. That's just as valid as being able to bring mindfulness right into that point of sense contact and unpleasantness. It's just matching the quality of mindfulness to the quality of experience – diving into it, no matter how little or big it is, without being afraid.

Now sometimes the experience of aversion, whether it's in the fear mode or in the annoyance, irritation,

and anger mode – the source of it isn't always so obvious. And still, it can be a really strong experience throughout the day. Have you ever noticed when you go through a whole day, or what feels like an eternity, and suddenly you realize there's been a background mood – basically of total irritation with everybody and everything – the whole day, and somehow you didn't notice it? Which, of course, once we notice it, we wonder: How could I not? And you can't really pinpoint it at that moment.

But I've discovered that still, quite often when you notice that, not always but often, if you again dive into your mental-physical experience in the moment, there's some relatively subtle and not even that unpleasant experience happening – but sort of a repetitive experience that we don't quite let in, or we don't quite let in the unpleasantness in a clear way.

For example, I've noticed in my daily life, when I'm physically tired – and this isn't that subtle, but it took me a while to notice it – when I'm really physically tired, it's unpleasant. My body feels unpleasant when I bring my attention to it. So of course our first line of reaction is, "Well, then don't bring your attention to it, you know?" So I don't bring my attention to it, but it's still physically unpleasant. And by not bringing my attention to it, there's this little, almost constant aversion going on, which then manifests as a negative reaction to the people around me, or to what somebody says, or to something that normally wouldn't bother me. I'm really aversive. And it's not actually to what's out there. I need to turn around and notice: Oh, yeah, I'm tired. The body's hurting. Oh, that's what's going on.

Once, a couple of years ago, I gave that example and a friend said that he started paying attention after that. He noticed that all day he'd been feeling a little off, and at the end of the day he realized: Oh, my clothes are a little too tight. Just a little thing, you know, that we don't notice. If we were to notice it, it's like, "Oh, okay, unpleasant. No big deal." Or – and this is a little apt at the moment – some sound, like an ongoing, monotonous, grinding whine.

Lasting most of the day. And we start by bringing our attention to it, saying, "Well, that's okay. It's not so bad. That's enough of it already—I don't need to pay attention to it anymore." In, out, rising, falling, aversion to aversion to aversion. But we can just come back and notice: oh, yeah, monotonous grinding whine, unpleasant. Don't be afraid to keep turning into the experience and being there. We don't have to be afraid of unpleasant experience. Moving in is the point of liberation. You may get down on your knees and thank those guys by the end of this retreat, because it was your point of liberation. It could be.

I'm not trying to make light of it—it's definitely, for most of us, extremely difficult to be able, or even willing, or to believe that it's worthwhile to rest with ease, fully and openheartedly, in the midst of a difficult or unpleasant experience. All our training has been otherwise. So whether it's an unpleasant sound, or our clothes are too tight, or the body is tired—or whether it's really strong and unpleasant, a huge rage, a huge terror, some memory that elicits something really powerful—the whole range, it is difficult to trust enough that I can rest at ease in the midst of this.

Or as Joko Beck says, can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the

unpleasantness? Not to make the confusion and the unpleasantness go away. Just a willingness to say, "This too—this is the truth of this moment." Whether it's the initial sense contact or a whole reaction doesn't matter. Just to rest at the moment we can recognize that confusion or unpleasantness is present. You don't have to analyze it all the way back to the beginning. Can I find, for a moment, the willingness to rest here? That's the gateway to freedom in this moment.

It really doesn't matter. You don't have to be filled with bliss to open to truth, to open to emptiness, to open to compassion. Believe me, a moment of aversion can really serve us. You can welcome your moments of aversion. It does help to bring a little lightheartedness to it.

For me, when I began to recognize that the aversive tendency of mind is just a conditioned reaction and not take it so personally, it brought such a lightness and spaciousness that aversion isn't any more difficult as an experience. I don't judge it more than I judge greed, or sleepiness, or happiness—if I'm awake. It's really possible.

I remember the first time, years ago, when we would play the Buddhist parlor game of "Are you a greedy type, an aversive type, or a deluded type?" I'm not going to go into much detail, but we all experience all of it, believe me. Some minds simply have more of a tendency for aversion to be the reactive response. Some tend more towards greed. Some tend more towards delusion. The first time someone said to me, "Oh, you're clearly an aversive type"—which had never occurred to me—out of my mouth, without a thought: "Oh, I don't like that." And I thought, oh, maybe there's something to it.

It was years later when I really began to notice, without any judgment of it, that the way this mind is conditioned really is that if I scan a room or scan a situation, the mind is just drawn to whatever is unpleasant. It's just what it does. And I don't have to take that personally. It doesn't mean I'm a hateful, angry person. It just means this mind is going to scan the territory for what it doesn't like.

If I can just keep my mouth shut for thirty seconds and know that anything new anyone presents—like in a meeting, if someone says, "What about this idea?"—my mind immediately goes, "No, that's no good," for ten different reasons. If I can just notice my mind do that, let it do that, then it automatically broadens. Oh yeah, there are some good aspects to that. Oh yeah, that's beautiful over there. It's not a complete cutting off of beauty; it's just the tendency. And it's no worse and no better than the conditioning of mind that always goes to the beautiful and gets attached. It's just different conditioning.

In fact, I've been finding it quite humorous. It just isn't personal. We don't have to take it on as a statement of who we are. Once I really started noticing that, it just cracks me up a lot of the time. And as soon as it cracks me up, it's not personal anymore. The mind opens up, and I can look at a situation with more balance, whether it's internal or external.

I mention this because it's a way of trying to bring some wisdom and some compassion into your experiences of aversion, in whatever mode they arise.

And if you're taking it as really personal, that balance isn't going to be possible in that moment. In a moment when we're really identified with aversion—whether it's fear or whether it's anger, it doesn't really matter—you'll start to notice that the mental state of aversion itself actually colors our perception of what's happening. Have you noticed that? When you're angry at someone, they look really ugly. When you're in love with someone, they're so beautiful.

This effect is especially increased by concentration. When your concentration is balanced with mindfulness, great. But sometimes concentration can get really strong and the mindfulness—the knowing what's happening—slips away. Aversion might, for example, slip in there. So you're really concentrated and a sound goes off, and it feels like a gunshot went off next to your ear, and you react as if that's what happened. You don't even really know what the sound was.

Or more often, the aversion is projected outward in a way so that we perceive and experience, particularly with other people, how they look or what they do or what they say. This is one of the reasons we ask you not to write each other notes during retreat. You think you're coming from real clarity, and actually streams of aversion are going through it. We just don't see it.

A woman told me—it's really a perfect illustration of how this works—someone who, by her own admission, experiences aversion as a reaction to situations quite frequently. She was describing how it worked: she would notice a person come in looking really down, frowning when he looked at her, and she would just get triggered into waves of anger, aversion, reactivity to this person, building up the whole story.

She's been a really sincere practitioner of mindfulness, genuinely wanting to look at this stuff, not just suffer in it. So she would begin to dive into the wave rather than just riding it—rather than following the thoughts of "What's the matter with them? What have I done that they're so angry with me?" She learned to ride the wave of her own experience and really begin to see that the initial trigger, the initial unpleasant sensation, was the sight of the frown, and that was unpleasant.

But what was really keeping the whole cycle spinning, as she brought her attention into her own experience, was that the frown actually triggered her own feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, not being loved, loneliness—the whole litany. That is actually a much more unpleasant feeling than the sight of the frown, but not recognizing that this is what's keeping the whole cycle of aversion and anger going. It's not the guy frowning. It's the feelings of her own inadequacy and fear that are unpleasant.

As soon as she recognized that, that's the place of freedom. Then it was so clear. She said, "That guy—he wasn't even looking at me when he was frowning. He wasn't even thinking about me. It was something he brought in with him. He had a fight with his wife." It was just so clear that from her own feelings of inadequacy and shame and worthlessness, she'd projected a whole story out onto the world.

The point of freedom is always diving in. And often we'll see that the trigger really isn't the same sense

contact we thought it was, but something actually much more difficult to be with—yet much more freeing once we face it. So: what's happening now?

Mark Epstein says, "It's our fear at experiencing ourselves directly that creates suffering."

Let me read you a story from Michael Crichton. This is a true story. He's talking about his own traveling experiences. He was on a safari with his wife in Africa, where you hire a guide and sleep in tents and go all around taking pictures of animals. They were in their tent one night, and just before they camped, he'd said to the guide, "I'm a little afraid of elephants." The guide said, "Don't be. There are no elephants for miles. There haven't been. Don't worry about it."

So in the middle of the night, he and his wife both woke up startled—huge noise, crashing, banging outside the tent. He said he was just lying there paralyzed, thinking, "Oh my God, it's an elephant, it's an elephant," totally frozen. Finally it just got so bad he couldn't stand it anymore. So he picked up his flashlight.

Unzipped the tent flap, shone out the flashlight, and it shone right—he said—on a huge brown eye. And he said, "Oh, it's an elephant." At that point, he said, he zipped up his tent flap, lay back down, and went right to sleep.

The next morning, he was reflecting on it. And this is the interesting part—his reflection. He said, how was it that I was so hysterical? And as soon as I saw what it really was, I just went to sleep. At first, he thought it was something peculiar to himself. But then he realized we're all that way. We can work ourselves into a hysterical panic over possibilities that we won't look at. What if I have cancer? What if my job is at risk? What if my kids are on drugs? What if I'm getting bald? What if there's an elephant outside my tent?

And the hysteria goes away the instant we are willing to hear the answer—even if the answer is what we feared all along. Yes, you have cancer, but now you know what's happening. Yes, your kids are on drugs. Yes, there's an elephant outside your tent. Now the question becomes, what are you going to do about it? The subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops. Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on. It actually promotes the unwillingness to look. So whether the hysteria is fear or anger, it actually keeps us from looking at what's really going on. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that keeps us afraid. The minute we look, we can cease being afraid.

That's really a great summation of the power of mindfulness: it's not looking that keeps us afraid.

I do want to acknowledge there are times with fear especially—or really strong anger—when the energy of it is so intense that we actually can't get mindfulness there at all. It's way beyond. There are times for that. We'll talk about this in other talks, but sometimes the thing to do is to back off altogether, to take some walks, to not try to keep focusing because the energy is just too strong. So just remember that this can be the case. But usually you've pushed yourself a lot to get there. So at the first feeling you have that

maybe it's too strong, try diving in first. Because so often it's really the not looking that keeps us afraid.

Sometimes, talking so much about aversion or really opening to it as much as you have to in practice—because it's a lot of what comes up—it can feel like it's boomeranging. There are times when you come in and say, "I just feel like I'm a hundred times worse than I was when I started this practice, just filled with fear and aversion and negativity and whining and irritation and judgment." And it's just, as I said, really important to find ways not to take that personally and to know that we have to see it. It has to come up into our awareness. That's the first step of becoming free from the grip of fear, from unpleasantness and all the ways that we hide from unpleasant experience.

Not until we are completely liberated are we going to be going along with no grasping and no aversion. And if that's what you're holding as the way you judge yourself, please throw it out the window. Don't think that you're getting worse because you're seeing more difficult aspects. The power of mindfulness is that it gives us enough courage, it gives us the heart, it gives us the balance to be able to see the obscurations with more and more space. The seeing of them is the start of being free from them. Please don't let yourself get into some kind of endless regression—aversion to aversion, judging yourself and judging the practice and judging. Just wrap it up in one big ball of negativity and simply feel what's happening in your body. Quit trying to figure it out.

Another couple of more subtle ways aversion might manifest. One is as resistance. And I know for me sometimes this is quite hard to catch. It's easy when it's the two-year-old mind throwing a tantrum: "I can't, I don't want to do this and you're not going to make me. I will not come back to the breath. I will not walk slowly." That's obvious. But sometimes resistance is much more background until we notice it.

I was sitting last fall for quite some weeks, and I kept moving into this mental state that I was calling doubt. But I was doing mettā, and I would get into this state of, "Well, what good is sitting here sending mettā to everybody? I should be going out and doing something to ease suffering in the world." You know how the mind can get on that track.

I might as well just go home. Now, home for me is a five-minute walk through the woods. So to have the thought "I should just go home" a hundred times a day and not act on it was really interesting. And it would pass. It took me ages, it seemed, before I quit believing this whole story and recognized, "Oh, it's just the mental state of resistance." As soon as you notice it, it's really like the elephant in the room—but it's more subtle, more background.

Someone described resistance to me once as something so comfortable it was like wearing an old blanket for protection. I've noticed that in me, resistance is a way to keep things a little bit at a distance. You don't quite notice that's what's happening sometimes, but it keeps that sense of disconnection going.

One other way that aversion manifests—one we sometimes don't recognize—is as desire. Did you catch that in the little line Michelle read the other night from the sutta about the two darts? She read it, but I just

want to emphasize this one piece. Remember, it was about when you have an unpleasant physical feeling, and the unawakened person then meets that by shooting another arrow into themselves: "I'm so bad for having this unpleasant physical feeling." Or it can be mental: "I'm feeling fear, and that really shows what a bad person I am"—another dart.

But this is the piece I want to emphasize: Someone who's untaught does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sense pleasures. So in that person, an underlying tendency—not even quite conscious—to lust after sense pleasures gets settled in, comes to underlie the mind.

Do you get a sense of that? It's like when there's something unpleasant, without realizing it, the pattern of mind that gets deeply conditioned is: the only thing I can do is go after something pleasant. And often we don't realize that this wave of desire—whether it's you suddenly going off in fantasy over and over and you can't figure out what's happening, or suddenly you're so hungry you've been going along fine and then you have three helpings at lunch and ten chocolate chip cookies and can't quite figure out what's going on. You're looking at craving, you're being really good, you're noting craving, you're noting desire. But sometimes you just need to open up, back up a little, and notice if there's maybe something unpleasant going on. Again, it could be some ongoing physical thing, or often some subtle unpleasant mental state we don't quite recognize. And that leads to just a wave of desire.

In my life, I've gotten to notice this. I'll be driving along somewhere, just going home, and suddenly it comes up: "I've got to go into town and get some cookies. I've got to get some ice cream." And it just feels like this physical impulse—I've got to do this, this hand reaching out. I've learned to recognize it because I'll be asking, "Why? I buy it and then I don't even eat it half the time." And I'll realize: I don't actually want that thing. It's the underlying tendency to avoid the unpleasant. So I'll just come back and ask, "What's going on?" Oh—I'm lonely. Okay. It's quite okay to be with loneliness. The ice cream really doesn't hide it anyway.

My first three-month retreat—I'm saying this so that you don't have to do it—I unfortunately had a car. Somewhere around November, I really didn't understand what was happening, but in retrospect I was filled with this emptiness, this loneliness. It seemed unbearable, mostly because I didn't notice what it was. I went into town. I got a really big bag of chocolate chip cookies. I went back to my room and quite mindfully ate about two-thirds of the bag—which, I don't normally do that. For me, that's really quite unusual behavior. It took me two-thirds of the bag to notice that the cookies were dropping past the empty place and not filling it up. It was a physical experience. Finally a light went on: "Oh. Okay, I guess I'll put these away and just feel this empty place."

Oh yes, loneliness. It's painful. It's scary. And it's okay. It's just what it is.

The opening to truth—however truth is presenting itself in this moment—is what frees our heart and mind from fear, from selfishness, from aversion. Only what's happening in this moment is our avenue to

truth. It doesn't matter whether we like it. Awareness doesn't care whether experience is pleasant or unpleasant or neutral, whether we like it or don't like it, whether it seems spiritual or not.

Whatever is happening, if we can have the faith in ourselves, the confidence in the power of awareness, the power of mindfulness to meet what's happening—even if only for a brief moment—then something becomes possible. If we dive into the wave, there's the possibility to recognize, just for this moment, our innate purity. Rather than fighting with the clouds, rather than getting clobbered by the wave, we meet experience directly.

And if we don't recognize it? That doesn't matter, because there's the next moment. There's this moment. There's always only this moment.

When we begin to believe that we can make friends with all these aspects of aversion, that's the beginning of a way into a really deep connection with ourselves, with life, with recognition of freedom. We no longer need to fear the unpleasant or let our reaction to it continue to block our awareness of the radiance of truth, of our true nature.

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