Working with Aversion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:05:31

Tonight I'd like to share some observations and have us investigate together one of the three main aspects or manifestations of the deluded mind. This particular manifestation is what in the Pali is called *dosa*, translated as hatred or our friend aversion—one, I am proud to say, of the few subjects on which I am an expert.

I think it's really important in speaking about this that the mood I'd like to hold is not one of "we hate aversion and we have to get rid of it," which is often the way we greet this particular visitor. Rather, I want to hold this exploration of this aspect of suffering, this aspect of the so-called deluded mind, in the context of our potential for freedom and peace. We can realize that aversion in all its many forms and grades is not who we are. It is not our personal possession, and it's not a sign of personal failure—that you're an evil person when you experience it. We need to really be able to recognize that it's simply an obscuration of our essential peace. In that way, rather than hating and fearing it, we can get interested in understanding: How does this manifest? How does it function to keep me deluded, to keep me lost in suffering, to distract me from essential peace?

Here is a brief list of some of the manifestations of *dosa*: aversion, ill will, irritation, boredom, resistance, denial, impatience, annoyance, anger, rage, guilt, dislike, hatred, depression, sorrow, regret, violence, aggression, cruelty, fear, anxiety, terror, self-judging, self-hatred—and anything else you can think of in your own experience.

I really want us to look at this with the intention to understand rather than to judge, because it's really very interesting. Aversion—and I'm going to use "aversion" instead of *dosa* as shorthand to cover all of these aspects—arises due to ignorance. A definition of ignorance is not knowing things in their true nature. A lot of times we think of ignorance as "I'm stupid, I can't do it right." But think of ignorance in a more open way: simply not knowing things in their true nature. This is actually why aversion arises in any moment.

Joko Beck says that our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. And certainly it looks as though I am separate from other people and separate from all phenomenal existence. So as long as we think we're separate, we're going to suffer. We feel we have to defend ourselves. We feel we have to find something in the world that will make us happy.

Aversion, in whichever form, arises in a moment from this misconception that somehow I'm separate. If you look at it, whether it's aggression or fear, there's somehow the perception that I'm separate from this painful experience and somehow I can hold myself apart from it—that somehow we can get it out of here,

and I'll just continue on my happy, merry, separate way. Except that we're miserable instead of happy and merry.

In the moment, aversion arises from this misconception of separation and also functions to strengthen it, because it pulls back from experience and in fact creates that very separation that is the cause of our suffering. And so it continues in this cycle: ignorance, confusion, aversion, separation, more ignorance, confusion, separation.

Thinking that ignorance is the cause of aversion, maybe we can hold our investigation of aversion in this attitude of interest. How does that work? How does it work to keep the cycle of suffering going? How does aversion function in a way that keeps this sense of separation feeling so real? How does it keep me distracted from resting at ease in whatever arises?

One of the famous quotations from the Buddha: "In this world, hate never yet dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate. This is the law, ancient and inexhaustible. You too shall pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?"

I wonder, if you're really being in touch with yourselves, how does our heart or mind—or rather our conditioning—relate to this statement? "Only love dispels hate. We will pass away. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?"

When I really look, I can find mixed responses, and I start with this because I just want us to be aware of our conditioned views around anger, fear, aversion. When I hear this in one way, I think, "Oh, that's beautiful. That's wonderful. That's a really beautiful ideal and a great way to live." And then I come down to myself and go, "Possible? Forget it. It's really nice, but it doesn't seem too rooted in my experience of what is possible."

It's helpful to realize that the Buddha isn't given to making nice metaphors that aren't related to our experience. He's talking very literally here: that hate never dispels hate, that love is the strongest power. How can we, no matter what, hold on to annoyance with another? Can we even let that in as a possibility—that it's not just true for the Buddha, it's true for all of us at any particular moment?

Not to hold this up as an ideal that if I don't do this, therefore I'm bad, awful—we call this aversion, this particular form of thinking. Not to hold it up like that, but to open into our minds and hearts the possibility that for me too, in this moment, I might be able to recognize that.

And so with that in mind, we begin to explore our attitudes towards aversion, towards fear, towards pulling away.

In another place, the Buddha said that lust, hate, and delusion—think of hate—is a maker of measurement in the mind, meaning that hate imposes limitation upon the range and depth of the mind. Quite literally, the natural mind and heart is unbounded. So think about when we're caught in a moment of aversion in

any form—the experience is quite distinctly one of constriction, one of separation. The sense of heart-mind unbounded is not there. Can we also let in the possibility that the heart and mind that is unbounded is actually our truest and natural state, not the constriction of fear and separation?

This certainly has not been the conditioning that I grew up with, or that I find prevalent in the world around us. I don't know about you. Where I grew up—I mean, actually kindness and generosity was the baseline of my family. It wasn't a horrible, violent family. But what I really learned, when I look back—because I see it with me now, I don't have to look too far back—is that discussions can start out amicably, but when it really comes down to the nitty-gritty and there's something I really want, the person who gets the loudest and the angriest wins and gets what they want. That kind of adage that there is in this culture: the squeaky wheel gets the grease. We see that happening all the time. Last year there was a book on the bestseller list called *How to Argue and Win Every Time*. It was on the bestseller list in the New York Times, and the subtext was "ways to win arguments at home and at work." That's really, you know, when it gets down to it—forget this nice loving-kindness stuff and get to the point.

And when someone does act, really, from a heart and mind unbounded, it's so inspiring to us. First, because unfortunately it's much rarer than "how to argue and win every time," but also I think it touches that place in us where we know this is really the truth. This is really a potential for us. And I think maybe that's why little news stories about such people can get national airplay—because in some way it's touching that place in all of us that knows love is really stronger than hatred.

I won't read this whole article. This was just in the paper this week. The gist of it is about a man who's in his thirties, and when he was ten, he was kidnapped by somebody and shot and left for dead. There was a grudge against his father. He lived, though the man didn't know it and abandoned him. This boy was found and survived, although he's blinded in one eye from the bullet. They never found who did it until recently, when the sheriff—the same police officer who was on the case then—was still working. He always had a suspicion who it was. And the person he thought it was turned up in a nursing home, really an old, decrepit man who was dying. In fact, I think he just died when this article came out. The police officer went and talked to this man, who was dying and lonely and completely miserable, and he admitted that he'd done it.

The man who was shot had completely forgiven this man already. And he became his only visitor at the nursing home. He would go and visit him every day until he died. This is just one thing he said—he was blinded in his eye, but he said he did not feel that he had been permanently traumatized, adding that he bore no ill will toward the man who had kidnapped him and left him to die. "It was not hard for me to show compassion given his circumstances," said Mr. Carrier, who is married, has two daughters, and until recently worked as a youth minister. "I moved on. This event did not haunt me all my life." And he goes on to say, "I'm glad he was able to put the past behind him." He went and really kept trying to help him know that he was forgiven. "I tried to let him know he had a friend."

It's just very touching. Very sweet. And this man's not making some big deal about it. He's just very matter-of-fact. That's our potential in any particular moment. We get plenty of moments here to work with it—that's one of the functions of a retreat.

So what I'd like to do for a few minutes is just talk about some of the ways that aversion arises in our experience here, just so we can recognize and begin to see how it functions, without prejudice, without thinking, "Oh God, the hated enemy"—just to explore it.

I think the first and most important thing to recognize is that in whatever form we're experiencing aversion—from very mild to very strong anger or terror—no matter what the content is, it is a mental state that is arising always, here and now, as a response to a present moment sense experience. In other words, either a sight, a sound, a thought or emotion, a physical feeling in the body, a taste, a smell—any of the six sense experiences—an unpleasant experience that's arising in this moment.

We're lost in fury at something that happened ten years ago or that might happen ten years from now. What's actually happening is a response of aversion to an unpleasant thought in this moment. I find that very helpful because it takes me out of getting lost in content and into being able to see what's happening right now that's causing this explosion of story.

Once we can recognize that—and of course it's easiest with little things, smaller versions, don't pick the biggest one in your day—see what happens when you can notice the sense experience arising, when you notice the response of aversion. What's actually going on? There's contact. Say there's an unpleasant sound. There's the sense contact, hearing, the unpleasant feeling, and the aversion is the mind, the attention, the energy as it were, flinching back, just ever so slightly, disconnecting from that particular sense door experience. It really, literally feels like a gap between attention and the particular object of experience. So it is actually a disconnection. That's why it feeds the sense of separation—because what it does is pull back from experience and not be able to connect.

And of course in that gap, which takes absolutely no time, this whole surge of associated thoughts, emotions, other sense experiences, memories, and reactions, fueled by the aversion, can just come flying up and the whole thing cycles into a much stronger experience.

A slight example: unpleasant sound, the window being opened. We look up and see an unpleasant sight, and immediately just thought—that sound, that's just like what my mother used to do. Every time I just got comfortable, she'd come in and throw open the window. She had no respect for what I was thinking, and that's really affected me my whole life. And then you have a glimpse of that person again, so there's another seeing contact, and then a wave of rage. What had just been an unpleasant sound, an unpleasant sight, gets completely blown up out of context. There's a whole story, a whole spilling of unpleasant experience. That particular person gets so categorized by our mind, they become the demon of the ages. And there is, at this point, no seeing clearly. There's no wisdom, there's no sense of just knowing what's happening. And it can go on, as I'm sure you know, for hours—something that was really quite minor in

the beginning.

One moment of disconnection, and we don't notice that. Another moment of disconnection, and we don't notice it. And pretty soon, we can be really in rage or terror about something that isn't even happening, that maybe never happened, or that maybe will happen ten years from now. If this keeps going, I'll end up in whatever—if this is how I keep behaving—and on and on and on. Completely out of touch.

And if we don't recognize what's happening at some point, then the mental strength of this leads us to unskillful conduct. We say something, we do something, we write something. Here we don't do too much—the worst we do maybe is write a note, which can elicit a lot of pain. But out in the world we can do a lot more than that. All I'm saying is once we get out of touch, then we continue to respond, not being able to see clearly what's actually happening.

This is really where mindfulness is always our strongest protection. I'll keep coming back to mindfulness, but I'll talk more about the way aversion works. In that moment, at any point in that process, if you can remember: however strong this feeling of fear or aversion is, it's arising right now in response to an unpleasant, difficult experience right now. Can I bring my mindful attention in and connect either with that sense experience—the coolness of the air on your skin if it's from the open window, or the sound if it's that which is eliciting it, or the sight of a person if it's that sight that keeps triggering it—right to the sense door, or else come and feel the sensations in your body, just being with the unpleasant, the aversive feeling itself?

Because as soon as we're doing that, we're countering the disconnection of the aversion. Again, the heart, the mind, the attention is connected with present moment experience. That's the protection of mindfulness. In a moment of mindfulness, there's complete connection with what's happening. And in that moment, there's no room for greed or aversion to arise. There's just what there is. Coldness, unpleasant. Sound, unpleasant. Sensations, unpleasant. Thought, unpleasant.

Just there, what there is. In that moment, the mindfulness is a protection. It's always our ally. It can always be accessible. It doesn't have to be precise. But we must recognize any form of aversion as a disconnection and call on our ally of mindfulness to connect again in this moment. It only takes that moment to reconnect, no matter how far and how long we've been gone.

And I know it's not that simple. I mean, it's simple when we're aware of it. It's simple when it's a little thing. I know very well that a lot of the time it is far from being that simple. When I'm totally caught in fear, I can't simply reconnect—"Fear, fear, fear. Oh yes, fine, that's right." It doesn't work that easily. But that doesn't mean to give up on it.

In Daniel Goleman's book *Emotional Intelligence*, he has a section where he's talking about anger and aversion, citing several physiological studies. I don't have all the science precisely, but I can give the overview. When something unpleasant happens and brings up a reaction of anger in a person's mind, it

has a corresponding physiological, physical response—which is hardly news to any of us. We didn't need a study to know that.

What these studies then showed, and this is also what the Buddha said, is that the experience of anger might pass fairly quickly from the mind. But the residue of the excitation in the body, of the hormones releasing, takes longer to fade from the body than the angry experience does from the mind. The Buddha also said this—that the mind changes so much more quickly than the body.

Because of that, and this is what we can experience here as part of how the yogi mind works, if we're triggered by anger, the aversive, difficult experience passes, but the body is still slightly reacting. Then another unpleasant thing happens, there's a reaction in the mind of anger, and physiological stimulation comes into the body. But the body is already still a little bit triggered, so the response is even more intensified.

By the time the cycle keeps going, you can think in your mind that unpleasant things have come and gone, that you got angry but you relaxed. And then all of a sudden, one little incident happens—what we call the straw that broke the camel's back—and we just explode in rage or fury. Sometimes we don't even know why. But it's because there's been this snowballing effect, so that by the end, a little unpleasant experience that we haven't been mindful of can really elicit a huge response.

A friend of mine was telling me a good example of this. He was at some sort of amusement park, Universal Studios in Hollywood I think. He went into a fast food place and was in line to get a Coke or something. The man ahead of him was really in a hurry and very impatient—you know that kind of feeling when you just have two minutes and you want to go have some fun again. The people were slow, the waitress was slow, and this guy was just really angry and impatient and hyped up. So my friend tried to say something very nice and soothing, which you know how well that goes over with a stranger. The guy got really, really aversive and angry at my friend, got his coffee or whatever, and stomped out.

Then my friend waited in line, got whatever he wanted, and after some minutes went back outside. The man was standing way across the area where you stand at those little tables and drink your coffee. He seemed like he'd sort of calmed down, but just the sight of my friend walking out the door so upset him that he got completely jangled and spilled his coffee. My friend could see this, and he thought, this is the kind of way that without awareness, aversion just builds on itself, and we find ourselves really reacting off the wall without knowing why.

So that's one way anger can build and get out of control. Another way I've noticed is that we can find ourselves at the end of the train of ongoing, building anger without realizing how we got there—incredibly negative, or suddenly in a long, vitriolic chain of self-judgment with really no idea how this arose.

I often find it helpful to step back and give a big picture, because what can happen is you could be having

an ongoing, very mildly unpleasant experience. I've noticed when I'm physically tired, which can of course last all day, that when I tune into my body, it's very uncomfortable. There's pain, but it's very low grade. It doesn't call my attention unless I deliberately look at it.

But it's unpleasant. And so it can be arising many moments during the day, and when I don't notice it, when I'm just not aware of it, there's slight aversion, slight impatience, slight annoyance—that's so quiet I don't really know what's going on until suddenly I just turn around and snap at somebody. Or I sit down and notice that my mind is in a litany of everything horrible and selfish I've done since I was ten years old—I didn't go to this party with this friend of mine—really with hatred. And I think, "Whoa, what is going on?"

When I look, I see: oh, my body hurts. It's just mildly unpleasant. But the ongoing nature and the unseen quality of it can lead to a whole mood of actually a lot of unpleasant aversion or fear. As soon as I notice it, recognize it, land the attention—"Oh yeah, tiredness, tiredness, tiredness, unpleasant"—it's just that. It doesn't have to lead into this whole taking us away. But again, it means the willingness, the ability to connect with what is unpleasant.

So that means the wisdom to know that ultimately we are not separate. If somehow there's still the underlying belief that I can really be separate from this unpleasant experience, then we'll keep trying all the manipulation to make that happen. So really what it takes is a seeing of: all right, unpleasant. It's just what's happening. And in that can be the freedom from getting so lost in the aversion.

And then, of course, there are the times when whatever's unpleasant is going on is far less genteel, and the response is definitely not one of just noticing subtle sense experience arising and passing. You can still bring in mindfulness—just don't worry about being too precise.

I noticed this some years ago. I was beginning a few days' retreat when I was manager here. It's really hard when you're working here, when I was managing, to even get three days in a row to sit, even though you're supposed to have five a month. It was very hard to do that. It had been two or three months and I was really holding on to my three days.

And someone—we won't say who, but someone who definitely should have known better—waited until just as I was going into sitting to bring up something that they said was really urgent, that couldn't wait. I had to, during my sitting days, meet with somebody and interview somebody, all this stuff. I just got furious. The kind where, of course, one is right. The self-righteous kind, where obviously they should have known better. The kind of anger that really justifies itself and just grows and grows.

Then I went on with my sitting, and it was really interesting because as I paid attention, I learned something in a way that I've never been able to ignore again. As much as I believed and acted out the anger, I wasn't really doing anything other than saying, "Yes, it's true, he's a jerk, he should know better," and all these things. "I can't believe it." Writing letters to him in my mind and actually storming into his

room and telling him what I thought of him. The more I did that with some mindfulness, the more I saw that this was not releasing the anger. I think I really got it that it's a false concept that if I really let it out, it releases it. It just got bigger and bigger and stronger and stronger until it was like a black fire burning in my gut. So painful and unpleasant.

Until finally I gave up. I mean, I gave up thinking I could do something about it. And I just went out and said, "Okay, I'll just be with anger." That's when I learned about stomping meditation instead of walking meditation. I went way out in the backfield and I was just stomping, stomping. Anger, anger. That was as precise as I could get with mindfulness. But it was good enough.

I stomped for a while, an hour or so, and then gradually it becomes walking. And huge anger becomes burning and tightness and black ash in my stomach. I really learned, first, that it is possible to be with anger. It doesn't feel good. There's nothing pleasant about it. It's not like I came out of that like, "Yes, I'm really a great yogi." It felt bad from beginning to end. But I really saw the suffering and the nature of separation in the experience of aversion that strongly.

This is again Joko Beck. She says, "Can we find in ourselves a willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness?" That's what's so hard. Can we just find in ourselves the willingness to rest in the confusion and the unpleasantness? She calls it letting the mud settle without having to do something right away. It's hard, whether the confusion is anger or fear. And all that is, is mindfulness. So we just do the best we can, but finding how to rest in it.

It is difficult. And the other form of aversion that is fear—one of the things that makes it difficult—our fear of experiencing the unpleasant, our projection of how bad it's going to feel to be with this unpleasant experience, is already aversion. It's the fear, and that's what keeps us holding life, holding experience at a distance.

We can go to incredible lengths to avoid an imagined unpleasant experience. I don't know if you've ever noticed yourself doing that here. I do it a lot in my daily life. When I notice it, it's really helpful, because the fear of unpleasantness causes me to subject myself to so many contortions and so much more difficult and unpleasant experience than just meeting the original unpleasant experience. It's quite amusing, actually.

Just a recent example: some months ago a very good friend asked me if I would come teach a weekend with him in Canada at a certain time next year. I knew the minute he asked me that it was not going to be possible because my schedule was really packed. I knew that. But he was really trying to talk me into it. He's a very good friend. I never see him. I hadn't seen him for three years. And so right away, this coagulation of fear arose: If I say no, I'll feel badly because he'll feel badly, and he won't like me anymore, and he'll think I don't like him.

So I stalled. That was months ago. And I went through all kinds of contortions, trying to shift around all

these commitments I have for next year to find a way to fit in flying up to Canada for this particular retreat at this particular time—even though I already feel overextended, and I'm really working to find balance in the way that I teach, and I get really stressed. Even with all of that, I went to huge lengths to try to switch everything around in order to avoid the projected unpleasant feeling of his disappointment and being mad at me. It's ridiculous, really. And it turned out to be impossible—I couldn't do it. So then for the last three weeks I've been putting off calling him to tell him. Every day I think, "I've got to call him." And fear comes up, fear of how he's going to feel, and then he's not going to like me, and oh no, another person doesn't like me, I can't make the world happy. Every day I have this thought. And so there's this heavy... it's ridiculous.

Finally, last night, I got home from talking in Cambridge. I got home at midnight, and there's a message from him on my machine. I thought, "No, I've got to call." His message said, "Please call before nine in the morning." So I called him. I was trapped, no way out. It was totally pleasant. He completely understood. It was lovely to reconnect. None of the unpleasantness that I projected even happened. I submitted myself to four months of ongoing unpleasant experience to avoid that moment that didn't even turn out to be unpleasant. It's insane. This is really ignorance at its highest pitch—separation, disconnection with reality.

And if I would just meet a moment of fear, we would save ourselves months of suffering and torment. So think of that next time you find yourself going to some incredible contortions here to avoid the pain that's going to come in the next moment, or the next sitting, or the next time you hear that sound. Just dropping into the experience will save you all that grief. I wish I could just pass it on to myself.

So not only does aversion separate us from experience, it completely distorts our perception of reality. It distorts our judgment. When we're in fear or anger or aversion, we can't make any kind of balanced, clear decision because we can't come from knowing what's really true. Really, once I'm done with the fear of what my friend was going to say, knowing him all these years—did I really think he was going to blast me and hate me because I happened to be busy a particular weekend next year? Of course not. That's ridiculous. But the fear, the separation from experience, completely distorts our judgment. So we can find ourselves doing all kinds of unwise things and really not knowing it.

Okay, that's kind of broad and obvious. Well, it's broad—maybe it's not always obvious. I want to mention another manifestation of this aversion, which you think of as holding back from experience, that's very prevalent. It's been coming up a lot in interviews. But it can be much more subtle, so sometimes we don't recognize it. And it's the form of aversion that we would often call resistance.

Resistance just means, "No, I just don't want to be here with this"—whatever *this* is.

Sometimes resistance is really obvious. The two-year-old throwing a tantrum: "No, no way, I don't want to walk now and nobody's going to make me." That's obvious.

But sometimes—and someone brought this up in a really clear way today, I really liked the way he talked

about it—sometimes it's a very soft and quiet but pervasive background mental state of resistance that's actually coloring our perception of anything arising in the moment. We're not really recognizing it because it's not hard, it's not harsh. In fact, as he was saying, often it's a stance, a mental state that has become very familiar to us throughout our life. Maybe for some of us resistance has been, as it were, a protection against pain and suffering that perhaps as a child was actually too great to think we could bear. Even without that, we just have developed a stance of holding ourselves a little bit away from experience, feeling that it's a protection, a friend.

And so when this mental state, this pervasive mind state of resistance arises, we might not recognize it as such. But how it actually feels is really comfortable—like an old friend. Or as this person was saying, it's sort of like wrapping yourself in a warm old blanket. You know, you just think, "Oh, I just don't think I'll sit right now. I don't really think I need to pay so much attention to the breath or noting. I'll just kind of sit and be at ease." And it just feels kind of nice and comfortable. But if you could really notice it, it's resistance. It's a form of aversion. The effect it has is of just keeping attention a little bit removed from experience.

So you might find, trying to meet the breath, that because there's no big thing going on, you just can't quite get there. You try to notice sensation—you're aware of it, but there's really this feeling of disconnection. The energy isn't quite there, and you can't quite figure out what's going on.

Again, open up. I'll often just ask myself, "What's happening now?" And then in this big background picture, I'll notice: oh. I just kind of don't want to be here. I just don't want to be feeling my mind and my body. It's that simple.

And rather than try to push through it, simply turn around and notice the resistance. Actually, if you use noting, note it. If you're not using noting, really notice it. Let that be the place of connection. Resistance, resistance. Just kind of let it wash through and really feel it. And again, it doesn't have to be unpleasant even. It's almost like, "This is my old friend, I don't want to let go of this." But at least we're noticing, we're connecting, and the resistance is not being fed.

One other way that resistance often manifests—and in this way can be unrecognized—the Buddha said, using this phrase, "an untaught worldling" (that's people who don't really look at how the mind is working): "An untaught worldling does not know of any other escape from painful feelings except the enjoyment of sensual happiness." Therefore, one proceeds when faced with painful feelings to look for and enjoy sense pleasures. And in doing that, the tendency of the mind and heart to lust, to grasp after pleasant feelings, comes to underlie the mind, comes to be a sort of underlying pervasive tone in the mind.

And so sometimes we might notice—we don't actually notice aversion—we notice we're getting lost over and over again in pleasant fantasy. And you really notice it, you notice the pleasantness, and you come back and you get this feeling something else is going on but you don't know what. Or sometimes it's not even just as simple as pleasant fantasy, but we find ourselves actively going after pleasure. Somehow food,

the pleasantness in food, suddenly assumes a tremendous importance on a particular day, a series of days. Or we're just lusting after reading anything. You know those times when you just read the toilet bowl cleanser over and over and over? Anything, for some reason. Some pleasant hit, but we don't quite realize what it is we're doing.

At times it is wanting pleasant. At times, again, back up and look a little more broadly. It might be a manifestation of resistance, a slight holding ourselves away. There's something going on that's difficult or unpleasant to be with that we're not even aware of, and it's manifesting in this restless search for pleasure.

And really that's why we're so lucky to be on retreat, because I feel in life we do this a lot. Ever find yourself in the car on a quest for ice cream or cookies? Or you go out to do an errand and suddenly you must stop in the bakery and get a cookie.

And I'll check in and ask myself, why? I'm not even hungry. I've really learned to do this now, because nine times out of ten, some vague unpleasant or unhappy memory has come up, or some emotion, some longing, some loneliness that I didn't really notice. And it channels into this impulse: well, let me just get something sweet, and then I'll be happy again.

I actually learned this during the first three-month course I ever sat. I hope to save you from doing this. It was well into the course, sometime in November. It's the only time I kind of broke retreat. I had a car here, and I went into Barre and bought a big bag of chocolate chip cookies. Not the good kind—you can't get the good kind in Barre, so don't even go looking, because you won't find any. This was a really bad thing I did, so don't think about it.

But I brought the cookies back to my room, and I started just eating one after the other after the other. I don't normally binge; it wasn't a typical thing for me. It took me two-thirds of the bag to notice what was actually happening—this empty, gnawing, lonely, fearful feeling. Each cookie I ate, I was hoping for it to drop into that feeling and fill it up. But it missed and went to my stomach. And then my stomach started really hurting, and I thought, oh, I get it. These two don't connect at all. Eating cookies doesn't help this feeling.

It was a major learning. Being with that feeling, with nurturing mindfulness—that's what was actually helpful. I could be with it, just hang out in it. It's okay. That's where the wisdom comes. That's where the freedom comes. So I hope I've saved you from having to learn that lesson the same way.

And then the last aspect of aversion I want to talk about—one that can easily arise even in just beginning to look at your experience here. Whenever we begin to think about a particular phenomenon, whether aversion or clinging, we become aware of how often it's actually arising, more than we ever noticed before we were mindful. It's easy to let that aversion turn against oneself and become quite judgmental, quite self-critical. "Oh no, I didn't realize how completely hateful I am as a person." Or "My practice is

really awful because look how much I'm getting caught in this. She said be mindful, and I'm mindful, and it doesn't go away—it just gets bigger." Sometimes there's even a real fear: "All this aversion, this fear is generating more negative karma." And so there's resistance to being with it at all.

Just recognize that any form of judgment toward self or others is simply another form of aversion, another pulling back from experience. You don't have to believe it. Judgment is not an accurate evaluation of who you are or your experience—almost never. It only increases the cycle of distortion and denial.

I say this because the thing I've found most helpful in learning to understand these patterns, to feel a lot more spacious around the tendency of the mind to get locked into aversion or fear, is to make friends with it. See the judgment as just judging—don't believe it. Okay, it's just another arising condition, the lesson of anattā. It is not who I am.

As soon as I can see aversion arising due to conditions—the conditions of this particular mind—there's so much space around it. And in that space, it's become really fascinating to explore, to see just how a mind that has a long habit of aversion actually works. It brings in a lot of humor, a lot of lightness, and more and more sense of impersonality.

So let me share with you some of the things I've seen about how that conditioned, aversive mind works. Not everybody is the same, of course. When I said I'm an expert on aversion, it's because—well, we joke around about the different personality types, how some people's conditioning tends more toward aversion while other minds go more easily toward greed, and some more easily toward delusion. We don't get away with anything—we all get all of it, don't worry. But some of our minds tend more in one direction than another.

This way of talking about things can be useful if it helps you see how the mind is working. It's not useful if you're going to start identifying and typing yourself and making yourself crazy. But in that way of looking at experience, my mind is definitely a classic aversion type. They say, for example, if you want to check your type: when you walk into a room, what do you notice first?

Aversion types will walk in—if you're traveling with someone, going into a hotel room together—and I'll immediately notice what's wrong with that bed. It's kind of sagged. It's too close to the bathroom. The mattress looks a little lumpy. That one's near the window—I'll take that one.

My friends who are more greed-oriented would walk in and say, "Oh, that's a beautiful bed. The light from the window is really nice. It's sitting very lovely. I like the sense of space around it. And this area over there—I'll take that one."

We both focus in on the same bed, but one from what's wrong and one from what's nice. And the delusion type just wouldn't really notice. So my advice is to travel with a delusion type. It works out really well.

I can see I'm not going to get through all this tonight. I didn't want to leave you on a totally depressing

note—I did have some things prepared about working with aversion, but I don't think we're going to get to them. I'll have to continue next time.

I just want to continue this train of thought because it's gotten really interesting to me. It's lightened things up completely to notice that what happens in a mind conditioned to aversion is that given a whole field of experience, the mind will go right to what's unpleasant.

I was on a ferry in Thailand a couple of years ago. A beautiful sunny day, lovely water, just about an hour ride to get to this beach. Everything was pleasant—with my friends, sitting up in the sun, looking down at the water. There were a lot of people on the ferry. And I completely zeroed in on one woman who was really making a spectacle of herself. And my mind said, "She's obviously American. Americans are always the ones. People hate Americans when they're traveling. Everyone can tell I'm an American too." And I went through this whole thing. She was American—it was true. And over in Thailand there aren't that many Americans, more other nationalities. But anyway, I pulled back and noticed this. Actually, there was so much pleasant and neutral experience happening, and that unpleasantness was really minor. But this mind just goes right for that, and then pulls back and separates from everything else, and the whole story builds up. It's quite amusing if you can just see the mind do that.

I've also noticed that if anything new arises in experience—something new, unexpected, some change—if you come and ask me, "I have this new idea for something," the immediate response, before it even bypasses conscious awareness, is no. It's no good. I don't like it. It's not going to be as good as it is now. Even if how it is now is horrible.

I've learned this about my mind. If I can keep my mouth shut and let it go—"No, that's no good, it stinks"—and then, okay, that's done with, I can evaluate in a quite balanced way. Yeah, maybe that would be nice. Really look at it.

If we believe or get reactive to that aversion, then right away we're caught in it, and I have to defend why it's a bad idea. Or then I have to let down and say, "Oh, I'm really sorry, I'm being a jerk," and then I turn the negativity against myself. But if you can just see it without reaction, there's space again. You don't have to buy into it.

And underneath that, you begin to see that what triggers the negativity is actually fear. Anything new coming into my experience elicits fear. Nothing to do with rationality. It's very slight.

Don't even notice it. As soon as I can see that, it's okay. Unseen, it triggers a whole solidified reaction.

And it can be so subtle. I noticed the other morning, whenever I fill the tea kettle to heat the water, I invariably put in way too much water, and it takes a lot longer to heat, and I'm always in a hurry in the morning. Franz is always saying, "Why do you put in so much water? It's obvious, it's too much." I noticed the other morning—it's fear. I put in the water, I can tell it's enough, and then I think, "But it might not be enough. And then I'll have to heat up some more." So I throw in another bit of water, that whole extra bit

is too much, and I have to wait the extra time. Every single day I do this. That level—just a little shoot of fear—it's fascinating. It doesn't have to be any judgment, but just to see how the mind works. And then it's operating in a ground of freedom, in a ground of anatta, in a ground of selflessness.

I'm really not going to be able to finish this tonight. I think I'll continue next time because I don't want to just leave you with, "Here's all the ways we're aversive—go deal with it." I'll give a very quick summary of how to work with it.

The first and always resort, our greatest protection, is mindfulness. At whatever level you can bring the mindfulness in, because it's connection. Whether it's to the immediate sense contact that's eliciting the reaction of aversion, whether it's on the broad level of stomping, stomping, anger, anger, or whether it's in the subtle background sense of a flavor of resistance or denial in the mind that you can't really touch but you can intuit, you can feel—all of those levels of mindfulness are helpful. They connect us with reality, take us out of identification with the negativity.

A second mode of balancing is something I talked about last week in wise attention: to see when we're hopelessly caught, or you can't really tell where you're getting caught in the negativity—you just know it feels too big or too confusing—and that's to deliberately balance your perception, to bring up what Thich Nhat Hanh calls seeds of joy. For example, I notice myself thinking on retreat at the end of the day, "This has been a really crummy day. I feel rotten, my practice has been awful, the people here are a pain in the neck, this has just been horrible, the weather is bad." And I'll just stop and say, "Okay, balance. Deliberately notice what's not wrong." Almost like counting my blessings. At first I have to stretch a little bit. "Okay, I have a nice warm bed to lie in on my break. I have my health. Actually, it's lovely to be here." At first it feels forced. Pretty soon it's just flowing—all the beautiful and pleasant and all the grace in my life. And it really balances the coloring of unpleasantness. Or just open from the physical to hearing, to seeing, or go take a walk. All the different ways we've talked of backing off, balancing perception.

The third, and this is what I want to talk about more next week especially, is to work with the metta practice. The Buddha talked about five different ways of working with annoyance or a grudge you hold against somebody when you're caught in it. And the first one is to practice metta. Practice metta to yourself. And then to the person or the thing you're upset with—but I would really advise to yourself first, so it's not this kind of, "I hate this person's guts—may you be happy, may you be peaceful," and fooling ourselves. Open to your own pain. The metta does not deny that. It actually gives it the ground of acceptance so that rather than judging ourselves for not being perfect, there's a sense of metta, of acceptance, of just who we are that gives an open-heartedness and strength and courage to then be with whatever it is that's difficult.

And the fourth is—again, I don't mean to make this sound like a last resort—but again, it's patience. Not the patience of, "Oh God, all right, until it's over." But again, it's connection to just be with things as they are, to give up any expectation, to give up any sense of what should be happening, or wishing that things

were other, just making friends with the experience of fear, aversion, whatever it is, as it is in this moment.

All of these are aspects of wisdom, because these are ways of connecting, of really knowing what's true rather than being lost in the aversion which keeps us from knowing reality as it is. The connection again accentuates, lets us re-recognize our essential completion, whether it is with fear or aversion or self-judgment or knee pain or beauty or joy. So this aspect of patience, of just being with what is, and giving up any grandiose thoughts of getting somewhere, is actually a great manifestation of wisdom.

I'll end tonight by saying that I don't mean to make it sound simple. Aversion, dosa, fear—these are very difficult states to recognize, to be with, to have spaciousness and kindness toward ourselves and them when we're experiencing them. Please don't judge yourself or think that if we could really see this clearly, it's all going to go away.

And on the other hand, we don't want to make such good friends with our aversion and fear that we actually think, "You know, it's really not too bad. In fact, it's kind of serving me, this aversion. I think I won't really do too much about it. I'll just wallow in it a little bit."

I'm exaggerating, but there's a way we cannot quite summon enough—I would say commitment—in ourselves. Commitment not to hate ourselves, not to think we've got to uproot this with a pickaxe, not to think it's never going to arise. But the commitment to keep meeting the unpleasant with a willingness, as Joko said, to sit in the middle of it. Not to feed it, not to push it away, but to really let ourselves just sit there with mindfulness, knowing that our greatest purpose is really liberation.

And in order to come to freedom, it's only in this moment, going into the experience in this moment, rather than trying to avoid it in any way.

This can take great courage. It can sometimes be discouraging because it's moment after moment. But you can turn that around and say, "Okay, this moment I got lost. Now this moment, there's a new opportunity."

I'll close with this from Yoshio Kenpo:

"The essence of awakened enlightenment, Buddha nature, is present in everyone. It can't be changed or degenerated, no matter what we do."

And that's really good news.

"Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded."

This recognition of our true nature is the borderline between Buddhas and ordinary beings, and it's the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives.

So every moment is a new crossroad, a new opportunity to recognize our Buddha nature.

Let's just take a moment.

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