Getting Off The Hamster Wheel

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:05

Today in one of the groups a question came up which I feel is very important, one that arises at some point at the beginning of every retreat, especially if you haven't done a lot of this form of meditation practice before.

The question is very basic: Why do we want to be aware?

I think it's a crucial question. Because often, though not for everyone, after two days of being aware, what we're aware of seems to lack depth and profundity and great insight. It veers towards the mundane or the uncomfortable. I find myself often in retreat asking, "Why? Why is feeling the breath going to liberate my heart? How does that work?"

I want to talk a little bit about that.

If you reflect for a moment on why you came here, just let yourself feel again what it was and is that brought you to such an endeavor as a ten-day silent retreat, whatever words you might put on it. We would all probably have different ones. My guess—of course I can't know—is that in some form each of us would be looking, in our own way, for what we might call happiness or peace or an open heart, or to live with more love and compassion, more connectedness, more joy, whatever way we would describe it.

And instead we might find ourselves confronted with restlessness, boredom, out-of-control thinking, an occasional moment of breath, dissatisfaction, doubt—whatever might come up. Our tendency at that time is to think, "Well, this certainly isn't the happiness or peace I came for. It seems to be going in the other direction."

So how do they come together?

I'm sure some of you have heard this before. One of the things that supposedly motivated the Buddha to teach after he was awakened was that, in looking through the world, he could see that every human being—all of us—are one in our heartfelt desire to be happy, whatever that means for us. That's part of what connects us as human beings. And the sadness, what moved the Buddha to compassion, was seeing that in our very sincere efforts to be happy, no matter how twisted they might come out, because we don't really understand true happiness, we do the very things that keep us spinning in dissatisfaction and anguish and unhappiness.

It's like a hamster spinning on a wheel—the faster we go trying to be happy, the more oppressed and unsatisfied we feel. Until we stop for a moment and take a look, we don't see, we can't understand what

our confusion is, how we're misinterpreting our experience, misinterpreting the nature of happiness.

Einstein once said that everything in the world changes—everything changes except one thing: the way we think. We need to find a new way to think.

So that's what we're here for, in some ways. To begin to explore how the ways we think about ourselves and the world might not be accurate. And to begin to discover how to experience ourselves moment to moment in a way that is accurate, integrated with truth, in a way that allows us to rest at ease in the nature of our true hearts.

Put very simply, breaking it down to bare bones, one of the main ways we tend to misinterpret or misconstrue happiness is that we tend to think—and we don't often realize this is what we're thinking—that happiness is equivalent to pleasant experience. If I have a pleasant or enjoyable sensation or thought or emotion or smell or whatever, then that's happiness. Which it is. It's a moment of pleasure. There's no question about that. But how long does it last? It's a moment of pleasure, but it's not the happiness of peace. It's not the sure heart's relief that the Buddha was talking about.

So without realizing it, we can end up spending our lives looking for pleasant experience. When pleasant experience comes, we do everything we can to make it stay. We try to arrange and rearrange our lives to get more pleasant experience. And when painful, difficult, unpleasant experience comes, it means we did something wrong. We blew it somehow, because happiness is more and more and more pleasure.

In trying to create a life like this, often without realizing we're doing it, this chasing after pleasure and running from what's unpleasant is what has us running on that wheel like a hamster. And even with our best intentions, we think, "I'm a good person. How come things aren't working out?" Because our understanding of what's going to make us truly happy is skewed. We can find ourselves in really unhappy circumstances and not know how we got there.

An example that felt so sad to me: I read an interview a few weeks ago with Marlon Brando. He said, "I never was a good father or a good husband."

I was always busy with my own life. Now I am a guilty old man who feels ashamed of his life. Besides food, there is nothing else in the world for me. That's the only thing in my life. I know this eating will kill me, but I just can't stop."

It's so sad. And not like, "Oh, he's some kind of weirdo." I can see in myself how easily I can get lost in following whatever he was following in his early life to give him pleasure. It's not making him happy now, and what's left? The pleasant experience of eating.

We're a society that has some extremely addictive tendencies. And it's played on, of course, by the media and advertising very strongly. In some ways, when I've been overseas or in Asia, I notice that the same tendencies of mine are everywhere. I'm not saying only Americans—remember, the Buddha was an

Indian man who lived 2,500 years ago. It was the same story. But it definitely seems to me, in my experience, exaggerated when I come back to the States. Just want, want, want, want. And then we suffer so much.

In our lives, whatever it is we're chasing after to give us more extended pleasant feeling—whether it's more money, more fame, a better job, a better house, better friendships—not that there's anything wrong with any of those things per se. It's that feeling that if I have this pleasant thing, I can keep it, and then I'll be happy. That leads us to fear and deny any unpleasant aspects of experience, which of course is going to happen.

We so easily bring that into the retreat here. Just look at your experience through the day. What do you find yourself looking for that would be a "good retreat"? You probably don't think, "It doesn't matter whether I have a lot of back pain or I'm really in bliss. I'm happy with whatever comes up." When you have a somewhat quiet sitting and the next one your mind's all over the place, it's rare—and I don't mean just if you're new to this either—it's rare to sit there and go, "Fine. Peacefulness, distractedness, it's all one in the Dharma."

And we laugh. It's almost like not a possibility. But that is the way of peace. That's the way of true freedom. If we come to the retreat looking to create some other reality than the one that's here right now in this moment, then we're jumping on that hamster wheel and running as fast as we can.

The secret is that we can just step off that wheel at any moment. Because the secret of freedom and the secret of our practice is that it really doesn't matter what's happening in your experience. It really doesn't. We use tools and we use technique, and I'll talk more about that, but the end result isn't to become a perfect breather or a perfect sitter or the best walker or to be able to sit down and never have a thought. Those are all experiences that come and go. Even if you had a whole sitting without a thought, so what? I bet when you stand up, there'll be a thought. Sooner or later, there'll be a thought. So what? That's not the point.

What we miss by getting so involved in our reaction to experience—wanting the pleasant, fearing the unpleasant—what we miss is the fact that real ease of heart, happiness, peace, connectedness with ourselves and all life is our natural state. It's our birthright. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Happiness is available, please help yourself."

But we don't know how. And that's what's such a mystery—because it's so available and we don't know how to recognize it. When we can, for just a moment, stop becoming so involved in our reactions to experience and just be with what is, very connected to it but without wanting it to stay or wanting it to go, just being with it—in that moment, we step off the wheel. In that moment, peace is available. Happiness is available. But it's not the happiness of necessarily ecstasy or a pleasant experience. It's just the happiness of peace, of connectedness, of acceptance of things as they are.

I'll give an example. Experience doesn't change; our relationship to it does. Being in a traffic jam.

Once—it's happened more than once, but this particular time—I was on the way to the airport in Boston very early in the morning, about six o'clock, to catch a flight to California that would connect to a flight to Bangkok. That's worse than missing a direct overseas flight, because if you miss the connection, you really miss everything.

We were cruising along, and in Boston, to get to the airport, you have to go through this increasingly narrow funnel of highways—six lanes down to one lane into this tunnel. Once you're committed to that way, there really isn't another route to the airport. We had just pulled off onto the exit that starts the maze of roads into the tunnel when everything stopped dead. You know those traffic jams where you're not even inching forward? You're just stopped. You turn off the motor. You can't go back, you can't go out, you can't go anywhere.

We sat there for twenty-five minutes. And I really watched my reactions—there wasn't much else to do. I went through the whole gamut. "Oh, it's fine, it's fine." I'm not calling this acceptance. I'm calling this pseudo-acceptance. "It's fine, no problem. We'll just sit here." Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. Now it's getting a little too long. This isn't okay anymore. The nervousness, the impatience—what can I do? Well, there's nothing to do. The whole anxiety. This is running on the wheel. This is suffering.

And finally I said, you know what? If I miss the flight, I miss the flight. That's all that happens. It's just what it is. And the whole extra fell away. For some moments, it was quite okay. I'm not saying it falls away once and that's it, folks, we're done. No, we keep practicing moment by moment by moment. But really, all the suffering, the fear, the nervousness—it was just gone. My friend and I started to have a nice conversation. It was quite amazing to see the difference.

That was some moments—five or ten—and then, as often happens when you stop getting so upset, the traffic started moving again. I made all the planes because they were late, and it was a nice ending. But to see that in that moment—it was not like a transcendent experience of leaving my body or being in a state of bliss. We were just sitting in the car in the traffic jam. Very ordinary. And in that ordinariness, we can find a real peace of heart and happiness.

This is one aspect, we could say, of freedom. I'm not saying it's the ultimate, absolute nibbāna, but it's an essence, a taste of freedom and peace that is accessible to all of us in any particular moment of our experience. It doesn't matter what's happening. It could also happen in a very pleasant experience, where the stepping off is to let go of our trying to hold on, knowing that this is really groovy but it's going to end sometime—and that's okay too.

The Buddha said once, "The supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by me, namely liberation through non-clinging." It's not so exciting as we might be looking for. We just stop trying to control everything and become really present with things as they are.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, our capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love—what you could call our Buddha nature—is always here. So our practice, this technique of vipassanā, is not to create some alternative reality. It's to help us learn how to recognize this potential to understand and to love that's always here. And because we're so used to not recognizing it, every single moment is another chance.

The day might have seemed really long and dreary sometimes. How many moments do I have to keep paying attention? It's wonderful, actually. I should have figured out how many seconds there are in a day, because every one of those is an opportunity to step off the wheel and recognize your capacity for peace, your capacity for love, your capacity for understanding. It doesn't matter what's happening. So when you get really disgruntled, when you're really fed up—fine. That's a moment to notice. Capacity for freedom.

It's great because there's nothing that has to block this. And once the question was asked: if it's so easy, how come we don't recognize it? If it's so simple, how come we have to sit through this long and sometimes grueling form of practice? How does doing something as mundane as being aware of our breath, feeling the sensations of our footsteps, noticing the pain in our knee—how does that help us wake up to our potential for happiness?

One of the reasons we don't recognize this potential is what I mentioned at the beginning, and I want to elaborate on it now. Our habits of reactivity to pleasant and unpleasant are so deep, so ingrained, that we don't even recognize when it's happening. For example, when we have a pain in the knee, we can become so involved in thinking about how it's going to be for the rest of the sitting, wondering what it means, wondering how we can fix it. Perhaps wondering if the teacher sits in a chair because she hurt her knee from sitting too long. I didn't, so I'll tell you right now. All of that thinking—"I can't bear it"—none of that is being mindful of the pain in the knee. None of that is actually being connected with mindfulness to the bare experience. And we don't even recognize this because we're so used to confusing our interpretation with reality.

The paradox of recognizing the potential for ease and peace in any moment is not that it's far away or somewhere else. It's that this Buddha nature, this resting at ease in whatever arises, is so close that it requires an immediacy, a totality of presence and attention to recognize and rest in it. Any reaction of mind—whether pulling away from unpleasant experience, or trying to lean forward and hold on to pleasant, or just zoning out and not connecting at all—any of those reactions actually pulls us back. I feel it almost physically, this pulling back from the immediacy, the totality of experience, and so we don't recognize. We don't even realize sometimes that we are not wholly present.

When we talk about concentration as a bringing together, a unifying quality of mind and body, it's not just that it's a nice state. It's not just that it helps us focus. This unification is what lets us really rest in the present moment. It's what lets us be totally here. And so our practice becomes, moment to moment, learning how to open into and accept whatever experience is arising right now—because that's all there is. In learning how to be fully present with kindness, we're learning how to accept and open to ourselves and

to all of life. We're learning how to be free.

This habit of not liking unpleasant, liking pleasant, and ignoring neutral—did you even know that there were neutral experiences? They happen a lot. We tend not to notice them at all. This habit is so deep that we don't even realize it's only a habit. As I said before, it's very common to evaluate our experience by how pleasant it is, and if it's unpleasant, we assume something's wrong. If you're sick, you've somehow broken the fabric of harmony in the universe—as if we're going to live our lives without ever getting sick. And I suppose we're going to die without ever being sick too? Or somehow if we can get the perfect balance of health, we'll never die. There's some element of denial, I think, in this attitude.

But I want to talk specifically about how this works, this relationship to pleasant and unpleasant, and how it blinds us to the potential for peace. The Buddha describes it—and I hope this is helpful because I think it's very elegant. He asks: what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person? He says an unawakened person experiences pleasant feeling, unpleasant feeling, and neutral feeling. An awakened person also experiences the same three: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feeling. So what makes the difference between them?

This discourse is called the Two Darts, or the Two Arrows. He says when an unawakened person experiences an unpleasant physical feeling—pain in the knee, for example—he worries and grieves, he laments, he beats his breast, he weeps and is distraught. Thus he experiences two kinds of unpleasant feelings: unpleasant physical feeling and unpleasant mental feeling. He says this is like two arrows. It's as if a person were shot with an arrow, and then with the beating of the breast and the worrying and lamenting, it's as if he shoots another arrow into himself. Thus, instead of suffering from the pain of one arrow, he suffers from the pain of two.

How often are we shooting that second arrow at ourselves?

But then he goes on, and this is what I find so elegant. An unawakened person, he says, in experiencing an unpleasant feeling, knows of no other escape from painful feeling than to look for a pleasant sensual experience. If you have a pain in the knee, you look for some pleasant feeling. If you can't move, then you might create a pleasant mental fantasy—something pleasant to get away from the unpleasant. This creates an underlying tendency, which is where we fall into the deep habit of resistance and reaction to unpleasant, and of real greed. The translation uses the word "lust"—a real yearning, a holding on to the pleasant. And so an unawakened person becomes caught.

in sort of this duality. As soon as there's unpleasant, there's a resistance, and then a trying to go for the pleasant. And we're back on the hamster wheel.

The Buddha says the difference with an awakened person is they experience the painful, unpleasant sensation, bodily or mentally—and that's all. They experience it. They don't grieve and lament and beat the breast. And so there's not created the unconscious tendency to resist the unpleasant and hold on to the

pleasant. And so there's peace.

Or as Ajahn Sumedho wrote once, one is able to witness the pleasant and the unpleasant without creating anything around it. It's just what it is.

Now granted, this might not sound really exciting, but it's extremely wonderful. It's just what it is. The reaction and the interpretation is what creates and maintains our dissatisfaction with ourselves, with our experience, with our life. And without experiencing this for ourselves over and over, it's really hard to trust, to have the faith that when something arises, pleasant or unpleasant, we just really be with it. We just open to it without resistance or clinging.

It's almost counterintuitive. Oh, pain in the knee? Let me just open into it. It's not our normal reaction. But we offer it as a radical alternative to these underlying tendencies the Buddha was speaking about—to simply meet the experience of this moment. Only this moment. You don't have to look beyond this moment. Simply meet this moment's experience just as it is, without judgment, without making up a big melodrama about it, simply being present with non-judging attention.

This is radical. Be with things just as they are. But it's the path of freedom. I'm not saying it's easy. Sometimes it's our fear, our habit of not meeting experience, that makes it seem as if it's impossible. When we actually just meet what's happening, it's just the dark. It's just a painful sensation. That's all. The interpretation is all the suffering.

An example. This is from Michael Crichton—he's a great Buddhist author. You might not have known that. He was writing about one time when he was on an animal safari in Africa, staying in tents with guides who knew the bush and everything. He was in his tent in the middle of the night with his wife, and there was a huge banging noise and brushing and rustling. He woke up just petrified. He's lying there thinking, "There's elephants out there." The guides had said there's no way elephants were in this area—they hadn't been around for a long time. But he was just lying there, and his wife woke up, and they're both terrified and shaking, creating all these ideas in his mind.

Finally, finally he said, "Okay, I'll get up and look." He creeps to his tent and unzips it, looks out—huge brown eyes, an elephant, right outside the tent. And he thought, "Ah, there's an elephant." Zipped up his tent, went back into his sleeping bag, and went to sleep.

This is what he said about it the next day. At first he was a little surprised that he got so calm and went to sleep after he saw what it really was. But he said later he realized we are all like this. We all can work ourselves into a hysterical panic over possibilities that we can'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 an elephant is outside my tent?

And that hysteria always 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.

Yes, your kids are on drugs. Yes, there is an elephant outside your tent. Now the question becomes: what are you going to do about it?

Subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops. Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on. It promotes an unwillingness to look. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that makes us afraid. The minute we look, we cease being afraid.

And I love that. It doesn't mean that when we look and cease being afraid, everything is wonderful. But it means we're connected with things as they are. And in that moment, intelligent action is possible. Opening again to life, to ourselves and others, is possible. Compassion is possible.

This is the way of the compassionate heart and freedom. It transforms our life by transforming how we relate to our life, not by necessarily changing the outer circumstances. No amount of meditation is going to stop illness. No amount of meditation is going to make everyone we know happy, or stop sorrow and loss and death and conflict. Nothing is going to give us constant bliss. And that's not what this meditation is about.

But the meditation we're practicing here gives us the tools, on a moment-to-moment basis, to learn how to come out of a life of blind reactivity—to really drop that being afraid to look that keeps us being afraid to look—and just look. Whatever we see is just what it is. And this opens us to a life of great compassion and connectedness to ourselves and others.

The main tool we're using here is mindfulness—mindfulness combined with concentration. I'm going to mostly talk about mindfulness now.

Mindfulness is a quality of attention, an energy of focused awareness that arises on a moment-to-moment basis, one that we can become familiar with and experience consciously. I want to describe some qualities of mindfulness.

Perhaps the most important: we sometimes call mindfulness "bare attention." It's bringing our awareness to the actual experience of something, as opposed to all our ideas about that experience. It actually makes things very simple.

For example, when we talk about feeling the breath, we might ask: can you describe what you feel when you feel the breath? And you begin to see how difficult it can be for us to know what the bare experience is. Because we can go through the whole range—"The breath is like a waterfall, and I feel it flowing down in sparkles, moving in and out." That's an image. That's a thought. Which is fine if you know it's an image or a thought, but it's not the sensations of the breath.

Then we might say, "Okay, I feel the stomach moving against my clothes." And in a way, that's what we feel—but that's also an interpretation. Because when your eyes are closed, you're not really feeling stomach or clothes. You might be feeling pressure, or scratching, or tension, or tightness. Even these are

words we put on the experience.

But how can you actually feel "t-shirt"? What does t-shirt feel like? What even does t-shirt mean when you come to the bare experience? All I can say about t-shirt is: image in my mind—that's seeing. I can feel a kind of warmth and scratchiness—that's the experience of touching. I can look and see a color I call lavender—that's seeing, and also thinking. The t-shirt is just an idea.

The power of practicing bare experience is simply this: the ideas aren't bad, but we bring our attention to the actual experience, over and over. This begins to cut through our habits of reactivity and allows us to just be with what is. Being with the breath in that way. Being with sensations in the body. Later, being with emotions, being with sounds.

So mindfulness has this aspect of bare attention—the experience, the sense experience itself. Feeling, hearing, tasting, touching, seeing, smelling, thinking.

That's all. Just the sense experiences, including the mind of thinking.

So there's the bare attention, and there's also the quality of mindfulness that is absolutely kind, non-judging, non-discriminating. With mindfulness, with the breath, a breath starts. We don't say, "Well, I don't really like this breath too much. It's a little rough. I'll wait for the next one." We feel the sensation; the attention is there. Non-discriminating, non-judging—it's just what it is.

With the breath, that might be easy. But when we begin to open up to sensations in the body, we see how this discrimination slips in. We feel the breath. "That's painful. A little too painful. I think I better just stay with the breath. I need to develop a little more focus before I feel that." Or certain kinds of cramps—I remember one time a friend was saying, "Well, I have these cramps in my stomach." "Oh, I'm really familiar with them. I get them all the time." So what? They're happening right now. But often we think, "That's familiar, I don't need to pay attention to that." Or we can easily think, "This is more pleasant," and without even knowing it, we just slip over and pay attention to the pleasant. Or the unpleasant—we can have a bias either way. But mindfulness doesn't discriminate. It meets whatever is happening in a very kind way.

Let me give an example of how this really cuts through our suffering, our interpretations, the confusion we place on reality. This is a very common experience. A yogi on retreat last year, in Barre, a retreat just like this, told me this after she'd been going through it for a few days. It's always nice when you go through it yourself and come to understanding from your own experience.

She said there was a repetitive noise in the hall—I think it was probably the ticking of a clock, though she didn't say. She'd be sitting there quietly, being with her breath, feeling very calm, and then hear the noise. Hear the noise. And she first became annoyed, then became just filled with rage and anger. "That noise is just destroying my concentration. It's ruining my practice." She was having a miserable time for days, until finally something—of course, we'd been saying it all along, but we always hear it when we can hear

it—she heard one of us say, "When you become aware of the experience of hearing, just be with the bare experience of hearing."

All of that—"Why is that noise in here? How dare they put a clock in here! It's ruining my meditation, my concentration is shot"—none of that is the bare experience of hearing. So she said, "Okay, let me try it." When the tick would come, attention right with ticking. Not even saying that, just right there with the hearing. And she said the whole suffering just died away. She became very peaceful and calm. There was just sound arising. And she said, "You know what? That clock wasn't bothering my concentration. My mind was disturbing my concentration. It had nothing to do with the sound."

This is really how coming back over and over to just the simple experience can help us—unknown to us how it even works—come to deep insight about the nature of our experience in any moment, and how suffering is created, so much of it, by our mind's reactions. And how just a moment can cut through it all. Which is really lucky for us, that it only takes a moment of connection to cut through it all, because we've spent an awfully long time building it up.

One reason retreats can be so uncomfortable is because we're cutting through our habits of mind. And as we know, habits might be really bad for us, but they can also be really comfortable. It's really hard to break a habit, no matter how destructive it might be. And our habit of reactivity—judging pleasant and unpleasant and neutral—is very deep.

So when we say, "Please come to the sitting and just stay here until the sitting ends," part of the reason for that is because it helps you not give in to the habit. Even if the reason you stay is simply shame—you don't want everyone else to know you got up and left. And believe me, that comes up at times. That has served us all at some point.

Sooner or later, you get over the shame, and there's nothing to do but come back and pay attention to whatever it is that's bugging you. And that's the moment when it's possible to say, "Ah. Oh, that's just an unpleasant feeling. It's just vedanā. I don't have to shoot the second arrow. That's just somebody clearing their throat. It's just hearing. I don't have to construct a whole reality around that." And if we don't make it in that moment, we get another moment to try again.

Tomorrow, as we begin to expand the instructions to include physical sensations in a broader way—not just waiting for the really intense ones, but any physical sensation—you'll see that this is a fertile ground for exploration. Physical sensations are a good place to investigate the quality of attention and the difference between this non-judging, kind way of being with experience versus how different it feels when we flip into being identified with or caught in the interpretation or the reaction.

For example, the breath. It's been nice and soft and calm, and then you sit down and all of a sudden it's tight and constricted and you can't breathe deeper than here. How easy is it to build up a whole life history around that? It's not just tight and shallow—it's a sign of my ongoing constricted heart, my

shallowness of emotions, my inability to do anything right, my inability to relate to other people, my type A personality, my great ambition, my driving inconsideration for others. No wonder it's torment! We come back and there's tightness, and instead of recognizing that that's all it is—just tightness—we shoot about twenty-five arrows of everything that's ever been wrong with us. Pain in the knee, pain in the back, anything it might be.

It's interesting to watch before it gets to be really strong, unbearable pain, because granted, it's very difficult for us to be at ease in the midst of strong and ongoing pain, whether physical or emotional. It's possible, but it's difficult, and it's not the best place to start learning. The place to start learning is with the little, nudgy ones. So when you feel a little nudge in your back and you think, "Well, I won't pay attention to that until it gets worse," you're losing a really good opportunity to practice mindful awareness.

Instead of doing all the things we usually do to avoid discomfort, bring your attention gently into the unpleasant feeling itself. This is mindfulness. Don't even call it pain—I find as soon as I say "pain," I've got a whole idea around it. This sensation: what does it really feel like? Is it tingling? Is it burning? Is it heat? Can you just get interested in the actual experience? This affectionate curiosity brings in the kindness, brings in the undiscriminating quality of mindfulness, brings us right into bare experience.

And then you can see the difference when there's just a moment of resting at ease in that unpleasantness, and then you feel, "Oh my God, but there's forty-two more minutes to this sitting. I don't think I can make it." That is the second arrow—fear, projecting into the future, tightness, aversion.

Aversion or fear, in my experience, really arises from the mistaken belief that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant or painful experience, that some way I can avoid actually being fully present for it. And in fact, if you notice how your attention behaves in that moment of "Oh no, I can't stand this for forty-two more minutes," your attention has actually pulled back. I feel it almost physically, as if pulling away from the experience of the pain, so that we're actually not connecting in that moment. And thus our experience of life when there's something unpleasant becomes an experience of unconnectedness, of separation, because that's what we're actually doing—we're pulling away from experience.

Now, if that worked, if substituting pleasant experience when there's something unpleasant actually worked as a strategy all the time, that would be okay. But obviously it doesn't, or none of us would be here. What brings us back into peace is actually going back and connecting with the experience.

A small example: sometimes when I sleep funny or something, my neck goes out and I'll have a strong headache that goes on all day. And I feel from that sort of disconnected and spacey—today's been a day like that. And I do what we often do when we think we're being mindful of something unpleasant. There are lots of ways we can kid ourselves, like, "Oh yeah, headache. I acknowledge it. There's a headache."

You feel it, sort of feel it. Call it a sideways glance. You know it's there, you let yourself feel it for a second,

and then kind of pull back and pay attention to something else more compelling. And the headache just kind of goes on and on. And we start to feel really not that present, not quite connected, not so alive.

Because the problem is we can't shut down selectively. When we shut down to anything, we're shutting down globally. When I shut down to my headache, when I pull back from that, I'm pulling back from everything. I do feel disconnected, but it's not because of the headache. It's the pulling back.

Just before I came in here tonight, I was standing right by our apartments looking out over the desert, and I saw a coyote wandering around, actually very close to the first little road you come to when you're going down into the desert. I got totally engrossed in watching it, so that I was completely unified and connected in that. Watching him for about five minutes. He didn't seem to see me at all, just meandering around. And then he turned and started toward me, almost came up the hill. And then I saw him look up and see me. He literally went like, "Oh my God, what's that?" and turned around and went in another direction. Just then Franz was walking in from the desert, and the coyote saw him—"Oh my God, there's another person!"—and went off in yet another direction.

I got really happy, very connected. And then I saw, right. I connected with my head. Oh yeah, right. There's a headache here, and I've been avoiding it all day. Boom. So the coyote, the connection that I felt, brought me back into connection with the headache, and again I'm present. Sometimes you might connect with something else, and then that lets you come back again to the difficulty. But there's no way we can avoid it and really be open and present in our lives.

So in learning to bring this mindful awareness to pain, it's just this: how can we soften into the bare experience? Not bargaining—"I'll pay attention if you go away in ten minutes. I'll pay attention if I get a really good insight from this." Any bargaining has an edge of aversion. The sideways glance isn't quite there. Gritting the teeth and enduring it, the willpower, is also not the gentle strength of mindfulness.

And one other relationship we can sometimes develop in practice toward pain—physical and emotional pain and suffering—is that we make it better than pleasant. I've often had people come and say, "Things are too nice. The practice is too easy. I must be doing something wrong." Whatever's happening is okay. Just as the difficult is totally fine, so is the not difficult. It's not that the more I suffer, the better I'm doing. Just as it's not the less I suffer, the better I'm doing. It's neither of those. Can we just throw those out the window and simply be with what happens without preconception, without prejudgment? That's our practice. Participatory, fully present in whatever's happening without needing to judge it.

Obviously this requires infinite patience. And patience actually arises from the wisdom of seeing things as they are—seeing that in this world, as we open to our moment-to-moment experience, we learn to open and embrace the whole show. That there is no happiness that does not sometimes turn to sorrow. That everything in the world is in constant flux, ebb and flow. The seasons. Day and night. The setting sun, the rising moon, the tides. Periods of health, periods of sickness. Periods of great happiness, periods of great sorrow. Periods of really nice, peaceful breath, and periods when you can't stay with more than two

breaths if it meant your life.

Everything's in constant change, and it's also completely out of our control. If we could really get that—that we can't make things stay the same and we can't control what's going to happen next—can you imagine how much more at ease we'd be in our lives? If we could just meet what happens without needing to know what it's going to be?

So what happens with this practice is that we learn to hold both of these. And it's not easy. To be able to be with great suffering is what opens us to the joy and the beauty and deep compassion. We can't have one without the other. Sometimes it's hard to hold them both.

This is from a woman named Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch woman who was writing this from a pre-concentration camp in Holland in World War II: "It is possible to suffer with dignity and without dignity..."

I mean, most of us in the West don't understand the art of suffering and experience a thousand fears instead. We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair. God knows it's only too easy to understand why.

We have to accept death as part of life, even the most horrible of deaths. And don't we live an entire life each one of our days? I am in Poland every day on the battlefields, if that's what one can call them. I often see visions of poisonous green smoke. I am with the hungry, with the ill-treated and the dying every day. But I am also with the jasmine and with that piece of blue sky beyond my window. There is room for everything in a single life—for belief in God and for a miserable death.

When I say I have come to terms with life, I don't mean I have lost hope. What I feel is not hopelessness, far from it. It's a question of living life from minute to minute and taking suffering into the bargain. And it's certainly no small bargain these days. Suffering has always been with us. Does it really matter in what form it comes? All that matters is how we bear it and how we fit it into our lives.

And that's the koan for all of us. It's not that we only open to suffering, but when we can open to the difficult—that's the reason we sit with these little nudgy pains—we find that we can use our own particulars of suffering. They don't have to be grandiose. But when we can be with our own difficulties, this is what opens our heart to the vastness of wisdom and the action of compassion that lets us be fully present for the joys and sorrows of others, that lets us live a really full and joyful and peaceful life, really awake and intimate in our life, but not caught in this blindness of reactivity.

So that we can live a life that's really heartfelt, filled with compassion, unafraid. We don't have to say at the end of our life what Marlon Brando did. We don't have to say with Colette, "What a wonderful life I've had. I only wish I'd realized it sooner."

A wonderful life includes all aspects. And what we're doing in this practice, as Joko Beck says, is moving

from a self-centered view of life and practice to a life-centered view of life and practice. We're part of life, but we're not the central focus.

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