An Attitude of Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 54:56

The talk tonight is called An Attitude of Mindfulness.

I want to discuss two different topics this evening. One is some technical aspects of how we do the practice and why we do the practice. The first day of a retreat, especially for those who are arriving, it can be helpful to reflect on some of the basics. The second thing I want to talk about is the spirit with which we approach our practice here.

Suzuki Roshi, who was the founder of San Francisco Zen Center, said it very nicely when he said, "In our practice we need to be serious, but we can't be too serious or we'll lose our way." So finding that balance between diligence and commitment to moment-to-moment noticing, and on the other hand, a sense of relaxation or ease or playfulness as we go through the day.

As Carol alluded to last night, some people begin a retreat, especially a long retreat, with very strong determination: "Enlightenment or bust! I've got to get some result. If I don't get enlightenment, at least I should get some jhanas, so I have a card stamp to take home and show people."

When I went home from my first long retreat here, one of my friends back in California said to me, "Did you have any out-of-body experiences?" And I said, "No." She said, "Did you ever levitate?" I said, "No." So it didn't stamp my card for her, but it was not what I was looking for.

So finding this kind of balance of mind that's wholehearted, but that is not putting pressure on ourselves. When I was younger in my practice, I had a lot of zeal. I worked really hard. Every retreat that I came on—long retreat, short retreat—I worked very hard, which I'm very grateful for today. I don't regret that in the least. But at times, in order to find balance, you usually have to go to each end of an extreme. So I was often at the trying-too-hard end of an extreme, and it manifested in my attitude.

When Sally and I moved to California, which was about twenty years ago—we met in England—but shortly after moving to California, we went to see a psychic. Because that's what you do in California. It's like you get your driver's license and you go to see a psychic. And where would we go but San Francisco, of course.

So we went to see a psychic and we walked in together. When I walked through the door, the psychic who was seated in a chair made this gesture of being thrown backwards by my energy. He said something like, "Wow, you're in such a hurry to get there. Don't you know that God comes more often to those who don't want him so much?"

So this was the phase of my strong zeal, or as it's sometimes called in Dharma circles, dhamma chanda—a wish for the dhamma, a longing for the truth. If that gets stretched a little too taut, it can bring us a lot of tension.

But on the other hand, if we don't have any of that zeal, then we come to a retreat like this, and first days are often long and hard, and the body's adjusting, and we're adjusting to the environment, and getting to know our job, and the people, and the teachers, and when can we take a shower. Sometimes it all seems like too much, and maybe I'll just spend the first days in bed. I'll get caught up on my sleep, and then I'll start to practice. So that could be a little bit insufficient on the energy and the motivation.

But somewhere between the two is a very useful attitude that we want to discover. We want to find it out through our own trial and error where that middle point is for us in effort.

Again, as Carol mentioned last night, one teacher expressed this really nicely in the short phrase: relax, observe, allow. This can be an instruction that you turn to again and again in our weeks together. I don't think there's ever an occasion where it's not a useful reminder: relax, observe, allow. It really sums up a lot about our practice.

So the first piece—relax—is a very important starting point. Joseph emphasized it in the instructions again this morning. We all will keep saying it over and over, and it refers to that inner place of being soft in the body and somewhat soft in the mind. When we can relax in meditation, it sends a strong signal to the brain and to the whole nervous system. The signal it sends is something like: "Things are okay. Things don't have to be different than they are. Things are okay right now." And that means we don't have to change anything from how it is. We don't have to fix anything.

You could say that this is evoking a factor that's really highly valued in the Buddha's teachings, which is a sense of trust—also called confidence, sometimes called faith. It's the first of the five spiritual faculties, and it's considered to be the thing that allows the whole path to be set in motion because we have a certain degree of trust that we can settle into and the path can unfold for us. This quality of trust is a very helpful place to start from. So we'll often stress this in the instructions: to relax the body and relax the mind as a beginning approach.

Why can we trust? Why is that a sensible thing to do? We talk a lot about how uncertain life is, how impermanent all the arisen conditions are. What are the grounds for this kind of trust and relaxation? Basically, it's the refuges that we talked about last night.

And particularly we can trust because the mind has an essential purity. This is what we spoke of last night—that seed of awakening, the nature we share with the Bodhisattva as he began his journey to Buddhahood. When we can start to feel that potential in ourselves, then we know: oh, that's what I can trust in. That's why I can let go a little bit, because that nature holds me.

There's a phrase that Joseph has used for years that I find really helpful: "settling back into the moment." I

think he used it in the first retreat I ever sat, back in 1976, and he still uses it today. It expresses that ability of the mind to settle in itself out of a sense of trust or confidence.

As you practice with this, you'll discover that things don't have to be perfect for us to relax. Things just have to be okay. Things just have to be good enough. And then there is the ground for that ease to come in. So don't think that everything has to be just right before you can let go. Things can be just okay.

Then, once you're in that somewhat relaxed place, the next step is to observe. This is really the active part of meditation. We could also call it paying attention, looking, watching, experiencing, being present. If we're interested, then the observing happens pretty naturally. So from that relaxed place, can we become interested in what's happening now? Then we activate that awake quality that is the very meaning of the word Buddha. We wake up and notice what's going on in the body, what's going on in the mind, what's going on around us.

This quality of interest starts to cut through the fog of dullness that we often bring into retreat, or the distracted mind that is so common both in retreat and out of retreat. There was a New Yorker cartoon not long ago that epitomized this daily life mind that most of us carry in the world. It was a cartoon in three panels. The first panel showed a guy at work, sitting at his computer, thinking about playing golf. Obviously, his mind was involved in the golf game where he'd rather be than being at work. In the next panel, he was on the golf course about to hit the ball, and he was thinking about his girlfriend—rather than being present to golf, he'd rather be with his girlfriend. In the third panel, he was making love to his girlfriend, and the image that came into his mind was of his computer at work, just to close the loop.

With that kind of mind, wherever we are, whatever activity we're engaged in, it isn't quite enough to hold us. This distracted mind is always looking for something else. Here, of course, we're really training to be present here and now without needing to find anything else. And that's a kind of radical step.

As we find ourselves more and more in the present, we discover the lightness and relief that comes from that ending of distractedness. In the time of the Buddha, there was a visitor to the community. The Buddha was living as he often did in a community of practitioners—monks and nuns. The visitor was struck by how well all the practitioners looked. He said, "Your community is so happy, they're actually radiant. They're smiling, they're healthy, they're glowing. Why is that?"

The Buddha replied that they are radiant because they've learned to abide in the present. Their minds aren't distracted by the pull of hopes for the future or regrets about the past. They're just fully here and now.

We'll talk in much more detail about how to carry out this observing. But once we relax and we're here, then we watch with interest what's happening—body, mind, environment.

The third piece is to allow. This means that whatever we're observing, whatever we find happening, we let it be just the way it is. We don't try to fix these experiences of mind and body, because we start to

recognize that everything that comes arises because of certain causes and conditions. Nothing arises purely randomly. Nothing arises uncaused. Everything arises because some other condition has been present to bring it into being. In that way, the moment as we encounter it could only have arisen in this one way.

We often teach with a friend and colleague in California, Sylvia Boorstein, who really has a way with phrases. This particular phrase came from one of her students, who shared it with Sylvia, and Sylvia's been sharing it ever since—so I'll share it with you. It was a California transmission. When someone asked Sylvia's student how she was, the student found the best response was: "I couldn't be better."

Whatever her condition was, that response was true. I couldn't be better. If I could be better, I would.

This moment has arisen from past causes and conditions—it couldn't be any different. And yet, the habit of our untrained mind, our unawakened mind, is to want it to be better and to try to make it better.

One of the things we observe again and again when we slow down and come into meditation is how many moments we spend trying to make the conditions better—trying to fix some ache in the body, some restlessness in the mind, some emotion arising from the heart. We don't want it that way; we want it this way. And we put our energy into trying to make it the way we'd like it to be.

In meditation, we start to see this is not just an infrequent occurrence, not just an occasional visitor, but a deeply conditioned habit of mind in each of us. This wanting to fix, wanting to improve, wanting to make things just right.

Through meditation we gain a very tiny amount of skill in being able to alter the way things are and make it a little better. Through our facility with awakening wholesome states of mind, the proper application of right effort, we find a way to alter that a little bit. But until we look at this innate habit, we remain caught in a significant pattern.

It doesn't seem like so much when you first become aware of it—oh, just a little tweak here, a little tweak there. I just want to improve it a little bit and then I'll be okay and then I'll rest in peace. But this little habit has quite significant implications.

You're probably all familiar with the term samsara. It refers to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that the Buddha described many times in his discourses, which he said has been going on for us since beginningless time, meaning that the number of existences each of us has had is uncountable, innumerable, too many to tally.

In the Tibetan tradition, they say that the source of our continued round of birth, death, and rebirth is the tendency to correct. The tendency to correct is the very heart of samsara.

So what's the heart of liberation? What's the heart for ending this wheel of continued arising and passing? It is not correcting—it is accepting, allowing with equanimity things to be just exactly the way they are,

moment after moment after moment.

This inclination, this direction to allow, has deep consequences and deep meaning. It's where we discover the quality of peace. Eventually, we discover the quality of an unshakable peace through that allowing.

So this process of examining the attitude we bring to our practice and finding one that's not too striving and not too loose is very, very important and quite central. Maybe more important than what we choose to pay attention to is the question: How am I paying that attention? What's the attitude I'm bringing to this moment as I meditate in sitting and walking and throughout the day?

One of the teachers all of us have spent time with and really appreciated is a young Burmese Sayadaw named U Tejaniya, who has a center on the outskirts of Rangoon and came to the Forest Refuge about a year ago. One of the teachings I've most appreciated that's central to his message is a specific teaching on right attitude and how to discover what that is. I like it because he expresses it very simply. Many of you have probably heard this by now.

He said to check in any moment and to check frequently through your meditation: What is the attitude right now that I'm approaching the meditation with? Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion in the way I'm approaching the moment? Or is there non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion?

This sounds a little heady, but fortunately, Sayadaw gave some very simple ways to investigate these three tendencies.

In answering the question "Is there greed?" he says, take a look and see: Do you want something to be happening in your meditation that isn't happening? Are you looking to make something happen? Do you want more peace? Do you want more metta? Do you want more samadhi, more concentration? Do you want an insight right now? Are you looking for something to happen, in which case there's some wanting at work? It's unnecessary because we don't need to disturb the conditions the way they are, and because it's unnecessary, we call it greed. It goes further than it needs to. So is there wanting at work? Take a look.

Is there aversion at work? You can check that by asking: Is there something that's happening that I don't want to happen? The flip side of wanting is not liking. So is there something in my experience that I wish would go away, that I wish would stop? A physical sensation, a mind state, a noise, the presence of some person or a smell, some food.

Is there something that I want to stop happening? That's the reaction of aversion.

Or is delusion present? Delusion is the most subtle of the three, and it has many layers. So Sayadaw recommends just taking a look at the top layer of delusion. Am I aware of what's happening? Am I in touch with what's happening? If I'm not, then delusion is present. I'm spacing out into something else.

So this is a very helpful thing to bring in. You could bring it in a number of times in a sitting, a number of times in walking, at different times throughout your day as you're moving around. How am I relating to

my experience of this moment? We can check this frequently, whatever our meditation focus happens to be—whether we're with breath or sounds or body or emotions or our food or our work meditation. We can be asking this question: What's my attitude right now? Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion?

Simply by asking the question, take a look and see what happens in your experience. I don't want to spell it out because I'd like you to do it. But I find that for me, there's a shift that comes inwardly just from asking the question. So try it. Try it a few times. And as you ask it, see also if there's an inner shift that happens just in the asking of the question.

Just to give some simple examples of missing the right attitude: the other day in my meditation, I noticed I was feeling some tension in the body. I wanted to have the experience that I'd had a few days earlier, which was of no tension in the body and a sense of relaxation and ease throughout the body. When that experience was there, it was kind of like my body sensations lined up in a certain way. There was this nice kind of pillar of free-flowing energy that ran up my spine and kept me erect, and everything felt very comfortable. I felt alert. I wanted that experience again. And in some subtle way, I was trying to make it happen. I was trying to bring it back.

When I realized that that's what I was doing, then I could say, "Oh, wrong attitude. That's desire. That's greed." But I was still wanting it back. So just noticing it doesn't always make it lift. Be aware of that. We may notice greed or aversion. It doesn't mean that they go away.

So I was noticing it: "Okay, there's wanting. There's wanting." And then the realization came. It was an insight I've had many times before, but I had it again: I can't control the body. I can't control my body sensations. I can't control my experience of the body. And then when I saw that, the real letting go happened. And as soon as I let go of the trying, the body relaxed into a comfortable pattern of sensations. So I can't control, but sometimes insight can help us relax and that opening takes place.

On a day like today, there can be a lot of opportunity for aversion. If you're a continuing yogi, there are a lot of new people to get used to, new teachers to get used to, maybe a new rhythm, new people around you in the hall, new neighbors in your residences. There can be a lot of speediness at this time in the retreat compared to the people who left a few days ago. The place is a little fuller now, so the dining room's a little more crowded at lunch.

For new people who've just arrived, settling in—as I mentioned earlier—brings a lot of bodily adjustment, a lot of mental adjustment. So aversion can easily come up today. Many opportunities for noticing resistance on a day like today. Of course these things will pass, and we can just kind of be stoic and gut them out.

But if we do, we're missing the opportunity to be mindful of our attitude. So when resistance is present, please notice it. And then see how the noticing affects your meditation. See what happens.

We're not asking this question so that we can become judgmental about ourselves. If we notice that greed or aversion or delusion is present, we want to notice that without adding any more greed or aversion or delusion. So we just notice, oh, that's wanting. No judgment, no further ripples of it. Wanting's present. We simply commit ourselves to noticing.

This is the pure property of mindfulness at work—just noticing. And then, at times when we find greed and aversion and delusion aren't present, we meditate, and with another one of Sylvia's lovely little phrases, our meditation becomes without agenda and without struggle. See if you can remind yourself from time to time throughout the day what it's like to be present without any agenda and without any struggle. That's the same pointing to right attitudes.

Now I want to talk a little bit more about the mechanics of observing. This is introducing some vocabulary that we'll be using throughout the retreat, so it's good if we can all get agreed on the terms we're using. To introduce it, I'd like to open up a kind of big picture view and ask each of us to take a look at our basic situation as human beings.

Regardless of being on retreat or in daily life, regardless of being in a female form or a male form, regardless of being young or old or white or black or any particular culture or race, what is our basic situation as humans? Maybe to frame it, I'll read something from Rumi, the Persian poet, when he said, "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea."

That says something about our basic situation, doesn't it? How did we end up in this body, on this planet, alive on this earth? I have no idea. And yet, here we are.

So what does it mean to be a sentient being? We talk a lot in Buddhism about sentient beings and the possibility for all sentient beings to be free. What does it mean to be a sentient being? It really means that we're conscious beings, doesn't it? I want to talk a little bit about this factor of being conscious and what that involves.

What does it mean to be conscious, sentient? Maybe to approach it, we might ask by contrast, what is it when you're unconscious? Say you're in deep sleep, no dreaming, or you've fainted and there's nothing going on. By distinction, being conscious means things are going on, right? Isn't that the essence of being a conscious being? Things are happening for us.

This quality of happeningness is central to the Buddhist worldview. In fact, you might say it's the domain of Buddhism. Like moving objects are kind of the domain of physics, and interactions between atoms and molecules are the domain of chemistry, and the behavior of the mind is the domain of psychology. In Buddhism, the domain is the happenings in conscious experience.

So what's happening in conscious experience? What are the things that happen in your experience as an awake or conscious human being? This is from a discourse of the Buddha from the Samyutta Nikaya called the Discourse on Totality:

"Bhikkhus, listen, and I will teach you the totality of existence."

This is kind of bold, isn't it? How many people do you know who would start a discourse like that? I don't think Einstein ever said that. I don't think Freud ever said that. I don't think Marx ever said that. So here's the Buddha: "I will teach you the totality of existence. Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak. What is the totality of existence? It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and objects of touch, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called the totality of existence."

And here he means sentient existence. Simple, isn't it?

These are just these six kinds of things happening: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena, and the organs through which they come. This is the domain of Buddhist investigation. These are the things that we look at again and again and again. Is there anything omitted here? Anything left out? Maybe something will come to you later, so you can drop me a note. But let's just take this as the basic situation for us as sentient beings. This is what we want to examine in our meditation.

We want to understand how these things come, how they pass away, and what our relationship to them is. Because being sentient means we're in relationship to all these things moment after moment.

So there's one other aspect that we want to tease out. You have sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental phenomena. Because you're conscious, you're experiencing all these things. They are registering as events, we could say, in your mind, in your consciousness. So each time there's the receiving or the registering of one of these events, that which receives it in Buddhism is called consciousness.

The Buddha's term in Pali is vijnana, and in English we translate it as consciousness. Whereas in the West we tend to use consciousness in a kind of broad, almost cosmological sense, most of the time in the Buddha's teachings, vijnana is used to mean just this receiving of a sense impression—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, mental phenomenon.

This is the first word that I wanted to talk about so that we're on the same page with it. And we often, instead of consciousness, we'll say "knowing." So right now, if your ears are working, you're conscious of that sound, or we could say in shorthand, you're knowing that sound.

There's just the bare sense data of sound that's happening, and it registers automatically in each of us. It's different from a corpse's experience, isn't it? If the bell was rung and there was a corpse, chances are that sound would not be arising, probably because the ear had ceased to function, the mind had ceased to function. So the sound is a physical thing, but the knowing of it is a mental event called a moment of sound consciousness, a moment of hearing consciousness. Or we would often just say what's happening in us all at that moment is a knowing of that sound.

To fill out the picture that the Buddha just described, we need to explain that word "mind"—the mind

organ that he mentioned. He said the mind and mental phenomena. Mind in this passage refers to this capacity for consciousness or knowing. So you could say it's the organ that knows, arising at all the six sense doors.

That's our life. We are experiencing the six sense objects and knowing them moment after moment. And they're always changing, so a new consciousness is arising, knowing each new moment of things that are happening.

This kind of knowing we're describing is not an intellectual knowing. It's not a conceptual knowing. It's pre-verbal. Any sentient being here would know this sound, but a dog or a baby would know this sound, even though they might not have the word "bell" or the word "sound." Still, that would register in their consciousness. So this is not a particularly intelligent kind of knowing. It's just a bare sense knowing.

It's happening all the time, as long as we're awake. There's always some object at the six sense doors, at some of the six sense doors, happening for us. And we can't turn it off. When the bell sounds, can you choose not to hear it? Maybe if you plug your ears, but otherwise, we don't have any choice. It happens automatically.

So this consciousness faculty is almost mechanical. I mean, we need to be living sentient beings. But once we are, it happens beyond our will. We can't turn it off. If the sound is there, we will know it. Albert Einstein had this kind of sense consciousness. A dog has this kind of sense consciousness. A baby has it. An ant has it. So all sentient beings are characterized by this. Buddhas have it. Bodhisattvas have it.

We all have it. This is one level of knowing that we'll talk often about.

There's another level of knowing that Joseph alluded to today in the guided meditation, which is better described by the term mindfulness. So mindfulness in Pali—you probably know the word is sati. Sati originally was another of those words the Buddha took from common Indian usage and gave a deep spiritual significance. In common Indian usage, the word simply meant remembering, but it's used as mindfulness for our knowing what our experience is.

This early sense of remembering is quite a nice thing to reflect on because it has the sense of "remember you're here," or recollecting—recollecting that you're awake, recollecting your attention in the present moment. If you've ever read the book Island by Aldous Huxley, it was his last novel, presenting a very optimistic counterpart to Brave New World. By that time he had gotten into LSD. Island was a kind of utopian paradise set on a tropical island somewhere in the Pacific.

One of the features of this very enlightened society was that the people had trained the mina birds to speak. What they were trained to do was say very loudly, "Here and now, here and now," so that wherever you were on the island, you'd keep getting this reminder to remember here and now. That's the sense of remembering—remembering what it is that you're about, remembering what it is that's happening.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha uses again and again this encouragement—as Joseph mentioned this morning—when one breathes in long, one knows that one breathes in long. When one breathes in short, one knows that one breathes in short. This kind of knowing has a quality of intelligence, of an awake, paying attention, comprehending quality that hearing the sound does not.

So vijnana, or consciousness, is basically unintelligent in its barest form. Sati, or mindfulness, has intelligence—requires intelligence to function. This is pointed to in the sutta by the choice of the word that the Buddha uses, which was translated this morning as "knowing." The word in Pali is pajanati. It can also be translated as understand, discern, distinguish. The later commentaries used it as a synonym for panya, which is the common word for wisdom in Pali.

That points to the fact that this quality of mindfulness is an intelligent response to the events that are revealed by consciousness. You could say that consciousness reveals the phenomenon, mindfulness understands it or knows it for what it is. It knows that it's a present moment arising, may know which of the sense doors it's arising in. As you connect with your breath, you know it's long or short. As you connect with the sound, you may know that it's pleasant or unpleasant, that the pitch is high or low. This active quality of intelligence is brought to bear on the bare phenomena that are revealed by vijnana or consciousness.

So you might say there are these two levels of knowing. One is quite automatic and unintelligent—we could just call that simply knowing. The other is of a higher level, has intelligence—we might call it understanding. We'll also call it knowing, so I will leave it to you by context to understand which level we're talking about. But I just wanted to make it clear there are these two different levels of knowing that we may discuss.

Because mindfulness introduces this element of intelligence, it becomes the opening to wisdom. As you probably know, in the Eightfold Path, wisdom is the first part of the path—right view, right intention—that comprises the wisdom component, and it's considered that it's only wisdom that can liberate us. So the open door of wisdom is activated through this quality of mindful intelligence.

This is drawn out by some of the Thai, particularly the Thai forest teachers, who have this habit—this lovely habit—of combining the terms for mindfulness and wisdom and using them as one word. So Ajahn Buddhadasa, a great master in the Thai tradition, would often talk about satipanya, mindfulness-wisdom as a pair, with a clear implication that where mindfulness goes, wisdom will follow.

So in our practice of paying attention moment by moment, we're not just being mechanical. We're not just being vanguards of samadhi by bringing mindfulness to collect the mind, but we're also opening the wisdom door to insight.

What happens in a very practical way, as we start to bring the mindful attention into the details of our experience, is that we encounter a breath, we know that it's breathing in, we notice that it's long, and we

start to notice that it has a beginning and it also has an end. We start to tune into sounds, and any sound that arises we can trace the beginning—it extends for a while and then it fades, and we notice that it has an end.

As we start to get close to the individual characteristics of these detailed phenomena of our experience, revealed by consciousness, we also start to understand their universal characteristics. We start to see the impermanence of every arisen phenomenon. We start to see that if we try to hold on, it's futile. If we try to change the way things are, we suffer. So we see the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned arisings.

And because everything arises and passes at these six senses, then we know that nothing is stable or ongoing in the field of the senses. So we realize there can't be an ongoing I, an ongoing core to this phenomenon. The close attention of mindfulness leads us directly into insight.

You probably know that the kind of meditation we're practicing is called Vipassana in Pali. It means seeing clearly, often translated as insight meditation. And this is how the insight connection gets established. All we can do to encourage insight is to pay close attention, interested attention, with this right attitude. As we see more and more the details of our experience at the six sense doors, the truth of their universal nature—what are called the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—come through clearer and clearer.

I was talking with a staff member at Spirit Rock recently, someone who had a very strong longing to be on a long retreat, someone with a lot of Dhammachanda, a lot of zeal right now. He asked me, "I haven't been able to do a long retreat yet. Tell me one of the benefits that I might expect from doing a long retreat." I could have talked about things like the fantastic altered states that arise from time to time, or the strange concentration phenomena that come for some people, or how beautiful nature looks when you go out to watch the sunset. But what I told him, what came to me, is that the three characteristics become really unmistakable after a while—really unmistakable. I heard it from a number of you in interviews this morning: this absence of ongoing self becomes so apparent at times, and the impermanence becomes just a simple fact of life that we almost don't even comment on because it's so taken for granted.

So this is the awakening of intelligence, the awakening of insight, the awakening of wisdom through this close attention.

As we give meditation instructions, we can point to phenomena at all the six sense doors. There are so many different meditation techniques—they're mostly about what you pay attention to that's arising in your field of experience. We started today with the breath because the Buddha started there. It's a wonderful beginning and can be the whole of your practice career. But we'll introduce many other objects because different ones work well for different people. So we'll give you a lot of choices.

As we introduce the different objects, please remember that the most important thing is not your object, but the quality of mindfulness and attitude that you're bringing to it. There's nothing sacred about the

breath, even though we started there. Any object of the six senses can work just fine. So we'll give you a lot of choices. Find the ones that work best for you.

One of the other factors that is so helpful in letting wisdom grow out of mindfulness is the quality of interest. And of course, this also supports the right attitude. We have this great capacity for self-understanding, and it's strongly buttressed, strongly supported by the element of interest. If you can develop an interest in what you're looking at—whether it's the breath or a sound or your body sensations, the thoughts and emotions, even this play of consciousness—sometimes that becomes the most fascinating aspect of sentient life. Anything that you experience, you can pay attention to. And so anything that you become interested in of these six kinds of objects can become the basis for your mindfulness.

The quality of interest brings a wholeheartedness and a natural ability to stay in the moment. What's it like when you see a chipmunk on one of the stone walls? What's it like when one of the chickadees lands in the palm of your hand when you're out there with sunflower seeds? Isn't there a natural, wholehearted interest in that moment?

Sally and I were driving back to our apartment after lunch. We were on the backside of the loop, and she spotted a coyote standing in a field in the noonday sun—a green field and this big, bushy-haired, dog-like thing. So we just stopped the car and we were just riveted on the appearance of this coyote because I've often heard them at night but I haven't seen them. And here in broad daylight was this creature in the middle of one of the fields. So we just stood and watched it. But then it sort of tuned in that we were there. I think the sound of the car engine running—it noticed. So it loped off. And again, watching a coyote lope is fascinating. It's almost like a deer because it had a bounce in its step that most dogs don't have. So it was just a short experience, but we were so present because we loved seeing that creature.

Imagine if you loved seeing your breath in that same way, if you loved seeing your body sensations, if you loved meeting a thought or a mind state in that same way. Then that natural interest and curiosity will hold your attention without any effort. And the function of mindfulness can just happen very naturally.

So this practice of checking attitude can be very helpful. Is there wanting? Is there aversion? Is there delusion? But what happens when we ask those questions and we look and we check and there's not? Am I wanting something different? No. Am I resisting something that's happening? No. Am I in touch with what's happening?

Yeah.

So in that moment, as far as we can see, there's not greed, there's not aversion, and there's not delusion. What does that feel like? I don't want to describe it because honestly, every time it arises, it can be different depending on what other factors of mind are present also. But let's say that's a wholesome state—the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion.

When you start to feel what that state is like and the potential of it, you're starting to find the sweet spot in

meditation. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that this is when meditation proceeds well—when we find no greed, no aversion, no delusion.

There's a very wonderful Thai laywoman teacher who taught in the second half of the last century named Upasika Kee, a very enlightened laywoman, I think, from her writing. She pointed her students again and again to this place of the absence of greed, the absence of aversion, the absence of delusion and the presence of awake attention. What she called this was unentangled knowing.

And that's kind of the feeling of it. We're present, all the phenomena of the six senses are happening, but we're not entangled with any of them either in a reactive formation of holding on or reactive formation of pushing away. So there's this sense of freedom and awakeness at those times.

Sariputta was once asked—one of the chief disciples of the Buddha was once asked—what is nibbana? What is the unconditioned element? And he said, "It is the destruction of greed, the destruction of aversion, the destruction of delusion. This is called nibbana."

Do you notice a similarity? Non-greed, non-aversion, non-delusion—very close to the unconditioned nibbana, the description of the final freedom, the unconditioned peace.

So you could say that as you start to find this sweet spot in meditation, this quality of unentangled knowing, you are approaching the quality of the unconditioned. It's not full, not necessarily complete in that moment, but you're getting a taste of it, a foretaste of it, which is the culmination of this path.

So this right attitude that we're looking for is, let's say, as close an approximation as we can find today to this quality of nibbana, this unconditioned element that is the release pointed to by the Third Noble Truth.

When we start to understand this, we start to feel that the path—which is this unentangled knowing—and the goal—which is this absence of greed, aversion, and delusion—start to come together. And we can have a sense that we're touching the goal even as we're activating the path. So in a way, we arrive at our destination moment after moment. And each of those moments of arrival furthers the path, draws us even closer to the fullness, to the completeness of nibbana, the unconditioned element.

I'll just close with this quotation from the Satipatthana Sutta, where the Buddha concludes by saying that this—that is, the foundations of mindfulness—"this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way"—that is, the establishment of mindfulness.

At the end of a Dharma talk here, we'd like to just sit for a minute or so in silence together, just to let the words settle before we move. So we'll just have a moment of silence together.

Thank you for listening.

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