Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:17

The Buddha's entire forty-five years of teaching, as you probably know, was all about the theme of suffering and the ending of suffering—always these complementary pairs. Sometimes Buddhism has gotten a reputation for being a gloomy religion because of its emphasis on the dukkha aspect. But when you listen to the discourses of the Buddha, he almost always pairs dukkha with the end of dukkha, and points as often to the liberated qualities of mind as to the struggling qualities of mind. So in our practice also, we want to keep both these halves in mind.

However, the fact is that near the start of a long retreat—this six-week period for those who have arrived—the predominant experience tends to be on the dukkha side. And it may not stay that way for those of you who have been here for seven weeks now. You may be moving into the positive and blissful and liberated experiences from time to time. But dukkha has probably still not gone completely out of your vision. As we go on in the second half, we'll talk more and more about the beautiful qualities of mind through qualities like the spiritual faculties, the factors of enlightenment, the brahmaviharas, and so on. But tonight, I'm going to focus on the dukkha aspect of things.

When I contemplate life in the world and think about the magnitude of suffering and distress that's happening, it seems very complex. We can look on a global level at the international conflicts and wars that are going on. We can look at a national level and the number of people living in poverty and unemployment. We look on the community level and know friends who've lost their homes or lost their jobs. We look on the family level and see conflict and stress.

And yet when we come into retreat, it all begins to seem very simple. Our own personal suffering becomes pretty straightforward. I've been struck by this a number of times. It seems to me that once I start to look at my own situation—and Buddhism always encourages us to do that, you might say to take responsibility for the state of our own minds and the possibility of freedom of our own minds—when I look from that point of view, when I ask what can I do to solve the problem of my own suffering, it starts to seem simple.

Because it seems to me that in retreat there are basically three things I suffer from. And this may be true for you as well. You can check and see.

One is body pain. It's a frequent visitor because we're sitting long periods, long hours without moving, and often that accumulates some degree of holding and tension that becomes uncomfortable. You sit long enough and any sitting will become uncomfortable. So that's the first thing that I always find myself dealing with.

The second thing is mental pain. Whenever I sit, I go through a whole range of emotions, some of them pleasant and some of them not so pleasant. So I encounter in my practice, as in my daily life, the forces of wanting and loneliness and fear and sadness and regret and anxiety, self-judging, judging of others, anger, irritation, and so forth—part of our whole human experience, in addition to the beautiful states. But these difficult states still come.

And then the third form of suffering I experience on retreat is unique to meditators, I think. So isn't it nice to know we have our own special brand of suffering? And it's the suffering that comes from wanting the meditation to go well. You know, when you were an untaught worldling, as the Buddha said, did you worry if your mind wandered? Did you worry if you couldn't keep it on a chosen object for ten minutes at a time or one minute at a time? No, that wasn't a problem. But here, quite often during the days on retreat, I find myself thinking, "Why can't the mind stay a little more settled? I want more stability. I want more experience of concentration." So I suffer from wandering mind, restlessness, lack of stability, lack of concentration—a unique occupational hazard for us.

But these are the only three things that I notice. That's it. And when I'm in the retreat mode and I start to sort it out that way, then I realize, oh, to make my peace with life, I have to make my peace with these three areas. And that's really it. That solves my problem of suffering while I'm in retreat.

If we can solve our problem of suffering while we're in retreat, we'll find that when we go back into the world, we know much better how to solve the problems of suffering that we find ourselves in, whether the suffering is from us or from others. Because when we understand the roots, we're able to liberate them more easily in our own mind, and we're able to deal more skillfully with the suffering of others.

So tonight I want to focus specifically on this second type of retreat suffering, which is the suffering of difficult mental states. I want to talk about how to work with the difficult emotions that arise for us, which arise in retreat as well as in our daily life. When you look across the world as a whole, you can see how much havoc these states play in the world. You can look across the West today and see virtually an epidemic of depression, it seems to me.

We can see this epidemic reflected in the growing numbers of people reporting these conditions to their doctors and receiving treatment. It reveals something profound about our culture and our modern world.

We suffer from anxiety and stress brought on by the relentless pace of life, feeling its daily impact in our bodies, hearts, and minds. We experience loneliness and isolation as we become disconnected from genuine community, watching the breakdown of relationships that once sustained us. Being part of this culture, we ourselves are subject to all of these afflictions.

When we don't understand these states, when we don't know how to release them, we often feel victimized. We become hostages of our own minds, which inflict pain upon us. But precisely because these conditions are such a source of suffering—both individually and globally—they also point us toward some

of the greatest openings in dharma practice.

I personally believe that vipassana practice, with its direct application of mindfulness to our experience, holds immense potential for healing in the world. When we begin to shine the light of mindfulness on these difficult emotions, they start to open up, revealing possibilities for liberation. Perhaps not final liberation or complete freedom, but pathways that can bring significantly more freedom into our lives, both in retreat and at home.

One of the most immediate benefits of vipassana practice is developing greater facility in working with difficult emotions. This encourages us—indeed, invites us—to open up and explore the full range of what occurs in our minds.

So often in life, we can see how people close down, how we've all restricted our emotional range because some territories have become frightening. We haven't been able to handle the intensity of certain emotions that arose for us, often during adolescence when we opened to experiences we couldn't fully integrate at that stage of life. By failing to integrate them, we moved into adulthood with limitations—areas of closure, holding, and unresolved issues.

Through meditation, we can begin to explore this complete range and bring greater understanding to it all.

Pema Chödrön, the wonderful nun who is abbess of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, expresses this beautifully: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every dark and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, grisly, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just learn about the whole thing."

There is tremendous encouragement to do this, and meditation provides us the method. This is the key. The tool of mindfulness gives us the means to examine every area of our mind, every corner, whether beautiful or frightening and dark. If we leave those areas unexplored out of hesitation, reservation, or fear of what we might discover there, we will always live in tension with ourselves—somewhat divided. But meditation offers us the possibility to enter the whole of the psyche, make peace with what we find there, and in doing so, integrate our being to a degree we haven't been able to achieve before. This is an essential part of our journey.

I find it refreshing to watch children deal with their emotions because they're not afraid of them. Children will dive right into the normal emotions of daily life. They'll be playing happily together, full of laughter, joy, and giggling. When something comes up—some anger or conflict—they'll go right into that too, yelling at each other, ready to bump heads. Then five minutes later, having worked it out, they'll be playing happily again, peaceful and calm. They don't hold back, and the emotions don't get stuck.

This happens as long as children are raised with a basic degree of respect. When children are severely neglected, mistreated, or abused, emotions can become overwhelming—too much for them to understand

or handle, and then closure happens. But when they're brought up with consistent respect and trauma doesn't enter the picture, there's a natural openness and lack of fear that is quite inspiring. We can learn this approach as well.

Watching children shows us that to have that sense of openness and freedom, we don't need to eliminate these difficult states. That doesn't become the immediate aim of our practice. In the long term, it is said that this does happen for practitioners at advanced stages of development—sense desire and aversion are eliminated from the mind at a certain stage of awakening, and all other mental impurities are eliminated at full awakening, the final stage.

But at our current stage—since we're probably not going to reach the third stage of awakening on this retreat—we can discover tremendous freedom by opening to what we actually have.

When I first came to meditation, I really hoped it would allow me to get rid of these states. I thought enlightenment would accomplish that, and I couldn't wait to become enlightened so I could be free of this kind of pain. Now I see it the other way around. I don't believe enlightenment is possible until we make peace with these states, until we achieve some degree of wisdom in relationship to them.

Again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like what is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run 100 miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

This is the invitation: whatever form of emotional difficulty is yours—and it varies greatly from person to person. For some, the dominant difficulty is craving; for others, it's anger; for others, fear; still others struggle with confusion or self-judgment. Whatever is most present for you becomes the place to inquire into, explore, and learn about. There is no other way than diving in and discovering its nature. This is meditation's invitation.

Just to set this within the classical foundation, what we're talking about is included in the third foundation of mindfulness, as described in the Satipatthana Sutta. This is the foundation that focuses on what's called citta. The first foundation is body, which includes breath. The second foundation is feeling tone, which I think was introduced in the instructions this morning by Carol. The third foundation is called citta—it can be translated either as mind or heart. The fourth foundation is called dhammas, and I think of this as the principles of nature, learning about the principles that govern us. So the talk tonight is focusing on the third foundation.

This foundation is described by the term citta, which is often translated as mind, but could just as well be translated as heart. If you ask a Western person, "Where is your mind?" we're likely to point here, to our heads. If you ask someone in Thailand, "Where is your citta?" they will point here, to the center of the chest. Because it's considered in Buddhist teachings that the base of mind is in the center of the chest. It

includes emotional as well as cognitive activity.

In the teachings of the Buddha, there is not this kind of clear distinction in using the word mind that we often might make in the West when we talk about the mind in relation to—or as opposed to, or compared to—the heart. So this word citta encompasses both. It encompasses our thinking faculties and our emotional faculties as well.

This was brought home in India through a meeting with the Dalai Lama. You probably know that over the last fifteen years or so, a group of scientists have been meeting annually with His Holiness the Dalai Lama to explore the overlap between Buddhism and Western science, sharing perspectives between these two worlds. The Dalai Lama is very interested in this dialogue.

What's emerged from these meetings is a series of research studies that are starting to validate in Western empirical terms the benefits that come from Buddhist meditation—both physical benefits, mental benefits, emotional benefits, and so forth. So these studies may become the way that the rest of the West starts to believe what we've been trying to tell them for a long time. But you see, they're not so interested in listening to meditators, because if we believe in a religion, we're already biased. We're not trustworthy, you see. So the scientists who are impartial and objective, reporting on it, will convince a lot of people that we could never reach. So I'm very appreciative of their efforts.

One of the foremost researchers is at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. His name's Richie Davidson. He's a longtime vipassana practitioner, but don't tell anybody. He has been working with the Dalai Lama for a number of years now through this organization called Mind and Life. At one point, the Dalai Lama asked him to bring over some of his equipment to India, because His Holiness wanted to show the rest of his monks what this research was about.

Well, a lot of Richie's experiments were done in MRI machines, and that's a little too much equipment to transport to Dharamsala. So what he did was take over electrode caps that they have created out of strips of leather lined with electrodes. The electrodes come in contact with the scalp, and there are quite a number of them—maybe fifty electrodes running down, implanted in these leather strips in the cap that the subject puts on. They're connected by wires to a computer that reads the output from each electrode. So they can measure where brain activity is happening in a reasonably precise way. It's not as good as an MRI, but it's reasonably precise when subjects are looking at different pictures or engaging in different meditative exercises, such as generating compassion.

So Richie carried over a few of these electrode leather caps and put one on to demonstrate to the monks how the experiment was being carried out. He explained the purpose of the research: to measure brain activity so that scientists could understand what was happening in the mind of meditators and then share that with the world. His Holiness was up on the platform with Richie, and there were about five hundred monks in this large auditorium.

Richie said that when he finished the presentation, all the monks just broke up laughing. Just five hundred of them cracked up at the same time. He assumed that it was because he looked so silly with the electrode cap on. But that wasn't the reason.

One of the monks, in explaining it, spoke up and said, "This is so funny. You're trying to investigate the mind by measuring the brain when everybody knows that the mind is here." And he pointed to the center of his chest.

Richie told us this story on a retreat some months ago, and we had a discussion with him: How can we measure what's happening here in the heart center? Because there's not quite the same kind of electrical activity as is going on in the brain. So that will be the frontier of neuroscience—to measure what is happening around the heart center. That would be fascinating.

So this third foundation of mindfulness is looking into the whole area of heart and mind, and I'd like to read you the way this is introduced in the Satipatthana Sutta. The Buddha, in giving these instructions of the third foundation, puts it this way:

"And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind—that is, citta as citta? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion. This is how a bhikkhu abides, contemplating mind as mind."

A couple of things to notice in this description. First, the term "understands." This is our old friend, pajanati, which we also encountered in relationship to the breath—understanding a long breath or a short breath. Or we could just use the word "knowing." So again, this concept of knowing or understanding comes through here.

The second thing to mention is that in the instructions, the Buddha is focusing on these qualities we've been talking about—greed, hatred, and delusion, or the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion. So we see again that these three are the critical roots of unwholesome states. The absence of them are the roots of all the wholesome states.

It's quite interesting to look in this way because you can take any suffering state of mind and analyze: what's the component in it of greed? What's the component of aversion? What's the component of confusion? Because every unwholesome state is a mix in some way of those three. Then you can look at wholesome states of mind, beautiful states, and see what's the mixture of non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion.

So this is the exploration of the realm of citta, and we'll be looking particularly tonight at the difficult or suffering aspects of this.

I want to talk a little bit about the vocabulary that I'll be using, not just tonight, but throughout the retreat. A lot of us share this vocabulary, so I want to introduce it early. We often talk about citta as encompassing moods, emotions, and states of mind. I'll use these three terms at different points tonight, so I want to distinguish what I mean by them. Other people may use them a little differently.

For me, emotion is something that's a strong feeling—a very obvious and clear strong feeling: happiness, sadness, joy, fear, loneliness, anxiety, and so forth.

Mood is something that has an emotional quality. It has a heart tinge to it, but it's often more subtle, not quite as pronounced, not as strong. More like a kind of cloud in the background that pervades everything that you might miss if you weren't just tuning into it. You might say, "Oh, I woke up this morning and I had a kind of mood of melancholy"—just feeling kind of melancholy. It's not a big deal, but it's kind of there in the background in a pervasive way. Or you might go for a walk and the sun is out and you've just been sitting in quiet, and you just feel a mood of tenderness. You look around and everything just seems very open and vulnerable, and there's a tender relationship to it. It's not going to knock you over the head, but it's a coloring that's in the mind at that time.

Then there's this more generic term that I'll use often called states of mind. This is the broadest term. For me, states of mind include moods and emotions, but it also includes the more subtle qualities of mind that develop through meditation—qualities like mindfulness, calm, equanimity, peace, wise attention. These are factors of mind that we can notice, that we can appreciate, that are very wholesome, but they don't have a particularly emotional quality to them. Their affect is quite neutral, but they are very wholesome at the same time.

So states of mind is the broadest of these. It will include moods, emotions, as well as refined meditative states. The technical term that came out of the Abhidhamma, the Buddhist psychology, that you'll often hear is "mental factors." The Abhidhamma, which is compiled in the few hundred years after the Buddha's death, identified fifty-two different factors of mind that could arise. And it said, "That's all there could be. There are no more." And every other one is a combination of these fifty-two factors. Well, life has gotten more complicated since then, so there are probably at least a hundred fifty-two now. But at any rate, there's a lot. There's a wide range.

So in working with difficult emotions, there are two things that need to happen. One is, compared to when we begin practice, for most of us there needs to be an attitude shift, and it is toward greater acceptance. This is the kind of first move that we need to make in relation to these states. We need to have more willingness to let them be just the way they are.

The second thing that needs to happen is we need to bring greater understanding of the states in. And we do that just by observing them. That's the beauty of mindfulness—to simply watch these states arise, persist. We learn how they're given to arise, how they're sustained, and how they pass away. That understanding is ultimately what frees us from their grip.

Because we start to see their mechanical nature. It's like a button is pressed and one of these reactive formations comes up. Once it's activated, it has its own particular dance. We learn its steps. We learn how they impact us. The mystery starts getting taken out of it. When the mystery gets taken out, they can't enchant us in the same way. They can't delude us or confuse us or mislead us.

The wisdom aspect that comes simply from observation is the most important piece. But in order to activate it, we have to open with acceptance first. These are the two steps: accepting attitude and greater understanding.

Let's talk about this in more practical detail—how to work when one of these states comes up. The first step is to know what it is that we're feeling. To name it is very helpful—to name the emotion you're feeling if you can. As Annie said the other morning in response to a question, if you don't know the name, don't worry about it. You can name it as "something" or just "this." If you happen to recognize what it is, then you can name it, and that will be helpful. But just to know that something is present and you're feeling it—that's the first step.

This is harder than it sounds, even when we're pretty mindful. I'll give you an example. I was practicing here for a six-week period some years ago. About two weeks into the retreat, I'd settled in and was pretty present. After the 8:15 sit, I got up from the hall and walked out to go to my walking place, which was down in the grassy area below the meditation hall. I walked out the back door, very present with my steps, aware of lifting, moving, and placing with each step.

Partway down the hill, I looked out to my walking path—there was someone there. This should not have happened, because I had been walking there every walking period for those two weeks. I thought, "Don't they know that's my walking path?" I was still very mindful—lifting, moving, placing—and as I started to walk down the hill, I was trying to figure out what had happened. Did I cut in front of them in the breakfast line this morning? Is this their revenge? Are they trying to play mind games with me? I was lifting, moving, placing. I was really with my steps.

But inwardly, I was fuming because it seemed, at the most charitable, very undeveloped of them. Nonetheless, I walked down to my walking area, found another patch of grass, which much to my surprise worked just as well, and did my walking meditation. I was about thirty minutes into it when I noticed—I'm angry.

I had continued to go through all the blaming thoughts and the figuring-it-out thoughts, but I had never made the notice: "Oh, anger." As long as I couldn't recognize that that's what I was feeling, I was just caught in it. I was caught in the story. I believed what I was thinking. I had no doubt that they were wrong and I was right, and that angry tone colored my whole world. The identification with the experience was so strong, there was no space to liberate it.

Once I could recognize, "Oh, I'm under the sway of anger," then I could work with it because I know how

to work with anger. I knew by then I needed to feel it in my body, recognize it in my mind, and look at the kinds of thoughts that arose and how they impacted the anger. Within a few minutes, it was gone. I was able to release it.

Until I could recognize it, there was no possibility of releasing it because I was just glued to it. This process of noticing what we're feeling is a very powerful step toward freedom.

One research study is particularly interesting. Scientists—I think these were psychologists—were working with subjects who had problems with anger management. They'd tried many techniques to get people to inhibit their responses when anger becomes activated in them, because many people will just lash out verbally or physically, lose their temper, and get themselves into a lot of trouble.

They tried many techniques to inhibit anger responses, with varying degrees of success. In this particular experiment, researchers used only one simple instruction with their subjects: when anger arose, they were to say "this is anger." That was the entirety of the intervention—nothing else. No additional instructions or advice were given.

The subjects practiced this for two weeks, and the results were remarkable. Those who had practiced this simple recognition showed significantly greater success in managing their anger compared to many other methods previously tested. This strikingly successful approach was nothing more than basic mindfulness—the simple act of knowing what we're feeling.

Even when we cannot find precise words for an emotion, just recognizing "this is what I'm feeling right now" creates space around the experience. We no longer need to blindly act out our emotions. This space emerges through the intelligence that mindfulness brings to each moment.

When we add this new piece of information—"Oh, there's anger present"—we introduce a wisdom element into our experience. We discover that our emotional state has shifted from just anger to anger plus mindfulness. This wholesome quality of recognition gives us the space to make wise choices about how to respond to the emotion rather than being swept away by it.

Three Aspects of Emotional Awareness

In working with emotions through mindfulness, we need to examine three interconnected areas: how emotions manifest in the body, how they feel in the mind, and how they express themselves through our thoughts. Bringing all three aspects under the umbrella of mindfulness creates a comprehensive understanding of our emotional experience.

The Body

Every strong emotion creates some kind of impact in the physical body. With anger, we typically find contraction, an upsurge of energy, and tension gathering around the neck and shoulders. Learning to recognize these bodily signatures helps us identify emotions as they arise, often before they fully develop.

The Mind

This aspect can be more challenging to understand because emotions feel so embodied that we might think the bodily sensation is the emotion itself—that anger is simply that contraction in the neck. However, as meditators, we need to distinguish between the physical and mental components of our experience.

While the contraction and tension belong to the body's domain, every emotion also brings a distinct mental coloring or flavor to consciousness. The taste of joy differs completely from the taste of fear or the flavor of anger. By becoming familiar with these mental qualities, we can identify emotions simply through their characteristic mood-tone, even when physical sensations are subtle.

Though we experience emotions as unified phenomena—mind and body seamlessly coupled—we can learn to recognize their different components. It's like drinking coffee with milk: we taste one unified flavor, but understanding the individual tastes of black coffee and plain milk helps us comprehend how that combined flavor emerges.

Sometimes in meditation, bodily sensations may be so light and moods so subtle that we don't register much physical impact. In these moments, we can still recognize emotions through their mental flavoring alone—that particular coloring they bring to consciousness.

The Thoughts

The third component involves observing our thinking patterns. When we examine anger's mental quality, we often discover a fiery or burning characteristic. Then we can observe the accompanying thoughts. In my walking meditation example, the thoughts centered around righteousness: "They're wrong and I'm right. They shouldn't be there because this is really my walking path."

As long as I continued entertaining these thoughts, I kept reinforcing the anger. When I stopped feeding these mental patterns, the anger naturally began to fade. This reveals the powerful relationship between our thinking and our emotional states—how our thoughts can either sustain or dissolve our emotional reactions.

So this is something else we want to really understand about emotions. All the afflictive emotions are sustained by thinking. Let go of the thoughts, and the afflictive emotion fades.

Basically, left alone, any emotion will pass. That's why it's safe to open to them. Emotions don't have the ability to sustain themselves forever. They only get that power through our resistance. When we try to suppress an emotion out of fear, we prolong it. If we open to it and allow it, it will arise, persist, and pass away. That's the nature of emotion.

Another way to think about this factor of thoughts is that we create a storyline around the emotion. The storyline with my anger was that I was right and they were wrong. If you look at anger in general, that's

generally what it's founded on—a storyline of "I'm right and they're wrong." As long as we keep going over those thoughts and believing them, we sustain the anger. Cut through the storyline, let go of your belief in the storyline, and the emotion will fade.

Let me share something I've observed in my practice and in many meditators' practices. There are four big emotions that everybody needs to learn to relate to. They're like the primary colors of our emotional palette. The Buddha made a list of the five hindrances, which is very helpful for understanding different obstacles in meditation. But I want to talk specifically about these difficult emotions and make another important point.

For an afflictive emotion to be sustained, it has to rely on a sense of time. Afflictive emotions cannot endure with a completely present moment orientation. They can only endure if we generate around them a sense of time. This isn't true of beautiful states of mind. Mindfulness can exist purely in the present moment. Love, compassion, happiness, joy—purely in the present moment. One of my teachers likes to use this wonderful phrase: "happiness for no reason." Not because we're counting our chickens or storing up goods or hoarding anything—happiness for no reason. We let it all go, and happiness is just there. It doesn't need time. Afflictive emotions do.

I want to suggest that afflictive emotions are born out of past and future—that'll be one axis. The other axis is pleasant and unpleasant. Since you talked with Carol this morning about feeling tone, you know that the feeling tone of pleasant and unpleasant is the root of much grasping and preoccupation.

So past and future will be one axis, pleasant and unpleasant another. Let's explore what emotions emerge from these four quadrants.

We'll start with pleasant and past. Say there was an experience in the past that was very pleasant. The implication is, because it was in the past, it's not here today. What's a primal emotion that comes up around that? Loss and sadness. This is one of our primary responses to life. We had something beautiful, something lovely. We lost it. We're stricken by grief, sadness, loss. That's the first of the big ones we need to relate to.

What about something very pleasant in the future? Desire. Something very pleasant that's going to happen only in the future creates a wanting of it. The second primal emotion.

What about something unpleasant that happened in the past?

And I'm going to modify this a little because I'm going to lead you. Connected with another person: anger. Somebody did something unpleasant to us, and we hold that with anger. The third primal emotion.

Something unpleasant that we think is going to happen in the future: fear.

So I want to suggest that these are the big four that we need to learn to relate to—sadness, desire, anger, and fear. As a subset of these four, a subset of anger, we sometimes direct that anger toward ourselves as

self-judgment. And so that would become, I would say, a fifth major one that we need to relate to. I think we're going to have talks on a number of these emotions, so because of time, I'm not going to go into them in a lot of detail. But let's look at each of them just briefly.

Let's take desire for an example. Come into retreat. There are many things that have been pleasant in your life that you don't have here: contact with friends, the food of your choice, going out to a movie, intimacy with your partner, the comfortable chair you sit in at home. There's often a sense of wanting for those things. Very, very common that that arises.

Let's look at the quality, sort of the psychology of desire. There's a payoff for us in bringing up those images. Here we are in this very kind of stark, austere, we might say ascetic setting, and we recollect something really comfortable or juicy or sweet about our home life. What's the impact in the mind of that? Kind of pleasurable, isn't it? It gives you a sweet hit for a moment.

But take a look at the other quality that comes with it. There's a comfort in the image, but at the same time, there's this realization: it's not here now. It isn't real. It's only a memory that's not the same as the real thing. So along with the sweetness or the comfort comes this yearning. And that's the essence of desire. We're unsatisfied because we don't have it now.

So desire is always this bittersweet experience, and it cannot be satisfying. If you look closely and feel it in your body and your mind, you'll feel the dissatisfaction of it. This is the kind of quality of thirst that's in the craving that the Buddha pointed to. It's always unsatisfying because we never want something we already have. You ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? A nose in the middle of your face? No, that would be way too easy. We always want what we don't have.

So take a look. When desire is present in the body, what's the feeling of it? I notice it often in relationship to meditative states here. The wanting for me on retreat is often about states of meditation, and I notice it as a kind of leaning forward, trying to make calm happen, trying to produce concentration. So I start to tune into that tension in the body, and that alerts me. Then I might notice, oh, my thoughts had been about a particular sitting that I wanted to recreate. So then that yearning quality of the mind—

The storyline in desire is something like, "If I had that, I would be happy." So it's a basis of happiness if I had it. If that concentration came back, then I'd be happy. Of course, what we don't look at is that object is impermanent. Either the object will fade or our delight in it will fade, one or the other.

We talked quite a lot about anger. I just want to mention a couple of things that the tradition says about anger. We feel this self-righteous indignation that we are in the right and the other person is in the wrong, and so we blame them. There is in the quality of anger usually an aspect of what we'd call ill will.

That is, because we're suffering on account of their action, we would like them to suffer. This is the opposite of metta. Metta is goodwill—we'd like them to feel good. But with anger, the quality intrinsic in it usually is ill will.

Now think about that. Can you take responsibility for that? Could you say out loud to yourself, "Yeah, I'd really like that person to suffer. I can't wait to see them hurting. I would really enjoy that." That state of mind is bordering on what we call in Buddhism cruelty. Cruelty is the actual enjoyment of someone suffering, and it's the opposite of compassion.

We may feel it's okay to be angry with somebody. It's okay to feel a little bit of ill will, but then you realize it's right next door to cruelty. Can you feel good about being a cruel meditator? That's a hard one for me. So looking at that was a strong encouragement for me to let go of anger.

The other strong encouragement is feeling in the body, feeling in the mind that burning quality with anger and realizing the pain it causes us. In the tradition, it's said that anger is like picking up a hot coal and wanting to throw it at someone. But before we can throw it, we have to pick it up, and then we get burned. In a situation like this, where we're restraining our speech, we're restraining our bodily action, generally we're the only one who suffers with anger. So that became for me the strongest encouragement to let go. I simply didn't want to suffer with it. The other analogy that's used is that anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to fall sick. Doesn't work.

So: desire, anger, sadness. In sadness, we have had something beautiful and lovely in the past. It's not with us, and there's a sense of loss. Feeling it in the body, there's a kind of heaviness, a weightiness, often a heaviness in the heart area. And the mood is just a kind of glum, dark, hopeless quality. The thoughts dwell on the fact that the thing that we loved is not with us anymore. And the storyline I see in sadness is something like, "I can't be happy because I've lost it or because I don't have it." So all our well-being really depended on that thing, that person, that experience, whatever it was.

Sadness can feel so pervasive that we're often afraid to open to it—as though if I open to the degree of sadness that's with me, I'll drown. It will be too much. And so we hold ourselves back from really feeling it directly. But this worry about drowning is just another belief, just another thought that we have told ourselves. We need to open to it little by little, because it's the opening that lets it come up, and in the coming up, present itself and pass. So we're not going to clear sadness out with one or two looks, but touching it a little bit, moving away, touching into it a little bit, moving away, generating all the wholesome qualities that come through meditation—loving-kindness and mindfulness and wisdom. Those will start to lift the sadness up and out.

And the last of the four main emotions is the quality of fear. Fear has a special place in my heart because it was my biggest hindrance for years in practice. I've worked with it a lot. I became very familiar with it and I so appreciate all the lessons that it taught me.

You read things like "these defilements are the very food that wisdom grows on." The defilements as we work with them are said to be the manure for bodhi, the nourishment for enlightenment, as we learn how to relate to them in our life. And in the beginning, I thought that was all hokum. I thought that was teachers just trying to cheer me up. But as I look back at my own experience of working with fear, I

appreciate how much I've grown from that and what it taught me.

If you learn one of these emotions thoroughly, you'll understand how all the others work too, because all their mechanisms are similar. So for myself, with fear, I came into my retreat, I started to feel fear, and I really didn't want it to happen. I was very resistant to that experience. I thought something had gone way off track if I was feeling fear. I was supposed to be feeling more happiness, and here I was feeling more afraid. But I took the encouragement of my teachers to investigate it, and I started to explore it in the body.

It was so helpful to find that I could ground my attention in the body at a time when I was feeling afraid, because otherwise I was disconnected. I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to turn to. So my teachers told me to ground the attention in the body. There I found shakiness and trembling and lightness that gave me no sense of groundedness or security. I had to ask myself: can I be with this? Can I open to it?

I looked a little at the storyline of fear. The storyline in fear seems to be something like: this moment may be bearable, but the next moment isn't going to be. Watch out. So I just came back into this present moment. Can I bear this bodily feeling? Can I bear it? And I could. I could bear that shakiness. I could bear that trembling.

Then I had to look in the mind. What's the mood or tone or color of fear in the mind? What does that feel like? I turned the attention toward the mind, and it was really hard to get to, because fear itself is a wanting to flee. As I got close to that thing, it was like: get away. I get closer again, and it was: get away. I had a very hard time actually connecting with the mind's nature of fear. But because of the wonderful support of samadhi and the stability that it gave, I was able to touch it, touch it, touch it. And I asked: can I bear that? And I could. I could learn to bear the mental tone. Then I would look at the thoughts that projected into the future and let go of those.

I came more and more just to bear the momentary experience of fear. And I found out it was a paper tiger. There was nothing but that experience of shakiness and wanting to flee. Shakiness and wanting to flee. I just became more and more comfortable with it over time. When I did, it lost a lot of its power over me. The more I could open to it, the less it tended to have me in its grip.

The invitation is there whenever these difficult states are present to open to them with acceptance. It takes a lot of courage, but this is where we find courage in our practice. I found levels of bravery I had no idea existed in me. And I know all of you are finding the same thing day after day. As you commit with perseverance and diligence to meeting every experience that arises, your courage is developing moment after moment.

I found that I had the capacity to understand. In the middle of the most difficult experiences, some of the most difficult experiences in my life, I could bring out qualities of wisdom. And the wisdom could understand the problem. Through understanding the problem thoroughly enough, it ceased to be a

problem because I could see how it was put together. It was just another mechanism. Once I could let it be, it would come and it would go.

That's what we finally understand about these difficult emotions. They aren't problems in themselves. They are not a problem. They come, they dance, and they go. What just happened? What was that dance? Oh, it's just the weather system. We really come to trust that awareness, mindfulness, and wisdom have the capacity to receive them, to hold them, to understand them with perspective, and not to be shaken by them.

This becomes our practice. It's not that we awaken after we've gotten rid of these things. We awaken in the middle of them. The most powerful qualities of mind can be brought out directly in relationship to these states.

This is transformative. We start to gain a confidence in our mind, a confidence in our understanding, a confidence in our practice that we can handle whatever the heart and mind throw up at us. Wisdom cannot be overthrown when it's strong enough.

I'd like to close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition—The Four Blessings of Gampopa. This is considered a supplication. To whom the supplication is made is for your own decision. It could be considered to the Dharma, to the Buddha, to a special being like the Dalai Lama, to your own wisdom mind—however you'd like to interpret it.

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's sit for a moment together in silence.

Thank you for listening.

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