Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:20

A couple of nights ago, Steve talked about the Four Noble Truths with particular emphasis on the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering. When we look around the world, it's quite easy to see, isn't it? Even if you shared this truth with many people, they might not acknowledge it. Yet if we look with an eye that is more open, it's easy to see.

This reminded me of an article that appeared in the New Yorker not so long ago. According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Authors of the 1200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. Surprisingly, they say, they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed, by positive logic, that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be given everything it must put up with.

Nine out of ten of the respondents in the survey stated that they would give up completely if they only knew how. The remainder also didn't see the point of going on any longer, but still clung to a slight hope for something in the mail. In a personal note in the afterword, researchers stated that statistically speaking, life is, quote, "just too much," unquote. As yet, they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all.

This may remind you of our situation here, except that you've probably given up hope of anything in the mail.

When I come on retreat, the question of suffering seems to get really simple after I've been in retreat for a little while. There are basically, you may have noticed, two kinds of suffering: body and mind. When you look closely, body suffering is basically about physical pain or discomfort.

This was really clear to me a couple of retreats ago. I went over to Burma and sat with the concentration master that I mentioned the other evening, whose name is Palok Sayadaw. When I arrived at the monastery in Burma, I was given an outline of the daily schedule. There were six sittings a day. The shortest sitting was an hour and a half, and the longest sitting was two hours. As soon as I arrived, I was expected to start practicing according to that schedule.

In practicing by that schedule, I encountered quite a bit of physical pain because I wasn't used to sitting for an hour and a half, much less two hours. I'm sure in your transition here, you've also encountered physical discomfort here and there while sitting for an hour or 45 minutes. This is one common occurrence and common theme of retreat—something that stretches us.

On the mental side, when I'm sitting, I divide it into two pieces. One piece has to do with meditative skill: How am I with the fact that I'm not with the present moment all the time? How am I with the fact that the mind gets restless and wanders or goes to sleep and gets caught up in thought? That's an area of some need for attention, lest we fall into suffering with frustration, disappointment, judgment, discouragement—all the feelings that come around a sort of loss of control. This is one area that I know all of you are working with in this retreat.

But the second area is really more challenging and has to do with directly painful states of mind. This is what I want to talk about tonight: How do we work with the difficult states of mind that come? They come not only in retreat, but of course they come in daily life also. How do these states lead to suffering for us, and how can we release the suffering and find freedom in relation to them?

As we enter this area of states of mind, we're getting into what's called the third foundation of mindfulness. In the Satipatthana Sutta, it starts off talking about the third foundation like this: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? 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."

So here are our three old friends—essentially greed, hatred, and confusion—that become the object for our mindfulness, either their presence or their absence. Their presence being unwholesome or suffering states, their absence being a wholesome state, a state of well-being.

This is the area of practice that I want to talk about tonight, and it's a very central area in our life, in our meditation, and in coming to greater freedom. So much of our core sufferings are from these states of mind—the difficult states of mind—and knowing how to relate with them.

Just a short word about terminology. I may talk about emotions. I may talk about moods. I may use the term mind states. Let me clarify that a bit. The word that is translated in the third foundation as "mind" is the Pali word citta. It could equally well be translated as "heart," because the word citta encompasses both qualities that we would call mental and qualities that we would call of the heart or emotional. Probably the best translation for the word citta, as it's used in the suttas, is the word "psyche." Everything that makes up our psyche is part of citta.

We may talk about emotions. These are generally considered heart qualities, and they're states of mind like love or happiness or joy or sadness or fear or embarrassment that have a resonance in our heart.

There is a tone of being pleasant or unpleasant that is usually rather strong. So for emotions, we're talking about these rather strong heart qualities.

When I use the word mood, it's more or less synonymous with emotion, but it may have a little gentler

intensity, and it may encompass a slightly wider range of feelings.

Then the word mind state or state of mind is the most encompassing, and it's really what's pointed to in the third foundation. It includes not only the range of moods and emotions, but also all the subtle states of mind that we become familiar with in meditation, like calm or mindfulness or concentration or equanimity or rapture. These more subtle states don't really leap out at us, but as we investigate the more refined qualities of mind, we start to really understand how these feel, how they present themselves, how they affect us. So the term states of mind encompasses this range of subtle meditative states as well as the more dramatic emotional states that come. It's the most broad and all-encompassing.

The Abhidhamma, which is a very analytic look at the teachings of the Buddha, says that there are 52 distinct mental factors or qualities of mind—the entire list of factors of mind that can arise. Although they join in so many different combinations that they give rise to a very, very complex set of experiences, it says there are only 52 building blocks in mind that give rise to these. Some of these building blocks are considered beautiful, or you could say wholesome. Some are considered unwholesome. Some are neither beautiful nor unwholesome, like the quality of intention that I think Steve talked about in the instructions. It's rather neutral.

But I want to focus tonight on talking a little about these states that have quite pleasant or quite unpleasant qualities. As a frame to the discussion, I'd just like to invite you to reflect on what are the most sublime states of mind that you've experienced in your life? It may be that you go back to childhood. It may be that you remember particularly deep meditation experiences. The most sublime states that you can recall. That may give you a sense of the range of the beautiful that's available within the human heart and mind.

And now I'd like to ask you to reflect on the experiences in your life, the mental qualities that have been most painful. Not particularly incidents—they may be connected with incidents. I don't want to focus on the outer incident, but focus on the inner experience. What was the most painful experience or what were the most painful emotions you can recall feeling?

And then think about all the states in between, states that are somewhat difficult, states that are somewhat pleasurable, and then the extremes. So I hope this gives you a sense of the range of the human heart and mind as it's played out through your experience. It's vast.

In meditation retreats, we often have the experience of touching these extremes. It's one reason that meditation is very challenging, but it's also why life is so challenging. If life was all just one way, it might be simpler to navigate, but it's this peculiar mix of the intensely sublime and the very, very difficult and problematic that course through us at perhaps a moment's notice, completely out of our control, that creates some of our imbalance in our relationship to living.

So there are many things to say about the beautiful states, the wholesome states of mind. We'll talk about

them a lot as the retreat goes by. For tonight, I just want to say briefly how not to be involved with suffering around the beautiful. And this is easier than how not to be involved with suffering around the difficult.

So essentially, I'm sure you know the first instruction: don't cling. Whatever the beautiful experience that comes to you or that you remember from the past, don't hold on. Let it go so that the mind comes freshly into this moment and is ready for whatever happens now. Clinging to even the most beautiful only creates an obstacle to being present with what is, as I'm sure you know.

The second recommendation, and this takes a little bit of practice, is a skill that should come with practice: Appreciate these states when they arrive. When a wholesome state or a beautiful state comes to you, please be very, very mindful that it's appeared. Naming it is helpful, feeling it in the body, feeling it in the mind, and knowing that, oh, this is the arrival of something beautiful or something wholesome.

So this could be a state like calm or peace or equanimity, loving kindness or compassion, contentment, joy, happiness, wonder, awe, friendliness, warmth. Sometimes they're subtle, but as soon as you become aware, please recognize that something very good has arrived.

Sometimes I found, especially in the early years of my practice, I took these states completely for granted. And there would be a respite from the storm of the hindrances and whatever. There'd be some peace, some good feelings, some openness to nature and appreciation, gratitude. And I'd sort of think, oh, this is the way it ought to be. That was the killer: "This is the way it ought to be." And I wouldn't recognize how special what had just arrived was.

I think this is a little bit of our Western problem, that we're raised in a culture that's pretty idealistic.

Our culture is remarkably adept at defining and describing how things ought to be. So we carry many opinions about how things should unfold. We are idealistic as cultures go. But the problem with this orientation is that reality isn't based on ideals. And when reality doesn't match the ideal, we struggle.

It could be the ideal about how a meditation center should work. It could be the ideal about how our fellow yogis should be behaving. It could be the ideal about how my meditation experience should be unfolding in this retreat. And when the reality doesn't match the ideal, we fight with reality. When you fight with reality, who wins? It's almost never the ideal, and there's usually tremendous suffering along the way to aligning with reality.

So our idealism doesn't serve us very well when it comes to meditation. It's wonderful to have an aspiration and to work toward ideals like social justice and equality and non-discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, and so forth. Those are beautiful, inspiring ideals within our culture that we move to actualize through law and through our own human hearts. But when we see that the reality is not in alignment with the ideal, can we keep from suffering around that?

It doesn't mean we stop trying to make a better world and move toward the realization of our deep aspirations for justice, equality, and so on. But can we not come into conflict? Can we not suffer when the ideal doesn't measure up? Especially when it comes to our own hearts and minds and experience.

What's interesting is that the Buddha's mind doesn't have a bias toward expecting that things should be wholesome. This is my interpretation anyway. There's no bias in the awakened mind. The awakened mind, we might say, starts at emptiness. It starts with not expecting anything particular, or starts at zero, if you like.

Then, if something beautiful shows up, we go, "Oh, how wonderful, something beautiful." We recognize it, acknowledge it without clinging. If something difficult shows up, we say, "Oh, something difficult has shown up," and we recognize that. But we don't have a sense that one or the other ought to be happening. We align our awareness just with the way things are. We let reality teach us.

In relating then with the beautiful emotions: don't cling and appreciate them when they come. You'll find this very helpful. The more we appreciate the beautiful emotions, the more likely they are to return. The more familiar we become with them, the more likely they are to come again.

So let's talk now about the difficult emotions—sometimes called painful emotions, defilements, hindrances, torments of mind, afflictive emotions. All of these describe this terrain. Emotions like fear or terror, humiliation, sense of low self-worth, embarrassment, depression, despair, anger, hatred, sadness.

How can we relate when these come to bring greater freedom in our lives? Two things are really needed here. One is an attitude shift, and that is in the direction of greater acceptance. And the other is more wisdom about these emotions. We just need to understand how these emotions are put together better. And we do that just by paying attention. This is the laboratory where we understand how the emotions work.

So it's actually a great opportunity when a difficult emotion comes in the middle of meditation. You don't have anything else to do but to learn about it. And from my point of view, learning about the difficult emotions is one of the key things that happens in a long retreat like this.

You know, mindfulness practice is becoming widespread in our culture—still in a small way, but much more widespread than it had been ten years ago. One of the most immediate benefits that people can receive is understanding how to work with difficult emotions through mindfulness. And it's one of the most immediate ways that people can get benefit.

So I hope this will be a source of interest for you on this retreat and a source of tremendous learning and freedom. Because as we open up around these core areas where we typically get caught, where we suffer, where we're in bondage, some of the greatest opportunities for freedom lie in this understanding, in this learning.

The first step really is to know what we're feeling when we feel it. This is easier said than done. Our culture has not really given many of us the tools to understand our emotional landscape. I grew up in a family of Anglo-Saxon descent. We didn't talk much about our feelings around the dinner table or in warm heart-to-heart conversations between parent and child. So I grew up without much fluency around my emotions, not really knowing what they were, the range that was normal in people, how to work with them, what was okay to express and let out, what I needed to moderate in my speech and actions. I had to learn much of this on the cushion, in meditation circles, within the sangha. It's been a slow education process for me.

Often knowing what we're feeling is really harder than it sounds. Let me tell you a little story. I was practicing here on one three-month retreat, sitting in the hall during the 8:15 sit. I'd been sitting for a couple of weeks at that point and felt pretty present and mindful. I was leaving the hall to do my walking meditation. For the last two weeks I'd been walking in the same spot, down on the grass in Yogi Park. So I went out the back door of the meditation hall, very mindful—lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing—very much with my walking. I went down the steps, feeling really present.

I looked out toward my walking spot and saw somebody was already walking there. This was not supposed to happen because that was my walking place. I had practically ground my initials into the dirt by that point in the retreat. Everyone had watched me walk there for two weeks, so they should all have known that spot had my name on it.

So I was walking down to my path, still thinking I was being very mindful—lifting, moving, placing—but all these thoughts kept coming up: What are they doing there? Don't they know that's my walking path? Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. More thoughts came: Did I cut in front of them at breakfast this morning? Is this some kind of yogi payback? Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing.

I kept walking and got to another walking place nearby. I started doing my back-and-forth walking, and it was a half hour into my walking period before I realized I was irritated. I thought I was so in touch—lifting, moving, placing—and I hadn't even noticed I was getting angry. That's how these states work. They come in underneath our radar. When they come in under the radar and we don't know what's happening, we're completely at their mercy.

Once I recognized I was irritated, then I could start to work with the irritation. I could name it. I could look into the thoughts that were going on around it. I could feel it in my body. I could let go of it. But until I understood that it was in operation, I was just completely caught in it.

So the first step, if we want to achieve some freedom in relation to these states, is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. Then essentially what we do is turn the attention away from the story of the hindrance onto the experience itself—onto the experience of the anger or the desire or whatever it might be.

In looking at an emotion like anger, start to notice that there are three parts you can tune into with any strong emotion. One is the kind of mood that comes in and colors the mind. I'd call it irritation. It could be annoyance. It could be anger. It's a particular flavor that comes out of the mind. That flavor is not a bodily thing, but the taste of it is something that comes out of the mind. That's why we call it a mental state. Notice that the flavor of anger is really different from the flavor of joy or the flavor of wanting. It has its own taste in the mind, and that's what I'd call its mood or coloring. That's one key piece, perhaps the central piece.

The second thing is that if the mood is strong, it's going to have an impact in the body. You're going to be able to feel where that emotion is expressing itself in the body.

If anger is strong, you're likely to feel a burning sensation and a sense of contraction. The contraction may be felt around the shoulders and chest, around the back. The burning and the sense of heat may be all through the trunk. So the second thing is, if it's strong at all, look in the body and feel what the physical sensation is.

Notice that these two are different components. Sometimes you'll go—let's say you're feeling anger in the chest, a contraction and a burning. You put the attention in the chest, you feel that contraction, and also there you feel strongly this coloring or the mood of anger. It's as though the sensations at that point in the chest are permeated with the flavor of anger. But notice that these are two different components. You might have the same contraction in the chest, but the emotion could be of sadness or fear. So there'd be a different coloring, a different flavor associated with the same physical sensations. Even though it feels like they're really merged—which at times they are—they have two different pieces.

It's a little bit like preparing coffee with cream. If you like cream in your coffee and you pour the cream in and drink it, you really know that's one flavor. But if you understand what the coffee tastes like separately and what the cream tastes like separately, then you understand how they're combined. Similarly, with the mood and the physical sensation, you get to know each on its own terms and you understand how they get merged in that direct experience. But they're two different pieces.

The third piece is thought. Thought plays a really central role in any difficult emotion that we are caught in. Anytime there's suffering around an emotional state, it's because thought is also playing a role. When I was walking and I saw somebody in my walking path, the thought that tripped me up was "they shouldn't be there." Or another way to say it is "they're wrong and I'm right."

These thoughts form themselves into a view or an opinion that we believe in. It's the belief, the conviction, the certainty that we're right about that which locks in the emotion. As long as I keep telling myself they're wrong to be there and I'm right, what happens with the anger? It just keeps getting built up and up, reinforced again and again. It's as though a fire is burning and every time I think that thought, I toss another log onto the fire. Let's crank the flames of anger up a little more. How do we do that? We think that thought.

If we stop thinking the thought or if we stop believing it, what happens to the emotion? It will just start to fade away. This belief or view that we have, I would call a storyline. Every strong emotion that we're gripped by, that we're caught in, that we're suffering from, is accompanied by a storyline—an unconscious belief that we've bought into that we usually haven't recognized.

In freeing ourselves from the emotion, we can work both on freedom in relation to the mood and the sensations, and freedom here means basically acceptance. Don't fight the fact that you're angry. Don't fight the fact that your body's contracted. That's just done itself. You didn't choose it, and right away it's not easy to un-choose it. Just notice that that's there and work with greater acceptance. That starts to allow things to relax. And also look at what thought you're believing that is fixing the emotion in place.

If you look at these three things—the coloring in the mind or the mood, the physical sensation, and the kind of thought that's at work—you'll pretty much have the whole view of the emotion. So pay attention in all three of those ways.

I'll talk about this a little bit in relationship to a couple of different mind states. Kamala talked very beautifully the other night about the hindrances, which is the classical list that the Buddha offered for us to look at for difficult mind states. As I look at my own experience and the experience of many yogis, I come up with a list of five emotions that I see as the most common ones that we get caught in. I'll just name what they seem to be to me: wanting, sadness, anger, self-judgment, and fear. These seem to be the ones that grip us the most tightly and form kind of the core bondages for many of us.

I thought it was interesting as I was reflecting about these—emotions are very much dependent on feeling tones. First foundation of mindfulness is the body. Second foundation of mindfulness is feeling tone or vedana, the quality of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Emotions, as the third foundation, are in a way built on the second foundation, which is feeling tone. Emotions have to do usually with past and future. That's how they kind of take us out of the present and spin us into past and future. So I thought about past and future and pleasant and unpleasant.

And try this. When something pleasant has been in the past and no longer is... What's the emotional response to that situation? What does that feel like? Anybody?

Sadness. I heard someone say that. Isn't that really common? When we have lost something that was pleasant, the emotional response is sadness.

Now let's look at painful experiences in the past. What's a really common response to something that's been painful that happened in the past? Anger, isn't it? If somebody has offended us and there's a hurt underneath it, the common response is that we get angry.

What about the future? Something pleasant that's out there in the future—what's the emotional leaning? Wanting. Something unpleasant that's out there in the future—what's the emotional reaction? Fear.

So we see what I would call the big four: sadness, anger, desire, and fear. They're all built around relation to pleasant and unpleasant in the past and in the future. That's an interesting reflection on these core emotions. Self-judgment, in a way, is a particular form of anger that's directed against ourselves—so it's actually a subset.

Let me talk about a couple of these. Let's take desire as an example. Desire comes up frequently on retreat. It may be for people, places, things. Steve talked about this in The Four Noble Truths, Kamala in her talk on the hindrances.

Carol and Sally and I were in Italy a few years ago, leading a retreat. First of all, it was a lot of fun to be in Italy on the dharma side because Italians are different in dharma practice than Americans are. One of the things we noticed was there was an espresso machine right outside the dining hall. So often after lunch, after breakfast, hits of espresso going down. We were staying at a facility that was a Christian convent, and their normal retreat fare was to put out wine with lunch and dinner. So we had to ask them, please, not to do that.

Italian yogis are just different. It was hard to hold the silence as well as we hold it here, and we just kind of let that happen. The other thing I felt is that the Italians I met were quite fluent with their emotions. They often knew what they were feeling and talked about it quite easily, even when it was quite difficult.

I had an interview early on with this young guy, and he said, "I'm having trouble getting into the retreat. I've done another retreat, and it was okay, but I'm having trouble getting into this one."

I said, "Well, what's going on?"

He said, "Well, we were there in August. This is our vacation time in Italy, and I had a choice of where to go. My friends were going on a vacation in the Caribbean and invited me to go along, or I could come on this meditation retreat."

I said, "Well, why did you come here?"

He said, "All the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out." And he said, "But as I come on this retreat, I'm just thinking about my friends and all the fun that they're having there—the warm sunlight and the sandy beaches, the beautiful women of the Caribbean. And here I am just being with my breath."

I said, "Could you say that this is a case of desire?"

He said, "Yes, yes."

I said, "Well, when you're feeling desire for something, is it ever easy to be with something else?"

He said, "No, it's not."

I said, "Does the desire necessarily mean that the thing that's going on is bad?"

He said, "No, no, not necessarily."

I said, "So do you think it might be possible to let go of this desire?"

He said, "I'll try."

So a couple of days later, he came back in another interview. He had let go of the desire, and he was just here. He was settled in, he was with his breath, and then the retreat just unfolded.

But desire has this quality. When we're caught in it, we can't see what's in front of us. We can't see what's here and now. And it's not satisfying. Because one of the things you notice is, do you ever desire for what you already have? Do you ever sit there and think, "I'd really like a nose in between my eyes"? I've never had that desire reported to me. We always want what we don't have, and there's always that gap. So in desire, there's inherently this dissatisfaction.

Sometimes it's pleasant to encounter a beautiful object, but there's always in that encounter a bittersweet quality because of this gap. We can't have it right now. So it may be the desire for things outside, maybe the desire for things in retreat—particular kind of food, a particular temperature, particular weather, certain quiet in the meditation hall or in the residences, a certain kind of experience in sitting. All these things act in the same way and keep us from being at ease with the way things are. It's one of the functions of desire.

So what's the storyline of desire? I would put it something like this. You can look and see different forms of desire might have a little bit different stories, but it's something like, "I can't be happy because I don't have this." Something like that. That there's a belief that if we had that, we would be happy, and without it, we can't be.

In coming into feeling desire in the body, I think you can find that even if desire is subtle—it may be a desire for a concentrated state of mind, it's not a very big or blatant wanting—there's a kind of leaning or tension that we can feel in the body. This started to be a clue to me when I was looking at what's making the sense of friction. If the body was kind of leaning forward or I felt some tension, that would sort of clue me in that a desire was present, and then I'd try to look and see what is the desire for. And once I saw it, then I was better able to release that desire.

I talked a little about anger earlier, opening to the feeling of anger, really letting it be there and be fully expressed in the body and in the mind without acting on it. So we find with emotions that there is the possibility of finding a middle way between suppression and expression. Often from a Western psychological point of view, we may be told, "Well, if you don't suppress the emotion, then you really need to express it." But in meditation, we can find a middle path.

We're not suppressing because we let ourselves feel it completely, but we also don't have to express. We don't have to go out and get mad at anybody. We don't have to behave in such a way that we are

aggressive or offensive. We can feel the emotion very strongly. There's no suppression, but we don't have to act on it.

And then take a look. Anger is almost always accompanied by some thoughts of blame—what someone else did that was wrong. Now, the interesting thing is those thoughts of blame may be accurate. Somebody may have done something that was wrong. There's a lot of wrong going on in the world. You know, all over the place, terrible things happen. Wars and murder and racism, oppression and exploitation, abuse on a personal level. These things are not right. They're not appropriate. And if they've been done to us, we are justified in saying that wasn't right. It was not a right action.

The thing to look at if we want to release suffering is: does holding on to that conviction free our own heart or not? Is there a way that we can know that something wasn't right, but not hold on to the sense of blame about it? It's almost like there's a quiet conviction. The action was wrong. It was hurtful. It hurt us. It doesn't feel good. Somehow the person doesn't understand. Maybe they haven't apologized. But how can we release that burning that's in our own heart of the resentment?

What happens if we just stop thinking the blaming thoughts? Instead of adding more fuel to the fire, we simply don't add any more fuel and then see if the fire dies by its own accord.

So it's not to excuse what the other person has done. It's not to condone it. It's not to say it was right. It's not to overlook our own hurt. And often in daily life, in societal conditions, it may be very important to express the sense of injustice or harm that was done on an individual level, on a group level. But at the same time, can we do it in a way that our own heart is not burning with resentment and blame? So that we're inwardly free, even as we recognize the other person's unskillful actions. See if that's possible.

The Dalai Lama tells a story of a monk that he knew when he lived in Tibet in 1959, before he fled to India as a result of the Chinese invasion. The Dalai Lama remembered him as rather an ordinary monk. Many years later, he met up with him again after this monk had been in prison—in a Chinese prison during the years of occupation. He had spent more than twenty years in prison and finally escaped to India, where he was able to meet with the Dalai Lama.

The Dalai Lama, of course, was concerned about his welfare, so he asked him how his time had been in prison. The monk said, "Well, I felt that I was in danger." The Dalai Lama jumped to the assumption that perhaps he had been tortured, so he said to the monk, "Do you mean that you were tortured?" The monk answered, "Yes, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I meant that I was in danger of getting angry at my captors."

This illustrates the kind of potential of the practice—to be in prison, to be tortured, and to be able to so hold one's own balance of mind that one doesn't slide into anger. Why? Because of the suffering—the suffering for ourselves and the suffering for others. This is a possibility.

When anger is directed against ourselves, it comes across as self-judgment. This is one of the very, very

strong and unnecessary sufferings that we have in the West. So many of us grow up with this sense of not being good enough and think thoughts about ourselves that deprecate us. We believe in these thoughts, are more harshly critical of ourselves than we would ever be of anyone else, or than we would let anyone else be of us. Often when it gets quiet in a retreat, the voice that kind of percolates to the surface is this self-judging voice.

One of our students in California—Sally and I worked with a number of older students and had a group with them for a few years—was discussing this tendency to judgment. She said, "You know, it started off very realistically. Somebody called me up and said they didn't want to see me as their therapist anymore." She was this person's therapist and they ended the relationship. "My first thought was, 'Well, it just wasn't the right fit between me and this person.' And then I thought, 'Why wasn't it the right fit?' And I thought, 'Oh, I didn't have enough compassion for them.' And 'Why didn't I have enough compassion?' 'Oh, I'm really not a compassionate person.' 'Oh, why am I not a compassionate person?' 'Well, my heart is really closed and tight and I'm really not a good person at all.'"

This is kind of the way self-judgments go. They spiral from one incident that is understandable and rational, but then we overgeneralize until we're making these blanket kinds of generalizations about ourselves that no longer hold truth. It wasn't true that she wasn't a good person. It wasn't true she wasn't compassionate. She'd been a therapist for many years. She was compassionate and caring. But she convinced herself in that moment that she wasn't.

How to work with judging? The first thing is just to see the judgment when it comes and feel the pain of it. Sometimes a few thoughts in a row will come and it's like we're putting arrows into our heart. Let yourself feel the pain of that judging. I think until we feel the pain we're causing ourselves, we're not motivated enough to let go. But when we feel the pain, maybe then we can bring in some mercy and just realize we shouldn't suffer like this. It's not needed, and it's not justified.

So tuning into the pain, and if possible, feeling that compassion, that sense of mercy for yourself. We don't need to do it to ourselves. Notice the judging thoughts—you might just make a note: "judging." Joseph Goldstein has this little tip that lightens it for him.

He adds a phrase, "and the sky is blue." Oh, I'm a crummy meditator and the sky is blue. And it just puts a little bit of smile into the sentence. So you can try that.

The other thing I find very helpful is to question those thoughts. Is that true that you're a crummy meditator? I mean, who can really say that that's true? When I think about what makes a good meditator, I think about how sincere is the person. Are they sincerely trying to learn? Are they sincerely trying to look at their own areas of bondage and come to greater freedom? And anyone who would undergo a schedule like this is very sincere, in my opinion.

So I think you all are great meditators. All of you that I have met with are great meditators, from that

point of view of heart sincerity, devotion, faith, commitment, strength, perseverance—many beautiful qualities. So question these judgments. The ones that hurt aren't true.

One way to work is to make them tell you the truth. It's like there's a judge there who's putting these oppressive thoughts on you. Turn around and tell the judge, "Say it in a way that's true. I'm not going to leave until you tell me the truth." And by the time you express it in a way that's true—oh, I was not with the breath for a ten-minute stretch. Oh, okay, big deal. Doesn't mean I'm a crummy meditator.

The bottom line of the storyline with self-judging is usually something like, "I'm not good enough," or "I'm not lovable," or "No one can love me." And when we believe that, when we buy into it, it's a very oppressive burden that we carry largely unconsciously. We may not even know it's there. And only when it starts to lift can we feel what a weight that's been on our shoulders.

Practice of metta and compassion for oneself are very helpful with self-judging. We'll talk more about working with other states as we go.

I wanted to leave you with one technique that has proved very helpful for me and many people we've shared this with. It's a technique called RAIN, and it was formulated by another Vipassana teacher. It's an acronym, R-A-I-N, that reminds us what steps to take when a difficult emotion is coming and we feel we're struggling with it.

The steps are recognition, acceptance, interest, and non-identification.

Briefly: recognize the emotion that's being felt—fear, sadness, desire, whatever it is. Accept the experience. There's not something positive you have to do to accept. It just means stop resisting it. Stop thinking it's wrong. Stop trying to make it go away. Stop trying to deny it. But open and let yourself feel it with a really allowing and accepting frame of mind. Just let it be there.

Third step: become interested. Can you have a child's curiosity about this emotion, like you're feeling it for the first time? Notice how children can be playing happily away, laughing and joking, and then all of a sudden they'll say something that is in conflict with another child, and they'll turn to anger in a moment and have a big fight. Then a few minutes later that's all gone and they're laughing and joking again.

Kids have this amazing fluidity with their emotions. They're not afraid of moving through that range. So what would it be like to be a child feeling anger or feeling fear? And you go, "Wow, what is this?" Like it's never been felt before. And you just want to open up and say, "What does this feel like? How does this feel in the body? How does it feel in the mind? What kind of thoughts come when I'm like this? How do I regard the world? How do I feel about myself and other people?" Just exploring it.

That interest is such a wholesome factor that it can totally shift your resistance and aversion toward the emotion.

The last point is non-identification—not claiming these states as me or mine. All these emotional

experiences are not uniquely yours. They're part of the whole human package. Everybody knows these qualities: fear and loss and despair, agitation, insecurity, anger and resentment. Because they're part of the whole human package, it doesn't mean that you've done anything wrong by feeling them. We all have these things. It's just part of our makeup.

So can there be just seeing this as another arising? An emotion arises, persists for a while, and passes away. No need to claim it or identify with it. When we can see it that way without the label of "I," it's much lighter—just one of many mental states described in the Abhidhamma, experienced previously by the Buddha and by every human that's lived. It's arising and living now in us, but the beautiful thing is it also will pass.

This is why it's safe to open, because each of these states that arises will also pass away. This is why we can open and accept, because ultimately they won't harm us. If we don't struggle with them, they can't harm us.

I'll close with this poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. A little background: it was written when he was in his early twenties, during a very spiritual phase—an overtly Christian phase. He imagines that before each of us is fashioned by God the Creator, God has a short conversation with us before sending us into existence.

"God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently into the night. These are the words we dimly hear: You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now, give me your hand."

Let's just sit for a moment, please.

Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Thank you for listening.

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