The Attitude of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 53:51

Tonight I want to talk about something of the spirit of our practice and how we approach it, and also to define some of the terms that we've been using and will continue to use and hopefully put a little more context around what we're doing.

Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master who founded San Francisco Zen Center, had a lovely statement about the spirit of Dharma practice. He said, "We have to be serious about our practice, but if we're too serious, we lose our way." This is a good reminder for all of us in an intensive practice situation to try and find that lightness of mind and lightness of spirit that Joseph talked about last night.

In doing meditation practice in our tradition, it's easy to get overly attached to some of the fruits of practice. We can get really interested in the concept of enlightenment, for instance. Or having had some very good sittings, even in the past or on this retreat, we might get attached to the strong concentration, feelings of bliss or peacefulness, and have a very strong motivation to recover those. But that kind of approach to practice where we're aiming towards some achievement or attainment can wrap us up in knots.

I got a little feedback on this one time in California. It was a period of practice where I had a lot of zeal for practice. I had a lot of motivation, which in our tradition we call dhamma chanda—love for the Dharma, desire for the Dharma. But it was probably a little out of balance with the sense of relaxation.

I'd been living in California for a few years, and I went to see a psychic. It's something you have to do after you're in California for a few years, kind of like getting a driver's license—you go to see a psychic. My friends had gone to see this guy and raved about him, so I thought I'd go.

I went into his office in San Francisco and walked in the door, and he sort of drew back, almost in alarm, as though my energy was pushing him off his chair. He said, "Whoa, slow down. You're in too much of a hurry to get there." He said, "Don't you know that God comes more often to those who don't want him so much?"

So I realized that I had to balance this dhamma chanda with the opposite side of the spectrum, which is this quality of relaxation that we've been talking about. And yet it's possible to go too far that way also. If you come in and you're too relaxed, you might say, "Oh, I think I'll sleep the first few days. It's so cozy in my room. It takes about three days to get through the tiredness. Then I'll come back to the hall." But the practice isn't going to unfold so well.

So we have to find some kind of approach that is somewhere in between these two—not too much

striving, but also not too loose. We'd like to talk about this place in the middle as what we call a right attitude to practice.

One teacher expressed this quality of right attitude with three simple instructions. He said, "This is how you can approach your meditation: Relax, observe, and allow." Just that simple. So let's talk about each of those three steps.

The first step is to relax. As soon as you sit down, it's good to relax. Partway through sitting, if you notice that your shoulders are starting to migrate up around your ears, it's good to notice that and consciously relax again. At any time during the day when you feel wound up, either physically or mentally, it's good to remember to relax.

Relaxation is almost a magical instruction for our whole system. When we can actually tune in and just drop a level, it sort of sends a message throughout our nervous system that says, "Things are okay." If I can relax, things are okay, and the situation is not too bad.

This quality of being able to relax expresses a very important state of mind that we talk about a lot in Buddhism called trust or confidence. It basically says that we can trust in the moment to support us, to be workable, and we can trust in our own hearts and minds to find a way to work in this moment. So when we're able to relax, it really soothes the whole body and mind, and it sort of lays to rest some of those flutters of worry or anxiety.

It's a fair question: why can I trust? Or what can I trust in? Myoshin spoke last night very effectively on the three refuges of trust in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and I think that's always helpful to reflect on. But maybe more immediate to us as we're coming into our direct experience of the moment is trusting in some purity in our own heart and mind, in our own citta—this word that really means both heart and mind.

When the four of us were thinking about putting this retreat together, and I think we've said it's kind of an experiment for us as much as it is for you, what we wanted to convey to you was a sense that you can explore and discover your own experience and find within yourself some kind of refuge that is part of your direct experience. You don't have to go looking outside yourself. It's the reason that we're talking a lot about awareness and the knowing and coming into the present and investigating that side of things, because it has the potential to be a really wonderful refuge and place of trust.

What we find is that the mind itself has a certain strength and purity that doesn't depend on the circumstances around us. So the circumstances don't have to be perfect for each of us to be able to relax. The mind may be a little bit scattered.

There may be thoughts. There may be some flickers of disturbing emotion—some sadness or apprehension, anxiety. The body may not be entirely comfortable. You may be sleepy. You may be bored. That's all okay. The circumstances just have to be sort of good enough. And maybe most of our moments

are kind of good enough for us to trust and bring out that quality of relaxing.

Once we relax, the next step is to observe, pay attention, see what our experience is showing us. It really helps to be interested. I think there was a question this afternoon about how does one become interested if one is not supposed to be actively doing. And I think a really helpful ingredient is interest. When we're interested in our experience, then the presence is there. The willingness to look and feel is there.

This is really the heart of being awake. I'm sure you know that the word Buddha in the Pali language that his teachings have come down in simply means the awake one. So really what we're trying to discover for ourselves moment after moment is how do we wake up? Interest, alertness, a willingness to learn are all really important pieces of this waking up process which is actualizing our own awake nature.

So we want to, as far as possible, not spend too much of our time drifting into thoughts of past and future and fantasy and analysis and imaginary conversations, although that will happen again and again. But we want to have the willingness to come back into the present moment, turn to our experience, and see what's happening. So we'll observe our body and the knowing of it, our relationship to that, our mind, the knowing of it, the relationship to that, and the environment, the knowing of it and our relationship to that. We'll talk in more detail about all of these focuses.

The third aspect of this instruction is allow. And that just means once you're relaxed and you pay attention, you let things be the way they are. You allow your experience to be just as it is. Everything happens from past causes and conditions. We aren't in control of creating this moment the way it's unfolding. There are so many factors that have gone into its unfolding just as it is. And based on all those factors, it couldn't be any different. Couldn't be any different. Couldn't be any different.

That's why one of our colleagues, Sylvia Boorstein, who's a teacher also at Spirit Rock in California, likes to say when somebody asks how she is, she says, "I couldn't be any better," because it's the literal truth. We are the way we are. The moment is the way it is. We'd like to have our experience always be a certain way—you know, a pleasant way, an uplifting way. It's not always like that. And there's this kind of universal human tendency to try to tweak it so that it is like that. And if you take a look at a lot of our thoughts and activities during meditation, I think you'll see that we're constantly trying to adjust the experience to make it more pleasant or as pleasant as possible.

But we forget that this attempt to control things carries a certain price. And the price, you could say, is our peace of mind or our freedom. There's this image from the Buddhist tradition of samsara being this never-ending round of birth and death and birth and death. And you can interpret that in a very long time frame of many human lives. You can interpret that in a moment-to-moment way—how we go through the day, sort of incarnating as different beings: the sad being, the sleepy being, the frightened being, the ecstatic being, the joyful being, the contented being, the worker being—all the way through our day, this sense of being born and dying again and again and again, constituting this round of samsara.

And this Tibetan teacher said that the very essence of samsara is correcting. This whole wheel is put in motion by our attempts to make things better than they are. And conversely, the relaxation into freedom comes out of accepting things the way they are. So this allowance is not only a kind of convenient easing of friction, but it turns out to be a very profound teaching about how we can best live with great peace of mind and great ease in the world.

So this is one teacher's pointing to this right attitude: relax, observe, and then allow. Another teacher took this sort of allowing piece and refined it, made it a little more precise, and for this we owe a lot of appreciation to a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya. All four of us have had a bit of contact with him over the past few years and have appreciated his teachings a lot.

He says that the way we can check our practice attitude is just to ask ourselves a simple question in any moment, and he recommends that we ask it often: "In my mind at this moment, in relation to my meditation, is there greed, is there aversion, or is there delusion?" You may recognize these as what are called the three kilesas or torments of mind, sometimes translated as defilements, that are the root cause of all the problems in our life personally, in the life of the society, for all of us as humans. Greed, wanting more than we need; aversion, the stance of negativity or disliking; delusion, the stance of being confused or not in touch, not seeing and understanding the way things are.

So we can take a look at any moment. Is there greed?

Is there aversion? Is there delusion?

Well, those can be a little abstract. So Sayadaw recommended three simple questions that are very practical to allow us to answer that question.

Am I wanting something to happen that isn't happening? So when I'm sitting, for instance, in meditation, am I wanting the mind to be peaceful? Am I wanting the body to be really calm and pleasant? Am I wanting the lunch bell to ring so the sitting will end and I can go eat? These are the influences of greed or wanting.

Is there aversion means am I resisting something that's happening? There's a pain in my knee and I wish it would go away. There's a feeling of restlessness in the body and I don't like it.

Or for delusion, the question is, am I knowing or not knowing what's happening? So there are many layers of delusion. We'll talk more about them as the retreat goes on. But in a very simple way, am I not in touch with my experience in the present moment? Then delusion is present in the mind.

So I want to recommend this practice to you. I think we'll probably all talk more about it as the retreat goes on. But just to suggest that you could start to ask this question a few times in every sitting period, a few times in every walking period, during meals and in between. Is there greed? Is there aversion? Is there delusion in my relationship to what's happening? And you'll find it a very interesting exploration.

On days like today, we might find that there's a flood of aversion. Often on first days, there's a lot of sleepiness, and it's not a particularly enjoyable state until you finally go to sleep, and then it's actually one of the better ways to pass the time on the cushion. Or body pain. In the first few days when I sit, sitting so many hours when I haven't been sitting so much at home, the body goes through a real adjustment, getting used to the posture and getting accommodated to the discomfort of the first few days. Or boredom. We miss the things at home. Life here doesn't look that stimulating or exciting. We long to be somewhere else—an expression of the lack of interest in the neutrality of the experience.

So there may be a lot of aversion, a lot of resistance in the first few days. You can also be longing for the kind of sweet states you might remember from other meditation retreats. So both greed and aversion are usually big on the first few days. And delusion because we're often away in thought a lot early on.

But see if it's possible that our meditation can be an expression of a relationship that doesn't have an agenda for something to happen and doesn't have a struggle against what's happening. That is kind of the sweet spot in meditation practice. No agenda and no struggle. Notice what it feels like when your meditation comes out of that kind of attitude. It's almost like from this place we find, oh, this is really the proper way to meditate.

And of course we learn we can meditate and be mindful of agenda or be mindful of struggle. But the difference when both of those are absent is really noticeable. It's a qualitative difference. So continue to check in your mind. The more familiar you become with this place of no agenda, no struggle, no greed, aversion, delusion, the easier it will be to get there. And from this place the meditation unfolds in a really beautiful way.

So there's a little bit about attitude and an approach to meditation, but how can we carry out this observation and what do we observe? What do we carry out the observing on? So I want to talk about some of the key terms that we'll be using, but before I do, I want to take a big picture view of what we're doing here.

I just want to ask in a kind of broad way, as a meditator, what do we understand our basic human situation to be? In the most basic terms, what constitutes a human life? Sort of as observed from the meditator's point of view. Where's the difficulty in it? And where's the freedom or release in it?

So thinking in a fresh way, I like to orient myself around this quote from Rumi: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea."

Continue beautifying this talk (part 4/9). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

Ever feel like that at the start of a meditation retreat? How did we get here? What is up?

Another way to say it might be—we talk a lot in Buddhism about our care and compassion for sentient beings. What does it mean to be a sentient being? What does it mean to be sentient? Or you could say

conscious.

Are you conscious in this moment? Are you sentient in this moment? Well, you're not unconscious, are you? Or if anyone is, could you wake them up? Generally, we're conscious when we're awake.

How do you know you're conscious? We've all had the experience of going unconscious for a while, either coming out of deep sleep or fainting or emerging from anesthesia. How do you know when you're conscious again? Isn't it that things start appearing? And isn't that our basic nature as sentient beings? Things appear to us. If we were unconscious, nothing would be appearing to us. But because we're conscious, things appear.

From a Buddhist point of view, what appears, the Buddha put into six categories. The first are our five physical senses. But rather than paraphrase, let me read you the sutta. This is called the Sutta on Totality from the Samyutta Nikaya, one of the old Pali texts of the Buddha's teachings.

"Monks," the Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life."

That's kind of bold, isn't it? In one discourse, he's going to teach the totality of life. Einstein didn't say that. Freud didn't say that. Marx didn't say that. Here's the Buddha: "I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak.

"What is the totality of life? 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 life. Anyone who talked of a totality beyond this would not be speaking of what they knew about."

So basically, it's the five physical senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch—plus the mind and objects of mind, which for our purposes are primarily thoughts and feelings. We'll elaborate more on this as we go, but for now, thoughts and feelings are the objects of mind.

It's kind of a simple classification. There are just these six categories, the six senses—five physical and one of the mind. And yet, is there anything in your experience that lies outside this list? Can we take it as a comprehensive list of human experience? Let's take it that way as a platform to work on, at least as a hypothesis, and we'll explore.

So basically our life as conscious beings is that we come into the world and all these sense experiences have confronted us since we woke up—certainly from the time of our birth—and have been happening pretty nonstop as long as we're awake. Some of them are beautiful, attractive, pleasant, delightful, enjoyable. Some of them are frightening, painful, terrifying, hair-raising, to be avoided at all costs, we believe.

And it's really this intense mixture of the pleasant and the unpleasant that makes our human life such a challenging circumstance. If it were all pleasant, we could probably live with that. If it were all painful, in some way we'd just get resigned and numb to the extent that we can. But we retain this sensitivity to the

beautiful. And then that opens us up to our vulnerability to what's uncomfortable and unpleasant.

This is really, I think, our basic human situation. We're such sensitive creatures. We're capable of great pleasure and joy. But life continues to present us with difficulties and pain. Moreover, we can't control—as we just talked about a few minutes ago—we can't control the ever-changing flow of these appearances, and we can't control the pleasure and pain ratio.

We're simply subject to these experiences arising whether we want them or not. And it's this constant struggle—because we have such a deep yearning for security—this constant struggle to secure ourselves with the pleasant and to push away the painful that really constitutes this round of birth and death. We're constantly trying to make the pleasure last and make the pain go away.

Where might the freedom be in that?

Meditation attempts to provide an avenue to freedom through the activation of a faculty called mindfulness. A close synonym we'll explore a little later in this talk is the word awareness. As we activate this quality of knowing and understanding our experience—its pleasant and painful aspects and our relation to it—the mind starts to disengage its tendency to grasp. Understanding comes in of the dilemma that we're caught in, this alternation of pleasure and pain, and we start to develop a non-grasping equanimity that understands this flow.

That non-grasping equanimity gives us a place to rest that creates a greater and greater sense of freedom in our life. And in its maturity, in its development, it leads—the Buddha says—to the complete absence of suffering, even in the midst of this changing display of pleasant and unpleasant.

So it's really the cultivation of this quality of mindfulness that we're here to engage in this week and to feel the freedom possible from it.

Let's talk in a little more detail about these experiences that come and their impact on us, and then what the quality of mindfulness develops and how it helps us.

These experiences come alive for us—all the appearances come alive—because of our sentient nature, our conscious nature. In the Buddha's teachings, the faculty of mind that is open to receiving all kinds of experiences is called consciousness. The Pali word is viññāṇa, and it has a particular meaning in his teachings. It is simply that cognizant factor of mind that knows the bare reality of a sense datum.

So a sound arises. And immediately as that sound arises, that consciousness arises in each of your ears. And that consciousness of just the sound, that knowing quality, is this element of viññāṇa. It's the most basic part of mind, as the Buddha described it.

Viññāṇa doesn't have any intelligence with it. You could be almost dozing off and yet that sound could still penetrate. You don't have to do anything verbal with it. You don't have to interpret it or recognize it or think about it. Just that bare pre-verbal knowing of the sound itself—that faculty of the mind is called

consciousness. It's what we've been referring to informally as knowing. So knowing and consciousness are synonymous most of the time that we use it.

We all have consciousness. Babies have consciousness. Animals have consciousness. In the Buddhist view, all sentient beings have consciousness. And that simply means that experiences are appearing for beings at their sense doors. We don't have choice about this. We can't decide not to hear. If I ask you not to hear the sound, you can't choose to do that. So it doesn't take volition. It doesn't take intelligence. It's a more or less automatic functioning of our mind and body combination. We have the sense door of the ear, and we have this consciousness factor that receives it.

Mindfulness is—you could say it shares a cognizant quality with consciousness, but it's a higher level of cognition. Mindfulness, and I'd like to use this as our working definition, is the quality that understands what our experience is in each moment.

If you're being mindful and the sound happens, you would notice, "Oh, sound," or "hearing." So there's this reflective quality that mindfulness gives that is understanding what is happening to us.

The Buddha's main discourse on the practice of mindfulness, as you probably know, is the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. And in it, there's one word that he uses again and again to characterize mindfulness. He'll say, "When the practitioner breathes in, he or she understands, 'I breathe in.' When the practitioner experiences a mind influenced by greed, he or she understands, 'The mind is influenced by greed.' When the practitioner experiences a pleasant feeling, she or he understands, 'I experience a pleasant feeling.'"

This word "understand" is a translation of the Pali word pajānāti, and its root is very similar to the root for wisdom. The word for wisdom is paññā. And it could be translated as understanding, discrimination, distinguishing. Sometimes it's a synonym for wisdom. But it involves—I hope you see—all of these involve some measure of intelligence.

So mindfulness means that we're bringing intelligence to these appearances in consciousness. And we know what's going on. We know when there's an in-breath. We know when there's a sensation of pain. We know when there's a feeling of happiness or sadness that's happening in us. That requires a level of intelligence that the simple consciousness doesn't.

It's really this factor of being able to understand our experience that proves to be the liberating factor in our path.

Notice how mindfulness differs fundamentally from consciousness. Consciousness operates quite automatically—it simply happens. Mindfulness, however, sometimes arises and sometimes doesn't. It requires a little effort in the beginning to cultivate this factor, though not an enormous amount of work. Remember when Joseph asked us to move our arm—it wasn't difficult to know we were moving our arm or to recognize that sensations were being known. But it does take some effort to turn our attention in that direction, to know that this is what our experience actually is.

Mindfulness requires a kind of intelligence that I don't believe animals possess. I don't think animals are capable of carrying out our meditation practice. While I can't say this conclusively, I'll borrow an example that Joseph uses, which I find quite illustrative—what he calls "black lab consciousness."

If you've ever watched a black Labrador going about their daily activities, you'll notice there isn't much mindful attention happening. There's a smell, and they're off. Another dog enters their territory, and they're immediately reactive. Imagine the black lab near the kitchen when the scent of dog food being opened reaches them. Does the lab pause and think, "Hmm, a smell is arising at my nose. That's a pleasant smell. Now I notice desire arising for the taste of that food. I hear the sound of dog food being put in my bowl—hearing, hearing. Would it be skillful to wander over for a sniff and taste?"

That's not how the black lab operates—that's how mindfulness works. As humans, we have a choice. When a delicious smell wafts from the kitchen, we can ask ourselves whether we should go to the dining room now. We can check our watch and determine if it's appropriate. But the black lab simply smells and goes—a split-second reaction.

Mindfulness is a special quality we must cultivate, and it's the enlightening factor on the path. Honestly, when we look around, much of the human world operates at a level not so different from the black lab, which explains why the world is in the condition it's in. But mindfulness offers us the genuine possibility of transforming our reactions to circumstances.

We can integrate these two elements. Normally, mindfulness in our lineage focuses simply on the appearances themselves. We would typically open a retreat with instructions on mindfulness of the sensations of breathing, then expand to mindfulness of other bodily sensations, sounds, emotions, thoughts, sights, and so forth.

We've taken a different approach in this retreat. While it's perfectly fine to notice those things—and we encourage you to notice them—we've added and elevated in importance what I would call mindfulness of consciousness. When we ask you to notice the knowing of things, which is synonymous with consciousness, we're actually encouraging you to be mindful of vijnana, or consciousness itself.

In the meditation Joseph led this morning—the big mind meditation—when he said to look at the nature of mind, at the nature of awareness as a combination of emptiness and awareness, he was encouraging you to direct mindful attention toward this quality of knowing. We could simply say "be aware of awareness," but in the technical language of the early Pali texts, what we are practicing in those instructions is mindfulness of consciousness.

For those interested in the details, this practice is part of the fourth foundation of mindfulness where the Buddha describes mindfulness of the five aggregates. Consciousness is one of the five aggregates, so this is the link in the Satipatthana Sutta to this instruction. We can pay attention to the knowing itself, and that's what we're encouraging you to do.

But it's not easy. Did anyone find that today? It's challenging because in my experience, consciousness is the most subtle phenomenon we can pay attention to. The other reason it's difficult is that consciousness receives objects—consciousness is of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, and feelings. But becoming conscious of consciousness presents something of a contradiction, like the eye trying to see itself. The eye sees other things.

We can't grasp consciousness with consciousness in that direct way. We have to approach it sideways. For me, this means feeling its functioning. Consciousness functions moment after moment by revealing things. As we stay close to the revelation of each appearance, we remain close to the consciousness of it, the knowing of it.

If you found it too elusive or subtle at this point, don't struggle against it. Return and pay attention. Be mindful of breathing.

Body sensations, sounds—wherever you find a comfortable base in the realm of appearances, pay attention there. And little by little, this knowing will become clearer, will unfold more through the instructions, more through the Dharma talks, and you will get closer and closer to feeling it, seeing it. It's a very intuitive process. It can't be grasped like other objects are grasped.

So that's consciousness, mindfulness, and mindfulness of consciousness. And then the next word I'd like to talk a little bit about is this word we've been using quite a lot, which is awareness. Does everybody understand awareness clearly? I don't either.

Awareness is a very interesting word, and for those of us who have come up through the suttas of the Buddha's original teachings, it's very interesting to me. There's no word in Pali that we need to translate by the term awareness. There's no term the Buddha used that quite corresponds to our use in English of the word awareness. And yet other traditions of Buddhism, particularly some Tibetan schools, use this word a lot and it becomes really central in their teaching.

So how are we using the word awareness today? The way it seems to me—and it's all a personal take because it can be used differently by different teachers—is that awareness seems to be a word that spans consciousness and mindfulness. Or you might say it blends the two. Both consciousness and mindfulness are manifestations of cognition, of cognizing. And awareness is a word that kind of holds both ends of the spectrum.

For instance, we have said something like awareness is the very nature of mind, that it's spontaneously happening, that it's ever-present. That is a description more of what the Buddha called vijñāna. It doesn't need to be willed or intended. It's ever-present. Consciousness has that aspect, that it's always happening, quite automatic. So awareness conveys things like spontaneity, effortlessness, naturalness, and this ever-present sense, a little bit like consciousness has.

But awareness as we use it in English also has a connotation of intelligence. When we say something like,

"Were you aware that you were feeling sad?" that means really, "Were you mindful of the fact of sadness that was present in your mind?" In that, it's more like mindfulness.

So we tend to use awareness in a way that evokes both some of the intelligence of mindfulness and some of the natural spontaneity of consciousness. Because mindfulness has a little bit of intelligence involved. Intrinsic to it, knowing, understanding what's happening. It's the doorway to wisdom. And it's the wisdom that gets developed from mindfulness that starts to liberate the mind. Well, awareness also has this property of intelligence associated with the word. So awareness is a nice lead-in also to wisdom.

The sense of spontaneous intelligence—the feeling of that, the flavor of that—is something that we want you to start to have some faith in, whether we call it awareness or whatever we call it. This is the refuge that we hope you can discover on this retreat, that that natural intelligence and wisdom is always there in us in every moment, just waiting to be recognized.

This is from Ajahn Mahā Bua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

So if that's true, if there is this kind of deathless quality in us that is intelligent and beyond birth and death, that becomes a very immediate resource for us. And so we just need to refine our confidence in that and our ability to touch it, our ability to access it or recognize it again and again and again.

Doing that, whether we do it through directly pointing to the nature of awareness or whether we activate wisdom by exploring the appearances that come, both have the same power to awaken us. So I don't want to say that this looking at awareness is a kind of different order of meditation. It's not. Mindfulness itself will wake up our wisdom, whatever it's directed to. If it's directed to breath, body sensations, thoughts, sounds, or consciousness itself, they're all liberating practices.

The way that mindfulness tends to work in our normal practice, as we start paying attention to the different aspects of our experience, the six sense appearances, we start to become interested. Interest is a really critical component. You notice how when you love something, you love watching it.

I was just teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock, and there was a visitor from Canada who was on the staff side and didn't know our California birds, but she brought a bird book. And she was out the whole month. I would see her for like an hour at a time, out with her binoculars, scanning the trees and listening to the bird songs for all these new birds that she'd never encountered before. And I could tell from her energy and from talking with her a little bit that she loved birds. She loved watching their behavior and learning about their habitats and their flight patterns and their silhouettes in the sky when they flew.

And it's that way with all of us. When we love something, the interest comes really naturally. So this love for what we're paying attention to—the term from the Buddha is called rapture—and we find that that

quality of love and appreciation for our meditation grows.

The more we do it and the quieter the mind gets, we love—after a certain point, we love watching the breath and we love observing body sensations because we get so interested in the nature that's living out through this body and mind.

As we start to pay attention to the breath, we see each breath is different. And we become really interested in how it's born and how it persists and then how it dies. We stay with an in-breath till the very last fading away. And then we're right there for the movement of the first flicker of the out-breath and stay with it until it fades away.

And similarly with the other aspects of our experience—the sensations and thoughts and emotions—we really want to understand them as we become so interested in this nature that's living in us. As we do, we become really familiar with their individual characteristics, just like my friend watching the colors and the flights and the sounds of those birds. She got to know each of those birds really well. We get to know the breath really well. We get to know impatience really well. We get to know loving kindness and compassion really well because we start to love them.

We start at first to see their individual characteristics. You know, this breath is long, this breath is short, that emotion is fiery, this emotion is very pacific. But then as we keep observing, we also start seeing without even trying their universal characteristics. Oh, every breath ends. Every thought has a beginning, a middle, and then it passes away. Every mood that I've ever had on this retreat has not lasted. Everything that was pleasant in my life has faded, and I couldn't hold on to it for satisfaction. Nothing lasts forever.

So through these observations we start to see the characteristics of impermanence, lack of satisfactoriness, and lack of abiding self-structure within the whole experience. Then we take that kind of interest and we see how wisdom grows. We see that when we understand that everything fades and we can't hold on for satisfaction, non-clinging becomes so much more natural. We start to live more from a space of not holding on and not grasping.

Then we start to take that interest and investigation and wisdom that have developed and we turn it toward the nature of consciousness itself. In fact, one author said that this type of meditation he described as the penetrative focus free of conceptual elaboration upon the very nature of conscious awareness. And we discover then the possibility of this kind of refuge for ourselves.

There's a Thai teacher who comes to Spirit Rock every spring called Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian is a master of meditation developed in both vipassana and loving-kindness from the time he was very young. He has this incredibly joyful appearance and energy. He said that he hasn't had any anger for the last thirty years. And he seems like that because every time I see him, he's just joyful and energetic and outgoing. His favorite mantra—he doesn't speak much English, but this is the little English he speaks—he'll touch space and he'll say, "Empty, empty." And then he'll say, "Happy, happy." It's a union of emptiness

and happiness.

So this is a quote from Ajahn Jumnian about this refuge: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and he used the Pali term mahasati, which means great mindfulness—"the best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure awareness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharma of impermanence and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

We start to see that most fundamentally, when everything else comes and goes, this is what we are. We are this empty space of knowing in which everything appears. From the time we were young, everything started to appear. Mother, bottle, milk, kindergarten, high school, career, marriage, income tax, Paris Hilton—everything appears on that screen, some beautiful, some not so beautiful. But the knowing stays with them all, stays somewhat constant with them all.

As we start to place our emphasis, our attention, our trust in that knowing, we start to shift our center of gravity from the preoccupation with the specific objects that are appearing—to which we're inclined to cling if they're pleasant, or push away if they're unpleasant—to simply rest in this knowing space that is free from greed, aversion, and delusion. Because we notice that the knowing doesn't have preferences. It reveals the painful as easily as it reveals the pleasant. So this knowing already has the right attitude that's free from greed, aversion, and delusion. We trust more and more in that. We put our attention more and more in that. We start to trust our being to that.

I'll just close with a quotation from Rumi called "Tending Two Shops."

Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way. Checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish.

So let's just sit for a minute in silence, please.

Thank you for your attention.

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