The Pure And Luminous Mind

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:45

I want to start tonight with a quotation that Carol used in her talk when the Buddha said, "This mind is luminous, but it is colored by visiting defilements. The uninstructed ordinary person does not understand this, so for them there is no cultivation of the mind."

There's this image that in our nature there is this pure and luminous mind, or you could say awareness, that's the foundation for all of us. It gets colored or covered over or stained by these defilements that visit it and obscure it, but it's still there underneath all the time. Ordinary people don't understand this because they dwell so much of the time in the obscurations, and so they don't bother cultivating the mind to uncover this brilliant original nature.

The Buddha goes on: "This mind is luminous and it is free of visiting defilements. The instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is, so for them there is cultivation of the mind." When we gain some conviction that our original nature is pure and undefiled, it gives us the motivation to rediscover that again and again, to open it up so that it becomes more and more our living experience.

So what stands between us and the manifestation of this pure mind are these visiting defilements. The work of cultivation is about understanding their effects and how to release them. That's really what I'd like to talk about tonight.

These forms are many. There are many such visitors—just a very partial list: craving, lust, anger, hatred, aggression, sadness, despair, loneliness, fear, anxiety, terror, shame, jealousy, confusion, guilt. The list could go on and on. In Mahayana Buddhism, it's said that there are 84,000 of these afflictive emotions. But that was invented about 2,300 years ago when life was much simpler. So I think today there must be at least 168,000 of them.

Of course, when the underlying luminous mind is exposed and touched, as it unfolds it has the capacity to bring forth all the beautiful states of mind too. So qualities like love and compassion, joy, wisdom, generosity, non-clinging, renunciation, calm, equanimity, mindfulness—all of these are implicit, you could say dormant, and just waiting to be activated within this pure and luminous mind that is our basic nature. And I trust that there are at least 84,000 of these also. So that's the strength of our nature.

It is really in the activation of these beautiful qualities of mind that we develop the path. So when the Buddha says, "For the noble disciple, there is cultivation of the mind," it means learning to release or liberate the obscuring qualities, the difficult qualities, thereby exposing the pure nature underneath, which then manifests in all the beautiful qualities. This is really the work that we're engaged in here.

When I first started practice, I was in my mid-twenties, and I was very drawn by the idea of enlightenment. Back then, the books that were available were largely from the Zen tradition, and they talked about these old Chinese and Japanese masters who had become enlightened, and that was very appealing to me because it was a way out of my emotional problems. I thought, being lovelorn, being insecure, being lonely—all I have to do is get enlightened and all that stuff will go away. So enlightenment was so appealing because it was going to rid me of my emotional problems. That's really what generated my interest in the path in the first place.

But as I think of the path now, I have a different take on it. Now I think that it's not possible to get enlightened until we've resolved our emotional misunderstandings and cleared up and liberated those forces. Then enlightenment can perhaps visit us. But we need to do this work first. There's no magic bullet that's going to come along in our practice and solve these conundrums for us. So fortunately we don't need that. We can use our own native intelligence to start to relate to these forces of mind and find out how to become free in the middle of them.

It's really about inviting these states to come, not trying to shy away from them or hide from them or avoid them, because we have the capacity to know them and to let them be. This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, grisly, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing. There is a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method."

Because we actually have the capacity to make peace with this emotional realm, the states that are the source of a lot of our suffering in day-to-day life as well as in retreat, we do have the potential to make peace with this. I like to think of this process as becoming enlightened before we're enlightened. Because as we understand this whole level of the heart and mind, we open to a great deal of inner freedom.

It's not that we have to make any of these states go away. For most of us, they will not go away for a long time completely. They are not uprooted until very advanced stages of development. But nonetheless, we can come to harmony with them through understanding. So even though the first impulse of our mind is to get rid of them, it's not actually what works because it's simply not possible at our level. They don't go away immediately. And that's why we have the opportunity, and it's a great situation for learning, to learn to relate to them directly.

Again, from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality 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."

So tonight I want to explore this whole area of the difficult states of mind, the source of most of our suffering.

I want to ground this exploration in the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness, specifically in what's called the third foundation of mindfulness. While breath and body are included in the first foundation, the area we're examining tonight is significant enough to have its own foundation—the foundation called *citta*.

We've mentioned this word several times. *Citta* can be translated as either heart or mind, encompassing both affective and cognitive qualities. When we say *citta*, we always mean both dimensions. In the West, we tend to split heart and mind, but in the Buddha's teaching, they were never separated. One teacher suggested that the best translation for *citta* is psyche—a beautiful way to understand it. This is the realm of our psyche we're exploring today.

If you ask a person in Thailand where their mind is located, they'll point to the center of their chest. Ask someone in the West, and ninety-nine out of a hundred will point to their head. But in Asia, it's assumed that the heart and mind are located here in the chest.

There's a wonderful story that illustrates this cultural difference. You've probably noticed the abundance of neuroscience research today, where scientists use rigorous methods to prove meditation's benefits for mind and body. One of the foremost researchers is Richie Davidson from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who is himself a meditator. He pioneered studies of Tibetan monks—meditation adepts who were placed in functional MRI machines to map their brains as they entered deep meditative states of absorption or generated strong feelings of compassion.

Dr. Davidson has consulted with the Dalai Lama for many years. They've brought His Holiness to meet with American scientists and have traveled to Dharamsala to meet with him there. On one trip to Dharamsala, Richie decided to demonstrate some test equipment to the Dalai Lama and other monks.

Since they couldn't ship an entire MRI machine—a bit too heavy—they brought a cap: essentially a leather shell with strips running down it, fitted with twenty to thirty electrodes along the strips. When placed on a subject's head, the electrodes contact the scalp, and cables running to a computer detect brain activity, measuring and graphing brain waves in real time. They actually ran experiments here a couple of years ago on yogis after a three-month retreat and found very impressive results. So come to a three-month retreat—it really works. We're not sure about nine days yet.

They demonstrated this apparatus for the Dalai Lama in a great hall with about five hundred monks present. After putting the cap on someone, connecting it to the computer, and explaining through a translator how the experiments work, something unexpected happened. When the translation finished, all five hundred Tibetan monks burst into laughter. They found the whole thing absolutely hilarious.

Richie assumed they were laughing because the cap looked silly—which it does. But when they asked what was so funny, the monks explained: They thought it was ridiculous that people would try to study the mind and meditation's effects by examining the brain, because everyone knows the mind is located here, in the center of the chest.

So that's our next challenge: How do we measure the mind at the center of the chest? I don't have the answer for that.

This is the realm of *citta*—heart and mind, cognition and affect, all experienced through this third foundation. We'll explore the beautiful states of mind as the retreat progresses, so don't be impatient. We won't give you *dukkha, dukkha, dukkha* the entire retreat. We usually start there and warm up to the beautiful states.

Two important shifts are necessary to feel relaxed and free with difficult emotions that visit us. First, we need an attitude shift—moving from resisting and judging these forces to acceptance and allowing.

Second, as we open in this more allowing way and shine the light of awareness on difficult states, we develop greater understanding of how they work. We begin to see that all these challenging states of mind have their own mechanisms—they operate in particular ways. Because we all share the full range of human emotions, these mechanisms work in remarkably similar ways for everyone.

Through this study, we're learning about our mental nature, which is the same as all human mental nature, and we're understanding the nature of these obscurations.

As we start to study them, we see how they're put together. We see they all have a process of arising, persisting for a while, and then passing away. We start to have great conviction or faith in their temporary nature. None of them are permanent or very long-lasting.

And we start to see that as they manifest their nature, they come in just like weather systems. Just like this warm breeze that came in today lasts for a while and is temporary, as you probably had guessed, so also all the moods that come in arise, last for a while, and pass away. When we can start to understand them just as weather systems, we don't have to own them. They're not particularly yours or mine. They're just these states. And we become familiar with their own nature.

As we do that, we start to see their essential impersonality. We don't have to own them. We don't have to identify with them. They're present. They come. They go. So this is the operation of wisdom. One of the shifts is just of greater openness. The second is greater understanding through the wisdom factor.

In learning about these states, the first thing that's really helpful is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. It's not often taught in this culture. I grew up very untrained in this area. So when I came into meditation and I found that one could actually observe the mind and the kinds of moods that came through, for me it was like discovering a new world. There was a whole landscape I hadn't known anything about.

It was like my wife taught a friend of ours who's, I think, 63 years old. She taught her last year to snorkel. This woman had never snorkeled before. They were in warm waters together. And our friend came up from her first time of snorkeling and said what most people do when they have had their first snorkel:

"Wow, there's a whole world under there I never knew existed." Because it is amazing, isn't it, if you start to see that. So that's the way it is looking into our mind. There's a whole world of beautiful states and difficult states that live and breathe and move within us. But until we've closely looked and examined, we don't sort of know that landscape and terrain. So it's a very interesting exploration.

Kids, I think, have a tremendous potential for learning this early. One of our Sangha members at Spirit Rock runs a preschool. And because it's the Bay Area, it turned out that all the parents of the kids in her preschool were supportive of meditation. It might not happen everywhere, but it happened for her. So she has about 20 kids who are aged 3 to 5 in this preschool, and because the parents were into it, she's basically structured it as Dharma training for these children.

She has them from 9 to 1, five days a week. She tells them stories from spiritual sources like the Jataka tales, early lives of the Buddha, other traditions that have clear spiritual messages. She teaches them yoga asanas where she uses the animal poses and makes stories about what the animals are doing while the kids are in the yoga poses. And she teaches them to meditate and takes them into a meditation room and encourages them to sit. And she has these three- to five-year-olds quiet, sitting quietly for 30 minutes at a time because they've so soaked up kind of the vibe of the stories and the movements and everything else. It's an extraordinary thing that she's doing.

One of the ways that she gets them into this meditative state is that she has them do yoga postures and they end up in a lying down posture at the end. I think it's savasana. And as they lie down, see, they can't relate to words like calm and awareness. That's not in their vocabulary, but they relate really well to images. So she said, as you settle down into the floor, imagine that you're just falling into a pool of water. And then you're becoming the pool of water. And within this pool of water, all the fishes swim. And the fishes are your emotions. You can have a happy fish swim through your water. You can have a mad fish swim through your water. A sad fish can come. A friendly fish can come.

All the fish can come and swim through your water. Just lie down and open up the water and let all the fish come.

So one five-year-old boy got up from this exercise and he said, "I could let all my fish come except the mad fish." And she said, "Well, why couldn't you let the mad fish come?" And he said, "Well, when you don't know that you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

When you don't know you're this pure, luminous mind in which everything moves, the mad fish makes you do things. It's amazing. The kids have this kind of intuitive understanding available. And we can learn it. We can learn it also. But for me, it wasn't so easy. It wasn't so apparent in the beginning.

I'll give you a little example. I was doing a long meditation retreat sitting in this hall in the early years of my practice. And I'd been settled in for about two weeks, so I was pretty present and pretty concentrated. The morning sitting had ended—I think it was 9:15—and I went out the back door to go for walking down

on the grass that's below the parking lot. And I felt I was being very mindful as I left the hall. I was with every step, slowly lifting and placing and lifting and placing.

I got out the back door, and I looked down to my walking area, and there was somebody on my walking path. And I'd been walking in that path every walking period for two weeks. And I look out there and I go, "How could somebody walk in my walking path? I've been there every period. Haven't they been observant?" And then I was just very mindfully still walking, lifting and placing and lifting and placing. I get a little closer and I think, "Are they trying to play head games with me? You know, did I cut in front of them in breakfast this morning or something?" Lifting and placing.

And so all this time I was kind of getting steamed that somebody was in my walking place. But I walked down there and I found another stretch of grass not far away. And to my surprise, it worked just as well. So I was doing my walking, I was about thirty minutes in, and I was still dwelling on this guy who was in my walking path, and all of a sudden I realized: I'm angry. I hadn't picked up on it. I thought I was being really mindful by being with the lifting and the placing, and I was missing the main thing that was happening to me.

This is what we mean by delusion. When I say delusion is not knowing what's happening to us, I was in a state of delusion. I thought I was mindful, but I didn't even know what I was feeling, and it was the main thing that was going on.

When I didn't know what I was feeling, I was completely caught up in it. I believed in my story—that it was my walking path, and that guy shouldn't be there. And I was right and they were wrong. And as I was telling myself this story over and over again, what happened is my mind just kept going back to that person. And I might still be with my feet, but I wasn't really with what was happening. So I was caught. I was completely identified. I believed in the story.

When I realized I was angry, it was like a light bulb went on in my mind. "Oh, anger." Then, instead of pointing all my attention at the other person, I could turn the attention to my inner experience. "Oh, there's anger here." Then I had a possibility of release because I knew how to meditate with anger. I knew how to feel it in the body. I knew how to feel it in the mind. I knew to look for the kinds of thoughts that were going on. But until I recognized it, I couldn't even do that meditative work. I was just completely glued to it.

So this is what these hindering energies tend to do. We think we're being mindful, but they slip in under the radar. Boom, they establish themselves, they take us over, they point us in some other direction—with anger toward the person that we're annoyed about—and we really lose touch with what's going on inside.

So the first step, and it's really the most important step, is to turn that attention back to ourselves and say, "Oh, what I'm feeling now is anger," or whatever else it is. So be aware of this with these hindering qualities.

They're quite tricky. They seduce us in a different direction away from mindfulness. But if we can just remember first to recognize they're there, mindfulness is reestablished, delusion is dispelled a little bit, and we can start to work. We can start to relate.

So there are a few states of mind that I want to talk about specifically tonight. There are four big ones that I see again and again in my practice and in meditators that I work with.

One of the curious things about these difficult states of mind, the unwholesome states, is they're bound up with time. Anytime you're caught in one of these hindering energies, you are also caught in the web of time. Wholesome states don't have this quality. Just in a moment, very freshly, we can feel love or joy or compassion or generosity, not dependent on past or future. But when the hindering energies are there, we're locked somewhere in past or future with them. So this is one of the main axes on which these hindering energies unfold.

The other axis they unfold in is pleasure and pain. We've talked about how this human life is such an unpredictable mix of the pleasant and the unpleasant. And our tendency to lose our balance is largely due to that. We don't know which is going to come. We don't know quite how to rest in the middle.

So I want to suggest that the four main obstructing energies come from this combination of pleasure and pain mapped against past and future. Let me ask you to investigate a little bit with me.

Let's start with one quadrant: past pleasure. There was a pleasurable experience in the past, but it's no longer here. What's the emotion that attends upon that kind of event? There was past pleasure, but it is no longer. Sadness, isn't it? It was here, it was beautiful, I've lost it, and that engenders sadness. This is a strong part of human experience—our response to pleasurable things that were in the past.

Now let's take an unpleasant experience from the past, particularly one connected to another person. What arises? Anger. Anger arises if we remember something that somebody did to us that was unpleasant in the past. And that's another very strong human experience.

Pleasant in the future—that's craving, isn't it, or desire. When we think about something pleasant that could happen in the future, that sparks desire.

And what about unpleasant in the future? Fear.

So I want to suggest that these are the main four dominant kinds of hindrances that come to us: sadness, anger, desire, and fear. These are the four I want to touch on this evening. There are many others—this is by no means exclusive, and you'll find different variations of these. One variation I want to touch on is that when the anger is directed against ourselves, it takes a particular form of self-judgment. It's another strong one for meditators in retreat. And to this group, I want to add one other that I'll talk about toward the end: the factor of doubt.

Each of these four, which can come and visit us frequently in daily life or in meditation retreat, has three

main components that I would suggest to you as a meditator are very, very helpful to investigate and explore.

The first is every one of these has a mood that is just a quality of mind. There's a mental tone, a kind of coloring that comes into the mind, an atmosphere or a climate, you could say, that is connected with that particular emotion.

He said, "The problem is my girlfriend. I keep thinking about my girlfriend. And I want to be with my girlfriend." So I said, "Well, that's understandable. How does that feel when you have those thoughts about your girlfriend?" And he said, "Well, it feels good to think about her. I love her very much, and it's pleasurable to bring her to mind."

I said, "Okay, that's fine. But tell me, at the end of thinking about your girlfriend for a while, how do you feel?" He paused for a moment and said, "Well, I feel sad." I asked, "Why do you feel sad?" He replied, "Because she's not here."

This is the bittersweet quality of desire. There's immediate gratification in the fantasy, in bringing to mind something we want. But the end result is always a sense of lack, because we're reminded that we don't have what we're fantasizing about. The very act of desiring points to what's missing.

So when you notice desire arising in your meditation practice, investigate this quality. Feel into that tone of wanting, that reaching quality of mind. Notice how it expresses in your body—perhaps as a kind of leaning forward, a tension, an unsettled quality. And then look at the story that sustains the desire. Usually it's something like: "If I had this thing, this person, this experience, then I would be happy. Then I would be fulfilled."

This story is the glue that keeps the desire spinning. It's the belief that our happiness depends on getting something that's not here right now. But when you look carefully, you can see that the very structure of desire guarantees dissatisfaction. It's always pointing away from this moment toward some imagined future fulfillment.

The interesting thing is that when you see this clearly—not intellectually, but in your direct experience—the desire often just collapses. You don't have to fight it or push it away. You simply see its inherent frustration, and it naturally releases its grip.

This doesn't mean you won't want things or that you'll become some kind of emotionless robot. It means you won't be driven by the compulsive quality of wanting. You won't believe the story that your happiness depends on getting what you desire.

What's wrong? He said, well, this is our vacation time. It was August. And he said, I had two choices. Some friends invited me to go on a vacation to the Caribbean with them, or I could come on this meditation retreat. And I said, why did you come here? He said, because all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out.

So we were his second choice. And it looked pretty austere compared to Caribbean beaches and the warm waters and being with his friends. And he said he just wasn't getting into being here. But I worked with him to see if maybe the problem was not the absence of the Caribbean, but the presence of the wanting. Because wanting has this unfulfilling quality—when we dwell in it, we feel unsatisfied. Wherever we are, we'll feel unsatisfied if we're wanting something else.

So I suggested, what would happen if you just didn't think about the Caribbean for a while and just were in the present moment? How would that be? And he came back a few days later. He had kind of let go of the Caribbean fantasies, and he had really settled into being in the retreat, and then it was no problem. He settled in, and the meditation unfolded beautifully.

Once we settle into the retreat, the desire force tends to express itself in relation to retreat life. So the things that we start to want are peaceful sittings, concentration, special insights, feelings of expansiveness, a moving quality of loving-kindness. Those are a little harder to pick out because they're so embedded within our environment. But start to tune in that they have the same dissatisfying nature and that it's only when we can release them that we can fully settle back into the moment the way that it is.

So when desire is present, notice how the force feels in the mind. I find there's a kind of leaning forward, kind of toppling into the future to make the next moment the way that I want it to be. And I start to feel that body tension, just a strain in my body as I'm leaning after something I can't quite get. So the tone in the mind, the sensation in the body, the thoughts that come typically about future, and the story of desire as I look within—something like, I would be happy if only I had that. So it's like a promise of future happiness if we could attain that. You take that storyline out, the force of the fantasy really goes away. So play with that.

When anger is present, we find ourselves dwelling on the incident from the past that caused it. Take a look inside. The mental quality of anger is kind of fiery or burning or hot. You feel inside the body, and it's similar. There's usually a constriction, contraction. There's often quite a lot of energy with anger, but it feels like there's a lot of friction in it, as though it's burning. Sometimes heat comes strongly into the body with anger.

Notice what kinds of thoughts come—probably quite similar to when I was looking at my walking path being occupied. Thoughts of blaming. And so we run the thoughts over and over, blaming the other person, justifying ourselves. Those are the kinds of thoughts that come. So the storyline, for me, feels something like—and you might find variations on this storyline; this is not like fixed in doctrine—but take a look and see what the storyline is for you. For me, the storyline is something like, I'm right and you're wrong. And that's the basic belief that sustains anger. And if you take that belief away, the anger just crumples. This is why it's so helpful to have dialogues.

So also take a look in anger at the feeling in your own experience when anger is present. And if you look within, there's this burning, there's this friction, there's this fiery quality. It's very unpleasant. It's a very

unpleasant emotion to feel. So there's a saying in the tradition that anger is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will get sick. It doesn't work so well.

One of the most convincing things for me to encourage me to let go of the blaming thoughts was the realization that I was the one who had the poison. Especially in an environment like this, we may be angry at somebody here, we may be angry at someone at home, but we're the ones who are suffering and they're going about their way very happily, quite unaware of the poison that we intended for them.

Another image from our tradition is anger is like picking up a hot coal to throw at someone. But before we can throw it, we have to pick it up, and then we get burned. So I found it very, very helpful in anger to feel the suffering that the state brings to me. Now, that encourages me often to let go of these blaming thoughts because the blaming thoughts keep adding fuel to that fire. Every time I think another blaming thought, the fuel gets thrown on and the fire gets higher.

So it encourages me not to think those thoughts anymore. And when I stop thinking those thoughts, the fire starts to die down. But just stopping to think those thoughts is kind of an act of faith, because at first I thought, "Oh, well, if I don't think those thoughts, then I will be condoning that person's action. I'll be saying, oh, what that person did was fine." And it may not be fine.

You know, it could be accurate that you were right and they were wrong. That could be a kind of clear perception because awful things happen in the world to very innocent people. These things happen. There's war and there's torture going on in so many countries around the world. In our own culture, there's individual violence and domestic violence, racism, assault, and all kinds of injustice taking place that are wrong, unskillful acts.

The question is, even if we perceive that clearly, do we need to keep telling ourselves that story? Once we've understood that someone did something that was unskillful and perhaps motivated by ill will or malice, do we need to keep telling that story, thereby fueling the anger? Or is it possible to hold it with the understanding that yes, that was unskillful on their part, but we don't need to consume ourselves with anger?

The Dalai Lama tells this story of a monk that he used to know in Tibet. The Dalai Lama left Tibet in 1959 after almost 10 years of Chinese occupation and fled to India. This monk stayed in Tibet, was not able to leave at that time, and was eventually imprisoned by the Chinese government for about 20 years. And then finally he got out and escaped to India and met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala.

So the Dalai Lama received the monk and they had a conversation because the Dalai Lama makes an effort to meet people who have escaped from Tibet. So they were talking about the monk's time in prison. And the Dalai Lama asked him how his treatment had been. And the monk said that he had been in danger. And the Dalai Lama said, "Yes, of course, you must have been very worried about being tortured or even killed." And the monk said, "I was tortured, but that's not what I meant by being in danger. I

meant I was in danger of being angry, but I wasn't."

The Dalai Lama said after that, he had to conclude that this monk was a very developed practitioner. This is an extraordinary capacity. It's not a capacity I have. But to me it's very inspiring to know that this is even part of our human potential. To have that kind of mistreatment and to be able to hold it without moving into anger. Because anger doesn't often accomplish a lot for ourselves. There is a strength in it that we may be able to draw on and to use, but we have to be careful of burning ourselves in the process.

One form of anger is self-judgment. And this is something that often comes into people's minds as they enter into the silence, maybe because we're away from social contact. We start to feel the ways that we're very hard and judgmental on ourselves. With self-judgment, most helpful to be able to identify the kinds of thoughts, develop a label for the thoughts as being judging. Notice the impact of that on our mood. Feel the sense, the kind of heaviness and the oppression that comes from self-judgment. And feel the pain and the suffering of it.

Something that really helps to relate skillfully with this is a sense of compassion for ourselves. When we feel the hurt that we bring to ourselves through this judging tendency, let ourselves feel that directly, then some compassion can come in for ourselves.

One of the other strong things we have to deal with in life is a sense of sadness. We've all had a lot of disappointments in life. There have been things that we hoped would turn out that didn't, things that we hoped would turn out better than they have. With sadness, often I think we're afraid to open to that feeling because there may be a belief, "If I open to this, it will never end. I'll drown in it, and it's bottomless and will never lift."

But notice that that's just a belief. And so to have the courage to open and let that feeling come through, feel it in the body. Sometimes there's a heaviness, just a kind of weightiness, maybe in the chest. Feel the mood of sadness. Notice the thoughts. And the storyline for me in sadness is something like, "I can't be happy because I've lost that," that thing that it's focused on. And if we believe in that, we don't allow ourselves even a moment of opening to real happiness. Happiness could be a possibility of just an opening in this moment to a delight or joy. But if we believe in the storyline of sadness, we can't find that willingness. We can't find that openness even for a moment.

So most grief has its own timeline.

If we open and let ourselves feel, not resist, it will move through us. Grief often moves in waves—it comes, and at some time will pass. So we need to trust in that natural process in order to allow the sadness to have its movements.

One of the particular hindrances that meditators encounter, which I wanted to touch on briefly, is the quality of doubt. In this sense, it's skeptical doubt, particularly about the activity we're engaged in here. You'll notice this when the question comes up, often early in retreat: "What on earth am I doing here?" We

can't seem to connect with why we came. We can't make any sense out of the instructions being given. The question arises: "What does sitting on my butt and following my breath have to do with happiness for myself or anybody else?" None of it makes any sense.

Then we often fall into questioning the teachings, the practice, the teachers, ourselves, or all of the above. When doubt comes, if it isn't seen clearly, it's in a way the most paralyzing of all the hindrances because the uncertainty, the indecision stops us in our tracks. It keeps us from taking a single step forward. We can't make a commitment to anything.

It's like we've come to a crossroads. Should I go right? Should I go left? Should I go straight ahead? And we can't move in any direction because there's not enough determination to take that step. So we just stand at the crossroads and kind of dither.

If we dither with the meditation, then we don't give ourselves a chance to carry out this experiment. Someone in an interview this morning said something interesting: "This is like an experiment where we're the scientists, but we're also the laboratory." That's really quite accurate. This mind-body investigation is an experiment, and there's a certain formula that we suggest you follow to carry out the experiment. We suggest that if you do, these are the results that will happen.

But it's like you get to the doorway of the experiment and you don't mix the chemicals. Then you go off at the end of the week and say, "Well, nothing happened. I guess this stuff doesn't work, or it wasn't the right thing for me."

So if doubt is there, it can completely block our ability to open and progress in the meditation practice. Once we recognize it, we can see its paralyzing nature and we can just take that determination: "I'm just going to follow, I'm just going to do it, then I'll check after."

The last quality of mind I wanted to touch on tonight is fear. Fear was something that had a really strong presence in my practice in my early years. It was my main hindering energy, and I had to spend a lot of time coming into it, touching it again and again and again.

One of the first things I saw is that when fear arose, I was afraid of it. That tended to multiply it. As fear arose, I'd get more scared. As that got bigger, I'd get more scared. It would be this spiral, and I didn't know how to work in that situation.

What was very helpful for me was learning to come into the body first and foremost. When fear arose, I would always bring my attention directly into the body and just feel whatever sensations were there. It might be a contraction in the belly. It might be a kind of fluttery, light feeling through the chest. There might be sweat under the arms. I would direct all my attention, all that I could muster, to just being with those body sensations.

I would ask myself, "Can I open and feel these? Can I allow these to be present?" And I found that after

contact, after contact, after contact, I could. I found that they were bearable.

As I investigated the storyline of fear, it was something like: "This moment is bearable, but something really awful is going to happen in the next." So if I could come back into this moment and bear it, that sort of undercut the fear. That's where I directed my energy: "Can I open and bear the manifestation in this moment?"

First I got comfortable or familiar with the body sensations. They didn't get pleasant, but I could bear them. Then I looked at the state of the mind.

And in the mind, the tone of fear carries a quality of wanting to get away, wanting to move away, wanting to flee, not wanting to feel. So I tried to bring openness to that too. Generally, little by little, I would bring more and more acceptance to the body, to the mind, understanding the story of the fear, and it grew more and more workable. But I still really didn't like it—and this was after many, many encounters.

Finally, one day I was sitting with the fear, and I noted that I still had resistance to it, even after working to bear it so many times. I asked myself: if I was truly going to be accepting of this, could I be okay if this stayed like this for the rest of my life? That, to me, was a sign of true acceptance. Could I be okay with this for the rest of my life? And the answer was no. Are you kidding? No way.

But I didn't stop there. I investigated further: why? Why couldn't I accept this being here for the rest of my life? What came into my mind were images of things I had enjoyed intensely in life up to that point. I would think of times listening to a piece of music, so involved that I'd be in rapture of delight, strong emotions that the music unlocked. Or watching a sunset somewhere beautiful in nature when I was completely open, with a sense of just merging with the sky and the earth—that sense of oneness and deep connection.

I thought I'd have to give these things up if I was going to be fearful. So I sat with that for a moment and thought: you're going to resist it now on the off chance that one of these things might come along later? I realized I was giving up my present equanimity and peace of mind in the hope of some future getting high. Then I just realized that wasn't a good trade.

So I opened to the possibility that I could be with this state the rest of my life and that I could be okay with that. When I did that, the fear lost some deep hold on me. That degree of openness broke something in the grip that fear had held over me. I went through a period of practice where I was completely equanimous to fears arising or not arising. If it came, that was fine. If it didn't come, that was also fine. I truly had no preference.

Since then, fear has come back a number of times—visits from time to time. But I feel I have the way to understand it and relate with it, and it doesn't throw me off balance these days. Of course, I haven't faced a lot of difficult life situations yet, so I'm not making claims about the future, but it's become much, much more workable.

With all these difficult energies that come, we have the potential to bring that same level of equanimity and acceptance to anything that visits us. Your particular main one may be sadness, or desire, or self-judgment, or fear, or anger. But the capacity is there for each of us to develop this complete equanimity in relation to these states so that they really don't obstruct us or obscure us any longer.

As we do that, we find that we start to clear out a lot of space in the mind—areas that were formerly problematic. Experiences in life that we couldn't accept were felt as a threat or problem. They aren't intrinsically problematic, but if we avoid them, then there's a problematic relationship that leads to suffering. As we can open to them, a lot of those problem areas just clear out.

Difficult emotions are one of the most challenging areas of life. So those problems, one by one, as we understand and as we open, start to disappear from life. We begin to develop great confidence that we can relate to whatever life throws at us, because we've learned to relate with some of the most difficult aspects of our hearts and minds.

I'd like to close tonight with this quote from the Tibetan tradition—The Blessings of Gampopa, who was a disciple of the famous Tibetan yogi Milarepa. It's presented as a kind of prayer or supplication, but you can think of it as directed to anyone you like: to a guru, to a deity, to a higher power, to your own inner wisdom. Understand it in whatever way makes sense to you.

The Four Blessings of Gampopa:
Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's simply sit together for a moment in this understanding.

Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Thank you.

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