From Ignorance Come Impulses

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:58

At this point in the retreat, if we take a look back at the mind that we entered the retreat with, or the mind of ordinary daily life, we can see that the normal human experience is one where there's a kind of ongoing rush of thoughts and emotions.

This ongoing rush of events, of movements of mind, tends to bring along with it also a swirl of emotions. So that in the normal course of an untrained mind, there's a feeling of being stirred up, never fully at peace or at rest. This is so much an ordinary part of life that most people don't even notice that that's what's happening in their minds.

But from the perspective of meditation, where you have touched a different experience and a degree of inner peace, then looking back at the normal daily life experience, it looks busy—some degree of turmoil and disturbance, and some degree of flooding of emotions as just an ordinary experience.

At one point in my meditation practice, when I had tasted some degree of peace and then was looking at this mind, the question came to me and became a subject of a lot of interest: Why does the mind move at all? Why is this the normal human experience of things? Why do we not just rest in a state of inner peace until thought is needed to carry out a task, and then we summon it up, employ it, and then put it to sleep again? Wouldn't that be a saner way to live? Isn't this kind of ongoing turmoil that is the normal human condition a little crazy? And why are things the way they are?

This is the area I want to explore in the talk tonight. We've talked about the role of intention in movements of body, in utterances of speech. Tonight, I want to bring a little bit of the investigation of intention into the area of thinking. I'd like to suggest that the thoughts that come are not just random or uncaused, but that if you look closely at their nature, many of them—I don't want to say all, but many of them—spring from some kind of deep and habitual inner urge, or really more accurately, urges. There are lots of different motivations, volitions, intentions, and urges that propel thoughts into our mind, into our experience.

Just some common examples that I know we're all familiar with: A friend comes up in our meditation and there arises a spontaneous wish for them to be well and happy. That's the urge of loving kindness or metta. Of course, we cultivate it through formal practice of the Brahmaviharas, but it's a natural urge that is there often when we connect with people we care about.

Or we're feeling a lot of gratitude, a common visitor in a retreat at this point, and a friend comes into mind who we feel is not as fortunate as us, and there's an urge to share some of what we have. It may be our

time and energy. It may be other of our resources. We want to share something with them to improve their situation. And that's the urge of generosity, another natural urge that we take care to develop through meditation.

Or another time, someone will come to mind whom we've had a conflict with and a feeling of resentment or anger will come up, and we feel in that an urge or a mood of ill will. There's some way we'd like them to be a little less happy than they are when that mood is present—another of these urges from habits of mind.

Or we might start to think about someone that we're really close to, maybe a partner or a good friend that we'd like to go on a great trip with, a vacation of some sort. And we think about being in the company of our friend and we think about the lovely place or places that we'd visit. That's entertaining for a while and somewhat pleasurable. And we look into that thought and we say, "Oh, that's expressing this urge of desire"—especially comes in when the atmosphere is so austere and we want to provide a little hit of pleasure. So this deep force of desire coming through in that way.

We might think about our job back in our daily life and feel a sense of, "Oh, I wonder if anything's going to have changed while I'm away. Are people taking care of things all right? Is office politics going to stab me in the back while I'm gone and can't defend myself?" And this fear urge, another primal movement of heart, may come in.

Then what we start to notice is that when these thoughts come from these kinds of urges, they're not just neutral, equanimous events in the mind, but they carry an emotional punch. And the emotional punches, like the other conditions of life, roll through us with an alternation of pleasant and unpleasant experiences. It's lovely to feel loving kindness and generosity. It's not so lovely to feel anger, longing, ill will, and fear.

So the net result is that in the untrained mind, these thoughts travel through our experience rather pell-mell, completely out of control, rushing one after another with this alternation of some wholesome—but honestly, if we look closely, the majority are not metta and dana, are they? When we first come into retreat and establish ourselves in those first days, it's not like we're overwhelmed out of so many thoughts of love and compassion and joy and generosity. It's more the other stuff that's going through—the force of all the hindrances that we've talked about.

And that's why, as we just look on this experience without trying to change it or to judge it, we start to see why our life feels so stirred up outside of our arena of meditation, the avenues we discover to peace and calm. There's just this random flow of thoughts from these deep urges that carry these packets of emotion—some wholesome, many unwholesome—and it leaves us feeling tired, tense, sometimes beaten up, sometimes quite victimized by the force of these habits of mind.

So this is the area where we start to understand that thoughts are also carrying intention. Of course, many

of them we could carry to the next step. We could call our friend and tell them how much we love them. We could go to the pay phone and place an order with REI and send them a really nice gift of a new bicycle that they've been wanting and express that generosity. We could get really upset and write them a letter expressing our anger.

But because you all are such well-trained yogis, I know you're not doing any of that. So these impulses are only being born in thought, but they could be carried out, couldn't they, in actions of speech or body. These volitional forces move through us. We can hold them in mind, where they act as disturbing forces, or at times we can express them through speech and bodily action as well.

It's quite interesting to tune into how thoughts carry an emotional charge—many of them—and those charges are expressing some kind of, often a deep kind of intention or wish.

So this is a little digression. I don't want to go into this in the talk, but I want to plant the seed for your exploration. Are there thoughts that don't carry any emotional charge? That's the first question. The second question: Are there thoughts that don't carry any intention or volition? Are there thoughts that arise without volition, without expressing an urge like this?

I'm going to leave that question for you to reflect on later if it interests you. But what I want to talk about tonight are the ones that come with an intention or an urge, that express a volition of the mind, and can act in this disturbing way.

Because of this volitional component, these thoughts—and then if we move into actions of body and speech—are sometimes called volitional formations. They're sometimes also called mental formations. They're sometimes also called karmic formations, because the volition or intention is the seed of karma, wholesome or unwholesome. The Pali term that we're using here is *sankhara*. And this is the same term as we talked about in the aggregates—the fourth aggregate, the third mental aggregate called formations.

So again, looking at the influence of these, we have to ask: why do these keep arising over and over in the mind? James quoted the *Hsin Hsin Ming* last night, the verses on the faith mind, that said something like, "Stop talking and thinking and there is nothing you cannot know." But you see how extraordinarily difficult it is to cease this process of talking and thinking. There's no off switch up there that we can just reach up and turn. This is a powerful process.

As we start to look into it—which is what I want to explore in the talk tonight—we'll see that this is not just a random or superficial occurrence, but rather this is a phenomenon that is deeply rooted in our psyche. But not just in our individual psyche—you could say it's deeply rooted in the human experience.

So that's what I'd like to look into. Where does this movement come from? And that this is essentially the problem of meditation to resolve—the arising of this disturbance from our inner volitions and urges.

I'd like to link it to what the Buddha called his most profound insight, his most profound teaching, which

is the chain of dependent origination, which many of you have heard of. We're not going to go into it in detail. I want to focus just on a part of it. But in the chain of dependent origination, the Buddha outlined twelve links or steps that carry us into suffering. It was a very detailed explanation of how suffering comes to be in our experience, step by step.

The heart of it is the territory that Carol was describing in her last talk—how sense contact brings up pleasant and unpleasant feeling tones, and the mind habitually responds with some form of craving, either greed or aversion, and then that leads to clinging, to taking hold of the object, either to draw it in or to push it away. And where there's clinging, there will be suffering. That's the heart of dependent origination.

It's actually not the part I want to focus on tonight. Carol did a great job of covering that, so I think we've been through that terrain. What I want to cover tonight are the first two links of dependent origination. And colloquially, the way we could describe it is: the first two links say that impulses come from ignorance.

So that's our topic. Impulses come from ignorance.

The way that the chain is presented, ignorance is the very first link. And so it's considered the root of everything that can lead to suffering. When ignorance is in the mind, suffering will inevitably result to a greater or lesser degree. And the whole twelve links of the chain explain that process in a lot of detail.

The second link in the chain is volitional formations. The Pali term is *sankhara*—it's the same word we were talking about earlier in the talk. And the word that links them can be translated—the Pali word is *pa ccaya*—and it can be translated as "conditions," "is a necessary condition for," "gives rise to," "influences."

So the traditional translation of these two links were: ignorance conditions volitional formations. The term for ignorance in Pali is *avijja*. So the whole Pali link has a very nice sound. It's *avijja-paccaya-sankhar a*.

Ignorance gives rise to sankhara or these volitional formations. But in this context, I prefer the term "impulses" as a translation for volitional formations because it captures that inner experience more vividly.

As a meditator, when you sit down on the cushion and tune into this part of your experience, it is felt—or I feel it anyway—as an impulse that comes into me, often from somewhere quite deep down. This impulse is out of my control. It's experienced as something that springs up from some deep layer of mind, uninvited, unrequested, and uncontrollable—just a budding into the mind of this force. So I'm quite fond of this term "impulses." We can say that impulses come from ignorance. This is the meaning of these first two links.

Now it's crucial to understand that the chain of dependent origination not only describes the arising of

suffering—it also describes the undoing of suffering. When you trace the chain in reverse order and examine the ceasing of each step, suffering ends. The key to this is that when ignorance ends, the whole chain collapses and suffering comes to an end.

So ignorance is considered the linchpin in our human condition. When it is present as a force in the mind, we will fall into suffering. When it is eradicated, suffering is over and done with. The entire journey of the Buddhist path can be understood as the uprooting of the force of ignorance from the mind. But as you know, that's not a simple undertaking.

The first term, ignorance, is a translation of the Pali word avijja. Avijja literally means "not wisdom"—that's all it means. "Ignorance" has a rather pejorative connotation in our culture, but the Pali is simply "not wisdom." So if you prefer to think of it as "unwisdom" or "not wisdom," that might feel less harsh.

The important thing as we examine this is not to be judgmental about the factor of ignorance in the mind. We all have it. We're going to have it for a while. There's no need to be embarrassed about it, so I hope you won't feel judgmental about yourself as we explore this term.

One of my teachers explained it beautifully. He said the wisdom mind arises in practice—that's one side of the hand. Ah, wisdom is there: clarity, peace, understanding. Then a minute later it swivels, and unwisdom is there: confusion, obscuration, some measure of suffering or discontent. This is our life as meditators—wisdom, unwisdom, wisdom, unwisdom. They go back and forth like this for a long time.

So don't be discouraged by the presence of unwisdom. It's simply a fact of life, a way we're put together right now.

The basic meaning of avijja-paccaya-sankhara is that when ignorance is operating in the mind—which it will be much of the time—this will give rise to these not-well-thought-out impulses, which will lead to suffering through actions of body, speech, and mind.

So what fundamentally drives these impulses, these unwholesome forces of mind? It's our old friend craving in its manifestation as greed, aversion, and delusion. You're very familiar with the forces of greed and aversion. Delusion means we don't recognize their activities. It acts as a veil that prevents us from seeing clearly how greed and aversion operate, because when we start to see clearly how greed and aversion work, we want to give them up. We do give them up when we see them clearly.

As Ajahn Sumedho expressed it: when you start from ignorance, you end up in suffering. This is a helpful way to think about it—start in ignorance, end up in suffering.

Here's an example. A bank robber went into a bank with a note for the teller. He approached the window and handed the teller this note.

It said, "Give me all your money. If you don't, I will shoot you. I have a gun in my pocket."

The teller, having gone through the usual training, knew it wasn't worth risking their life. So they put the money from their drawer in a bag and handed it over the counter to the robber. He got in the car and drove off.

When he got home, the police were waiting for him. He couldn't understand how they had tracked him down so quickly. When he asked, he found out that the note he had written to the teller was on the back of his deposit slip, which had his name and address.

So that's ignorance leading to suffering—unwise choices. Of course, we're not quite that unaware. But when we don't understand how our actions come out of unskillful impulses, when we act out of greed or aversion, we end up causing harm, and we leave a kind of karmic deposit slip that's got our home address on it. The karma police track us down, and it all comes back.

Sylvia has this beautiful saying—I haven't heard her say it this retreat, but I've heard her say before: "When we see clearly, we act impeccably." This is the factor when wisdom is there. We see clearly, these impulses don't dominate our consciousness, they don't dominate our actions, and we stay out of the realm of suffering.

These forces of greed and aversion we feel in our personal life are also rampant in the world, as I'm sure you know. All the misery of the world is also traceable to these three roots: greed, aversion, and delusion.

Just a couple of simple examples. The financial system is in such bad shape basically because of greed. When credit was easy, bankers were writing unbelievable mortgages, handing out loans that they really should not have. As an example, one of the stories I heard: a gardener who was making $14,000 a year in California went to a bank and applied for a loan on a $700,000 house with no money down and was given the loan. Why would a banker do that? That seems really unwise for the institution. But it made sense because the bank got fees off generating the mortgage. Then they took the mortgage and bundled it up with a bunch of other mortgages and loans, bundled it all together and sold it to a financial institution. Why would the financial institution buy it? Because they packaged it with other instruments and sold it to investors, making a commission. So the banker's greed and the brokerage's greed combined to put all this worthless debt out there that could never be paid off, but people were profiting along the way. All the predicament we're in right now, mostly caused by greed—rampant, unrestrained greed.

And for the force of aversion or hatred, you don't need to look further than the daily headlines from Iraq or Afghanistan, where almost every day some suicide bomber is killing more people, mostly innocent civilians. Just hatred and fury unchecked, unreasoned.

This is a dynamic that causes the suffering in our own hearts and minds—we see this clearly in meditation. This is a dynamic that spreads all the harm in the world. It's underlain by this force of ignorance.

So let's talk about this ignorance a little bit. Ignorance here doesn't mean not knowing certain facts. It

doesn't mean you don't know who the president of Zimbabwe is or you don't know how to conjugate a verb in Latin. It's not about that kind of knowing.

The Buddha described ignorance as not knowing the Four Noble Truths. Now, I could ask a lot of you, "What are the Four Noble Truths?" and I'm sure you'd be able to tell me. There's the truth of unsatisfactoriness in life—that's the first. The cause of that unsatisfactoriness is craving—that's the second. The third states that the end of unsatisfactoriness or suffering lies in the end of craving. And the fourth says the way to the end of suffering is through the Eightfold Path.

So we may all know that, but there can still be ignorance in the mind because we haven't fully embodied it. We haven't gotten all the implications. For example, if we understood the truth of unsatisfactoriness as it applies to all the sense realms, we wouldn't crave or cling any longer. We crave and cling for conditioned things because we haven't quite understood they don't really fully satisfy. And when they pass, we suffer with their loss.

So the Buddha's injunction is that we should understand the first noble truth, and we haven't fully understood it because we keep craving. So we haven't carried out the second injunction for the second noble truth, which is to relinquish craving. We fail to relinquish the second noble truth because we haven't fully understood the first.

And because we haven't fully relinquished craving, we haven't fully seen its end, which is the third noble truth. And we haven't fully seen its end because we haven't fully walked the eightfold path to its conclusion. So we understand them intellectually, but we haven't taken them all the way into complete integration with our experience. And that's why ignorance is still there.

Another way of understanding ignorance is that we don't really get the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. Again, if we truly saw change, we wouldn't try to hold on because we'd know that anything we held on to was going to change and that would be painful. Because all conditioned things are unsatisfactory, we'd know not to cling to any of them. And in seeing the selfless nature, we'd understand there's no way we can collect things around the center of self.

So in shorthand, a nice way to think of ignorance is to think of the construction of self. As long as we're believing in a self, we're caught in ignorance. So that's a nice shorthand way to think of it. The sense of self, the belief in a separate I, is the sign of ignorance.

Ignorance is related to the factor of delusion in the list of the roots of the unwholesome. The Pali term is moha, as Carol mentioned. This word moha originally means, in its etymology, stupefied. So that might be a nice way to think of delusion—stupefied. And that feeling is not so far off at times in our practice. At times when there's confusion, you feel lost or uncertain or bewildered, not sure where the ground is—that is the factor of delusion. This sense of bewilderment is a part of it. And this sense of bewilderment supports the operation of greed and aversion. When we're not seeing them clearly, they have more reign.

If we saw them clearly, they wouldn't take us over so much.

These three forces—greed, aversion, and delusion—are talked about in Buddhism as different personality types. And when we look into the personality types—the greedy, the aversive, and the deluded—what we really understand is they're all just different ways of trying to manage the unsatisfactoriness of experience. Trying to manage dukkha.

The greedy type undertakes a strategy in the face of dukkha of trying to pull in as much pleasant stuff as possible and as often as possible. So it's to keep the dukkha at bay by maintaining a steady diet of pleasure. That's the first strategy.

The second strategy, the aversive type, is to prevent against dukkha by constantly being on guard and pushing it away. So the aversive type sees the unpleasant and wants to keep it at some distance. And that's the pushing away effect of aversion.

The deluded strategy is quite interesting. It is not to feel. The deluded type sort of steps out of the interplay, the variation of pleasant and unpleasant, by going into a bit of a fog so that the intensity of that variability is not really felt so much. So this is kind of the origin of the fog of delusion. It's like, let me not feel. Let me stay in space. Let things not come too close. So with deluded temperaments, there's often a little bit of a spaciness about them.

I get this feeling sometimes when I travel a lot. At different times of year, I may be in different places, and I notice this happening more as I get older. I'll be driving a car down some road which I've been on before, but all of a sudden I wonder, what season is it, and what town am I in? And I just don't know. I have to think for a minute, and I just feel spaced out and not really in touch while that is going on.

Sharon Salzberg is a self-confessed deluded type. She's talked about it a lot in talks, so I can share this. She recounted an experience that's very typical of the deluded mind. She was teaching a three-month course at IMS. She lives right next door to IMS. She'd driven home at night the night before, parked her car in the driveway, went home and slept, and in the morning she walked over to do interviews at the center next door. She walked across the driveway where she'd parked her car, and it wasn't there. And she thought, did I park my car here last night?

So that's the first sign of a deluded temperament—not really knowing where you left your car. Did I park my car here or not? So she wasn't really sure, but she walked into the center and she saw somebody who is a good friend and might know, and she said, "Do you know where my car is? I parked it in my driveway, but it's not there this morning." And the friend who knows her as a deluded type said, "Are you sure it's not there?" So that was the right person to ask that question of. And she said, "Well, a car is a pretty big thing. I think I'd have noticed it this morning if it had been there."

But she said that just for a minute, she had this confusion—was it really there and I just didn't see it? And so that's another sign of the deluded temperament: not being quite sure. It turned out somebody had

borrowed her car without telling her, and that solved the mystery. But it was an interesting chain of reactions to watch.

So there's this quality in the deluded mind of being a little disconnected from our own experience. If we don't make that connection moment by moment, it doesn't go clearly in, and then it's easy to forget what's happened, where we are, what's going on.

The countermeasure for the deluded temperament is that the proximate cause for wisdom is wise attention. So this is the way to get the counterpart to delusion—wise attention. What I think is very helpful for deluded temperaments is steady noting practice, just waking up the mindfulness in each new moment to take clear account of what's happening right now. Just that moment-by-moment kind of refreshing of the wisdom factor will bring in the strengthening of this factor of wise attention, which overcomes delusion.

So I want to look a little more deeply now at how our current situation has come about, how we find ourselves in this situation of impulses coming out of ignorance being such a disturbing force in our life. I want to suggest that there are three steps that have happened somewhere along the way in our development. It may be back in beginningless time, as the Buddha has mentioned, but somewhere along the way there was this primal step where we lost touch with our true nature.

There is in each of us an essential nature that is sometimes called the deathless, sometimes called the unchanging or the unconditioned. Somewhere along the way, that was lost track of. Its quality of not being subject to change, which was lost touch with, got substituted with a belief in an ongoing self. So can you get a sense for that flip? There is the unchanging. There is the unconditioned. There is the stable. There is the permanent. But somewhere along the way, consciousness lost touch with that and, in order to try to compensate, let's say, it created the notion that the self is that ongoing, enduring, permanent entity.

So it constructed this sense of I in a way as a replacement for the essential, deathless nature that we all share. But it forgot it. And that's the operation of ignorance. It forgot the substitution. It forgot that that substitution was generated from its own volition. And it started to believe in the reality of the self, identified with a particular body and mind, and therefore had to project all the rest of experience as other.

So there was now this creation of a duality. There's a belief in myself on the one side and all the rest of creation, all the rest of the appearances that arise in consciousness are now labeled other. This fundamental split is what we could call the first level of obscuration. This is the basic sense of ignorance.

Once we buy into it, all of a sudden we have an activity that can never be completed. That activity is to protect the I against the threatening aspects of the other and to nourish the I from the pleasing aspects of what we have labeled other. Once we undertake this project, it can never be done. The I can never be completely protected. We're always vulnerable. Anything can happen to us—illness, accident, natural catastrophe. We could die. All of us could die in the next hour. So the I can never be fully protected, nor

can it be fully nourished. We have very beautiful experiences. We have pleasure. And they all pass. And then we're back in this open space again.

Out of that creation of the false sense of duality comes the strategy of greed and aversion. And the delusion is we don't recognize the split that we have created. So we keep operating, searching for the pleasant, pushing away the unpleasant, on and on and on. And this is what essentially removes our inner peace. When we commit to this project of defending and nourishing the I, we give away our inner peace, and we commit it to caretaking the self.

Then, as greed, aversion, and delusion start to become habitual, highly conditioned, deeply conditioned tendencies of mind, they give rise to all the other afflictive emotions. In the Buddhist texts, it's said that there are 84,000 afflictive emotions based on greed, aversion, and delusion. Now, that number was made up like 2,000 years ago. The world's in much worse shape today. I think we must have at least 160,000 today.

Different varieties of afflictive emotions. Just start looking at the list: sadness and loneliness and fear and self-judgment and shame and humiliation, wanting and longing and yearning. The list goes on and on. These become habitually conditioned and then make up that swirl of afflictive emotions and thoughts which is our normal human condition. This is the layer of obscuration that keeps us from seeing clearly, so we have trouble reconnecting with our essential peace. We call this the swirl or the layer of afflictive emotions—the second layer of obscuration. The first was the false creation of self. The second is the layer of afflictive emotions.

Then, because we're often taken over by, driven by, compelled by these afflictive emotions, we act them out in ways that harm others. When we harm others, of course, we end up harming ourselves because the duality was never true in the first place. There is no real division between my heart and your heart. If I harm you, I'm also harming myself. But we pretend that's not happening from this place of ego. We pretend the rest of the world doesn't matter because all we're committed to is nourishing and protecting this self, and we don't worry about the impact elsewhere.

This is delusion because deep in the unconscious we know duality has never been true. The unconscious knows that, but delusion keeps us from understanding it consciously and from integrating that understanding. Sometimes we act out of desire and hurt ourselves or others—sexual desire, intoxicants, killing beings for food. Sometimes we act out of aversion, hatred, lying, killing, and so forth.

This creates another level of problem for us. These unskillful actions build up in our whole body and mind and form a layer called karmic obscurations. It's hard to see through the thickness that results from a lot of unwholesome deeds because there's a level of regret and remorse and shame that we're at first in denial about. We can't see them because we pretended it doesn't matter. Our ignorance gets compounded with greed and aversion expressed outwardly in all kinds of unskillful actions that end up harming others and ourselves.

So these are the three layers: the sense of self, the afflictive emotions, and the karmic obscurations.

Then how does the path work? What are we doing here? I find this really fascinating because the Eightfold Path starts at the outer layer and works back in to the deeper layers. This is the path of, as it's traditionally described, sīla, samādhi, and paññā—ethical conduct or virtue, concentration or meditation, and wisdom or insight.

We start by beginning to practice with virtuous conduct. Really, if we simply practice with the five lay precepts, it goes a long way. We start to look at these areas of killing, of taking what's not given, of lying, of misusing sexuality, and misusing drugs and intoxicants. As we start to clear up our behavior in all those areas, then we have the openness to start looking at some of the past misconduct. That's when the life review comes in, and we open to the feelings of real remorse and regret for the unskillful actions that we've done in the past.

As we start to make our peace with the past actions and our present conduct becomes much more refined, that itself brings a level of great harmony into the mind because we're no longer in as much conflict with the outside world. The relations start to become harmonious and stable and undisturbed. This is a terrific advance, simply the practice of sīla and the clarification that brings in the heart and mind. It takes out the factor of regret, remorse, and the denial of wrongdoing.

Now this practice can be really beautifully refined. I love to think about this story of the Dalai Lama when he was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. Oprah ran an interview with His Holiness in O Magazine a few years ago, and this is the account of that interview.

Oprah began by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect," Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bed bugs also."

"And that's it," Oprah said. She couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she finally continued. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced

meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

So that quality of...

of this understanding, we recognize that the very process of seeing clearly is itself enlightenment. This is not a distant goal we're working toward—wisdom is already present in every moment of clear seeing.

When we look closely at any experience—watching a thought arise and dissolve, feeling sensation flow through the body, hearing a sound emerge and fade—we discover that nothing has the solid, permanent characteristics we once attributed to it. Everything is revealed as fluid, interconnected, arising from conditions and dissolving back into emptiness.

This direct perception gradually dissolves the fundamental delusion that there is a solid self at the center of experience who needs to be defended, promoted, or satisfied. The ego-structure, which seemed so real and important, is seen to be a mental construction—useful for practical purposes but not ultimately real.

As wisdom deepens, we naturally begin to live from a place of greater freedom. The compulsive reactivity that once drove our behavior starts to relax. We respond to life's circumstances with increasing clarity and compassion, because the self-centered agenda that once filtered everything through the lens of "what's in it for me" begins to dissolve.

This is what the Buddha called the purification of view—seeing reality as it actually is rather than through the distorting lens of self-concern. When we truly understand that there is no separate self to protect or aggrandize, our hearts naturally open to the welfare of all beings.

These three stages—ethical conduct, concentrated meditation, and liberating wisdom—work together as one integrated path. Each supports and enriches the others. Without the foundation of skillful conduct, the mind remains too agitated for deep concentration. Without the peace of meditation, wisdom lacks the clarity needed to see deeply. And without wisdom's insight into the illusory nature of separateness, both ethics and meditation remain subtly self-centered.

Together, they constitute what the Buddha called the Noble Eightfold Path—the way leading to the complete cessation of suffering and the realization of our deepest freedom.

of the implication of impermanence, we see that all these factors are uncontrollable. The outward world is uncontrollable. Inner experience is uncontrollable. They're all just coming and going according to their own nature through many, many causes and conditions.

So that lets us take our hands off the steering wheel. What we are really doing is surrendering those outworn strategies of greed and aversion. We start to see that if we simply relax and trust the unfolding of the moment, there's a deeper ease, peace, and happiness that comes from that trust and relaxation than came from any degree of control, which is always governed by fear. Control is always based in fear.

As we start to trust the natural unfolding of things, we let go of these strategies of greed and aversion. We rest more in the present moment. And as we see through this duality, the interconnectedness becomes so apparent. We start to see that we are not so different. When we look at ourselves in terms of nature, my body and your body are the same nature, put together in the same way. My emotions and your emotions are the same emotions. We have the same range, put together a little differently from person to person. My awareness and your awareness—it's the same nature. It's just human awareness. We start to feel like we're just the same water poured into different vessels, as one of the old poets said.

At some point in my practice, as that kind of deep interconnectedness became clear to me, my very motivation in practice started to shift. First, I was only concerned with these levels of obscuration getting cleared in this mind and body. I just wanted my awareness to be free from the delusion, from the karmic obscurations, from the afflictive emotions. But then I started to see it's the same awareness everywhere. My wish started to be: I'd like all the awarenesses to be free of obscuration and be able to shine with wisdom—with the wisdom that is our common nature, the wisdom that is at the heart of all of us.

So even my intention in practice changed, and this is something I offer to each of you. Our intention can become working for our own understanding and liberation as a way to help remove the obscurations everywhere. This is the quality in practice that we talk about as bodhicitta.

We can reflect on this, make it a part of our daily contemplation. I like to make a resolve in this direction at the start of every sitting. I just say something like, "May I come to awakening in order to benefit all beings." The understanding is that if I can awaken, then it will be easier for others to awaken.

This term bodhicitta, sometimes translated as enlightened mind—I like "awakening heart." You can just bring this in and make it a part of your daily experience, your daily reflection. We can start to include as motivation in our practice to wake up in order to benefit others, to be able to liberate awareness wherever it's obscured.

So this is called purification of view. We start to see through the duality, the falseness of the duality of self and other. We see how everything is arising according to its causes and conditions. This is the work of paññā, or wisdom. But the work is not done yet.

Wisdom has one more step. Seeing through the falseness of self is good. Seeing the truth of impermanence is good, and it brings a certain freedom. It doesn't bring complete freedom. So wisdom has to take one more step, which is to go beyond the duality and touch again that essential nature. We could call it our essential emptiness, our essential unconditioned nature, our unchanging nature, the factor of nibbana.

When the mind has been collected through the purification of conduct, the purification of view, when wisdom has been developed and the mind comes into balance, there is the possibility for that penetration to take place, where there's the touch—the direct touch of the unconditioned.

Some people on this planet have developed this quality to a very high degree. I was in Nepal a few years

ago. I was practicing with my Tibetan teacher named Soni Rinpoche, a young lama. One of his teachers was staying at the monastery while I was there. My teacher said, "Would you like to meet this lama? He's a very highly regarded teacher. His name is Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche."

At first I said, "No, I don't really need to." I thought, seeing one Rinpoche, you've seen them all. Then I thought about it for about a day and said, "Yeah, I would like to meet him if I could. I've heard a lot of good things about him." I actually had an offering from a friend who asked me to pass on some dana to him.

So I had an occasion to meet him. I went into the room where he was prepared, sitting in meditation posture. His wife was there, along with a couple of attendants, and my teacher translated. We had a little chat, and then I prepared to offer the dana.

I crawled forward, did three prostrations to him, and then offered out the envelope. As he took it from me, I looked directly into his eyes, and he looked back into mine. As he did, he went into his meditation state. I'd never experienced anything like it before.

I looked into his eyes and his eyes moved slightly apart as though he was looking into a great distance. Then something in him went completely still. I felt like I was looking into the unconditioned nature. When I thought about it later, it wasn't even accurate to say his mind was still. The feeling was there was no mind there to be either still or moving. He was just utterly empty.

As I kept looking into his eyes, I felt like I was falling into that empty and unconditioned nature. I felt if I could have just looked a little longer... I don't know what would have happened. But I felt so exposed. His gaze was so penetrating and he was so undefended that some nervousness came up in me. The nervousness broke the spell and he saw it in my eyes. Then he just went back into his normal mind state and the moment passed.

But I felt I had seen at that moment one of the qualities of the Buddha that is probably why so many people woke up when they came into his company—because of his deep touch and manifestation of this utterly still, unconditioned nature, the highest kind of happiness that we can each touch as a possibility when we penetrate through these layers of ignorance and obscuration.

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

This is the peaceful. This is the sublime. That is the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, cessation, nibbāna.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.