Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:01

The Buddha said often that his teaching was only about two things: suffering and the end of suffering. In regard to the first, he said that our job is to understand it—to understand it fully.

When we consider this in the context of our daily life, this task can seem complicated, unending, a little overwhelming. We look around at our friends and family and may feel something similar because we may have people in all sorts of different difficulties and life situations. We ourselves may have been in very difficult life situations.

It's not uncommon that we have a friend who has become addicted to drugs, or one of our children, and we don't know how to reach them to move them out of that. Or we may be bringing up a family and lose our job, and our home becomes in jeopardy with all the foreclosures that are happening. That situation seems overwhelming.

We may find as we look around society that there are different currents that seem unworkable. The political polarization happening in this country and around the world today seems almost insoluble. The difficulties of violence in all its forms—racism and injustice and the suffering of poverty all around the world. What do we do? How do we understand that? It's very difficult.

But when we come on retreat, the situation becomes simpler and the suffering becomes workable. This is one of the beauties of life in retreat because we can leave behind some of that complexity.

As I come into retreat, suffering comes down to basically three things. One is physical pain. I'm sure you all have experienced that, felt that, know that meditation isn't able to solve it in all cases, but it can help us learn to relate to it. So a very frequent source of suffering in retreat is our reaction to physical pain. This is a good learning ground because it will be with us in our life as well.

The second kind of suffering is emotional pain or mental pain. There are so many different varieties here: qualities like desire and wanting, longing, yearning, hatred, aggression, despair, depression, jealousy, loneliness, envy, pride, sadness, grief, sorrow, embarrassment, shame, guilt, confusion. There are more, right? We're vulnerable, aren't we? And we all know all of these.

In the Mahayana teachings, these are described as afflictive emotions. That's a nice term because when these states assail us, we are afflicted by them. We suffer on account of them. They cause us pain. In the Mahayana descriptions, there are said to be 84,000 of these states. But those texts were written 2,000 years ago, and life has gotten a lot more complicated since then—there must be at least twice that many now.

All these different forms of emotional pain come to us in our daily life and also here while we're on retreat. For most of us, I think these are the most common and probably intense forms of our personal suffering—the different kinds of emotions that visit us. This is really what I want to talk about: how to work with these difficult and afflictive emotions, sources of so much pain in our life here and outside.

Then there's a third kind of suffering that we have as meditators that normal people in daily life don't have. We're very privileged, you could say, to have this third kind of pain, and that is the pain of meditative frustration. We sit down, we direct the mind to be present, we pick up our anchor. Does it stay there? No, of course not. So it wanders off. When it comes back, we often feel some degree of disappointment, discouragement, frustration, anger, self-judgment—all those things that we are subject to because we've taken a meditative path.

If you were to go ask the person on the street, "Did your mind wander much today?" First, they wouldn't know what you were talking about, and second, if you explained it to them, they really wouldn't care. So as meditators, we have this third kind of high-class suffering, which is the suffering of the wandering mind.

But it's primarily the difficult emotions that assail us that are most of the suffering in our human life. So that's what I want to talk about.

The beautiful thing about mindfulness practice is that it gives us very immediate tools to begin to relate to these states. In the long run, the promise is that they can be uprooted through the different stages of awakening and be completely removed from the mind.

The Buddha said that they are cut off like a palm stump, no longer subject to future arising. But that is a very high level of attainment. And if you aren't an arhat yet, you wouldn't be familiar with that. I'm not familiar with that.

So for us, for a long time in our spiritual practice, we're not going to be rid of these states. I used to think that was really disappointing. When I began meditation, I thought, "I'll clear this up in a few years." It didn't work that way for me. But you never know. I'm not saying what's going to happen for you. You never know.

I had to take a different approach, which was to learn how to find some freedom in relation to these states when they came. That is possible. It is possible for all of us and all of you who have this level of commitment to find that through the practice of mindfulness and its supporting factors. So this is what I want to talk about tonight—how we develop that kind of freedom in relationship to these difficulties.

As we explore the range of mind through meditation, we find out we don't really have to be afraid of what we're going to find there. When I came into meditation, I really was afraid of my emotions and the range of them. But just having observed them and survived them for many years, most of that fear has gone away, and this is possible for all of us.

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, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. So this is part of our project here on retreat, part of the work of each one of us. The more fully we're able to take it up, the more freedom will unfold within our experience, even before we're enlightened. There's a great deal of freedom available even before that effect of enlightenment.

This area, in working with mind states, traditionally comes under what's called the third foundation of mindfulness in the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the mindfulness of mind. The word that's used for mind, the Pali word, is *citta*. It's spelled C-I-T-T-A, and it's pronounced "citta." So this is the realm of *cittanupassan a*, mindfulness of mind.

To be sure we're on the same page, this word *citta* doesn't refer to mind as just the thinking mind, but it refers to mind as the thinking and feeling mind both. One word in Pali refers to what we might call heart and mind. So we're talking about the emotions as well as the thought process when we use this word *citta*.

Sometimes we'll call it heart-mind, and sometimes we'll talk about getting in touch with our heart. Sometimes we'll just use the word mind. Tonight I'll probably mostly just use the word mind, but I want you all to be clear I'm talking about heart and mind, emotions and thoughts together. I'm not separating them. The Buddha didn't separate them so much.

This is understood in Asian countries as well. If you go to a Buddhist country and you ask a person where their mind is, they tend to point to the center of their chest. If you ask someone in the West, "Where's your mind?" they'll normally point to the head. That's not true in Asian countries. They'll point to the center of the chest.

There's a nice little story about this. You know, there's been a lot of interest lately, a lot of research in neuroscience on the effects of meditation. And you don't need to have neuroscience to prove to you the effects of meditation because you know it firsthand. But in this culture, scientists really are the high priests. And there's a lot of the population that will only listen to something when the high priests say that it's actually true. So it's very helpful for getting the Dharma out to a wide audience that the scientists validate through their research the effects of meditation that you know for yourselves firsthand.

One of the foremost researchers in this field is Dr. Richard Davidson, who teaches at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He was really a pioneer of this whole field. What he may not tell his colleagues, but is true, is that he was a vipassana meditator before he was a neuroscience researcher. His motive for doing the science was to give this empirical validation of the effects of meditation that he already knew. There's a nice connection between him and this community. He's helped us on retreats here for scientists to introduce them to meditation.

Richie is the one who did the groundbreaking experiments with the Tibetan monks, where advanced practitioners would enter these MRI machines and they'd look at the activity of their brains and discover that they were kind of off the charts in areas like compassion and stillness and meditative states of concentration.

The Dalai Lama invited Richie to India, to his home in Dharamsala, to demonstrate some of this research to the Tibetan monastic community. It wasn't practical to transport an MRI machine—those things are bigger than a station wagon. Instead, Richie brought scaled-down scientific equipment consisting of a leather cap fitted with rows of electrodes. The electrodes touch the scalp at many different points, connected by wires that trail from the back of the cap down to a computer. As subjects perform different tasks, the triggered brain activity is recorded by the electrodes, which roughly map what areas of the brain are being stimulated. The computer then analyzes these signals in relation to the tasks being performed—a poor man's MRI, you might say.

This was the equipment Richie brought to Dharamsala. His Holiness was on stage, Richie was on stage, and five hundred Tibetan monks filled the audience. Richie wore the cap while explaining how they were trying to measure mind activity by recording electrical signals in the brain. When he finished his lecture and removed the cap, all the monks burst out laughing.

Richie was certain they were laughing because he looked silly in this black leather cap with dozens of trailing wires. But that wasn't why. One monk explained their laughter: "You're trying to measure the mind by putting the cap here," he said, pointing to his head, "when everybody knows the mind is located here," pointing to his heart. They found it absolutely hilarious that these scientists were missing the boat entirely.

This is fascinating. In the Buddhist tradition, the seat of consciousness is generally understood to be in the heart center. This gives us an interesting way to hold our thoughts—they're not necessarily just originating in the head, but something more profound is happening at the heart. This is the sense of *citta*. It encompasses both heart and mind activity, and this is the area of the third foundation.

The best translation for *citta* is actually "psyche." Psyche also carries that sense of moods as well as thoughts, though it's a bit cumbersome, so we'll generally use "mind."

If there are 84,000 afflictive emotions that we uncover through meditation, I believe there are also 84,000 beautiful emotions. We'll explore these in much greater detail as the retreat progresses. Usually in the early days, the difficult emotions are more obvious, so we'll start by addressing the difficulties as they unfold. Later, we'll go much deeper into the beautiful states.

To develop greater freedom in relation to these emotions, two shifts are needed. The first is a shift in attitude. We touched on this the first night by discussing the quality of allowing. This is the attitude shift we truly need regarding our difficult emotions.

When people first come to retreat, they really don't want these emotions. That was certainly my experience. I didn't come to meditation to experience anger, fear, and desire. I came to find peace and love. But this is part of what comes as we deepen. All these states move through us. We need to become familiar with them, so we must open to them. We must allow them. If we have the sense that they shouldn't be there, we'll always be in conflict with them.

This is an important question to examine as you begin touching these difficult emotions: Is there an attitude of accepting that it's okay for them to be there? This is really important.

The second piece is developing greater understanding of them. We need to understand their nature—not only their individual nature (how anger feels, how disappointment feels, how depression feels), but also their universal nature. Like all conditioned things, they're subject to the three characteristics: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

We begin to see that these three characteristics apply to our emotions just as they do to every phenomenon that arises. The impermanence lets us know they won't stay forever. This is why it's safe to open to them. They come, and if we leave them alone, they'll also go. They're unsatisfactory—that's clear in this case. And they're also not who you are. They're not you, and they're not even yours.

They belong to the human heart-mind of which we are instances, but we are not unique owners of these emotions. The emotions are not unique to us—we all know these things. This is simply part of nature. Just as our bodies are part of nature and not all that different from one another, our heart and mind is part of nature, and we're not that different from each other. So we start to understand this about these emotions. We don't have to claim them as "I" or "mine."

In working with these states, I want to describe in greater detail how to engage with them. The first step is knowing what we're feeling. If we don't know that, it's very difficult to begin making a relationship. But this is not as easy as it sounds. We're not generally taught this in our culture. I didn't learn it from my parents, my school teachers, or my university professors. Nobody sat me down and said, "What are you feeling now? When this person said that to you, how did that make you feel? And when you felt like that, what emotions were connected?" I didn't have those kinds of dialogues across the dinner table at my parents' home. So I grew up really unaware of this inner landscape. It was only when I started to meditate that I realized I needed to learn what this was all about, because there was a whole world in there that I became fascinated with and wanted to understand, needed to understand.

I think one of the greatest gifts we could give the world would be to let children learn what their emotions are when they're still not afraid of them. You know how kids will just let anything rip through them? They don't hold back at all. They're open to feeling anything. If we can educate them at that point in their lives, they'll grow up with tremendous emotional intelligence.

One of the projects I'm really excited about is based in Oakland and called Mindful Schools. Some

Vipassana meditators have created an organization dedicated to taking mindfulness training into public and private schools. They've now trained over a thousand people to go in and teach. In some cases, they've received grants to do the work. In others, they've gotten funding from the schools because it has real benefits for the children. They've been successful in teaching in elementary schools and middle schools—ages roughly ten to fifteen.

This is wonderful. One of the teachers goes in and the students love to see her coming. They call her Miss Mindfulness. "Oh good, Miss Mindfulness is coming today!" At the end of the training, when asked what they appreciated about it and if they enjoyed it, one child said, "I love to be mindful because if I do it before I go to bed, I get really happy and I have wonderful night's sleep." Another said, "If I'm really mindful, I don't feel like hitting my little sister." So this is unfolding in a lovely way, and I think the potential here is great.

There's another school developing as well. One of our sangha members near Spirit Rock in Marin, California, has started what is essentially a dharma preschool because she found enough parents in the area who wanted their kids to grow up learning the dharma. She has twenty three- to five-year-olds, five mornings a week, and she teaches them dharma. She teaches them yoga and spiritual stories and some chanting, and finally a little bit of meditation. She's gotten them to love silence. They'll have their lunch for thirty minutes, and twenty three-, four-, and five-year-olds will be quiet while they eat because they've come to love the process of just being present. It's kind of magic—it's hard to imagine kids that age being quiet that long.

One of the meditations she leads I particularly love. She'd come to the end of a yoga session and have them lie on their backs in corpse pose. You can't use words like mindfulness and awareness and attention—that's too abstract for them. So she leads them with imagery. She'd have them lie on their back, close their eyes, and she'd say, "Imagine a big lake. You're floating in a big lake. Through the lake are swimming all kinds of fishes. Just let all the fishes swim around. There might be a happy fish and a sad fish and a jealous fish and an angry fish and a loving fish."

You just let all the fishes swim through, but you're not any of them. You're the water. Let yourself be as wide as the water and just let all the fishes swim through. Whatever fish is coming, you just let it swim through.

After the meditation, she asked the kids to report. This four-year-old boy said, "It was pretty good. I could let all the fishes come, except I couldn't let the mad fish come."

She asked, "Well, why couldn't you let the mad fish come?"

He replied, "Well, when you don't know that you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

Four years old. It's beautiful. Kids are really ripe for this stuff—it's going right in there.

Knowing what we're feeling doesn't necessarily come so easily to us, but we can learn it. We can learn to tune in and understand that. As an example, I was doing a long retreat here one year—sitting the six weeks. I was a couple of weeks in, and so I was pretty present. I felt I was pretty concentrated. I had just finished a sitting in the hall, probably the 8:15 in the morning, and I was going outside for the walking period.

Every walking period in the first two weeks, I'd walk down on the grassy paths in Yogi Park. I'd walked in the same spot every day for two weeks. So I leave the meditation hall, and I'm pretty with it—stepping, lifting, moving, placing, going out the back of the hall, down the steps, lifting, moving, placing. I felt very present.

I looked down at Yogi Park. There was somebody in my walking path. I couldn't believe it. Lifting, moving, placing. What's he doing there? Doesn't he know I've walked there every period for two weeks? Lifting, moving, placing. Did I cut in front of him in breakfast this morning? Is he playing some kind of head game with me? Lifting, moving, placing. He's not very sensitive. If he was sensitive, he would have known that was my spot. Lifting, moving, placing.

So I walked down to the grass. I found another patch of grass, which to my great surprise worked just as well. And so I was walking along and occasionally just cast him an evil glance. He just kept walking also.

It was about thirty minutes into the walking before I finally realized I'm angry. I had thought I was so mindful. I had really thought I was present with my steps, and I was missing the biggest thing that was happening to me. I was pissed off.

Once I recognized that, I could work with it. I could relate to it and I could release it. Until I saw that, I was just enmeshed in it, because I was believing the story I was telling myself. He was in my space, and he was wrong to be in my space, because it was my space. Once I could see that, I could let go of those thoughts and the story, and then the whole thing was over.

Next walking period, I beat him to it. So order was restored.

This showed me something fundamental about these afflictive states that come. They're propped up by what I'd call a storyline or some belief or view. Andrea alluded to this the other night in talking about releasing her anger. There was some belief I had that kept that anger in place, and the belief was: I was right and they were wrong.

There was no real reason that he shouldn't have walked there. My name was not on that patch of grass. IMS had not deeded me that strip. It was open for everybody. If I'd let go of that belief, I couldn't have sustained the anger. But when I did let go of it, the anger fell apart.

All these afflictive emotions have some kind of belief underpinning them that supports them. That's what I call the storyline, and we'll come back to that. One way to release the afflictive emotion is to give up the

storyline.

What was happening to me in that walking meditation—I was fairly mindful, but the anger came in like a low-flying aircraft that slips beneath our radar. I didn't have the radar up in the emotional terrain. I had it up in the physical domain, but it slipped into the emotions without my seeing it. As long as I couldn't name it, I was just caught in it. Naming it, recognizing that it's present, is a really important first step for beginning to make a good relationship with it.

One way to think about this is that when these states come, we need to shift where our attention's pointing. My attention was pointing at the person in my walking path, and as long as it was pointed there, I was caught in my reaction. I had to turn the attention to look at what I was feeling, and then there was the potential to release it.

So you could say that these hindrances—I think this is true, but I'm not going to state it categorically, you can play with it—hindrances are a result of misplaced attention. We direct the attention outside to the situation instead of inside to what we're feeling, and that's what gives rise to and sustains these states. When we can name what's happening, that's a recognition that we've turned the attention inwardly, and that's when we can start to work.

In conversations with scientists who are doing research, I heard of one study where they were investigating different ways to work with anger in people in daily life who had a problem with anger management. They were looking at different kinds of intervention for people who had trouble acting out their anger. One of the methods that they tried with them was to just get them to name anger when they noticed they were feeling it. That's all they had to do. They didn't have to try and be mindful of it. They didn't have to try to put an antidote in place. They didn't have to do anything else. Just name it. And that proved to be one of the most effective interventions that they worked with.

This power of naming is part of the mindfulness practice. It's like the noting. But with difficult emotions, it's so important because it shows there's not only anger there, there's also some kind of awareness that knows it. We're not just angry, we're also knowing it. And that knowing is a little bit of wisdom. So now all of a sudden there's not just anger, there's anger and awareness and wisdom. The odds start to tilt in our favor at that point.

There are a few states of mind in particular that I see a lot in my own practice and in meditators that I want to focus in on this evening. I want to suggest that afflictive emotions are bound up with time in a way that the beautiful emotions aren't. With a beautiful emotion like love or joy, it can just arise spontaneously in a moment. You walk in, you see somebody, you feel a surge of loving kindness. Beautiful. Walk out the door, the sun is setting, there's this beautiful pink-red streak across the sky, joy comes up. Or you see someone with a little sadness in their face or a few tears in the meditation hall, compassion comes through right in the moment.

But for an afflictive emotion to be sustained and for it to cause suffering, it needs to be sustained. It depends on time. We have to get involved in time to keep these things going. That's one of the features. The other feature that difficult emotions revolve around is pleasure and pain. As human beings, we are subject to ever-changing flows of pleasure and pain in our normal experience. Andrea gave the instruction this morning on feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We'll leave the neutral out of this discussion. But this changing flow of pleasant and painful is just part of our human condition, and it's around these strong experiences that the difficult emotions come.

So if you enjoyed eighth grade algebra, I'm going to take you right back. I'm going to suggest we have a horizontal axis, which is time, going from past to future. And we're going to have a vertical axis that's about pleasure and pain, going from painful up to pleasant.

This divides our territory for the afflictive emotions into four quadrants. Let me ask you: what are the emotions connected with those four quadrants?

Let's start with past and pleasant—this quadrant up here. Something that was in the past means it's not here now. Very pleasant, but it's gone. What's the emotion connected with that? Loss, nostalgia, sadness, grief. That's where loss and grief come from. It was beautiful in the past, but we don't have it anymore. It could be a relationship, it could be a loved one, it could be someplace we lived, even some beautiful experience. We feel sad at the loss of that—its pastness, its gone-ness.

What about painful in the past—and I'm going to restrict it a little bit—connected with another human being? What's the emotion that tends to arise around that recollection? Could be guilt. But there's a stronger one, which is anger. If someone has hurt us, caused us pain in the past, then the emotion that constellates around that memory is anger. Guilt would be if we had caused pain to someone else, so guilt is in that family also. Shame as well. Let's say anger is often the strongest or hardest of those.

Let's go to the future scale. Something pleasant that's out in time in the future—what's the emotion? Craving, desire, wanting, hoping. That's pleasant in the future and we can get very bound up in that as well.

What about unpleasant in the future? Fear, dread.

This came through to me just a few weeks ago when I had to make a presentation at the Marin County Board of Supervisors. Spirit Rock was putting forth a new master plan with building plans, wanting to increase the number of people who could use our facility. So I had to make the main presentation to the Board of Supervisors where we were seeking approval.

For about two weeks before that presentation, I had this sense of dread about it. It kind of surprised me because I don't mind speaking in public so much, and it was fairly short. But there was something about the responsibility that felt like a burden. There are sometimes hostile people in the public hearing phase of a proposal who will attack one, and the people I was talking to were not people I knew. All of that

contributed to just this sense of dread about going and giving the presentation.

But even though I dreaded it, I didn't mind the dread. I would rather not have had to do the presentation, but I didn't mind the fact that I dreaded it. So it was okay. And in the end, the presentation went fine—Spirit Rock got approved. So we're moving forward with building plans as we speak.

So these are the four what I would call primal emotions that we often feel: sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear. These are the ones that I hear again and again. One variation of anger is when it's directed against ourselves—it comes as self-judgment. We become disappointed and blame ourselves, and that's where self-judgment comes in. So these are the five big ones that we hear a lot, and shame and guilt are also significant for people.

As we explore these states—and I want to go through these four or five tonight—I want to look at three facets of them. If they're strong, they'll be felt in the body. So in coming to relate to one of these emotions, the first place to look is: how does it feel in the body? This is a good place to ground the attention because it's usually a very concrete object and easy to find.

The next one is to look at the mood that's in the mind—there's a coloring or a flavor that's a mental piece. You know how joy feels different than sadness.

Fear feels different than hope. There's a mood that each of these have. So we want to get familiar with it. It's kind of a taste. Each has a unique taste or flavor. And that's a mental component. That's of the mind, not of the body.

And the third thing is: what's the storyline? The belief or thought or view that props the emotion up, which if we didn't believe it, the emotion couldn't continue.

So I'll talk about these four or five emotions and how these components reveal themselves.

First, let's look at desire or wanting. This is wanting a pleasant experience. It comes up often in retreat, especially in the early part. The desire is often about things we've left behind. We want something from home that isn't here—a person, a food, a comfy chair, a TV, a movie, a record, something like that. We find our fantasies going there, sometimes quite a lot, especially in the early phase of a retreat.

Tune in when it comes. Tune into the energy of this wanting because there's something nice about it. The nice is that pleasant experience. We don't have it. In fact, the environment here is pretty austere. The time between pleasant experiences is sometimes rather large, like one lunch to the next. So pleasure becomes kind of a big deal. It's very understandable that if it's not there, the mind will bring it in—will bring in something pleasant. And it's like comforting ourselves by thinking of something pleasant.

So notice that there's a pleasant quality to these desires that's a little bit comforting. But is it satisfying? And this is the other side of desire. There's always something a little frustrating in wanting because we don't have the thing. There's a separation from the thing we want. The image of it isn't the same as the

thing, and it doesn't satisfy us in the same way.

So that's the kind of bittersweet nature of desire. There's something pleasant, and also there's some frustration involved in it. It's not as satisfying as the present moment, but that's one of the things we have to learn about it.

And this frustrating quality is intrinsic in desire because we never want what we already have. Have you noticed? Do you ever want a hand at the end of your arm? That doesn't really come up, does it? But if you didn't have it, you'd really miss it. But we never want that because we have it.

Some years ago I was teaching a retreat in Italy and this question of desire came to the fore. A young man came in early on in the retreat for an interview. And I really loved the interviews with the Italian yogis because they had this kind of fluency with their emotions that I didn't have before I started meditating. They tended to know what they were feeling and were very comfortable with it, able to talk about it and report it quite easily. It's a little bit the stereotype of the Italian character, but I found it true in the meditative setting. So it was a delight to talk with them.

So this young guy comes in, and I asked him how he was settling in. He said, "I'm not doing very well. I don't think I really want to be here."

I said, "Well, what's going on? What comes up?"

He said, "Well, I think I'd rather be somewhere else."

I said, "Well, why are you here?"

And he said, "Well, this is August. It's our holiday time. And my friends asked me to go on a trip with them to the Caribbean, or I could come to this meditation retreat."

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

And he said, "All the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So I came here.

So I get it. We're the consolation prize.

He said, "Yeah, and I just keep thinking about my friends there and the beautiful beaches and the blue waters and the sunshine. I just don't really want to be here."

So what we talked about was this nature of desire—how maybe it's not the absence of the Caribbean that's the problem, it's the wanting for the Caribbean that's the problem. And if you could let go of these images of the sand and the water and the sun and just be here, maybe it would be okay here. So try that. See if that would be all right.

I didn't see him again for a couple of days, but by the next interview he came again, we spoke, and he was totally fine. He'd been able to let go of the desire, and then he'd really landed, and it was great.

So when desire is an obstacle, it's sometimes helpful to remember it's not the absence of the object that's the problem. It's the wanting for it. And that's one way of releasing. Because the storyline is something like: "If I had that, I'd be happy." Then we keep telling ourselves that storyline. The corollary is: "I can't be happy because I don't have it." If we let go of the object and we don't have the storyline, then maybe we can be happy. That's the lesson with desire.

After we've been here for a while, the desire force gets tuned more toward things in the retreat, and especially it gets tuned around meditative experience. So we find ourselves really wanting that sitting that was calm and collected, or the one where the body didn't hurt, or the walking meditation where we had unlimited loving-kindness for all sentient beings everywhere. And those are the things that desire forms around.

Sometimes it's hard to pick up because it's so much a part of the fabric of our life. So we come and sit and we're in some kind of conflict, but it's sometimes hard to know what it is. With desire, I look for a kind of leaning forward tension, like I'm moving towards something. And that's that kind of future pull towards something. Sometimes I don't even know what it is. But I'll feel like this pull out of the moment, which is different than that settled back feeling. And that will clue me in. There's some kind of wanting, moving forward, leaning into, going on.

Then I'll look at my thoughts. And I'll say, "Well, what have I been thinking about?" Oh, I was thinking about a concentrated sitting. And then I'll realize, "Oh, I'm wanting concentration." And then it's easier to really—oh, just here now. Just come into this moment.

Anger is one of the difficult forces to work with. Andrea talked about this quite a bit the other night. I won't go over it a lot. But as you feel anger, generally connected to some episode in the past, notice first how it feels in the body. Often with anger, there's a strong sensation of tension, contraction, kind of burning. It's often a fiery quality in the mind and can be really unpleasant.

I was doing a metta retreat here one year, a six-week metta retreat, and my difficult person was on the retreat with me. So our paths would often cross during the day. When I'd cross paths with them, I'd start going: "Just think about what they did this past year." We had had different kinds of conflict over the year. "Just think about the way they behaved." And I'd start getting stirred up, and I'd get angry, and I'd go back to my room and sit, and I'd be angry for like twenty minutes, thirty minutes. It sort of moved through, and then I'd get back to the metta: "May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful."

Then we'd cross paths again. "I can't believe they acted that way." And then I'd go to sit, and I'd be stirred up. As I was getting more sensitive and more open with the metta, my body was really open and my mind was really bright. And then this anger would come in and I just felt the contraction so strongly—it was so

painful. I felt like my body was being held by these vice grips. Finally it just became so unpleasant.

I would do anything to get out of it. "How do I get out of this?"

So I started looking at those blaming thoughts. The storyline with anger is basically: "I'm right and you're wrong." And every time we think another thought and believe it, we throw another log on the fire. So I kept building the fire up hotter and hotter, and I kept suffering from it. When I could stop the blaming thoughts, the fire went away—died down, went away.

So the only thing that could persuade me to let go of the blaming thoughts was the pain I was in from the anger. So look closely when anger is there, how it feels. It's not pleasant. In the texts, it's compared to someone picking up a hot coal to throw it at another person. But of course, before you can throw it, you have to pick it up and then you burn yourself. It's also compared in the texts to drinking poison and hoping the other person falls ill. Often the other person doesn't even know you're upset, right? It's just hurting you.

Of course, sometimes this storyline of "I'm right and you're wrong"—sometimes it's true. And those are the hardest ones to let go of. Sometimes it's really clear somebody has done something unskillful and really has hurt us in an unkind way.

So I'll tell you this little story from the Dalai Lama. He left Tibet in 1959 to escape to India. At the time that he left, he had known a monk in one of the monasteries, and he judged the monk to be a rather average practitioner. Then he escaped to India in '59, established his center in Dharamsala. About twenty-five years later, this monk escaped after being in prison for many years. He escaped to India, and as many of the escaped Tibetans do, he managed to see the Dalai Lama very soon after he arrived. The Dalai Lama loves to welcome the Tibetans who have gotten out of their country to India.

So he met with the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama, of course, was very concerned for him and said, "Well, I heard that you were in prison for twenty years." The Dalai Lama was worried that he may have been tortured—at least he wasn't killed. But terrible things happen in those prisons. So he said, "How did you fare?"

And the monk said, "Well, I often felt that I was in danger."

The Dalai Lama said, "Do you mean you were worried about being tortured?"

And the monk said, "Oh, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I was in danger of becoming angry." He said, "But I didn't."

Imprisoned for twenty years, tortured often, didn't generate anger. The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of the monk's practice. That's an awesome level of practice. It's not something I feel capable of, but it points us to a human potential. And so maybe when somebody cuts in front of us on the freeway, we can sort of remember that as an inspiration. We may be right that they were wrong, but maybe we can let

go of our anger.

This quality of self-judgment—James talked a lot about this the other night, so I'm not going to talk about that tonight. Just to say that it comes up frequently for people on retreat, and the tools of mindfulness and especially loving-kindness can be really transformative in working with this quality. So if this is up for you, please talk to your teachers about it. There are lots of great ways to work with it, and it can make our whole level of self-trust and self-confidence entirely different. So it's a great one to work with.

Sadness or grief—another of the difficult primal emotions arising out of a sense of loss. Often the feeling in the body is a kind of heaviness, and the tone in the mind is kind of dark and burdensome. And the belief, the storyline, is something like: "I can't be happy because I've lost this. I can't be happy because of the loss." And if we keep believing that, that perpetuates the sense of burden or weight that's in the mind.

But sometimes opening to sadness is difficult because we might feel like it's so big. It might be carrying a lifetime of disappointments that we haven't ever really been able to open to or let ourselves feel. And there's the worry: "If I open to this, I'm going to drown under it. I'm going to get lost in it. I'll never make my way out."

But that's just another belief. That's just another thought. And with sadness, as with anything else, we just need to open little by little and feel it. As we open to feel it, every time we contact it with mindful attention, it releases a little bit of the weight of it. It's really the bringing into consciousness, touching it with awareness, letting go, that starts to allow these emotions to move through. And this is how grief and loss get processed also.

Finally, with fear. I love to talk about fear because it was my main hindrance for the early years of my practice, and I worked with it a lot. One of the breakthroughs for me was when one of my teachers, I think it was Joseph, said in a talk that in order to begin to develop this allowing attitude with fear, we needed to open to the body sensations that came with it.

So I'd had fear come up a lot. Every time it came, I hated it. I didn't want anything to do with it. And it made me more afraid. I was really afraid to feel my fear. So I couldn't move to open to the whole thing at all. But my teacher said, open to the body sensations and see if you can allow and bear those. I started to feel those. I started to feel the contraction in the stomach, the kind of fluttery energy, the lack of grounding that came up into the chest and the head, that shakiness that goes with fear. I asked myself, can I bear this?

Then I learned something kind of interesting. The storyline in fear is that this moment may be bearable, but in the next moment it's not going to be. Something disastrous is about to happen, so be on your guard because you may be okay now, but you're not going to be for long. Watch out. That's where that vigilance comes from. If you've carried fear for a while, there's a vigilance about, I can't trust the world. It's not safe.

That part of the vigilance really came through to me one evening. I was meditating in England. I was

sitting a long retreat in England. I was doing standing meditation before the Dharma talk. It was one of these really incredibly beautiful soft summer evenings where it had been a warm day and the warmth of the day was still in the air. I was standing out by an apple tree in the back. It was full of leaves and the apples were growing and the doves were calling in the distance. There was just this soft twilight.

I was standing with my eyes closed and I was in this pattern of fear. Wow, everything's so scary. My body's scary, my mind's scary. And then I opened my eyes and I opened my ears and I tuned into that incredibly beautiful and gentle and nourishing English summer twilight. I just went, wow, it's really a scary world, isn't it? And it was so clear the whole thing was just a projection of my mind. The world wasn't threatening. It was beautiful and supportive.

So there's a storyline that we create that's gotten embedded somewhere. Something disastrous is going to happen. But if we can come back into the present and feel the sensations as a starting point, we find we can bear those. Then I could open and feel that quality in the mind, the mood that's fear. That was harder. Because the essence of fear is run away from. Run away from it. And so it wanted to run away from the feeling of fear. So it was very hard for me to bring mindfulness to touch the emotion of fear directly. But then finally I could do that. And then that became bearable.

So the whole experience became okay, but I also wanted to get out of it as soon as I could. And then my teacher said something else. He said, if you really accept it, it would be okay if this fear was with you for the rest of your life. So I had to ask myself that question. And that kind of became the acid test.

Would it be OK if this fear was here for the rest of my life? And the answer was obvious. Hell no. No way. I couldn't take that.

And so I asked myself, well, why? Why couldn't I allow that? And I thought, I could never listen to music the same again if I was always scared. I could never have this kind of merging experience with a sunset if I was scared. I could never fall in love again if I was scared. So I'm not going to give those things up. And I didn't. So I kept clashing with fear. I couldn't really accept it that deeply.

And finally, it wore me out. The fighting with it wore me out. And I thought, I can either find peace now, or I can cling to these hopes of future gratification. Which would I rather have? And finally, I wanted peace now. And I said, OK, if this lasts the rest of my life, it's all right.

And when I opened to it that fully, something in the power of fear just started to drain out of my mind. And it lost some kind of grip over me. Some kind of obsessive relationship went out of my relationship with fear. Fear has come again many times, but it's never had that kind of grip in my mind because I learned how to be with it so fully with so much equanimity. I really didn't care if it arose or not. I really didn't care. It didn't matter to me one way or another.

And so if you develop this kind of relationship with your main hindrance, whichever one it is, you'll learn a lot about how to open to all the hindrances and the kind of freedom that's available through that. So you

don't have to go through such a struggle with every one, but by learning from one, you'll find out how to relate to all of them. And then a great deal of freedom opens up in the mind because we're not afraid of our emotions so much anymore. We find that space that lets them all come and go.

So I want to close with a poem from Rilke, the German poet, from a small book of his called The Book of Hours. And a little bit of setup to this: Rilke was in a very religious phase in his early 20s, and this book came out of that period. And so this is about an image where, as each of us is created by God, God gives us a little pep talk before he launches us into this human life. So this is the pep talk.

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your memory, go to the limits of your longing. Embody me. Flare up like flame and make big shadows I can move in. Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Now give me your hand.

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

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

Thank you.

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