Working With Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:18

The subject of the talk tonight is working with difficult emotions. At this point, we've talked quite a bit about how to relate to the hindrances and the kilesas. The thing about hindrances and kilesas is that they can span quite a large range of intensity. Sometimes they can be fairly mild. It still helps to tune into them, but you could almost at times leave them in the background and keep your attention somewhere else.

What I want to talk about tonight are when emotions come up that are quite strong and really can't be ignored or left in the background. You may not be having any of them recently, but you probably have had some in the past, and all of us probably will again in the future. So it's really helpful to learn how to work with these states. These are qualities like fear, shame, anger, loneliness, grief, wanting, humiliation, despair. They're kind of big events.

They can be big sources of suffering in our life outside and also in our life in retreat. Outside it's kind of interesting because they often come up in situations that are quite complicated. We have a child who has gotten addicted to opioids. What do we do? Or a partner leaves us or goes off and has an affair. Or there's a boss at work who's bullying us. In these outside situations, the situation and relationships are so complicated that the emotions sometimes get lost in the middle of all the other stuff that's going on.

But when we're in retreat, it gets really simple. There are two sources of suffering. There's physical pain and there's emotional pain. That's pretty much it. And so we really are brought right face to face with both of these. And as the First Noble Truth says, our job is to understand dukkha. These are the two primary forms of dukkha. We need to grow to understand them. So this is part of the curriculum. Not an easy part of the curriculum, but it's part of the curriculum.

And then as meditators, we're really lucky because we have a third source. And that is the wandering mind—the third source of dukkha. It doesn't stay where we put it. Now, for most people in the world, that's not a problem. But for us, that's a problem. So this is a very privileged form of suffering. Not quite as intense as the first two. But when we don't understand the big events of physical pain and emotional pain, they can be overwhelming. So in order to ensure our stability, we need to find ways to work with both of them.

The good news is that in working with emotional difficulties, we can gain access to a lot more freedom than we had in the beginning of meditation. This is one of the biggest immediate benefits of Vipassana practice. We can feel it start to happen right away, and it opens up a lot of possibility of freedom that we didn't know was available. So it's a wonderful area for us to explore and grow in because we change not just our relation to the emotions, we change the emotions themselves as we learn to work with them. They

become less intense and they come less often. So this is something that can be seen in the course of our practice in a reasonably short period of time.

And this is something that we really do need to do. This is from Pema Chodron: "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 these are things we can't just run away from. We really need to meet and come to terms with them. Don gave a beautiful talk the other night about how when we meet suffering honestly, we can find that it transforms into faith and then gladness in the mind. So this is a beautiful pointing and a beautiful opportunity.

This is from Suzuki Roshi: "We say, pulling out the weeds, we make nourishment for the plant. We pull the weed out and bury it near the plant to make nourishment for it."

So even though you have some difficulty in your practice, those weeds will help you. You should not be bothered by the weeds you have in your mind. We should be grateful for the weeds because eventually they will enrich your practice. If you have some experience of how the weeds you have in your mind will change into mental nourishment, your practice makes remarkable progress.

In this talk, I want to explore how the difficulties we encounter with these emotions eventually come to sustain and support our journey to awakening, our journey to freedom. They really do become compost and enrichment for our unfolding.

What we're talking about tonight falls within the third foundation of mindfulness—the realm of citta. This Pali term is sometimes translated as mind, sometimes as heart, or sometimes heart-mind, because it encompasses both emotional and conceptual components. While we tend to think of the English word "mind" as conceptual and associate "heart" with emotion, citta contains both. The translation I prefer, though it's not common, is psyche. All these elements—both thinking and feeling—are part of our psyche. This is where these emotions land in our practice.

As you know, the states of mind in Buddhist teachings fall into two categories: wholesome and unwholesome. The unwholesome mind states are those that lead to suffering. This is a very pragmatic view, not moralistic. We're not immoral because we have these states; they simply lead us into suffering. Their roots are always some combination of greed, aversion, and delusion—what the Buddha called the roots of the unwholesome.

The wholesome mind states lead to happiness. Again, this is practical rather than moralistic—it's simply about what leads to the state we ultimately want to find. The roots of wholesome states are non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion.

This use of negation is quite interesting. In ancient India, these negative formulations were often used to point toward positive qualities. Non-greed—the opposite of grasping—manifests as either renunciation or generosity. Non-aversion becomes a synonym for metta; when there's no aversion in the mind, there's openness, acceptance, a form of friendliness. Non-delusion is essentially synonymous with wisdom, with clear seeing, with understanding things as they are. So we could say the roots of the wholesome are generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom.

The whole point of the path is to increase wholesome states and reduce unwholesome states, which means we're more securely planted on a path toward happiness and away from suffering. This is the definition of right effort—this is what we're working toward.

Looking at these teachings over many years, I find it amazing how through the tools the Buddha gave us, we can shape the mind in any direction we want and to any depth we want. How would you like your mind to be? Would you like it to be loving? Do a lot of metta practice. Compassionate? Do compassion practice. Wise? Do investigation and vipassana practice. Calm and placid? Do samatha practice. Any direction you would like to go, there are tools to shape the mind that way to any degree you desire. It's quite remarkable.

We'll talk more about wholesome states as we progress through the retreat. Tonight I really want to get into the unwholesome.

With difficult emotions, we need two things to change. First and foremost, we need to change our attitude toward them. Normally our reaction is: I don't like it, I want it to go away, I resist it. This has to change to acceptance.

These difficult emotions show up—this is simply reality. There's no point in being in conflict with what is. We need to learn this fundamental acceptance. Remember, the A in RAIN is accept or allow. We must learn how to genuinely accept and allow these states to be present.

The other essential element is understanding them better. We need to comprehend the true nature of these difficult emotions, these afflictive states. They share the same nature as all other conditioned phenomena—they're impermanent, they're unsatisfying, and they're not me or mine. When we learn to see them through this lens, they become far less troublesome.

But why aren't they me or mine? They certainly feel like mine when they arise. They're not me or mine because we all have them. When you step back and take a broader view of where you're situated, we're all part of the human species. Every member of the human species carries all these emotions until they're truly awakened. So how can it be your personal mistake? How can it be your individual failing? This is simply part of the package that evolution has gifted us with. We don't need to identify with these states—we try not to identify. They're just part of the human package.

The first step in this process of understanding is knowing what we're feeling. And we must do this when

we're actually feeling it. You cannot decide ahead of time, "I think I'll get rid of fear on this retreat," without actually experiencing fear. Liberation doesn't work that way. You cannot think your way through fear. You cannot think your way to freedom.

To become truly free of these states, we must relate to them as they're arising in the here and now. This might seem like unwelcome news, but this is how things actually work. We become free by engaging with these emotions as they manifest.

The first step is knowing what we're feeling. I don't know about you, but neither my parents nor my school teachers taught me how to recognize my emotional states. This wasn't part of my curriculum—not at home, not at school. So when I entered the meditation hall and was instructed to observe my states of mind, I had no idea what I was looking for.

But gradually, through descriptions like the five hindrances, the kilesas, the seven factors of awakening, and the Brahmaviharas, I learned there was an entire world unfolding within. I developed familiarity with this rich inner landscape, and it was wonderful to begin understanding the complexity that exists there.

Imagine if we taught children this awareness. How would society transform if children grew up knowing what they were feeling and understanding how to work skillfully with their emotions? It would be revolutionary.

There's a nonprofit organization called Mindful Schools, operating in California and expanding elsewhere, where teachers trained in insight meditation go into middle schools and teach children how to meditate with their emotions. The work is tremendously rewarding, with measurable, practical results.

Even with younger children, we have a sangha member in California who has practiced for many years and wanted to bring this learning into preschool. These are children three, four, and five years old. She established a preschool in Marin with the specific intention of teaching preschoolers how to meditate.

I couldn't imagine how one would approach such a task. You cannot simply tell a three-year-old to sit still and pay attention to their breath—they'll be running around within moments. But she truly understood children and was remarkably skillful. She began by teaching them yoga first.

There was considerable demand for places in her school, but she maintained one requirement: she wouldn't accept a child unless the parents were also meditators. She didn't want the children to become wiser than their parents.

The parents had to meditate to get their kids in. So here are these three-, four-, five-year-olds, and she taught them yoga first so that they'd be moving their body and stretching and getting their energy out. Then at the end of the yoga, she'd have them lie down on the carpet in the school and she'd lead them in a visualization.

The visualization is this: She had them close their eyes and said, "Imagine a big lake. There's a big lake, and you're the water. Now, in this water, there are all kinds of fishes that swim through. There's a happy fish. There's a sad fish. There's a lonely fish. There's a mad fish. There's an excited fish. But you're the water. You just let them all swim through. It's no problem. The fishes are just swimming through the water."

You probably know that for a long time, a body of water, like a lake, has been a symbol for consciousness. So the kids kind of grok this on some deep intuitive level, even though if you said to them "consciousness," they wouldn't have a clue what you were talking about. They're becoming the lake, and they're just watching the fishes swim through.

At the end of one of these exercises, she asked, "Well, how was that for you?" This five-year-old boy put up his hand and said, "You know, I could let all the fishes swim through except the mad fish. I couldn't let the mad fish swim through." She said, "Oh, you know, why was that?" And he says, "Because if you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you hurt people."

This is from a five-year-old. It's so brilliant.

We need to learn what we're feeling when we're feeling it. And it's not always easy. An example from my own practice: I was on a three-month course, sitting in the hall a lot. At the end of every sit, I'd go out that back door, go down the stairs, and go to a patch of grass that was still there—there's still grass there, there was more back then because it's gotten filled up with buildings and plantings. I'd do my walking back and forth on the grass below this hall.

I was about two weeks into the retreat, so I was getting settled and enjoying the walking. I walked out the back door and I was being really mindful: lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. Then I looked down to my path where I'd been walking every walking period for two weeks, and there was somebody there. I couldn't believe it. What are they doing in my path? I've been in that path every walking period for two weeks. Lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. Are they playing games with me? Did I cut in front of them in line this morning? Lifting, moving, placing.

I just kept mindfully walking down, and there was a bigger patch of grass. I found another patch of grass that, to my great surprise, worked just as well. I didn't think it would, but it did, and I did my walking. It was thirty minutes in before I realized I'm angry. It took me that long to see it.

I thought I was being really mindful, lifting, moving, placing, but I was missing the main thing that was going on. I hadn't picked up what I was feeling. I was angry. As soon as I saw it, like I'd been telling myself the same story—they shouldn't be there because it's my path—for 30 minutes. Finally, when I saw I'm angry, then I had a way to work with it.

So if we don't recognize what's going on, these hindrances just slip in under our mindfulness radar. I was in the present moment, lift, move, place, but I missed this thing that had slipped in. So that's delusion at

work. We're not fully aware of what's happening. So always good to kind of keep one eye on the mind state as you go through your day mindfully. Keep an eye on what's going on in the mind because these things just slip in.

As soon as I could see it, I could release it. I thought, this is silly. And I could just release it. Until I knew I was so identified with being angry, I couldn't operate with it with any kind of skillful approach. So that's why it's so important to know what we're feeling, and if you can, to name it. You know, develop a vocabulary so that you recognize the different emotions that are coming. There's a kind of release that is possible when you align the note with the emotion that's being felt. There's a wisdom that develops when you're able to do that. So take a little bit of time and care. Develop a vocabulary that matches the range of your emotions. It's really helpful.

So as we've said many times, the key in working with hindrances and these emotions—the emotion is going to point us towards something else. Like it was pointing me to the guy who was walking in my path. And that's where my attention was for about 30 minutes. And then I was stuck. But as soon as I recognized what was going on inwardly, that is to the hindrance itself, then I could work with it and release it. So instead of going where the hindrance is pointing, come to the hindrance itself. That's the way that it can be released.

It's very interesting, this naming of emotions. There have been a lot of studies about how to manage anger because it's such a destructive force in the workplace and personal relationships and so forth. So there are a lot of anger management courses going on in the world and a lot of different techniques have been tried. So there was one study in an anger management class where they offered a few different approaches. One of the approaches they offered was just tell the people, every time you feel anger, just name it anger. Don't do anything else. Just name it anger. They found out that that approach worked as well as any of the other systematic approaches that they tried in calming down people's anger and tendency to fly off the handle out of anger. Just naming it was a lot.

So I want to talk about some of the states that we run into with difficult emotions. And I see, I'm on the end of listening to a lot of people, I see a number of states, a select number of states that come up again and again and again in reports from meditators. And rather than name them, I want to see if you can name them.

So one of the things I'm going to say is that if you have a really beautiful emotion like love or compassion, that can be totally in the here and now. You just see something beautiful and love comes up. You see someone struggling, compassion just arises. But these afflictive emotions tend to get tied up in time, in concepts of time.

Vance was talking this morning about how location is not an aspect of reality. It's a concept. Time is also not an aspect of reality. It's a concept. When you come into the moment fully, there's no past and future. Past and future are only thoughts. But these thoughts of past and future are needed to sustain these

afflictive emotions.

So, bear with my background a minute. I want you to imagine a graph that has two axes, one horizontal and one vertical. You love seventh grade algebra, right? We're going back there. So the horizontal axis is going to be time. It's going to extend from the past on your left to the future on your right.

And the vertical axis represents feeling tone—pain at the bottom and pleasure at the top. The horizontal axis represents time, and the vertical represents feeling tone, marking off four quadrants.

Let's examine the first quadrant: pleasure in the future. If there's something pleasurable that you anticipate in the future, what emotion accompanies that? Greed. Yes—desire, wanting. That's what arises. Something pleasurable in the future generates wanting. This is the first of these strong forces that arise frequently for people.

Now let's take the lower quadrant: something unpleasant anticipated in the future. What's the emotional response? Basically fear. You might call it worry or anxiety, but these are forms of fear. That's another big one.

What about something pleasant in the past? And when I say it's in the past, I mean it's truly over. What arises then? Grief. When something has been pleasant in the past but is now genuinely gone, the response is sadness, grief, loss. That's the third emotion that surfaces again and again.

And what about something unpleasant in the past, particularly connected with people or persons? Anger. "Somebody did that to me," and we feel anger. This is the fourth of these major emotions. A subset of anger is self-criticism, self-judgment. We review our past, feel dissatisfied with it, and so self-judgment arises.

I find it fascinating that these unwholesome states of mind are propped up by time—by past and future. Relying on time in meditation is delusion because the present moment is where we want to be and is the only place we truly are.

These are the four major emotions I want to explore: desire, grief, anger, and fear. Let's examine each of these.

What I want to explore with each emotion are the three components of a strong emotion. When an emotion arises in a powerful, difficult way, there will be a response in the body. A subtle emotion like compassion might ripple through, and you might not feel very much. If you were feeling very subtly attuned to the body, you'd probably sense that ripple. But if you're not subtly in touch, it might pass through the mind without making much impact.

However, with these emotions, when they're strong, we feel them in the body. So the first approach is to bring attention to the part of the body where the emotion is felt. Let the attention go directly in and feel the sensations.

The second element is that each emotion has a particular flavor—a mental component. The flavor of wanting differs from the flavor of fear, which differs from the flavor of love or compassion. All difficult emotions have a physical expression and a mental tone or flavor or mood.

By connecting with the body where the emotion is felt, you can more easily stay in touch with the emotion itself. If you try to stay in touch only with the mood or flavor of the emotion—just the mental phenomenon—it's somewhat insubstantial and difficult to maintain connection with. But by grounding the attention in the body where the emotion is felt, you can stay connected to both the sensations and the mood of that emotion.

The third component is that there's usually a story being told in the thoughts. So examine the thoughts accompanying the strong emotion. Like with my walking path being taken by another meditator—the thoughts were saying they were wrong and I was right. Usually at the root of anger is something like "they were wrong" or "they did something wrong to me."

So take a look at all three of these components when working with difficult emotions. When that story went away and I saw it wasn't really my path, the anger crumpled. So the thoughts sustain the emotion. When you get a mindful handle on all three—the thoughts, the bodily sensations, and the mood—it's very helpful.

Let's examine the first of the difficult emotions: desire, something pleasant projected into the future. This happens frequently on retreat. We want a pleasant experience. Sometimes we're thinking about home, sometimes about friends, sometimes about someplace we'd rather be—any place other than here.

Notice how desire shows up. There's something comforting in wanting. You may find that when things are boring in the meditation hall, a pleasant fantasy arises because it brings comfort, bringing to mind something pleasurable. This happens often: "Oh, a little bored with my experience? Let's remember something pleasant."

But the desire that sources that fantasy brings a bittersweet feeling because the object isn't here now. Desire always has this unfulfilled quality to it. We always want something we don't have. Do you ever find yourself wanting an elbow? No, because we already have one. What we want is always something we don't have. So we think about it—it's comforting, but there's built-in frustration, built-in dissatisfaction. Craving is the cause of suffering, as stated in the Second Noble Truth.

Some years ago, I was teaching a retreat in Italy with Carol. I loved working with Italian yogis because I found them so fluent with their emotions. They talked easily about feelings, were well in touch with what they were experiencing, and weren't shy about discussing it. The practice meetings were very lively and interesting.

There was this one young man who came to the first practice meeting. When I asked how he was finding the retreat, he said, "I don't want to be here."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Well, this is August, the time when in Italy we go on vacation. Some friends of mine were going to the Caribbean, so I could either go there or come to this retreat."

"Why are you here?"

"I couldn't get a ticket to the Caribbean."

He was having trouble settling into the retreat because he kept thinking about his friends in the Caribbean—how warm it was, how beautiful the waters were, how great the food would be. They were there and he was here in this "miserable retreat." He just didn't want to be here.

I suggested, "Maybe the retreat isn't the problem. Maybe wanting something else is the problem. The desire itself is what's making this experience so frustrating for you."

He was willing to consider this possibility—that the desire was stirring him up, and that's why the retreat wasn't satisfying.

A few days later, at the second practice meeting, he had totally settled down. "I took your advice," he said. "I let go of thinking about the Caribbean, and then it was fine to be here. Now I'm enjoying it."

This is what desire does: it blinds us to the present moment and the possibility of what's actually here. Often with desire, we're not unhappy because the object is lacking—we're unhappy because the wanting itself is creating a gap, creating frustration. It wasn't the absence of the Caribbean that was making him suffer; it was the wanting.

That's a good thing to keep in mind. Another form of desire that often comes in retreat is sexual desire. Monica talked about this when she discussed the hindrances. I just want to add one little piece, as this has come up a lot for me in retreat.

One of the ways I found most helpful to work with it is to take a look at the direct experience of what's evoking the wanting. In my experience, when sexual desire arises, there are usually two compelling pieces. One is a visual image—for me, it's usually connected with a fantasy. Some image is there. And the second is sensations in the body. So the image is very pleasurable, and the sensations in the body are very pleasurable.

I switched from noticing the image and the sensations, which I would do with noting—seeing, seeing, sensing, sensing. That didn't cut it so much. But when I tuned to the feeling tone of the image and the feeling tone of the sensations, that really cut it. So I would just note pleasant, pleasant for the image, pleasant, pleasant for the sensations in the body. And that cut through it for me.

This has happened a number of times. I don't think it's just random, because I kind of saw what this fuss is all about—it's just pleasant feeling tone. That's all it is. It drives the world crazy, but it's just about pleasant

feeling tone. So it was very helpful to unhook me from that feeling tone.

The next area to look at, the next strong emotion, is anger—a particular form of aversion. Notice how it feels. When anger is up for me, the body feels very tight, contracted, constricted. I feel it especially in my shoulders, neck, head. Everything's bunching up around that top part of the body, and there's a burning quality to the energy there. It feels like the area's on fire.

The storyline is usually, "I'm right and the other person's wrong." As we tell that story again and again with those thoughts, it's like the fire just keeps growing. Every thought adds another log onto the flame that's building. We can keep doing that. We want to keep making it hotter? Keep adding those thoughts of blame and self-righteousness. But that's what causes the anger to grow.

So the solution, obviously, is to stop thinking those thoughts, stop holding on to the blame, the blaming ideas and the self-righteousness. But one of the things that's tricky about that is sometimes those thoughts might be true. Sometimes the other person really has done something harmful, thoughtless, cruel even, and we've suffered from it. So sometimes it's hard to let go because we actually have a correct perception that they did something unskillful and we suffered as a result.

This is where it needs some careful investigation to see that the two don't have to be connected. You can have a clear perception that someone did something unskillful and unhook from the blaming thoughts about it. This takes some skill. It takes some subtlety. But this is an avenue to becoming free.

So another example from my practice. I was on a six-week retreat here, and I was doing metta practice. I'd been in a couple of weeks, and the metta was flowing, the phrases were flowing, the concentration was developing. The tricky thing here was my difficult person was also on the retreat. The person who had been most difficult for me over the past year of my life was also sitting that retreat.

And so in going through the building, we would often cross paths. As soon as we did, I would go, "I can't believe what they said. I can't believe what they did." And the anger would just start going again. So often I would be lost in it for like thirty minutes, and then finally, I'd get bored of it or something.

I'd come out and I'd reconnect with the metta. But that kept happening, and it wasn't pleasant. So I had to learn to work with it.

The way that I eventually got weaned from it was to feel how painful it was. I'd been cruising along with metta, and it was so satisfying and so delightful. And then I pitched myself into this hellfire of anger. I'd done it myself. And I was really burning. At some point, I just realized, I don't want to burn anymore. And so I gave it up as the only way I could restore peace of mind.

Sometimes we just have to feel the pain of anger before we'll know to let go. In the text, it's said that getting angry at someone is like picking up a hot coal to throw it at them, but first you pick it up and burn yourself. Or it's said to be like drinking poison and hoping that the other person gets sick—which they

don't. Because the other person didn't know what I was going through at all. It was just all in my head. So it's a really self-injuring approach.

It's not easy to let go of anger because sometimes it is accurate. The Dalai Lama tells this story about a monk that he used to know in Tibet. He thought this monk was a good guy, but a kind of middling practitioner in the Dalai Lama's estimation. The Dalai Lama had fled Tibet in 1959 when the occupation started. This other monk did not leave and he was imprisoned for twenty years—his crime was being a monk.

After twenty years he managed to get out of prison and escape and come to India. At that time the Dalai Lama was trying to meet all the people who had come out of Tibet and found refuge in India because he felt so strongly connected to their plight and the cause of the Tibetan people. So this monk made his way to India and got to meet the Dalai Lama. In the course of the conversation, the monk said, "You know, I felt I was in prison for twenty years and I felt I was in danger." And the Dalai Lama said, "Oh, I can understand. You must have been feeling in danger of being tortured." And the monk said, "No, I was tortured. But that's not the danger I was talking about. I was in danger of getting angry. But I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk's level of practice. So this is a human possibility. I consider this very advanced practice, but it's a human possibility not to get angry even in a situation like that. I like to remind myself that that's something that people in my lifetime have experienced and worked with. And it helps me to put my problems in perspective.

Another way that aversion comes out is that it gets turned toward ourselves, and we fall into self-judgment, self-criticism. We might recognize there's this underlying criticism of ourselves. We have a feeling that we're not good enough in some way—we're not quite valuable as a person, not fully valuable, not valued by people. We can look back at our past and see, "Oh, this came from my parents or my teachers or my peers and that criticism." But honestly, knowing the source of that doesn't release that feeling. In meditation, you may come upon the source, but it's not much help in becoming free of the feeling of self-judgment.

This kind of self-judgment can go quite deep and be very subconscious, and yet we're carrying it. I came upon it in my practice in early years, and I felt physically weighed down by it. I felt like there was a weight on my shoulders from not measuring up to some standard or other.

This is more difficult, perhaps, if you're a member of a marginalized community in this country or where you grew up. In this country, there's a dominant culture, which is white and heterosexual and middle class. If you're from a group that isn't aligned with that dominant norm, the message you get from the dominant culture—from the media and books and commentators—is that you're not as good as. This is a very tragic state of affairs, but this is a reality in our country today, in the U.S. at least. One may grow up with a feeling of not being as valuable because of one's ethnicity, because of one's sexual orientation, because of one's gender identity, and so grow up with this sense of not being lovable or not quite

belonging here.

And it's subtle, right? But when we start to meditate, we can maybe really feel it strongly. And then we really need to use the tools of the meditation to hopefully work our way through those feelings. And the loving-kindness practice is really valuable for this. And so is solidarity with other members of those groups. Very, very helpful.

Something that really impressed me that I read shortly after it first came out was Michelle Obama's memoir. It's called Becoming, and it's a really beautiful book. You all know she was, if you're not from the U.S., you still probably know she was the first lady, wife of Barack Obama. And she's an amazing woman. She grew up in an ordinary household in a not very prosperous part of Chicago and went to schools that are kind of associated with not very prosperous areas of cities. And yet, she wanted to advance herself.

And so in her school years, she worked really, really hard. And she also had the support of her parents who were very loving. I think that's a big element of what saved her. And so through the work through her school years, she was able to get in one of the hardest to get into high schools in the Chicago area. So there she received really good education. And again, she worked really hard. And then she got a scholarship to Princeton. And at Princeton, she worked really hard and she got admitted to Harvard Law. And there she worked really hard and she got a job at this prestigious law firm in Chicago, which is where she met Barack. She was Barack's mentor when he came into that law firm. That's how they got connected.

She said in the memoir, it's very moving, she describes at every step of the way how she was plagued by self-doubt and the doubts of the authority figures around her that maybe she wasn't good enough. Because of her background and the color of her skin and all the difficulties she'd had in growing up, the self-doubt plagued her at every step. And yet she just moved into it and developed and grew. And you look at her self-confidence today, you just don't see that kind of doubt. But she really had to work to grow into the person she is. And that's why the title of her memoir is so impressive. It's called Becoming. It's sort of the story of how she became the Michelle that we know and love. Beautiful story.

So sometimes these patterns are fairly deeply rooted and will come up again and again. And it can seem like, oh my gosh, am I ever going to get free of this? And the reason they're so strong is that they're karmic patterns that we have repeated over and over and over many times over many years. It's our own now. When we were young, we didn't have an option. But now we're repeating these same judgments and opinions. That's what makes it a karmic pattern. And so it's gotten entrenched in our psyches. And so this can be frustrating.

I was on a retreat one time with Trudy Goodman. And one of the yogis raised their hands to ask a question. And they asked Trudy, and they said, "I keep seeing my same old stuff, and I'm so tired of it." And so Trudy's response was, "Whose stuff would you like to have?" Right? We're going to have somebody's. Might as well take ours.

So the next one is sadness. Sadness. And we've all had disappointments in life. We've lost friends or partners or relationships or jobs, family members. We know what that is like. One of the greatest losses probably is for a parent to have a child who dies. Personally, it's hard to imagine a greater loss for me than if I had a child who died. So in California, we had, as a Sangha member, a parent whose child had committed suicide. And that would make it even more difficult. And so there was a lot of grief, a lot of feeling of loss, a lot of sadness.

But this person was committed to the dharmic path and kept coming on retreat to try to work with and hold the grief that this brought about for them. Every retreat they'd come and the grief would be hard to bear—kind of overwhelming. It was really what their practice was about: just being with the grief and the sadness and that loss. This happened year after year.

Then one year, the person came back on the retreat and the grief was gone. The missing was still there, but the overwhelming nature of that grief had just been worked out. This is something I think it's really helpful to understand about grief: it has its own timeline. If we're able to open to and feel it, it will pass through.

Sometimes we're afraid to feel sadness or grief because we feel like, "Oh, it's too big a pool. If I open to it, I'm going to drown. If I really open to it, it's going to go on forever." But grief has its own timeline and timeframe. We can learn to open to it and hold it with mindfulness, and eventually it does move through. This is a really powerful demonstration of that for me.

The last of the big areas I wanted to talk about is fear. This is my personal favorite, because this was my big difficulty emotion for many years. The hard thing about fear is that every time it came up, I'd get scared. I didn't know how to handle it. It wasn't what I wanted—I wanted to be calm. The fear would come up and I'd think, "No, not that again." So it was hard to get in to feel it, but the instructions were to feel the body sensations, so that's where I would bring my attention.

My stomach was clenched. I had this fluttery feeling all up and down my chest. I felt kind of shaky and ungrounded. It was really unpleasant, but I could connect with the sensations in the body. What my teachers instructed me to ask was, "Are they bearable? Could I bear those sensations?" I didn't really think so, but I looked and I saw I was bearing them. I went through a whole sit and I had them and I came out the other side. I had been able to bear those sensations.

Then I tried to get close to the mental tone. But it's hard because the mental tone of fear is moving away from. Every time I got close to the mental tone, it would kind of repel my attention. It says, "You don't want to come here. This is scary. Don't get too close." But over time, I got closer and closer to the mental tone of the fear.

Then I looked into the belief I had about it, and it was something like, "I can bear this moment, but the next moment's going to be unbearable." That was kind of the story within fear. So I'd open up to those

three parts and got more and more familiar with it.

At one point, one of my teachers said, "Okay, if you think you're accepting it, ask this question: Would it be okay with you if the fear was with you for the rest of your life?" So I asked myself that question—would that be okay? And the answer came immediately: no way. That was not going to happen.

But then I was in struggle with the fear, right? I wasn't really accepting it. So I had to look: why did I feel that? I couldn't open to it. All these reasons came up. If fear was always with me, I couldn't get into music the way I had been able to get into music. I couldn't open myself to a sunset the way I had been able to.

I couldn't fall in love again if I was full of fear. So there were all these future things that I wanted. But by holding out for them, I was making the present moment full of conflict and avoidance and fear. I was sustaining the fear.

So I gave up. I said, "Okay, I'm going to open to fear even if it wants to be here for the rest of my life. That's going to be okay with me." And I did open and I really meant it. And at that point, when I opened in that way, it broke something in the fear. It cracked its spine in some way. And fear has never had the same power over me again that it had before, because of that degree of opening.

For a long time in my practice then, I didn't care if fear came or not. If it arose—totally fine. If it passed away, totally fine. If it wanted to stick around, totally fine. If it wasn't there, totally fine. I really didn't care whether fear came or not. And from that point on, I knew that fear would come again, and it has come again, but it's never felt crippling. It's never felt like it really scared me because now I know how to work with it.

Once I realized that, I understood it wasn't just fear that I had learned to work with. I had discovered how to work with any emotion. I knew how to go through the same process with any difficult emotion that came up. And that gave me a huge amount of confidence. I just had the feeling nothing that's going to come on the emotional level can really deeply block me any longer.

So I had to dig really deep to get to that kind of relationship with fear. I had to find a kind of courage that I didn't even know was there to open that thoroughly to fear.

This is a quotation from Ajahn Liam. Do you remember I read something about Ajahn Liam the other night about his enlightenment experience as a disciple of Ajahn Chah? This is Ajahn Liam. He was in conversation with another abbot late in his practice life. The abbot asked him, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?" And Ajahn Liam said, "I'd have to say that the hardest thing was fear." And then he paused. "But just to say that it was hard isn't quite right. I would have to say that it was a worthy opponent. Working with it brought about the growth of a lot of wisdom. It was a worthy opponent."

And that was the same way it was for me. I had to grow my skills in meditation and my strength as a human being in order to discover freedom in relation to fear. And that growth and confidence has served

me well ever since.

So these mind states that come along in your practice that look like a disaster—they may be your lifeboat. You climb on that lifeboat and it really fuels your journey to freedom, to awakening, to liberation. Because you develop strengths you didn't know you had. They're there potentially, but we all need to bring them out.

So in the beginning I kind of had the idea in practice that I needed to get out, get away from confusion in order to find freedom or awakening. Confusion is this agitated state of mind where we feel kind of lost and adrift and we're not sure what's what or where to go. I thought all that had to go away before I could find awakening.

Well, that's not the way I understand it now. The way I understand it now is that I have to find my awakened mind in the middle of the confusion. And it's finding the awakening in the middle of confusion that transforms it and makes it weaken and little by little fall away. And then awakening is right there for us.

So it's not like we get rid of this stuff and then we find awakening. We awaken in the middle of all these difficult emotions. Whichever one is our main song—

We awaken in the middle of that and we find stability, equanimity, acceptance, compassion, friendliness right there. And then we find awakening is not far away. This is what we're practicing for. And it's possible. It's possible in a retreat like this to unfold in that direction.

So I want to close with a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke. He wrote a collection of poems when he was in his twenties—they're his most accessible poems. It's called The Book of Hours. He was traveling around Europe, especially Germany, but some neighboring countries, going to churches. He got into a Christian phase, and you can really feel the awakening of his spirituality as you follow the poems that he wrote on this journey.

The setting of this particular poem is that before God makes us and before he releases us into the world, he speaks to us. So this poem is what God says as we're about to be admitted to life:

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.
Give me your hand.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me.

Thank you for your attention, and you know what happens next. Good night.

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