Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:30

The Buddha's teaching was all around suffering and the end of suffering. In his very first discourse on the Four Noble Truths, he said that our obligation or our endeavor with regard to the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, was to understand it. That's what's to be done in regard to the First Noble Truth. So the understanding of suffering is really the starting point for the whole path.

When we look at the extent of suffering in the world and think that we need to bring an understanding to that, it seems too complex. It seems overwhelming, the reach of suffering in the world and all the causes and conditions for that suffering to arise. In our daily life, we probably know people with really difficult family situations, relationship situations, personal situations that just seem very hard to sort out or understand.

A son is using drugs and his life has fallen apart and he can't support himself. An aging mother is developing Alzheimer's, advanced Alzheimer's, and the family can't afford a facility to provide the kind of care that she really needs. Or the head of the household has lost their job in the current economic downturn, and there's no source of income for the family to be able to support themselves. These kinds of situations are all over on an individual level.

On a societal level, there's the plague throughout society, wherever we look, of poverty, racism, inequality, and injustice, people not being able to be supported and cared for adequately. And on a global level, humans are getting really close to ruining the planet that gave birth to us through climate change and global warming. Along with that, a mass extinction of species is expected. So all these conditions from the personal level to the societal level to the global level can seem impossible to figure out or resolve.

Sometimes that's why it's nice to come into retreat, because the question of suffering becomes a lot simpler. As we settle in here, and in a way we are stepping out of the broader societal problems and family problems for a while, then we bring that intention to understand suffering back to a very personal level. In our direct experience, what is the source of suffering?

It soon becomes apparent when I get into retreat that there are basically only three kinds of suffering. There's bodily pain, which can come from just the posture and sitting too long. It may come from illness. It may come from injury. But there's bodily pain in all its different manifestations. There's not much that we can do about that through meditation practice often. Sometimes it will change as we go, but we can't always control it.

Then there's mental pain, or you could say emotional pain. We're familiar with all the different kinds of

afflictive emotions that can visit us. Qualities like loneliness and fear, anxiety, anger, wanting or yearning, sadness and grief. All of these emotions visit both in our daily life, but here we really get to see them as our common companions. In Mahayana Buddhism, it's said there are 84,000 of these afflictive emotions. That gives a sense of the extent. But that was from a long time ago, and life was simpler then. So they've probably doubled by now.

These are the two main things we deal with again and again: physical pain, mental or emotional pain. And then as meditators, we have a third kind of pain that people in the world don't have. And that's frustrated meditations. We can come down and intend to connect with the breath or the body, and yet the mind wanders. When we notice that, sometimes that can get really frustrating. It wanders and we fall into sleepiness. So we have the pain of meditation that doesn't accomplish the goal that we intended to accomplish, this quality of a wandering mind.

If you go out and ask the general person in the street, did your mind wander very much today? Number one, they wouldn't know what you were talking about. Number two, they wouldn't care. But as meditators, we have this privileged circle of pain that we deal with. Restlessness, lack of stability, wandering mind, lack of concentration.

Tonight I want to talk particularly about this second kind: the kind of pain that comes from difficult emotions or afflictive emotions. These are the source of most of the big sufferings in our lives, sometimes in retreat or in our daily life. These are the emotions that are stirred up by the encounters with life, which take many different forms. If people don't understand these emotional reactions, they can be really debilitating. The experiences of depression or anxiety or grief or panic can be so overwhelming in someone's daily life that they are no longer able to function effectively. So these can be a very big burden in outer life. They can be a very big burden in retreat life.

I think one of the biggest blessings of mindfulness meditation is that we can learn to work with all these states. When we bring the meditation to bear on them, we can start to understand them. They all become workable. Originally I came into meditation and I was really drawn by the image of the Zen master who had conquered all these emotions and eliminated them.

I had the idea that at a certain level of development, I would possess about as much emotion as this stone Buddha behind me. That was a youthful, idealistic misunderstanding.

In my understanding now, we don't aim in the near and medium term to get rid of these states at all. Perhaps in the long term, someone like the Buddha or a fully enlightened being has managed to free his or her mind from all the influence of difficult and painful emotions. I believe in that possibility. But in our medium-range practice goals, that needn't be our aim—it's somewhat unrealistic.

What we can aim for is to explore these states of mind and through exploration understand them so deeply that a lot of the sting is taken out of them. In that way, a certain confidence comes into our lives

and practice—that whatever life throws at us and however the heart responds, we have the tools to deal with it.

What I really love about our practice that we've received from our teachers is the range of these tools at our disposal. The tools of mindfulness, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity give us enough to understand this whole range of difficult emotions and bring them into workability, so we can be with them and suffer less and less as our practice develops.

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 creepy, splendid, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing." There's tremendous encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method.

I feel this is really true. This journey opens up an exploration that is very interesting and rewarding—one of the most immediate sources of freedom from our meditation practice.

Classically, this area of meditation comes under the third foundation of mindfulness in the *Satipatthana Sutta*. This is the foundation that concerns itself with what in Pali is called *citta*, which is generally translated as "mind." But it doesn't mean just conceptual mind. *Citta* encompasses both emotional states as well as the thinking part of mental activity. Sometimes we call it the heart-mind—heart and mind together.

In Thai, where I practiced for a while, the word for mind is *jit*, which is a direct borrowing from the Pali word *citta*. If you ask a Westerner where their mind is, most of us will point here to the head. But if you ask a Thai person where their mind is, they will point here to the center of the chest—this is where they understand the *jit* to be. In Buddhist thinking, many texts point to the center or root of the mind being in the heart center, not connected with the brain.

There's a wonderful story that illustrates this. You all know there's extensive neuroscience research now investigating the effects of meditation to scientifically validate it. One of the foremost researchers who got the whole thing going is a PhD at the University of Wisconsin in Madison named Richie Davidson. I don't know if he tells his professional colleagues this, but he was a longtime Vipassana meditator first, and he got the idea to validate through science the effects of meditation he had discovered for himself. His work was inspired from the beginning by an aim to validate meditation in the eyes of the scientific community.

He developed over the years a great friendship with the Dalai Lama, who strongly supported this project. Richie was the one who did the groundbreaking work where they placed senior Tibetan lamas in MRI machines and mapped their brains through various advanced states of meditation. The results were off the charts in the areas of stillness, compassion, and happiness—dramatically different than anything scientists had seen before.

The Dalai Lama invited Richie to Dharamsala to talk about the research and demonstrate some of the

effects. Richie couldn't exactly ship an MRI machine over there—it's bigger than a station wagon. What he took was a cap made of leather with strips going down along the top of the head. From the strips hung electrodes that reached down to the scalp and measured the brain's electrical activity. Each electrode was wired to a computer that could generate a map of brain activity—a simpler form of what they were doing in the MRI.

So Richie was demonstrating this equipment in Dharamsala to His Holiness and about 500 Tibetan monks. He put on this black leather cap with the electrodes and thirty wires dangling off the back, running into a computer, and he felt pretty silly—it doesn't look very noble.

At the end of his demonstration, the monks broke up laughing. Richie thought it was because he had looked so silly. But a Tibetan monk stood up and said, "We were laughing because you think you're going to measure the mind up here, but everybody knows it's actually located here in the chest."

They thought it was simply silly to try and measure the mind in the head.

So we talked a little bit with Richie about how we could possibly measure the impulses around the heart, but we haven't figured that one out yet.

This is the terrain of the third foundation of mindfulness from the Satipatthana Sutta. That section of the ancient text begins like this: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind?" Understanding that mind here includes both heart and mind. By the way, in this context, bhikkhu—which normally refers to an ordained monk—the commentaries say refers to a sincere practitioner of this meditation. So in the context of this sutta and this retreat, we are all fulfilling this term of bhikkhus for the purpose of meditation.

"How does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind? Here a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

This quotation revolves around these three qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion. You can recognize two of them are emotional—desire and hatred—and one of them is more cognitive—delusion or misunderstanding. So you can see how even in the sutta, it weaves together the affective and the cognitive parts of what mind does.

The qualities of absence of greed, absence of hatred, absence of delusion give rise to all the beautiful states of mind—and we'll talk a lot more about those later in the retreat. The qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion in different combinations give rise to all the painful or afflictive qualities of mind. And that's the area I'd like to talk about tonight.

With these painful emotions, there are basically two things that need to shift as we undertake our practice with them. The first is that our attitude has to come much more toward an accepting relationship to them. Normally when these states come in, they're the last things we want. When I first started practicing and fear or resentment or anxiety came in, that was the last thing I wanted to see. I came here to get calm. I wanted to get peaceful. I wanted to get insight. I didn't come to get this stuff. But that attitude doesn't work so well. We can't just push those things out, so we need to develop an accepting relationship with them.

The second big shift is a greater understanding of their nature. We need to understand their particular nature—how anger works, how fear works, how wanting works. But we also need to understand their universal nature. These states are conditioned arisings, and the Buddha said that of all conditioned arisings, they are subject to the characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.

Impermanence means they come, and therefore they will go. All these emotional states, once they arise, are also going to pass away if we let them. They are unsatisfactory, and of course the painful ones are inherently unsatisfactory, so that's clear. And they're selfless in that we don't own them and they are not our identity. They're not who we take ourselves to be. They're just passing visitors like clouds.

Once we start to understand them in relation to these three characteristics, they lose a lot of their power and enchantment. Essentially, in seeing these three characteristics, we see the empty nature of emotions. When I say empty, it doesn't mean that they don't exist, doesn't mean that they aren't real, doesn't mean that they aren't something we feel, but we see their essential insubstantiality. And when we see that insubstantiality, we can't take them as seriously as we did before. So that's part of the investigation and the insight that I'll talk about tonight.

In working with all these states, the first step is to know what we're feeling when we're feeling that. Now, I don't know about you, but I never got taught this as a kid. My parents did not go out of their way to say, "Dear Guy, what are you feeling today? Did you have a good time at school? Did people treat you well? Oh, did you feel hurt? Do you feel resentful? Do you want to fight with that guy who belittled you?" This was not the dinner conversation at my house.

So when I came into meditation, I felt there was a whole landscape of my heart that I had to figure out with the help of my teachers, but I basically had to figure out for myself with their guidance. And I just think it would be such a huge contribution to the world if we could teach children in school simply to know what they're feeling. That kind of emotional intelligence would, I think, solve a lot of the problems in the world. And there's an organization that's starting to do this in this country.

They're based in Oakland called Mindful Schools. They have this fabulous program of going into public schools at the elementary and junior high levels, teaching children mindfulness and using it to explore how they feel. The changes are remarkable. Students will say things like, "Now I like to meditate right before I go to bed because it makes me so peaceful," or "When I'm mindful, I don't get angry and hit my little sister." It's really a wonderful program, and there are now about a thousand teachers who've been

trained to take this practice into schools. It would be terrific to see this grow.

Here in Marin, we have a Sangha member who runs what is essentially a Dharma preschool. She's a longtime meditator who has found enough parents connected to this Sangha and other Sanghas who want their children to have basically a Dharma-oriented upbringing. She's received their permission to turn her preschool into a Dharma training ground. She has children who are three to five years old, and she tells them stories from the Jatakas, teaches them yoga and meditation, and has quiet periods that last up to thirty minutes. If you can imagine a group of twenty-three to five-year-olds being quiet for thirty minutes at a time, there's some kind of magic happening there.

She explained that when you teach meditation to children that age, you can't use words like mindfulness, investigation, and attention to the object—it's too abstract for them. So she teaches them with images. She told me about one class where the children were doing yoga, and at the end they lay down on their backs as she began leading them in meditation. She said, "Okay, close your eyes and imagine a big lake. In this lake, there's all this water. Let your mind become the water. Through this water, all kinds of fish are swimming. There can be a happy fish and a sad fish and an angry fish and a loving fish. But you're the lake, and you just let all these different fish swim through. Let them come and swim and go through."

She guided them like that for a while, and after the meditation, she asked the children how it was. This four-year-old boy raised his hand and said, "Well, I could let all the fish come, but I couldn't let the mad fish come."

She asked, "Why not?"

He replied, "Well, when the mad fish comes, if I don't know I'm the water, it makes me do things that hurt people."

A four-year-old got it. When he's the water, he can hold it all.

So it's easy not to know what we're feeling. This came really clear to me during one long retreat. I was sitting about two weeks in and was fairly settled. I was walking out from the meditation hall, feeling I was pretty continuous in my mindfulness, noticing the movements of my feet with the lifting and moving and placing notes. I reached the area where I had been walking—I'd walked there every walking period for two weeks, very steadily—and there was somebody in my walking path.

I couldn't believe it. Everybody had been at this retreat for two weeks, and I thought, "Don't they know I've been on that path for two weeks? Did I cut in front of the line at breakfast?" Still very mindful: lifting, moving, placing.

I walked a little farther. "Are they trying to play some head game with me? They must know it's my path. What is going on?" Lifting, moving, placing.

I kept walking and had to find a different path, so I took another patch of grass which, to my great

surprise, worked just as well. I couldn't understand that. Every once in a while I'd shoot them an evil look because they were still in my path. Lifting, moving, placing—I felt I'd really been mindful.

It was only about thirty minutes into the walking period that I realized: I'm angry. It took me that long to see it. I felt I was really present, but I missed the most important thing that was happening in my experience.

I was angry. I was with the steps but I missed the main thing that was going on.

This is kind of how these afflictive states or these hindrances work. They fly in underneath our mindfulness radar and convince us to turn our attention to the outside situation. I was so focused on the person who had taken my path and why they were wrong and why I was right that I missed my inner process. So with all these emotional states, that's what they tend to do. They grab our attention and direct it to an outside focus, and in doing that, they take us out of our own experience.

When I realized I was angry, then I had the tools to work with it. I knew how to feel it in my body. I knew how to examine my thoughts. I knew how to release it. So within a minute or two, it was gone. Until I had seen it, I was just locked into the mechanism of it, and there was no way for me to step out.

One of the key underpinnings that keeps these difficult emotions in place is some kind of view or belief about the situation. I'm going to call this the storyline of the emotion. In my case, the storyline that kept the emotion going was I thought that it really was my walking path and they were wrong and I had a right to it. So take a look at this with anger and see if this isn't often the case—that there's a belief or a view underneath that they're wrong and I'm right. And as long as we keep telling ourselves that story, then it sustains the anger. When we turn our attention to the emotion itself, that takes the juice away from the outer situation and then we can start to relate to it with the tools of meditation.

So the first step is to name what's present. In my case, anger or resentment. In other cases, fear or wanting or loneliness or irritation or sadness or grief or envy. There's something powerful about that naming process. And so even if you're not doing noting generally during the day, this silent mental labeling that Kamala mentioned this morning is very helpful to name these difficult emotions. It creates some space around it.

Among the scientific research studies going on was a group studying anger management. They took a group of people who had problems controlling their anger and not letting it act out with others, and as the experiment, they gave them the assignment simply—this is all they did—every time they felt anger, to name it as anger. There was no other instruction, there was no other intervention. This turned out to be a really effective way of anger management, just to name it. Compared to a control group that didn't do anything, these people had a much more successful outcome simply by naming the emotion that was present.

So there's something powerful when we name it. It's like we bring a kind of wisdom to it. Now I know

what this is. And then that reminds us, I know how to work with this. As meditators, we learn—now we know how to work with this. So there's not just anger there. Now there's mindfulness, some awareness, maybe some compassion for ourselves, maybe some wisdom that's accompanying it. So in the middle of the difficulty, we're bringing in a bunch of really helpful and positive factors just by naming it.

There are certain states of mind that I see again and again, both in my own life and in meditators that I talk to, that are the big group of these difficult emotions to work with. I want to suggest that all the difficult emotions that we get caught in have to do with time. Time is not necessarily a factor with the beautiful qualities. You can just see someone and have a moment of loving-kindness or a moment of compassion. You can walk out the door and see the light of the sunset and have a moment of joy. These can come in a moment, go the next moment—it's all fine. But a difficult emotion that we get caught with that makes us suffer is going to have something to do with extending over time or relationship to time.

The other thing that difficult emotions are about is pleasure and pain. Our life as human beings is full of a succession of moments of pleasure and pain, sometimes very strong, sometimes rather subtle. But it's the memory or the holding on or the accumulation of those moments of pleasure and pain that cause the stickiness in living.

So there are these two factors: time and pleasantness. We can put time on the horizontal axis, going from past to future, and the pleasure level on the vertical axis, going from pain up to pleasure. There are four ways to combine these.

So let's look at these. I want to say that there's a difficult emotion connected with each of these four quadrants.

Let me ask you: if something has been pleasant in the past—here's this quadrant, pleasant in the past, which means it's no longer here, no longer available—what emotion do we tend to have for that?

Okay, desire is something people often say, but I think desire is really about projecting into the future. Let's say it's not there at all anymore. What then?

Sadness. Grief. This is the source of sadness or grief—something that was pleasant in the past but is no longer available to us. An old relationship, an old friendship, an old house, death of a loved one. This is the terrain of sadness and grief.

Now, unpleasant in the past. And I want to make it a little more specific—unpleasant or painful related to another person. How do we react there?

Anger. Exactly. If someone has done something unpleasant to us in the past, we tend to hold it with anger or resentment. So that's the second big one.

Pleasant in the future. You've already said this. If you're looking forward to something that's really going to be delightful, this is desire—the whole field of desire, yearning, longing, wanting.

Unpleasant in the future. You're looking forward to something that you expect will be painful or difficult. What comes up?

Fear. Fear, anxiety, nervousness. Just a week ago, less than a week ago, I had to give a presentation in front of the Marin County Board of Supervisors. Spirit Rock was applying for a kind of big change in our overall building plans, and Jack Kornfield was out of town, so I gave the presentation. I had a sense of dread about it for about two weeks before I had to do it, from a combination of the sense of responsibility and not knowing the people and the crowd and all of that. Fortunately, it went really well, and we got approved. It was so irrational, right? We don't need to dread these things, but it's just the way the mind works. I dreaded it.

So I want to suggest that these are the four kind of primal emotions that human beings have dealt with for a long, long time: sadness, anger, desire, and fear.

One subset of the anger is if it gets directed toward ourselves. If we feel that we've messed up and either hurt ourselves or somebody else, then what comes up is guilt or self-judgment. So it's kind of a powerful variation on the anger piece.

These are the five I want to talk about tonight: sadness, anger, self-judgment, desire, and fear.

Let's start with desire or wanting. This can come up often in retreat, maybe particularly because this atmosphere is fairly devoid of sense pleasures. The meals are great, the nature is beautiful, but there are long stretches in between those meals where the body may be aching and the mind is running and meditation is kind of boring. So desire often comes in at those times to provide us a little bit of a pleasant fantasy realm.

We may find ourselves wanting our home, our comfortable couch, dinner with a friend, a TV show, something that we've really enjoyed from our home life. This happens a lot.

But one of the things that we see if we start to explore this movement of desire is there's a little bit of a bittersweet quality in it. Because thinking about that person or place or thing is kind of pleasurable, right? You bring in that memory, that wanting, brings in an element of pleasure that's comforting. But at the same time, we don't have it. And that not having it is suffering, subtle or big. There's that missing that's there.

So desire always has these two things.

There's like a beautiful thing and there's this longing, which has always a current of frustration or unfulfillment, lack of satisfaction in it. Because for some reason, we never seem to want what we already have. Ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No, but if we didn't have it, we would really miss it. But we don't want what we've got.

This desire force came through really clearly a number of years ago. I was teaching a retreat in Italy,

which is a lot of fun because I just found the Italian yogis so kind of honest about their emotions and fluent. They had a fluency with their emotions that I didn't have until I started practicing. They were able to be in touch with how they felt and to talk about it.

Of course, there were a few cultural changes we had to modify. We held the retreat at a rented Catholic nunnery, and they were used to renting it out to other people. When they set up for lunch the first day, they wanted to bring out carafes of red wine on the lunch table. So we had to adjust that part of the meal serving. And then there was an espresso machine right outside the meditation hall. As soon as people left, ding, ding, ding, ding—wake themselves up.

Early in the retreat, this young man came in. We were talking through an interpreter, and he explained to me that he was really having a hard time settling in because he didn't think he really wanted to be here. So I said, "Well, what's going on? What are you thinking about?"

He said, "Well, I'm not sure I wanted to come on this meditation retreat."

I said, "What were your options?"

He said, "Well, some friends invited me to go on a ten-day trip to the Caribbean with them." This was August, so this was the holiday season. "And I could have gone to the Caribbean."

"Why didn't you?"

"All the plane tickets were sold out. So I came here."

So I can understand why that would create a little rub. We were the consolation prize and he really wasn't so into being there.

But then what we did is we just worked with this factor of desire. "When you think about the Caribbean and the beautiful beaches and being with your friends and swimming and everything, there's an element of desire there that you would like. And that makes this situation look not so great. But maybe the problem is not that this situation is bad, but it's the thinking about the other that has you stirred up. So see what it's like if you don't think about the Caribbean."

He came back in a couple more days, and that advice had totally worked for him. He said, "Okay, I let go of the vacation idea. I just planned on being here. I really settled. I've arrived, and now everything's fine."

Take out the force of desire—the present moment is often not so bad. The storyline underneath his unhappiness was: "If I had been in the Caribbean, I would be happy. And not having it, I can't be happy." But in fact, that was just a belief. When he let it go and could just be here, it was fine. It was the wanting that had made for the discontent.

In meditation, once we settle in, the desire force tends to go not so much to homesickness, wanting to be back in our comfortable homes. It starts to find itself within the field of meditation itself. One remembers

a sitting that one had in an earlier retreat, or one remembers a particular insight that came when one was doing walking meditation on another retreat, and often that's what we want back—the peace of the sitting or the uplift and inspiration of that insight.

Or as we go through the days here, the concentration will come together. We'll have a sitting where the body's very relaxed and the attention is naturally present moment to moment to moment. We'll go out and walk. We'll come back very excitedly for the next sit. Not there anymore. And often there's a strong desire...

how can I get that back? How can I make that happen again?

In sitting meditation, I look for this quality of desire through tuning into the body. When it feels like the body is tensing and going forward, that's a sign to me of the desire force being there. Often I don't know what it is I'm wanting, but if I look into my thoughts to identify what I'm thinking about, sometimes that reveals the content of the desire, and then perhaps I can let it go. I look for that straining forward, that toppling into the next moment, and the counter is to settle back into this moment. There's a sense physically of moving backward, becoming more grounded in the body, dropping a little lower with a sense of relaxation.

There's a word for the general tone of negativity, which is aversion, and I want to talk about that. The general tone of negativity or disliking takes many different forms: hatred, anger, ill will, impatience, irritation, depression, despair, grief, judgment, blame, resentment. There are countless flavors of this state.

How does it feel when aversion is in the mind? Everything seems inadequate or incapable of satisfying us. There's a story from the time of the Buddha. He was standing in a grove with a group of monks when a jackal ran out of the forest. It stood in the clearing for a minute, then bolted into the hollow of a tree where it lay down, but didn't stay long. It popped up and ran into a cave where it lay down, then got up and ran back into the forest.

The Buddha pointed this out to the monks: "Did you see that jackal? It wasn't happy in the forest, wasn't happy in the clearing, wasn't comfortable in the tree hollow, wasn't comfortable in the cave. It wasn't comfortable walking, standing, lying down, or sitting." The jackal blamed its discomfort on the forest, the clearing, the tree hollow, the cave, on standing and walking and sitting and lying down. But the problem wasn't with any of these—the problem was that the jackal had mange, a very itchy skin disease that's very hard to bear.

When we're in a state of aversion, it's as if the mind has mange. Nothing feels good. Everything rubs us the wrong way.

There is a classical antidote for aversion: loving kindness. The meditation that Sally led this afternoon is the antidote the Buddha recommended for this general quality of aversion. Whether it's a state of despair,

irritation, or grief, the practice of loving kindness helps to clear that.

Sadness is one form this disliking takes. It comes out of disappointment or loss—a very significant feeling that often makes us feel helpless. There's worry that if we open to it, we might become overwhelmed or drown in it. Even in meditation, we can tend to keep it at bay, not letting ourselves fully feel it.

But this is only a worry that it will be too much, that we can't accommodate it, that it will overwhelm us or cause us to get lost. We need to trust in the qualities of mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion to hold whatever sadness is in us. Most of us have had disappointments, losses, some degree of sadness or grief. It's a frequent visitor during meditation retreats.

I encourage you to let that sadness come, let it express itself if it's there, open to feeling it. It's only by feeling it that we can allow it to arise and then manifest its impermanence. All kinds of grief will pass through if we give them enough time and space. They have their own schedule, but if we open the channels and let them come, our wisdom is capable of holding them while they go through their process of release.

When anger arises—another form of aversion—it often comes when we sit and remember old events in our life, people who have hurt us, people who have caused us harm. So it's very important to learn to meditate with this emotion also.

With anger, the body gets tight. There's a kind of burning quality. And the thoughts that come tend to be thoughts of blame—that the other person is wrong and we ourselves are right. So it's very helpful to meditate with this.

It's really important to listen to these thoughts because we find that the blaming thoughts are the things that keep the anger going. Anger is kind of a fiery state, and what sustains the fire, the fuel for that fire, is the blaming thoughts. If we drop the blaming thoughts, the fire will die out. That's all that really needs to happen. But as long as we keep tossing on more logs, the fire will keep growing.

But it's difficult because it's like, if I don't think those blaming thoughts, it's like I'm condoning what that person did. And that wasn't right. And sometimes that's really true. You know, the problem is we're telling ourselves "I'm right and you're wrong," but sometimes that actually is true. So what do we do then?

This is a story from the Dalai Lama. He said that when he was still living in Tibet prior to 1959, when he escaped to India, he knew this monk—one of many monks in one of the monasteries there. And he judged this monk as just having kind of middling practice. Then the Dalai Lama escaped to India, living now in Dharamsala. And then something like twenty-five years later, this monk showed up in Dharamsala and asked for a meeting with the Dalai Lama because he likes to visit with people who've managed to escape.

So of course the Dalai Lama inquired after his welfare and said, "How was your time there? I understand you were in prison." And the monk said, "Yes, yes, I was in prison for twenty years and I often felt I was in

danger." And the Dalai Lama said, "Did you feel you were in danger of being tortured?" And the monk said, "No, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I meant I was in danger of becoming angry, but I didn't." The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of this monk's practice.

So that demonstrates a possibility. I mean, it's an awesome possibility. It's way beyond what I feel myself capable of. But it's a possibility that we can apply to lesser situations. Maybe someone does harm us, and that's clear. And we see clearly that was unskillful conduct on their part. And our reaction may be of anger, but it is possible not to hold that. It is possible to let go of those blaming thoughts, even though we're right.

For me, there's only one thing that has persuaded me to let go of those blaming thoughts, and that has been the pain of anger itself. I would be in the middle of a meditation retreat, very open and sensitive. My body had been just dropping tension for weeks or months. I'd be in a very open and sensitive place. Some situation would come up and I'd get angry in my thoughts about it and my body would go into this strong contraction. And I wouldn't be able to release it. I'd feel like I was just in the grip of a big pair of pliers. And I'd still keep thinking the blaming thoughts.

And finally, you know, after enough times, it got so unpleasant. The suffering of anger itself was so strong that I became deeply motivated to let go. And I was able to learn to do it better and better. I still get caught from time to time, but I know the way out. If I can just get to the point of letting go of the blaming thoughts, then the anger will decline.

And I began doing it out of concern for my own welfare. But of course, I see how it also benefits the world. If I can release my own anger, then I don't spill it on others. So in Buddhism, it's often the case that we come to this understanding: what benefits us also benefits others, and what benefits others also benefits us. The two aren't really opposed.

This quality of burning ourselves in holding anger before it goes to another is pointed to by the classical texts in a couple of different ways. One thing they say is that becoming angry at somebody is like picking up a hot coal to throw it at them, but it burns us first. And the other way that it's described is that becoming angry is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will get sick.

If we feel ourselves being angry, it's not to judge that experience.

We all will have anger from time to time. It's not to consider ourselves a bad meditator or to try to suppress it. Really, inwardly, you want to let anger just rip—to be able to rip within you without any censorship. Outwardly, you want to be really careful about how you express it. But inwardly, in meditation practice, you want to let it come on as fully as it is wanting to. And then investigate it, explore it, explore how it's created, how these thoughts build it and sustain it, and explore the impact in your own mind and body. That will give the encouragement and the direction to be freer in relation.

When this sense of anger or judgment gets directed toward ourselves, then it becomes a very heavy

weight to bear. It affects our confidence in the world and our ability simply to feel good about ourselves. It seems in the West we have kind of an epidemic of this quality of self-judging now. Here it's so often seen in retreats—it's something people are working with.

Some years ago, a group of Western Buddhist teachers were meeting with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and asked him how to work with this problem in the meditators that they met. The Dalai Lama couldn't understand what they were talking about. "Not liking oneself? What do you mean? Can you explain this to me? How does this come about?"

He had to go around through all the Western teachers in the room—there were about twenty of them—and ask, "Do you feel this?" Yes. "Do you feel this?" Yes. "Do you feel this?" Until all those teachers acknowledged that this had been a difficult part of their own practice. Then he started to understand. But he said in Tibet, children are so valued and so loved by their parents and extended family and community that they don't grow up with this sense of being inadequate or unlovable. It's just not part of their culture.

The storyline or underlying belief with self-judgment is something like—and all these storylines I'm suggesting are really for you to investigate for yourself to see what the truth is for you—but it's something like, "I'm not good enough, I'm not worthy enough, or I'm not lovable enough." But it's simply not true.

It's almost ironic—it's sad, but it's ironic—that meditators have this problem because you all have devoted a lot of your life to developing love and compassion and wisdom to benefit yourselves and the world. If there was a group of people that I would say are good people, this kind of group is it. You all have a commitment to integrity and developing positive qualities. From my point of view, as I've met with you, you are good people. But it's so hard for us to feel that ourselves, and it's so hard to have confidence in that.

This is one of the reasons why the practice of loving-kindness is such a powerful force in working with this. When we start to feel that loving-kindness is really alive in us—even if we're feeling it for other people, like friends, family members, benefactors, children, pets—we know that there's something really good inside that's alive and awake and manifesting in us. The presence of loving-kindness within us gives us a lot of self-confidence and a lot of trust in our own goodness. It's a very powerful practice in many dimensions, and this offsetting of self-judgment is a big one.

The last of these primal emotions I want to mention is fear. I love talking about fear because it was my teacher. For many years, this was the main hindrance that I worked with in meditation, and I learned so much from it. I can honestly say I don't have any regret about going through all the fear I went through because it woke me up in so many different ways.

I also feel that if you take any one of these hindrances, which is your primary one, and you really work it to reach a strong degree of freedom, you'll also know how to work with the others. It's not like you have to learn every one anew. Through working with fear, I felt like I came to terms with all the difficult emotions

that I've experienced.

With fear, I had it a lot in the early years of my practice and I hated it. When it first started to come and it came on strong, I absolutely hated that state of being in fear. Finally, one of my teachers gave a talk that opened the door for me. What he said in the talk was, "See if you can bear the physical sensations that accompany fear."

So that's what I took as my challenge, because I could grapple with the physical experience of it. I just started to feel, anytime fear would come, I would feel how I felt in my body. I would feel that tightness in my abdomen, that kind of fluttery energy that starts to rise through the chest, maybe the sweating under the arms, a sense of lightness and lack of solidity that comes with fear. And I would ask myself, "Can I bear this?"

Because with fear, the curious thing is, we come from a place of feeling, "Yeah, well, maybe I can bear this moment," but the belief is the next moment is going to become unbearable. Something disastrous is going to happen in the next moment. But that's just another view. That's the storyline of fear.

Something terrible is about to happen. But if we come into the moment and ask ourselves, can I bear this moment? Then maybe the answer is yes.

So I learned to bear the physical expression of fear. Then I turned to the mind and I said, what's that flavor? What's that mood like? The closest I could get was it was a wanting to run away from, want to flee. And that was hard to get close to because the movement is, I want to flee. So it was really hard to bring mindfulness to touch that bare emotional quality of fear. But I learned to do it.

So I was able to bear it in the body. I was able to bear it in the mind. And I no longer quite believed something disastrous was going to happen. But I was still resisting it. So then my teacher said, okay, if you're going to really accept it, could you accept this fear being here for the rest of your life? That became the acid test.

So I asked myself that question the next time fear came: could I accept this for the rest of my life? And the answer was no. No way. Of course I couldn't. So then I said, why? And I said, well, I couldn't enjoy music the way I like to. I couldn't merge with the sunset the way I like. I couldn't fall in love. So I kept resisting it.

And then I realized that I was giving away my own peace. I had a choice. I could either find peace here and now through accepting my experience or I could continue to fight it. And finally, I didn't care what I was going to lose. I accepted it. And I said, okay, if this state is like this for the rest of my life, it's okay with me. And it truly was.

And when I did that, the power started to drain out of the fear. By that full acceptance of it, just the way it was, it lost some kind of grip over me. And ever since that time, it's come again many times, but it's never had that kind of grip again. So I felt that I now know how to work with this visitor. And over time, it's

almost become a friend.

You know, when it came again around the supervisors this past week, it wasn't pleasant, but I didn't mind it being there because I knew that I could just practice through it and that it was going to pass.

This is why all these emotions are safe. They're all going to pass. So all we have to do is open, let them come, and by their own nature, they'll also go. So truly, we don't have to be afraid of any of them. We open to them with real acceptance. We let them express themselves. They're not fun, but by their own nature, they will also pass. So we don't have to make them go away.

So I'd like to just close with this poem from Rilke, the German poet. It's from a little book called The Book of Hours. And the scenario is that he's imagining the words that God says to us on the day that we're created, just as we're launched into this 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.

Now, give me your hand.

So let's just sit for a minute together. Let everything happen to you—beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final.

In this moment of sitting together, we return to the fundamental truth that has woven through our entire exploration: the impermanent nature of all experience. Whether we encounter beauty or terror, joy or sorrow, each arising is temporary, each feeling will pass. This understanding becomes our refuge, our steady ground in the midst of life's constant change.

The invitation to "give me your hand" speaks to the intimacy possible when we truly embody the dharma. We're not alone in this journey of awakening. There's a companionship available—with the teachings, with the sangha, with the very fabric of existence itself. When we stop trying to control our experience and instead let everything happen to us, we discover this profound interconnectedness.

"Just keep going" becomes our practice mantra. Not the going of endless striving or pushing through, but the gentle persistence of staying present, of continuing to open, of meeting each moment with fresh awareness. This is the courage the dharma asks of us—to keep showing up, to keep practicing, even when the path feels uncertain.

As we conclude this exploration together, may we carry forward this reminder that no feeling is final. In

our joy, we remember impermanence and stay humble. In our suffering, we remember impermanence and find hope. This wisdom becomes our constant companion, teaching us to hold all of life more lightly, with greater compassion and deeper understanding.

The country they call life awaits us, with all its seriousness and wonder. We meet it now with open hands and awakened hearts.

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