Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:07

The Buddha's teaching was all about—and I mean this literally—understanding how we suffer and how to come out of it and find happiness, the deepest kind of happiness possible.

When we look at life in the world, the kinds of suffering that we see in our friends and on the planet seem so complex that many of them seem insoluble. A son is using drugs and doesn't listen to anybody else's advice. Our mother has Alzheimer's and it's very painful to watch her decline. Our marriage starts to unravel because a partner is unfaithful and very painful. And not to mention the global issues of climate change and wars and racism and genocide. It seems overwhelming, the amount of suffering.

But when we come into this setting, everything becomes much simpler. The kinds of suffering that we're subject to even become really simple. This is encouraging because when we can see them so simply, we find out they're workable. They're really workable and quite solvable with the tools that we have.

There are really three ways we notice suffering in this setting. The first way is bodily pain. Anybody had a dose of that today? Usually first days of retreat, that's a very big part of the experience. You're sitting and there's pain in the neck or the back or the seat gets sore after a while or the knees start to ache from that old skiing accident. This is very common and it's unsettling. It's scary. We don't know where it's going to lead. We're sometimes confined with that pain for forty-five minutes at a stretch, so it's difficult. Meditation doesn't promise to end the physical pain. We can change our relationship to it, but meditation is not always a remedy for physical pain. Some pains it is. A lot of pains it is not. Some of this is unavoidable.

The second big area of suffering that we feel here is in our states of mind, in the difficult emotions that we find when we sit and are quiet and just with ourselves. The whole range of painful emotions that humans are subject to will come, among all the people here, in various forms: wanting and loneliness and sadness and fear and envy and pride and anger, resentment, self-judgment and criticism. Many more different flavors will come and be experienced in this setting, not necessarily because anything here triggers them, but because they're habits of our minds. We start to realize that in this simple setting, we see the habits of our mind so clearly.

The good news is that our meditation is a very powerful tool for working with difficult emotions. In the long run, the practice offers the possibility that we can actually be completely rid of these difficult emotions. But that's a long-term project. That's not one retreat. It's not one three-month retreat. It's probably not one lifetime. The teachings and the practice offer that possibility, which I find very inspiring.

I've had the good fortune to meet people, as I've practiced over all these years, whose minds seem to be pretty free of most negative emotions. I remember particularly Dipa Ma, who some of you may have heard of, a very highly developed teacher from India, who came upon meditation out of a deep sense of despair when she lost her husband and two children to illness. So out of that grieving, she had to find a root, and her root was meditation. She was a very accomplished practitioner, a very accomplished yogi.

At the time that I met her, fairly late in her life, she was once asked, "What's in your mind?" Because everybody was struck by her presence. She said, "There are only three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and loving-kindness." That was it. I never saw her deviate from those three, except occasionally a little joy snuck in there.

I really have faith from some of the teachers that I've met that this degree of freedom is possible. But it's not necessary for us to reach that level to find a really satisfying amount of happiness in our life. The tool of insight meditation and mindfulness give us the way, the route to work with these difficult emotions so that they don't become such a burden in our lives. As they become less burdensome, other more beautiful emotions begin to open up.

In Mahayana Buddhism, which came around about four hundred years after the death of the Buddha, it was said that of these difficult emotions, there were 84,000 different ones. That's a lot for us to work with. Of course, that was 2,000 years ago, and things were simpler then. By now, there are probably 168,000 or something.

But the good news also is that the beautiful emotions we will be exploring—love and compassion, joy, balance of mind, mindfulness, concentration, equanimity, peace, calm, tranquility, happiness, contentment—are equally available to us.

I think there are 84,000 of those too. So as we get more space around the difficult emotions, then these more beautiful emotions come in naturally because they're a natural part of us as well. So we cultivate them through our mindfulness practice, we cultivate them through our metta practice, and that development starts to bring them out in all those different flavors.

So those are the two kinds of pain that we see very clearly when we come on retreat. The third type is a type that we enjoy as meditators specifically. The person in the street doesn't enjoy this third class of suffering. It's the suffering of the distracted mind.

Because if you go to the person in the street and you ask, "Has your mind been wandering today?" they're not going to know what you're talking about. But if you ask a meditator, "Has your mind been wandering today?" Oh man, it drove me crazy. I couldn't believe how restless it was. You know, I'd connect with a breath for two breaths and then it was gone. It was so frustrating.

So we have this third kind of suffering, which I consider a fairly high class suffering, but it's our own special kind: the wandering mind of the meditator.

In the talk tonight, I want to focus specifically on this second area—the difficult emotions which are huge burdens in our daily life and sometimes in our retreat life until we learn to work with them—and how the tools of meditation can help us get a new relationship with them. It's not in the near term that we aim to get rid of these. If it was possible, the Buddha would have told us how. But in the near term, for most of us, that's not a possibility. But it is possible to completely transform our relationship to them and in that find a huge amount of freedom. This is one of the most immediate benefits that people will find through mindfulness practice, through Vipassana. It's very real and it's very accessible. So that's what I want to talk about tonight.

These meditations about the states of mind and emotions come, for those of you who are familiar with this, in what the Buddha called the third foundation of mindfulness. The first foundation is the body, which we've talked quite a lot about. Second foundation is feeling tone, which we'll talk about later. The third foundation are all these qualities and states of mind. And the fourth foundation is basically the dharmic principles of the Buddha. These are areas that we can pay attention to. So this was identified specifically as the third foundation. Therefore, it's a central part of the Buddha's teaching.

The word that he used for this foundation is citta. It's worth explaining a little bit. I may often use the word mind, but emotions in Buddhism are considered part of mind. So we will sometimes, to emphasize that, we will say heart-mind or heart and mind. And both of them are included in this word citta. Citta is frequently translated as mind, but a better translation probably is psyche. Because psyche has both the cognitive and the emotional components. And it's important to remember when we say mind, we mean the emotions too.

If you ask someone in the West, generally, again, man or woman in the street, where is their mind? Where do you think most people will point? Yeah. Mind's generally understood without too much controversy to be up here.

But if you ask someone in Thailand, "Where is the mind?" The word they use is jit. Where do they point? Yeah. The center of the chest in the heart area. And this is kind of a classical Buddhist understanding that the actual seat of the mind is in this area we call the heart center, the center of the chest.

A friend was giving a demonstration to some Tibetan monks over in Dharamsala of the neuroscience that is growing up in Western research centers. So he took over some simple equipment—a cap with some electrodes connected to a computer—and he put it on to model it for them and showed how all the wires fed into the computer and it decoded the electrical signals. And he took it off, and the monks, there were about 500 monks in the audience, they broke up laughing. And he thought it must be because he looked so silly with the cap on his head. So he asked them, "Why were you laughing? Was it because of the cap?"

They said, "No, no, no, it wasn't that. It was that you're trying to measure the mind here when we all know the mind is located here." They thought that was so silly.

So I'm waiting for the neuroscience that figures out how to measure the mind here.

That will be really interesting.

So this word *citta* encompasses the cognitive aspects and the emotive aspects, and we're going to talk tonight about the emotive aspects of mind or the heart-mind.

In coming to greater freedom with these difficult states of mind, we need two things. The first is a shift in attitude, because mostly when these states come up, we don't like them, and we try to push them away, or we judge them as something that shouldn't be happening. That's a problem. That resistance is a problem. That's our normal conditioning, and we need to unlearn that. We need to open to these states with acceptance. That's the attitude shift.

The second thing is we need more wisdom. We need to understand the makeup of these emotions. In particular, we need to understand how they are part of nature as everything else we experience is part of nature. Usually in the West, when we say nature, we mean that stuff—trees and grass and clouds and rain and sky. We're so fortunate here to be surrounded by beautiful physical nature. But in the Dharma, we understand nature also to mean the mind. This body is a part of physical nature and it obeys the same laws as the rest of physical nature. The mind is also part of nature. So there's physical nature and then there's mental nature.

We need to understand that these states, these difficult emotions are also part of nature, and that means they obey or they manifest these qualities called the three characteristics of everything that exists. Everything that exists in nature is characterized by impermanence, by unsatisfactoriness, and by not having a self. These emotions are the same.

When we understand their nature, they are passing and transitory phenomena. They don't belong to us and we are not them. We are not our anger or our insecurity or our grief or our loneliness or our self-judgment. We've spent so much time believing that we are—oh, this is who I am, this particular pattern. It's not the case. We all have all of these. They're all part of nature, human nature. And so we understand that for all of us, they arise like the weather. They manifest for a while, and following their nature, they pass away.

That's why it's safe to feel them. We start out thinking, "I don't want to feel it. I can't feel it. I've got to push it away." But when we realize they're part of nature, we just let them show their nature. They arise, they play, and then they go. Without our doing anything, they go. And that's why we don't have to fuss with them. So they arise, we feel them, we acknowledge them, we name them, we get to know them, and then we watch them pass. Their passing is what we trust in. It's why we don't have to push them out because they will go on their own.

As we understand this nature, that all these emotions are manifesting the three characteristics, we become much more transparent to them. They arise, they persist, they pass away, and they don't have to

bother us. They don't have to harm us. They don't have to make us do stupid things in the world. They can flow through us in our equanimity. Our balance can be there.

So let's investigate these a little more closely. The first step in working with difficult emotions is to know what we're feeling. This is not as easy as it sounds. I'll tell a little story from my own practice that shows this.

I was about two weeks into a six-week period of retreat, part of a three-month course, but I was just there for six weeks. I had settled in after two weeks. I was feeling very present, very mindful. Every day I had done my walking meditation on the same path down on the grass near the meditation hall. So morning sitting had ended and I went out from the meditation hall and was walking down to my walking path when I noticed there was somebody there.

I couldn't believe it. I'd been walking on that path every walking period for two weeks. I thought, didn't they see me? Is this a vendetta or something? Is this a Vipassana vendetta?

And I was walking very mindfully. I really noticed lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. I thought, did I cut in front of them at breakfast today? Are they getting back at me for that? Lifting, moving, placing. I thought, they're not very sensitive. If they were very sensitive, they would know that was my spot. Lifting, moving, placing.

I got down there running more stories like that, found another walking path, which to my great surprise worked just as well for meditation. And thirty minutes into the walking period, I realized I'm angry. I'm angry at this person who is in my walking path. I had been angry for about thirty minutes and I hadn't known it. I thought I was really mindful. I was lifting, moving, placing, but I was missing the central fact of what was going on, which was I was pissed off.

Now that's kind of hard to believe, but this is how these hindrances operate. Even when we have our mindfulness radar up, they slip in underneath. We don't know what we're feeling when we're feeling it. That's when we're in danger. If I could have had a conversation with that fellow, it would not have been a good outcome.

So not recognizing that we're angry puts us in danger. Recognizing that I was angry gave me the way out. Oh, I know how to work with this. I could let it go and settle into my walking and be open again.

The first most important thing is to know what we're feeling. The reason these things are called hindrances is that they rob our mindfulness. We lose our mindfulness to them by getting involved in their story and the drama that they build up. The story I got involved in was a story I created—he's in my walking path and it's really mine and it should have my name on it and he should have known that. As I kept running that story over and over, I locked myself into that drama, not even knowing I was angry.

That's the way the hindrance works. It blinds us. It blinded me to seeing the most important thing going

on—I'm angry. It's that blindness that robs our understanding, robs our wisdom until we start to notice, oh, there's that emotion. This is the really crucial step: knowing what you're feeling. Being able to name it is really helpful. I suggest that as you work with these emotions, you name them when they come.

What happens then is, instead of directing all my attention to the guy who stole my path, I was directing my attention to my own experience. As long as I'm focused on him and what he did wrong and why he did it and what I'm going to do to him and how we're going to talk about it, I can't free myself. When I can turn the attention back home to my experience, then I can release what's going on.

Another way of talking about the hindrances in terms of mindfulness is misplaced attention. We're placing our attention on the external circumstance or person instead of the inner world where it's rooted. As long as we're fixated on the outer circumstance, we're not going to be able to liberate or come to a freeing relationship to that emotion. But when we can turn the attention here, which is the right place to put the attention, then we have the possibility of freeing ourselves in that moment.

As we turn our attention to these difficult emotions, I want to encourage you to look at three particular areas. If the emotion is strong at all—and it's mostly strong emotions that make us suffer—it's going to have an impact in the body. This is a great place to ground your attention because the body will hold your attention. We've been working with the body for two days now. You've learned how to connect.

Let's say I'm feeling angry. I might feel a pressure in the chest and a burning around the neck and shoulders. I turn my attention there. I can feel it in the body and I stay in touch with it there. As I feel it in the body, I know the sensation—tightness, pressure, heat—and I'm also staying in touch with the anger. So if it's strong, find it in the body.

Where are you feeling it? Where is it manifesting?

Second, turn and feel that mood or color in the mind. You know, anger feels different than even impatience, feels different than happiness, feels different from fear. Just on a... the flavor of the emotion, the taste of it, which is a mind quality, feels different from anger to joy to fear, whatever. So let yourself taste that flavor of anger or whatever.

And then the third piece is if the difficult emotion is being sustained for a while, if it's lasting for a while, it's being supported by a belief that we could call a storyline. We've made up a story that justifies the emotion and keeps it in place. My story was he's taken my walking path and that's wrong. That's what fed the anger. And as long as I kept thinking those thoughts, the anger kept getting built up. When I could see that the storyline was a creation of mine, then the anger could just die down.

Again, the anger will manifest impermanence if we don't keep stoking it back up. Taking out the storyline lets the emotion just wilt away, which all emotions are ready to do when we withdraw our investment. So start to notice the sensations in the body, the mood in the mind, and the story that supports it. We'll go through some specifics to give some more examples of this.

And this is what mindful awareness does. Mindful awareness starts to understand how the emotion has been put together from these different components. And understanding that, we're not so enchanted by it, we're not so deceived, we're not so gripped by it anymore. So this is the wisdom factor starting to come in with the emotions.

In my own practice and working with lots of people over the years, it seems to me that there are four emotions particularly that are kind of primal and that we all feel and work with and that constitute the most difficult ones. Then there are some subgroupings. And I want to see if you can tell me what these are.

So I'm going to suggest difficult emotions get born around experiences of pleasure and pain. This may be a new concept, but I'm going to suggest and you can think about this. The reason life is so difficult is because we have a mix of pleasure and pain. If life was always pleasant, it wouldn't be problematic, would it? It's the alternation that makes life difficult. So the alternation of pleasure and pain makes for difficulty.

The other thing that makes for difficulty is time, or you could say memory and anticipation. When we're completely in the present moment, it's hard to be overwhelmed by a difficult emotion. Difficult emotions depend on a sense of time.

So let's say that pleasure and pain are on a vertical axis. This is for all of you who really liked algebra in the eighth grade. Pleasure and pain are on a vertical axis. Pleasure up here, pain down here. And time will be on the horizontal axis, with past over here, the present, a very tiny point in the middle, and then the future over here. So again, for you algebra buffs, this creates four quadrants, right?

So let's start off with past pleasant. So that's up here. Let's say that something was really pleasant in the past. What emotion might you have in relation to it? Now, past means it's not here now. So, hmm? You'll have a memory of it for sure, but there's an emotion around it.

Missing it. Could that be sadness? Yeah. Sometimes people will answer this and say desire, but that's if it could reappear again. But let's say that it really is gone. Then sadness or missing is more the emotion, isn't it? So sadness or grief is one of the primal emotions that we all work with.

Let's say it was unpleasant. We're in this lower quadrant. Unpleasant in the past. And just to narrow it down, let's say it was connected to somebody. Somebody did something that was unpleasant for you in the past.

What emotion arises around that? Anger. Resentment. This is another of the big ones. Of course it doesn't have to, but that's the trigger for anger. Some degree of pain that happened in the past is the trigger for anger. We don't always succumb, but that's the trigger.

Okay, let's move into the future. Pleasant in the future. How do you feel about that? Hope. It's good. What's another synonym? What's a stronger synonym? Desire. Desire, longing, hope, yearning. This is the kind of emotion that we feel about pleasant things in the future.

And what about unpleasant things in the future? Fear. Fear. So we have sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear.

So I want to suggest that these are maybe the four most primal emotions that we humans work with, live with, or are subject to. And at times, each one of them can be overwhelming and very, very painful.

Now, there are different subcategories that I'll get to with some of these, but these are the four that I mostly want to talk about tonight.

So let's take, as an example, desire. This is a movement of mind looking for a pleasant experience. It comes a lot in retreat. You've probably seen it a lot here.

How many of you have wished you were home sometime in the last couple of days? Some nice thoughts of home? No? Congratulations. How many of you wish for more chocolate chip cookies at tea?

So often in retreat, there's a missing of the pleasant things in our life - the ability to choose our own food or sleep in our own bed or be really warm when we get up in the morning or be with friends and go out for a nice meal. Often it comes. It's maybe not a big source of suffering, but often that wanting comes when we're here.

I was teaching a retreat in Italy. Actually, Carol and Sally and I were all there. It was a lot of fun to work with Italian yogis. They're very frank about their emotions. It was a kind of emotional culture, and they knew their emotions well and were at ease talking about them.

The retreat setup was a little different. It was at a Catholic convent, and when we first went in the first night for tea, there was a carafe of red wine on every table. So we had to ask them to remove that. More suffering. And then you grow up.

But we did not take away the espresso machine that was outside the meditation halls. Every time at the end, ding, ding, ding, ding, people were awake.

So at one point early on, I had an interview with this young man, very nice young fellow, and I said, "How's the retreat for you?" He said, "Oh, I really don't want to be here. I'm really having a terrible time, not happy at all." I said, "Well, why are you here?" He said, "Well, my friends invited me to go to the Caribbean with them or I could have come here." I said, "So why did you choose this?" He said, "Well, all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out." That's why he was at the retreat. He said, "But while I'm here, all I can think about are my friends in the Caribbean and the beautiful sand and the water and the warm sunshine."

Just so I don't want to be here.

So we talked about this a little while. I said, "So you're wanting to be somewhere else. What if that wanting wasn't here? Is this situation actually bad in itself? Is it really unpleasant being here?" He thought about it

and said, "No, you know, it's not so bad, but I really want to be there." I said, "But what if that wanting wasn't there? Would it be so bad to be here? Go check it out. In those times when the wanting isn't there, see if it's that bad."

So he went away and practiced. I saw him again a few days later. He had let go of the wanting, had settled in fine, and was really enjoying the retreat. It was so interesting because that's what wanting does—it makes us think that we would be happy if we were somewhere else, and since we can't be, we can't be happy here. That's what strong wanting does. It blinds us to what's good where we are.

So wanting has this bittersweet quality. You can notice this when you're feeling a little bit of suffering around wanting—check out the bittersweetness. It brings in a pleasant object, and that's the sweet part of it. But you don't have it, and that's the bitter part of it. So desire is always like that. It always has this frustrating quality. When there's a little suffering around it, there's the suffering of frustration, because what we want are things we don't have. Do you ever want a hand at the end of your arm? No, because you have one. If you lost it, you would really want it.

So desire is inherently frustrating. It seems to hold the possibility of gratification, but the lack of the object makes it dissatisfying. And we can't find that real contentment that comes from being present.

The next general area I want to talk about comes under the heading of aversion, which is a word we use a lot in dharma talks because it's one of the fundamental tendencies of mind. Basically, again, because we're driven by pleasure and pain, we want the pleasant and we want to push away the painful. That movement of pushing away the painful is what we call aversion. And that movement of wanting to hold on to the pleasant is what we call wanting or desire.

So aversion has lots of different blooms. I'll just name a few: ill will, anger, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, resistance. Get the flavor? It's a big one. It's one of the fundamental movements and expresses itself in many different ways.

In general, the storyline under aversion is something like: "I can't be happy because this is here. This painful experience is here and it's blocking my happiness." When we're in a state of aversion, everything sort of rubs us the wrong way. Everything doesn't fit right, is not suitable, is not quite to our liking.

Long term, the antidote that the Buddha talked about for this general tendency of aversion is loving kindness. It's kind of interesting—if you notice that there's a lot of aversion in your general approach to life, and sometimes that's just the way it is, loving kindness is a very good practice to offset that. You can kind of think about it because you can feel into aversion how it makes the mind tight and stiff and hard. Loving kindness opens and softens and sweetens that mind. So it undoes the tightness of aversion with this soft opening. It's a very good general direction for people with aversion.

So I want to talk about a few aspects of aversion, one of which is anger, one of the four primary ones. You'll notice that when you're angry with someone, you will tend to think certain thoughts that blame that

person, just like I was doing with the person in my walking path.

Notice how when you're angry with someone, you tend to think certain thoughts that blame that person, just like I was doing with the person in my walking path. You can see that the more thoughts you think, the more the anger builds up. You're justifying your point of view and blaming the other person. Those anger thoughts tend to be the same again and again.

We could say the storyline with anger is "I'm right and they're wrong." We tell ourselves that over and over and over. That very telling builds up the anger. Then we feel it in the body—the body becomes tight and burning. We feel that fiery tone in the mind from the flavor of the anger.

What happens if you stop telling yourself the angry thoughts? The anger fades. This is a really useful thing to know. If you want to get out of anger, stop telling those stories. Then you'll see the anger doesn't have the support and it fades.

But of course, in the beginning, our thinking is very compulsive, and we don't feel we have much choice about what we think. As mindfulness develops, we have more and more choice about thinking those thoughts. The curious thing is that we can see the pain of anger, and we still choose to continue to think those thoughts. It's so funny. We sabotage ourselves in doing that. But at least we know there is a way to let the anger fade, and that is to stop thinking those thoughts.

Now, one of the things that's tricky is sometimes those thoughts are true. People do terrible things in the world and hurt us and other people deeply. When we think, "I'm ethically right and they're ethically wrong," that may very well be true. But is it helpful? That's the question. Is it helpful?

The Dalai Lama tells this story. He left Tibet in 1959, which was ten years after the Chinese invasion and occupation, when he saw that it wasn't going to get any better. But there was a monk that he knew there who stayed behind, and eventually that monk was imprisoned and spent twenty years in prison for the crime of being a monk. While he was in prison, he suffered a great deal, but he eventually was released and escaped from Tibet to come to India.

The Dalai Lama in those years was trying to meet all the refugees who came, especially monks who managed to get out of Tibet. As soon as he came to India, he found the Dalai Lama and had a meeting with him. The Dalai Lama remembered him from earlier, and he remembered him as quite an ordinary monk, nothing special. The Dalai Lama asked him, "Well, how was your time in prison?"

The monk said, "Oh, I felt I was really in danger."

The Dalai Lama was very concerned and said, "Do you mean in danger of being tortured?"

The monk said, "Oh, no, I was tortured, but that's not what I meant. I was in danger of getting angry at my captors. But I didn't."

That was the level of his practice. Who was ethically right in that situation? Who had all the grounds in the world for anger? And yet he didn't allow himself to get angry at his captors. The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk's practice. He was much better developed than he had thought before.

This is a real human possibility. This is beyond me—I am not at that point where I could do that yet—but I am a lot better than I used to be at letting go of anger sooner and sooner when it comes.

As we explore and investigate in this way, we start to see that when we become angry, we suffer first. Tune into the feeling of anger, the tension in the body, the kind of burning quality in the mind. It's not a pleasant experience. In the texts, they say that getting angry at somebody is like picking up a hot coal that you want to throw at them. But you've picked it up and it burns you first. Especially explore if you're angry while you're here—whoever you're angry with doesn't even know it. But you're suffering.

Another analogy is drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

For me, feeling the suffering of anger was the biggest encouragement to let go. I had to feel my own suffering in anger time and again before I said, I don't want this anymore. And it was a great motivator in letting go sooner and sooner. So it's important to feel that pain of anger. There's a lot of learning there.

Now, we can still act in the world when someone has done something that's ethically wrong. We can still act in the world, and I believe we'll be clearer in our actions if our mind isn't clouded by anger. So maybe we can use a little bit of the strength of anger to make us determined, but then let go of the delusion of the cloudiness in order to act properly. And sometimes that means acting forcefully.

One variation of anger is when we turn it toward ourselves. In the West, we tend to do this a lot in the form of self-judgment, self-criticism. It almost seems like our culture has created generations of people who don't like themselves very much and find every opportunity to criticize themselves. We are lacking—we find ourselves lacking in so many qualities. I'm not good enough. I'm not lovable enough. I'm not attractive enough, I'm not smart enough, I'm not thin enough, I'm not making enough money. We can never quite feel good enough about ourselves.

So the story is that we're not quite good enough or lovable enough. And this is felt as a kind of burdensome pressure that doesn't let me feel hopeful or confident or tall with optimism—a burden that weighs me down. And it's very widespread. We hear it a lot in retreats. People comment on this, that especially as they get quiet, they hear a lot of thoughts judging themselves. You're not doing this right. You're not doing that right. Not good enough in many different forms.

A group of Western teachers was meeting with the Dalai Lama some years ago and asked him how to work with this problem. And the Dalai Lama could not understand what they were talking about. He had no experience of it and he had not seen it in Tibetan culture. And so people had to explain it time and time again before he started to get a flavor of what they meant. And he went around to each of the Western teachers and said, "Have you experienced this?" "Yes." "Have you experienced this?" "Yes." Every Western

teacher there knew what this was like from their own personal experience. And the Dalai Lama hadn't. And it's not really in Tibetan culture.

So this is definitely something that's workable through meditation. Again, the development of loving kindness is a huge asset in this way. Because when loving kindness grows, we start to feel, oh, there's goodness inside. This is a goodness that's always been there, but it maybe hasn't been so strong. We haven't seen it clearly. As metta develops, we start to feel, oh, there is real goodness inside, and we feel better and better about ourselves.

So when you notice the judging thoughts, take a moment to just feel the impact, that kind of burden that it puts on us to be perfect. And notice you don't have to believe the thoughts. The way through self-judgment is not getting rid of the thoughts, because that would be more aversion. But the thought can be there and we don't have to believe it. We don't have to take it so seriously. "Okay. That's the judging mind again." We could say, "Thanks, Dad. I appreciate your concern for my perfection." But we don't have to believe it.

A way to lighten it up was recommended by Joseph Goldstein. He said, when you hear a judging thought, add on the words "and the sky is blue." "I'm a crummy meditator, and the sky is blue." So learn to see them with some degree of understanding. This is just a judging thought.

It's an old pattern. It's not true. The people who are most tuned in to this self-judging mind are meditators, but I happen to think meditators are the best people in the world because you all are devoting your time and energy to making your hearts and minds clearer and adding more love and wisdom to the world. That's what we need. I think you all are doing the best work on the planet, and yet some of you may be feeling this self-criticism. It's not warranted. You all are good people, and I hope you will feel that and believe in that.

So another of the emotions that we come upon is sadness or grief. We've all had lots of disappointments in life. I think there's grounds for sadness in every person I've known. Some of us have had bigger losses than others. Some losses take a long, long time to heal from. I don't want to minimize the work involved in grieving. But sometimes it feels like when there's been a big loss, it can feel like we can't start to open to it because we'd drown in it. We'd get lost. We'd never come out. But that's just a belief. That's a story.

What I've seen is that even in the biggest kinds of loss—and I'm thinking of parents who lose a child to suicide, which I think is one of the probably most devastating things that happens in a life—even then, the capacity is there with meditation to touch that grief and little by little open it up and let it come through and let it pass through. A huge amount of healing can take place if we're open to starting that process, being able to feel it and touch it, and then also finding a way to open to the beautiful aspects of life, which loving kindness also reveals to us. My general impression is that grief has a timeline, if we're willing to open to it, that it also will pass, although it can sometimes take some time.

The last of these primal emotions I wanted to talk about is fear. I want to especially talk about this one

because it was one that I learned a huge amount from in the early years of my practice. It was such a constant companion for me in years of practice. At times it became a very, very intense kind of overpowering experience. I had to develop wisdom in relationship with it or I really would have been lost.

When fear comes, the storyline is something like, "This moment may be bearable, but there's a calamity about to happen." If you feel into fear, it's that feeling that something awful is about to descend. Yet, even though the fear is there, the calamity usually doesn't follow. We can first just start to question that, and maybe it's safe to let the fear be felt. That was the way in for me. What if I just feel the fear?

My teachers directed me to feel it in the body. That was where I put my attention. Many, many times when fear would come, I would feel the body sensations and I would try to open with acceptance. There'd be a contraction in the belly. There'd be a fluttering in the chest. There'd be sweat under the arms. I would just try to open to those. The question I ask myself is, can I bear these sensations? Because normally when fear comes, if it's strong, in the beginning it feels unbearable. I didn't think I could bear it. But I found that I could bear those sensations. Yeah, I can feel that. I'm not going to die from a fluttery chest or a contraction in the belly. I can bear that.

Then as I was able to bear that, I could start to explore that mood in the mind. Fear is tricky because the essence of fear is, let's get away. Let's escape. So trying to get close to that mood was, let's not feel this. It was hard. It's subtle. It's tough to just feel that fear directly. But I was able to do that. I found that I could bear the emotion.

I could bear the sensations. I no longer quite believed the storyline. But still, sometimes fear would be very strong, and I didn't like it. I could bear it, but I really didn't like it.

At a certain point, I had to dig deeper. The question I asked myself was: am I really accepting this or am I just pretending to accept it so it will go away? At that point, I was kind of pretending.

So I said, if I really was going to accept this fear, could I be okay with it if it was here the rest of my life? That was the question I asked. I thought that's the bottom line with this. If I really accept it, then if it stayed forever, could I be okay with that?

The answer immediately came: no way. I could not accept it being here the rest of my life.

So then I inquired, okay, why? Well, if fear was always here, I couldn't enjoy a sunset the way I used to. I couldn't get high listening to music the way I used to. I couldn't fall in love the way I wanted to.

I said, okay, so you want to hold out for getting high sometime in the future. And that's why you're going to keep fighting now, fighting the fear now. In other words, you don't want peace now if it means the possibility of giving something up in the future.

When I saw that, I said, no, I want peace now.

So I finally surrendered. I said, okay, I'm going to open to it whether it stays the rest of my life or not. And I did. I went through a period of working with fear where if it came, that was totally fine. If it didn't come, that was totally fine. I had no preference either way.

When I opened to it to that extent, something about that grip of fear in my mind broke. It could never hold me the same way that it had before. Curiously, that complete acceptance or complete surrender to the fear broke it. It broke its spine in my mind.

So this is possible for us. Fear has come many times since, but I know how to work with it. The fear doesn't scare me. I can be with it. I can work with it. I can work with acceptance. Of course, a lot of things haven't happened yet. There's no telling what will happen later. But so far, so good.

All these emotions are capable of this kind of transformation and this kind of taking the grip out of our minds of these strong, afflictive emotions. What transforms them is this deep, unconditional acceptance with the understanding of their nature. They come into the mind, they express, and then they pass away.

I want to suggest a simple way to remind yourself of the nature of these states when they come. We can practice with this tomorrow morning again in the instructions. It's a little acronym called RAIN, R-A-I-N. It was developed by a Vipassana teacher. If you go through these four steps of RAIN with your difficult emotions, you'll start to get a really good handle on a wise and mindful way to relate.

The four steps are recognition, and that's the naming process. When we can name the state, it creates space around it. Like when I could name my anger in walking, I could start to work with it. So we recognize the emotion that's there.

The second step is acceptance. We work to not resist because you may have heard this line: what we resist persists. What we open to can pass. So we work to accept rather than resist these states.

The phrase "like this" invites interest—what is it like? How does that feel in the body, in the mind? What kind of thoughts come with it? And "like this"—there's no I or mine in that. Anger is just this arising, and it's like this. Your experience of anger is not so different from my experience of anger. It's all part of the human package, all these emotions—part of human nature, part of the human package. Not I, not mine.

I'd like to close with a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke that he wrote when he was in his early twenties. He was in a very Christian phase of his life, from a book called *The Book of Hours*. The scenario in this poem is that God has created a being and is about to launch them into their life—this life that you and I are living—into the world. But before doing that, he gives them a little pep talk. So the poem is the pep talk.

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

You, sent out beyond your memory,

go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.

Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.

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

Don't let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

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

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. We'll take questions in the morning or comments. Thank you.

We have about fifteen minutes for walking meditation, and then we'll come back and sit for the last period of the day at nine o'clock. It won't be a full thirty minutes, and we'll begin with chanting to wake everybody up.

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