Healing and Freedom

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 49:41

James talked the first night we were here about the importance of reflecting on our motivation for being here, what brought us here. This reminded me of a situation I witnessed at the gym a few months ago.

I had been going to the gym over a couple-month period just to bring back some muscle tone. I'm certainly not a serious weight builder, as you can tell by my physique—and it wasn't much better back then either. I've always tended toward the wimpy end of the male spectrum. I would just do a few rounds on the Nautilus machines and some sit-ups.

But I'd look at the other half of the gym where all the free weights were, where the serious guys worked out. I'd watch them lifting these huge barbells racked with weights on both ends, and I was in awe.

One day, two teenage guys walked into the gym. They were probably sixteen or seventeen and even skinnier than me. They went straight to the free weights section. They were buddies, and one would lie down on the bench while the other would, with all his effort, lift one of these huge barbells loaded on the rack above him. His friend would lie there with his thin little arms—just like mine were at sixteen—and with all his effort, he'd press it up as high as he could go. He could barely get it up there, and then his friend would help him bring it back down.

They were so into it, and I eavesdropped on a bit of their conversation. One was saying to the other, "Boy, did you see Lance in here the other day?"

Lance is kind of the hero of the gym. He's about six-foot-five and built out of brick. He came over to work with me on a machine one day, and I put my hand on his shoulder and thought I was touching concrete. Lance is incredible. At the very front of the gym, the advertising poster shows Lance in one of his entries into the Mr. America contest. He's really heavy duty.

These two teenage guys were saying, "Did you see Lance the other day? He pressed 515 pounds." That was an astronomical number to me, and probably to them too. But I could tell that something in them was really inspired by Lance pressing that amount of weight. Lance had become their ideal in the endeavor of bodybuilding and weightlifting. I could tell they were going to keep pumping that iron as long as they could until they felt they'd gotten a little bit closer to where Lance was.

I mention this because it really brings out this factor of motivation. I was impressed by their motivation. Even though it wasn't my motivation, I was impressed that it was theirs, because they had an aspiration to move toward that starry ideal that Lance represented for them. I could tell that their whole path of bodybuilding was going to be way different from mine. Two months later, I dropped out of the race. I'm

sure they're still going on.

This factor of motivation or aspiration has a profound effect on our spiritual life. It points us toward some distant star or distant wish. In some ways, the farther we set our aim for that distant wish, the higher our trajectory will be over the course of our path.

I'd like to talk tonight about two of the common aspirations or motivations in spiritual practice. Basically, as I see it, most people come to practice either to reduce our suffering or to increase our happiness—sometimes both. These are the two primary motivations for people.

In looking at these two, we can divide them, for the sake of discussion, into the areas of healing or reducing suffering, and freedom—increasing our happiness. Tonight I want to talk about these two aspects of our spiritual practice: the aspect of healing and the aspect of freedom.

We've been talking throughout—all of us have talked about—how if we can come into the present moment with that full attention of mindfulness, without greed and aversion and delusion, there is a moment of freedom. There's a moment of that spaciousness.

But as Silvia said in her talk last night, sometimes it's not so easy to come out of our own personal history and our own personal suffering. For that reason, healing occupies a really important part of this journey for many of us.

Classically, the difficulties that people find in their meditation are described in terms of the kilesas...

a term in Pali that's often translated as defilements. I actually don't like that translation very much. A lot of the Buddhist texts were first translated into English during the time of Queen Victoria, and the terminology still carries a bit of the Queen's English upon it. This word "defilements" is one of those words.

Originally, the word kilesa meant "torment of mind." Another way we can think of it is as a bias of mind or a tendency of mind that takes us away from clear seeing. Mindfulness really represents that clear seeing of things as they are. The kilesas of greed, aversion, and delusion represent a movement away—a tendency away from clarity. And they bring their own forms of suffering.

You might notice in your practice which of these tendencies is most predominant for you. When your mind slips out of balance, what direction does it go? Does it go to wanting, to some form of desire, some projection of what's incomplete and needs to be fulfilled? Or does it move in the direction of aversion or negativity with all its different flavors—the flavors of disliking, of judgment, of criticism, of anger, of fear? Or is it in the direction of delusion, of not seeing clearly, of a kind of veil of ignorance or dullness around our contact with the world?

Each of these three tendencies is its own strategy to make us happy. We follow it because we think it will bring happiness. The strategy behind greed is: "I'm going to draw in all the pleasant stuff. And if I keep the

pleasant stuff coming and I'm full enough of it, I won't ever have to feel the pain of life."

The strategy in aversion is rather to push away what's unpleasant. We aversive types—and this is my type, this is where I get fixated—try to keep ourselves safe by blocking out whatever might be threatening or unpleasant.

The deluded type has a way of dealing with pleasure and pain by insulating themselves from the fluctuations of pleasure and pain. The deluded type clouds their contact with the world to keep everything at a safe distance. There's a little bit of haze or spaciness in between. Deluded types are usually very genial people. They're lovely to hang out with, and they're said to be the best traveling companions. Because you wind up in a new city somewhere and check into a hotel room and say, "Which bed do you want?" And the deluded type says, "I don't care. You pick." So that's lovely. If you're thinking about traveling, they're highly recommended.

The greed type, of course, will say, "Well, that one's by the window and it has a nice view. I want that one." And the aversive type will say, "Well, this one's right by the door and you'd keep walking in and out all night and wake me up, so I don't want that one." So they both have preferences.

It's interesting to note that this kind of classification has really been in the Buddhist texts for hundreds of years. Around 400 in the Christian era—I'll just notice that Buddhists don't say Anno Domini, AD. We don't say 400 AD because that's not particularly our lord. What you tend to say is Christian era, CE. So you might start to see that coming in more and more.

Around 400 in the Christian era, this monk in Sri Lanka named Buddhaghosa put together this thick volume of all the practices and understandings that were current at that time. This was less than a thousand years after the Buddha died, so it was still almost fresh in people's minds. And he's actually the one who first put down on paper this sort of psychological classification of greed types, aversion types, and delusion types.

Let me read how he says you can tell yourself. He says you can tell by your step, for one thing. "The step of one of greedy temperament is confident and graceful. The step of one of aversive temperament is rigid. And that of one of deluded temperament is muddled. Likewise in sitting."

He says you can also tell when you go to bed. "One of greedy temperament spreads his bed unhurriedly, lies down slowly, composing his limbs, and he sleeps in a confident manner. When woken, instead of getting up quickly, he gives his answer slowly as though doubtful. One of angry temperament spreads his bed hastily anyway. With his body flung down, he sleeps with a scowl. When woken, he gets up quickly and answers as though annoyed."

One of deluded temperament spreads his bed all awry and sleeps mostly face downwards with body sprawling. When woken, he gets up slowly saying, "Hmm?" You might check this with your roommate on the last day—not yet, please.

Well, one has to take some of these old texts with a grain of salt, a healthy grain of salt. It reminds me of a comment that someone made about channeling—you know, channeling where a human being receives words from a being who has died and is on another plane. The comment was, "Just because they're dead doesn't mean that they're smart." We might even say the same about the venerable Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa.

So a classical way of describing the kinds of difficulty, the kinds of suffering that we're liable to, is in view of the kilesas. And becoming familiar with our own tendencies of mind is part of self-knowledge. We all have these tendencies.

Another way that they've been described classically is through the hindrances, as Carol talked about a couple of nights ago—the hindrances of sense desire, of aversion, of dullness, of restlessness, or doubt. You can start to see the influence of the hindrances as well in your meditation practice and the suffering that they bring.

But frankly, I feel that our times call for different terminology than the classical ones. Maybe it's the age we live in. Maybe it's the culture that we're in today. We live in unusual times.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was one of the great bringers of the Buddha Dharma into America and founded Naropa Institute in Boulder in the early seventies, was talking one time about the similarity of the Buddha Dharma coming to Tibet and the Buddha Dharma coming to America. He said when the Dharma came to Tibet, it was in about eight or nine hundred of the Christian era, and it migrated up from India. He said it came into a country that was absolutely wild and quite barbaric. The population was sparse. There were not many cities. There were a lot of people living a nomadic life. Bandits were absolutely rife throughout Tibet. Anywhere you traveled, you were in danger of your life and your possessions. And there was no established religion like Buddhism or Hinduism. The Bon religion was there, which was quite shamanistic. You had all these old guys probably hanging out in caves with hair down the middle of their backs, practicing white and black magic all over the place. It was a wild country. And morality was unheard of at that time in a formal religious way.

Trungpa said that actually lent a certain vitality to the Dharma that flourished in Tibet. He said it actually provided very fertile ground. And he went on to say that the same barbaric situation exists today in America. Because of that, he was very confident that American Buddhism was going to have a lot of vitality.

So having grown up in this, shall we say, less than fully civilized era, we've all been affected by that. There's a sort of fragmentation in our culture that we've all come under the influence of.

For myself, when I first came into practice, the overriding difficulty that I had to deal with was fear and anxiety. I was sort of a survivor of the sixties. One of my main gurus at that time was Timothy Leary—"turn on, tune in, drop out." I followed his advice, to excess. So I sort of emerged from the sixties with a lot of confusion. My adherence to the precepts was, shall we say, less than ideal. I had a lot of

confusion and unhappiness and fear when I came into the practice. For many years, that's what I worked with. The bliss of concentration was not for me for a long time in practice.

Other people experience in their practice a great sense of worthlessness or coming into contact with low feelings of self-esteem. This seems to be really widespread in our culture today—that we just don't feel that great about ourselves by and large.

The Dalai Lama was meeting with some Western teachers, as he does every year. In fact, Sylvia is just back from a recent meeting with him. Maybe we'll talk about it later. This question of worthlessness came up and how to help people work with this feeling. The Dalai Lama couldn't get a handle on what this feeling was. I mean, this is a man who has had such a sense of grace and self-acceptance for his adult life. This is a man who can go into Madison Square Garden in front of 15,000 people giving a serious tantric initiation.

This happened once. He climbed up onto the platform that had been built for him, felt that the cushions were quite soft, and in front of 15,000 people, bounced up and down a few times like a little kid, just to get the feel of the cushions. He was so comfortable with himself, so relaxed.

He couldn't understand what this feeling of low self-esteem or worthlessness was about. And yet, for many of us, it's a striking feature, especially of our retreat practice. We may walk around for days just not feeling very good about ourselves. We compare ourselves with other people who seem to be practicing much better and sitting much more still and walking much more slowly and eating much more mindfully. We feel we'll never measure up on the scale of the good meditator.

Another of the strong characteristics that we see in retreats is the legacy of childhood abuse and the feelings of hurt and shame and betrayal that this leads to. These are probably some of the most difficult experiences that meditators can deal with. I've been really impressed at the number of people, both men and women, who out of that background have come into intensive meditation practice and really come to grips with the legacy of that kind of upbringing.

During the three-month retreat every year that Carol helps to teach in Massachusetts, there are always a number of people who come on that retreat from this particular background of abuse. It is absolutely awesome to hear some of their stories and the amount of courage and dedication and commitment that they have to go through essentially the same atmosphere that we've gone through together these five days—they go through for three months, carrying all the pain of those memories, and yet working through the practice of meditation to heal those wounds. Some very impressive healing has been done in that context. Tremendous courage for those women and men.

Self-hatred is another pattern that comes up often for people. It's sort of an amplification of the low self-esteem, and many people suffer from this.

When I was a monk in Thailand, I had just ordained and was on my way to a practice monastery in the

north of Thailand near Chiang Mai. I stopped at a monastery in Chiang Mai that had been founded by my preceptor and hung out there for a few days—a little bit of a break in the travel. There was another Western monk staying there, and I liked this guy immediately. He had a big physique, kind of built like a bear, and he was somebody you immediately felt would take care of you if there was any problem. He had this wonderfully friendly vibe—he just radiated warmth and metta. The Thai people really liked him too. He had been in robes for something like fifteen years and spoke fluent Thai.

In the mornings, he would carry on his own practice in a little hut by a pond—a very beautiful setting. In the afternoons, he would receive visitors, Thai people and Western people impartially, about half and half. The Thais would come and tell him their problems in meditation or their life and he would counsel them. Westerners would come and he would give us instruction in meditation. He was a great guy.

When he went out for his morning alms round, he had a begging bowl that was enormous. I've never seen an alms round like this guy had. He would go out and it would soon be full because the people nearby the monastery knew him and they all loved him. They'd just line up out on the streets to give him food every morning. It got to where he had to actually take a couple of the small novices with him and they'd carry plastic bags. When his bowl was full, he'd take the food out of his bowl and put it in their plastic bags, and they'd put the plastic bags under their novice robes and keep walking behind him. So he had this little entourage every morning for his alms round.

He came back and would share the food out with the other monks and nuns who maybe weren't so fortunate in their alms gathering. But I noticed that he still ate quite enough himself—he was well taken care of.

When I came to talk to him about his practice, he said that for the first nine years that he was in robes, all he was doing was working with his self-hatred. For nine years. And yet the product of it, the fruits of that work were so clear.

He had such a big heart and such understanding and love. Everybody loved the guy. Everybody who met him. He was a beautiful example.

So some of the other common things that you might find as you start to practice and start to touch your own personal hurts and personal history are feelings of depression or loneliness or despair, or a sense of alienation—of not fitting in this world or this culture—of disconnection, of having your heart closed, of having a numb heart, of having a broken heart, of feeling some shame, an embarrassment even about being here.

All of these reasons for our suffering are workable with our Dharma practice. The beautiful thing about this mindfulness practice is that it can go to any level of the mind or body. Absolutely anything that is capable of being experienced, of being felt, is capable of attention. So we can take our mindfulness into absolutely any level of our existence and apply it there.

For some of us, the healing takes the form of healing in the body. This is another area I want to spend a few minutes on. Often the emotional patterns actually show themselves first in the body. What happens is that as the awareness is sustained over a period of days, it starts to penetrate different parts of the body.

Generally what's happened is that through our life, with our unconsciousness and not knowing how to work with our emotional life, events have come along that we haven't fully accepted, haven't fully allowed. We've held those emotions down and they've gotten locked in the body—maybe feelings of fear or anger or shame or hurt, grief, whatever.

Often those areas that have been held for a long time are first experienced as numbness. We actually direct our attention to that part of the body and don't feel anything. As the days go by, the awareness starts to have some effect and we may start to feel a little bit of ache or tension in that area. As we continue to just give a soft kind of attention, that pain may become very, very visible. Particular areas where you're likely to feel that kind of stored tension are the back, the shoulders, the neck, the chest area, the abdomen.

As the awareness penetrates and softens in those areas, sometimes they will open up and release whatever has been held there. Sometimes the release is just a physical energy. Sometimes it comes with a strong emotion. Sometimes with the emotion may come a memory of some event or image from the past. Whatever the experience is, it's simply to keep giving that really soft and kind attention throughout the process.

As the release takes place, then some clearing happens—some clearing of long-held accumulated material, both psychic and physical. And as it clears, our whole experience of life becomes lighter, a little bit freer.

It requires some finesse in working in this area. It requires a kind of combination of a lot of courage, a firmness of intention and resolve, and also a lot of gentleness—to really be gentle with yourself in working with those areas of holding.

When the release happens, it can feel really chaotic. The physical energy gets released. Sometimes there's a lot of emotion, a lot of thoughts, and you feel like you've gone backward in your practice. Somebody came into an interview today and said, "Gosh, I feel like I've gone backwards. The first few days I was getting settled, and now it's just all gone. Mindfulness was settling, I was feeling stiller, and then boom! I've lost it. I can't get it back."

Often that's a sign that the meditation is progressing just right—not that you've lost anything, but that you've touched that deeper level and some unfolding is happening. And that's really a healthy and healing part of this practice. So not to become discouraged. It's actually a sign that things are opening and that you can trust in that. That's something really to welcome.

There's another level to working with pain that I wanted to share. This is a quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who was an Indian teacher of Vedanta. He died about ten years ago. He said, "The essence of

pleasure is acceptance. Whatever may be the situation, if it is acceptable, it is pleasant. If it is not acceptable, it is painful."

The questioner, the person in dialogue with him said, "Well, pain is not acceptable." And Maharaj says, "Why not? Did you ever try?" He said, "Do try and you will find in pain a joy which pleasure cannot yield, for the simple reason that acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does. The personal self by its very nature is constantly pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The ending of this pattern is the ending of the self. The ending of the self with its desires and fears enables you to return to your real nature, the source of all happiness and peace."

With all this emphasis on healing and talk of healing, sometimes this retreat atmosphere takes on a little of the flavor of a ward somewhere. I don't know if you've ever just taken a look outside during the slow walking as though you'd come in off the street—it looks a little at times like a bit of a mental asylum here.

Jack's first teacher was an old Thai monk named Ajahn Chah. The first time he came to the States, I think it was in 1980, he came to Barre, Massachusetts, where the Insight Meditation Center is, and he taught a retreat there in this fashion, which was not at all his fashion. His style of working was just to have people live a very simple life in the forest—do your work, do a little bit of sitting, live in community, be mindful, live in nature, be simple—and five years later things start to happen. Because we're so American, we're hell-bent on speed, and we have these jam-packed ten-day retreats.

So he came to one of these and helped to lead it. In the afternoon one day, he was walking around the grounds, the front lawn, people were doing their slow walking back and forth very nicely, and he would walk up to each person and say a few words in Thai, give the person a big smile, and then walk on. At the end of the day, someone asked his translator what Ajahn Chah was saying to people. And he said, "Oh, he was going up to everybody and saying, 'I hope you get well soon.'"

I hope we all get well soon. We can all use it.

So what's mindfulness in this healing process? We've been talking for about five days, really non-stop, about mindfulness. How does it relate to this process of healing?

Well, what happens ordinarily when you're in the middle of a meditation period and some strong emotion comes? Something difficult—anger or fear or embarrassment or something like that. What's a normal reaction? Often don't we resist? Don't we find ourselves resisting? We didn't come here to suffer. This is not what I want to be doing. This is not it. I came here to get peaceful, so this is the wrong thing. Go away.

And somebody in an interview the other day said that it's kind of like when that kind of emotion comes and there's resistance, it's like being in a room where a young child is pounding on the door and wants to get in. And you don't want to let the child in, so you keep the door shut. And as long as the door's shut, that child's going to keep pounding, and your peace is disturbed. So finally you get the idea, "Oh, I'll open the door." So you open the door, and the child comes in and plays quietly. Conflict gone.

I thought that was a really beautiful analogy to the process of not resisting that strong emotion. When we can really open to it with mindfulness, we find that the energy kind of drains out. Often with our resistance we feed that energy. When we open to it, the energy goes out of that difficult emotion and into the seeing. It goes into the mindfulness and into the clarity. So in that way we find a new relationship in our emotional life. We don't have to get free by getting rid of. We can get free by changing our relationship to our experience.

So this is really a key. As we do that, we find that emotions start to clear themselves out. We don't have to force the healing. It happens naturally. And it's not to say that through this we get rid of anger, we get rid of fear, we get rid of desire, but rather they start to re-find their natural balance. Just like a child goes through so many emotions during the course of the day, but they can just let them flow through. When we're not fixated on our past, we can do the same. So the emotions start to clear up and start to wash through us. And in that way, we come to a balance in our emotional life. Still have the light and the dark, but they start to assume a more natural balance for us.

So this is one of the great healing properties of mindfulness.

And an interesting question comes in at this point. And that is, do we think, in doing our meditation practice, if healing's a goal for us, and it's a very wholesome goal, do we think that we're doing the healing? Do we think that we're doing this meditation practice in order to carry out our own healing? This is kind of an interesting question.

I'd say that's not quite the right understanding. If we see the healing as primary and the mindfulness as secondary, or just a tool, the mindfulness can become a tool to the healing—a little bit we're putting the cart before the horse.

And we could say the same thing about using mindfulness to reduce stress. It can be used to reduce stress, but again I'd say that we're perhaps putting the cart before the horse.

I'd say that there's another way to look at this process of healing in relation to mindfulness. The quality of mindfulness itself is so spacious, so vast and so pure that nothing sticks to it. Mindfulness has this quality of non-adhering. So whatever mindfulness illuminates can be released. Anything that mindfulness has the power to illuminate, it has the power to release.

Through mindfulness, as we pay attention to all our experience, everything that we've ever held becomes available for release. That may start with our bodily tension. It may go on to our stored emotions, to all the conditioned patterns of feeling and ways of reacting that we've built over the years. All the ideas we've built about ourselves that we've fabricated out of concepts and held onto for many years can come up and be let go of. And our views about the world and everything in it.

By its very nature—not by any working at it or application or functioning of it—by its very nature, mindfulness leads to letting go. It is simply too spacious to hold on to anything. And then when we let go,

we're able to live much less burdened, much more lightly. We travel much more simply on this earth through letting go of what we don't need, of what's just a carryover from the past.

Suzuki Roshi put it this way: "Those who know this state of spaciousness will always be able to dissolve their problems through constancy."

So this gets kind of interesting. There is this wonderful part of ourselves called mindfulness and it has these qualities that can be very useful. In the beginning we kind of get more interested in the objects that the mindfulness shines on than we do in the mindfulness itself, because it has a utility for us. But as time goes by, meditators generally find that they start to get more interested in the mindfulness itself than in any of the phenomena that are being illuminated.

It's like we had a light and we shine it all around and we get fascinated by what it picks up—this stack of papers and that stack of papers and the clock and the bell. And we never stop to look back at the light. At some point, we usually get interested in looking back at the light and wondering, what is this thing? What is this amazing thing called mindfulness?

The Buddha actually talked about mindfulness as the link to nirvana, or the link to the unconditioned. In the Four Noble Truths that I talked about the other day, the Third Noble Truth is that the end of suffering is in the end of craving, a state that the Buddha equated with nirvana—the unborn, the undying, the unconditioned.

And he said about it, in a dialogue with someone who came to visit him, this man came up and said to the Buddha, "There are these five senses—the senses of sight and sound and smell and taste and touch. Where do these five senses come together? What's the resort of the five senses?" And the Buddha said the five senses come together in the mind.

The man thought for a moment and said, "Well, where is the resort of the mind? What holds the mind?" And the Buddha said, "Awareness is the resort of the mind."

"Okay, what's the resort of awareness?" And the Buddha said, "The resort of awareness is freedom."

The guy said, "What's the resort of freedom?" And the Buddha said, "The resort of freedom is nirvana, the unconditioned, the unborn."

The guy said, "What's the resort of nirvana?" And in one of the very few instances of humor in the whole of the Buddha's teachings, he said, "This is going too far," and he stopped the man.

But it's very interesting because awareness is right in the middle of that chain, from our sense experience to the unconditioned. And it plays that kind of role.

It's always a little dangerous to talk about nirvana because immediately people start thinking about enlightenment. And it seems like when we think about enlightenment, we all go a little bit crazy. And so I

always hesitate to bring the word up or to use it.

This kind of craziness really came through in a book that I read recently. I don't know if any of you have discovered this young writer named Mark Salzman. He wrote a book called "Iron and Silk," which was about learning martial arts in China. He's a really wonderful writer, and he's just written an autobiography of his childhood. He grew up in a suburban setting in Connecticut.

And he calls his book *Lost in Place: Growing Up Absurd in Suburbia*. So I knew this was a title I could relate to.

He starts off in the first chapter by saying that when he was thirteen years old, he saw his first kung fu movie. Before it ended, he decided that the life of a wandering Zen monk was the life for him. He announced his willingness to leave East Ridge Junior High School immediately and give up all material things, but his parents did not share his enthusiasm. They made it clear that he was not to become a wandering Zen monk until he had finished high school. In the meantime, he could meditate down in the basement.

So he immersed himself in the study of Chinese philosophy with the kind of dedication that is possible only when you don't yet have to make a living, when you're too young to drive, and when you don't have a girlfriend.

He says he turned their basement into what he thought a Buddhist temple should look like. He marked off boundaries with candles and set up a shrine. He outfitted the shrine with objects from a cookware shop—the only store in town that carried oriental gifts—a bamboo placemat, a package of chopsticks, a sake cup which he turned into an incense burner, and a plastic Chinese kitchen deity with the character for "tasty" painted on his stomach.

He goes on to say that the trickiest thing was what to do about his hair, because real Zen masters shave their heads, as anyone knows who has watched the *Kung Fu* series on television. His father had never liked his long hair and had often said that he wished he could shave it all off. So he went directly to him and asked if he'd like to have a wish come true. His father's response was to raise one eyebrow, which he understood from experience to be a no.

As an alternative, he ordered something from the back of a comic book called a "surprise bald head wig." When it arrived by mail four weeks later, it turned out to be a disappointment. It was floppy, dimpled, and a sickly gray color. Nonetheless, he tucked his hair up underneath and wore it proudly for his meditations. His sister Rachel, two years younger than his younger brother, thought he looked like a giant fetus.

So we don't want to dwell too much on this enlightenment stuff. But nonetheless, in practicing mindfulness, we're really doing something more profound than it may at first appear. We're really activating that link to our deepest nature, to our truest nature.

I wanted to read you something from *The Questions of King Milinda*, where an awakened monk named Nagasena went to visit this king and the teachings were conducted in question and answer fashion. This is one of the books outside the core Buddhist teachings that's central to our tradition. I'm going to read a passage about nirvana, but I'm going to substitute the word "mindfulness" because I think it still works well.

It says, "Mindfulness shares two qualities with water. As the lotus is unstained by water, so is mindfulness unstained by all the defilements. As cool water allays feverish heat, so also mindfulness is cool and allays the fever of all the passions. Moreover, as water removes the thirst of humans and animals who are exhausted, parched, thirsty, and overpowered by heat, so also mindfulness removes the craving for sense pleasures, the craving for becoming, and the craving for the cessation of becoming."

This is really in the direction of an unlimited freedom. Mindfulness leads in only one direction, and that is a freedom that doesn't have any limits.

In moving in that direction, one of the concepts that comes up for us that we may want to let go of when the time is right—not before—is the concept of healing. Because as long as we are fixed with the concept of healing, we sustain a view that something's wrong, that something's broken, that we're broken, that there's something wrong with us. And that belief that there's something wrong with us really undermines a lot of our confidence.

I wonder if fundamentally anything can go wrong with us. I wonder fundamentally if anything has ever gone wrong with us. And I wonder fundamentally if anything can go wrong with life as a whole.

There's this wonderful Native American teacher who comes to Spirit Rock named Fred Wapipa. In doing a sweat lodge with him last summer with James and a few other people, Fred started off by telling us that in his language there was no word for hope. He said there's no word for hope because we know that everything's all right. Just as it is, everything's all right.

So I wonder in our meditation practice, where can we touch that level of faith? Where can we find that kind of trust? And are we prepared to find it? Are we prepared to keep looking in our practice until we find that absolute trust that brings that unlimited kind of freedom?

The Buddha said that the spiritual journey is a journey that brings many benefits. He said it brings the benefits of being respected by those who value wisdom and compassion. It brings the benefits of outer harmony. When we live a life that's grounded in the precepts, we establish harmonious conditions with the other people that we live with, with all the creatures that we interact with. It establishes the conditions of inner harmony, which are really synonymous with healing. Healing is really the work to come out of discomfort and into greater harmony in ourselves. It establishes the conditions for coming into great insight, understanding, knowledge, and vision. It's really what each of you are talking about when you come into the interviews every day.

And yet the Buddha said that if we stop at that point in our spiritual journey...

We're like someone who has gone into the forest intending to build a house and coming to a great tree in the forest, needing the heartwood of that tree to build their house. If we stop with respect, with outer harmony, with inner harmony, with knowledge and with insight, he said it's like somebody who's come to this great tree and gone away with the twigs and the branches, leaving the heartwood standing.

What he said is that the heartwood of the spiritual life lies in this complete freedom. I'll read you the passage: "So this holy life, my friends, does not have respect or outer harmony or inner harmony for its benefit or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is the unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, the heartwood of this holy life, the end of this holy life."

So I wonder if we can keep looking at our motivation from time to time, keep checking and see if we have that kind of aim in our spiritual journey. To see if that's the trajectory that we envision for ourselves. Really to come away from this path not with the twigs and the branches, but with the very heartwood of a complete freedom that's unshakable.

I'd just like to close with a little poem from Rumi. It's called "Tending Two Shops." He says:

"Don't run around this world looking for a hole to hide in. The only real rest comes when you're alone with God. Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. You have eyes that see from that nowhere, and eyes that judge distances, how high and how low. You own two shops, and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way. Checkmate that way. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish."

Let's just sit for a minute.

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