Purification of the Heart

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:25

I'd like to talk tonight about the purification of the heart.

There's a cartoon that was posted in the office at Spirit Rock. It's a cartoon on evolution that shows a fish rising up out of the sea next to a beach with a thought bubble coming from the fish's head saying, "eat, survive, reproduce." Then you see the next stage in evolution—a lizard-like amphibious creature—with the same thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce." The chain of evolution continues with a land-like reptile, then a chimpanzee clamoring about on the beach, each with the identical thought bubble: "eat, survive, reproduce."

And the culminating stage, of course, is the human being standing beyond all of them on the beach. This man is standing there with a very quizzical look on his face, stroking his chin and going, "Hmm, I wonder what life's all about."

It wouldn't be too hard, even if you were a serious observer of the world, to look around and see that we're so ruled as a race, as a species, by our fears and our desires, our wanting for food and sex and our fear about being able to survive or not. We could be forgiven for thinking that this really is where evolution has led us, that this is what we really are—unless we had some kind of other perspective on the situation, hopefully a more spiritual perspective.

The Buddha once summed up his teaching, and in fact all teachings, this way: "Do good, don't harm others, and purify the heart. This is the teaching of all the Buddhas, all the awakened ones."

It sounds simple put that way, doesn't it? What we are primarily about in our meditation, in being here, is this work of purifying the heart.

When the Buddha made this statement, of course, he didn't use the word "heart" because he wasn't speaking in English. He used the word *citta*, which is a word in both Pali and Sanskrit that sometimes we translate as "heart" and sometimes we translate as "mind." It has dual meanings—both the meaning of the emotional life that we normally refer to as the heart, and also the meaning of the world of thought or intellect that we refer to as mind.

If you ask an Asian where her mind is, she'll typically point to her chest. If you ask a Westerner where we feel our minds are, we normally point to our heads. So this word *citta* really refers to this unity of emotion and intellect. But because the emotional life is so predominant in the work of purification, I want to talk tonight about this as a process of purifying the heart.

As we look closely at our experience, we run into the basic problem that I think all humans are subject to: we try to control our experience. That effort to control our experience involves us in some degree of struggle because we want things to be one way and we don't want them to be another.

We want to come in and sit down and have the body be comfortable, not have a pain in the knee or a knot in the upper back or a clenched fist in place of the heart. We want all our meditations to be like Sylvia's description last night of the seven factors of awakening—mindful and investigative and energetic and rapture-filled, full of tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. We really want those experiences in our meditation, and we'd really rather they not be filled with what Marie talked about a few nights ago: the five hindrances.

We have these preferences on every level of our being, and so we tend to relate to all of our experience through three basic strategies that we've learned to kind of cope with the way things are. These are the strategies that the Buddha called greed, aversion, and delusion. He thought that these were so linked to our difficulties that he called them torments of mind. He called them the *kilesas* in Pali, often translated as defilements, but "torments of mind" is more accurate. We can see these strategies in the way we approach our life and our meditation both.

Acting out of the strategy of greed, what we try to do is keep pleasant experiences coming in. If we can surround ourselves with a never-ending stream of pleasurable experiences, there will be a kind of security in that. We'll always be able to be safe and protected. So this is a strategy of greed.

With aversion, what we try to do is keep anything that's painful or unpleasant at some distance from us, with the thought that if we can keep it away, then we'll protect this area that we call myself, and that will not be subject to the unpleasant in life.

The strategy of delusion is that we sort of create this veil between ourselves and our experience so that we don't have to feel it very clearly. We can use a fog or we can use a little bit of stepping back, a little bit of unclarity or confusion so that the world doesn't impinge on us quite so dramatically.

These are three ways that we have of basically avoiding the hot and cold, raw nature of life as it is, to soften the blows of the pleasant and the unpleasant that we're all subject to.

It's said in the Buddhist texts that each of us has a preponderance of one or the other of these strategies—that there are some people who are more conditioned by greed, some more by aversion, and some more by delusion. In Buddhist psychology, these are said to be the three main personality types that people get categorized into, if you're into that kind of thing.

I'd like to read you a little bit from an ancient text. This is from a book called the *Visuddhimagga*, which means "the path of purification." This idea is so central that one of the main commentaries is titled that. This book was written about fifteen hundred years ago in Sri Lanka by a monk named Buddhaghosa who tried to compile all the primary practices of his day.

It was very encyclopedic, very detailed. It gets a little dry in places—I don't recommend it as bedtime reading. It's about that thick.

So I'd like to just read you a little description in case you're wondering which of these three you are. This might help. He starts by describing the walking meditation of the three types:

"When one of greedy temperament is walking in his usual manner, he walks carefully, puts his foot down slowly, puts it down evenly, lifts it up evenly, and his step is springy. One of aversive temperament walks as though he were digging with the points of his feet, puts his foot down quickly, lifts it up quickly, and his step is dragged along. One of deluded temperament walks with a perplexed gait, puts his foot down hesitantly, lifts it up hesitantly, and his step is pressed down suddenly."

Now you might also want to know what the sleeping situation is like, so he goes into that:

"In sleeping, one of greedy temperament spreads his bed unhurriedly, lies down slowly, composing his limbs, and sleeps in a confident manner. When woken, instead of getting up quickly, he gives his answer slowly as though doubtful. One of aversive temperament spreads his bed hastily any which way. With his body flung down, he sleeps with a scowl. When woken, he gets up quickly and answers as though annoyed."

Recognize your roommate?

"One of deluded temperament spreads his bed all awry and sleeps mostly face downwards with his body sprawling. When woken, he gets up slowly saying, 'Huh?'"

This is the wisdom of the ages being revealed to you in these secret teachings. You might have a little reaction to this, like the person who was skeptical about channeling, who said, "Just because they're dead doesn't mean that they're smart." But enough for cynicism tonight.

So these forces of greed, aversion, and delusion are very prevalent in our moment-to-moment experience, in our daily life, in our retreat experience. The Buddha actually said that they are the roots of suffering. They are more or less synonymous with our human dilemma that leads us into suffering. In fact, he said to make an end of suffering without ending greed, aversion, and delusion—this is impossible, can't be done. They're really one and the same.

So we could say that the purification of the heart must mean to come to some degree of freedom around these tendencies of mind. This is the way out of bondage. Bondage is bondage to greed, aversion, and delusion. Freedom is freedom from these forces.

I was a little surprised that some of our politicians are learning to speak the language of bondage—hopefully with freedom also. This was a comment from a presidential hopeful. I'm sure you'll recognize the name: J. Danforth Quayle, who said that Republicans best understand the importance of bondage between mother and child. I never knew he had that much depth.

So we approach our experience with this intention of controlling, wanting things to be a certain way, and we act that out mentally, moment after moment after moment. But the problem is that our experience is basically ungovernable. Our experience is the unfolding of many, many conditions, most of which are outside our control. Not all, but many of which are outside our control.

And so we don't really have a way of controlling. Nobody has a handle on controlling what arises moment after moment. And if we're living from a strategy that wants to shape it a certain way, we will always be vulnerable. We really can't arrange the world to always be pleasant. That's the bad news.

The good news is that it is possible to become more and more free in relation to these forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. What we need to trust in, in approaching life as Dharma practice, in bringing a Dharmic understanding moment by moment, is that our freedom doesn't rest on making life painless. It doesn't rest on removing all the difficult experiences from living. It rather rests on being free in our response to life from these reactive tendencies of greed, aversion, and confusion.

So the possibility of the end of suffering isn't dependent on the outside world. It's really dependent on our inner awakening. That's really good news. Because as they say in the Tibetan tradition, we really have two approaches to ending the painfulness of life. One approach is that we could cover the whole world in shoe leather. The other approach is that we could put shoe leather on our two feet.

So which is more practical? We will never succeed in covering the world with shoe leather and removing those spikes and thorns and bumpy rocks. But we may succeed in covering our own two feet with shoe leather and being able to walk softly.

This unpredictability of life reveals itself in the most unexpected moments. I want to share a story from my last visit to Vancouver that illustrates this beautifully. I was teaching a weekend retreat on loving-kindness practice, and on Sunday afternoon, I created space for individual conversations since the large group format hadn't allowed for personal meetings during the weekend. Four or five people came forward for these brief one-on-one exchanges.

One woman approached and sat beside me, tears flowing from the moment she began speaking. In those few precious minutes, she shared her story, and I understood completely why she wept. The previous evening, after our Saturday practice had ended around five o'clock, she had gone out for a walk with a friend—a woman who had actually introduced her to the Dharma, a fellow meditator who had awakened her to practice.

They were walking together, heading to dinner, when her friend, who was about forty years old, suddenly collapsed from cardiac arrest and died that very evening. Despite this tremendous shock, this woman had returned to the retreat the next day because she felt it was the most healing place to be, and she continued with her practice. But the jolt to her system was enormous—and perhaps also a profound teaching on the unpredictability and uncontrollability of our experience. One moment you're walking with a friend, and a

few hours later, she's simply no longer there.

This is the reality for all of us. Even the Buddha couldn't avoid such changes. When Sariputta, one of his chief disciples, died before him, the Buddha said it was as if the sun and moon had gone out of the sky with his passing.

Through our moment-to-moment relationship developed in meditation, we begin to recognize the uncontrollable nature of life. We see how our attempts to relate to experience through greed and aversion, through likes and dislikes, actually fill us with tension. These very efforts to control become a source of suffering. We start to see the limitations of our strategy and may begin to discover that peace comes when we're able to relax the controlling, even for brief periods.

In the beginning, there may not be whole hours or days that are primarily peaceful, but even these moments when the effort of greed and aversion subsides—when you feel restful and peaceful and calm, simply abiding within the moment—offer profound guidance. This really points to the third noble truth that Sylvia spoke about a few nights ago: the ending of struggle, the cessation of craving, of trying to shape things according to our preferences. It's a powerful indication of where happiness truly lies—in this purified heart that has not taken up the struggle, that in this moment is not engaging with the battle of likes and dislikes.

Some of you may have heard stories about Dipa Ma, a great Indian teacher born in Calcutta who suffered tremendous grief when she was quite young. She had four children and a husband, and in a very short period, her husband and several of her children died. This pitched her into despair—a bottomless well of grief she didn't know how to navigate. She said she essentially retired to her room and went under the covers for a year or more, so paralyzing was her grief.

Then someone suggested she try meditation—Vipassana in the same style we're practicing. She enrolled in a retreat with an Indian teacher named Munindra, and it turned out she had extraordinary aptitude for meditation. She once described how, when she first began walking meditation, she focused intently on the sensations in her feet—just lifting, moving, placing. Then she began to feel some friction around her foot, an unfamiliar sensation she hadn't expected. She continued walking, and the sensation persisted. When she finally looked down to see what it was, she discovered a dog that had bitten and fastened onto her ankle. But her attention was so concentrated, so unwavering, that this barely registered on her consciousness.

She continued developing her meditation, progressing very deep very quickly, moving through many levels of insight as well as concentration. She became one of the most developed people I've ever encountered. I was fortunate to spend about a month with her when she made her first trip to America—I had the privilege of looking after her and cooking for her.

She brought with her surviving daughter, Dipa, and her four-year-old grandson named Rishi. "Rishi"

means seer or wise person, but I can assure you this boy was not particularly wise in the conventional sense. He was pure energy—quite wild, as four-year-olds can be, whether in the house or out shopping in the malls. Rishi was everywhere at once.

This situation became the perfect demonstration of Dipa Ma's equanimity. I never saw her flicker into even a moment of irritation with him. She remained completely balanced, completely peaceful, completely loving throughout. When someone once asked her what occupied her mind, she replied simply: "There are three things in my mind—peace, concentration, and loving-kindness."

She didn't even consider herself fully liberated. She thought she was still just on the path like the rest of us, a little further down the path perhaps, but she remained a practitioner. She still considered that she was developing. And yet she had this tremendous purity that I never saw waver. As Ryokan said, "When your heart is pure, all things in this world are pure."

This purification of the heart really transforms our relationship to life. One of the things we purify in practice is our intention. As we begin the practice, we may think that we want to shape our experience, to mold it to be a certain way. As our intention evolves, we become more and more accepting of a relation to experience that's not trying to shape it, but that is eager to learn from it.

So that's the shift that happens—we start to open up and become available to learn from our experience, not demanding that it be a certain way. We listen to our hearts, we listen to our bodies, we listen to our thoughts so that we can understand. And when we understand, then things are easier.

Sylvia told me about a lovely phrase from the Jewish prayer service that says something like, "May we purify our hearts so that we may truly serve." I think this is a beautiful inclination. When we become pure within ourselves, we're better able to help others. The Dalai Lama himself said that altruism by itself is a noble thing, but by itself it's not very powerful. It really needs to be joined with wisdom. And with wisdom and understanding comes the freedom from conflict. And then when that freedom is there, we're really better able to touch others, to help them.

As the factors of greed and aversion decrease, it's like two pans on a scale. As these decrease, the opposite qualities are increasing. So the opposite quality of greed, of this grasping nature, is said to be either generosity—this open-handed giving—or renunciation, relinquishment, simplicity. These are the transmutations of greed.

The quality of aversion goes in two different directions, related but a little dissimilar. One is loving-kindness. It's a basic shift. Instead of having an antagonistic relation to the world, the relationship becomes friendly. Or compassion, caring about others' suffering. Delusion clarifies into wisdom itself—it becomes clarity or seeing things as they are.

So these qualities of generosity, of love, and of wisdom are the fruits of the purification of heart. You could talk about it in terms of the decrease of the unwholesome or the increase of the wholesome. Either way,

it's the same thing.

Sometimes it may seem like we focus a little too much on the negative here, and so I like one of the answers on the interview sheets. You know the question that says, "Have you ever had prolonged depression?" One of the meditators answered by saying, "No, but I've had prolonged happiness."

As we slow down through our practice and listen, our experience starts to unfold in a new way, as though it wants to talk with us, as though it wants to share things with us. Basically, one of the things that happens is some of the accumulations start to unfold themselves.

What do we mean by this accumulation? Throughout life, we've had experiences that have maybe been difficult to handle—something has happened either outside or inwardly, some emotion comes, some physical energy that's difficult to accept. A sadness or fear or rage, a sense of humiliation or shame, and we haven't been able to allow that experience to go through us. We've been scared by it, basically. In response, we've used various techniques to shut it off, to close to it, to keep from experiencing it.

When we stop that process partway through with some kind of contraction, what we do is we lock in that emotion that we were frightened of. It gets locked in often on a bodily level. It gets locked into the heart as well. So after going through twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years of life, we all usually have some storage of these feelings, these stored, suppressed feelings.

In the silence and with awareness, these energies that wanted to express themselves now have the space to do that. And so they start to come into consciousness. They start to be experienced. It may be in the beginning we just feel a little tightness in the body, maybe in the heart or the back, or contraction in the belly. And as we just stay with that with a gentle attention, it may open into some feeling of sadness or fear or anger. Sometimes that feeling will come just by itself. Sometimes it will come with a release of physical energy.

Sometimes there may even be memories—very clear memories of a situation or an event in our lives that come with the feeling.

We see that this leads to a natural cycle in practice: the deepening of mindfulness and concentration creates steadiness of attention and stillness, which invites the emergence of stored energy. This stored energy can be quite strong, and its release often feels chaotic. So this is a really common cycle in practice—to have deepening stillness followed by a period of upheaval, often one right after another.

It may feel like, "Gosh, I'm just starting to understand this practice. Things are finally calming down. I can stay with the breath, being with it consistently. It feels peaceful. I'm starting to get the hang of what they were talking about. Now I understand those instructions John was giving the other day—just stay with the body sensations. It's all coming clear now. I've got the hang of this meditation. The rest of these six weeks is just going to be a cruise."

Then that deeper connection with ourselves allows the release of some deeper material, and that experience is normally quite tumultuous. It feels like upheaval. Suddenly it's very difficult to connect with the breath. There are lots of emotions, lots of thoughts, lots of physical energy—just racing, racing, racing.

We think, "What did I do wrong? I had it just yesterday, or just the last sitting. I shouldn't have let myself have that daydream about the vacation I'm going to take in the summer. I shouldn't have allowed myself to linger over tea at lunchtime. I did something wrong that's making all this happen."

But it's really not like that. Actually, your steadiness is what gave the space for the stored material to emerge. So it's a really natural part of the practice.

During that time of upheaval, it may feel like the practice is just blown to the four winds. Concentration? Never knew it a day in my life. More than a breath at a time? Can't get to it. Just not happening. This is a time when it's easy to feel discouraged.

But if you just maintain your steadiness—and it may simply be being willing to sit and walk through the disturbance—what you'll find is that after a little time passes, the connection with the breath comes back. Calmness returns. You feel that steadiness again. The practice more or less puts itself back together.

So often when we're going through an intensive retreat, we experience these cycles where the practice really comes together and feels the best it's ever felt. It feels so easy, so effortless during these times. This is when you start thinking about signing up for the three-month retreat in Massachusetts in the fall, or going over to Burma to ordain as a nun the next time you have some time off.

Immediately following that can be what seems like the worst period of practice you've ever had. These cycles may keep repeating. And of course, in those really difficult times: "Is my car still running? Am I going to be able to get a getaway vehicle together to get out of this place? Do I need to call my house sitter to tell him to vacate because I'm coming back tonight?" All plans to leave start flooding in.

This is such a good training ground because both phases present real challenges. In the periods where practice seems easy and flowing and effortless, we really get to discover what the sweetness of meditation can be like. We taste some of the fruits of the sustained attention we've cultivated. We know that potential of real peace and real clarity—being able to see things as they truly are, so rich and satisfying.

But we also have to be aware that sometimes the biggest obstacle to mindfulness is pleasure. I don't know if you've noticed this. When I sit down at lunch and take the first bite of a really good meal—

I space out like no time else in the day. As soon as I get a really pleasant taste, I forget to taste anymore. It's like, "Oh, this is so great," and I'm off somewhere in some pleasant thought escapade.

The same thing happens with sitting. When the calm and the peace and the concentration and connection to the breath arrive as these unexpected visitors, we might think, "This is what meditation is supposed to be like. Now I don't have to work so hard at being with the breath. I can just settle in and enjoy this

because it's happening naturally and it feels so good."

It's really important, even in times that feel good, to sustain the mindfulness moment by moment—still to put in that effort of connecting with the breath, with the sensations.

When you get into the tumult, then it feels like nothing can connect. It feels like the meditation has dissolved. What's the point? Why should I try? At those times, it's still helpful to keep coming back and connecting with the present, but you may not be able to do it in a very precise way. Connecting with one breath may not be possible. Seeing one thought may not be possible because they're going by like a waterfall—too fast, too furious.

So at times like that, that's okay. Connect with a more panoramic understanding of the situation and just feel it as restlessness. Feel it as confusion. Just make space in the mind for this experience of tumult, of the waterfall, and then you're connected with your experience just as it is. Don't worry about being precise. Trust that if you just keep staying present, the calmness and balance will return.

And really what you gain from all those cycles, again and again, is a greater and greater sense of equanimity—seeing the pleasure and the pain, the easy times and the hard times as just two halves of what meditation has to offer. You start to trust that every time you get lost, you know you'll get found again. And every time you get found, you can be pretty sure you're going to get lost again—and it's okay. Both halves of that cycle are all right.

So don't feel that you have to hold on really tightly to one or that you have to be afraid of the other. Start to recognize that these are the two faces of retreat practice, of meditation as it unfolds in its depths. We gradually, over time, just get more and more trust that that process is a good one—that it strengthens us, that it heals us, that it opens us, that it purifies us.

This is from Rumi: "This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness. Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all. Even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."

This is so true. Each can be seen as a guide from beyond because they are our opening. When we turn our attention to the breath or sensations, to the present moment, we get one of two outcomes. We either get the connection to the present moment with clarity, or we get an obstruction to that present moment awareness. Either one is just where we need to learn. It's just perfect in that moment. So being open to both is really, really helpful.

Now some of these accumulations come in a way that we struggle with them. Mostly they come in a way that we struggle. And sometimes we struggle in a way that we actually draw the noose tighter. This is

when we're in a situation that's described as a knot. A knot is basically created when there's a kind of energy coming up in us that we can't open to, but we meet with the same kind of response.

A good example is fear. If fear comes into your practice and you're afraid of it, what happens? The fear builds into a kind of crescendo. It's created this knot of fear that we don't see a way out of.

I was doing a long period of metta practice last fall. Doing the metta practice intensively over a period of some weeks is basically a concentration practice. Insights come also, but because you're returning to the phrases and the metta again and again, it's largely strengthening the factor of concentration. I talked to a lot of friends who'd done the practice—I'd done it myself—and some of my friends, their concentration just seemed to keep deepening in a very steady and gradual way. My experience had always been that my concentration deepened for a while, and then I'd go through this period of upheaval.

And then it would settle down, just the cycle that I've been describing. I started to notice that what happened was because I wasn't so comfortable or familiar with the metta practice, when I got into the upheaval period, I couldn't trust that it was okay for that to happen. So when I got agitated, I got worried that I was getting agitated. And of course, that just made me more agitated. I really struggled with it.

Over time, I started to trust: oh, that agitation will pass. It's okay. Just let it come and let it go. But as long as I was getting worried about it, I was just prolonging it.

So in working with these uprushes of energy from accumulations or from knots, the skillful thing is just to be with them in a very open and accepting way. Sounds easy. I know it's not.

If we can be there with a clear attention that's not moving toward it—why would we move toward it? Because we can make of this untying a project. We can actually see our meditation as being primarily about the loosening of these accumulations. Then we might get invested in the uprushes of energy. We might get invested in the knots even, and think that if I'm having the opening of the accumulations, my practice is unfolding as it should. That can become our central purpose.

Actually, the unfolding of the accumulations is just a byproduct in meditation. It's just a byproduct of awareness. It's not the central path to liberation. So as long as we're involved in that as our main project in meditation, then we might miss out on the deeper pointings to freedom, to the essence of liberation.

Also not moving away. Of course we tend to move away because these are difficult energies—the energies of anger or fear or sadness or shame. So we want to find that middle path that's not moving toward out of making an agenda, that's not moving away out of resistance or fear, but an awareness that can clearly be there with these difficult states of mind and body and just allow them to express themselves.

Someone came in today to an interview and was talking about a real shift in relationship to these energies. The person said, "You know, I struggled with these upheavals for a long time and I finally got it that I could just be with it in a really spacious way." He said, "Now it's like the lights are on, but nobody's

home. There's just the energy unfolding itself." And when that happens, you can trust in the Dharma to unfold it in the most skillful way possible.

The lights are on but nobody's home. If these difficulties arise and we don't make a big deal out of them, we don't hold on to them, we don't cling, we could say that they self-liberate. They arise and like everything that arises, they pass away.

This self-liberation is described in one tradition as like a snake that's coiled up and just uncoils itself. It's also described as like writing on water—it just passes without a trace. No big deal, really easy. But if we get involved in grasping, either because we're resisting or because we want to fix things and help the project along, then we get tangled. That's how the tangle gets created.

Well, basically in relation to these states, to be there with full awareness—a keen awareness and interest is crucial—but then to kind of take the hands off the steering wheel and surrender. This movement of surrender is a movement that we can do in any moment of practice.

Krishnamurti had this beautiful phrase. He said, "The first step is the everlasting step." And I think you could say that this movement to surrender is an everlasting step in our practice. Because when we get out of the way, then we put our whole trust in the hands of the Dharma. And the Dharma knows what to do. The Dharma knows how to unfold the situation.

So in our practice, can we start to know when we're reacting to what is with trying to control through greed, aversion, or delusion? Can we also know the states of non-greed, of non-aversion, of non-delusion? Be aware of how they feel. Be aware of their impact.

There are really simple teachings around these states of mind. I was visiting some friends over Christmas, and my friend who's a meditator called her daughter and then spoke to her granddaughter. The granddaughter came on the phone and said, "Oh, Nana, I got a lot of really good presents this Christmas. You should see it, Nana. A lot of presents under the tree."

And her grandmother said, "Well, now that you have all those, does that make you happy? Or do you feel like you want more?"

The little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I'd like to have more."

And he said this went on for about 20 minutes. Then I realized this turtle was teaching me something. When I was just sitting peacefully with both the calm states and the painful memories, both were fine—I could be present with either. But when I reached for the peaceful states, when I tried to grasp them or hold onto them, they disappeared, just like the turtle withdrawing into his shell.

This is such a beautiful teaching about non-attachment. When we try to grasp the pleasant experiences, even the most wonderful meditative states, they slip away from us. When we try to push away the difficult experiences, we create more suffering for ourselves. The practice is really about developing this quality of

awareness that can be present with whatever arises—the turtle coming out of his shell or the turtle withdrawing, the moments of peace or the moments of pain.

This is what we call equanimity—not a bland indifference, but this wise and compassionate balance that recognizes both pleasure and pain as part of the human experience. In the Pali teachings, this quality is called upekkha, this beautiful balance of heart and mind that neither grasps after what we want nor pushes away what we don't want.

So in your own practice, notice this tendency to reach for the pleasant states. Notice how when you try to manufacture calm or create bliss, those very states become elusive. And notice too how when you resist the difficult emotions or thoughts, they tend to become more solid and persistent. The practice invites us into this middle way—being fully present with whatever is arising in this moment, whether it's the turtle's head emerging from the shell or retreating back into safety.

This doesn't mean we become passive or that we don't take appropriate action when needed. But there's a difference between wise action that comes from understanding and reactive grasping that comes from wanting our experience to be different than it is. The turtle taught my friend about the difference between these two ways of engaging with life.

He said, "At that moment, I got it. Opening and closing are just part of life. The turtle is showing me that being open isn't always the right way to be. Sometimes being closed happens or is appropriate. And I saw that with my own heart. I need to be allowing of these cycles where my heart opens and my heart closes, and it's all just a part of the natural flow."

So he shifted into that more allowing kind of panoramic relationship to the openings and closings, and he said that it brought him a much deeper sense of freedom in relationship to them.

Remember that life is relationship. There's our present moment experience and then how we're relating to it. And these two factors keep interplaying with one another. They condition one another. In tuning into our present moment experience, we may find sometimes it's nice, sometimes it's not so nice. Look at then how we relate. That's the more important piece.

I was sitting, again, extended period of retreat, one of my teachers was Sharon Salzberg, and Sharon said something in the Dharma hall one day that I'd probably heard a dozen times before, I'd probably said a dozen times before, but she said it and it really struck me. She said, "It doesn't matter in this practice what you're experiencing. What matters is how you relate to it."

That's a really radical statement. And that is the view of this meditation. It doesn't matter what our experience is, whether it's joyful, delightful, happy, open, or if we're experiencing some fear, some anger, some sadness and terror. The important thing as relates to the practice is: how are we relating to that moment?

If we can bring into that moment this warm and clear attention—because that's really what mindfulness is. Mindfulness truly is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, and therefore has this basic warmth, has this heart quality to it. That's the transforming factor. That's the liberating factor.

It actually doesn't matter so much whether your practice of mindfulness is developing on difficulty or developing on ease. The Buddha said there are four different types of meditators. There are ones who go swiftly with pleasure. There are those who go swiftly with pain. There are those who go slowly with pleasure. And there are those who go slowly with pain. I will tell you right now, I'm in the fourth category.

It really doesn't matter because the liberating factor is this open-hearted attention that we bring to whatever our experience is.

Why is it liberating? This is a question that really grabbed me after a while. Why is this open-hearted attention fundamentally liberating? The clearest way I know to say it is that it is the functioning of our Buddha nature. We've talked a few times about this deep dimension of ourselves, which is timeless, as John was saying this morning, which is unstained and unsullied, which is fundamentally pure—pure beyond any possibility of impurity.

The activity of this Buddha nature is mindfulness. As we become mindful moment after moment, what we are doing is basically giving birth to our own awakened nature. We are bringing forth the awakened mind moment after moment after moment.

When we shine it on an area of difficulty, we transform that moment. Even though the experience in the moment may be of sadness or hurt or anger or fear, when we meet it with this warm, clear attention, we're bringing the wholesome alive in that moment. So you cannot say that a meditator who's working with mindfulness is only in an unwholesome state. The awareness itself is a powerful, wholesome element in that moment and transforms over time those feelings.

As we bring forth more and more this open and spacious, essential nature, all the accumulations, all the knots, all the karmic conditioning basically dissolves in it. The Buddha said that the fetters, the difficulties, rot in mindfulness, the same way that the ropes and sails of a seagoing vessel rot in the sea air, the salt water, the wind, and the sun. They simply decay because this nature is so fundamental that nothing can stand up to it. It has the possibility of absorbing and dissolving every structure that it's presented with.

This is the alchemy of our practice. In meeting these difficult emotions, difficult states of mind, bringing this wholesome and warm attention to them, we transform that difficult moment into a moment of activating the awakened nature. This is pure magic. How can we bring forth enlightenment in the middle of difficulty? Just by paying clear and warm attention, moment after moment.

So we find our freedom not in getting rid of the difficult emotions, but in bringing out this deeper dimension of ourselves, which is open, accepting, spacious, and friendly, until there are no more corners of the mind that we can't meet with that kind of openness and that kind of acceptance. In the mind of the

Buddha, there are no more rough edges that can't be opened to.

For us, every rough edge is another opportunity to open and move one step closer to Buddhahood.

As one of my Tibetan teachers said, the sacred point of our practice is the liberation of confusion.

I'll close with a quote from Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa. This is a prayer, and it doesn't so much matter who it's directed to. It could be directed to the teacher, to the Buddha, to the Dharma, or anywhere you feel appropriate. These are called the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessings so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessings so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's sit for just a moment in the beauty of this teaching.

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