Healing and Freedom

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:57

James talked a couple of nights ago about this factor of intention in our practice, which is so central to directing us, and I want to carry on from that theme and explore it a little further tonight. I hope I don't repeat a lot of the things he said. I wasn't here to hear his talk, and most of all, I hope I don't end up arguing with him, which sometimes happens, but trust you'll hold it in a big mind.

I was working out at the gym where I work out in Fairfax a few years ago. I'm not, as I've mentioned, a dedicated bodybuilding kind of guy. I just like to stay in reasonably good shape. But one day I was in there and one of the guys who worked regularly at the gym at that time was also there. His name was Lance.

Lance was built. There was a photo of him up at the front of the gym when he had competed at a Mr. America contest. He really had the physique, right there with all the well-known Schwarzeneggers and so on. Every once in a while, he'd come along and give me a tip on how to do the machines or the weights or something and put an arm on his shoulder. It was like touching a stack of bricks. He was so solid. So he was kind of an inspiration to us all in the gym and also a little bit foreboding.

But one day I was in there and there were two young teenage guys working out next to me who were even scrawnier than I am because they haven't aged and put on the little belly yet. I heard them talking and they were talking about Lance in kind of odd tones, describing his abilities. They said, "Did you see Lance the other day? He pressed 515 pounds."

I could see their eyes lighting up like, that is really fantastic. And what I got from that is that they both aspired to be able to do that too. I didn't really. That was way out of my league. I was happy just in the very minor leagues that I was in. But they aspired to that. What I picked up from that is that their trajectory in their weightlifting career was probably going to be a lot higher than mine ever was.

Because what we aspire to becomes a kind of guidepost that we align and direct our practice to. So that was kind of inspiring for me, just to touch into the fact that one can aspire greatly in any discipline, whether it's weights or mastery of a language or a skill like meditation, and that the higher we set our aim, that will influence our whole trajectory as we carry out our career in that.

When I look at the aims that people have coming into dharma practice, I see basically two main aims that people come in with. One is an aim to heal from all the hurts and troubles that life has brought our way and to become whole again, to restore a sense of wholeness, calm, peace, openness of heart, however you'd like to describe it. A kind of balance, coming to a happy balance in life.

The other motivation that I see people come with is the aspiration to be liberated, to be completely free in

the same way that the Buddha discovered he could be completely free.

One of my teachers put this kind of succinctly. He said, the dharma does both these things. He said, "First it makes us healthy and then it makes us free."

In the talk tonight, I want to talk about basically these two parts of dharma practice: the part that makes us healthy or heals us and the part that makes us free. I want to start off by saying that I think both of these are really good motivations in practice. They're both valid and noble reasons to be here and to be doing the work that you're doing.

They also constitute, to my mind, to some degree phases in our practice, that we often tend to move from one—the healing or healthy phase—into the other, the phase of aspiration for liberation. The motivations and therefore some of the accompanying attitudes are different in these two phases. So I want to explore what those differences are like.

I want to talk first about using the dharma practice for healing. I think a lot of people come into meditation because they're unhappy. I think this is very, very widespread and very appropriate. When I first came into meditation, this was my motivation. I would have been hard pressed to say exactly what was the problem in life. I remember sort of scratching my head at different times. I was in my early twenties and I thought, what's the problem here?

At one point, I had a friend whose name was True Light. This will give you a sense of the circles I moved in in those years. I had a friend named True Light. We shared many altered states together. At one point, I shared with her that I really wasn't very happy at this point in my life. She said, "Okay, just come into the moment. What are you unhappy about right now?"

And her question really stopped me. I had to say, I don't know. I really couldn't put my finger on what the unhappiness was. I just knew that I hadn't been happy for a long time, and I wasn't happy about that.

This is often the situation when we're young and first come into some kind of spiritual life, some spiritual way of looking at things. There may just be a pervasive sense that life doesn't feel quite right, that we've lost some connection we knew before.

As we start to practice and investigate our experience as the meditation instructions direct, we come to see that the suffering was around particular states of mind that were frequent visitors—unpleasant, uncomfortable visitors. As I started to look into my experience, I found that I had a lot of fear and anxiety. That was the main reason I couldn't feel happy, contented, open, loving, spacious, and connected with life.

But for other people, the particulars will differ. For some, it might be grief or unworthiness or self-judgment, a sense of disappointment. It might be desire, wanting, or insufficiency. It could be anger that disconnects us from other people. Or maybe we just notice our heart's closed and we want to be able to open it. We remember how it felt when we were younger. We've lost something.

These emotions, this closeness of difficult emotions, may have their roots in many different areas. It could be childhood conditioning, could be trauma—either recent or old. Could just be a sense of dissatisfaction with life. But the main thing is that when this is our motivation, when our suffering is around emotions and emotions become the center of our focus, we believe the root and core cause lies in these difficult emotions. They're the ground, the basis, the source of the suffering.

So that's where we tend to focus our practice. We concentrate on the emotions, and at least that's how we conceive of our practice—thinking about focusing on emotions. In fact, there may be a lot of other things going on as we practice, but that's where our conscious interest and intention lies. And then our motivation for practice becomes clearer: we want to find a way to be free in relation to these difficult, painful emotions. We may use the breath to get in touch with them, but the breath is just a tool. Awareness of breath is just a tool.

I should mention that some people don't particularly go through this phase, so this may not be relevant to a number of you here. I ask you to listen from a kind of disinterested place. Many people also come into Dharma practice from a place of pretty good balance and a high degree of contentment. The emotional pain may not be apparent in the beginning, although it usually becomes apparent later on, and then that becomes what keeps us in practice.

I know people who've started practice out of intellectual curiosity. What's this teaching about? Impermanence, selflessness, unsatisfactoriness, the natural mind, Buddha nature, liberation, enlightenment. What's this about? This sounds kind of interesting. They explore from that avenue and then find that emotions actually do play a role.

At this stage, I want to examine some of the attitudes present in this stage of healing. We're really relating to meditation, to the Dharma, as a form of psychotherapy. We could go to therapy training, we could go to many different schools, or we could go to the Buddhist Spirit Rock School of Meditation Therapy—we just end up here for some reason. Whether it's Western psychotherapy or meditation, both seek to alleviate the pain of human existence, and in this stage, the pain of emotional suffering. So meditation is really seen as just another therapy tool at this point.

I checked out a few therapies when I was in my twenties. When I did my first retreat, I became hooked because I felt that of the things I'd sampled—which was a narrow spectrum—this was the one that had the power to go to any level of the mind where the suffering was happening. I felt that in my first retreat. Wherever the source of the conflict, the bind, the attachment, the knot lay in my psyche, I felt this practice had the power to go to that depth. And being able to go to that depth had the potential to release it.

From the very first retreat, I had complete trust in that, and my confidence never wavered. That trust was a great support through years of ups and downs and years of difficulty in practicing.

Some of the views we encounter as we come into Buddhist meditation we find are different than some

therapeutic views. The tools are obviously different, but the views may be different also, the assumptions. One of the things we see in Dharma practice is that we don't need to care so much about the past.

I don't know if this has been made clear in the talks, but it's very much our understanding that for the most part, the past isn't really that central to what we're doing here. Obviously, it has influenced us a great deal. It has totally influenced the way the present moment arises. But in our learning to free ourselves, even on this psychological level, we don't need to go back and revive the memories of the past to find that freedom. We simply trust that if we learn how to relate to the emotions as they arise here and now, that will be enough learning to free us.

So there's not the purposeful aim to send the attention back into the past, uncover some seeming source of the suffering and understand that source. We just trust that if the difficulties are arising in the present moment, we can understand it in the here and now.

The other difference in view is that we don't actually have to work all the emotions out. I think sometimes in Western psychological models, we think that we have to get one emotion, trace it back to its causes, and then kind of work it all the way through in the future so that we've really dissolved it at the root. In meditation practice, I talked the other night about how this factor of samadhi allows us to suspend the hindrances. When samadhi is cultivated to a certain depth, the hindrances just don't arise. They don't have room to come in.

In traditional Asian models of meditation development, this is basically the root. You work with a meditation subject until concentration is at such a level that the difficult emotions aren't arising anymore. Whether it's greed or fear or anger or sloth and torpor or restlessness, they're simply not arising. It's not that they've been eliminated from the system. But you've reached a meditative state of poise that doesn't allow them to enter. From that meditative state of poise, you deepen the faculty of insight to such a level that the afflictive emotions can be uprooted. In the traditional Asian model, there's not very much work at all on the psychological level of coming to terms with different emotions.

The other thing that we see that's different in meditation is that the purification of the mind and heart comes through a completely different angle—not through working out the negative, but in bringing up the positive. As we develop day by day the strength of mindfulness, it brings in its wake all the beautiful qualities of mind: faith, tranquility, investigation and interest, devotion, wisdom, concentration, loving-kindness and compassion. So a strong offset to the negative tendencies of mind—the hindrances, the difficult emotions—are all the beautiful qualities that are developing purely through the meditation model without particularly working on any of the negative. These positive factors are great allies, not only in learning to relate with the difficult, but just in purifying and strengthening the mind all on their own.

One of the attitudes that we see if we come with the motivation of healing in meditation is that we actually have an agenda. You've probably heard us say many times, "Be with your experience without struggle and without an agenda." But if we're coming with a motivation of healing what's painful, there's usually a

strong agenda at work—sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious. The agenda is something like this: I have to change the way I feel. I have to change the way these emotions are arising. I have to change the way I am. We basically feel I have to change myself—something's wrong with the way I am, and I have to put it right.

So in this approach from healing, there is a basic kind of non-acceptance of the way things are, a non-acceptance of what is. Something's gone wrong, we have to put it right. This may be a conscious view that we take up and we could just say to somebody, "Yeah, I believe something's wrong and I've got to fix it." It may be an unconscious view, but it's kind of part and parcel of the domain of healing.

This agenda then looks to replace the difficult emotions with more positive states. It could be conceived of as love or happiness or calm or peace or contentment, however you think of it. But often in this agenda, we'll focus on one particular emotion or one area of emotion that we consider the biggest problem. For some it might be wanting, for some it might be fear, for some it might be anger, for some it might be grief, some it might be unworthiness. We focus on that and we think, "That's it. If I can just take care of that, then everything else will be cool."

You may know this line from the Third Zen Patriarch: "The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences." How does that coincide, how does that coexist with the healing agenda? It doesn't actually coexist very well because with the healing agenda we have really strong preferences. We have preferences for these kinds of mind states and not for these kinds of mind states. We really want to change them.

As the positive mind states start to come in, because of this strong preference, we easily get attached to the positive mind states. For one reason, because we may not have had them for quite a while. We may have been wanting them for a long time and missing them. So when they come, we tend to hang on. Second, because they indicate that the agenda is working. This becomes the indicator of progress or success, that the healing is actually taking place. So it becomes a validator of the work that we're doing.

And it's very painful when these pass, because we're back again in that really unsatisfactory state of affairs, which is the suffering emotions. And we never know when they'll come back again. In the beginning, they're very tentative. They just appear briefly, and they don't have a lot of stability. And we're not sure when they'll come again.

Also at this stage of the practice, we may not be very interested in the teachings of the Buddha. Even if there's kind of an intellectual interest, it may not go very deep.

And we hear teachings like about not-self—there's no self—and we think, oh yeah, give me a break, you know, then who's suffering? We hear teachings on dependent origination and the twelve links of the chain of becoming. We hear talks about concentration and we think, it's all really kind of theoretical. It's like we've joined some university book club, and they're off in some kind of cultish intellectual pursuit.

I've heard many people say, either in questions in the hall or in interviews, "I just came here to open my heart. I'm not interested in all of this Buddhist philosophy." And there's actually another word that wants to go on the end of "Buddhist philosophy," but I don't want to say it right here. All this Buddhist philosophy stuff.

Of course these teachings on not-self, on dependent origination and concentration, these really are the avenues to liberation. But because they don't have much emotional content or much emotional juice, they don't seem to be relevant to the work we're involved in. "I want to open my heart. Don't give me this intellectual stuff."

The problem is that the opening of the heart, as I've experienced it, is only temporary if it's not supported by other factors. When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I had a lot of access to love. And I don't just mean relationship love or sexual love, but I had a lot of openness to life and a lot of love of nature and of being and of the creative arts, people, love of life, really. But it wasn't very stable. It would come and then it would go, and I wouldn't know how to get it back. When I lost that really loving connection to life, I'd get depressed, I'd get despondent, and I didn't know how to find it again.

So I think that the openness and connecting to life, which is what the opening of the heart is about, can't really be stabilized unless it's supported by other factors. And in Buddhism, there are two main factors that support this. The first and most important is wisdom, and it's primarily the wisdom of not clinging. It's clinging that closes the heart. It's clinging that shuts us off in many different forms—clinging to the past, some different expression of clinging to the way things were, clinging to what was. So the wisdom of seeing when we're clinging and how to release it is the central thing. And the second thing that supports that stability of the opening of the heart is samadhi. Samadhi gives the mind a strength, a firmness, and a steadiness that it can withstand the pushes and pulls both of life and of the inner states of the hindrances.

There's another factor that's really important to understand in this healing phase. Jack Engler is a friend of ours who's a long-time Vipassana practitioner, student of Munindraji and Dipama from the India days, and a psychologist who's a professor at Harvard. He has a line that kind of sums up this phase of the practice. He said, "It's really important, before you become nobody, that you be somebody." In other words, we need to develop a healthy sense of self before we can really let go of the sense of self.

So a lot of what this phase of practice is about is coming to stabilize in the positive qualities—in the openness of the heart, in access to happiness and contentment and peace and self-regard. And as those become more and more stable, we start to get a good sense of ourself, replacing the sense of ourself as fragmented or unhappy or broken. Then, from that place, there's the possibility of letting go of self.

I want to talk a little bit about this healing phase in a more personal way, and I want to talk about how my practice evolved with fear, because it was my main hindrance for a number of years in the early years of my practice. It came up a lot for me. Fear is one of our deepest conditionings. Sally mentioned it, I think, the other night, talking about the Third Foundation. It comes up often in interviews. It's a painful state of

mind.

Fear has the effect of closing our world in. You can feel that the heart of fear is this contraction in our being—we feel that something really unpleasant is about to happen. There's a sense of impending doom, and it brings with it a darkness that clouds our life, that clouds our time here. It's as though—I remember saying at one point when I was under this influence—I couldn't really touch the sunshine anymore, because I had closed off in some way to it. When fear is present, it really blocks our flowering. It prevents the unfolding of the beautiful qualities of heart and mind.

There's a line that I really like from a science fiction novel from the sixties. I don't know if any of you read Dune by Frank Herbert. It was quite a trip at the time. One of his lines in there—part of the training that the people were undergoing in this culture, which was something of a wisdom culture—was the line, "Fear is the great mind killer." Fear is the great mind killer. When it's present, it really stifles our creativity and our blossoming.

So coming into practice, this was quite strong in my early years, and I realized I had to come to an understanding of it. It became my dominant experience at times. I listened to my teachers talk about working with the emotions, working with the difficult emotions, and I realized I need to investigate what is this thing called fear. So I actually regarded it as a great opportunity when it came up.

Not the first time it came up, but after a while, because it gave me a chance to investigate. This is actually a teaching device used in places, especially in Asia. Ajahn Chah's teacher was a very fierce man named Ajahn Mun. In a way, he kind of re-established the Thai forest tradition in the early part of the last century. He taught Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mahabua, and a number of other great forest masters of the second half of the century.

Ajahn Mun used to instruct his monks to go off and sit in the forest in areas where they knew tigers to be on the loose. There were a lot of tigers a hundred years ago in the forests of Thailand. They were still really wild—this was before they were all logged. So he would instruct the monks to go sit out there. The monk would go wandering around through the forest, looking for a good place to sit and walk. Sometimes they would come upon a pile of bones of previous inhabitants of the area. There'd be a pile of bones, the begging bowl of the monk, and some scattered robes. And that's where they were encouraged to practice.

That could bring up some fear. But it was considered a good thing because this was a chief hindrance. And if you had the opportunity to practice with it, you might be able to become free of it.

So eventually I came to really appreciate the times when fear came up in my meditation and I could investigate it. It comes up in daily life for us, of course, but often we're so distracted, there are so many things going on, it's hard to connect clearly. Here, when there's nothing else to do, it can be the only thing really happening. And that's a tremendous opportunity to feel into it really clearly.

So I started to look into it, and it manifests in three ways. As far as I know, it manifests in three ways. It

manifests in the body. It manifests as a mental state or tone or mood or color. And it manifests through thoughts—certain kinds of thoughts come with fear when fear is present. I looked at it again and again and I couldn't find anything else but these three parts to it. So I started to work on getting comfortable with each of these three aspects.

First I grounded my attention in the body. This is generally the advice for working with strong emotions. I'm going to go through this cycle with fear, but I hope you'll see the extension to any other states of mind that are difficult. Ground the attention in the body.

When I came into my body, I found that what was happening was a sense of shakiness. Fear made my body light and trembling, and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. There was a contraction in the stomach. I would sometimes have sweat under my arms. I would feel too light and ungrounded, like I couldn't put a foot down anywhere. And sometimes my breathing would get really shallow.

So I kept investigating. And sooner or later I came to see that's about all that fear was in the body. It was just this trembling and lightness and contraction. And so I had to ask myself, can I accept this the way it is? And eventually I said, yeah. I mean, not the first time that fear arose, not the second time. But after being with it a number of times, it wasn't a big deal. It was just sensations. So I could open to it on the bodily level.

Then I started to look: well, what's the mood in the mind? What's the mental state? What's that tone or color of fear? And I started to try to feel into that. It's a different color than sadness or happiness or joy or anger. So what is that color? The closest I could get was a kind of wanting to escape. It was like a wanting to move away, wanting to flee. That was what I could pick up as the color in the mind.

And I thought, well, can I come to terms with that? Can I open and accept that part of fear?

And I found that I could.

Then I looked at the thoughts. What kind of thoughts come with fear? Scary thoughts. In fact, I think Sally read something from Krishnamurti the other evening that basically said it's thoughts and the proliferation of them projecting into the future that create fear, that stimulate fear. We might think of something awful that we don't want to have happen. "Oh, I'm going to have to leave the retreat and go home and deal with this work situation." And we get scared in the moment. He summed this all up, Krishnamurti, with this really nice phrase: thought breeds fear. Thought breeds fear. Thought breeds most other suffering too, if you look at it closely.

The way these thoughts work is a little bit like the story of the Chinese artist who was painting a big scroll painting. With bold strokes, he painted a leaping tiger—a beautiful evocation of the tiger. He stepped back from the scroll and looked at the tiger and got scared. "Oh my God, a tiger!" This is the way our thoughts work. We project something fantastic that hasn't happened into the future and then we get scared by the projection.

At one point in my practice, I started to tune into the unreality of that fearful projection. I happened to be in England doing a period of practice at the retreat center before Gaia House was established. It was called East Farmhouse, in Wiltshire. I was practicing there in the summer, and if you've ever been to England in the summer, you know how beautiful the experience can be. Everything's in flower. The English are great gardeners, so there are lots of flowers. The bird life is really rich. The sun doesn't set in midsummer until ten o'clock or so at night. It stays light until eleven. And there can be this really beautiful softness that settles over the landscape around nightfall, around dusk.

So I was out doing standing meditation in the back garden of the retreat center, standing next to a flowering fruit tree—I think it was an apple tree. The scent of the flowers was faint but present in the air. The birds were chirping all around as it was getting darker. This softness was settling on the whole landscape. I was doing standing meditation with my eyes closed, and I was in a fear space, going "fear, fear" and noting it.

Then I just opened my eyes, and I felt this incredibly beautiful, light, soft, warm, birdsong-filled evening of English twilight. I had to laugh because the thought came up: "Yeah, it's a really scary place, isn't it?" The fear was so out of sync with the moment. And that's the way fear usually is. We can be all churned up inside with our eyes closed, sitting in this beautiful hall. Then we might open them for a minute and get a reality check. There's no problem. There's nothing wrong with the moment. It's absolutely safe. Most moments are like that. But when the mind state is active, we can't tune into that. We can't feel that. We're swept into the imaginary environment.

So I could accept the bodily experience, I could accept the mood of fear, and I could accept the thoughts—the projective fantasy of fear. That was it. There was nothing else there. Once I'd come to terms with those three things, I'd come to terms with fear. This sounds like a boast, but it's simple and it's true.

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.

This wisdom from the Indian teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj cuts to the heart of our relationship with experience. When a questioner protested, "But pain is not acceptable," Maharaj simply asked, "Why not? Did you ever try? 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."

He continues: "This 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."

This work of acceptance is really the key with difficult emotions. It's basically what frees us. We have to dig deep to find that openness of heart with these emotions. It doesn't come easily. Who would think that you can accept fear or grief or sadness or wanting just as it is? Because initially we resist them and we

fear them. But we can. We can accept them.

You've got to be a little careful here, because if you accept it in order to make it go away, it knows the difference and it won't go away. Because that's just aversion. So it won't be tricked. You have to genuinely open up and accept.

One way to do this—Sally might have mentioned this—just a skillful means to see if you've got real acceptance, is to ask yourself the question: would it be okay if this emotion was here the rest of my life? Would that be okay? When you come to the point that you can say yes to that, then there's real acceptance happening.

And that is possible. I came into contact with fear over and over and over again, so many times, working with acceptance repeatedly, that I came to that point. I had so much equanimity with fear that I really didn't care if it was there or wasn't there. I really didn't. It didn't make a bit of difference to me. If it wanted to arise in a moment, that was fine.

If it wanted to go away, that was fine. I really didn't care either way. And at that point, fear had lost some kind of hold over me. It wasn't because I'd worked out the source of it. I never saw any memories connected with fear being present. There may have been many things in my life that scared me, but memories never came up with my fears. So it wasn't about working through any particular old thing. Just by relating to the emotion itself, it kind of took the power out. It took the charge out of it.

It doesn't mean I don't still get scared or wouldn't get scared. If I found out tomorrow that Sally was really ill or that I was diagnosed with some illness or our house was swept away in this flood, I'd get scared. But I feel that I have the tools to work with it, and I don't feel afraid to feel the fear anymore.

So that creates a lot of space, not having that fear of the difficult states. It creates a lot of space, a lot of trust and a lot of confidence that we know how to work with the states that come into our mind. We know how to work with the most difficult emotions that come and we've learned something about how to release them. We release them through paying full attention and through opening and accepting.

What starts to happen as we do that, as awareness touches the difficult emotion again and again and again, is kind of like the energy starts going out of the emotion and into the awareness. The awareness gets stronger and as it does that, the emotion gets weaker. We take its power and we put it into mindfulness or awareness.

So after some period of practicing to work on this difficult state of fear, some shifts started to happen. I remember one retreat—it was in the early years of my practice, but I'd touched what I felt was a real depth in my meditation. I felt that I'd come to some kind of depth of really seeing the end of suffering, the temporary end of suffering. I was very excited about it.

I went to see my teachers, and all of them kind of minimized my insight. They did not validate it at all.

They all kind of said, "No, it's not what you think, not that important." One of my teachers I remember said to me, "You know, you're not very deep. So-and-so"—who happened to be a really good friend of mine who was on the same retreat with me—"so-and-so is much deeper than you are." I said, "Oh, thanks very much."

Nonetheless, the quality of teaching was not as high then as now. Nonetheless, I had a lot of confidence in my insight. What happened was that having come to the end of that strain of suffering, it's not that it didn't arise again, but I'd come to the end of it once. I knew I could do it again. Conceptually, I'd solved the problem. I'd solved the problem of my emotional suffering. And then the motivation fell away from my practice for a while because I'd done what I'd come into practice to do.

So that was kind of interesting. My motivation went away and it took a while for it to come back. I had to find a different reason to practice, and it did come back.

Then again, some years later—this is kind of another transition point—I was a monk and I was practicing at Wat Suan Mok in Southern Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery. I remember the afternoon, the actual afternoon that this happened. I was sitting out on my front porch, and it was really hot. Thailand in the retreat season is really hot. I was just wearing basically a singlet and my lower monk's robe, but sweat was just pouring down my abdomen. Mosquitoes were all around, but I kept a mosquito coil lit beside me so that it would keep the mosquitoes away. But that has a really foul smell, a really chemical smell, as you probably know.

So I was sitting there, and there was tension in my body. I wasn't completely comfortable. I had some restlessness in the mind, and a state would come in here or there that wasn't so pleasant. But I suddenly woke up and asked the question: What am I waiting for for happiness? What am I waiting on to be content with things the way they are? Am I waiting till there's no more heat? Am I waiting till there are no more mosquitoes? Am I waiting till there's absolutely no discomfort in the body? Am I waiting till there's not a twitch of movement of mind states in the mind?

I thought, if I'm waiting for that, I'm basically waiting for Arahantship, and that's a long way away. I thought, would it be possible to be content in this moment with some unpleasant conditions still here? And I saw that was absolutely possible and that was absolutely what needed to happen. That became the theme for my practice direction for a while—finding contentment just with what was, even though it wasn't perfect, finding contentment before I found perfection.

And then I realized that some of my assumptions and attitudes about practice from the healing phase of my work didn't fit so well anymore, and that I was going to have to make some shifts in the way that I understood things. I started to realize that there are three curious things about healing as a primary motivation in practice.

The first thing is that it's incomplete. It's not a motivation that can carry us all the way, because the

healing can end but we may not be at the end of the path—the end of the Buddhist path at any rate. So it's not a motivation that takes us all the way in spiritual life.

The second thing that was interesting is: how do you know when the healing work is over? Is it when the mind state doesn't appear anymore? I don't think that's realistic. How do you know when to quit the healing work? I'm not just asking this as a rhetorical question. I'm really pointing here to when does a motivation have to fall away? When does a motivation no longer concern us, grab us, interest us, cause us to do anything in practice? Because as I mentioned before, involved with healing is a kind of basic non-acceptance of what is.

"The great way is not difficult for those who have no preferences," Suzuki Roshi said this at the start of one dharma talk. "The difficulties you're experiencing now..." And then he just stopped. He just gave a long pause. The audience was hanging on the edge of their seats—oh, he's going to tell us how to release them or whatever. And then he finished the sentence: "The difficulties you're experiencing now will be with you for a long time."

Now, originally, if you weren't a practitioner, this could be kind of discouraging. But what he's pointing to is that unhooking of a desire to make things different—that really our practice doesn't depend on making these things go away. These difficult states of mind will be around for a while, but they don't have to block a deep sense of contentment and even a relative sense of freedom. So can we at some point—it's up to each person when that's appropriate—let go of the concern that we still have some afflictive emotions? They'll be around a while.

The third thing is that with healing as a motivation comes some kind of belief that we're broken, that something is fundamentally wrong with us. And I really question this. I really question if fundamentally we are broken. I think it may be possible for a human being to become broken through something like psychosis—I don't know, I don't know enough about that field to know one way or another—but that might be possible. But all of us are not in that situation, and I don't think that any of us are broken.

Broken would mean that something had gone wrong with the universe, something had gone wrong with life, as we're a part of life. And I think that, as Sylvia said the other night, the one thing that's not broken is the lawfulness of suffering. On the level that we all are at, the lawfulness of suffering and freedom all comes from causes and conditions that have brought us to this point in an entirely lawful way. Our suffering or lack of it is entirely due to previous causes and conditions.

I talked about arguing with other teachers. I gave a little bit of this talk a year ago and I made a statement in the dharma talk that we're not broken. Sylvia wasn't there for that talk and she came on the next night and made a statement in her dharma talk: "We're all broken." This caused a few mind movements, but at least we agreed that we were all either one way or the other.

So as we move out of this phase of healing and into a new phase, our motivation has to find a new focus.

And for me, it became the focus to be really free—to be ultimately free, finally free, the same kind of freedom that the Buddha had discovered. And in some ways it was like starting over again. It was having a new direction or a new aim. But in other ways it wasn't at all.

Because the interesting thing is our aim may change, and with that some of our views and our attitudes and our beliefs, but one thing that doesn't change is the practice. And I find this so interesting—that whether you're practicing for healing or whether you're practicing for full liberation, the instructions are the same. I think there's a profound truth in that.

I'm going to say it just briefly now and I may come back to it in a later talk. I don't want to spend a lot of time with it. I think the profound truth is that what is freeing us is our unconditioned nature, our Buddha nature that is alive and well in each one of us. Mindfulness practice is simply a way of activating that inner nature—mindfulness wisdom, if you want to think of it like that, this combination that they're always conjoined.

As we activate that nature, that's what does the work. That's what's really at the forefront. And all the healing work that goes on and all the unraveling, all the disentangling is just because this Buddha nature is stepping more and more into the foreground. And it just, in order to do that, it releases everything that's held along the way.

All the places that self has formed a knot through emotions, through views, through various kinds of clinging, all of those eventually get highlighted and released through the power of mindfulness and wisdom. So it happens on a psychological level, it happens on the level of views, it happens on the level of dependent origination and moments of craving. All those different kinds of clinging just get released in this one unitary movement to freedom.

But our attitude does shift with it. In the beginning of practice, when our interest was on disentangling particular emotions, we did have strong preferences. We really wanted this emotion and not that emotion. And when they came, we were really attached to them. This kind of agenda starts to really weaken. And we start to see it as kind of a curious habit of mind.

Somebody said to me at the start of this retreat, something I thought was really wise and really profound. They said, "You know, I don't care what happens in this retreat. I know that the result will be wholesome when I come out at the end of the retreat. So I don't care what happens along the way." This is kind of the pith statement of this intention toward freedom.

Sharon Salzberg put it in a way that kind of shocked me in one Dharma talk. She said, "It doesn't matter what's happening to you." That's a strong statement, isn't it? It doesn't matter what's happening to you. What matters is, can you meet it with mindfulness and acceptance? Because all the happenings, guess what? They come and go. None of them last. But the mindfulness being strengthened is the key to liberation. That's that Buddha nature coming front and center and sweeping its way to the foreground,

sweeping away the clingings.

It doesn't matter what's happening. Our practice is really just about different levels of holding getting exposed and then dissolved, exposed and then dissolved, and feeling the greater space that happens with each step in that series.

Upandita Sayadaw, a great Burmese teacher, put it even more directly. Someone came in and was complaining about being uncomfortable in the body as they were sitting and having difficult mental states. And he said, "What, you want different objects to note?" This is the same message. It doesn't really matter what's happening. What matters is can we really be present for it? And as we do, then we find that the mindfulness and wisdom together start to unfold themselves and start to take us on this really unitary movement to greater and greater freedom.

And the Buddha said that mindfulness is a path that goes in one direction only, to the ending of pain and suffering, to the ending of all distress, to liberation, to nibbana. If, when it's appropriate, we put our eye on that end, that goal, everything else will just follow from that—all the clarifying of the emotions, all the growth of the beautiful states of loving-kindness and wisdom and faith and devotion, contentment, happiness and joy, all will come out of aiming in that direction and letting our nature just keep moving us there.

And according to the Buddha, this is the proper aim for spiritual life. He said some people come to spiritual life because they'll acquire gain, honor, and renown in it. This is true. You can see this in spiritual life these days. There are a lot of bestsellers of spiritual books these days. You can get gain, honor, and renown from that. But he said this is like somebody who goes in search of the heartwood of a tree to build a great house or a great temple and comes away with just twigs and leaves and is satisfied with that.

He said you can also develop virtue along the spiritual path. Some people become satisfied just with developing virtue and becoming a kind person. He said that's like somebody looking for heartwood who stops at the outer bark of the tree. But if you're not satisfied there, you continue and you develop concentration, this great sense of harmony and peace and ease of relaxing into one's own nature. He said you can get satisfied and stop there. That's like somebody who peels away the outer bark and takes the inner bark, still searching for heartwood.

He said, but someone can go further. Not satisfied with concentration, they develop knowledge and vision, insight, true insight into the way things are. He said, this is like getting to the sapwood. But if they stop there and they haven't taken the last step, they haven't completed the path.

Someone who is still not satisfied but continues discovers this state of true liberation—a kind of liberation that can't be changed, can't be taken away, can't ever fall into suffering anymore. The Buddha said that is the one who has found the heartwood.

"So this holy life, friends, does not have gain, honor, and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue

for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit, or knowledge and vision for its benefit. But it is this unshakable deliverance of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heartwood and its end."

This is the invitation before us—not to settle for the outer manifestations of spiritual life, however beautiful they may be, but to continue deepening until we reach that which cannot be shaken, that which is truly free. The heartwood of liberation awaits those who are willing to go all the way.

Let's just sit for a minute together in the silence that holds all of this.

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