Working with Difficult Mind States: The Third Foundation of Mindfulness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:19

We're coming to the close of the third day of the retreat now, and the feeling in the interview groups today was definitely more one of people settling and arriving, starting to find their rhythm with the retreat. But of course things are never totally easy on retreat, nor are they easy in life. One of the main pointings of the Buddha is to that difficulty.

This is an article from a recent New Yorker magazine that confirms some of that: "According to a study just released by scientists at Duke University, life is too hard. Years of tests, experiments, and complex computer simulations now provide solid statistical evidence in support of old folk sayings that described life as 'a veil of sorrows,' 'a woeful trial,' and 'a kick in the teeth.' Authors of the 1,200-page study were hesitant to single out any particular factors responsible for making life tough. A surprise, they say, is that they found so many. Before the study was undertaken, researchers had assumed by positive logic that life could not be that bad. As the data accumulated, however, they provided incontrovertible proof that life is actually worse than most living things can stand. Human endurance equals just a tiny fraction of what it should be, given everything it must put up with. In a personal note in the afterward, researchers stated that, statistically speaking, life is 'just too much.' And as yet, they have no plausible theory how anyone gets through it at all."

So at least you're getting through it. You can be happy for that. You're probably in the top one percent of people. An experience like this really does bring the difficulties of living to light and may make us reflect on the difficulties in our outer life. But particularly in retreat, for me, it gets really simple. There are basically three things that are difficult: bodily discomfort; all the ways that the mind doesn't do what I want it to do in terms of meditation—doesn't stay with the object, and I get frustrated when it goes away; and third, the ways that we find pain in the mind itself—painful emotions and states of mind.

That's really what I'd like to talk about tonight: how do we work with the difficulties that come into the mind in terms of our emotions and moods, a major source of pain and difficulty on retreat and in daily life.

When I started practice, I was very keen on the idea of enlightenment. I thought that what enlightenment was going to do was get rid of all these ways in which my mind caused me trouble—the loneliness, the insecurity, the fear, the sadness and so on. I thought that some meditation moment would come along and just pluck them all out. And then afterwards it would be really easy.

I have a different view of enlightenment now. I don't think it works quite that way. Now my understanding is that in order to become enlightened, we have to solve the problem of these states of mind before we can become enlightened. So I think of this as working to understand and resolve these troublesome qualities of mind independent of enlightenment. This is actually doable. The enlightenment thing where they all get plucked up and ended—I'm not so sure about the nearness of that, for myself at least. But I do know that it's really possible to work directly in relating to these difficult states of mind and find a great deal of freedom in relation to them.

I think of this as the process of becoming enlightened before enlightenment. Because if we can learn to work with every state of mind that comes into our experience and not feel bound up in suffering in relation to it, then we have essentially solved a great deal of the problem of living. We will have opened up so much space and freedom that life will be completely transformed. And this is possible for each one of us.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, splendid, spooky, frightening, joyful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing. There's a lot of encouragement to do this and meditation gives us the method."

In the context of retreat, if you carry on long enough, you will experience, as you have in life, a very, very big range of states of mind. I invite you to think about, over your whole adult life, the most sublime moments that you've known. Just cast your mind back and reflect on what some of those have been—in nature or in relationship, in love, through art. And then also, I'd invite you to reflect on the most difficult and painful states of mind that you've known—states of depression or despair, strong fear or rage, loneliness.

Through that reflection we get an idea of the range that is within this human mind, within each human mind. We have the capability to develop in very beautiful and sublime ways. The mind also has the capability of creating for us tremendous suffering and agony. Most of us have known quite a wide range of these experiences in our life.

What we find happens as we get older is that the mind develops a real fear of going into some of those corners. It seems to me that children don't have so much of that fear when they come into the world, that they're born with a curiosity and a basic trust in life, and whatever happens in the emotional realm, they have the ability to go into and feel without holding back. As we get older, we hold back more and more. But it's possible through this exploration to go into, as Pema Chödrön says, every nook and cranny and feel what's there, open ourselves to it again. When we can do that, we gain a lot of confidence.

Because until we have explored the mind in that way, we get afraid of some parts of it and seal ourselves off from a certain range of our experience. In doing that, we constrict the mind and contain it too much. So we gain a lot of confidence when we can open and relate to any experience that comes along on the

level of our mind.

As we expand our capabilities, the mind starts to have fewer and fewer edges, less and less boundary. We can move into more and more of those areas without worry, without holding back. And as one of my teachers said, in the mind of the Buddha, there are no more edges. There is nowhere the mind of the Buddha can't go and find a sense of openness and ease.

In Buddhist psychology, the Abhidhamma core text lists fifty-two states of mind that it says are core factors within us that, when combined in different ways, make up the whole range of our human experience. Some of these are very beautiful states—love and compassion, wisdom, generosity, renunciation, peace, equanimity, mindfulness. Some of them are difficult and painful states—anger and hatred, despair, anxiety, grief, confusion, sorrow. Some are neutral qualities, not particularly wholesome or unwholesome.

As we open up to explore these states, our attitude needs to be one not of trying to get rid of them, because that may not happen for a very long time. And I think that it can't happen as long as we are still living in fear of them and want to hold them away. But what we can do is become more and more comfortable with the presence of these qualities.

This is again from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is at times and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

So tonight, I want to look at some of this range of states of mind to show how we get trapped in suffering and then how we can find freedom in relation to them.

In the classical Buddhist teachings, this is called the third foundation of mindfulness. The range of the third foundation, the area of it, is called citta. This is a Pali word that is sometimes translated as heart, sometimes translated as mind. A good translation for citta is psyche, because it includes both emotional qualities and thought processes, cognitive qualities.

Just a word on the vocabulary that I'll use. I'll often use the words emotions, moods, and states of mind. All of these are included in citta, this area of meditation which Rodney introduced us to this morning in the instructions.

Emotions are things we feel fairly strongly—joy and happiness, fear, anxiety. I use moods to cover more or less the same range as emotions, but sometimes moods are a little more subtle, not as strongly felt, maybe not as evident, maybe a little more pervasive. We might say that I had a mood of nostalgia looking at some old photos, something like that—not quite as punchy, but still present.

And then states of mind includes emotions, includes moods, but it also refers to the refined meditative states that develop as we practice—qualities like mindfulness, peace, concentration, equanimity, mental energy. These are included in the overall category of states of mind as well. We wouldn't really call these qualities emotions, but we can learn to notice when they're present or when they're absent.

Some of these emotions and states of mind are wholesome and positive. Some are negative and difficult and painful. I don't want to talk too much about the positive ones for now—we'll talk more as we go through the retreat. But just to say a couple of things.

One is what I'm sure you know: not to cling to the positive states of mind. They're attractive, they're pleasant. The tendency is to make them want to last, but when we cling to them, we kill them. There's a beautiful poem from William Blake:

"He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy,
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise."

So if we grasp these states, the very grasping kills the joy or the beauty of them.

But the other important thing to say about positive states of mind is that we often tend to take them for granted and not notice them or really appreciate them. I noticed in myself when I was meditating—if a state of contentment or happiness came along in my early years, I'd go, "Ah, that's what it's supposed to be like." And I didn't stop and reflect, "That's a really positive state." I could see that underneath that, there was this expectation: I should be feeling happy, I should be feeling content. Therefore, when that happened, I didn't make anything of it because it matched my expectation. This expectation is the ego's project.

The ego creates this expectation that we should always feel good, that happiness is our natural birthright. But this isn't seeing things as they truly are. Our mindfulness practice invites us to perceive what's actually present—not what we expect to be there, but simply what is.

When we carry expectations, we introduce bias into our awareness. We become partial, wanting experience to unfold in a particular way. But the Buddha's way of seeing is free from such bias. We could say the bias is zero, or emptiness itself.

With this unbiased awareness, when a pleasant state arises, we can recognize it clearly as pleasant. We appreciate it fully, understanding it as wholesome—a fruit of our practice, a result of the virtue and goodness we've cultivated. We take time to feel genuine gratitude for its presence. And when it naturally passes, we can open ourselves completely to whatever arises next.

This practice of noticing and appreciating wholesome states actually becomes part of the conditions for

their return. As we acknowledge and value these positive mind states, they tend to arise more frequently and regularly in our experience.

When working with more challenging emotions—those painful states of mind that create difficulty—two elements are essential.

First, we need a fundamental attitude shift. We must move away from resistance, from the belief that difficult emotions shouldn't be happening, from judging them as wrong and trying to push them away. Instead, we cultivate a quality of allowing. As Rodney mentioned in his morning instructions: relax, observe, and allow.

Second, we need deeper understanding. When we begin to see how these mind states are actually constructed—the mechanisms through which they arise and operate—we're no longer so easily overwhelmed by them. What we truly understand, we can allow without being so deeply troubled. Through careful observation of how emotions are manufactured, sustained, and eventually released, we begin to comprehend the workings of our own minds. And to the degree we understand this process, we're no longer enslaved by it.

The first step in learning from these potentially liberating states of mind is knowing what's present when it's present. We must recognize what emotions are arising as they arise. This isn't always straightforward. As someone asked this morning, it's not always easy to identify what we're feeling with certainty.

Sometimes thoughts provide clues, sometimes bodily sensations point the way. You might find yourself wondering tentatively, "Sadness?" with a question mark, allowing your identification to remain provisional. This uncertainty is perfectly acceptable. This entire exploration will gradually teach you to recognize your emotions as they occur, leading to increasingly clear perception through sustained practice.

This reminds me of an experience from my own retreat here. I was participating in a three-month course, about two weeks in, feeling fairly settled and mindful. When the bell rang ending a sitting period, I rose to begin walking meditation. For those two weeks, I had been walking in the same location every period—down by the parking lot on that grassy area below. I had actually begun wearing a path in the grass from my consistent practice there.

I stepped out the back door, maintaining careful awareness of lifting, moving, and placing with each step. I felt completely present, thoroughly mindful. But when I looked down at my familiar walking path, I discovered someone else occupying it.

I continued lifting, moving, placing, but thoughts began arising: "What are they doing there? Don't they realize that's my walking path?" Lifting, moving, placing. "I've been walking here every hour for two weeks. They must know it's mine." Lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them at breakfast this morning? Are they playing mind games with me?" Lifting, moving, placing. "They're not very developed. If

they were more aware, they would have noticed this was my walking space." Lifting, moving, placing.

I walked down near that person, maintaining my mindful steps, and found another spot on the grass that proved equally suitable for walking meditation. The rest of the period proceeded without difficulty.

About thirty minutes into the walking period, a thought suddenly arose: "Oh, I'm angry." I had been continuing the blaming story all along, and it took me half an hour of being completely immersed in it to recognize what was actually happening. I had been so identified with the anger while thinking I was being mindful that I couldn't see the main thing that was occurring.

This is how some of these hindering forces work. They sneak up on us like low-flying aircraft, zooming in below our radar. They take root because we get caught in the story. As long as I was telling myself I was right and this person was wrong, and believing it completely, I couldn't really relate to or even see the mental state itself.

This brings to mind Rodney's statement: "Do I want to be righteous or do I want to be free?" Well, at that point, I wanted to be righteous. But as soon as I could name it as anger, I could start to relate to it. I brought it into the field of mindfulness.

This is a crucial step in working with difficult emotions. These emotions try to turn our attention elsewhere—in this case, onto the object of my upset, the person I was angry with. As long as I follow that pointer, I'm lost. But if I can turn the pointer back around to myself and ask, "What am I feeling?" and look directly at the anger, then it becomes workable.

The first step in working with these hindering forces in the mind is to know them for what they are. This means, if you can, naming them. When we don't name them, we're in their grip, and they become a filter through which we look at the whole world. Everything takes on that color.

Once we've named the emotion, the next step is to feel it directly. Our understanding comes into play when we let our awareness connect directly with the experience of that emotion—feeling it in the mind, feeling it in the body.

Tonight I want to talk particularly about five states of mind that I see arising again and again in my life and in the lives of meditators, both in retreat and out of retreat: desire, aversion or anger, self-judgment, sadness, and fear. These are very common states in our lives and retreats. They're oppressive when we don't know how to work with them. They're burdensome and the source of much human suffering.

With each of these states, I want to suggest that there are three areas we need to examine to get a complete view of these emotions.

The first is what I would call the mind factor or the mood—the mental state itself. Each emotion has a particular coloring in the mind, a basic flavor that distinguishes it. Fear feels different from happiness; sadness feels different from compassion. There's a mental tone, a color, a mood in the mind that is the

primary characteristic of its existence.

The second aspect is the bodily experience. Whenever one of these emotions is strong, it will also be felt in the body. Look and see where in the body it's expressing itself. If it's fear, there might be a strong contraction in the abdomen. If it's happiness, there might be a light, bubbly energy in the chest rising up.

The third element is the thought or thoughts that accompany the emotion. All difficult mind states will have some kind of thought going along with them. Sometimes the thought triggers the mind state, but then the mind state will also trigger more thoughts. With difficult mind states, there will be some underlying belief—what I would call a storyline. It's usually an unconscious assumption that sustains the emotion. If you take away the storyline, the emotion collapses.

Once you examine the mental quality or color in the mind, the experience in the body, and the thought—especially the storyline—then you have the whole package of that emotion. When we start to understand how these influence each other, how the thoughts support the emotion, we start not to be so deceived by them. We begin to understand their impact on us, and it's really the understanding that frees us. We simply need to observe them and learn from them, and that understanding is transformative. They don't have to be gotten rid of.

As a brief side note, I don't believe that wholesome states of mind need a storyline for their existence. Metta, compassion, joy, love, equanimity can be spontaneous. I don't think they need the influence of thought. By contrast, the negative states, I believe, do.

Let's examine some of these in more detail. Desire is the first I mentioned—a really common experience in life and in retreat. It's reaching out for some pleasant experience in the future, this wanting something pleasant to happen.

On retreat, we often feel desire as a longing for people we're missing, places we'd like to be, certain foods or drinks or activities that aren't available to us here. As you begin to observe how it feels when desire arises, you'll notice it has a distinctly bittersweet quality. On one hand, the mind conjures images of something pleasant—we think about a friend or partner or a place we've enjoyed being, and this has a positive, uplifting tone to it. It's pleasurable.

But simultaneously, there's a frustrating quality, a gap, because we don't have it now. The desire force essentially says, "I want that now." And there's always a gap because what we desire is precisely what's not here. Notice this: we never want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? Not unless it gets injured. So desire always carries this bittersweet lack of fulfillment.

You may notice that when there's a little boredom or physical discomfort in meditation, the mind often turns to a pleasant fantasy to try to fill that space, as though we want to suck on something pleasurable in that moment. But that pleasurableness is never truly satisfying because of the gap of not having it.

Carol and I were teaching a retreat in Italy a few years ago, which was a wonderful experience. The Italians seemed to be very much as we imagine them—warm, talkative. Silence wasn't held in quite the same way it is here. We had to modify certain aspects of the culture for our retreat. It was held at a Catholic convent that was simply rented for the retreat. We had to put in a special request to the kitchen not to place carafes of wine on the lunch tables, because that's what they would normally have done. Right outside the dining room, there was a Nespresso machine, and after meals people were feeding it coins.

I found the Italian yogis to be very forthcoming about their emotions—quite in touch with how they felt and not shy about sharing this with us. A couple of days into the retreat, I had an interview with a young man, a very nice fellow who was having trouble settling into the retreat. When I asked what was happening, he explained that this was August, their holiday month. A group of his friends were going to the Caribbean and had invited him to join them on vacation. So he'd had a choice: he could go to the Caribbean on vacation with warm waters and golden sandy beaches, or he could come to the meditation retreat.

When I asked why he came here, he said, "Because all the tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

I could immediately see what was happening. The storyline here was that if he'd been in the Caribbean, he would be happy. If he had what he wanted, he would be happy. But because he didn't have it, he couldn't be.

This is generally how the storyline with desire works: there's an unconscious belief that "if I had that, I would be happy now." Examine whether this is true in your experience. There's this belief that the thing we want will make us happy in this moment, and not having it, we lack that happiness.

The very force of desire brings with it a sense of frustration. It blinds us to looking at the present moment, which is usually fine in and of itself. So I asked him, "What if you looked at the present moment without comparing it to Caribbean beaches? Maybe it would be okay."

He went off to meditate, and when he returned a couple of days later, he'd gotten right into the retreat. When we can let go of the wanting and see the present moment for what it is, often it's not problematic. But the very force of desire makes it seem unfulfilling or troublesome.

As we begin to settle into the retreat, the desire force often shifts into the area of the retreat itself. You may find yourself no longer thinking so much of home, but thinking about your last retreat or a pleasant sitting from earlier in this retreat. The force of desire then becomes "I want to feel that pleasant sitting again, that pleasant state of mind, that stillness, that concentration."

This can be just as much a barrier as desire for something pleasurable in the senses, because it can block our openness to this moment.

As I began to pay closer attention, I noticed something curious happening in my body. When desire was

present, there was a distinct quality of leaning forward—a subtle but persistent tension that indicated I was trying to manufacture a particular meditation experience. I was attempting to make stillness happen, to force concentration, to conjure mindfulness through sheer effort.

I started tuning into this slight forward-leaning tension as a reliable indicator that desire was present, even when I couldn't immediately identify what I was wanting. This physical signature became a valuable teacher. If you notice this quality of leaning forward in your own practice, it might be worth investigating. Check whether you're trying to recreate some particular experience from an earlier sit or previous retreat.

The release from this pattern lies in the willingness to settle back into what's actually here. Just this moment, exactly as it is.

A friend of mine belongs to what Buddhist psychology calls the "greed type"—a personality configuration characterized by frequent mind moments of wanting and desire. He's developed a simple but powerful inquiry for working with these states. When desires arise, he asks himself: "Is there anything truly lacking in the present moment?"

Often, when we honestly investigate, we discover there isn't. It's simply the force of desire itself that creates the sense of insufficiency.

On the other side of this spectrum lies aversion—the force of not liking or pushing away our experience. This is our general term for negativity, but it manifests in countless forms: ill will, anger, hatred, impatience, frustration, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, depression, despair, resistance, blame, resentment, and many others. Sound familiar? In retreat, most people encounter quite a range of these mind states.

When aversion occupies the mind, notice how it feels. There's a distinct resistive quality, and the body often contracts strongly. This physical tightening is the signature of resistance—not wanting what's happening, so we armor ourselves against it. The storyline of aversion is fundamentally: "I can't be happy because this is happening." Some particular unpleasant experience is present, therefore happiness is impossible. As this narrative takes hold and we believe it, a negative tone pervades the mind, coloring our entire experience.

The Buddha once walked through a forest with some monks until they came to a clearing. As they stood there, a jackal ran into the open space, paused briefly, then darted into the hollow of a fallen tree trunk where it lay down. Moments later, it emerged and rested in the shade, only to jump up again and disappear back into the forest.

"Monks," the Buddha said, "did you see that jackal? Standing in the clearing, it wasn't content. Lying in the tree hollow, it wasn't content. Resting in the shade, it wasn't content. It blamed its suffering on standing, on lying, on walking. It blamed its suffering on the clearing, on the tree hollow, on the underbrush. But the problem wasn't with any of these places or postures. That jackal had mange."

This illustrates the nature of aversion perfectly. It takes over the mind, making everything unsatisfactory. Nothing is quite good enough. The inquiry that serves aversive types well is: "Is there anything truly wrong with the present moment?"

One of aversion's primary manifestations is anger, as I discovered during my walking meditation. Anger's characteristic storyline runs: "You're wrong and I'm right." This sense of righteousness is integral to anger's structure. Each time we replay those blaming thoughts, the anger intensifies—we're adding fuel to the fire. The physical sensation of anger is typically contracted and burning. When you're truly enraged, you understand why red symbolizes anger; the body literally feels ablaze.

Now, it's possible that our angry thoughts about wrongdoing contain some validity. Perhaps someone did act unskillfully or unethically. But to understand anger completely, we must examine the suffering we carry when we harbor it.

The Dalai Lama tells a story about receiving a visit from a monk he had known in Tibet before fleeing the Chinese occupation in 1959.

This monk had stayed behind and had been imprisoned for a number of years and had finally gotten out of prison and escaped to India. The Dalai Lama received him and asked about his time there. The monk said, "Well, I felt that I had been in danger very often."

The Dalai Lama said, "Well, I can understand that. Do you mean you were in danger of being tortured?"

The monk said, "Oh, well, yes, I was tortured. But what I really mean is I was in danger of becoming angry. That would have been far more serious."

I find the Tibetan monks and nuns incredibly inspiring in their ability to maintain that balance of mind in the midst of really painful situations. The Dalai Lama said afterwards that before, when he lived in Tibet, he had thought this monk was rather ordinary. But now he had to reevaluate his opinion of him because he saw he was quite an advanced practitioner.

As we get angry, the important place to tune in again is what does it feel like in our mind and body, and to feel that quality of suffering that's in anger. I found that I was really only able to let go of anger by tuning into the suffering that it was bringing me. That's what encouraged me to let go of it again and again, and I've gotten better at it as I've practiced more with it.

It's said in the tradition that becoming angry is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. It doesn't happen. It's also compared to picking up a hot coal to throw at somebody, but we get burned first.

When anger gets directed toward ourselves, it turns into self-judgment. This often comes up on retreat as we start with comparing mind to compare ourselves to others who are here. If you ever open your eyes in the middle of a meditation period, it looks like everybody else is a Buddha. The hall looks so still, and you

just think, "Wow, they're having such good meditations. I wish my meditation was like that. I must be the only one here whose mind is all over the place." And of course, it's not true. If somebody looked at you, they'd probably think you were a Buddha. But we often tend to bring up these comparing thoughts when we're in the middle of retreat.

Then the comparing thoughts get a little off-center, a little irrational. I was talking with a student who is a therapist. She was talking about this comparing mind. One of her clients had left her and decided to terminate the therapy sessions. Her first thought was, "I understand that I wasn't the right fit for that person." That was a rational thought and completely acceptable for her. But then the next thought was, "I don't have enough compassion for him." Actually, "I'm not a very warm person," is what it turned into. And then it turned into, "I've actually never loved anyone and no one's ever loved me." By that time, the thought was this huge burden.

Start to notice when these judging or comparing thoughts come that there may be a grain of rational truth in them, but then we tend to blow them up in a way that they're not true anymore. It's the falsehood and the slight belief in the falsehood that really weighs on us.

When we're judging ourselves, the storyline in that is something like, "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not lovable. I'm not good enough to be loved or to deserve to be loved." It's some underlying fear like that. When we believe in that, we kind of crumple in on ourselves. We don't feel we can really come out because we feel what's inside is not very worthy.

This feeling of worthlessness seems to be really widespread in our culture. It seems like an epidemic in the West these days. The Dalai Lama was meeting with a group of Western Buddhist teachers a few years ago in Dharamsala. There were about twenty teachers meeting with His Holiness over a few days. They were asking for his advice on how to work with this problem, and he said, "I don't understand what you mean." The translator went back and forth a number of times and the Dalai Lama couldn't get what this problem was even about, because he said, in Tibet, they don't have this problem.

Finally he went around to each of those twenty Buddhist teachers and he said, "Have you felt this? Do you understand this? Have you felt this?" Every one of them said yes, they had. And yet, from his knowledge, it was not there in Tibetan culture at all. So this is something as Westerners we often have to work with, and it can become stronger.

It can become self-hatred or self-loathing.

Shortly after I ordained in Thailand, many years ago now, I was traveling to practice at a forest center in the countryside near Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. My preceptor, the elder monk who had ordained me, asked me to stop at one of his branch monasteries in the town of Chiang Mai. "It'll be interesting for you to stay there," he said. "It'll break your journey, and you can get to know this other Western monk who's there."

So I stopped there for a few nights and spent time with this Western monk who'd been in robes for about twelve or thirteen years at that point. I came to like him tremendously. He was a big fellow with a big laugh and what I thought was a very big heart—extraordinarily warm-hearted.

The first day I was there, we went out on alms round together, as monks do each morning. He had the biggest begging bowl I've ever seen, with a stomach girth to match it. His bowl was literally probably bigger than this bell. He walked ahead because he was senior, I walked behind him, and then two novice monks followed us. I wondered why the novice monks were coming, since they don't usually participate in alms round, but I kept quiet and followed along.

We walked down the street into a neighborhood where he was very well known. He was beloved in the community because he was such a warm person who received many visitors, counseling people on their practice, their lives, their children. People genuinely loved him in the community.

Lay people lined up on the street as we approached to offer him food. Because I was there, I received food as well. We filled up his bowl fairly quickly, filled up mine, and I thought we'd simply walk back to the monastery. But he slipped down an alley, and the two novice monks came forward, opening their robes to reveal large plastic bags hanging from their shoulders. We took the little plastic bags of food—which is how people offer it—out of our bowls and filled up the novices' plastic bags. They folded up their robes, our bowls were empty, and we hit the streets again.

We filled up again, then filled up the novices again, collected more, and finally took everything back to the monastery. We fed ourselves, we fed other monks, we fed numerous novices and nuns, and finally we fed the temple dogs—all basically from the love and appreciation those people had for this Western monk. He was so well-liked in the community.

I thought to myself, "Wow, he must have had a very fortunate upbringing and pleasant experiences. He's such a warm person."

As we were spending time together and talking, he said to me, "You know, I had to work a lot with this problem of self-hatred. It took me the first nine years in robes to work through my self-hatred."

I was amazed because he radiated so much metta, so much loving-kindness and warmth. But it hadn't been easy for him.

Another difficult state to work with is sadness. I often encounter this in the silence and solitude of retreats. Sometimes we hold back from opening to that sadness or touching it. There's often an underlying fear: "If I open to it, it will take me over and never go away. I could drown in that sadness and never surface again."

The storyline or unconscious belief with sadness is something like: "I can't be happy because I've lost something—a relationship, a part of my life, a way I used to feel, some situation. I can't be happy because

of that loss." So we hold back from being able to feel it.

But as long as we keep the sadness at a distance, it's perpetuated. The way that any of these states can be released as chronic states of mind is for us to open to them, so they can pass through.

The reason it's safe to open to all of these states is that they are impermanent, like every other conditioned phenomenon. Everything that arises is also of the nature to pass away—one of the central teachings of the Buddha. Emotions are also impermanent; they're just waiting to manifest.

Much of what it feels like to me is that these feelings we've held back and haven't opened to—all they want to do is come onto center stage, tell their story or sing their song or dance their dance, have us really hear them, and then they'll exit stage left. But as long as we can't give them that space and truly listen to their story, they keep expressing their frustration. It's like a child who has a story to tell, and we won't give them the space to be heard. Then they won't stop talking.

The last of the mind states I wanted to touch on is fear. This can be a powerful one and was for me the strongest hindrance I had to work with in the early years of my meditation practice. But it was therefore also one of the greatest sources of learning for me.

It was just part of my conditioning when I came to practice. There was a certain layer of fear in my mind that I had to work through, so sometimes it would arise quite strongly during retreat. This isn't the experience for everyone—I simply had a particular conditioning toward fear that not everyone shares.

At times, I would be completely gripped by this fear for extended periods. Though I understood the instructions to go into it and feel it fully, and I would follow this guidance again and again, the transformation came slowly. Over years of touching into it, the fear gradually began to diminish, becoming smaller and smaller.

One of the particular difficulties with fear is that when it arises, we're usually more afraid of the fear itself. We feel afraid when it comes, and then the very presence of that fear frightens us even more, creating an escalating cycle. What we need to cultivate is the willingness to simply open and feel it as it is.

For me, the way in was through bodily sensations. When fear arose, I would feel the contraction in my stomach, the fluttery sensations in my chest, perhaps some perspiration under my arms. I would ask myself: Are these sensations bearable? Can I stand this aspect of fear's manifestation? The answer was always that they were indeed bearable—I could tolerate these physical expressions.

Then I would examine the mental quality of fear itself—that particular tone of wanting to move away from experience. Is this bearable too? And I would find that yes, I could bear that as well.

The storyline that accompanies fear is quite simple: this moment is bearable, but the next moment won't be. It's a projection into the future that tends to capture us. Again, when we return to the present moment, we can undercut that narrative completely.

After making this effort to open to fear repeatedly—many, many times over an extended period—it eventually became much easier for me to work with. At a certain point in my practice, I reached such a level of equanimity with fear that I honestly didn't care whether it arose or not. If fear came, that was fine. If it remained, that was also fine. If it departed, that too was perfectly acceptable.

When I reached that level of equanimity with fear, I felt I had solved its fundamental challenge. This doesn't mean fear hasn't arisen again since then or that it doesn't make me uncomfortable when it does. But I now know absolutely how to work with it, how to open to it—at least within the range of experiences I've encountered so far. There could certainly be something even more intense that might test my equanimity, but I feel confident I understand the way to work.

The real key in understanding how to approach all these different states is to trust that they are workable. We have within us the capacity to understand them and to accept them exactly as they are. It's this trust, combined with the willingness to touch into them directly, that transforms our experience and truly gives us freedom from their grip.

Originally, I thought the way to transform these states would be to eliminate them entirely and replace them with awakened states. I believed that's what had to happen. But what I discovered is that I could wake up in the middle of those very states. Right in the midst of desire, sadness, or fear, I could bring forth an awakened quality of mind. I could bring mindfulness, interest, curiosity, and intimate awareness to whatever was arising. That's what began to transform the entire experience.

I'd like to offer you a simple acronym for approaching these difficult mind states in an awakened way. It was developed by a colleague of ours, and the acronym is RAIN—R-A-I-N—representing four essential steps.

The R stands for Recognition. The first step in relating skillfully with any of these states is to recognize what we're actually feeling. This is crucial because accurate perception of the emotion creates space around it in some important way. When we can clearly identify—oh, this is anger, or this is fear, or this is unhappiness—it unsticks the experience and creates some breathing room.

If you're uncertain about what you're experiencing, name it with a question mark. Make your best approximation. Over time, this recognition will become increasingly clear and effortless.

The A stands for acceptance. Some people prefer the word allowing. It essentially means not that you have to actively do something, but that you stop resisting. We drop our tendency to push the experience away and simply allow it to be as it is.

This is profoundly challenging. With states that are difficult to bear, this acceptance won't come the first time, or perhaps even the second or third. But if you move in that direction again and again, that acceptance will gradually emerge.

There's a way to discern whether you've truly accepted a state: ask yourself, "Would it be okay with me if this state lasted the rest of my life?" If the answer is no, then deeper acceptance is possible. With my fear, I eventually reached that place where I could genuinely answer yes to that question. That's when I felt my equanimity with the fear was adequately developed. Acceptance is truly a key turning point.

The I stands for interest or investigation. When we can become genuinely interested in a difficult experience, it completely shifts our relationship to it. Interest energizes us, gives us confidence, and expresses our willingness to learn. This curiosity opens our mind.

We begin to explore: When anger is present, where do I feel it in my body? What's that sensation like? Is it burning? Is it contraction? How far does it extend through my body? What kinds of thoughts arise when I'm angry? Do I feel blaming? If I'm blaming someone else for being wrong, how does that make me feel? This investigation opens the wisdom, the learning, the understanding of how these states actually function.

The final letter, N, stands for non-identification. This means removing the "I" or "my"—taking out the sense of self or ownership of the emotion. When we notice anger, we might typically say, "That's my anger," or "I'm really angry." Instead, we can simply observe: "Anger is present." Just note "anger." The "I" and "my" are extra additions that aren't needed and generally add layers of confusion and burden. Try experiencing these states without claiming them as "I" or "mine."

Carol has mentioned a beautiful phrase from Ajahn Sumedho: "Wanting is like this," or "Anger is like this." This simple phrase actually encapsulates all four points of the RAIN practice.

Consider the phrase "Anger is like this." The word "anger" represents recognition—naming the experience for what it is. The word "is" expresses allowing—this is what's true in this moment, what we need to open to and accept. "Like this" invites investigation: What is anger actually like? Let me feel it, see it, observe it. Notice that in this phrase—"Anger is like this"—there's no "I" or "my," so we also have non-identification.

Either approach can cultivate this awakened relationship to difficult states. This awakening begins to release and transform their hold on us. When we see these experiences in this way, we discover that we're transforming moments of suffering into moments of awakening. We bring forth the awakened qualities of mindfulness, energy, investigation, confidence, friendliness, allowing, acceptance.

Moment after moment, we learn to transform our suffering into awakening. In that transformation, we discover freedom. We find this freedom not by trying to eliminate these states—which frankly doesn't work ninety-eight percent of the time—but by coming into full awareness right in the midst of these difficulties.

So I want to close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition—The Four Blessings of Gampopa. Gampopa was a disciple of Milarepa, a great yogi in Tibet. These are expressed as a supplication or a prayer. You can think of this prayer as being offered to the universe, to the Dharma, to the teacher, to the Buddha, to

whoever you would like.

These are the four prayers or blessings of Gampopa:

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

Let's just sit for a moment together, please.

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

Thank you for listening.

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