What Are We Doing Here And Why?

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 53:03

I'd like to express my own welcome to you. It's always a shift for us coming into the three-month retreat. There's a lot of appreciation for those of you who have held this space, created this space for six weeks, and we feel like the new people, the new ones on the block. Then the shift happens when we begin to talk to you and put names to faces that are new, reconnect with old friends, and then speak to you in this way in the hall. I always enjoy getting over that little hurdle of feeling quite new here and then remembering what it's like to be here.

Thank you all for being here. I'm sure you're all very aware that you are part of something much greater than each individual one of you. As Joseph said last night, this course has been going on for thirty-three years. In the scheme of some things, that's not a long time, but in the scheme of our lifetimes, I think for most of us, it is. It really represents something—the space that you all create here during the three-month retreat.

I've sat here many times myself, but when I don't sit here, I always know the day that the three-month course begins. I'm sure some of you do this too and think, "Oh, they're just starting to sit at IMS." And then after a while I think, "Oh, they're still sitting at IMS." And then much, much later I go, "They're still sitting at IMS." And at some point I think, "Oh, they've just finished." And all those people are coming out, back into the other reality, from an experience that's life-transforming.

So you are holding that space this year for all those people out there who think of you practicing here. For me, it was always inspiring to think of this many people wanting to practice in this way. Often I knew people who were here, and just to reconnect every now and then in my own daily sitting or at different times of the day and know that this was going on—I always like to think of that. You are holding something here that's really precious and inspiring for all those people out there who have either been here or would like to be here. Just to appreciate that.

But even saying how precious this is, I know that retreats aren't easy, whether it's your first full day or your fortieth day here. It's not easy doing this practice. It's challenging. It's tiring. We're required to give up an enormous amount to come here and practice in this way. Most of us come here with some intention of gaining more happiness, and then we discover: this is suffering. This is difficult.

But I think what's happening here is that meditation is a bit like a vaccination or like homeopathy, where you're given a little bit of what ails you, and that tincture is what's actually going to create the freedom or the happiness. But you have to take that in. You have to work with that difficulty or that suffering, and you probably sense this already. There's plenty of chance here to work with suffering—suffering of the mind,

suffering of the body. That's what we do here.

But it's not about suffering. Of course, it's all about suffering. As the Buddha said again and again, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." So that's what we're really here for.

I said something like this at the beginning of another retreat about how difficult retreats are, and I got this note the next day from a yogi. He said, "I'm having a great time. Am I doing something wrong?" So just know, if you are having a great time, no, you're not doing anything wrong. It's great. But for a lot of us, there are challenges. Or we go through phases, of course, when it's difficult, when it's blissful. This is what happens on retreat.

For me personally, this retreat particularly marks a transition. I've been on sabbatical for about six months. I ended the dedicated practitioner program that Joseph mentioned last night in April of this year and took about six months off from doing a lot of teaching. I did teach one retreat in this time, but it's kind of interesting to take that much time away from doing this. I was doing my own practice, did some retreats, but I didn't do much teaching. I feel a bit rusty. It's like, what's going to come out when I sit up here and speak or when I speak to yogis? Luckily, it's a little bit like riding a bicycle—not completely, but I haven't forgotten. And it brings a kind of freshness.

to doing this, which I'm really appreciating. And it brings up this question for me, one I'm wanting to explore with you this evening because it's a really central question: What is it we're doing here? And more importantly, why?

If you haven't yet asked yourself this question, I think it's a good one to know some kind of answer to. It's not like there's one right answer, because it's always changing. But this is really central to our practice here. What is it that we're doing, and why?

My good friend Sylvia Boorstein, who I often teach with, really hones this point. She says about everything, "To what end? To what end am I doing this?" So to know for yourself a little bit about this, about why you're here—whether you've been here for many weeks or have just arrived—what is actually going on here?

Because there are obviously so many things we could do with our time, especially gathering this many people, all the energy it takes to put this kind of retreat on, and all the things you had to do to get here, to take care of in your life, to do this. When I was thinking about this, I thought, well, what are all the other things that people do that they deem really important? And what are we doing differently? People go to things like Star Trek conventions, or they reenact Civil War battles. Why do they do that?

But here we're doing something different. We're really looking to gain an understanding of nature—of our nature, of the nature of the mind and body—that will lead us to freedom, to greater happiness. So it's important to have some understanding, some sense of this big picture.

The simple thing we're doing here is practicing mindfulness. If someone was to ask you, "What are you doing here all these weeks?" you might say, "Well, I'm going to be practicing mindfulness." But even that—what does that actually mean? What is mindfulness?

As this term, this practice even, is becoming more mainstream—it's not quite mainstream yet, but it's getting there—you'll read that term in magazines about articles having nothing to do with meditation, people talking about being mindful of this and that. Now there's mindfulness-based therapy and mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindfulness-based yoga, and mindfulness being taught in businesses and corporations. It's really becoming much more commonplace. But in that, the understanding of what it is can get diluted, can get confused.

It used to be Zen that was the in thing, you know, ten, twenty years ago. That was the phrase being bandied around, especially "Zen and the art of." First it was archery, then *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and people started to understand something—some very slim understanding of Zen. Zen art and Zen furnishing, things like that. And whenever this kind of thing happens, whenever the mainstream takes over something, it gets distorted.

So I looked up just today what there is now for "Zen and the art of." There was *Zen and the Art of Mindful Investing*, *Zen and the Art of Triathlons*—there were many of them. I just picked a couple on the first page or so. The last one I saw was *Zen and the Art of Ferrets*. So I hope we don't go that way with mindfulness, but you never know. Mindfulness and ferrets.

Here we're keeping it pretty simple. We're doing mindfulness-based mindfulness. It's not any of those other things. We're just keeping it simple.

I'm going to use a very simple definition of mindfulness to begin with: it's just the act or the process of knowing what's happening here and now in your direct experience. What's important in that is the knowing quality—that there is actually cognizance going on. But then there's the question of what are we being mindful of?

Again, it's an open question. We could choose any number of things to be mindful of. We could be mindful of the weather, of nature, of trees, of the clouds, of the movement of the air, the breeze, the wind. From all of these things we could learn something if we paid that kind of attention to them, and the Buddha often talked about how we can learn from nature. There's a lot we can learn.

But when we focus outwardly in that way, it's not ultimately liberating for us. What we need to do, what's important to do, is to pay attention in here—specifically to the mind, to our mind—because that's where we suffer, and that's where we can also find freedom and happiness.

So it's mindfulness particularly of getting to know the mind, of discovering, learning about, exploring all of the different manifestations of our minds, all of the different experiences that come up for us.

So just being in the moment, that's all it is. That's not all it is. He was in the moment. He knew this moment, but he had no context for understanding what was happening to him, where he was, who he was, who other people were. And there was that terrifying sense of lostness, of groundlessness—true groundlessness that wasn't a refuge at all.

It's very similar to what Guy was saying when I mentioned this article: that's what a description of the Bardo is like. That's a Tibetan understanding that between this life and the next life, we enter this in-between state where we're a disembodied consciousness floating around. And in that, we're completely fragmented because we have no refuge. We have no context for our experience and no continuity of the body. So it's very disorienting.

The other important aspect of mindfulness is that it's in this moment—being in the present moment. Again, another thing that's been taken into popular culture and bandied around a little, where everything is about being in the present moment, being here and now, "be here now" kind of thing. But this can get trivialized. People can misunderstand what the power of that is, because you can see that babies or animals are in the present moment. And there is a power and a beauty to that capacity they have, but what's missing is that knowing quality I just spoke about—or more specifically, wisdom, understanding. Just being in the moment isn't enough.

I recently read, in a New Yorker that came out in the last few weeks, this amazing story by Dr. Oliver Sacks. Many of you, I'm sure, have read his writings. He's a neuroscientist who writes these fascinating stories about people that have had some disruption of their mental functioning through accident or disease or by birth. What's interesting about them is he's always so compassionate and sympathetic to these people, but really writes in a way that points to the fact that the way we understand the world is only because of a biological process that is working in a certain way. You shift some little facet of it, and that reality can change quite dramatically. We think, "Oh, this is what reality is like for everyone." But you can see through his writings that this is not the case, and that other people can have a very different reality.

This particular story was called "The Abyss," and it was about a man who, through an infection of the brain, lost all short-term memory and most of his long-term memory. This is what he wrote about this man: "He was left with a memory span of only seconds—the most devastating case of amnesia ever recorded. New events and experiences were effaced almost instantly."

As his wife Deborah wrote in her 2005 memoir, *Forever Today*: "His ability to perceive what he saw and heard was unimpaired, but he did not seem to be able to retain any impression of anything for more than a blink. Indeed, if he did blink, his eyelids parted to reveal a new scene. The view before the blink was utterly forgotten. Each blink, each glance away and back, brought him an entirely new view. I tried to imagine how it was for him—something akin to a film with bad continuity. The glass half empty, then full. The cigarette suddenly longer. The actor's hair now tousled, now smooth. But this was real life, a room

changing in ways that were physically impossible."

In addition to this inability to preserve new memories, Clive had retrograde amnesia—a deletion of virtually his entire past. So this is what he woke up to one day. She wrote about him: "It was as if every waking moment was the first waking moment. Clive was under the constant impression that he had just emerged from unconsciousness because he had no evidence in his own mind of ever being awake before."

And this is a quote from him: "I haven't heard anything, seen anything, touched anything, smelled anything. It's like being dead."

Desperate to hold on to something, to gain some purchase, Clive started to keep a journal—first on scraps of paper, then in a notebook. But his journal entries consisted essentially of the statements "I am awake" or "I am conscious," entered again and again every few minutes. He would write: "2:10 p.m.—this time properly awake. 2:14 p.m.—this time finally awake. 2:35 p.m.—this time completely awake," along with negations of these statements. "At 9:40 p.m., I awoke for the first time, despite my previous claims." This in turn was crossed out, followed by, "I was fully conscious at 10:35 p.m. and awake for the first time in many, many weeks." This in turn was cancelled out by the next entry.

This dreadful journal, almost void of any other content but these passionate assertions and denials, intending to affirm existence and continuity but forever contradicting them, was filled anew each day and soon mounted to hundreds of almost identical pages. It was a terrifying and poignant testament to Clive's mental state, his lostness in the years that followed his amnesia—a state that Deborah called "a never-ending agony."

It's amazing to think, when we speak so glibly of being in the moment, that this is what that can look like.

It's usually a state of a lot of fear. And all of us have probably had even moments of this. If you've ever woken up in a strange bed and you have that thought, "Where am I?"—and it's amazing how that sort of becomes "Who am I? What is the reality here?" For most of us, we come quickly back together. "Oh, here I am. I'm in Barre in the fall teaching the three-month course." That's the strange bed I'm in. But it's very disorienting when we have that lostness, that not being able to know where we are.

So being in the moment isn't enough. It has to be held in a context where we understand what's happening to us. What is it we need to bring to our mindfulness, to being in the moment, that fills this in, that allows that process to actually lead to some deepening of wisdom or understanding?

First, I think, of course, it's the big picture—where I started. Why are we doing this? What is this all about? Why practice at all? To really begin with our intention, our motivation for practice that brought us here to retreat. And if you've been here for a while, it's something you need to keep renewing. You can't go on the fumes of some aspiration you had three months ago. To come here, this intention is central to keeping the practice alive. Whatever that might be for you—and I don't want to go into this a lot this evening—but just to raise it as a question that you yourself need to keep alive, keep the flame alive of. What are you here

for?

The simple answers, the obvious answers people talk about: to be kinder to themselves or to others, to find more calm or peace, to reduce the suffering in life. And the big one of all: to find some degree of freedom, liberation, enlightenment, however you hold that. There's this great saying I've heard before: enlightenment is an accident, but retreats make us accident-prone.

But then the question is, why? Why does doing this make enlightenment more likely or possible? After a day of sitting and walking, you might look back and say, "What's that got to do with anything? Sure, I sat, I walked, I went here, I went there. How is that going to help me if I have this motivation, this aspiration to wake up, to be happier, more content, to find some degree of freedom in my life?"

Well, I think we all probably know and trust—you wouldn't be here if you didn't—this mysterious process of meditation. It isn't something that's immediately obvious. And certainly if someone from the outside were to come and look at what you did today, it would be a little mysterious, wouldn't it? "What are they doing all the time? Just sitting there, and then just walking to and fro—not even going anywhere. They're just walking to and fro. What's that got to do with anything?"

It is mysterious, but we have faith—or we grow in this faith—that something is being shifted here through this practice, through this paying of attention, on a subconscious level. It's not obvious to us, certainly not sitting by sitting, breath by breath, even day by day. You can't judge your practice or know what's really happening for you. But to have this faith or sense that it is shifting on this much deeper level.

A friend of ours, Stephen Batchelor, who's quite a famous Buddhist scholar, was just teaching a study retreat at Spirit Rock. He was actually teaching with his wife, Martine, and Sharda was also teaching with him. I didn't sit the retreat, but I went over a number of times to hear Stephen talk because he's always fascinating to hear and has usually got quite radical new ways of looking at both practice and the Buddha's teachings.

This was just a little aside that he made in answer to a question, but I thought it was quite interesting. He was responding to someone and he said—and he's very bright, one of the most learned people I know—"I would be reading a text and not able to understand head nor tail of it. Just, you know, it was like another language." He'd try reading it, and he'd read and read, and he'd have to just give up. Say, "I just don't understand this." Put it aside and not even think about it.

And he said what would often happen: he would come back years later, without having really thought about that text or had any particular relevant experiences related to it, pick it up again and read it. And he said it was like it was crystal clear. He couldn't understand how he didn't understand it before. But there was no way he could say, "Oh yes, because this shifted in me, or I understood this, or I read that and that helped." Some deeper process had been going on in his understanding that opened this text to him in a way it hadn't been opened before.

And this is a bit like what happens in meditation. It's much more mysterious than anything you can put your finger on, especially if you try to look at it in a small way from day to day. It's like the experience many of us have where you're hearing a Dharma talk or reading something, and you've heard it so many times before, and on the hundredth time you go, "Oh, *that's* what they mean when they say that." That recognition. Or often what also happens is someone will come and say, "You said this last night. Why didn't you tell us that before? That was so helpful." Well, I think we had said it before, but sometimes we're just not ready to hear it.

So we trust this process where something is deepening, even if what we're doing might not seem in and of itself that relevant to this bigger picture of waking up.

What happens on retreat is that our priorities get shifted. Whether we're aware of it or not, sometimes it is fairly conscious, but often it's just like someone changing the temperature of the water that we're sitting in—so slow we don't even notice. We go from always becoming, that sense of doing, to just being present, to just being. We go from complication to simplicity. Things get very simple here. What are you going to be doing tomorrow? Sitting and walking. When is lunch? Twelve or twelve-thirty. It's very simple here. Life out there is so complicated. We take all that away and move toward more and more simplicity.

We go from having lots of desires to still having lots of desires, but learning to let them go because there aren't so many ways to fulfill them here. So we learn that there's actually greater happiness to be found in letting go rather than running around crazily trying to fulfill them. And we go from aversion to acceptance.

There are many shifts like this. You probably have your own you could name that just happen gradually as we practice—without, as I said with Stephen, this big aha moment. Sometimes there is, and we see this process clearly. But it's only when you step back that you see, "Oh, right, I really let go here" or "Something shifted around this." So we change on these very profound and deep levels through this process, just of paying attention, just of being present.

Through this paying attention, what we see—if we look with this knowing, this wisdom that I spoke of, which is not being the wisest person on the planet or anything, but just the clarity of being willing to look and see what's actually here, what's going on in our experience—we begin to see that we're held in this web of cause and effect. Things happen for a reason.

What is actually going on when we pay attention in this way is that our meditation becomes like a huge experiment we're doing with our minds and our bodies. If I do this, I see this happens. When I pay attention in this way, that happens. What we're seeing is this very central teaching of the Buddha called conditioned arising, or dependent origination—paṭicca-samuppāda—which is quite a complex teaching. But in its essence, it's just this: conditionality. When this is like this, that is like that. When this arises, that arises. When this ceases, that ceases. And all the different variations and permutations of that.

This is all we need to know, in essence, for our meditation practice. As I said, there's a complicated wheel of twelve links of dependent origination. But just to see this causal nature of our experience can invite all kinds of new learnings for us.

The Buddha considered this teaching on dependent arising revolutionary. It was unique. He discovered it. He saw this connected reality that we all live in and how our actions have effects, have causes. We have this moment's experience, and then there's an effect that comes out of that movement.

Again, this is a complicated teaching I won't go into. But we don't need to understand it in its entirety. And certainly we can't figure it out, because it's not completely linear. It's not always A causes B, this always follows that. There are just these relationships where this experience, this way of being, conditions the next moment. It influences, it affects this next moment.

And we start to see this patterning. Through that, we can begin to notice what leads to more happiness and what leads to suffering. This is what is central to the Buddha's teachings—what develops wholesome qualities in us and what allows us to abandon unwholesome qualities or activities or actions. This whole realm is central to what we're learning here when we begin to pay attention.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, who many of you may know, is an American man who's been an ordained bhikkhu monk for many years now. He has a monastery in San Diego and is a very prolific teacher and writer with lots of material available on the web—really good, practical writings. One of the central pieces of his teaching is all around this, and the words he likes to use are "skillful" and "unskillful." He says that what the Buddha was teaching are skills, life skills. Just like we can learn to play the piano or learn to be a good communicator or learn to be a carpenter, we can learn these life skills through this process of paying attention in this laboratory of our mind and body. We can begin to understand for ourselves what we need to do to increase freedom and happiness and decrease suffering and contraction through learning these skills—what's skillful and what's unskillful.

So this is the context within which we can begin to pay attention. We start to see that we're actually making choices all the time about what we pay attention to. I started talking about how it could be all sorts of things, but even within our internal experience we're making choices all the time. It's just that most of the time we're not aware we're making choices. We think we're on some preordained path. "I'm always like this," or "It's always like this for me here," or "I'm always this way in the morning," or "The two o'clock sit is always like this for me." We're actually making choices through what we're paying attention to in our perceptions, and that is what's conditioning our experience and therefore creating our worldview.

So again, mindfulness, by highlighting what we're actually paying attention to, can bring some wisdom into this. If we continually pay attention to what's difficult and challenging in our experience, what's likely to happen? We become grumpy, aversive, contracted. In saying this, it's not that we should deny difficulty. But when there's a whole range of experiences and all we keep going to is what's difficult or challenging, it's understandable that we're going to feel some sense of contraction or pain or dis-ease about what's

going on.

I always remember hearing about some yogi who said what meditation sometimes feels like is being on pain patrol—like, where's the next five-alarm fire that I need to go put out? And when one diminishes, I'm just on the lookout for the next one. When you're on pain patrol, all you see is pain because that's what you're looking for.

Consider the difference it makes if you start to focus on where the practice is going well. Or what's uplifting for the mind or heart. Or where can I find some ease or relaxation in this moment, even if there's difficulty or pain in the body? It's not to ignore or deny that reality, but just to recognize the power that our choices have, the power that our attention has.

This process of making choices is one of the things that can really get highlighted by paying attention. We often offer it as a whole meditation practice in itself, so we might talk about this as the days go by—just paying attention to intention and seeing what opens up for you out of that.

We pay attention in this moment because this is where we're actually living our lives—in this moment, not lost in the past. So much of our time is spent reminiscing, dwelling in regrets about all the past hurts and injustices and losses that we've all experienced. And again, not to say that we can't learn from the past. Often on retreat we can go through a sense of reviewing things that have happened, and there can be both real understanding and also letting go if that process can be worked through skillfully. But often that's not what's happening. We're really caught in something and just going around and around and around—stuck in these reminiscences, these longings, these regrets, this guilt or shame, however it might be manifesting for you.

There's a quote I want to read from a book I just finished called *Eat, Pray, Love*. If you've been out in the world at all, you can't avoid this book at the moment. Even if you don't want to read it, someone will thrust it in your hand and say, "Oh, you're a meditator. You have to read this book." That's what happened to me. I wasn't going to read it, but so many people were talking about it that I figured I had to. It's by Elizabeth Gilbert, and it's a story of three periods of her life. She takes a year where she spends a few months in Italy, and that's about eating and just the sensual pleasures. Then she goes to India to an ashram where she meditates, and that's the "pray" part—really awakening her spiritual life. Then she goes to Bali, where her intention is to find balance between these two.

I enjoyed it. It's very funny, especially the time in India. She has some very insightful and humorous ways of talking about her meditation experience that I'm sure we can all relate to.

The next morning in meditation, all my caustic old hateful thoughts came up again. I'm starting to think of them as irritating telemarketers, always calling at the most inopportune moments.

You know how it is. You come into the hall thinking, "I'm just going to have this great sit. I'm peaceful. Everything's fine. The body's comfortable." And then up they dial—you know, the repeat dial—until you

answer. And you always do. You always answer. That's when you need to just listen to the voice machine and say, "No, I'm not picking up that one." But we usually do.

What I'm alarmed to find in my meditation, she goes on to say, is that my mind is actually not that interesting a place after all. In actuality, I really only think about a few things, and I think about them constantly. I believe the official term is "brooding."

And we spend so much time doing that. Have you noticed? I remember on one retreat where I was so happy when my mind quieted down fairly quickly and just left behind the things of the world that I'd been dwelling on. How peaceful. But what I found quickly took its place were these ten things about the retreat. And all I would do is think about them. It didn't make a difference that it wasn't those things—it was these things. We just pick something up and go around and around. How many times do you have to think something to get whatever you're going to get from it? It's like wringing out a cloth, but we keep wringing and wringing. We brood over things.

So we get stuck in the past. But we can also brood about the future. We can project into the future with all of our hopes and fears. And when that gets exacerbated, it becomes longing and dread about what might happen next.

Hopes and fears doesn't sound too bad, but when you call it longing and dread—which is what it really is—can't you get a sense of what's happening there? It's this constant movement, wanting, not wanting, yes, no, yes, no. And it's debilitating. We get stuck in that place because it doesn't allow us—as we know, and I'm sure you've all heard this a million times—to be here now, where our life is actually being lived.

Part of this temptation to move into the future is the fantasy that I know I have, that many of you have, that we all have to some degree—the fantasy that we can control it in some way. That if we think about it enough, worry about it enough, move the pieces on the chessboard enough, it will turn out okay in the way that I want it to.

How many times have you had that idea and had it disproven? You want to venture into the thousands? And yet here we sit again, playing that out. "Oh, maybe this time. It's just because I didn't get it right before. Now I've learned from that past one. Now if I do it this way, or I'm a little different, or I'll try this strategy..." We have this complete fantasy, this delusion that I buy into again and again—that if I just get it right, that it's just because I haven't figured it out yet that I haven't been able to have everything turn out right in the future. So we keep believing this.

When we actually look at what's happening here, we can see all of what we call the kilesas, the defilements—greed, aversion, and delusion, these torments of mind. They're all at play in getting caught in future imaginings. There's the desire for it to be a certain way. There's the fear, the aversion, that it won't. And then obviously there's the delusion that we can actually control it in some way. It's just operating.

For me, it's helpful to unpack it a little. What's actually going on when I'm lost in these fantasies about the

future? Even if it's just the fantasy of what's for lunch—which we can spend many hours wondering about when we start to smell the garlic being fried or whatever. On retreat, our future imaginings can get a little simpler and more local, but we're still involved in them. And we can't control what's for lunch.

So just to look at what it is. And then we judge ourselves because we haven't figured it out yet. There's something out there that would fix this for us. There's some experience or thing or person out there that would make it all okay. And the only problem is we haven't had it yet or found it yet or done it right.

Again, to really look at what are the beliefs that are underpinning this movement into the future that prevents us from just being with what is in its simple way. Because we're constantly disappointed because this thing isn't there. We think it's this, and it brings us a little happiness perhaps, but then we're on to the next thing. We're on to the next thing. We're trying to manipulate our experience to get it to be better—in the whole physical realm of sense pleasures, but of course here on retreat in the whole realm of our spiritual life. A better sitting, a better walking, to be wiser, to have something good to say in my next interview.

I remember being on a retreat where we had interviews every day, and you spend a big part of the day thinking, how can I package what happens so it looks good? Because I have to have something different to say. If I say the same thing, the teacher isn't going to be interested. So we try to work with it. We're always moving it about.

Being in the moment, all of this practice, as I said earlier, is about trusting and learning to let go. It's so hard. Again, from *Eat, Pray, Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert writes: "Letting go, of course, is a scary enterprise for those of us who believe that the world revolves only because it has a handle on the top, which we personally turn. And that if I were to drop this handle, even for a moment, well, that would be the end of the universe." If I wasn't there worrying and planning and strategizing, it would all fall apart. Just to really see, if you take this to the extremes, how deluded this is. And that recognition can bring us back to actually just being here for what is.

So we land in the present moment, hopefully with some wisdom, where we can see things as they are, see things clearly without these layers of projection. And this is where we come to what we call right attitude. Guy spoke last night quite beautifully about this and used these three words: relax, observe, accept. Really the heart of right attitude that brings us back from that sense that we can control or even need to control what's coming. We accept what is. We relax into the present moment and we know what's happening.

For me, the most important part of that phrase is the acceptance—just being okay with what is, even if it's not pleasant, even if it's not what you would wish for, even if it's not at all elevated or pleasing. It's what is.

Acceptance brings so many other beautiful qualities with it. Of course it's equanimity. It's a simple way of saying what we're experiencing is equanimity, what we're practicing is equanimity, allowing things to be just as they are. Acceptance is actually a facet of metta, of loving-kindness, that brahma-vihara that

accepts ourselves and others and experience just as it is, just as they are, just as we are. That is what unconditional love is—acceptance, just as it is.

And it allows us to become mindful because it lets us see things just as they are. It allows us to see through that veil of our projections and our fantasies and our fears and our regrets and the avoidance of things. Acceptance allows the mindfulness to be fully connected so we can see the truth of things. Things can actually reveal themselves to us when we accept them because we're not resisting anything.

It's a huge support for patience, which is another quality that we need on retreat. As we make this aspiration, this intention to be present moment after moment, it needs this enormous well of patience. Just this is okay, and the next moment and the next moment.

I think acceptance is the huge antidote for all of the kilesas—the greed, aversion, and delusion I just spoke about. At the heart of the kilesas: wanting what we don't have, not wanting what we do have, and not knowing what's going on, not being clear or connected. These are the kilesas.

Again, from *Eat, Pray, Love*—I just read this book, so I got all these quotes out of it; I just finished it before I came on retreat—she said: "The yogic path is about disentangling the built-in glitches of the human condition, which I'm going to oversimply define here as the heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment."

I thought that was very insightful. Just a concise way of putting it: the heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment. Because contentment is so important. That's wanting what you have and not wanting what you don't have and knowing what's happening, being in the truth of the moment and knowing it for what it is. It sounds so simple, yet it's so difficult. We see the strength of the wanting mind that's always moving, always moving, with this thirsty nature, looking for the next thing that we think is going to satisfy it in some way.

And I think when we start to explore this nature of desire, it's really helpful to remove the object, whatever it is. The object isn't relevant. Just feel that desire, that discontentment for what it is. It's agitation. It's dis-ease.

Desire is very seductive because the object is out there holding this allure that it's going to give us what we want. But take the object away and just feel what's there—that leaning forward, that emptiness, that wanting. That's what's really at work here. That's what we're living in and out of when we don't see it.

So we allow things to be just as they are. We don't reject any part of our experience. We don't want what we don't have. We don't not want what we do have. We use mindfulness, this awareness of the present moment, to cultivate an attitude of acceptance—whatever it is, it's okay. We notice what's present, what's actually here in the mind and the body, without resistance, without judging, without aversion.

And we're willing to learn. We're willing to look at this process not in some isolated way, but in a context

where we see what's being cultivated through our movements of mind—what leads us into more suffering, more contraction, more wanting, and what allows us to let go, to be more open and accepting.

This will change. There isn't a right way to meditate. There's no right way to be mindful. There's no one thing you need to learn. It's a process of constantly waking up and seeing what's here now for me, what's going on in the mind, in the body.

But in all this, don't get the sense that there's a lot of doing, that we're always vigilant and having to fix something or manipulate our experience. Really trust the wisdom that comes from this bare knowing. In some ways it's as simple as that. Joseph used this famous line: just sit and know you're sitting, and all of the Dharma will be revealed to you. We don't trust that. It seems like there should be more. And on one level, of course, there is more—we need to have a big picture of what practice is about. But at the simple, essential level of what our moment-to-moment experience is, this is it. To sit and be aware and awake and see what's happening.

I'll finish with a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh, from his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, where he gives his definition of what mindfulness actually is:

"Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves. It is the miracle which can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life. Thus mindfulness is at the same time a means and an end, the seed and the fruit. Mindfulness itself is the life of awareness. Mindfulness enables us to live."

What's key in there is that it's a means and an end. We're not doing it to get something done, always projecting to the future. In and of itself, it provides that sense of wakefulness and freedom that we think we're looking for. If we can be here right now, it restores us to wholeness and allows us to live our life.

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