Habits of Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 57:36

The other day, or maybe it was only yesterday, I mentioned in the morning how it can be helpful to take a moment to reflect, to connect with our deeper motivation, that faith which keeps us going. This morning in the instructions, Guy also spoke about moment-to-moment intention, but in the questions I could hear it morph into the bigger sense of our motivation.

I want to begin by reminding us that mostly I'm just talking about things we all know tonight—just reminding us of what we already know. This practice, both the external form and the internal work that we're doing, goes against the stream of society. That's how it is now, and that's how it was at the time of the Buddha. He said it himself: it's like swimming upstream against the normal flow of society.

If you've been here for six weeks, there's no question, but even if you've been here for one week, you know that there are times—sometimes fleeting, sometimes quite long—when you really need to be able to reconnect, to call on your motivation, to call on your faith. Our usual way of thinking, the way of being in the world that we've been taught from our culture, can't always sustain what we're doing here. As someone said today, practice is going fine, and then the mind says, "Okay, I'm out of here. Time to go to that beach. Time to do whatever."

The way we're brought up, the way we live, we believe all this stuff. The mind says something, we think, "Yeah, that's right," and we do it. The next minute it says something else, and we think, "Oh yeah, that's right too." And we do that, and we wonder why we're crazy. In the world, in normal society, that's what we do—we just follow the habits of the mind.

In some ways, that's one of the great things about an intensive retreat structure like this: the fact that we're all here together. Other times that's the difficult thing, but at those moments when we really think, "What am I doing? It's so hard to just keep paying attention," we look around and there are all these people also doing it. We think, maybe I'm not completely insane.

That's externally—we find something to strengthen our faith, to strengthen our motivation. Whatever got us started in our practice in the beginning, whatever inspired us initially, it's called bright faith in the way the Burmese speak about it. Maybe someone you met really inspired you, or talked about the Dhamma, or inspired you in how they were. Maybe something you read. Whatever it was, it lights us up. It gives us energy. One of the definitions of faith, or saddhā, is confidence, willingness to do. That gets us here, gets us started. Sometimes that's what we need to call on in the hard moments.

You might have a little short snippet of something you read—tiny, tiny, little short thing—not books and

books, not forty talks on one CD, but some little thing that inspires us, that reminds us of bright faith. Or looking at the statue of the Buddha, or reflecting on people that we've known. I think why people talk about the Dalai Lama so much is because he's such an inspiring figure in that way. We need this.

We also need to be able to tune in internally to what's our deepest motivation, as I said the other morning, because external bright faith gets us going, but it doesn't keep us going through the most difficult times. Luckily, as we begin to have more experience for ourselves, the bright faith, the external inspiration, gets verified.

One of the wonderful things about the way wisdom arises in our mind through paying attention, through awareness, is that you only need one little short second of wisdom, of insight. That can balance weeks of slogging through. Thank God it doesn't have to be equal airtime, or we'd really be in trouble. You're going days and days and weeks, and then—"Oh, I see. It's all empty. It's no problem." And it really is no problem.

So the big mystery, really—the big mystery of our life, of how our mind works, of the habit of mind, of spiritual practice—to me the big mystery is this: why, when it's so clear there's no problem, when it's so clear that really nothing that's happening matters, why do we get sucked in again? Two seconds after we see, "Wow, that's just craving, and the suffering is the craving," why do we turn around and go crazy because the last banana's gone?

You know? Why? And we can watch the mind doing this and go, "But it's just craving. It shouldn't bother me. It shouldn't bother me, but..." We can't kid ourselves. Now it does bother me. And why does it bother me? That bothers me. And then we get spinning, spinning.

So this is the habits of our mind. And that's mostly what I want to speak about tonight.

The faith, reconnecting with our motivation—it's essential. It's inspiring. It takes us out of the known. It takes us out of the normal cultural world, what we've been used to. And that's really what the practice of awakening is. It's looking at our life, our minds, our bodies from a different perspective. And to do that, we need to create a little space.

But sincere motivation needs to be supported by discerning wisdom. Just the most sincere motivation in the world, the bright faith—it gets us going. But until we start to really have verified experiences, until we really start to see through things for ourselves, even for a second, then with the best will in the world, with the most sincere motivation—"I'm really here to wake up, to serve all beings," whatever—our motivation is very sincere, and honor your motivation. But it takes just a little turn of the mind for it to morph into, "Well, what am I getting from this retreat? What's this practice doing for me? How is my practice doing? How am I progressing compared to everyone else?" You know all the different ways of that. And it slips in so subtly, doesn't it, that we don't really notice.

So without the discerning wisdom, we get caught—really, with the most sincere motivation, practicing for whatever reason we're practicing—but the attitude, the mind that's paying attention, is caught in the old

habits. What we're doing is shifting our focus of interest, shifting what we trust.

His Holiness, speaking of the Dalai Lama, says, "The purpose of our spiritual practice is to fulfill our desire for happiness, for peace. We are all equal in wishing to be happy and to overcome our suffering. And I believe we all share the right to fulfill this aspiration."

So he uses the H word—happiness. That's a big word these days. I was in a bookstore a couple of weeks ago, just a regular bookstore, not spiritual, and looking at one of the tables where they lay out books to display. It wasn't the spiritual table either. It was just one of the tables in the middle of the store, a lot of books. So I started counting. There were fourteen books with the word "happiness" in the title on this table. And as I say, a couple of them were spiritual, but the rest weren't. That's—yeah, we'd like to be happy. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be happy. As His Holiness says, that's normal motivation. The Buddha taught suffering and the end of suffering, you know.

But without wise discernment, without understanding ourselves, the nature of happiness, the nature of suffering accurately, the choices we make—all too unfortunately—in our deep motivation for happiness are not coming from wisdom. The motivation may be sincere, but without understanding ourselves and the world accurately, it doesn't work, right? Samsara doesn't work. That's why I think we're all sitting here. If it worked, we wouldn't have to do things like this. We could just follow our intuition, follow our basic instincts.

So this practice works internally against the stream—the stream of society, the stream of our mental habits, those patterns so familiar they feel natural, appropriate, trustworthy. The real question, what we're actually shifting in our practice, is: where do we place our trust? Where do we place our confidence, moment to moment to moment?

One of the big places in normal life, in the stream of culture—this culture anyway—is that we really trust our thoughts. On another level this is laughable, having sat and actually looked at your thoughts, but we trust them. We trust our explanations of things, our rationalizations, our descriptions. When something happens and we can't explain it right away, we don't like that very much. Fear comes up.

Even if on an intellectual level we can all say we know our minds are crazy, we know thoughts aren't reliable, notice how often when you come into an interview or when you're spinning in some kind of struggle, it's because we're either believing in or reacting to our thought process. Our habits, our instincts aren't reliable, but it's hard for us to see it.

I read a review—I didn't read the book, just the review, which gives you a lot of information—of a book called *How Doctors Think*, written by a doctor. It's really interesting because I don't think doctors think any differently from the rest of us; this just happens to be about doctors. He said that misdiagnoses, which are of course often made because no one knows everything, only about twenty percent are accounted for by technical mistakes—machine errors, not reading handwriting correctly. By far the majority of

misdiagnoses result from habits of mind that cause doctors to make snap judgments or overlook alternative possibilities. And remember, this isn't just doctors. It's all of us.

He gives a couple of examples. The author's own son almost died at nine months old from an intestinal obstruction because the pediatrician assumed that the parents, being first-time parents, were overreacting to a normal virus. The doctor didn't really look carefully, and the baby almost died. Or other times, when a doctor makes a diagnosis and sends the patient to specialists, because of that first diagnosis the specialists by far in majority start by already thinking it's that. They're much more likely to confirm than to actually look fresh and see whether it's that or not.

Does that sound familiar? "I already know what this is. I labeled this yesterday. I don't have to look at it again. This is what fear is like, now and always."

Diagnoses may also be wrong because the doctor stereotypes, paying more attention to the patient's age or race or living habits. I've read a lot about how women's heart attacks are much more frequently missed than men's because the assumption is that men have heart attacks more frequently than women—which isn't really true. Emotions also interfere. A doctor may like a patient too much to consider a worst-case scenario, or they may not like the patient and so don't listen to important complaints. "Just a whiner. I'm not going to really pay attention."

You see how our minds can do that with ourselves, right? I don't need to draw the obvious parallels anymore. But this is really the power of moment-to-moment mindfulness—this willingness to just meet freshly, without bringing the whole baggage of all our preconceptions. That's the idea. Simple but not easy. We don't even know what preconceptions are there half the time. We think we're meeting something freshly, just like the doctors.

This is from Sayadaw U Janaka: "We practice vipassana in order to live in happiness, to be free from suffering. Our suffering arises due to our suffering mental states, and these arise due to our belief in personality view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. And *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, personality view, arises due to our incorrect understanding of the nature of mental and physical experience."

So it keeps coming down very simply to the nature of this moment-to-moment mental and physical experience. Going against the stream means recognizing that much of the time we don't even see what we already think we know. We're looking through that veil. We're not meeting mental experience, physical experience, freshly. And in our motivation, our real wanting to be happy, we assess and make choices for our happiness based on misunderstanding what happiness is, what can make us happy, what even we are—never mind what can make us happy. All based on these really deeply inlaid habits of mind.

I heard on public radio yesterday—I think it's the ninetieth anniversary of the revolution in Russia in 1917. They were interviewing people on the street, talking about how the last decade or so in Russia has been so chaotic that some people are yearning, have a kind of nostalgia, for the stability of the Stalinist

era.

Even though it's known now, it's not a secret anymore that some 20 million Russians were killed in the gulag. That's not a secret anymore. So this one woman, they were talking to her on the street, and she said, "Yeah, people say he murdered half of Russia, but still, he had a unique personality." There are not many people like him. You have to be someone special to be able to have all that power in your hands. And this was in an admiring kind of way.

We think we know what will make us happy. It's chaotic. Okay, I love stability. Take it from Russia to you're sitting here on the pillow, but you get the drift. It's chaotic. If I could just have everything stay the same for a while, then I'd be happy. Then I'd see how things are. So get rid of all this stuff. We think we know. We don't have a clue.

Bhikkhu Bodhi—do you know who Bhikkhu Bodhi is? He's an American man, actually from Brooklyn, who has been an ordained bhikkhu in the Theravada tradition for many, many years. He lived in Sri Lanka. Now he lives in the States. He is one of the foremost translators from the Pali into English of the Buddhist scriptures, extremely learned. He's also very humble, a really wonderful person.

So he's writing this: "Remember that the Buddha's teaching goes against the current of one's habitual assumptions and attitudes. After all, most of our habits revolve around the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self."

I want to repeat that. See if you can recognize anything here. Most of our habits, the habits of our mind—and these are the habits that drive our choices, more than our choices, our assumptions about what will make us happy—the desire to enjoy pleasure, to avoid pain, and to preserve the illusion that the universe centers around our individual self. When one's personal experience of suffering becomes vivid enough, then it will induce one to become disillusioned or disenchanted with these habits and to begin to place our trust in something else.

He says in the Buddhist disclosures on reality, but I think what we start in this practice to see and place our trust in is mindfulness, awareness, consciousness itself, rather than placing our trust in pleasure making us happy, displeasure causing our suffering. Rather than placing our trust in "everything centers around me, me, me." We don't even know half the time that that's what the mind is doing.

I read this on the back of *The Inquiring Mind* from Francisco Varela, the scientist: "The purpose of calming the mind in Buddhism is not so much to become absorbed, but to render the mind able to be present with itself long enough to gain insight into its own nature and functioning."

That's exactly what we're doing here. Just allowing the mind to quiet enough to turn around and look at itself, to see what's the nature of mind and how does it function. And to do that, moment by moment by moment, we have to be able, just for a moment, to put down our preconceptions, to put down our ideas about what makes us happy, our preferences, and just meet this arising experience as it is. Trusting that

insight, understanding, discriminating wisdom is a natural function of moment-to-moment awareness.

Do we trust that? Sometimes, maybe. But a lot of times, what are we putting our trust in? These habits, right? They're so ingrained. They're so deep in our life. That's what the Buddha saw when he woke up—that everyone wants to be happy and keeps doing in their effort to be happy just the thing that makes them keep on suffering.

We see something isn't working in our daily life. So here we are, really sincerely. But until we recognize that these habits are kind of the lens through which we're experiencing moment-to-moment reality and making choices, until we start to see that, we come here and we bring the same habits to a meditation retreat as we bring to how we live our life.

Even when we say sit down, just be aware of whatever's happening by itself, there's still a sense we're doing something. You're sitting down. You're shutting up. You're turning your attention inside, hopefully noticing once in a while what comes and goes. Already that's some direction, that's some activity.

And so how are we going to approach any new activity when we're not in the freshness of awareness? With the same old habits. We approach it, we put forth effort in order to achieve a result that is pleasant. I mean, how many of you here are really working with virya in order to experience more unpleasant? Do you think of waking up as including unpleasant experience?

When you really look at it deeply, what's in our mind—isn't there somehow a bias that the more we wake up, the more pleasant everything's going to be? The ending of suffering somehow has a connotation of pleasant. Somehow, even though there's pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral, all that unpleasant is just going to fall away, and it's all going to be nice, floating on clouds. I know it sounds exotic, but look, just watch next time you're having a little hissy fit about what's happening in your practice, and see if you're having a problem because it's pleasant. Probably not.

So the effort is usually for some result—because that's what we've learned—usually pleasant. And in any case, it's somehow going to confirm me, a sense of how I can assess myself. It fulfills me. It confirms me. It gives me a sense that I'm getting somewhere, that I'm more empty than I was when I started this retreat. That sense of it's all about me.

And then we trust our thoughts so much. When you sit there and start thinking, "Well, if it's not all about me and there isn't any me, how am I going to do it?" And why do we get so caught in that? Because what's getting stronger? The more we think about that, the sense of me, me, me. I'm losing me. Oh my God.

So that's our habit. That's what we know. We bring the same thing to the meditation, and that's how we get into the striving. It doesn't have to be this way. I'm not saying this is what's going to happen and there's no way out of it. I'm just pointing it out so that we can begin to notice when there's this sense of looking ahead, when there's this sense of striving, when there's a sense of somehow it isn't going right, "I thought I would be further along by now"—to see that and ask, "Oh, what habit's driving the bus right now?" It's all

about me. It should be more pleasant. It's looking into the experience. We're trusting in that moment our trying to organize and manipulate and arrange experience to meet some cockamamie idea we have that we heard or we read or we made up.

Instead of turning around and saying, just trust in this moment, only for this moment, the awareness. The simplicity of just the awareness of knowing in this moment. Hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, sensing with the mind. And it doesn't matter what. It really doesn't matter what.

Ajahn Sumedho calls awareness the point that includes. Really trusting that awareness in one moment—not extended in time as some thing existing, but just in the moment. That moment of pure awareness, the consciousness aware of what's happening without the coloring of wanting or aversion or me, me, me. Just this sensation. Just this hearing. Just this pleasant. Just this unpleasant. Moment after moment after moment. That continuity. It's a very different possibility. And it's so subtle.

Always accessible. So familiar. Even more familiar, if possible, than the habits of wanting and aversion and "it's all about me." But completely intangible—nothing you can really point to or hold on to. Just this. Oh, this.

The practice is really about turning our interest, our trust, our love, our confidence—whatever word works for you—devotion, away from whatever experience or object is arising. You know it's there, but it's going to come, it's going to go. No matter how fantastic or horrible, it's going to come, it's going to go. And when it's gone, it's gone like it never existed.

I don't care how incredible an experience we have. I don't care how horrible and fearful it is. It's going to go, and it'll be really gone, and it'll be like it never existed. When you think about it, just get that taste. It happens more as we get older, so maybe you younger people don't have the feeling yet, although it's true for all of us. I see it with my mother; I see it more with me now. All the stuff that happened in my whole life—it's nothing but a thought. It's just nothing. I couldn't tell you if I feel fifty-six or two. It doesn't really matter. It's just a concept because it's only now.

And when there's that freedom of only now, we don't have to cling on so much for dear life to what's arising, physical or mental. It's just—ah—awareness, experience in the knowing of it, hearing in the knowing of it, thinking in the knowing of it. And we can come to trust, to have confidence, to love the knowing of it. That's really the shift that this whole practice is about.

In those moments—those moments I mentioned at the beginning—when it's really so clear, there's no problem. Sometimes we think there's no problem because we've hit into a really pleasant, lovely state, but that's a problem because it goes, and then we see it's a problem. But the kind of no problem where there's nothing special happening, just that—no clinging, no aversion, not me-centric—just this thing, nothing special, always available. Those moments are really the heart of this practice.

We lose it. We get caught up again. We get focused back into experience, into manipulating experience,

into trying. And those are the habits that Bhikkhu Bodhi talks about. Fascinating. Fascinating how we keep getting sucked back in. And if we can bring interest to that rather than incredible frustration and dismay, it's helpful. If you can just see—it's fascinating.

It continues to be fascinating to me that I really, on some level, and sometimes I really get it: nothing that I can experience is going to make me ultimately happy. It never has. It won't last. It really doesn't matter. I know that. And sometimes I really know that. And then I turn around and my thinking knows it, but that's basically useless. And it's like, no, I've got to have this. This headache has to go away and then I'll be happy. And all the resistance and all the wanting and all the sense of struggle.

What's happening? Oh, just this. Just as it is. Because it's not about the experience. Oh yes, awareness. It's like this. The point that includes. Awareness can be aware with anything. So our practice comes to be more noticing the awareness than the knowing. Noticing when we're not noticing it. Noticing what experiences or thoughts or actions we somehow place outside.

Awareness can't be present if this is happening. We all do it. And then at some point, after we struggle—you struggle for an hour, you struggle for a day, you struggle for three days—something in the mind lets go. "All right, this is just this. That's okay." All the clinging went away. We took confidence again in the awareness. It's just like a Tai Chi move.

When we're caught in relationship to experience—this should be different, this should be better, this should last, this should go away, this means this about me (and that's the big one)—when we're caught in that, it's endless struggle. Like trying to rearrange the furniture in prison and not seeing that the door's always open.

But we don't have to change anything. We don't have to change anything. You don't have to be a better person, a different person, have a better personality or a different personality. You don't have to have better concentration. You don't have to walk slower or faster. You do have to be interested. But awareness is not some special thing, like some people have an awareness power. It's just the nature of how the mind works.

The Tai Chi move is withdrawing the identification from the relationship, from our entrancement with our reaction to what's happening, and just noticing the knowing. Just noticing the knowing. There's nothing you can judge that by. There's nothing you can confirm yourself by. But when there's that withdrawing of relational reaction to experience and just that movement into the knowing, just like that, it's completely different.

The Buddha, when he woke up—as far as we can tell, he woke up into the same world, didn't he? It's not the world that changed. He still had a body, still had a mind. He got headaches. He had backaches. He ate bad food. What changes is the relation. The happiness isn't about getting better experience. It's about understanding the nature of mind and body—the coming, the going. It's not about me. It's not that we just

get pleasant. It's not that the suffering is the unpleasant. The waking up is that knowing, knowing, knowing.

When we talk about emptiness, it's not that there's nothing. It's just that there's no solid, long, permanent, lasting entity in anything. But everything's still here. It's just that we withdraw our tenacious hold, our relational reactivity, our entrancement with experience and our reactions to experience, our entrancement with what everything means about me or to me.

And if you think I'm exaggerating, just notice as you go through the days. With humor—it helps. Humor helps. Notice how almost everything that happens—not quite everything, but almost anything—how quick does the mind get it back to what it means to me? Just somebody walks through the dining room on the other side. How quick does that have something to say about me? "Oh, look how they're walking. They look pretty mindful. I'm not as mindful as they are." Or, "That's the person who was breathing loudly this morning. They really bugged me—but I'm so equanimous, it doesn't matter." It doesn't take any time. Somebody puts food on their plate, and immediately: how does that relate to me? Just notice this, and notice the difference when the thought is, "Oh, I'm really such a lousy meditator."

Oh, awareness of judging. You don't have to get rid of anything. Awareness doesn't care. I love the way Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it. He says, "You know, it's like this." So judging feels like this. "I really am so caught up and frustrated" — this is like this. Sleepiness is impossible to meditate with — sleepiness is like this. There's nothing that needs to be different. Awareness can be aware of anything. Anything.

I don't know if you can get a sense of how truly liberating that is. The thing is, we have to be interested enough. It's not like, "Okay, two moments a day I'll be aware and just have that freedom, and the rest of the time I'll just run around seeking pleasure and avoiding the unpleasant." That strengthens that habit. So what we're doing with this austere structure here is to support our moving into noticing the knowing — just to support that.

If we're willing to have that steadiness through the day, not of striving to make something different, it's really liberating. "Oh, all I have to do is just notice what's happening all day." And whatever's happening, we can notice it. Doesn't that feel much more relaxing than "I somehow have to twist and turn my experience and get it like this, and then I can notice it, and then I can feel like I'm getting somewhere in meditation" — and oh my God, I'm so exhausted.

Someone was just saying to me today how they'd had a day or two where it was just this sense of things happening and the knowing of it, and there wasn't much reactivity or aversion in the mind. And suddenly when they woke up in the morning, unusually there wasn't tiredness. There was just this brightness, this clarity in the mind because there's no struggle anymore. All the energy that goes into our running after the pleasant and avoiding the unpleasant and constructing the whole world every moment — making a new construction of the world about me and then reacting to it — it's exhausting. Just think: we don't have to do it.

And you don't even have to get rid of that either. Just shift from our entrancement to the knowing. And then when we're not noticing that again, we'll know because we're struggling again. "Oh, struggle. It's like this." It's just all day long. And it's really a whole different possibility.

So in that way, any appearance, any object, serves as a conduit back to awareness, back to knowing. There's nothing that's a distraction. There's nothing that needs to be a problem. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral — a problem is just another word for struggle, and struggle? Oh, struggle's like this.

Really, the times when I'm knowing that, it's so free, so lovely. And you're just the same old person. You don't get a new personality, but you don't care anymore. Other people may care, but that's their problem.

But I do want to emphasize — I know Guy spoke about right attitude the first night, and that's the point. This love of awareness, confidence in awareness — it's really the quality of knowing that is, you want to say, the pure mind, the luminous mind. That's the sutta of the Buddha's that I'll read in a minute. It's awareness that is not colored by wanting, by aversion, or by delusion. There could be other beautiful qualities present. There can be calm. There could be compassion. There could be wisdom. There could be rapture, interest, investigation. It's not like nothing is there, but it won't be colored by these afflictive torments of the mind, which keep us from recognizing nāma-rūpa, mind and matter, accurately — and then keep us spinning in this confusion.

I just want to read this. I'm sure most of you are familiar with it, but it's really just the shift. From the Buddha: "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it."

This unlearned people do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind. We don't understand, we don't recognize the pure, luminous, just empty quality of knowing of the mind. We get entranced by the attachments, by the kilesas, by the wanting, and that's what we spend our life and our time in relationship to. That's what unlearned people don't understand.

"Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This the noble follower of the way really understands, and so for them there is cultivation of the mind."

That's what we're doing—cultivating. When we say cultivation of the mind, it's not that the mind somehow needs improving. That moment of awareness is always luminous and pure. The attachments, the greed, the aversion, the kilesas that come—they come and go. When we're entranced by them, we just don't notice the luminous, pure quality. But even when the attachments are there, it's not that they can ever really stain or affect that luminous pure quality.

So when we know that, and that's where we have just a moment of insight, we go, "Oh, right, just knowing is like this." That touches us so deeply because we see, oh, that's really how it is. And it's like that in any moment. We just forget.

So when the Buddha talks about the noble follower of the way cultivating the mind, it doesn't mean

somehow we can control and make that moment of knowing, that moment of awareness, more pure. It's that we learn to have confidence in that more. And we feed the wanting, we feed the attachment less and less and less. So in any moment when we're going, "I've got to have this, I need this," and there's so much suffering—when we see, "Oh, it's like this"—that's a movement from feeding the attachment to confidence in awareness. In that moment, we're no longer feeding the kilesa. That's cultivation of the mind.

It's not in our power to make awareness any clearer, any better. It doesn't need to be. We just learn to recognize more and more frequently and to trust that—to trust that over our assessments and our evaluations and our judgments and our ideas about ourselves. To trust that over our deeply rooted sense that somehow if it's unpleasant, something's wrong and I've got to fix it. That I can't possibly be free with this going on. Instead, we see: "Oh, it's like this."

Even when I say that, probably in the back of your mind you're thinking, "Yeah, yeah, right. Easy for you to say." But the question is, where do we place our trust? And it's not something we can just have an idea about. It's a deeply experiential thing that cuts underneath these habits of mind over and over and over.

So how do we get so tricked back? There are lots of ways, but I just want to highlight something that Guy spoke about in the instructions today. This sense of vedana, this feeling quality where the mind experiences a sound, a sight, a smell, a taste, a thought, a sensation—experiences it as being pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. That's not something inherent in the experience. That's how it's experienced in the mind in that moment. The so-called same experience, the sound, you could experience as pleasant one moment, neutral another moment, unpleasant another moment.

Because we so often don't notice that—and this is one of the subtle experiences that happens almost every moment—it's so quick and fast that we often don't even recognize, "Oh, the pleasant or unpleasant is happening." And right away, that's when the thoughts go into: pleasant is good, this is what should be happening. Or unpleasant is bad, this shouldn't be happening. And that happens so quickly.

There's an unpleasant sensation. You don't even recognize that. The mind goes, "This is pain. Something's wrong with my knee. What's going to happen? There's five more weeks." And in no time, you're in the hospital. It's gone so far, so fast. Mingyur Rinpoche has a great way of describing this.

We get into so much pain and confusion by letting ourselves get lost in the thoughts of whatever happens. Sogyal Rinpoche describes this beautifully: you project a thought, then a second thought believes the first thought. Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. And by this time, the first thought has become absolute reality. By the time the tenth thought comes—and that's about this much time—it believes that the fifth has always been so. Explore that. And then we're just running on that. No wonder we don't have a clue what's going on half the time.

So this is one way we get tricked with this pleasant-unpleasant-neutral dynamic. For the noble follower of the way, as the Buddha said, there's cultivation of the mind. One of the ways we cultivate is by what we're

doing here—just our interest, this quality of quieting the mind just enough, as Francisco Varela said, to look and see how it works. Notice, without judgment, out of interest. Notice, as Ajahn Buddhadasa said, how much of what you do is for the sake of pleasant feeling. And notice how long pleasant feeling actually lasts. A feeling, vedana—like that, like that, like that. It's so quick. But just keep noticing how much of what we do is enthralled to trying to get more pleasant or to get away from unpleasant. Unpleasant also—like that, like that.

Neutral—well, we think we want calm. People think they want calm. I can't tell you how often people come in and it's often quite a surprise: it's calm, what's wrong? It's calm, I'm bored. It's calm, what's going to happen to me? It's calm, I've got to do something. And in fact, often people see—I've seen it myself—that the mind will just start creating all kinds of suffering scenarios rather than stay with calm. Neutral? I'm out of here. Back to basic instinct again.

But this is, again, where our practice, our understanding of how things really are, the true source of happiness, runs counter—running against the stream of the world again. This sense of going after pleasant, avoiding unpleasant, it's all about me. On some level we trust it—not reliably, but we trust it. It sort of holds our world together. This is what makes sense to us. This is how we've lived our lives. I mean, when people are really in a suffering thing and you come in and say, "Oh great, just notice it's unpleasant"—most people don't go, "Oh, thank you so much, that really helped. That's what I came here for."

It holds our world together. And in fact, the Buddha said in his sutta about the two darts that when a normal, unawakened person experiences an unpleasant feeling, an unpleasant vedana, the only escape they know from unpleasant feeling is to lust after sense pleasure. And so when there's unpleasant, we pull away. He says it's as if we're hit with a dart and then we hit ourselves with a second dart. This is unpleasant and this is really bad. I don't like it. I've got to do something. We shoot ourselves with a second arrow.

So we have the habit in our mind of pulling away, of resisting and resenting unpleasant. And then—to me, this is so poignant because it really resonates as true—the only escape normal, regular people know from unpleasant is to go and get some pleasant sense experience. So that's life: running between avoiding the unpleasant and going to get something pleasant. Food, sex, relationships, sleep. Sleep's a big one—a big pleasant experience here especially, right? Food's limited, sex is out, but sleep...

It takes a lot of vision, a lot of faith, a lot of courage to step out of that way of being. And I feel so personally fortunate—I'm so grateful every day to know that there's a path, to know that there's another way of being, to know that this isn't the end.

Because really, imagine before you knew there was a path of awakening and all you knew was to get more pleasant. That's how saṃsāra doesn't work. Because sooner or later, it doesn't work. But if that was all there was, how sad would that be?

So here we are. We get lost often in thinking it's only about getting pleasant, only about feeling good, only about what confirms me. But then again, we remember: no, I can turn around again and notice the knowing.

If you went out on the street and said to someone, "Do you know what would be really freeing? If you just noticed the knowing of your footsteps"—I don't think they'd believe you. But actually, it's incredibly radical. It's freeing. It's available every moment with every experience possible. There's nothing that awareness can't be with. Ajahn Sumedho says it's the point that includes. And we simply recognize it by, in a moment, letting go of our entrancements and our absorptions with experience, with objects, with our likes and our dislikes.

I want to end with reading something from Ajahn Sumedho to that effect. He's talking about patience and non-clinging, and he says:

"Buddha wisdom is just this much: knowing the conditioned as the conditioned, the unconditioned as the unconditioned. Buddhas are no longer deluded by any conditions. And so they incline to the spaciousness, the emptiness, rather than towards the changing conditions within the space. In your meditation now, as you incline towards the emptiness, the space"—I would just say the knowing—"your habitual grasping, fascination, revulsions, fears, doubts, and worries about the conditions begins to lessen. You begin to recognize them as just things that come and go. They're not self. They're nothing to get excited about or depressed about. They just are as they are. We can allow conditions to be just as they are because they come and go. Their nature is to go away, so we don't have to make them go away. And in this way, we naturally liberate ourselves from the struggle, the strife, and the confusion of the ignorant mind that has to spend all its time evaluating and discriminating, trying to hold on to something, trying to get rid of something. It means that we exist peacefully rather than complaining, rebelling, and causing more frictions and confusion and adding to the confusion through believing in our own confusion."

We recognize the space just by not clinging to the objects and the reactions to the objects in our experience.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said that habit and passion blind and mislead. Compassionate awareness heals and redeems.

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