Awareness Is The Path

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 52:30

Last night Joseph was talking about mindfulness, the difference between just being in the present and mindfulness—actually knowing clearly what's happening in this moment. The difference between awareness and just kind of hanging out.

In some ways, all the different techniques, the different methods that we've offered here, and there are many, many more—all the methods of Vipassana are not about trying to create some better state or to make you good meditators. They're all methods to support, to enhance our recognition, our familiarity, our trust in awareness itself, in the purity of awareness. The way we come to understand how our minds work, as Joseph talked about, is not by sitting down and figuring it out and making charts and graphs, though God knows that's been done enough. It's by the moment-to-moment, absolute surrender with total commitment into awareness of whatever happens to be arising right now.

So in a way, awareness—mindfulness with clearly knowing—is the path. Not even to talk about goal, but moment to moment, it is the path.

Awareness that is mindfulness is all about the attitude, what qualities are in the mind, in the consciousness at the moment with awareness. That's really what I want to talk about.

We're not here to cultivate a particular experience. I mean, you might be here to cultivate a particular experience. And maybe you'll get it, and maybe you won't. And then if you do get it, you'll find out it really didn't matter. It came and it went. And then here we still are.

Here we still are with—the word that comes to mind is "task," but that's not inspiring enough. Here we are with the joyful and at sometimes daunting and vast life path of exploring the nature of reality, the nature of suffering, and the nature of peace and freedom. And finding that the recognition, the understanding of both—freedom and suffering—is right here, right now, in what's arising in this moment, how it's observed through the quality of the purity of mind of awareness or the confused, deluded mind. We take turns experiencing one or the other.

That's what we're studying. We're studying the deluded mind, as Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche once said, and we're studying the awakened mind. And it's not like here's all the deluded and somewhere else is the awakened. It's back and forth, back and forth.

We're here to reintroduce ourselves to—there's no "our," of course—our own awareness. Just the natural, pure knowing quality of mindfulness. When the knowing faculty, when consciousness is not colored by, when we're not identified with the qualities of confusion, of wanting, of craving, of ill will, of fear. They

could even be present, but not when we're identified with them.

When purification of mind or cultivating the pure heart is spoken of, I used to not like that term because it brings up all that pure-impure, good-bad stuff. But if I think of pure as squeaky clean—which is how someone once in an interview described it to me. She'd had some moments of just this really pure moment-to-moment awareness, and that's how she described how the experience felt: just like the mind and heart is squeaky clean. Whatever is arising is just this. Nothing in excess and nothing lacking. Just this with wholehearted presence.

This is not some unattainable, esoteric state up on Mars somewhere. Something that really makes this whole path workable for me is the understanding, the knowing that there's only moment-to-moment arising and passing experience, that there's nothing that lasts for more than a fraction.

Knowing that, what we call "my mind at this moment, my mind filled with greed"—have you had that experience at all of your mind being filled with greed? And how one might call it that: "I'm such a loser. My mind is filled with greed." That's become very solid, very temporal, lasting in time, and something really difficult that we have to do a lot of stuff to change and become a person whose mind is not filled with greed. Of course, the trouble really is as long as I'm "a person who"—that's really the source of it. But we'll get there later.

If you notice, in that moment, what's happening is that in a moment of what we call mind or consciousness, this knowing quality arises. And all different mental states or mental factors come and go with it. So a moment of greed is really that: a moment of consciousness, a moment of other mental factors, and coming together in that moment, there's also greed. That doesn't mean it's steady state.

Now, if we get a "Yeah, I do want that, I do need that, let's really crank it up"—well, that moment of greed strengthens the next moment of greed. But it's very cause and effect, very rational. If with awareness there's "Oh, greed feels like this"—what's being fed in that moment? Not the greed.

In that moment, the interest, the attention, the ardency, if you will, the love is going into the awareness. Wow, awareness of greed. Greed feels like this. Greed doesn't last so long in that moment. It's not being fed. The awareness, the mindfulness gets stronger. And you might very well discover the next moment is a moment of just this. And then the next moment is, "Wow, I had a moment of no self and no greed. I want another one." And then there's a moment of greed. That's how it goes.

How can we take this personally? We do take it personally—that's why we're all suffering here. We react to each of these moments like, "What does it mean about me? I'm so bad. I'm so good. I'm so liberated. I'm so lost." It's exhausting. It's a moment of greed, a moment of pure mind, a moment of delusion. I mean, it's not so clear cut, I realize that. But it's not unattainable. That's what I'm trying to say.

And our path is this ardency Joseph talked about last night—of total commitment, of interest. I like to use the word love, really. Love of awareness, of this process of just being willing to be totally here and see

what's happening without our interference. It sounds easy. We know it's not, because we are schooled to interfere. Because we're schooled to think that somehow we can fix it. We can decide to be a better person. We can decide to stop being greedy. We know that doesn't work, right? Because if it worked, we wouldn't have to come do this. But we don't really know it doesn't work.

So as Joseph said last night, what we're doing here—and we're quite privileged to have this opportunity, also privileged in that we're interested, that we care enough to explore this way—because as you already know, it's not always enjoyable or easy. It really requires, in some ways, the strongest commitment of our life. Because everything's included. Everything. There's nothing outside of this exploration. How can there be? Because in each moment, everything is here. That's all there is. Anything we try to exclude is delusion pushing away the reality of the moment.

So we're privileged. And it is somewhat rare. But what I really wanted to get to tonight is this: it may be rare, but it's not some esoteric thing that's somehow divorced, separated from the way we live our lives, from the way everyone lives their lives in the world. What we're watching and learning about, hopefully, and suffering from and feeling joy with in our own minds here in little things—this is the exact same processes that go on in all human minds. Which is both beautiful and, to me, extremely frightening.

I think Sally read from the Dhammapada. I just want that last line: "With our minds we make the world." This world, this whole world—with our minds, we make the world.

This summer I was in Munich for a few weeks, longer than usual. So I had time to do something that I've wanted to do for many years but never had the personal time for. I went to visit Dachau, one of the concentration camp memorial museums from the Nazi wartime. This was for me a really powerful experience. Grounding. Very grounding. And unexpectedly powerful. It kind of brought me home even more deeply than usual to the vastness of the human mind, the vastness of what we're doing here, and the reality of what the mind can create in the world. It aligned me with what's really important in this world and how completely out of whack the world can get.

And it's not just about concentration camps in the Nazi time. I don't have to even run through the list of things—I'll say some in a minute.

But the memorial sits in really quite a lovely park, and it's really big. That's one thing that surprised me. There's a couple of buildings that are still standing, and in one of them, they made a museum. I think they did a really good job. It's just lots of big bulletin board placards with different information—different aspects of Dachau all through the years, and really very broad. Almost too much information to take in because it was room after room.

But the way they did it that I thought was so skillful was that they'd give an overview—maybe medical testing, maybe that one was about that—and they'd give an overview, but they always made it individual. There was always a picture of some particular people. It would say their names. It would say a little bit

about them. Whether it was a guard or whether it was an inmate, there was a way that it made it—you couldn't just say, "Oh, it's some vast other there thing." It's a really individual person after person after person.

I think that's what grounded me in what's really important in this world, in this life, and not in some kind of la-la-la, "Oh yes, compassion is the natural state of the pure mind." I say that all the time. In a place like that, looking at the vastness of how many people were involved, I can't just so easily go, "Well, as soon as you see how much suffering aversion causes in your own mind, the wisdom naturally arises and compassion is there." I mean, I do believe that. I have experienced that. But that's rather glib in the face of whatever we might be confronted with. And we never know what we're going to be confronted with in life.

So when I say the vastness—beyond the individuals, that's why I thought their approach was so wise. Because otherwise, you just get lost in the bigness. Then out behind, there were just the foundations where other barracks had been, but they were gone. So it made it like a nice park. It was huge. I don't know, twenty or thirty barracks had been there. And when I came back into Munich and talked to friends, they all said, "Oh, that wasn't even one of the big ones." And that just kind of—I don't know—it made it all more real.

In my life, I've done tons of reading about the whole gulag system under Stalin, a lot about Chechnya, Bosnia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, racism and sexism and bigotry in this country. I mean, you can look around anywhere. It's not a one-off. And when you look and see how many people and individuals, there's no way my mind could say, "Oh, these are just the bad, weird people. These were all monsters." Can't be so. Can't be so. So many people involved in so many ways. They have to be pretty much regular folks, most people.

And it makes me look in myself. I don't know what I would do if I was in a situation where each person has to make, in some situation, a small choice. We can make choices from greed, from fear, from denial, from looking around—"Well, everyone else is doing it, it must be okay"—or the denial that we just don't see what's too painful to see. I'm sure you've recognized that in your own personal experience. And you can't see it till you see it. You can't talk your way out of it. Or fear, or wanting to protect someone, or being afraid of losing something. Who knows? And each decision might be as good as one can make, not knowing how to work with greed or fear or denial. We don't know what we'd do in a situation.

It makes me think of a book I read a few years ago by a doctor named Hassan Bayev. He's a Chechen, and he had come back from Russia. He's a surgeon, and during the height of the war between Chechnya and Russia, he came back just to work in the hospital. He was the only surgeon in all of Grozny, doing operations on both sides of people in the conflict for some years.

It's quite a story. Because he wasn't taking sides—even though he said, "I'm a Chechen, I'm a patriot, but I'm a doctor first"—the situation was very intense. The name of his book was *The Oath*, the oath being his

oath as a doctor.

I don't have time to get into it anymore, but the thing I always remember him saying was that his oath was to cause no harm, to help as a doctor. And he said, "I was in a situation I'd never been in. I'd never held a gun. I'd never been in the face of violence." He was threatened and attacked from both sides. And he said, "When you're in a situation you've never been in before, you don't really know ahead of time how you're going to act, how you're going to respond."

I really can relate to that. I don't know how I would respond.

Somehow this being in Dachau and connecting me with all these other strands of study grounded me in a way that actually gave me a stronger sense of commitment to this path, commitment to understanding our mind. I saw even more profoundly the strength, the power of these habits in our mind—fear, greed, wanting power, ill will, aversion. So much of that impulse to "get rid of all this group of people" comes out of fear of the other, out of wanting something the way it used to be. Doesn't that sound familiar?

Seeing the vastness of it, rather than getting completely discouraged, was like, "Yeah, let's get real about this." I know that we don't have to be driven by these forces, that it's possible to be filled with anger, filled with fear, filled with greed—to really feel it and not act in that way. But the only way it's possible isn't to have some idea, "Oh, I want to be a good person. I won't act from anger anymore." I tried that one.

The only way is by really knowing, fearlessly, how greed and hatred and anger and fear work. How do they arise in our mind and heart? How do we experience them? How strong can they be? What's the effect of acting on them? The only way we can know that is by being so interested, with awareness, with kindness, that we just sit back and watch it all happen here.

Granted, we're in a situation where we're not going to be challenged in a life-threatening way. We are in a special situation. The situations that come up where we feel filled with fear and filled with greed are going to be less intense than being life-threatened or having your family threatened. But that doesn't make the way these habits work in our mind any different.

So don't just say, "Oh, well, I'm filled with greed, but it's just about wanting another helping for lunch, and it ran out, so I'm just a greedy person." Sit down. Don't judge it. Watch. It's about a stupid thing, but that's not the point. Watch how strong it can get. The greed can be so strong that even though I have the full intention to be fully present with, "Oh, greed is like this. Greed is like this. I'm feeling it in my body. I'm noticing the thoughts"—and then suddenly, I'm out in the parking lot with my car keys thinking, "Where can I go get some ice cream?" How did I get here? Oh, I think greed was kind of the intention. But then at least, thank God, I noticed it.

So it's little. And it's okay that it's little. But the force of how these habits work is working in the same way. And seeing how even an example like that—the greed, or the not getting what we want, really. If there's greed and then we can get what we want, we don't have to actually look at how much suffering there is in

the greed, because we got what we wanted. That's how samsara works. You want it, you get it. You want another thing, you get it. Or you get it, and then it's not doing it anymore, so you want another thing. And you can get that, and samsara just keeps rolling.

You don't get it, and you're stuck here on retreat, so you can't really distract yourself. And you have to just sit there and feel: greed feels like this. Then you start to see why most people don't want to look at greed.

Better to act on it than feel it. My god—talk about masochism. And greed is nothing compared to how much suffering there is in hatred and fear. Greed gets under the radar, though. Don't kid yourself if you're a greedy type rather than an aversive type that you're somehow better. Don't kid yourself. It gets under the radar and you think, "Oh no, everything's just nice." Everything's just nice until you can't get that thing. Then you're in trouble.

So what we're doing here, it may be relatively rare, but it's, in my opinion, so important. We can't change anybody else's relationship to their experience. We know that. I mean, within our close intimate relationships, we may not know that—we keep trying—but you can't. But we can work with understanding our own. And then that's what we can bring to the world: who we are and how we respond and how we relate. And it does make a difference. So it's so important what we do.

When I was telling some of these guys what I was going to talk about tonight, they asked, "What are you talking about?" I said, "Oh, you know, awareness and Dachau." That's kind of a leap, isn't it? But I don't think it's a leap. At all, I don't think it's a leap. I think that's what this world is. And what we're doing here isn't just some intellectual, interesting thing we're doing because we have a few months. This is really the heart of freedom and suffering, not only for ourselves, but for what we can bring to the world.

And I say that because hopefully when you touch into that for yourself, if you believe it—you don't have to believe it, it's up to you—that gives me, when I remember that, when I believe that, when I know it's true, the courage that it takes to keep waking up into this moment. Because at least fifty percent of the time, it's not going to be a pleasant moment. There are phases when there's more pleasant than unpleasant. But if you think awakening is about getting more pleasant moments and fewer unpleasant moments, you can throw that idea out the window. Because that's really where these deep habits come from.

And it sounds so clinical and technical. How can the sense of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral lead to concentration camps? That's the genius of the Buddha, in my humble opinion—that he was brilliant and obviously had quite a bit of mindfulness, that he could really see this moment-to-moment way the mind was working and the cause and effect relationship. But we don't have to be the Buddha. We can take what we've learned and then just take it on trial and look in our experience and see: Is it so? Does this happen for me? As I said, it's on a smaller scale, but it's the same habits. And they're just as strong.

So we really need this ardency, this commitment, this courage to show up with this simple, non-judging, committed awareness. Our path isn't to make ourselves different. Awareness is our path. This pure, simple

awareness of what is.

I know you're probably all familiar with this quotation. It just kind of turns things on their head, the Buddha. I know you know this: "Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, but it is colored by the attachments that visit it." And I say the attachments, the aversions, the kleshas, the torments, the distortions of mind. It is colored, this luminous mind, by the attachments that visit it—that *visit* it. "This, unlearned people do not really understand, and so they do not cultivate the mind. Luminous is this mind, brightly shining, and it is free of the attachments that visit it. This, the noble follower of the way really does understand, and so for them, there is cultivation of the mind."

To me, that kind of turns our unexamined assumptions of the world on their head. What I'm calling unexamined assumptions, what the robot mind acts on, what the normal world acts on. You want something?

Get it. Greed is good, right? If there's wanting, that means you need it. If you get it, you'll be happy. And that's just the normal way of things.

With unpleasant experience, naturally there's ill will and aversion, or anger, or fear. What else? Unpleasant is bad and pleasant is good—that's just the unexamined assumption about things. And if something is neither pleasant nor unpleasant, well, we just don't even notice it. That's delusion.

The other aspect of delusion, and again the unexamined assumption, is that basically it's all about me—what we call identification. The pleasantness, we want it because it gratifies me. Unpleasant, ill will comes up because it's not nice for me. And even neutral—it's like, I'm bored, I need something to happen. Because it's a little scary if there's not something to react to. Then there's no me to really suffer.

So what this quotation is saying is that the attachments—which I'm calling greed, hatred, and delusion—they visit the luminous nature of a moment of awareness, a moment of consciousness. But they do not touch it, color it, stain it, harm it in any way. But the kleshas—the greed, the wanting, the aversion, the fear, the me, me, me—are just basically so much louder, you could say. So much more obvious. We're so much more trained to give all our interest and energy to that, that that's where we go.

We forget to notice, "Oh, greed is like this." Well, that's not—what good is that? Greed is like this. Give me a break. Ill will. Ugh, ill will feels like this. Yeah, well, something better should be happening than that. We want to get in, focus on the experience, focus on what we can get, focus on what we can get rid of.

Turn around. What we're doing here is turning around and recognizing a moment of awareness, a moment of pure conscious awareness. That's all. It's not about changing the experience. It's just about re-recognizing, over and over and over and over, mindful awareness and the steadiness as we're doing. That's what we're doing here. I'm sure you know—anything we're talking about is trying to support us to do.

At first it's some work, and we forget. And we don't know how to just let awareness notice what's happening. We think we have to do it. That's why it's so exhausting. You're trying to relax and be present with just this. No, not this—this. I'm trying to be present with the breath. No, not that way, this way, right? No, I don't want to be present. If I was really present, this wouldn't be happening. This would be happening, right? And then you wonder, how come we're all knotted up?

Awareness is awareness of—doesn't matter. Whatever's arising does not stain or color or tear or damage awareness or mindfulness in any way. In any way. That's what's turning it on its head, so to speak. Because the moments of mindful awareness, they're not flashy. Much more subtle than all this stuff that's going on—beautiful, ugly, lovely, whatever.

It's just much more subtle. But it's available in any moment, regardless of whatever experience is happening. Pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Sense of self, not sense of self. Sense of self is just another arising experience in a moment.

So our practice is really to strengthen this interest. That's why Joseph was talking about last night—ardency, clearly knowing, mindfulness. Then whatever is arising, as the mindfulness develops... it's difficult in the beginning, but gradually we learn how to just be here for this moment, be here at this moment, with a little less striving. And you find magically the awareness starts to get a momentum of its own. If you're doing metta practice, it's the same. The awareness of the metta starts to get a momentum of its own. And in that more steady awareness—not 100% steady, as Sally said, but more steady—wisdom, paññā, arises by itself.

It's not our job to figure out what wisdom is, how it should arise, and make it come. No way. Because we can only think about what we already know, or what we've heard, or what we think wisdom should be. Actually, it would be helpful if you look in your mind and see what thoughts you have about what wisdom should be, so you know what not to believe. Because any thought is too limited. Any thought is too limited. So our doorway to wisdom, our doorway, is just this simple, steady awareness that allows for accurate recognition of the way things are in this moment to arise.

The habits of wanting that come with pleasant—we're caught in them, but they're fairly observable, no? At times when the mind is somewhat quiet, we can see we're not really wanting unpleasant experience. Just noticing: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thoughts, moods—they can have a little tinge, as the Buddha said, of being pleasant or unpleasant or neither one to us. We mostly don't notice this. It's a feeling, a mental quality. It's not like a thing in the experience. But we experience any sense experience with just that tinge. It's quick, it's gone, it's very fleeting.

And the habits are so strong that when it's pleasant, the mind just leans in a little bit, once more. And that assumption—oh, this is right, this is good, this is the way things are supposed to be—it's just so ingrained.

With something unpleasant, a sound just comes. We experience a really strong, shocking unpleasantness,

or even just mildly unpleasant. And it's not the same for everybody. And it's not the same for any one person all the time. It's changing in every moment. A little bit unpleasant, just the tendency to shrink back a little bit. If it's stronger, a tendency to get rid of it. And if we're really lost in it, it goes into ill will or it goes into fear. We're not saying you should go and make yourself suffer or hurt. We think, of course, it's normal—it's unpleasant, it should be gone. That is just the way of things. Of course it's suffering.

And in the neutral, we just space out, go to sleep, look for more intensity, or make up a daydream.

The assumption is that it's these experiences that are in the way of peace or happiness or freedom, right? And I don't have to tell you that we get caught in the same patterns in our meditation, do I? I talk about this stuff all the time. On a mental level, I really know it, but that's not enough. On a cellular level, sometimes I really know it. And then the times that I don't really know it—because everything is only this moment—I find I'm practicing away, or I'm in my life, and all of a sudden I'm suffering, I'm struggling, and I go, what's going on? And then I realize, oh, I think this thing shouldn't be happening.

There's a teacher, not a Buddhist teacher, in California—Byron Katie.

She has a great line. She says, "When you fight with reality, you lose." It shouldn't be happening—but it's happening. This is what's happening. Oh, it's like this. And then it's okay.

The block to the freedom, the peace, the ease—the natural peace and ease, this luminous mind—that's what turned it on its head. What if, as Ajahn Amaro says, this luminous mind, the natural peace and ease of mind, is what's really natural? We just don't remember to notice it. And the kleshas, the attachments that visit, that color, that seem to block the natural peace and ease—they're adventitious. They come and go. We don't need to give them all the attention. We can notice them, but come back and turn around and notice the awareness, the natural peace and ease in this moment. We can really learn to shift.

And so when the Buddha says that for those unlearned people there's no cultivation of the mind, you're just like a victim. It's unpleasant—it's bad, what can I do? It's pleasant—I need more, I can't get it, what can I do? And it's all about me. There's no way out of that. But this is offering us a chance to really turn that on its head and explore.

So the work of our mind, the work of meditation, is to see both how the mind's working when the natural peace and ease is observable, accessible—and when it's not, what's going on? How does suffering arise in the mind? How does it cease? We can see this moment after moment. When we get caught in hating the suffering and taking it personally and blaming ourselves, we're missing—just in that moment we're missing—oh, look how it works. But then you're blaming yourself, and suddenly you go, "Oh, blaming myself is like this. That's aversion." And here it is again. Natural peace and ease available. That's our path.

So the assumptions that pleasant is good, unpleasant is bad, neutral we don't see, and it's all about me—they're not subtle. And we do get caught. But in some ways, I think they're easy to recognize. Sometimes they're easy to recognize. It's certainly workable.

But an even more profound and subtle level of the way that these kleshas, these distortions of mind, work when we're not aware of them is this: when there's wanting, greed in the mind and we're not aware of it in a moment of consciousness; when there's fear or aversion and we're not aware that it's there; when there's delusion, confusion, and we're not aware that it's there—it actually colors perception so that we do not perceive what's happening in this moment accurately.

And that's when we talk about the delusion of "it's all about me," that I'm the separate, lasting, temporal entity. It's not like that's an idea we can talk ourselves out of. I bet you've tried. Doesn't work, does it? In fact, the more you think about it—"Yes, yes, I really get it. It's all conditions. It's all just arising. We're all part of the great net of Indra, and there's no separation here. Therefore, from now on, I will just respond with compassion, knowing that we're one"—and then, you know, two minutes later somebody gets in front of you in line and you're like, "I can't believe—oh, I'm responding with compassion, responding with—" and then, "Why can't I respond with compassion? I'm so greedy, I'm so deluded, I'm so selfish," and then you're beating yourself up. All this in service of seeing that there's no self, right? Because it comes right back, recycling it all around me, me, me.

Because it's not something we can talk ourselves out of. It's a deeply rooted moment-to-moment perception—because there's only moment to moment. It's the perception that without wisdom, we don't perceive accurately.

We cannot will ourselves to perceive accurately, because we don't even know that we're not perceiving accurately.

There's a famous quotation from Einstein that exactly fits this. He wrote: "A human being is a part of a whole called by us 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. She experiences herself, her thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of consciousness." It's exactly that—an optical delusion of consciousness that we're something existing in time and space, separate from other things. "This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for the few people nearest to us." He goes on to say, "Our task is to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

But I would also add that the simplicity and commitment to moment-to-moment pure awareness—when it's possible, and when it's not, in the next moment we remember again—also frees us from this optical delusion, from this prison. Because the prison is a delusion of recognizing wrongly. The genius of the Buddha was to see through this.

I'll give you an example of all the delusions. There's something called the four agati, the four wrong courses of behavior or prejudice, from the Vinaya, from the rules of the monks in the Pali canon. The first is chandagati, which is prejudice or seeing wrongly that leads to wrong action caused by desire, by partiality. We see wrongly—the desire causes us to perceive inaccurately, which causes us to have prejudice, which causes us to make decisions that aren't based on the way things really are. That

limitation, that optical delusion. Dosagati is the same thing—prejudice caused by hatred, enmity, ill will. Mohagati is prejudice caused by delusion, by not seeing clearly. And the fourth, bhayagati, is fear—prejudice and wrong action, wrong choices, wrong decisions caused by fear.

When you say it, this is kind of obvious, isn't it? When we're really afraid, doesn't everything look fearful? And even if you tell yourself it's not, it's the actual perception. You really can't tell what's what. They say that in the Sotapanna stage, when practitioners have a first taste of awakening, those four prejudices are seen through.

The genius of the Buddha was recognizing that mohagati, delusion, really underlies all of them—continuing to have that optical delusion of me, the center of everything. Don't judge it, but notice how it acts when it's here, when it's not. How any sense experience immediately becomes "me hearing." Or "what does that sound mean about me?" You see somebody walking in the distance and right away it's like, "Oh, they're walking better than me. What does that mean?" Or they're sitting: "Oh, I'm sitting better than them." Or, "Oh, that's a really pretty pair of socks. I wish I had them. Oh, I'm so greedy." Me, me, me, me. Just noticing that.

The genius of the Buddha was to see through this. And in the moments when there's not that me and other, when there's just not me as the center of things, there's accurate recognition. It happens by itself. We can't will it, but it happens quite naturally because the perception, the clarity, the awareness isn't colored by confusion. But we can't do it from some ideal, even with the best of intentions.

There's a great story I heard on the radio. They were talking about economic policy of enlightened self-interest, which as we know doesn't actually work. But they were using this example, which I loved. Apparently some footbridge had been built recently over the Thames River in London, a big footbridge. Soon after it opened, hundreds of people were walking over it—maybe right after it opened, just getting used to it. The radio said it was like two hundred or three hundred or four hundred people on this bridge. And the whole bridge started to really shake. It was like too many people on this bridge. Everyone got scared, and each person did what seemed like the appropriate thing to do—the bridge was shaking this way, so each person stepped over that way. All four hundred of them stepped over that way, which of course made the whole thing worse.

You're acting from the best of intentions, but it's limited by just me. And we can't will ourselves out of that. In a moment of sampajañña, what Joseph was talking about last night—clear comprehension, the whole big context, mindfulness in context—would say, "Oh, what's going on here?"

It's shaking. Some would go that way because it's not this reference point of "me," which is our natural reference point. So that's an example of sampajanya and how it happens quite naturally when we're not locked into this optical delusion.

I just wanted to offer this. I read in a great book that came out recently from Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn

Pasanno, who are two Western monks in the Ajahn Chah tradition. They brought out this book—it's a compilation of sutta references and some material from Ajahn Chah. It's called *The Island*, and it's all about aspects of awakening, of nibbana. It's quite wonderful. They've done a great job of compiling all these references, and of course it's for free distribution if you write to them.

This is from Ajahn Chah talking about, in his very pithy, earthy way, the relationship between sati, sampajanya, and paññā—sati being mindfulness, sampajanya the clearly knowing, and paññā wisdom, that Joseph talked about last night. I liked it. It sort of fits in here.

He says sati is like the hand—like our hand that simply picks things up and cognizes them. Sampajanya, clearly knowing, is like the arm. The arm is what enables the hand to reach for objects, to move objects around. So sampajanya, the clearly knowing, refers to seeing an object in its bigger context, how it relates to its surroundings. And paññā, he says, is like the life source—it's like the body. For him, paññā is the seeing of things in terms of anicca, the impermanent nature; dukkha, the unreliable, unsatisfactory nature; and anatta, that there's no intrinsic, self-existing, separate entity here. Seeing things in that way—that's paññā.

He says that while a hand and arm have their functions, without the body they are powerless. And it's like that with sati and sampajanya. That's what we practice. The paññā—seeing clearly, knowing, seeing through our optical delusions of permanence, of "this thing is going to make me happy," of separate entity—that happens naturally and spontaneously because that's just the nature of things. We don't have to create it. It's how it is. We're just setting up the conditions where we stop feeding the habits, and instead we feed the awareness. And it allows the Dhamma to reveal itself. In that self-revealing Dhamma, our heart and mind is free.

There's still unpleasant in the world. Don't think there's not. The suffering, though—the suffering doesn't have to be there in that way. And we can experience this just in a moment. Whether you're hurting, or you're down on yourself, or you're just feeling lousy—in that moment: "Oh, feeling lousy is like this." And all that extra just goes away.

Someone was telling me about feeling really sick, and when they were feeling really caught—trying to be mindful of it, but really caught, and knowing they were caught, feeling kind of reactive to the symptoms and the physical experience, noticing that struggle. And then at another point, just completely opened into: "Oh, heat is like this, tingling is like this, burning is like this"—not even getting put together in a sense of "I'm sick," but just experience. There was no more suffering about it. And then there were even moments when you couldn't even say you were sick. You didn't even feel sick at all. There are moments when you're sick, moments when you're not, and it's just what it is. That's quite knowable for all of us.

This wisdom, to me, is like such a huge relief—to know that with the steadiness of awareness, wisdom is inevitable because nature is how it is. We don't have to create it, thank God. In fact, we only make a mess when we try to create it. All we have to do is settle back, bring our interest, our love, our commitment, our

courage, and just let it rip. It's ripping anyway. All we're doing is just showing up and being here with it.

Ajahn Chah says: be the knower, the knower of experience, not the owner of experience. Just loving the knowing, loving the awareness. It's like a Tai Chi move from being caught in this.

Oh, it's like this. That's John Semedo's language. "It's like this." It's helped me so much—in daily life, in meditation, it's the same. You're all caught. You're liking. You're not liking. You can't even say what's happening. But you know something is going on that you wish wasn't. What is it? Oh, I don't know. It's like this. That's all. Stop trying to fix or own or be or figure it out. It's like this. It's really powerful.

So I just want to end with another statement from Ajahn Chah, which I'm dropping in for your reflection. Just see how you think about it. He says in his way: samsara and nibbana are like the front and back of the hand. They happen in the same place and are known by the same awareness.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.