Am I OK?

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 54:16

So here we are on what's about the tenth day or so of the retreat. We've sat up here a lot in the mornings and evenings, giving instructions and exhortations about practice, offering many options—talking about awareness of the body, of the breath, using the breath to calm ourselves, being aware of emotions, moods, and mind states. This morning, or was it yesterday, Joseph gave the more subtle meditation object of vedana, or feeling tone. All of these are venues for our mindfulness, ways we can develop this continuity of awareness.

But what's actually happening most of the time, especially in the non-formal meditation periods? What's your predominant experience? Are you thinking a lot?

This is what happens. This is what we see in our practice. We have this intention to be present. We follow these instructions. And again and again, the mind goes off into thought, into fantasy—particularly, if not entirely, thoughts of past and future. Sometimes we have thoughts of the present. That's actually a bit of an advanced practice, thinking about what's happening now. But it's still thinking—thinking about our practice, thinking about the breath. Still thinking.

I wanted to talk about this tonight so we can be really honest about what's actually happening, so we don't deny that this is a big part of many of our experiences on retreat, and also so you get a sense you're not alone. If you're feeling that everyone else is zooming around in blissful peace and quiet—I don't think so. I actually think there's a lot of this going on.

In meditation, we get to see the nature of our mind. It's a little humbling, isn't it? We try to follow these instructions, try to sit down and be calm and quiet, and zoom, zoom, zoom—off we go.

One of my favorite cartoons recently is from that strip *Rhymes with Orange*. The little subtitle reads "As Medicine Advances." The scenario shows a patient sitting in the doctor's examining room, wearing that thin paper dress they make you put on so you know who's got the position of authority in the relationship. The doctor has come in with a clipboard and is obviously reading the results of a test. The doctor says, "The MRI confirms it. Your mind is full of dumb and repetitive thoughts."

We don't need an MRI to see that. We just sit here and the mind goes around and around and around. It's what the mind does.

Now, in speaking about it like this, I don't want to give the impression that thoughts are the enemy, that a good meditation means getting rid of thoughts, being blank, being in some kind of zoned-out place. It's not that at all. Rather, it's about really seeing the power of our thoughts.

You might remember in my talk a week ago, I started with that quote from the Dhammapada: "Mind is the forerunner of all things, mind is chief." This points to the fact that through our thoughts we create our world, we create the reality we live in. So it speaks to the importance of looking at the very nature of these thoughts, because they're so important.

What we see when we look at the realm of thought is that it's often really chaotic—this jumble, this push and pull, this field of the kilesas, this relentless alternating of greed and aversion with a good dose of delusion thrown in for good measure. This is what we're in most of the time.

I was thinking about how we can go back and forth so quickly and easily between wanting and not wanting, greed and aversion. I was reminded of one of my favorite childhood stories from a long time ago. Do you remember Dr. Doolittle, the man who could speak to animals? He had this amazing menagerie of creatures he had relationships with. One was the pushmi-pullyu—an antelope-like being that had a head at both ends. They were always arguing: Which way should we go? What should we do? Where should we eat? What should happen now?

This is what it's like in our minds a lot of the time—this tug of war, this struggle between wanting and not wanting.

Now, the thing is, this is actually pretty normal. This is the human condition. We've had years of practice thinking this way, relating to our experience in this way. It caught my attention the other morning when Joseph, responding to a question, said, "Distraction is the habit of the mind." We've trained in distraction. We've got PhDs in distraction. We've spent years cultivating this kind of mind that goes back and forth about everything we experience.

Actually, a few of us teachers were talking the other day about how hard retreats are, and really appreciating your practice, the sincerity of your practice in settling in for all these weeks. Retreats are difficult mainly because of the craziness of our minds, this pushing and pulling that's always happening—especially in the beginning of practice, but really in the beginning of any retreat. And by "beginning," I'm taking a very big picture view of what that means. I don't mean a few days or years. I mean the long-term view. It's tough.

Joseph said he can still remember the first time his mind settled down a little, and he had that taste of peace or calm. He just said, "Ah, this is what they're talking about." It was such a revelation, such a difference from his normal way of being with his mind, with his thoughts.

So this is what we work with a lot in our practice. It's the nature of the mind to think. Again, it's not that this is bad or wrong. We can't expect it to stop or change. The ears hear, the eyes see, the mind thinks. But here, as meditators on a retreat like this, we can begin to get curious about what we're thinking about—especially on a retreat where we don't actually need to think about very much.

How much thinking do you really, literally need to do to get through a day here? It's not very much, is it?

Wake up, go sit, shower, eat. No one's expecting you to write an editorial about current events or a synopsis of your day, or have some witty repartee to offer at the next meal, because it's in silence. You don't need to be creating and coming up with opinions and ideas the way we often do in our lives. Whether we need to or not out there, here we really don't need to.

Joseph has this great line: "Nothing is worth thinking about." Two meanings to that, obviously. But just to start looking at how much we fill our minds up, how much is extra, how much is just this relentless pushing and pulling—greed and aversion and delusion cycling around in our experience.

So we start to look at the very nature of thought. What is a thought? It's a string of words in the mind, perhaps an image. Some people are more visual than others. We hear it, don't we? It's curious sometimes to even wonder: whose voice is that? Is it our voice? It's not quite our voice. A thought is actually just a blip of energy in the mind.

What's interesting about thoughts is they have the power that we choose to give them. If we believe them, as the Dhammapada says, they create our world. If we notice that they're there and let them go, they're like a stone falling into a pool—they just drop in and disappear. We have this choice about cultivating a different relationship to thought, once we get curious and start to see how much of it is extraneous, isn't necessary for our moment-to-moment functioning.

When we look at thoughts and start to see them more clearly, pay attention as we do in meditation, it seems that they're very random, and certainly that we don't have any control over them. They're just arising, they're coming. It's like, where did that come from? But there actually is a conditioned nature to them. We might not be able to understand it, because it works through all the circuitous pathways of the mind and the little things that can trigger a stream of association. We might not understand it, but there is a lawful nature to thoughts—they are arising out of our conditioning.

You probably know this: if you have an experience and aversion arises and you dwell on it and think about it, it's likely the next thought will be an aversive thought. We can see how they get conditioned. Sometimes we can track a sequence of thoughts. You're sitting there thinking, how on earth did I end up thinking about this? And then you trace it back: oh yes, I thought of that, and then that. There are leaps from one thought to another. There was a reason, but from where you started and where you ended up, it's worlds apart.

I'm not encouraging you to do this—I actually think it's quite futile most of the time—but sometimes it's fascinating to see how we weave this world out of very disparate bits of information that we dredge up from our memory banks. Just to see that this is what the mind does. It's like a machine that captures all this information, tracks it, and keeps throwing it back up—especially when we're not asking for it. You're trying to remember something and it's gone, and then an hour later up it pops from the retrieval mechanism.

But what's more important about thoughts and the nature of thought is to begin to understand—and you've probably seen this already, it's really rather obvious—that whatever is unresolved for us, whatever has uncertainty about it, this will come up in our meditation. It's inevitable. This is just the nature of our experience.

And our willingness to be with this uncertainty, this unresolved experience, this worry, anxiety, whatever it is—our willingness to be with this, to get curious about this. As Pema Chödrön said (I quoted her in my last talk also), practice is learning to stay, to be with these places of tension in our experience. Willingness to be with that is what allows the practice to deepen and unfold. Unwillingness to be with it, or identifying, making a story out of that, is what leads to restlessness, what leads to this tumbling of thought, these floods of thinking.

And as I was thinking about this, I really saw that the core aspect or movement of mind, the series of thoughts that cause this type of thinking, this obsessive thinking, this flood of thinking, are these variations of the thought: Am I okay? Am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay? This is actually, to a large extent, at the core—it's the seed energy behind this fluttering nature, these floods of thoughts that can come.

So much of our energy, our time, is spent pondering, wondering, exploring, worrying about these questions. Am I okay? Will I be okay? Was I okay? Encapsulated in that is all of our regrets about the past and our anxiety about the future. And again, this is the push and pull that we often find ourselves in.

Now this tendency of mind, of course, we didn't invent it in the twenty-first century, or the twentieth, or the nineteenth, or any thousands of years before that. It's been a part of the human condition for a long time. The Buddha talked about this a lot, saw it as very central to our suffering—as really a cause of suffering. He said this kind of thinking, this kind of dwelling on our experience, leads to an increase of desire, leads to the solidification of a sense of self, and leads to an increase of ignorance.

There's this great passage in the Majjhima Nikāya, sutta number two, the Sabbāsava Sutta, which goes like this. Pay attention, it's a little complex:

This is how she attends unwisely. Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what did I become in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I become in the future? Or else she is inwardly perplexed about the present thus: Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where will it go?

The Buddha called this unwise attention, and said that it leads to all kinds of suffering—that the unarisen taints arise. And taints is another variation of the kilesas, of the greed, aversion, and delusion. And arisen taints get stronger through this paying of attention.

Yet it's what we do a lot of the time. How was I? How am I? How will I be? We see this mind. And it's kind

of deep in our culture.

As I was thinking about who I could give as a modern-day example of this kind of mind, this worrying, fretting kind of mind, I thought of Woody Allen. He's kind of our exemplar of the neurotic mind in our culture. So I found this little quote. It's a little different, but it's kind of how we dwell on things. You don't need to listen as closely as when I read the Buddha, but it still bears close listening. This is a direct quote from Woody Allen:

To love is to suffer. To avoid suffering one must not love. But then one suffers from not loving. Therefore to love is to suffer. Not to love is to suffer. To suffer is to suffer. To be happy is to love.

To be happy, then, is to suffer. But suffering makes one unhappy. Therefore, to be unhappy, one must love, or love to suffer, or suffer from too much happiness. I hope you're getting this down.

But this is what we do, isn't it? We obsess, we worry. What about this? And if I do this, then that has that impact, and then I could do this, but no, what about that? And I did that in the past. This is the nature of our experience. We're always trying to figure it out. We're trying to fix it. We're trying to fix ourselves through these machinations of the mind.

Has it worked yet? Yet we keep doing it. It's all we know to do sometimes—to gnaw on past and future, trying to figure it out. And so we see how much in meditation our mind is going between these two. It's a huge cause of restlessness.

I actually think that restlessness—not accepting what is—is one of the biggest hindrances for Westerners. You know, of all the hindrances, I actually think restlessness is the one. If we could really work skillfully with that, it would be huge for us. I've seen in my practice in Asia and being with Asian teachers that they don't seem to have so much of that tendency of mind. They're much more accepting of themselves and their situation. And if their teacher says, "Sit down and stop thinking," they do it. That doesn't work for us here. We just have this obsession with our experience.

I really see that restlessness, in a way, is both a cause and an effect of all the hindrances. And I think this is interesting or helpful for me to see, because you need to know all the aspects of these experiences to be able to work with them skillfully. Just see the amount of restlessness that not getting what you want causes. The amount that getting what you don't want causes. Yes, there's the aversion, there's the wanting, but there's restlessness there too—some level, whether superficial or quite deep, not allowing us to settle. And of course, doubt. Central to doubt is restlessness: not being able to land, not having confidence. And so we keep skimming off. It brings agitation to the mind and the body.

We need to look at this pervasive nature of restlessness and really start to know it so that it doesn't push us off our cushion, our meditation, our mindfulness.

I see this restlessness woven through so many of the ways we relate to our moment-to-moment

experience. How often are you waiting for the next thing to happen? You're sitting, waiting for the period to end. You're sitting, wishing you could be walking. The bell rings, you go out and walk. How long does it take before you start thinking, "Boy, I wish I was sitting instead of walking. Sitting is much better than walking"? You come in and sit, and you want to get up and walk again. This is the mind doing this movement over and over again—dissatisfaction.

How many mind moments do you spend waiting for lunch? And then lunch comes, and you're not quite fully present because you're already thinking about going and having a nap or going for a walk or whatever you like to do. There's this constant not actually being present for what is. We're searching here and there for a resolution to this problem that we feel, this suffering that we feel, and we don't actually know what the problem is or what we're looking for. We just know that it's not here. It's not in this moment. It's somewhere else. This vague sense of dissatisfaction, things not being quite right.

It's really important to see if that's there for you—to recognize it, to use your mindfulness to understand it the way we do: naming it, feeling it in the body, seeing the thoughts that are associated with it, just getting to see its nature and knowing that it's not the voice of wisdom. It's not what will lead you to more presence. It's actually going to take you off your meditation seat.

Because I've been thinking about writing this talk and this whole area of restlessness, I realized that I had some insight around it for myself. For me, like all of you, we've come away from home.

I mean, I'm away from home for the six weeks that I'm teaching here, and I realized that underlying my being here was this sense of being in suspension—not quite limbo, but suspended. My life is back in California, and I'm here, and it's kind of this interruption of my life. I'm not quite fully here. This is just something that I'm doing, but I keep thinking back to California, to life there, my friends and connections.

And I just had this realization, actually this morning as I was sitting here, that that's suffering. That my life is here. It was while I was sitting here—my life is here, sitting in this meditation, feeling my knees on the cushion, taking the next breath.

It sounds obvious. It's what we talk about all the time: being here, being here now. But there are ways we delude ourselves about these very obvious truths. And as I said, for me it was an insight that allowed me to become more fully present here and really realize: this is my life. My life is wherever I am. My home has to be wherever I am.

Maybe you're feeling a little bit the same, that this retreat is kind of an interlude in your life, a stepping out of your life. This is your life. We need to be alive for it and know it. And I know you've had those moments. You feel the beauty and the power there is when we connect in that way. This is it. There is no other "it" elsewhere—in the future, in the past, somewhere else. It's really here. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, we get to experience the miracle of mindfulness that reveals our experience in this way.

As we pay more attention to our mind, as we get a little clearer, a little more connected, it can actually

seem that our practice is increasing this restlessness, these movements of mind. I don't think that's true. I think it's just revealing what's so often there. Restlessness is actually really endemic in our culture—this busy, connected, wired, instant, "got to happen yesterday" culture. It's a culture of restlessness.

A guy mentioned this statistic about teenagers these days sending three thousand text messages a month, sending or receiving. That's a hundred or more a day. We were talking about it at lunch, and someone said they'd just read an article about college-age students who've gone back to school. There are students sitting in their dorm rooms trying to work out their new living arrangements with their roommates—on their beds, texting each other. There's just something about that which has a restlessness in it, just that thumb thing. It's a culture of restlessness.

So we really need to get curious about this. I started thinking about restlessness and how endemic it was a couple of years ago. I was seeing how pervasive it was for me and in the people I talked to. One of the things you might know is that restlessness is one of the last fetters to go before enlightenment. In our system, there are four stages of enlightenment, and restlessness—a very subtle kind of restlessness, not the gross kind—is one of the last to go. So it's really very deep within us. Getting to know it in your practice, being able to work with it, see its nature, see its presence—this is really important, really helpful for most of us.

For me, a key is seeing its suffering nature. This very quality can be unpleasant in the body, in the mind. It doesn't allow us to find ease or peace. It doesn't allow us to settle. And it keeps us superficial. I keep saying this: restlessness is like a pinball machine. You're always ricocheting off into the next thing, looking forward or into the past. Restlessness keeps us superficial.

Then, as we start to see that, we need to be aware of our relationship to it. We can often be really averse to it, really upset with it. It shouldn't be like this. I shouldn't have restlessness. Well, hello—it's here. It's here. It's our reality.

We need to practice with it. So we get curious about it. What is restlessness actually like? What's its energy like? We can tell ourselves a story about it where it's very unpleasant, intolerable. But it is just energy. We can know it like any other experience.

In this process of getting curious, if we make a big story about it, label it as restlessness that we can't tolerate, of course the mind will reinforce that. But if we get curious about it and see it as energy, can we use that energy for practice? Because restlessness often happens as an uplifting kind of energy. Can we actually use that? Is there any pleasantness in it?

We were talking about this very thing this morning, how to work with it. Someone suggested seeing if there's any pleasantness in the energy. It's interesting, again, how our labeling of something really determines what our experience is. We say it's unpleasant, and by God, it's unpleasant—we're going to reinforce that. So we get curious about it. If we have the sense it's not okay, it won't be okay. If we get

curious about it, it's just another place to explore with our mindfulness.

So there's working with the energy itself, but really at the heart of this talk what I want to keep pointing to is: what's underlying the restlessness? What's this issue that's always bubbling up there? As I said, for me it's some variation of "Am I okay? Am I okay now? Am I okay before, in the future, whatever?" I really see this as a seed issue.

This reminded me of the piece of grit that gets in the oyster—the one that actually ends up making the pearl. In the beginning, it's an irritant. We don't like it, and that's what causes the restlessness. It really is preventing us from deepening because we're always going off in different directions; the mind moves into past and future so easily, so quickly. But if we're willing to stay with this—both the energy of the restlessness and also looking a little deeper into what this core issue is, this underlying issue—this can lead to a profound deepening in our practice as we become more able to be present. This is the pearl that gets created out of this initial irritant.

Anything, if we turn to it with mindfulness, can lead to understanding. This particular area, if we start to really look at this core question—am I okay?—can lead to a profound acceptance of who we are and what our experience is. This is so essential for our practice.

As I've been saying, out of this issue, "Am I okay," the mind moves in three ways. I was going to say main ways, but it's pretty much what the mind does. I think it's just three ways: past, present, and future. What else is there? I want to talk a little bit about all three.

A huge one for us is the mind going into the past, just bringing up stuff from our history. It's actually a natural process that happens in meditation, and there's something important happening in this. As I said, whatever is unresolved—whether it's a huge life issue, deep trauma, or the smallest thing, the littlest incident—if there's some way emotionally or psychologically that we haven't come to terms with it, haven't fully accepted it, this will come up for us. Whether it's something that happened yesterday or in the long distant past that we thought was well over and done with.

These experiences can bring up a whole range of difficult emotions: guilt, shame, fear, anger, blame, judgment, irritation. For many of us, we go through this process we call a life review, where over time every experience of this nature, every unsettled, difficult experience comes up, and we have to experience it again.

It's the work of a lot of therapy, but I think there's a real wisdom to the way it happens in meditation—this very organic way where the material, the memories, we don't go looking for them, no one's telling us to talk about them. But in this way, when we're ready, this material surfaces. Sometimes memories are overpowering and you need to work really skillfully with them. I'm not talking about needing to go into these things and bearing down on them. Really trust the practice. Talk with your teacher if you have strong memories coming up that are challenging, difficult, because this can be an important place of

healing and learning—but it needs to be worked with skillfully.

It can be on a lesser level than that too. Times we weren't there for a friend, kind of disappeared from their life when they needed us. Or we were mean to our sister when she was ten years old.

We didn't let her play with us. Or something quite recent. Ways we weren't there for ourselves. Many of us have had the experience of actually abandoning ourselves, and there can be a lot of regret, remorse, and shame about that.

It can feel at times like we've gone through this—we've been on many retreats, been through this process—but I see there's always new things to add to this list. Whatever is unresolved in my life, when I sit down to meditate, whether it's just what email I need to send or what business needs to be taken care of, it will come up. And the longer we sit, the more space there is for this kind of process.

It can be things recently happening on this retreat, or what was happening just before you came on retreat. You don't leave your life at the door here. It's all here with you. And if it's unresolved, if there's some lack of acceptance or some uncertainty about an experience, it will be here sooner or later with you on this retreat.

Right here on retreat, all of our different interactions with your fellow yogis—the way we can get irritated with them, impatient with them, annoyed at them—we can feel the impact of that. And the way we judge ourselves, the way we're critical of ourselves, we can feel that coming up.

So we have a memory, and then there's a response to it. I think it's interesting to notice, again, as part of the mindfulness, part of getting curious. What we often do in mindfulness is unpack experience. When we take it as a solid thing, it's not very workable. But if we can see the layers of experience, the nature of experience, the components of experience, then it becomes workable.

Fear, for example. Fear is just thoughts in the mind and a feeling in the body. But if we get caught in it, believe it, it's really difficult. In this way, with everything, we start to unpack.

So notice what kind of energy comes with these memories. Is it a downward kind of energy of sadness, regret, shame, or guilt? Or does the energy move up? Is it more anger, irritation, fierceness about the memory? We pay attention to that and respond appropriately in our mindfulness.

I really see there's a whole process we need to go through in working with these memories from the past, and we can't circumvent it. We might often think that we should not have to go through this, but I've seen for myself and so many other people that it's really necessary. We need to acknowledge what's happened, accept what's happened, forgive whoever we need to forgive—ourself or other—and then develop compassion.

These four parts are so important. The acknowledgment is really just recognizing that whatever happened, happened. Recognizing the unskillful nature, the harmful nature of whatever we did to

ourselves or to others, and not denying or minimizing it. The fact that it's up means it's meaningful for us. We don't need to say, "Oh, I should be over that by now," or "I should be able to deal with this," or "I should have gotten beyond that." It's here. Let's pay attention to it. It's part of this little seed of restlessness.

We need to accept that whatever happened, happened. Yes, I did that. Or that happened to me. They did that to me. She said that to me. This is the acceptance.

And in that, we really need to understand the difference between guilt and shame on one hand, and remorse on the other. In guilt and shame, there's an identification with the action as being me—that I'm the one who's bad or wrong. And there's always a tendency to want to hide away. This is not so helpful, really not a skillful way to relate.

Remorse looks at the same event and says, "Yes, I did that," but sees the action as unskillful, not the doer, and makes a determination to learn from that, to have more understanding, to have acceptance about that experience. Remorse can be helpful. We can learn from remorse.

Guilt and shame tends to keep us stuck.

And then forgiveness. There's this great quote: "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." How much of your time have you spent trying to redo the past? Taking back something you said, doing something you didn't do, not doing something you did do—all the if-onlys and I-should-haves. We can spend hours doing that. It's futile.

When we're ready—and again, you could give a whole talk about this; it's such a deep area—forgiveness comes when we arrive at true acceptance. What happened happened, and we let go of the resentment and the blame and the judging and the feeling victimized. We're really ready to move on.

And then compassion—really bringing a tenderness to this experience, really opening to it with love. Understanding why whatever happened happened. I saw for myself, moving through all those stages, how at first when these memories would come up I would just cringe. There was this pushing away: I don't want this, it's so horrible, it's so painful. And a lot was things I did to myself, not taking care of myself. I just couldn't understand the person who would act like that.

And then gradually there came acceptance, and then the real forgiveness. And then ultimately this sweet compassion of just: this is the human condition. That poor frightened girl or teenager, whatever she was going through—she did the best she could. So there's really a different relationship to those experiences now.

These are the four stages that I think are important to go through as experiences from the past come up. The smaller ones perhaps not so detailed, but the larger ones—the ones that really trigger us—this process is really helpful. Acknowledgment, acceptance, forgiveness, and compassion. This allows that seed worry

of "how was I in the past" to resolve a little.

And then there's the future, the other huge arena for our mind's activity. So much worry, anxiety, and planning. I don't know about you—how much time do you spend planning? I mean, planning everything. Planning how you do the laundry, planning when you pick your laundry up. What's the best time? Is it better to get there first or to get there last? Should the laundry be in bags or not in bags? All of these conundrums that we face, the challenges of yogi life—we can spend hours dwelling on them. When to take a shower? Is it better before or after, this time or that time? Planning the next hour, planning our next lifetime. How many of you have been on this retreat planning your next retreat?

We just spend hours in this mind state. This scenario, that scenario, what about this? Add that factor. What about this person? What about that? It's endless.

What kind of energy, what's the feeling in the body when you notice this kind of planning? It's agitation, isn't it? Even if what we're thinking about is somewhat good, notice what it is. Sometimes there's a real anxiety. So again, in this unpacking, see the aversion that's there, or the fear. Really notice that.

Sometimes we're thinking about things we're excited about in the future, things we want. Notice that energy. In that, there's grasping. There's a lot of wanting. And it's the actual pleasantness of the fantasy that keeps us obsessed, keeps us stuck in it.

It's really helpful when you notice these planning thoughts, these future thoughts, to notice the vedanā of them—as Joseph was talking about yesterday, the pleasantness or unpleasantness. You'll find that will be a key to just unsticking quite a bit from them.

And really, start to feel the suffering in this obsession with the future, in this fantasy of the future. It's not reality, is it? It's some imagination. For me, it was a big

I could spend hours happily in fantasy on retreat. It really makes the time go by very quickly, doesn't it? Decorating your fantasies, because you're in charge. You're running the show, and everything's kind of working out well, adding a bit of this and a bit of that.

So after one retreat, I determined that I would compare my after-retreat life with my in-retreat fantasies to see how many of them actually came true. What do you think my hit rate was, my success rate? About zero. Literally none of them came true in the way that I thought. The things that I thought I wanted to do, I didn't want to do. The conversations I thought I would have didn't happen. The way I related to things wasn't what I thought it would be. Nothing was what I was fantasizing about.

So next time I was there fantasizing, it's like, why do it? Why create these fantasy worlds that don't really have anything to do with reality? To really see that—there's a pleasantness there, but it has nothing to do with reality. And to feel the impact living in this fantasy world has on your present moment experience.

As I was saying before, compared to the great fantasy, this—you know, rice cakes for dinner, tahini and

peanut butter. What do I choose? I choose fantasy. But there's no reality there. We really need to see this obsession with this daydream. It's a dream. It's an illusion. And it takes us out of being present for what is. After a while, rice cakes start to look pretty good, actually. But if you're in your fantasy, you can't enjoy anything that's here. So really see that, see what it does.

And then there's the present moment, really the heart of "am I okay." I think it's helpful, if this speaks to you, to get a visceral sense of that mind state, that mind moment of "am I okay?" For me, it's a little jittery because it's kind of looking around, checking out everyone else, how they're relating to me. Am I doing it right? Am I doing it as good as the others or better than the others? Am I better than yesterday? How will I be tomorrow? It's all of this agitated comparing and judging.

What do the teachers think of me? As I leave the room, what are they thinking about me? Do they talk about me? You know, when they get together... I mean, we do talk a little bit because we need to share some information. We don't talk a lot about what's going on with you. It's not the top of our priority. We care. We don't obsess.

And you can really see what you're often comparing yourself to is a made-up story. It's a made-up story of what we think. It's a made-up story about what the other yogis think about you. And we all do this, where we think everyone is noticing what we're doing. How am I walking? How much food am I taking? How long am I sitting? The truth is, most people are obsessed with themselves.

They're not paying attention to you. I hate to break this to you, but they're not paying attention to you in the way that we think they are, in the way that leads to this sense of agitation.

There's this great Zen teacher, Yvonne Rand. She's very earthy. She has this quote—it's a little strong language, but you'll forgive me, I'm just quoting her. Her line is: "I'm the piece of shit the world revolves around." And it just captures how we're often judging ourselves while simultaneously wondering, "Are they looking at me? What are they thinking about me?" Carol was saying it perfectly: "It's all about me." I hate to break it to you—it's not. Everyone's in their own world.

But to see how this obsession creates anxiety, we need to see it. We need to see this core of it, this "Am I okay?" and move to another way of relating to that question. Because it is a central question. We want to be okay. The heart of this practice is about becoming okay. But we don't get there through this restless agitation, these kinds of mind states I've been talking about.

We get there by coming into accord with reality, with things as they are. It comes about by minimizing projection and story, and actually deepening a true sense of connection—to ourselves, to our inner knowing, to others, and to reality—by knowing the truth of things and beginning to actually trust ourselves.

We have everything we need here to awaken. That's what I talked about last week. We have a mind and a body. That's all the Buddha said we need to come to awakening. And here, not only do we have a mind

and a body, we have supportive conditions. We have the retreat container. We have the teachings. We have the Dharma. It's just what we do with that.

My good friend Sylvia Boorstein, a great teacher, says her main practice is just sitting down and not telling herself stories. Not telling yourself stories—stories about yourself. How are you? How was I? How will I be? It's as simple as that. We do it by being willing to be with what's here. And even if what's here is restlessness, we can know that. We can get interested in that. We can accept that.

Of course, we need to acknowledge the places in our experience where there is contraction, where there's pushing away, where there's holding on. But it's by turning towards, going towards, getting curious about, getting interested in—this is where the shift comes. This is where the mind actually begins to become our ally rather than this source of frustration and resentment and worry and anxiety.

We don't need to be a victim of this restlessness of the mind, of this obsession with who am I and how am I and how was I and how will I be. We start trusting that. Trusting the simplest way of practice: being present, showing up. Then things can really begin to unfold in a very natural, gentle way. We don't have to push. We don't have to have an agenda. We just need to show up.

I want to finish with a really short poem by Hafez called "It Felt Love." It goes like this:

How did the rose ever open its heart and give to this world all its beauty? It felt the encouragement of light against its being. Otherwise, we all remain too frightened.

And when I read that, what I thought is that what we're feeling is the encouragement of mindfulness, allowing us to open—to open to what is true, true in both a personal sense, but also in the deepest impersonal sense, the nature of reality. And this mindfulness brings that light that allows us to unfold to the deepest places of our being.

really these core issues. And as we open to that, explore that, as we turn towards what's difficult, see the places that we contract or hold on or grasp or are filled with restlessness—as we turn towards that and explore—it leads to a deep and profound acceptance of who we are and our experience. And that is what allows the freedom that's possible in this path and this practice to be known and tasted. And the only place it's tasted is here and now. Not past, not future.

So let's just sit together.

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