Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:01:01

The subject of this evening's talk is working with difficult emotions.

The Buddha's teaching, as you know, is all about suffering and the end of suffering. When I'm in daily life, living that busy life in the world, the question of suffering seems really complicated. You can talk to people in your circle of friends and family and hear all the different situations they are dealing with and working with—there is such a range. Maybe somebody's son is using drugs and they don't know how to help. Or somebody's aging parent has contracted Alzheimer's but they don't have the money to pay for a good care facility. Or a family loses their jobs and their home in the economic downturn, and where do they turn for support? Looking more broadly, I think everybody these days tends to feel that the other political party has gone crazy—whichever political party you're from, you feel that about the other side. Or looking on a broader scale, it's just hard to believe that human beings are ruining the only planet we have to live upon through the effects of climate change. It's really disheartening.

So there are so many problems on so many levels—personal, societal, global. The question of suffering seems very complicated. But then we come into a situation like this and it gets really simple. When I'm in retreat, it seems clear there are only three things that cause us pain.

There's the body, and that's often present. Physical discomfort probably comes in a number of times during the day, and we've talked some about how to work with that.

There's emotional pain. As we start to pay attention and go through our days, we see the movement of different states—loneliness or anxiety or hopelessness or judgment—move through the mind, some of them more difficult than others.

And then being here, we're privileged to have a different kind of pain: the pain of frustrated meditation. If your mind wanders, sometimes that's really the most difficult thing in a day. "I can't stay connected to the present moment." If you were to go into the outside world and talk to the man or woman on the street, they wouldn't even notice that their mind was wandering, much less care. But here, through our aspiration, we generate a new type of dukkha. So it's a very privileged kind of pain that we enjoy—that's our third kind: wandering mind, restlessness, lack of stability, lack of concentration.

In retreat, these are the only things we really have to deal with on a difficult level: body, emotion, meditation. Really simple.

We've talked some about working with the body. We talk a lot about the craft of meditation, how to work with the third. And tonight I want to talk specifically about this middle portion—how to work with the

difficult emotions that come.

Whether we look in retreat or in outer life, this area of pain is one of the greatest we can see. In the world, we probably know a lot of people whose lives have been really affected by depression or anxiety or panic or serious loss and the grief that comes from that, self-doubt, lack of self-confidence. And in retreat too, some of our most difficult experiences are dealing with these kinds of feelings that come up for us.

When I first came into meditation, I didn't feel I knew this terrain very well. When one of these difficult states would come up—like fear or anger—the only thing I wanted to do was get rid of it. I thought, "This is not why I came to meditation. I don't want to have this be happening while I'm here on retreat. How can I make it go away?"

You're all sophisticated meditators and you know that doesn't work. In the short term, we can't just push these states aside. In the long term of practice, it's said that they do all disappear—that the very roots of them are uprooted and they never arise again. But that's a high attainment. For us, it may not happen this week, and we should probably be prepared to have them around for a while.

So the aim is not for them to go away, but rather: How can we find freedom while these states are present?

I think one of the biggest and most immediate benefits of our meditation practice, our mindfulness, is in this area. Through understanding and working with difficult states, we can immediately find a lot of freedom, both in our meditation and in our daily life. This is a very, very fruitful area for our practice.

Pema Chödrön puts it this way: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's creepy, grisly, splendid, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. This is really key. Meditation gives us the method, and the method is mindfulness—paying attention in this area and learning from the experience, learning from what we find out.

In the teaching of the Buddha, this falls into the third foundation of mindfulness as described in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. This is the foundation of the mindfulness of mind. The word we're translating as "mind" is the Pali word *citta*. Most often translated as mind, sometimes translated as heart-mind, to emphasize the fact that this word *citta* includes both emotional components as well as thinking or intellectual components. So we may translate it as mind, but in Buddhist teachings generally, mind includes both the emotional and the cognitive aspects. Don't think that when we say mind, we're just thinking about thought.

We're also including the whole range of emotions. In fact, the best word, I think, to translate *citta* is the word "psyche," because it encompasses that same whole range of thoughts and feelings.

One kind of pointer to this is that if you ask a person from Thailand where their mind is, they don't point to their head, indicating the brain. They point here, to the center of the chest, or what we call the heart center. Their word for mind is *jit*, which is derived from *citta*, and they believe that the base of the mind is in the heart center. There are many Buddhist teachings that share this same understanding—that the center of the mind is really in the center of the chest.

Just a little funny story. There's a lot of neuroscience research going on these days around meditation, and one of the foremost researchers is Richie Davidson, who heads a lab at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Richie is a longtime Vipassana meditator and really developed his approach to experiments in order to validate what he had experienced firsthand from meditation, which is a lovely thing to know. We have a meditator on this retreat who works at the university in that field and knows Richie well.

At one point, Richie was going to Dharamsala, India, to give the monks around the Dalai Lama a little taste of the kind of work and research he was doing. He couldn't take all his equipment—his basic equipment is an MRI machine, which is a little too big to ship to Dharamsala. So what he took was one of these caps studded with electrodes, which make contact with the scalp and signal the activity in the brain underneath each electrode. You get thirty or forty electrodes all sending signals to a computer, and you can get a map of where the brain activity is happening.

So there was this meeting with the Dalai Lama, Richie, and about five hundred monks. Richie modeled this leather cap studded with electrodes for them. He felt kind of silly with it on, because truthfully, it looks rather stupid. But he explained what he was doing and then took the thing off. All the monks burst out laughing. Richie thought it was because he had looked so silly. But one of the monks spoke up and said, "Oh, that's so funny. You're trying to measure the mind through the brain when everybody knows the mind is located here"—pointing to the center of the chest. Like, what a joke, you guys!

So they talked a little bit about how you might measure mind activity around the heart, but he hasn't figured that one out yet. It's a later experiment.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, in the Third Foundation of Mindfulness, this is how the Buddha begins: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind?"

Just to mention this word *bhikkhu*, which we normally translate as "monk"—many of the commentaries say that *bhikkhu* here should be understood as a sincere practitioner. Anyone who's sincerely practicing the path of meditation is a *bhikkhu*. So all of you are *bhikkhus* tonight. Some of you may be *bhikkhunis* if you prefer.

"How does one abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion, and mind unaffected by

delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

So again, greed and aversion tend to be more on the affective side, more on the emotional side. Delusion tends to be more on the cognitive side—not understanding things the way they are. In this definition of the foundation of mindfulness of mind, we have both the emotional and the cognitive aspects coming in.

A word on vocabulary. I'll be discussing emotions, which are the strongly felt affective components: fear, anger, loneliness, jealousy, rage, happiness, joy, sympathetic joy, compassion, and so forth. I'll also be discussing moods, which are softer or lighter forms of emotions, kind of the cloud-like backdrop. You might be having a mood that's a little melancholy one day, or feeling a little tender, a little blue, a little nostalgic. It's not quite strong enough or fully formed enough to be called an emotion—just a background flavor in the mind. And then, broader than that, are these things we could call states of mind, which include emotions, moods, and refined meditative states—qualities like calm, peace, concentration, or equanimity. States of mind is the most inclusive term. Moods are a little lighter. Emotions tend to be the stronger expressions.

We'll talk more as the retreat goes on about working with positive states of mind, pleasant states that lead to happiness. But for tonight, I'm going to focus mostly on the difficult ones.

In finding greater freedom in relation to painful emotions—we might call them difficult, we might call them afflictive—we generally need two things to develop through practice. Many of you have already spent considerable time developing these.

These are not new to you, but I want to single them out.

The first is that we need a shift in attitude. We need to go from the attitude I had when I came into practice—I just wanted to get rid of these states. I didn't want to feel them. And every time they came, I thought something had gone wrong. We need to shift that attitude to one of acceptance and allowing and non-judging.

The second thing we need is a greater understanding of the nature of these emotions. Not just their particular nature—the flavor of desire, rage, or terror—but also their universal nature. All emotions can be seen as having what the Buddha called the three characteristics of phenomena: they're impermanent, none of them lasts forever; they're unsatisfactory, especially the difficult ones, not satisfying in themselves; and we can't really claim them as I or mine because we all have them.

It doesn't make sense to try to own an emotion like anger because it's part of the whole human makeup. It's in every human being who hasn't practiced to be free of it. So it's not yours or mine—it's part of human nature, just part of all of us. Nothing personal, really, about it.

We need to understand these three marks of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness as they apply to our emotions. These three together make up what we sometimes talk about as the emptiness of

emotions. Emptiness doesn't mean that emotions are boring or vacant. It doesn't mean they're absent. Emotions can be rich and vivid and lively and energized, but they're also impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless. And that expresses their empty nature.

So attitude shift to acceptance, and an understanding of the empty nature—these are the things that can free us in the near term.

As we start to relate with emotions in our practice, the first step is really to know what we're feeling. This sounds easy, but it's not. Growing up, nobody told me how to explore my emotional landscape. Not my parents, not my teachers, not my favorite TV shows, not my siblings. Nobody explained to me that there's a whole world in here that's very rich, partly beautiful, partly difficult, but a world that's really worth exploring. So most of us have to practice knowing what these are.

There's a beautiful program happening now in the public schools in Oakland called Mindful Schools, where a number of trained Vipassana teachers are going into public schools at the elementary level, spending about fifteen minutes at a time, taking a whole classroom and teaching them mindfulness, teaching them to be aware of what they're feeling. To me, this is really revolutionary. And it's beautiful that the public school systems are opening to allow this to happen. Of course, it can't be called Buddhism, because then somebody else would have to come in from every other religion, but it can be called mindfulness. So nobody really has to know about the roots. That doesn't matter. The point is that these kids are getting to know how to explore their inner landscape.

The kids wrote back a number of letters on what was so great, and they said things like, "I love mindfulness. It helps me be nicer to my baby sister." Or, "I love mindfulness. Watching my breath helps me to go to sleep at night." They're really getting a firsthand taste of meditation, kind of under the radar, and it's beautiful.

I have another friend and student who runs a preschool in the Bay Area as a Dharma preschool. She takes kids who are three to five, has them five days a week for the mornings, and the whole time they're with her, she's teaching them Dharma through yoga, through spiritual stories, through guided meditations. She said that in dealing with kids of that age, you can't talk about things like mindfulness or awareness or phenomena of the six senses—way too abstract.

So what she does is have them lie down and imagine their mind like a big lake. Just imagine that there's this big lake, you open your mind, and all kinds of fish are swimming through it, all different colors. There's a happy fish that can swim through, a sad fish, a loving fish, an angry fish. Just open yourself to this lake and let all the fish swim through. She guides them along those lines for a while.

At the end of the meditation, she asked the class one day, "How was that? Could you let all the fish come? Could you know what fish were there? Did you let them swim through?"

And this one young boy, I think he was four years old, raised his hand and said, "I could let all the fish

come through, except I couldn't let the mad fish come."

She said, "Well, why was that?"

And he said, "Well, when you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

Four years old.

So often we need to learn to explore and recognize all these different states that move through us, and it's not easy to pick them up. I remember one time I was on a three-month course here. I had finished a morning sitting, about two weeks into the retreat, and I was fairly settled. I walked out the back door to go to my walking place, which was down on the lawn. I was pretty present—lifting, moving, placing with my feet. I walked out the back door, down the steps, and then I happened to look down at my path, and there was somebody there. That was not supposed to happen.

So I thought, "What are they doing in my path? I've been walking in that path every walking period for two weeks. What is somebody doing there?" And I was noticing—lifting, moving, placing. I walked a little further and got a little more agitated. "Did I cut in front of them at breakfast this morning? Is this a revenge trip that's going on?" I noticed lifting, moving, placing. I went down a little farther and thought, "They must be really insensitive not to have noticed that I've walked there every walking period for two weeks." Lifting, moving, placing.

So I kept walking and got down to a different part of the lawn, which surprisingly worked just as well for walking meditation. I carried on with my walking period, occasionally shooting evil looks in that general direction. And then after about twenty minutes of walking, I realized: I'm angry.

I had thought I was so mindful—lifting, moving, placing—but I was missing the main thing that was happening to me. I was so invested in the story about it: "That guy's wrong, he's insensitive, he shouldn't be there." I was so obsessed with the outer situation that this inner thing had just escaped my notice. It sounds unbelievable, but it happens all the time. We just don't see, for a while, what's really going on with us.

The key to being able to work with it is that we have to notice what the inner state is. When I was preoccupied with "they're wrong, they shouldn't be there, that's my spot," I couldn't get any relief from the anger. It was just getting wound up more and more. Because what the hindrances do is they tend to point us into that outer circumstance that's triggered them. We get fixated on the outer and we forget to look at the inner. In order to find any freedom, we have to take that pointer and turn it the other way, back into our own experience.

Once I recognized it was anger, I could start to work with it. I knew how to feel it in my body, I knew how to notice the thoughts that were going through, I knew what that tone was about—and then I could release

it. But only when I saw it. Only when I recognized it.

Usually what happens with a difficult emotion is that we believe some story around it. And as long as we believe the story, we're not going to be able to be free of the emotion. These emotions or hindrances are kind of like low-flying aircraft. We've got our mindfulness radar up—"What's happening now? What's happening now?"—and these zoom underneath and take root because of some story that we create around them.

It's very powerful just to be able to name what's going on in us. There have been a lot of studies of meditation now through academic research. One study dealt with a group of people who had trouble managing their anger. When they got angry, they would always act it out very impulsively and cause problems for the people around them and for themselves. One group in this study was instructed: when you're angry, name it as anger. That's all the instruction they were given—just name it as anger. Compared to the control group that didn't do anything, this group that just named it as anger declined hugely in the outer acting out of it. Just naming the emotion was a really effective means of managing the expression.

There is something about being able to know what's happening that brings in some degree of wisdom. If we can recognize it, there's not just anger present anymore. The state that I was in as I was walking down there was kind of anger plus ignorance—a deadly combination.

Anger plus wisdom or intelligence or recognition or mindfulness or awareness—whatever you want to call it—much better combination. When we can bring that in, we know there's not just anger there. There's an ally helping us work with the situation. That's the mindfulness, the wisdom, the awareness.

I want to focus tonight on a few states of mind that seem particularly powerful for us as human beings, for us as meditators. They're states that come over and over in life and in meditation. It's a little different list than what Skye talked about last week. She talked about the five hindrances, the key list for meditators from the Buddha: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt. I'm going to make a slightly different list, which is really the big emotions that I see people working with in actual meditation practice—in retreat, out of retreat, in meditation, out of meditation.

But rather than name them, I'm going to ask you to tell me what they are.

To start drawing this out, I want to make a distinction between beautiful states of mind, as they're called in our tradition, and these difficult states. Beautiful states of mind can arise just in a moment and exist in momentary being. For instance, you might see somebody and have a real feeling of affection or love that just pours out of you. You might see someone else and have a sense of compassion. You might walk out into the evening setting sun, into the beautiful light and warm air, and have this upsurge of joy. These are just momentary floodings of beautiful feeling that come.

The difficult emotions, on the other hand, for them to involve any degree of suffering, we have to be

clinging to them with some concept of time. As we go through some examples, I think this will become clearer. Time has to be a factor in a difficult emotion that causes suffering for us.

So one of the ways we're going to look at these emotions is using an axis system where we have the axis of time running from past through present to future. The other thing that difficult emotions are born around is the range of pleasure and pain that we experience as human beings. This is a very mixed realm. There's great beauty here. There's a lot of joy and love. There's also a lot of suffering and pain. Anywhere you look on the globe, on almost any level—personal, social, cultural—you see this whole range of experience. Our range of openness, our range of sensitivity as people to these extremes of pain and delight, is also a basis for the afflictive emotions to build upon.

So the other axis that we'll use, the vertical axis, goes from pain to pleasure. The horizontal axis goes from past to future. The vertical axis goes from pain to pleasure. That gives us four quadrants.

Let's start with the quadrant of past and pleasant. Think about something in your life that was really pleasant in the past and it's not here anymore. That's what it means about being in the past—not here anymore, not in the present. What emotion could get stirred up? What difficult emotion could get stirred up by that? Something very pleasant in the past, not here anymore.

Nostalgia. Missing it. Grief.

This is basically it, isn't it? This is the basis for sadness. Nostalgia, missing, grief, loss—all about clinging to something that was very pleasant in the past that is no longer with us. This is one of the things that human beings everywhere struggle with. You can read accounts of this from the Buddha's time, of those who lost family members and were driven into states of great suffering and distress.

What about something unpleasant in the past? We'll narrow it a little bit by saying something unpleasant having to do with another human being that happened in the past. What emotion might you be feeling today thinking about that?

Anger. If somebody hurt you, insulted you, offended you, stole something from you, took something away, you could be angry or resentful.

And this is the second of these, what I would call primal emotions that we all work with. So there's grief, there's anger.

Let's go now to the future end of the spectrum. If there's something you're anticipating that's in the future and is very pleasant, what emotion might that condition? Desire, isn't it? Wanting. Imagine if we told you that you were going to get ice cream sundaes tomorrow for lunch. It's not true, by the way—I don't want anybody waiting! That would condition the thought, "Wow, that would taste really good. I'd really like some now." So that's the condition for desire: something pleasant in the future. Wanting, longing, yearning, desire, lust—these are very strong primal forces.

And then on the other side, what if there's something unpleasant that you think might happen in the future, something painful? What's the emotion? Aversion or fear. When we know something really painful might happen to us—like we have a scheduled visit to the dentist for a root canal—we could get anxious, fearful, nervous.

So these are the four primal emotions that I particularly want to talk about: sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear. These are things that I meet over and over in myself and in other meditators as well.

We've talked before about how each of these strong emotions has two major components. First, there's the coloring in the mind—fear feels different than anger feels different than happiness feels different than jealousy. Each of these moods has a different taste for us, a different taste in the mind. And if it's strong, it's going to have an expression in the body. With fear, there may be a strong contraction in the belly. With sadness, there's often a sense of pressure or heaviness in the chest. Anger often brings a sense of burning around the shoulders or neck. So we have the mental tone or mood coloring, and we have the physical expression.

There's one other piece that I want to talk about that's also important to take in, which is the area of thoughts. When we're in certain frames of mind, we tend to think thoughts that are like that. In a state of fear, we tend to think fearful thoughts. In a state of rage, we tend to think angry thoughts. It's helpful to notice that the thoughts continue to strengthen the feeling they come out of. Thoughts can trigger emotions; emotions can also launch or trigger thoughts. They reinforce each other.

There's one kind of thought in particular that's like a foundation for these afflictive emotions, and the thought varies from emotion to emotion. I'm going to call this particular thought the *storyline* around the emotion. It's something that we need to feel out for ourselves with an emotion, to get a sense of what the storyline is. I'm going to suggest a few tonight, but I might not have the words that quite fit you. So it will be helpful to investigate: What's the belief or story that's underlying my difficult emotion when it comes?

In the walking meditation experience that I talked about earlier, I believed that that person should not have been in my walking place. I really did. Silly as it sounds, I really did. As long as I believed that, I couldn't let go of the anger. So that storyline was basically, "I'm right and they're wrong." As long as I hung on to it, as long as I really believed that, it sort of kept the anger locked in place. As we go through these other primal emotions, I'll also point out the storyline that supports them.

It's really helpful to see that there's a conceptual underpinning to these emotions, linked to time—either past or future—and linked to some belief about them. This is all just part of our understanding of their nature, starting to see their empty nature, how they're all fabricated from different causes and conditions. Once we see how the whole mindset is put together, like a Lego set, we can see how it can be taken apart. And then it's not such an overwhelming mystery.

Let's take desire as an example. Desire is this movement that wants something pleasant in the future. It

can be really common on a retreat, especially in the adjustment period. We often go through a lot of homesickness as we start a retreat, missing people, missing places, missing things and comforts that we associate with home. As the retreat goes on, often this desire force gets connected to events of the retreat. "I'd really like to have that meditation that I had last week. I'd like to have that again." We don't really ask why we'd like to have it again since it disappeared last time, but never mind—I really want to have that again because it felt good.

So we desire things both outside and inside the retreat setting. And then it's interesting to take a look at the nature of desire, how desire feels while it's present, and to recognize that desire has this bittersweet quality in its very nature. It's pleasant, it's sweet to bring in an object that we like, whether it's ice cream or concentration. That brings a sense of pleasantness into what is a fairly stark environment often. So it's a way of comforting ourselves.

Desire has this comfort aspect. But the problem is that the thought of ice cream isn't ice cream. The thought of concentration isn't concentration. And we're still left without that thing we want. So desire always has this built-in frustration. It reminds us of what we want, but it doesn't deliver it. There's always with desire an unsatisfying aftertaste.

And that's really what the Buddha was pointing to—that the source of suffering is craving. Dukkha arises out of this force of wanting. And it's curious: we never want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No. We take that for granted. We never think about that. We just want what we don't have.

When this dynamic hits a meditation practice, some really good learning can happen, actually. I was teaching a retreat a few years ago in Italy, which was a delightful experience. Carol and I were teaching, and Sally was there also. First of all, it was just a delight to work with Italian yogis because they seemed to me very familiar with their emotions and were able to share them very openly in interviews. So that was a lot of fun.

This young man was on the retreat, and he came in for the first interview. We worked through an interpreter. He said he was having trouble settling in. I asked why. He said, "Well, I keep thinking about being somewhere else." I asked what was up. He explained that some of his friends were going for a holiday in the Caribbean, and they had asked him to go with them. So he could either go on the holiday in the Caribbean or come on this meditation retreat. I asked why he came here. He said all the plane tickets to the Caribbean were sold out. So we were the consolation prize.

But while he was on the retreat, he kept thinking about his friends on the beach in the Caribbean and how much fun they were having and the people they were meeting. He said he just couldn't stop wanting to be there, so he couldn't really settle in to being here.

What we talked about was that maybe the unhappiness he was experiencing was because of those

thoughts about the Caribbean. Maybe the meditation retreat wasn't actually an unhappy environment, but he was making it unhappy by thinking about wanting to be somewhere else. After he reflected on that for a couple of days and came into his next interview, he'd settled down.

This is a brilliant teaching: the situation we're in may be totally fine, but if we want something else, it will make it misery. Desire has this effect of stirring up discontent, taking a situation that may be absolutely fine and introducing a level of discontent to it.

The storyline, I would say, the storyline that young man was working from was: "If I had that, I would be happy." That's the storyline behind desire. That's why it's so compelling—if I had that, I'd be happy. Of course, desire never looks at the next step. What happens when that's over? Whether it's an ice cream or a vacation or a concentrated sitting, what happens when that's over? Oh, I'm just back to where I am already now. But desire never looks that far. It doesn't look at impermanence.

So when desire is present, feel it in the body. What I sometimes notice is a kind of tension, like I'm leaning forward to make something happen. You sometimes hear the phrase "toppling forward into the next moment." There's some kind of strain in the body that's looking for something else, even in subtle movements of desire. I feel it in that way. Then get familiar with this bittersweet quality—the object brings a sense of pleasantness or comfort, but also the built-in sense of frustration. It's really helpful to investigate the unsatisfying nature of desire as it's present.

The second hindrance I want to talk about is aversion.

Aversion has so many different flavors. I'll just name a few: ill will, anger, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, and resistance. And there are probably more. This is just some. It has a lot of different flavors, but they all share a similar quality.

I'll illustrate this through a story of the Buddha. The Buddha was meeting with some monks in the forest. And while they were standing there in a clearing, a jackal ran out from the forest—a small animal—and stood in the clearing for a minute, then ran off into the underbrush. It sat in the underbrush for a minute, then ran out of there and went into the hollow at the root of a tree. It lay down in the hollow, but very quickly jumped up and walked across to a cave where it sat for a minute, and then it moved on and went back into the forest.

The Buddha said, "Did you see that jackal? It couldn't find contentment anywhere. It ran from the forest—it didn't find contentment there. It stood in the clearing—it didn't find contentment there. It lay down—didn't find contentment. Went to the cave—didn't find contentment. Everywhere it went, it was discontent. And it blamed its discontent on the forest, on the underbrush, on the root of the tree, on the cave. Blamed it on walking and running and lying down and sitting." He said the problem wasn't with any of those. The problem was the jackal had mange—a very itchy skin disease that dogs get. And because of the mange, it was unhappy everywhere.

That's what aversion is like. When the mind is in a state of aversion, nothing satisfies. Everything we try, everything we pick up, everything we touch—not quite right. And you might say that the storyline behind aversion is: there's some unpleasantness somewhere in the field of experience, and because of that unpleasantness, we form the belief, "I can't be happy. I can't be happy because of this."

So with sadness, the feeling is something like, "I can't be happy because I've lost this thing from the past." As long as we believe that, the belief will block our ability to find contentment or happiness.

Sometimes it's difficult to open to the feeling of sadness and allow it because there's a sense that it may—especially if we've been carrying it for a while—seem huge. It feels like if I open to this, I'm going to go under. I'm going to drown in it. It feels too big. But that's just another belief. And with all these emotions, it's very helpful to go in, touch them with mindfulness, and if it feels too much, back off.

So with sadness, this is the way it often needs to be approached. Touch it. Feel it. Be mindful of it. And when it feels like it's becoming too strong or too much, then find a way to back off. Take the mind somewhere else—through a different object, through taking a walk, through loving-kindness. Place the mind in a different place.

Another form of aversion, of course, is anger—one of the strong forms. The body feels tight, the mind feels kind of on fire or burning. The storyline, as I mentioned with my walking meditation, is generally, "I'm right and you're wrong." This is the foundation for the angry storyline.

This is where it's really important to watch thoughts, because often when we're angry, we'll just put those self-righteous and blaming thoughts one after another. And what they each do is make the fire burn hotter. Anger is already a fire, and as we think more blaming thoughts, the fire keeps going up in temperature. So we see how with that thinking—"I'm right and you're wrong"—we keep stoking the fuel and adding it. If we stop the thoughts, the emotion will just die out, because that's the nature of every emotion. Unless it gets stoked, it will fade away.

Now sometimes it's difficult, because when we say, "I'm right and you're wrong," sometimes that's true. And those are the ones that catch us the most.

Sometimes it may be true, but that doesn't mean it's skillful to keep telling ourselves that story.

The Dalai Lama, in the early 1980s, met a monk who had just escaped from Tibet. The Dalai Lama had known this monk back in the fifties when he still lived in Tibet and had thought he was a monk of just middling capacity—a good monk. Then the monk had been put in prison for over twenty years and had finally escaped and made his way to India, where the Dalai Lama was able to meet him again.

In their conversation, freshly back in India, the monk said, "You know, when I was in prison, I really felt I was in danger." The Dalai Lama thought, as happened to many people, "Do you mean you were in danger of being tortured?" And the monk said, "No, that's not what I mean. I was tortured. But what I meant was I

was in danger of getting angry at them." He said, "But I didn't." The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his estimate of this monk's practice.

So even in a situation like that—he was imprisoned for being a monk, that was his crime, he had done nothing wrong, he was not resistant or angry to his guards, and nonetheless he was tortured—very clearly he was right, and they were not. But he did not let that perception give rise to anger.

So just observe when anger comes, how we tend to feed it and create it through these thoughts that justify ourselves and blame the other. And feel the feeling. Anger is painful—that's one of the things that's really easy to see. It's such a painful state. In the texts, it's likened to someone picking up a hot coal to throw at another person, but by picking up the coal, we burn ourselves first. And the other thing it's likened to is drinking poison and hoping that the other person gets sick—but we get sick first.

So we have to feel this pain of anger. For me, it was the only thing that really encouraged me to let it go. I didn't see any other way out of the pain except to let it go. We need to feel that fire and dukkha and learn from it.

One of the forms of anger that comes up is that we judge ourselves. We feel angry about things we've done in the past, or we blame ourselves, or we put the wrong onto ourselves—and that's doubly painful. This form of self-judgment seems to be really widespread in our culture today.

Again, a story from the Dalai Lama. Some Western teachers were meeting with him a number of years ago in Dharamsala—Western Buddhist teachers—and were explaining this problem in the West of people not feeling good about themselves, of judging themselves, of being critical about themselves, of not really having self-love. The Dalai Lama could not understand what was being described. He said, "What are you talking about?" And when he finally got it, he said, "You know, we just don't have this in Tibet. Children are raised in an atmosphere of love, and they're given positive messages from their family and the culture. And people grow up really caring and trusting in themselves."

So this factor of self-judgment I think we'll talk about more because it's so common in the West. It comes up very often on meditation retreats, particularly because we're not getting the kind of supportive affirmations of friends and family and normal human contact. In the silence, there's often a sense of loneliness and our fears about ourselves come to the surface. So often in retreats these judgments become really apparent, and we want to talk about ways to work with it.

In the classical tradition, the best antidote for all forms of aversion, including self-judgment, is the practice of loving-kindness. So for self-judgment as well as anger, the development of loving-kindness is a really powerful way to offset that.

One little word about the storyline behind self-judgment: it has something to do with "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not lovable the way I am"—some underlying belief. And it's so ironic in a way that meditators feel this so strongly at times, because you all are some of the best people that I know. Anyone

who comes here and has the intention to make the world a better place by developing understanding and love is holding one of the highest aspirations. And just from knowing each of you that I've met, and knowing what my colleagues are finding, you are all really good people. So there's not a rational basis for this kind of self-judgment in this group. And yet a lot of us carry it. It's a burden that we don't really deserve. There are ways to work with it.

The last of the primal emotions I wanted to mention is fear. This is the one that was my constant companion in practice for many, many years.

This is the one I would say I cut my emotional teeth on. I became so familiar with this state of mind.

The first thing that made it workable for me—I think it was after a Joseph dharma talk on the topic of fear in this very hall some thirty years ago—was that he simply encouraged us to look into the direct experience in the body and see if we could accept it. So my practice for a long time was: Can I feel the body sensations that arise when I'm in fear, and can I bear them?

Fear is this projection into the future, and there's some kind of belief like, "This present moment is bearable—just barely—but the next moment isn't going to be. Something unbearable is about to happen, something disastrous is about to happen." So if we can set aside the future story, the future thinking, and come into the present moment, the question becomes: Can we bear the fear?

The first avenue in for me was whether I could bear the body sensations of fear—the contraction, the flutteriness, the sweat under the arms, the lightness and ungroundedness that came with it. I worked hard at it. I couldn't right away. But little by little, meeting it time and time again, dozens of times, meeting it, feeling it, trying to open, eventually I could. And I said, "I can bear this."

Then I went to the mental experience. Can I bear that mood in the mind? Again, it wasn't easy, but eventually I could. And finally, I could come enough into the present that I could let go of the future. Because when we're in fear and the world feels like a scary place, there's some kind of projection going on that isn't in this world. I was in a meditation center—it's got to be one of the safest places on earth—and I was feeling like something bad was going to happen to me. It was a total projection, made up just out of that feeling of fear.

So over the years, just bringing mindfulness to this quality again and again and again, I've seen its power ebb, all by the force of mindfulness and loving-kindness. It's kind of like mindfulness has this wearing-away quality with these old habit patterns of mind and heart. It wears them down little by little, just like a wheel would get worn down if you put your hand on it every time it went by. It wouldn't wear away quickly, but it would get worn away. And mindfulness is like putting a hand on this churned-up energy every time it passes. And every pass slows it down, weakens it, until it can pass through.

So this is our approach with the difficult emotions: coming into the present moment, feeling them, noticing them in the body, noticing them on the emotional level, noticing the connection to thoughts. This

is how that whole complex has gotten constructed, and this is how it can dissolve and fall apart. As we bring to the difficult emotions this investigative and curious attitude, what we're doing is waking up in the middle of the difficulty.

It's not that we get rid of this stuff first and then we wake up, but in the very moment of difficulty—of fear or anger or wanting or sadness—we bring qualities of interest, kindness to ourselves, presence, wisdom, compassion, investigation. All these qualities are waking up in the very middle of the difficulty. That's what transforms the emotion, and ultimately that's what transforms us. Our confusion gets woken up out of its own very nature—not by making it go away, but by bringing aliveness and awakeness into the middle of it.

I'll close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition, which is a kind of supplication. The supplication could be to the universe, it could be to your own wisdom, it could be to the Buddha or a teacher—whatever you like. It's called the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

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

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