Am I OK?

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 58:10

So here we are, about ten days into the retreat—but of course, who's counting? I'm sure you're not.

At this stage, we've given you a lot of instructions. A lot of ideas and techniques and ways to practice: working with the body, working with the breath, moving on to more subtle experiences like moods and mind states, thoughts, vedana, feeling tone. A lot of different ways to be with practice, different ways to encourage this kind of bare attention, bare awareness—simply just being with things as they are.

But let's get real. What's actually happening most of the time? You're thinking. You're thinking about your experience, about yesterday, about tomorrow. You're judging, you're comparing, you're commenting, and you're narrating. This is a lot of what we do, even as we're trying to come into the present moment. It happens during the sitting meditation, and it happens even more in the in-between periods. That's just what the mind does. It roams in this field of especially past and future—familiar territory—but also thinking about the present. There's commenting or narrating or judging or comparing. That's actually a little bit of advanced practice. If you're thinking about the present, you're getting a little bit ahead of the game. It's still thinking, but at least you're thinking about this, thoughts about practice. But it's still thinking.

In meditation, because we're trying just to be simply present, to see what's here, see what's happening, we get to see this. And it's kind of humbling to see the nature of our minds and where it goes and what it does and what it obsesses around.

There was a cartoon I saw that really pointed to this. It's from the strip *Rhymes with Orange* by Hillary Price. The setting is a doctor's office. There's someone sitting on that little examination table, and the doctor's there with a clipboard, obviously reading the results from some tests to the patient. And the doctor says, "The MRI confirms it. Your mind is full of dumb and repetitive thoughts."

So we don't need an MRI to have that revelation. Look at what the mind does. It just has no shame. It goes anywhere and everywhere with great rapidity and energy.

Talking about it in this way, it's certainly not that thoughts are the enemy or that thoughts are bad or wrong or we shouldn't be thinking. That is not what I want to talk about tonight. Thoughts and the whole process of the aliveness of the mind—that's what the mind does. It's its nature, its conditioning, to think. But we do want to begin to understand our thoughts and where they're going, what they're doing, because it's through our thoughts, as the Buddha said, that we create the world. We create our reality through our thinking and our concepts and our reactions to experience.

And the thing is, this world that we create is often chaotic. We call it the field of the kilesas, or samsara. This is samsara: just this alternating push and pull of wanting and not wanting, liking and not liking, pushing away and holding on, and a good dose of delusion thrown in there for good measure, woven through. This is really a lot of what we experience a lot of the time. And this is actually pretty normal for a human being, for a human mind. We've had years of practicing to think in this way.

As one teacher said, distraction is the habit of the mind. We've actually trained our minds to some extent to be the way they are. They didn't just wake up and the mind was like that. We've had a lot of time—not deliberately trying, this is just how we have been trained or conditioned or learned to use the mind. It's what the mind does.

And when we bring that mind to meditation, well, there's a lot of struggle. I call the kind of meditation we're often experiencing "sheepdog mindfulness." The image is that our thoughts are the sheep. And sheep, they're a little fearful, and they just want what they want, and if they can't get it, they're struggling. If you see a sheepdog actually working with sheep, it often gets them into this little ball, but it's a quivering mass of these sheep. And any moment one's going to dart out, and that sheepdog has to rush around and try and pull it back in.

That's the kind of mindfulness we're often doing here. It's like, "Hey, come back here. Hey, come back here." And it's exhausting, right? Sheepdog mindfulness. The only way we're going to find some relief is if the sheep actually calm down a little—if they're actually okay with just hanging out with the sheepdog. Because otherwise, are you exhausted at the end of the day? We spend so much energy trying to corral this crazy mind.

So really looking at thoughts and seeing how they work, coming to a wiser relationship with them, is very important. Now again, as I say all this about thoughts, it's not that thoughts are bad or wrong. It's the nature of the mind to think. But here we can get curious about what's actually happening. What is it we're choosing to think about? It might seem like a choice, but that's part of what I want to talk about tonight.

Especially here on retreat, where, let's face it, we don't need to think about too much to get through a day. It's not rocket science—get up, get dressed, maybe shower, bathroom, whatever, come sit, go walk. Not a huge amount of calculation needs to go into this process. Yet, I'm sure you know, the mind obsesses about things great and small eternally.

As Joseph says—he has these great lines—one of his lines about thought is, "Nothing is worth thinking about." And that has two meanings, because nothing is worth thinking about, but also *nothing* is worth thinking about. Depends which way you look.

So we have this kind of mind. We've trained it for how many—twenty, thirty, forty, fifty, whatever number of years—to think this way. And we come to a retreat. We bring this agitated, obsessive thinking mind to practice, sit down, and expect what to happen? Something different.

Well, if you look at our conditioning in this culture—and it's not that different from a lot of cultures, but this is the culture we're in here in the U.S.—the societally approved drug of choice is caffeine. This culture runs on caffeine. How many Starbucks are there, and all the other coffee shops? And it's not just caffeine in coffee; it's in soda. And now there are energy drinks. You go into any 7-Eleven or convenience store or petrol station, and right by the counter, so you can grab one, is a big dose of caffeine.

This wired energy is rampant throughout the culture—this sense that people need it to get through the day. These energy drinks, especially Red Bull—I've never had one, but it's so popular. It's made the two guys who came up with it billionaires. They sell so much of this stuff around the world.

And the culture itself has this emphasis on everything fast, immediate, now. It used to be that email was bad enough, but now it's instant messaging. Email took thirty seconds or a few minutes; now it's instant everything. And there's the emphasis on multitasking, which science is proving isn't actually possible. All we're doing is more things at once badly, rather than many things well.

I was talking to a staff person the other day about how kids are growing up in this kind of world where you're doing all these things at once. He said, "Yeah, I was going to watch a movie with my son, and we sat down, and then I noticed he's updating his Facebook status and texting his friends. I'm like, 'Are you watching the movie?' 'Yeah, yeah, I'm watching, I'm typing, and I'm texting.'" The mind is just being stewed in that kind of hyperactivity all the time.

And then, as I said, we bring this mind—that's had all of these influences and impacts from society and how we live our lives—to this hill in the middle of central Massachusetts, you could say in the middle of nowhere, where the most exciting thing to watch is the sunset. Now, someone said we have construction TV, courtesy of the workmen out there—"Oh, what's happening with the construction? Oh my gosh!"—but relatively speaking, not much going on.

But now we want calm. We want simplicity. We want the mind to be quiet. And understandably, we get frustrated. We get impatient or surprised or even resentful, judgmental that the mind is not quiet. But it's understandable, because we have trained the mind in this other way, and this is its nature.

So if we want to train our mind in a different way, if we really want the possibility of some peace and ease in our practice, we need to start looking at this tendency of mind and the nature of thought itself. In meditation, you do get to see what a thought actually is. It's this blip of energy in the mind—some words or an image. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. And if you see it clearly, if you bring mindfulness to it, a number of you have said this already—I'm sure most of you, if not all of you, have had this experience—what happens? It's like a wisp, like a fog that fades, or a balloon that bursts, or a bubble that pops.

Thoughts have the energy we choose to give them. When we don't notice them, when we're identified with them, when we believe in them, they create our world. They create our reality. They create our view of

ourselves and our perceptions of others. If we see them clearly, we can start to have a very different relationship to thoughts, and this is so important.

Thoughts certainly seem random, or that they're not under our control. You just all of a sudden realize what you're thinking, and you're like, "Where on earth did that come from? How did I get there?" Sometimes you can see the sequence of thoughts that leapfrogged from this to that and all over the place and landed you there. Most of the time we don't need to figure that out—it's not that helpful. But thoughts are conditioned like anything else; they have a lawful nature. We mightn't be aware enough to see the triggering sequence that develops into a thought, but it's there, and it is possible to bring some mindfulness to it.

In the context of meditation, one of the things we need to realize is that whatever is unresolved in our life, sooner or later it's going to come up here. You create this space, and nature abhors a vacuum. So what comes up? The stuff of our lives. And again, this is natural. Especially if something is unresolved, this is where the mind goes—whether it's past or future—stewing over it, trying to figure it out.

Our willingness to be with that and see that process clearly allows the meditation to deepen, allows insight to unfold. Our unwillingness is what leads to restlessness—restlessness of mind, restlessness of body. It's what leads the mind to slip off or out of the present moment and into this story, the story of me, the story of my life. Really, this unwillingness to just be with things just as they are is what leads to restlessness.

The core of this movement of mind, this strong patterning of restlessness that many of us experience, I see as answering one basic question, which gets divided into three: Am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay? Most of what we're thinking about is, in some way, trying to resolve one of those three questions. And you can just see how much time and energy we put into that. Sometimes just really highlighting what the mind is doing helps us to understand how strong this tendency is. It's regret about the past and anxiety or planning for the future—this is what the mind is doing.

I read somewhere recently—and I don't know how they calculate these things, but this is what I read, and it was on the Internet, so it must be true—that we have 66,000 thoughts a day, and two-thirds of them are fear-based. You can count, actually. You've got the perfect experiment here; do some tracking for us. The Dalai Lama says that all unwholesome mind states originate in fear.

And really, when I'm talking about this—"Am I okay? Was I okay?"—you can see that it's really fear-based. It's some kind of anxiety that's very deep in most of us. Certainly, I know that very well.

So this is not a new phenomenon, as much as I've been talking about how this society and culture has led us to have this particular kind of mind. But it's certainly not unique to this time and age. The Buddha knew about this tendency of mind. He said that when we get into this kind of agitated worrying, it leads to an increase in desire and wanting, to solidifying the sense of self, and to ignorance or delusion.

There's actually a great sutta in the Majjhima Nikaya—it's the second one, so I don't know if they're in any

order of importance, but it's right there at the front—the Sabbasava Sutta. And there's a paragraph in this sutta talking about what we do with the mind:

"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?"

Can you relate? This is from 2,500 years ago. All of this trying to figure out, basically: Am I okay? Was I okay? Where will I go? What will happen to me?

The Buddha called this kind of thinking unwise attention. He says that when we obsess in this way, it causes unwholesome states to arise in the moment, and ones that have arisen to increase or persist. It's this kind of obsessive thinking that really, when you look at it, you see that even though we get so fixated in it, it's a source of suffering—the source of so much neurotic, obsessive thinking.

So I wanted to get a modern-day equivalent of that kind of thinking. Who did I turn to? Woody Allen. Here's a Woody Allen statement about the same kind of thinking:

"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.

Again, he's always a little funny, but it's kind of what we do, isn't it? We're trying to figure things out. We're trying to protect ourselves.

We're trying to plan. We're trying to control. We're trying to make things okay. We spend so much energy trying to make things okay, dwelling on the past, worrying about the future. And you can see it in meditation—how much time are you spending going between those two places? Thoughts of past worry, planning for the future. We could calculate how much. And that leads to this restlessness that I want to talk about tonight.

When we let the mind roam in these fields, it's both out of and the source of restlessness. And I really, as I've reflected on this, see restlessness as perhaps the major hindrance for Westerners—this unwillingness to be with what is or accept what is. The mind then just slips off, not being okay, looking to, struggling with.

In my limited experience, especially in Buddhist Asian countries, they don't have this tendency of mind so much. I've heard teachers say they just say to their students, "Stop thinking." And they're like, "Okay,

right." And they meditate, and they do it. I don't know if that's so, but I've heard that said.

But I had a personal experience of this myself. Not last fall but the fall before, I went on pilgrimage to India to visit the holy sites of the Buddha. It was actually the second time I'd made that trip; the first time, the year before, Guy and I had done it on our own. This time I went with a group of students from a dedicated practitioner's program that I lead.

The first time we went there, Guy and I met this lovely young couple in Bodh Gaya who are part of the convert Buddhist community. That's people from what used to be called the untouchable caste, now the Dalits, who are converting to Buddhism to basically step out of the caste system in India that's so limiting to people's lives and interactions. Some of them do it just to get out of the caste system, but Rajesh and Usha, whom we met, were really very sincere practitioners, just beginning to learn about Buddhism. We had this lovely connection with them.

When they learned I was coming back, they invited me to lead a daylong for their community. They met once a month, and I was going to be there at a time they would meet. So I led a daylong for convert Buddhists in Bodh Gaya, India.

It was kind of a trippy thing to do—to be in Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, speaking to Indians, the ethnicity of the Buddha, the land of the Buddha's birth. The Buddha was an Indian. And teaching them the Dharma was like this amazing circle that I felt part of, and so much privilege and blessing to be able to offer even a little bit back to the land of the Buddha's birth and help in that little way that I could.

But it had its strangeness too. I had to work through a translator. I'd never met anyone there apart from Rajesh and Usha. It was a very unusual mix of people, from a young fourteen-year-old girl to these elderly monks who came to kind of check me out. And it had its challenges, including this Swami who wandered in at lunchtime and started a big philosophical debate about the nature of the mind. I'm like, "No, no."

But at some point I said to them—and I was actually being helped by one of the students from my program, Scott, who had offered to come and support the retreat—"Would you like interviews? Practice discussions?"

"Oh, yes, yes, we would like that very much."

So we arranged that during one walking period I would go to one place and Scott would go to another. It wasn't a great facility. We were just in this little room and there was nowhere for us to do interviews. They just parked me in a corridor and said, "Stand here."

I'm like, "Okay, this is where I'll do my interviews."

There was kind of a chest there, so I just perched on it. And one by one, Usha, the woman who had helped arrange the day, brought these beautiful young Indian women to me. Without asking us, all the men went

to Scott, all the women came to me. So I would just start, and Usha was translating, and I'd say, "Well, how was your meditation?"

And they would just say, oh, very good, very nice. I would ask, okay, so what happens when you sit down? Oh, very peaceful, very calm. Well, do you have any problems in your meditation? No, no, no, I enjoy it very much. Is there anything I can help you with? And I didn't really know how to get in there.

So one by one, by the third one, the responses were all pretty much the same. I felt like saying, maybe you should teach me about meditation. Because everyone I spoke to, when they sat down, could invite the mind into this place of calm and ease. And their meditations, so they told me, were lovely.

This is not our general experience, is it? We sit down and it's often—not always, of course, and it deepens—but often a real struggle. We get caught in this push and pull of the hindrances that we've spoken about.

I see restlessness as truly at the core of our struggle with the hindrances. It's both the result of the other hindrances and the cause for the other hindrances to arise. Our actual experience, even as we're going through wanting or not wanting or doubt and even sleepiness, there's this restlessness present—this agitation, this unwillingness or inability to be present. When we're not getting what we want, when we're getting what we don't want, when there's doubt, there's fear, there's agitation.

We can find ourselves in what I call a restlessness cycle. There's a little bit of frustration or restlessness, so we get into the hindrances, into difficult mind states. Or maybe it starts with a difficult mind state—some memory comes up, some issues, some reactivity. But that's painful, so the mind slips off and gets agitated, and the restlessness increases, and more difficult mind states arise. We can often be caught in this cycle of restlessness.

We need to start noticing this tendency of mind because it can obviously be a real impediment for our practice, for our deepening, and for our ability to actually be with what is, to be present.

Ajahn Sumedho, who's one of the senior teachers in the Amaravati Ajahn Chah lineage—he's the head abbot of Chithurst in England, a very deep practitioner with a great sense of humor, very sincere—he talks about an amazing pilgrimage he made in India. My pilgrimage had its challenges, and we were driving in a bus with hotels arranged and food taken care of. He went on pilgrimage in India on foot, on dana, keeping the monastic schedule. That's another whole level. And he wrote a great book about it called *Rude Awakenings*.

In the beginning of that book, he talked about his experience as a newer monk in Thailand. He said at one point it was so difficult, but he stayed a Buddhist monk because to leave would have required the conviction that things would be better somewhere else. At that time in his life, conviction narrowed to one insight: any suffering is mind-wrought, and the way to the end of it has to come through getting to its root. Instead of figuring out different places to go, he realized he had to come to terms with restlessness.

Instead of muttering about the lack of interesting things to do and the stifling heat and the poor food and the hideous mind states, he realized that the root of the matter, although hard to come to terms with, was his own aversion. Sometimes he would recognize that he was holding out against things, and then he would relax, let go. That left the way it is, the pilgrim's way.

This is our struggle at times. It is difficult. Our minds are difficult. Our bodies can be painful. The conditions here, as good as they are relative to many people's lives, can be hard. But if we hold out against things, if we keep that sense of unwillingness—unwillingness to be here—then it leads to restlessness, it leads to suffering. This restlessness of mind keeps us agitated.

Have you noticed how we can often be waiting for the next thing to happen? We're sitting, and—I think someone was mentioning this last night—waiting for the bell to ring. The bell rings. We start walking.

When is that over? When can I go back and sit? Sitting is much better, isn't it, than walking? And then we come and sit, waiting for the bell to ring. Or we're waiting for lunch. And finally it's lunchtime, and we're eating, and we're not present for the food, not enjoying sitting down or getting served some nice food.

This tendency to be always looking for the next thing, always in suspended mode because there's this feeling that it's not here somehow—that whatever we're looking for isn't here, but maybe it's in the next thing, maybe it's in the next mind state or the next experience. And so we're searching out of this sense of dissatisfaction, and sometimes we don't even recognize it. We don't even know what we're searching for. There's just this sense that it's not here now, this vague sense of not-okayness that leads to this kind of restlessness.

It's really important to notice if you have this tendency, or if it comes and goes—this leaning forward because here isn't okay, here isn't good enough. And so there's this suspended kind of waiting until it gets better, until I'm a different person, until I get my next interview, until the dharma talk, until I can finally get to bed, whatever it is.

Turn to that. This is a knowable experience, this sense of dissatisfaction, this leaning into the future. However you notice it, it's knowable. How does it feel in the body? What's the mind like? What's the attitude? What are the thoughts around it? See that it's not the truth of things. There isn't something out there that's going to fix it, fix us, make it better. So it's always this invitation to come back and actually be present.

As we begin to notice this tendency of mind, it can often seem that our meditation is actually increasing our restlessness. We were fine trucking along, busy as we are in our lives, but come and sit and try to be still, and it's like we're consumed with this restless energy. But I think it's only the quietness showing us what's actually there much of the time. This is what we need to be aware of. And we can get curious about this tendency and actually begin to feel it as a suffering state. Usually we're so driven by the restlessness to find what we want out there that we don't turn to the restlessness itself, to the felt sense.

So again, we feel it in the body. What is that feeling like? What's the energy like? We see what the mind is like. And we see how restlessness keeps us superficial—this tendency for the mind to keep moving off whatever's happening and into past and future.

How we relate to restlessness is obviously important, because we can believe its message: that we need to keep moving, that we need to fidget. Just this antsy energy of wanting to do something, anything, other than just sit here or just walk up and down. It's like, I've got this energy and I've got to go. Sometimes you can feel like you're going to burst with it. I can't bear this anymore. It can be electric, vibratory, shock waves going through, or it can be a tightness or contraction. But it's just energy.

Sometimes people say about energy, "Oh, give it a big feel, give it a big space." And I think that's a helpful metaphor or practice. But I actually think getting really minute with it is helpful too. What is this energy like? And can I use it—like riding a wave—can I use that energy to get a little closer to my experience?

We often label this kind of energy as unpleasant. And as I said, it can be a suffering state if we see it. But can we find any pleasantness in it? Can we see it simply as energy that we can actually use for practice? We look at what the mind does with it, because it's the mind that's telling us: this is not okay, I can't bear this another moment, I need to get out of here, I need to do something, I need to get rid of this.

And so we need to look at that story, that message that "it's not okay," because it moves so quickly from "it's not okay" to "I'm not okay." And this is what gets really interesting.

This message, whatever level we tune into it—"I'm not okay"—to me, I really see it as like the grit in the oyster that makes the pearl. If we tune into that, bring that into our mindfulness, it is a doorway to really deepening our practice. Because we start to see how much, if we don't attend to it, we're just going to be caught in the push and pull of this again and again.

One of the interesting things about restlessness is that it's actually one of the last fetters to go before full enlightenment. In the Theravada system, there are four stages of enlightenment. In each stage there are these ten fetters that either get released, let go of, abandoned, or weakened, and they progress through the four stages. At the last stage of enlightenment, just before full enlightenment, one of the fetters to go is called restlessness.

I was always really curious about that—restlessness, you know, this kind of thing that's so common that we all experience. Why is that one of the last fetters to go? I've looked into that a little. There are some suttas that talk about this kind of restlessness and how subtle it is.

I was reading *The Island*, which is a compilation of teachings and talks about Nibbana, about waking up, by Ajahns Pasanno and Amaro. They collected all of the sutta references and ancient and modern teachings about Nibbana—such great material in there. They had a piece on this fetter of restlessness, and this is what they said about it:

"The restlessness to which this refers"—that is, as a last fetter—"is not the fidgeting of the uncomfortable meditator. It is the subtlest of feelings that there might be something better over there or just in the future, a feeling that that which is out of reach might have more value in some way than this. It is the ever so insidious addiction to time and its promises."

The feeling that "that out there" has more value than "this." And so the mind, whether it's moving in these really gross ways or the subtlest—the subtlest dissatisfaction, dis-ease—that's the kind of restlessness that is a fetter at this stage of awakening. But we all have tastes of that too, the mind just moving in these subtle ways. And they talk about the addiction to time and its promises.

So again, I really see the mind moves in these three major ways. It goes to the past, goes into the future, and if it's in the present—and this is advanced practice—it's still doing this kind of comparing. So there's still movement even in that.

What is it that the mind actually does when it's not willing to be present, when this stuff has come up and this agitation is present? It goes into the past. And this rumination about the past, this reliving of past experience, this eruption into the present of things from the past—this is a very natural, even normal, and perhaps even necessary part of our meditative process. This life review, in AA they call it a moral inventory, this recollection, this experiencing of actions from our past. It could be past from a few minutes ago, from yesterday, or from so long distant you'd forgotten all about these experiences. But in the quietness of the meditation, these things come up. They're just there.

And we can have all of these emotions around them. We can have guilt and shame and remorse and hurt and anger and grief and resentment about these feelings, these memories from the past. The stories will come up—the time you weren't there for a friend, the cruel thing you said to your sister, the phone call you didn't make, the abusive situations you might have been in and how you weren't able to protect yourself. All of these very complex things can come up.

Through the meditation we can really work through them, but there always seems to be more, doesn't there? We get through some layer and there's another layer underneath. This is very much part of our practice of no part left out, of just really coming to know ourselves.

In this there's a process that one way or another we have to go through to actually find the healing or the transformation that's possible—and certainly how we can begin to relate to these memories, these experiences more skillfully. There are four steps: we need to acknowledge that it happened, to accept that it happened, to forgive to whatever extent we're able to, and to bring compassion to the experience.

Acknowledging is just recognizing that there were harmful actions, whether we did them or they were done to us. It's not denying or minimizing what happened. It's simply this recognition, this acknowledgement: this did happen. And the fact that it's up for you means there's still some stickiness there, some suffering around that experience. So we acknowledge that.

And the acceptance is to say, yes, it did happen. I did that, or it was done to me, or I was part of that. It's just this willingness to say it happened.

Here in this process, we really need to distinguish between a whole package of guilt and shame on one hand, and remorse or regret on the other. Guilt and shame says about bad or unskillful, unwholesome actions, "I'm bad. I shouldn't have done that. It means I'm a terrible person. If other people knew, they wouldn't like me. It means this about me." And that's never helpful. Sometimes it happens and we find ourselves in those kinds of mind states, but we get stuck there, and that's the problem with identifying in that way. There's not a chance for movement.

Remorse or regret recognizes the same actions but sees the actions as being unskillful—not the person, not the individual. There's not the same stickiness. And it's willing, in the regret or remorse, to see the unskillfulness and to have some kind of determination to change. It doesn't mean we always can, but there's some recognition of the suffering in that experience and a commitment to ourselves, to others, to change that patterning of behavior.

So this is really helpful. We could say a lot more about this, but I don't have time to go into it. The key point is it's not about feeling guilty or ashamed, shaming ourselves about past actions. We've all done things that we regret, things that were unskillful, things that were harmful. Things were perhaps done to us that were really painful, really difficult. We need to recognize if we're getting stuck or identified and work with that as skillfully as we can, so that the next stage can happen.

That next stage is forgiveness, where we really see the whole story—that it couldn't in that moment have been otherwise. Whatever we brought to that experience, whatever happened, it happened. They say about forgiveness that forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past. Giving up all hope for a better past. How many mind moments or hours have you spent in the if-onlys? Or "I wish," or "I could have" or "should have," or "they shouldn't have, I shouldn't have." Trying to change the past is a recipe for suffering. Talk about stickiness. It's gone. It's no longer here for us now to work with. It's in the past.

But what we start to see is that while we can't change the past—as Carol likes to say, it's dead as the dinosaurs, back there with the pyramids and the pharaohs, gone—what we can change is our relationship to the past. And that actually does change the past in the way that really matters: in our relationship to it, our understanding of it, leading potentially to the last step, which is compassion.

This is suffering. Whatever happened—our own actions, the actions of others that harmed us—a lot of suffering. And to just let that be an opening to compassion, to really feel the tenderness of just how difficult it is to be a human being, the fragility, the vulnerability, the craziness, the challenge of life. And to really see that this whole process is possible. That whatever happened, healing is possible. Sometimes it takes time. We have to do this gently, when we're ready, when it feels right. But this is a process that meditation can really bring a lot of healing into—this process of acknowledging, accepting, forgiveness, and then compassion. And of course they all weave together. It's not just a linear list.

So that's one of the main movements of mind, a big movement we have in meditation: going into the past and ruminating, stewing, trying to fix the past. The other big movement, of course, is into the future—all of the planning and worrying and strategizing and manipulating.

We plan the next sitting we'll do, or where we'll go walking, or the next hour, or the next day, or the next meal, or the next retreat. How many of you have sat on this retreat planning your next retreat? "What will I do? Well, maybe then I'll have figured this out." It's so obsessive.

And part of it is that we have the luxury, most of the time, of a lot of choices in our lives and what we can do with our lives. Even here on retreat, in the limited world that we live in, there are abundant choices. "What about this? What about that? This aspect, that perspective. What would this person say? What would that person say? Well, what I thought yesterday, what I might think tomorrow. What practice should I do? What focus should I have? Should I look at vedanā, or what about continuity? Or maybe it's just about concentration." I'm sure Brian talked about the doubt that we can spin in because we have so many choices, and there's no one right answer. "Why doesn't someone just tell me what to do, for God's sake? Just tell me, do it like this. I could just get in line and do it." Sometimes we just want someone to do that.

And most of us in our lives, certainly in this culture in the West, live in a low, chronic state of low-level stress through this kind of agitation—the choices, the busyness of life, the multitude of things we have to take care of. I heard a doctor say once that no matter what people come in to see him for, all of the different conditions of mind and body—stomach and heart and liver or whatever it is—ninety percent of them are stress-related. If the stress in the person's life could calm down a bit, the symptoms and even the condition could be alleviated.

When we're having future thinking, I see there are two main threads that can run through it. There can be the anxiety thread, which is a bit of aversion, the worry. But there can also be the excited thread, which is more the grasping, the wanting—"What about this? And this will be great, and I'll do this and do that." So that's what's important to notice in that movement.

We can use the RAIN acronym that Guy spoke about the other morning, which is usually recognition, acceptance, investigation, and non-identification. In all of these things I'm talking about, that's a really helpful way to get closer to what's happening. I heard another teacher talking about this RAIN acronym, and she had two different ways of talking about the I and the N that I really liked.

So the R is recognition. The A is acceptance. For the I, instead of investigation, which can seem a little heavy-handed—or even interest—she said *intimacy*. And I really liked that as a kind of just getting closer. We're not talking about fixing or changing, but "Can I be with this?" And then for the N, non-identification or "not personal" can seem a little abstract sometimes. She said *nature*. This is just the nature of a mind and a body—to have moods, emotions, anger, fear. So I like that. Anything that helps us get a little closer is helpful.

So we explore this tendency of mind. We see its impact in the mind and the body and often can see it as a suffering state, as a source of restlessness. Sometimes we need to cut through it with the sword of wisdom. Joseph talked about working with thoughts the other day and all these skillful things. Sometimes it's just "not now."

I mean, how much time have I spent planning what I'm going to do when I get out of this retreat? I think Carol talked about this the other night. And it's weeks away, even months away, and we're still "I'll go there and go here and see this friend and that friend." So I did a test once where I remembered my top ten of what I was going to do—or maybe it was less than that, five or so. And when I got home, I actually tracked whether I did the things I'd been planning, whether any of them came true in any shape or form, like I'd spent hours planning and imagining.

Guess what my hit rate was for that match? Zero. Literally zero. Nothing. I either didn't want to do the things, or I kind of did them but they turned out differently. Or the person never said to me what I wanted them to—what I had planned. The conversation that I... it didn't happen. I wasn't in control of what they were going to say, like I am in my fantasies.

So when you start to see that, it kind of takes a bit of wind out of the sails of this obsession with the future and planning and fixing and trying to manipulate. And you can come to this view, this understanding, that not only can we not manipulate and fix the future—

We don't really even need to manipulate and fix the future—certainly not here on retreat. It's simply not possible. So we might as well give it up already.

I just start to laugh at this mind that keeps reaching out there, trying to live in some future life. What we're actually doing is reinforcing this subtle—or not so subtle—message that here is not okay, that now is not okay. It's this restlessness, as Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Pasanno describe it, of leaning forward toward something out there that's supposedly better. And that leaning makes this moment, right here, feel not okay.

So we come to the last category. Again, I don't know what your percentage breakdown is, but we certainly spend some time in the present. Yet what the mind does with that present moment is constantly ask: "Am I okay?" You can notice this kind of commenting or narrating—"Oh, now she's doing this," or "What about that?" A little too fast, a little too slow, too much of this, not enough of that. What about this? It might get worse. Don't know. What about... It's endless, this kind of thing.

And it's just like that sutta. How did I do yesterday? Not as good. I thought I'd be better today. Yesterday, this time of day, I had this experience. Today, not so much. What about tomorrow? If I do this today, maybe tomorrow will be better. It's endless.

And a big one is: What are others thinking of me? As I'm going through the meditation hall or the dining room, we have this sense that all eyes are upon me as I'm getting my food or my cup of tea. What do they

think? Oh, I spilled. Who looked? It's amazing, this mind.

But if you really think about it—let's get real again—everyone's doing it. So they're not actually looking at you. They're having the same obsessive thoughts about themselves. What do people think about me? Do they like me? Do they not like me? Am I too fast? Am I too slow? What about this? When do I take my shower? How am I doing my yogi job? What do the staff think of me?

I kept waiting on retreats here to get a note from the housekeeper saying, "No one has ever cleaned the front hallway as well as you have." It never came. They never noticed how magnificently I was cleaning the front hallway. But we can obsess around this, right? And it's all about me.

So just to break the delusion again: if we're all thinking about ourselves, then we're not thinking about you. We're thinking about me.

But even when we are present, it's still a bit of a dance. We're thinking about the now, but still with this sense of restlessness, of not being okay.

So what would it take to actually be okay? To have some trust in some fundamental okayness that really is the truth of things? On some deeper, more profound level, we are okay. We have a mind and a body. We're here practicing the Dhamma. We're blessed in many ways. What would it take to simply accept the okayness of this mind and this body?

It's a radical shift, but it's one that needs to happen for us to truly deepen in our practice. We have to begin to prefer stillness to movement, to prefer now to tomorrow or yesterday, to prefer this moment in all its messiness. I talked in my first talk about how we sometimes want to meditate from the neck up and not be in the messiness of the moods and emotions and fears and wants. But if we can just land in the here and now, there is a fundamental okayness that becomes a huge doorway to deepening and to seeing clearly.

I want to finish with a short poem by Hafez, called "It Felt Love":

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.

Mindfulness is this light that shines into our inner being and shows us its beauty, its okayness. Starting to trust that, being willing to stay, to be present, to be okay with this, with here, with now—that's where real freedom, real happiness and ease can actually be found.

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