Working with Afflictive Emotions

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 59:22

One of the most important teachings of the Buddha is his teaching on the nature of mind. In a famous passage, he said, "This mind, bhikkhus—" and remember, bhikkhus in its broadest sense means anyone who is walking on the path, so he's really talking to us— "this mind, bhikkhus, is luminous, but it is clouded by visiting defilements."

What does this mean in our experience? We hear a sound—it's very simple, there's just the knowing of the sound. Or we feel a breath, or feel the sensations of a movement. In the simplicity of just knowing, there's no problem. It's in that respect that the mind is luminous. Luminous here means the knowing capacity, the capacity of the mind to know. The nature of this mind, the nature of knowing, the nature of consciousness in and of itself is open, clear, unobstructed. It simply knows.

An image that expresses this really well came to me while browsing in a bookstore. I saw a title: *The Nothing That Is*. I thought, this is for me. The book was actually a history of the number zero, by Robert Kaplan. The first line read: "When you look at zero, you see nothing. When you look through it, you see the world." I thought that was such an apt description of the mind. When you look at the mind, you see nothing—there's nothing to find. Look through it, and you see the world. I got through those first two lines of the book, and then it got too mathematical. But those two lines were worth the purchase price.

So the question arises, both on retreat and in the busyness of our lives: what obscures this natural clarity? If the nature of awareness, the nature of consciousness, is clear and unobstructed and open and luminous, why don't we live our lives from that place of simplicity?

When we look carefully at our experience, we see that what obscures this clarity of mind and what causes suffering in our lives—both for ourselves and for others—are the arising of the visiting defilements. In Pali, the word for defilements is *kilesa*. You could say the unwholesome states of mind. One term we use for these states is afflictive emotions—those emotions that are the cause of suffering. There's a long list of them, as we all know: anger, fear, anxiety, jealousy, resentment, greed, envy, ill will, unworthiness, frustration, depression, grief.

It's natural for most of us that these feelings will arise at different times. Our challenge is learning how to be with them in a skillful way—in a way that transforms them from being afflictive into freedom.

The Buddha went on to say, after noting that the mind is clouded by visiting defilements—which means they're not always there, but they do arise—"The mind, because it is luminous, is freed from visiting defilements." He's pointing out that we actually can free our minds from the suffering these emotions

cause.

So how is it freed? How can we free the mind?

The first and fundamental step in working with these afflictive emotions is something we've already talked about: acknowledging and recognizing them when they arise. There's a wide range in our abilities to recognize and know what we're feeling. For some people it's very easy—they're tuned in to these different emotions, and when they arise, they recognize them clearly and quickly. For others it's difficult. We might be going on our merry way in our lives, being driven by different emotions that we may not even know are there.

Perhaps we feel something, but we're not tuning in, we don't know what these feelings are, yet still they're causing us to act in our lives, in our relationships, in our work. We're not tuned in, we're not aware, and so they can be the cause of a lot of difficulty.

For others, we may know what we're feeling—the recognition may be there, we're tuned in—but we may very well be in the habit of being lost in them, of being carried away by them, of being overwhelmed by them, this flood tide of emotions.

There are many different ways we can train ourselves to be mindful and to connect more mindfully when emotions arise, specifically with the afflictive ones. These are the emotions that I want to emphasize this evening, although everything I say applies equally to all emotions.

One way of tuning in is by becoming more aware of our bodily sensations. Maybe there are sensations of tightness or contraction or agitation or tension. Sometimes these sensations are residue of past emotions or past reactivity, so it doesn't always mean they reflect a current emotion. But if the sensations are enduring, maybe even strengthening—if we're feeling more and more tense and tight and contracted—that could be a signal for us to take a look. Is there some emotion underneath that is causing this reaction in the body? Maybe there's some anger or frustration. These physical sensations can be a signal for us to investigate and see what's there.

As an example, in my younger days, driving on narrow New England roads, I would find myself getting tenser and tighter whenever I found myself behind a really slow driver. Because they're curvy roads, it's difficult to pass. I could feel it in my body, which was definitely a signal of something going on in my mind—impatience and frustration. Of course, as I've gotten older, I have become one of those slower drivers. And I actually have compassion for the people behind me.

So that's one way: we tune into our body.

Another way we can tune into the afflictive emotions we're feeling is to begin noticing, in any activity, when we're feeling slightly out of sorts—just some malaise. We don't really know what it is, but we're not in the easy flow of our lives. Something is going on. Or maybe there are a lot of obsessive thoughts that

keep coming again and again. These are signs, these are signals. They actually can serve as a mindfulness bell. That feeling of unease or the obsessive thinking is like a bell that wakes us up to look and say, "Okay, what's underneath that? What's driving that feeling?" Usually when we look, we see that there is some kind of afflictive emotion going on. It might be unacknowledged worry, or unacknowledged fear, or anxiety.

Here's another example of how feeling ill at ease can become a signal to look. When we opened IMS, this was in 1976—we just had our 40th anniversary—for the first thirteen years, I lived in the center. I had a room in the center, and sometimes I had to switch rooms because people needed it. When I was forty, I realized I needed to get out of there. It was enough, this living right in the center in a room.

Through the amazing generosity of one particular student and friend, she actually offered to build a house for myself and my colleague Sharon Salzberg. It was an unbelievable gift. The obsessive mind in the designing and building of the house is its own story, but that's not the point here.

So it gets built, and I move in. When I first moved in, I did a month-long self-retreat. I thought that would be a good way to enter into living in my new home. Well, my mind started going a bit crazy. "The house is too nice. Dharma teachers shouldn't be living in such a nice house. Maybe I'll move out and give it to the staff." My mind was obsessing about this and feeling very uneasy. It was generating all these thoughts.

Finally, I said, "Joseph, what is going on? What are you feeling?" I realized I was feeling embarrassed. I was feeling embarrassed about living in this really nice place. As soon as I saw that, as soon as I recognized it clearly, I realized I would much rather feel embarrassment than move out of the house. The whole thing became a non-issue.

But before I recognized the emotion, before I could accept it, it was driving all this unease. That's the power of bringing clarity to what we're feeling. We actually are able to be accepting of it because we're seeing it. This is really important.

That's one somewhat trivial example, although at the time it didn't feel trivial. But in our lives, this is what's happening constantly.

We can also pay attention to another kind of signal—when we're in the middle of some action, doing something, and there's just some part of us that feels a little uneasy about it. We feel maybe this is not quite wholesome, not quite the right act. When things feel a little off.

When we're doing something, we all, at different times, will be doing greater or lesser unskillful things—unless you happen to be fully enlightened. So this is going to happen. But we can start paying attention to it, just to that feeling of being slightly off. That can become a signal to look: okay, what emotion is driving this action? Is it greed? Is it ill will?

A very good place to work with this—and this would be after the retreat, at home—is in our speech. How

often are we talking in a way that is just not quite right? Maybe it's gossiping about somebody, maybe it's something else, but we know it isn't quite right, whatever delight we get out of doing it. If we're paying attention to that sense of "no, this isn't quite right," then we can actually investigate: why am I doing this? What's the motivation? We can come to a much deeper understanding of ourselves and our actions in the world. That becomes another signal.

Sometimes we don't recognize different emotions because we're not seeing the full range of what's going on. We may be seeing and recognizing what's on the surface, but not seeing what's underneath. Because very often emotions come in clusters. It may not be just a single feeling.

Years ago, and for a few years, I was teaching retreats for lawyers, law students, and law professors. One of the third-year law students on one of the retreats said something really interesting. Of course, they're involved in a very litigious profession—a lot of conflict and a lot of stress. In our discussion of the meditation and his experience, he said, "I need to get angry in those situations so I don't feel the fear."

I thought that was so interesting. In those situations, he would manifest and feel anger all as a way of avoiding feeling the fear, which he felt would make him more vulnerable or less effective. When actually, learning to be accepting of the fear and to say, "Yeah, we can act"—there can be fear there and we can act in the face of fear, in the experience of fear. It need not stop us if we're accepting of it. But if we don't recognize it and we don't come to that place of acceptance, then it drives us to other unwholesome states, to other afflictive emotions.

This is an amazingly rich arena of investigation because it's such a big part of our lives. We may be aware of feelings of anger. But if we don't look deeper, we don't see: is there something underneath that? Maybe there are feelings of hurt or frustration or self-righteousness or resentment. There can be many emotions actually fueling the anger. And if we don't see them, then we stay caught in the anger. We have to look a little deeper.

What's important to understand is that this investigation in this realm is not discursive. It's not thinking about it, and it's not digging into our psychological history and life story. That's not what I'm talking about when I'm suggesting that we investigate.

Rather, it's understanding that there's a wide range of afflictive emotions as well as wholesome ones. Sometimes they're obscured, sometimes we're not aware of what's going on, and we can use various suggestions as a way of looking and investigating. But it's not by thinking about it—it's by settling back and just opening up in a very intuitive way. We're just kind of dropping into ourselves. We could say we're dropping into our heart to see what's there.

If we learn how to do that, very often what's there simply reveals itself, just as it did with the embarrassment about the house. I didn't think it out. I just asked, "What's going on here?" and then it revealed itself. That's the kind of investigation I'm talking about. It's intuitive. It's just getting quiet enough

for what is present to show itself.

Sometimes we don't recognize the emotions that are present because we misperceive them—we're taking one emotion to be another. Let me give you a few examples. At one time, I was feeling what I thought, what I was taking to be, sadness.

And so I was noting and being with it: sadness, sadness, sadness. But it was really staying a long time—that feeling of kind of being caught in some way. That feeling of being caught piqued my interest. How am I getting so hooked in this?

So I looked more carefully, and I saw that it wasn't sadness. It was unhappiness. Now these are close, but they are different emotions. These are different feelings. As soon as I saw accurately what it was, that allowed for the alignment with it so that I could be accepting. When I was misaligned, acceptance was impossible because I wasn't actually there for what was actually present.

Is this clear? When we're caught in something and we try all these different ways of looking and seeing and understanding and we're still caught, we might just check to see: Am I perceiving this accurately? It's very easy to misperceive. We could mistake frustration for anger. These are two different feelings.

Here's a big one. This is a life practice for you. We can mistake attachment for love. Try that one on. This is another whole talk. They are two very different feelings, and they are often conflated. That conflation can be the cause of a lot of suffering.

So clear recognition of what emotion is present—and again, particularly the afflictive ones, because they are the ones that are causing our suffering.

The next essential piece after recognition is mindful acceptance of the emotion. Because if we're not accepting of it, if there's aversion to it, we're actually feeding it. These emotions are afflictive, and if we're not aware and not accepting, they are going to be the cause of a lot of suffering.

So we have to understand what acceptance means in this context. What does acceptance mean in terms of an emotion that's afflictive? It doesn't mean justifying them. It doesn't mean wallowing in them. It doesn't mean judging them. Rather, it's simply the full acknowledgement: yes, anger is here, fear is present, frustration is present, jealousy is present. We're there for it, we recognize it, we're accepting of the fact that this is our current experience. In this regard, acceptance is just another word for mindfulness.

How do we know whether we're accepting of something or not? There's very good feedback, and I talked about this in my groups this morning. This has proved very freeing for me. One of the best indicators that we're not accepting of something is the feeling of struggle. If you're sitting, if you're walking, if you're in your life and you just feel that you're struggling with something, that struggle means only one thing: something is going on that we're not accepting. Because if we were accepting it, we wouldn't be struggling. It doesn't mean that we don't act. But it means we have to come to the acceptance of the fact that it's there.

Things that come up a lot in meditation: you're sitting and you just feel you're struggling. Instead of getting caught up and identified with being the struggler, let that be a signal to take a look. Okay, what's going on that I'm not open to? It might be some unpleasant sensations in the body that are in the background. We don't want to feel them, but they're there. So there's an internal struggle. It may be some afflictive emotion that's going on that we're not open to. It may be that the mind is just thinking the whole hour. And if we're not open and accepting of the fact that that's what's happening, we get into a struggle.

You can use this sense, which is very visceral, the sense of struggle.

It's actually a gift to us. This sense of struggle is telling us to look more closely at what's happening in mind and body, in our experience, to discover what it is we are not open to. What are we not accepting?

At one point I was practicing in Burma, and it was incredibly noisy. The monastery was right in the city, and they were doing a lot of construction. Right outside my room they were straightening steel rebars, banging metal on metal all day long, every day. I came to Burma to get enlightened, and they're banging away making this very unpleasant sound. So I was caught up in my own reactivity.

After a while—and it took a while—I asked myself, what's going on? How am I getting so caught in the reactivity? I looked at what was happening in my mind and saw it clearly: oh, complaining mind. That's what my mind was doing. It was just complaining incessantly. As soon as I saw it and could name it, it ceased to be a problem. Because when I was noting "complaining mind, complaining, complaining," in that very noting the mind wasn't complaining. I was actually being mindful.

This is just another example of how we need to recognize and be accepting of what is actually present, not fighting with it.

Sometimes we don't recognize and accept afflictive emotions because they're too painful or uncomfortable. Just as with physical pain, we have to train ourselves to realize it's okay to feel these emotions. This happens naturally through practice. In the beginning we might feel a little bit of pain and get really upset by it, but over time we relax. Okay, it's unpleasant, it's painful, and it's okay. It's the same with painful emotions. It's okay to feel them, but the tendency may be to avoid: this is too uncomfortable.

Or perhaps the emotions that are arising don't fit our image of being a good meditator. Good meditators don't feel angry, don't feel greed, don't feel pride, don't lie. Therefore, greed and pride and dishonesty can't possibly be arising. We simply deny that this is actually what is going on because it doesn't fit our self-image.

We really need to wake up from that one, because this denial is the cause of so much self-delusion. We end up living in pretense instead of acknowledging the actuality of what is happening. As long as we're unwilling to feel certain emotions, we're really living defensively. We're living in fear, creating all these inner structures to avoid feeling them. Our practice is to realize it's much simpler and much freer to be willing to feel the unpleasant mind states. It's okay. It's okay that it's unpleasant.

Sometimes, though, we do need to take it slowly, because some painful emotions can be very powerful, even overwhelming. Sometimes people are dealing with trauma from the past or present, and the emotions are so intense and overpowering that the mind at a particular time may not have the capacity to hold them in balance. We need to recognize this as well. When powerful emotions arise for whatever reason and we feel we're getting out of balance, getting overwhelmed, then the skill in practice is to learn how to back off a little bit. We give the mind some space, some rest, and move away from it. It's not always a matter of plowing through.

This is really important, because it can actually be harmful at those times to think, "I'm a meditator, I have to be with it." That's not the wise thing. So there's a lot of nuance here. This is the art of meditation. The methodology, you could say, is very scientific—a very precise methodology. But it's also an art in terms of how we relate to all of our experience, particularly to powerful emotional states. We need the mind and the heart of an artist.

From this foundation of recognition and acceptance, we can then bring some wisdom to this whole world, to this whole arena of our emotions. We can begin to apply what has aptly been called emotional intelligence.

One aspect of this wisdom mind with respect to emotions is discerning the skillful from the unskillful, the wholesome from the unwholesome. In both cases, whether skillful or unskillful, we need to have recognized the emotion and we need to have come to the place of acceptance of the fact that it's there. But once we've landed in that place of openness to what's arising, then we can bring discernment. Is this a skillful emotion or mind state, one that's onward leading to happiness? Is this an unskillful, unwholesome state that's onward leading to suffering for ourselves or others?

The Buddha gave enormous emphasis to refining this discernment. It's really what brings an ethical dimension to psychology, to an understanding of the mind. It brings an ethical dimension to our meditation and to our lives. What is harmful to ourselves or others? What is not harmful? What is beneficial? We really need to be able to see this clearly.

But this discernment can be a very delicate undertaking, because for many people it's a very easy step from seeing that a particular mind state—like pride or envy or jealousy or greed or anger—is unskillful to saying, "I'm a bad person because it's arising." People very often do this. They personalize the emotion, and so it characterizes in their minds who they are, defining them. They feel they're a bad person for having these feelings, or they may feel that it's wrong that these feelings are arising.

That's not what this discernment is about. It's not wrong that they're arising. They're arising because of conditions, and they're arising in all of us. We need to recognize them. We need to be accepting of the fact that they're there. And then we can ask: Is this wholesome? Is it unwholesome? If it's unwholesome, if it's afflictive, it doesn't make us a bad person for having it. And it's not that it shouldn't be there—it is there. But with that wisdom, we can then make some choices in our lives. Is this a mind state that I want to

cultivate? Is this a mind state or emotion that I want to let go of, that I want to abandon?

Without that discernment, we deny ourselves the possibility of choice. We're just going on in our lives, living out whatever particular conditioning we have. So we discern what's skillful and unskillful not in order to judge ourselves—even though you may notice that pattern arising. That's not the point of this discernment. The point is to make wise choices in our lives and in our practice.

But as with clear recognition and acceptance, there are nuances to this that can make it difficult to really see clearly what's skillful and what's unskillful, what's wholesome and what's unwholesome. Because some of the unskillful mind states are very seductive, and we justify them to ourselves.

There's a line from one of the suttas, a teaching of the Buddha, that is so apt, as are all the rest of his teachings. He said, "Anger, with its poisoned root and honeyed tip." There's part of us which loves it. It's energizing. We feel powerful. We can feel self-righteous—that honeyed tip of anger—but not seeing, as the Buddha said, its poisoned source. It's really rooted in a kind of hatred, but that can be masked.

Just another example of this: I read in an article about the writer Anne Lamott. She described how difficult it is to deal with the triumphs of other writers, particularly if one of them happens to be a friend. She writes, "It can cause just the tiniest bit of havoc with your self-esteem, and you find that you were hoping for small bad things to happen to this friend—for, say, her head to blow up."

These thoughts are going to come, you know. But we can see them, and even see them with a lightness of heart.

It's so important to begin to discern what's skillful and what's unskillful. The Buddha made it easy for us because he pointed out that all unwholesome states are rooted one way or another in greed, hatred, and delusion. And all wholesome states, one way or another, are rooted in non-greed, generosity, love, and wisdom. So there's a roadmap for understanding what it is that's going on.

This is particularly important because these different mind states, both wholesome and unwholesome, are not simply arising in our own hearts and minds—they are what motivates our actions. Why is there so much avoidable suffering in the world? We're bombarded with how much there is: the violence, the war, the hunger. There's enough food on the planet, but it's not being distributed very well. The oppression of racism, of homophobia. There are so many situations of intense suffering that's avoidable. So what's going on? Why is it still happening?

It's because people are acting out the mind states of these afflictive emotions. Acting out fear, acting out anger, acting out hatred, acting out greed. These forces are exactly the forces that cause so much suffering in the world.

And it's not only other people who have these mind states. One of the beauties of a retreat was expressed very well by a character in the book *Zorba the Greek*—do you remember that, from the sixties, by Nikos

Kazantzakis? One of the characters has this line: "Self-knowledge is always bad news." There's a lot of truth to that. We're all here in our practice, and if you've come expecting light and bliss and rapture, floating away into the clouds, you've probably been disabused of that by now. But even if that were possible, it's not the point. We really want to see with wisdom what it is that's going on in our minds, what it is that's going on in our hearts, so we can make this discernment.

We're taking responsibility for these forces which cause suffering in the world. We're taking responsibility for our part in that. But we can only do it if we're paying attention carefully, if we see and learn to recognize the afflictive emotions when they're there. To become accepting of them—accepting of the fact that they're there. Discerning what's wholesome from what's unwholesome. This is not only for our own happiness, but it's really for the benefit and happiness of the world.

So we've talked about recognition and acceptance. We've talked about discernment of skillful and unskillful. The last step in working with afflictive emotions—and with all others—is both the most difficult and the most liberating. And that is learning how to be with and to feel all of these different emotions, and then to learn how not to be identified with them. Not to be taking them as I or mine.

It is this understanding—seeing the selfless, empty nature of the emotion, whatever it may be—it's that understanding which transforms otherwise afflictive emotions into freedom.

So what does identification with an emotion mean? How do we experience that? I'm sure you're familiar with it, because it means being lost in, being caught up in, being captured by, carried away, taking them to be self. "This is me. This is who I am."

There is a huge difference—and I would suggest you play with this—the next time some strong mind state comes, there's a huge difference between experiencing it as "I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm frustrated, I'm angry, I'm greedy," versus "there is happiness, there is sadness, there is anger, there is pride." Just changing the way we language it will change our relationship to it.

But the habit of identifying and taking it to be self—"I'm angry, I'm this, I'm that"—that habit is very strong. So in the meditation practice, we need to retrain the mind in terms of how we're relating to these emotions. As our practice deepens, we can see with greater and greater clarity that the "I" and "mine" is extra. We are adding that to the experience.

It would be interesting for you to notice, when you feel caught up in some state, when you're really caught in and identified with it—if you can remember, notice the feeling of contraction. There's a certain tightness that happens when we're identified with these emotions. And then notice the difference, if you're mindful enough in those moments, to go from "I'm so angry" to "Oh, there's anger."

Or anger is like this. Notice the difference in your body. We go from a place of being contracted and tight, uptight, to a place of relaxation, to a place of ease. The emotion is the same, but we're relating to it in a completely different way. This is the wisdom mind that transforms the afflictive emotions into a place of

freedom.

One of the ways of not identifying, of learning not to identify so much with these powerful states when they arise, is to see their conditioned nature. They're arising out of certain conditions, and when the conditions change, the emotions change. So it's actually possible to be with them. It's like watching cloud formations in the sky. There can be powerful rain clouds, ominous looking. But if we're just sitting back watching them form, and conditions change, and then they dissolve in the clear sky of the mind, there's no tension in the experience of them.

One way of seeing or experiencing the conditioned nature of emotion—and this is really fun to do, fun in a certain kind of way—is to see the relationship between thought and emotion. I have found this completely fascinating. I have noticed so many different times how a particular thought arises, maybe a thought about some difficult situation that I have to face, or a seductive thought. I have seen how a thought can arise in the mind and immediately trigger a strong emotion. Thought arises, fear. Thought arises, greed. Thought arises, ill will.

And even when we have experienced this very same thought and very same emotional response a hundred times, sometimes I'll just play and purposely have the thought, just to see the response. And it's so amazing, so impersonal. It really makes me marvel at the mind. Here's this thought which in itself is nothing—just an insubstantial nothing—and yet it can be so powerful in triggering this whole emotional response. To see that again and again and again, we begin to learn not to be so identified with the emotion. We say, "Yeah, this is just coming out of that particular condition." Of course it works the other way too—different emotions can trigger a lot of thoughts. Just seeing that cause and effect relationship.

We can also understand the conditioned nature of emotions by seeing that our level of wisdom, our level of understanding, will very much condition how we feel about things. What for one person could be really upsetting could leave another person completely at ease.

A famous example of this, and I tell this story often because it's so apt, is the story of the poet Ryokan, a Zen master from nineteenth-century Japan. He was a hermit who lived in the mountains, led a solitary life, very poor, just lived in a little hut. He was a great poet, and there's a lot of his poetry that one can read now. He'd just wander through the villages playing with the children and then go back to his hut to meditate and perhaps write some poetry.

Well, one day he came back to his mountain hut and found that the few possessions he had had been stolen. So, being Ryokan, he wrote a little poem: "The moon at the window—the thief left it behind."

Now imagine you're going back after the retreat, you return to your apartment or your house, and everything's been stolen. "Oh, the moon at the window, the thief left it behind"—I don't think so. Depending on our level of understanding, of realization, we will respond very differently to the same circumstance. It just points to this truth: these emotions are conditioned by so many different things.

It's possible, when we're in the midst of strong emotions—and again, particularly the afflictive ones, the ones that cause suffering for ourselves or others—to begin to call up our inner Dharma coach. We have that wisdom mind within us, and sometimes it's just a matter of remembering and calling it up to remind us.

For example, there's one teaching the Dalai Lama speaks of a lot. So often with many of the teachings, whether from His Holiness or the Buddha, we hear things or read things and they just seem like a good description. We don't take them as an instruction. One of the Dalai Lama's favorite teachings—I think it comes from Shantideva—is this: when anger arises, when we're really in the throes of it, the inner Dharma coach, the wisdom mind, offers a reminder. One's enemies teach one's patience. And so we should really honor our enemies. They're teaching us patience.

But how often do we actually think of that? In the midst of some conflict, when we're caught up in anger, do we stop and reflect in that way? Not unless we practice doing it. But it actually has the potential to free us—to appreciate what can be learned in that situation, instead of being caught up and totally lost in the emotion.

So we use that inner Dharma coach. We might reflect: what I'm really angry about, when we're caught up—is it really that important given the magnitude of suffering in the world? We can get caught up in such a narrow little space and blow it all out of proportion to what's really going on. And so it's just a reminder for us: okay, I don't have to be quite so caught by this. It creates some inner space.

One teaching of the Buddha sets a very high bar, and I love it because it just points to a possibility, a kind of inner coaching. He said, "Bhikkhus, there are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you." So he's talking about people talking to us. "Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or with harm, spoken with a mind of loving kindness or with a mind of inner hate." People can speak to us in all of these different ways. "Herein, you should train yourself thus: our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving kindness."

Just imagine: there's this person who is speaking to you angrily, harshly, lying, filled with hate. Our mind will remain unaffected. Utter no unskillful words. Abide compassionate for their welfare, filled with a heart of loving kindness. That's a high bar. But even to hear those words and to know—well, can I remember this?—even if we can't do it in the moment, just knowing that this is a possibility. We don't have to be caught up in our own inner reactivity. There's a possibility here of actual transformation, of freedom for us in our lives.

All of these practices—the clear recognition, acceptance, discernment of what's skillful and unskillful, learning how to be with emotions without identifying with them, without taking them to be self, seeing their conditioned nature—all of these ways of working with powerful mind states open up the possibility of a much deeper and greater happiness in our lives. We can really begin to see how all of these mindsets,

all of these emotions, can self-liberate in this space of open awareness, the open sky of the mind. We're just with them, we see them, we recognize, we're accepting the fact that they're there, we see them with wisdom, and we also see that they arise and pass away. We come to a place of much greater ease, much greater freedom.

I'd like to close with a couple of lines from the Persian poet Hafez: "Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets trying to find you."

It is trying to find us. We can be happy. We can be free. And so this is really what our practice is all about.

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