The Power of Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 49:17

This morning there was a most inspiring piece of news, a rare event: this year the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded to the Dalai Lama.

It was really so moving. I still get chills just talking about it. What it said to me was that, not just for his peace efforts in Tibet, but that somehow he is the embodiment of what it really means to be at peace, as far as I can tell—which is kind of what our work here is all about. And it felt like somehow this is a recognition that the world is in some way coming to recognize the value and the power of this. It's kind of hard for me to talk about, but it moved me a lot and I wanted to share it with you.

So, in talking about the level of peace that someone like the Dalai Lama, at least from our projections of watching him, has attained, and knowing that our intentions and our firm commitment is also working in this direction, and yet still seeing how much our minds continue to be caught in distortions of perception—even though we may have had very clear insights into the painful and distorting natures of greed, hatred, and delusion. We really know it. And then we turn around and we're acting from that again. The mind is caught in that mode again.

So I want to talk a little bit about the power of conditioning. We need to really respect this—not to look at it as though there's some problem with us that we haven't understood, but to recognize that the power of this is immense, and we'll be touching on it throughout the whole retreat. I'm just introducing it a little now. And then I want to explore how the power of mindfulness works to begin to help us see through these distortions, how we can actually use specific ways of employing mindfulness in our practice, and what mindfulness actually means.

A book I read not long ago I found fascinating as regards the power of conditioning, of distorting perceptions in our mind. So often it's not as if we have a conscious choice; the perceptions are distorted on an unconscious level. Certain things never even reach our consciousness—they've been filtered out way before. This book comes from a scientific, psychological perspective, and the author gives a few examples of experiments that have been conducted to show this.

The first, not an experiment but a story, shows how on a physical level we can block the perception sometimes of great pain in a situation where to actually feel that amount of pain would possibly mean the difference between surviving and not surviving. He tells a story of Livingstone—Stanley or Livingstone, one of the two—who wrote this himself. He was being mauled by a lion, conscious, and he lived through it. In recounting it later, he said he just did not feel pain at that time.

Probably most of you have times in your own life you can think of—I know I can—when I've been in accidents and at the moment of impact felt no pain at all, to the point where I could bounce up and be on the side of the road in a tenth of a second, out of harm's way, and within two minutes was unable to move an arm and a leg. Somehow it's like a survival mechanism. The perception of the pain doesn't get through to consciousness.

The author takes this a step further, talking about how the mind seems to be able to screen perceptions so that certain stimuli—now more in the psychological realm—perceived as threatening, anxiety-provoking, or really in some cases maybe literally life-threatening, are also screened out. They never reach consciousness.

Here are a couple of examples. One deals more with the quality of mind of grasping, of one-pointedness on something. Some people were asked to watch about four minutes of a video of a very fast basketball game and were given the assignment to count how many times the ball was passed back and forth. It was very active, and they did that. In the middle of this video, through the court, a woman strolled dressed in white with a white parasol. She just kind of strolled in one side and out the other. At the end, people reported how many times the ball had been passed. No one commented on this woman. In fact, when told about it, they couldn't believe it had happened. They just hadn't seen it. They had to watch it again. Amazing.

The second experiment deals more with stimuli that would provoke anxiety.

And so they showed the subjects different pictures. The pictures had different things in them, but the one that I remember had about half of the picture showing something innocuous—a man reading a newspaper. And then the other half was something sexually suggestive and obviously not fitting with the other part of the picture.

The people were asked to look at the pictures—there were several of them—and then later describe what the pictures were of, what they could remember. But the second trick that the investigators had was some kind of device that could measure where the eyeball looked when viewing the pictures. So they could know not only if someone later said they forgot, but they could also see where their eyes had actually traveled.

People for whom the sexual images were anxiety-provoking or upsetting, when they reported on the pictures, would often just say, "Well, there's a picture of a man reading a newspaper." But what they could measure was that the eyeball had never even looked at the part of the picture that was anxiety-provoking.

How? God knows. But somehow there is a way of pre-screening ahead of time. If this is taken in, it's going to provoke anxiety, so we won't even take it in.

So we wonder why we're living with distorted perceptions, why we feel out of touch and disconnected. We don't know what's going on half the time. We're living with these filters, these distortions on our conscious

perception—blind spots in our experience. Certain things we have selective memory for; we just don't remember. Selective perception. We just don't allow the perception into consciousness. And when I say we don't allow it, I don't mean to imply that this is some kind of conscious, willful decision. This is operating on very subtle levels. But it's no wonder that we feel out of touch and wonder why things don't quite work.

These filters—these are the afflictions, the *kilesas*, whatever word we want to use. The most predominant, strongest ones are greed and hatred or aversion, fear, the forms of that. And identification, the confusion, delusion.

When aversion is the operant filter, the way we relate can take many forms: avoidance, outright denial, not even letting it in like I was describing. Just blocking what our experience is. I've seen it done in a way where a person is outright denying that they're perceiving what they're perceiving in front of their eyes.

Once when I was in a hospital, I'd been there a few days and they'd been doing a lot of tests. I was kind of at the end of whatever equanimity I had. They were trying to do some procedure that, had they done it the first time, wouldn't have been that painful, but for some reason they couldn't do it. So about the fourth time, the nurse couldn't handle it anymore and called in a doctor. I knew I was in trouble then, because nurses can usually do these things better than doctors. And so he was digging in my arm, and I started crying. He looked at me and said, "What's your problem? This doesn't hurt."

I thought, *whoa*. That's the most blatant form of denial. And I understood—he couldn't handle that he was hurting me.

Or how often I've seen in relationships where some part of that relationship is so important to me, or perceived as so important, that there is complete denial in my mind of many aspects that are painful, difficult, not working. Only when the relationship actually breaks up and I have nothing to protect anymore do I wake up and say, "My God, I thought it was a perfect relationship, and look at all this stuff. We couldn't even talk." And that's true. It's hard to believe that one could have been so blind—until the next time it happens again.

Greed works differently. It's that tunnel vision, like the people watching the basketballs pass back and forth. When greed is operant, we see the object of what we want. Everything else is either ignored or in the way.

And then identification—and each of these is topics and topics in itself. Identification is identifying any facet of our experience as solid me, unchanging I, something core, a root part of our existence. This is delusion. When we're operating from these skewed perceptions, we're operating from delusion. We're out of touch with our experience, and we continue to suffer, not really quite knowing why.

So this is where mindfulness comes in, luckily for us. As I was reading this book, I kept thinking, "Oh, mindfulness is definitely the cure for this." Because the key to wisdom is being able to see, to experience the actuality of what's happening here and now, just as it is in this moment—not being hindered by our

defenses, by our wants, by our anxieties, our expectations.

And the key tool for seeing what's happening here and now is the quality of mindfulness, as we practice and develop it—because it does take a great deal of practice and development.

As mindfulness grows, its light shines equally on each arising aspect of our experience, without discrimination. After a while, as each thing simply arises, we begin to perceive previously submerged aspects of our experience, because there's no discrimination going on. We're not heading toward one thing and keeping away something else, but just meeting whatever arises with a fullness of attention. We begin to see the filters themselves. And when we see them, they become simply another object to pay attention to, rather than some dark force driving our life.

This develops a wonderful spaciousness of mind, great equanimity, great acceptance. The Buddha said that there is no higher happiness than peace. And as we continue to work in this way, we start to get a taste of what that means—a real peace that's not dependent on having our environment be a certain way. We begin to stop trying to control things so busily, trying to order our experience so that the unpleasant stays away and the pleasant comes. We begin to greet all things equally, really learning that peace is not dependent on what experience we're having, but completely dependent on our relationship to that experience.

This is something I feel I can't say enough. I'm saying it to myself as well as to you. It doesn't matter what object is arising in consciousness. It's the relationship to it, the quality of meeting it with mindfulness—with spacious, open, active attention. That's what's important. And that's where understanding will arise from.

I want to discuss some of the qualities of mindfulness as we work with it here in this meditation retreat. The Buddha said that mindfulness is the greatest protection we have in life, and it's also the only protection we need. It protects us in many ways. One of them is that it protects us from being heedless—that way we drift through life as if asleep, not really quite aware of what's happening.

So often, when I'm sitting and my mind finally gets quiet, there arises this sense of loss from so many things that have gone by that I wasn't really present for. Almost every time I visit my family, I go with these great commitments about how present I'm going to be, how loving. And then when I leave, this always happens—I have this sense of remorse for just being heedless in many ways, just not being present.

Outside of retreat, it so often takes a major event to wake us up from this heedlessness. Hearing of Dipa Ma's death this year—actually, that was the strongest effect it had on me. A sense of this wonderful, loving being, and now she's just not here, in the snap of a finger. It woke me up to all the little moments of my life, to simply being present for what's happening now. I know we all have moments like this, over and over.

Mindfulness also has the power to wake us up in this way, very strongly. And it doesn't always take the death of a loved one or something equally traumatic. You know those moments when you walk outside and see a leaf turning red, and it's so exquisite, so beautiful. Or you're drinking a cup of tea, and somehow you're really drinking that cup of tea. You've never tasted a cup of tea—one sip of tea—that was so wonderful. Later you think, "Well, it's just old chamomile. I've had that a million times." This is the quality of heedfulness—being able to be with what's happening in the moment and really appreciate it for what it is. The power of mindfulness, simplicity, slowing down, and the very deliberate practice of attention.

In those moments when experience is so vivid and so exquisite, what's happening is that we're seeing without the filters. We're able to appreciate the moment for just what it is—not needing it to be something else, not trying to get away from it, not spacing out because it's not interesting enough, but just settling in and being there, the way it is.

So that's one way mindfulness protects us. It protects us from heedlessness by bringing clarity of vision, simplicity of mind to our experience—the ability to appreciate what's happening just for what it is.

Often when we talk about mindfulness in conversation, there can be a tendency to think of the actual experience as kind of generic awareness. "I'm aware of this, I'm aware of that. When I walk down the street, I'm aware that I'm walking. I'm aware that I'm going to the lunch line. I'm aware that I'm hungry." We use awareness quite loosely, often interchangeably with mindfulness. But mindfulness is really much more specific and has very particular qualities. The translation we've been using a lot for mindfulness is "observing power." To me, that gives a kind of gestalt feeling.

of what the energy of mindfulness is really like. It's an observing power.

I want to list a few of the qualities of mindfulness, and if you could, when I'm talking about them, also try to listen in an experiential way. See if you can get in touch with how these energies manifest in yourself, because while I'm putting this into words, it's really an active experience. Each moment that observing power meets an object, there's a very concrete experiential phenomenon occurring. I'm trying to use a lot of words to explain that.

The first quality of mindfulness—and I'm speaking now in terms of working in the retreat format—is this seeing of the object that's arising into consciousness just as it arises, as it is. In other words, it's as if you're sitting and a sense of tingling arises. In that moment, it's as if the noting mind, the consciousness, springs up to meet that object without hesitation and without anticipation, either one. There's this very active sense of object and observing power, mindfulness, coming together.

If there's hesitation—a slight sense of, even though it's not time to put it into words, "Well, I don't want to go to that tingling now, maybe it'll wait, maybe I'll go back to the breath"—usually that hesitation is the movement of the distortions, of the afflictions, some sense of choice. Either it's nice and I want to pay attention to that, or I'll wait until something better comes along, or there's that real subtle, unconscious

wanting to avoid certain things that might cause anxiety. Springing up to meet the object without hesitation means there's no choice involved, no thinking involved. It's just an active but non-judging movement. Object and noting mind come together. There's an active, energetic quality.

There's also no sense of clinging to whatever sensation or experience is happening. Not "Well, this is kind of interesting, I should see it through to the end even though something else has arisen and is more predominant." Something else arises, and the noting mind rises up to meet it. There's no clinging to the first object. Also no sense of anticipating—"Let's hurry up and get through this one so we can get to one that might be more interesting." There's a full, active participation in whatever experience is arising, and an equal ability to just let it go and move just as fully to the next experience.

That's one reason using the breath as a primary object can be so helpful. If you ever find yourself in a state where you're not sure which object is predominant, or where to go, or you're starting to get confused—rather than trying to figure it out, which unless you're in a very clear state is almost certainly going to lead into some greed or some anger, almost certainly going to be colored a little bit by that—just go back to the breath so that there's not a sense of really having to choose at all. Confusion? Note confusion, back to the breath.

Sometimes, perhaps many of us have experienced, there are times when working with noting, with mindfulness in general, with this quality of not hesitating but springing up to meet the object, it's almost as if we experience a fear and hold back just a little bit. Almost as if we're afraid to put that level of commitment, that level of surrender, into the observing power. There could be many reasons why we're holding back. Fear that I can't do it. Fear of what might happen if we really surrender into the process. Fear of what we might see. Lots of different reasons.

I just want to bring this up because in the slight holding back, that little bit of space gives room for doubt, gives room for the thinking mind to expand, gives room for proliferation. And again, it tends to lead toward more confusion. Whereas when we work—and it takes practice; it's not that you just sit down and immediately you're going to see everything arising the moment it's arising; I'm not implying that—but our willingness to continue that active engagement, as we do that object after object and we miss fewer and fewer objects, the mindfulness becomes very sharp and powerful. We really begin to see at much deeper levels what's going on.

The second aspect of mindfulness, which we've talked about a lot, is that it enables us to see the bare experience—what's actually going on—as opposed to taking the concept, the interpretations of the experience, to be the truth. It's about seeing directly, without the veil of interpretation.

We all know this. We all know the difference between noting "hearing" when you hear the bell ring, and thinking, "Oh, that's the bell ringing. It's time for the sitting to end." And even though we all know it, the concepts can be so subtle or so insidious, or we're so identified with them, so used to seeing them, that it can sometimes be very hard to separate out the concept from the bare experience.

Just to give a very common example: if you're following the breath, rising and falling, and the experience of it is very tight, very tense, very unpleasant and pressured—

And each breath, the thoughts that are going on: "Oh, this is because I'm such a rigid, controlling, ungenerous person. This is just the proof of it." Each falling: "God, I can't believe how rigid I am." And it's so hard sometimes to just know tightness, tension. Each breath becomes proof of how unworthy we are to be in a meditation environment, to live on the planet, to have friends—it just goes on and on.

And when it's not seen clearly, which it often isn't, that movement of aversion to the tension leads into that concept of what a rotten person we are. And that judgment, that aversion unseen, leads into a world of proliferation, so that by the end of the sitting you've gone over every ungenerous, unkind thing you ever did in your life and expanded on it and pretty much got an image set in concrete of what you are.

We all do this over and over. And when you finally say, "Oh, this is just tension, and this is aversion, and this is interpreting," it's so freeing. But it's so tricky, because we turn around and it happens again. So not to put ourselves down for it, but the power of mindfulness—this being able to cut through and be with the bare sensation—noting is really helpful in situations like this. We're able to note the sensation as it is: tightness. And the fact that there's aversion to it: aversion. And the fact that there's a concept forming about who we are. It doesn't necessarily need to go any further. And even if it does, we're not so lost in delusion. We're knowing that this is sensation, this is aversion, this is interpretation and image building. We're connected with what's happening.

So it's not to discard the use of concepts, but to tell the difference. And the more we work with developing the power of mindfulness, the more we find that it's much easier to get in touch with the actual experience in a moment. It's much easier to see how much of the suffering we're undergoing is coming about from an interpretation that might or might not have anything to do with what our experience actually is.

In this way, observing power mindfulness protects us from getting lost in the delusions and confusions created by the mind, by interpretation. We begin to actually relate in our lives to what's actually happening. It's quite a unique event sometimes, and things become so much simpler, so much less troublesome. We're back to being able to appreciate much more when we're relating to what's actually happening and not lost in the veils of interpretation.

Mindfulness protects us in this way because when we're really mindful of what's happening—whether it's tension, whether it's aversion, whether it's the breath—when that power of the observing mind springs forward to meet the object, in that moment there's no room for overwhelming greed or hatred or confusion to arise and overpower the mind. The mind and the object are coming together so completely that there's no space for the defilements, the afflictions, to arise and to overpower as they do.

So that's why we're always going on about really connecting with the object. That's also why continuity is so important, because each moment that we let up the mindfulness, there is room for the distortions of

wanting, the distortions of aversion, the distortions of identification to arise. And they're so powerful. They're such habitual reactions of mind that, basically, given an opportunity to arise, these things do arise. They're just so strongly conditioned.

But it's also important, I feel, not to underestimate the power of those moments when the mindfulness is clear, when you feel there's a real connection, there's just the experiencing of an object directly as it is. A clear experience of the breath. A time when you walk outside and the tree is just so vivid—there's nothing in that moment but the experience of seeing, of tree-ness. In those moments of close connection, the distortions, the filters aren't there.

Those moments are important because in the moment of mindfulness, it's a moment of purification, for just that reason. The distortions of greed, hatred, and delusion aren't arising in that moment. It's breaking the conditioning, the power of the afflictions arising. And that's really important. It kind of breaks the chain, even if just for a moment. But each moment that we're deconditioning or reconditioning the responses of the mind is really valuable. So I just like to put it out that it might seem like no big deal, but it is an important part of the practice. Those moments really count.

This sense of purification comes about, this sense of having no space for the greedy mind, for the hating mind to arise—it's not from an energy of repression. It's not from a violent pushing away of these energies. So the next quality of observing power is that it's totally non-violent, non-manipulative, non-controlling. It's a quality of mind that, although quite active, is not trying to change the experience in any way whatsoever—only trying to be there, meet it, accept it very fully and very actively, but accepting it just as it is.

It's been said that spiritual practice consists in reaching out and embracing all life fearlessly with an open heart. And this is the quality that we bring to connecting with each object in our experience, no matter what it is—embracing it fearlessly with an open heart. So observing power has this spirit of kindness, of metta even, to each thing that arises, to oneself. A quality of great spaciousness of mind, a quality like

Like last night, just as it was getting dark, I was walking outside and in the darkening sky—I know some of you saw it—there was a really beautiful crescent moon and the evening star. Exquisite. It was so beautiful.

As I was standing there, I realized I was kind of focusing on the crescent moon and the star, and suddenly my mind just did a flip and I became aware of all the space around them, the whole space of the sky. That's the quality of mind that goes with observing power—the space that is present for anything that comes into it. It doesn't try to change it. It doesn't manipulate. It doesn't push away. It has no choice. But it cradles, it holds whatever arises into the space. And then it lets it go when it's time for it to go.

This is the quality of mind that we can bring to mindfulness, to observing. It allows the whole range of experience to come and go without a problem. Real sweetness and openness.

Sometimes a specific concept—there are a hundred million, but I just want to talk about this one—gets in

our way of being able to meet whatever arises with this non-manipulative, loving quality. That concept is our ideas about what good practice looks like. If we think we know what good practice looks like—whether it's from another sitting we've had, whether it's from anything any of us say, whether it's from the person you've picked out who walks so incredibly mindfully that you've decided that's good practice, you make up what's going on in their mind and then know that's good practice—whatever it's from, once that idea is ingrained and not seen, it makes it really hard to embrace our experiences that don't come anywhere close to meeting our ideas of good practice. And so then we're in conflict.

I mention this because it's one that we all get trapped in a lot. Just notice if that's operating. Notice that—another concept. Embrace that concept and then don't let it undermine the ability to meet whatever's happening with real openness, real non-violence, a loving quality.

Another quality of mindfulness is that it's not superficial. It's very penetrating. When we're talking about aiming at the object and sustaining the attention, this non-superficiality means that the mind springs forward, meets the object, and then completely immerses itself in it. It's not a sense of holding back, not a sense of jumping over to the next. Sayadaw U Pandita uses the example of when you pour water into a glass—it doesn't just stay in one part of the glass, it covers the whole glass. That's the quality of mindfulness, just really sinking into whatever's happening. Not a casual glance and on to the next. And this develops as we work.

To work with all of these qualities that I've been talking about, it's very important to develop the quality of right balance of effort. The quality of learning to aim at whatever is arising in the mind and then springing forward to meet it with an appropriate amount of energy. It takes a lot of experimentation to learn, and it changes all the time—how to modulate the amount of energy we use. We talk about shooting an arrow at a target: you have to aim it, and you also have to shoot it with the proper amount of force.

It's possible often not to have enough energy, and we just kind of note an object, kind of observe it, and things get vaguer and vaguer. The other possibility is that we're using so much force and so much effort—and most of the way I've been talking tonight, I keep talking about springing up, really springing forward, meeting the object—it's possible to do that with so much force and energy that you get really knotted up, rigid and tight, and you're not really meeting the object. You're more trying to club it to death.

It's working with a balance between the active meeting and, when that's too forceful, a quality of alert receptivity. In that space, if you find you're using too much force, it can be helpful to move back into the analogy of the mind being like space—open, receptive, yet very alert. But rather than pushing forward to meet the experience, in that alert receptivity the experience rises up to meet the consciousness. As soon as it rises up, the alert part is to acknowledge it, note it, be with it. But it's not such a striving, pushing quality.

And for all of this, of course, patience is absolutely necessary. Patience and patience and endless patience. Because how many objects arise into our experience in one sitting? And how many times do we space out in one sitting—never mind going through the whole day? And that's okay. That's fine.

It's just this quality of working with continuity, especially this quality of patience. It doesn't matter what's happening. But as soon as we're aware that we've been gone for ten minutes and we wake up, there's something to come back to—whether it's the breath, whether it's your hand feeling the fork in your hand, whether you're bringing a cup to your lips, whether you're flushing the toilet. It doesn't matter what. There's something to come back to: the actual, concrete experience.

And the patience is just the willingness to come back a hundred million times, over and over. That very willingness to come back is strengthening the power of mindfulness, the power of concentration. It actually is part of the practice, not something we have to endure in order to get somewhere. We can look at those moments as equally important as any other moment.

Let me run through the four protections I've named that I feel are very valuable, very powerful—what mindfulness offers us.

One is that when we're working with mindfulness, we're protected from heedlessness, from walking through life in a daze, from not knowing what we're doing.

A moment of mindfulness protects us from being lost in the distortions of greed, hatred, and delusion.

It enables us to see the truth for ourselves. In some ways, I feel this is the most powerful one, because what we've seen, what we've understood for ourselves, nobody can take away from us. No one can say it's not true. Mindfulness enables us to connect with, to experience the actuality of just this moment and just this moment. That's what sets the conditions for liberating insight to arise.

And the final protection is that, as is often said, in protecting ourselves we protect all others. We're not doing this in isolation. As these protections grow, as we begin to grow in wisdom and understanding—as Thich Nhat Hanh says, without understanding we are unable to love—so as we grow in understanding through the power of mindfulness, it's just spontaneous that the power of mettā and compassion grow as well. This protection that's growing in ourselves flows out, affects how we relate to the world, to other beings. It affects ourselves and everyone else we come in contact with. We're not separate from society. And so it's really a very powerful protection.

Just as once we've experienced and understood the truth for ourselves no one can take it away, also no one can give it to us. We have to come to these understandings for ourselves. We have to do the work for ourselves, in whatever form we're doing it. No one else can do it for us.

We can take the Dharma as our refuge, and also take your own practice, take yourself, your experience as a refuge. No one else can give you freedom, just as no one can take it away. What we're doing here is really powerful, very important.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago*, talking about the day of liberation when people who had been in the prison camps under Stalin were released. He says: "The day of liberation—as if it

were possible to liberate anyone who has not first become liberated in their own soul."

And I would add that it's also impossible to take away the freedom of anyone who's been liberated in their own soul.

So hopefully, that's what we're working on here.

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