Wise Attention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:05:24

I was struck this morning in the questions and in talking to people over the last couple of days by a couple of things. For some people, there just seems like there's been so much information—how to meditate, all our talks, everything. And then listening to the questions today and speaking with people in interviews, I noticed a sense of how our minds want to reconcile everything and figure it all out, figure out which is the right way. There must be some right way. It can't just be all this huge amount of information that's all useful somehow. We just like to have models, plans, to know: do it like this and that happens. This is the right way—really focus. But now there's big mind, and what am I supposed to do if I'm in big mind? If something gets small, but I'm small in the big mind, is this the right way? And how can I do big mind when I'm walking? But what about concentration? And the hindrances are coming back, and it matters—no, it doesn't matter because it's all empty, but how come?

So first I thought I just don't want to talk at all, but I wasn't allowed that option. So then I picked the longest talk I have—that's what they get for making me talk, my long talk.

Actually, what I do want to talk about is just that. I want to talk about a particular sutta of the Buddha's where he is actually talking about the very, very subtlest level of the patterns of our minds, which they call *āsavas* or the taints—the most subtle latent level, and I'll describe it. So he's talking about the most subtle levels of how to abandon these underlying tendencies. This isn't like the gross level, where if you can't do anything else, do what he's suggesting here. This is the most subtle level. And he gives seven different ways of working with this, which is not just about very subtle, quiet meditation. It's about all different ways of our life.

I wanted to talk about this because I want to try to reinforce what's so hard for us to trust: that there is no one right way. Right way to what? As soon as we say "right way," the mind is making some idea, some sense of a state, or how things should look, or how I should feel, or what should or shouldn't be happening. As soon as we think "right way," the mind has come into comparison, making measurements, making limits. As soon as you're thinking, "Is this the right way?" it's all solidified just in that moment.

And it's so hard. This is the same thing I've been saying the whole time, but it's so hard for us to really trust. It's not about what's particularly happening. All the different practices and all the different aspects of the meditation and the Buddhist path they're pointing to—it's not getting some right way of meditating. It's just a tool. Not achieving some state of mind—that's going to change. If you can achieve it, it can go away.

But really recognizing, trusting this moment—that Bhante Vimamsaka talked about last week—of the

mind and heart that's really free from clinging. Whether that clinging is in the form of grasping or aversion, sense of self—all of that is clinging. And in a moment, all we can practice, all we can cultivate, all we can pay attention to is: what's the quality of the mind in this moment? That's it. The past is a thought in this moment. So is the future. So is the present. All we can cultivate.

Everything we talk about is ways to help us notice, really tune in: What's the quality? What's the attitude in the mind, in the awareness, in this moment? And so there's millions of different ways. If one doesn't work, another one might for this moment. The next moment is all different again. So you might as well—although I'm going to give you another one—throw out the lists that you go down. And I'm going to give you one. You can write it all down. Then at the end, you can throw them all out and just check what's happening now. Is there wanting? Is there aversion? Is there craving? Or not. Or you can't tell—that's also okay.

But looking, just knowing what's the quality of awareness now—not so focused on the object, the object, the object being sense pleasure, the object being the mind, the object being a state.

So all the methods he talks about in the sutta and all through the teachings, the practice—there's a simile he uses a lot, which is about feeding and starving. When we think in terms of "is this the right way to meditate—spacious, precise, very subtle, more gross?"—it's not about whether it's subtle or gross or spacious or precise. It's about what, in the way we're paying attention, in the way mindfulness is meeting what's happening, what qualities are being fed, what qualities are being starved.

The Buddha talks like this a lot. He talks about feeding the wholesome, starving the unwholesome. If in the way we pay attention we're feeding wanting, and it's getting stronger and stronger and stronger, and the sense of self is getting stronger and stronger and stronger in a moment—that's what he calls unwise attention. So that's what I want to really talk about: wise attention.

But first to this sutta. Andrea read a little bit of it, so I don't have to read that part about why his attention were all the views. But he says, he's talking about these taints—that's the usual translation for *āsava*—or this subtle underlying tendency, and the exhaustion, the abandoning of these tendencies. So I just want to describe what we mean by those.

When Sayadaw U Pandita was here, he talked about what he called the three rounds, or the three levels, of *kilesa*—defilement, suffering in the mind, the way it manifests. Three rounds of saṃsāra, he called it. The first—and also wholesome manifests in the same way—but the first he called "in deeds or speech." So if there's in a moment in the mind, in the awareness, really strongly, for example, greed, desire, and if it manifests on this most gross level, the level of what he calls the level of transgression, we act on it. There's really strong desire, and you act on it. You go in the kitchen, in the walk-in, in the middle of the night and take something, right? None of you, of course, have done that here, but it has been known to have happened. We have everything numbered and charted, and we know. But right, so that's acting out—level of transgression. And that's what *sīla*, the precepts, protect us from. When we commit to *sīla*, that's

protecting us on this level of acting out, of transgression of *kilesa*.

The second level he called—the translation to English was—the obsessive level. So take desire again. You're not actually acting it out, but the mind is completely caught up in obsessive thinking: "Oh, I've got to get that date. I've got to get that fig. How could I get figs? How could I get dates?" Not just a thought here and there—we're talking obsessive, right? You're all familiar with this. We're in the realm of familiarity so far, right?

What protects us on that level is *samādhi*. *Samādhi*, both in terms of the balance of mind—when a thought of desire comes up and the mind just doesn't go there—that protects us. Also the *samādhi*, the *samatha*, the really quiet, one-pointed concentration, also protects against this level of obsession. As U Tejaniya says, it actually suppresses that wanting. After a while, when the mind's really focused on something, it doesn't even come up. That's why we like when the mind gets really focused and concentrated and kind of narrowed down on one point—because the *kilesas* and the hindrances are suppressed. They're kept away. And we find out how really actually lovely it is when those things aren't harassing us in the mind all the time. It's like, "Oh my God, this is amazing." We think it's the best. It's the end. It's enlightenment. We just haven't had a moment that wasn't having this obsessive stuff going on.

But as you may have noticed, if you had some period when it's really quiet or really balanced, whether it's the one-pointed *samādhi* or just more open but really balanced—it changes, right? And have you noticed there can kind of, not always, but be these waves where it's really calm, really focused, craving's not coming much, aversion's not coming much, and it creeps in? "Now we've got it. I've seen through this now, right? That particular obsessive pattern's no longer coming up." And then it changes. The mind gets a little more restless, more things happen. And again, the assault—it can come up. And sometimes it takes a while.

And sometimes—this was amazing to me on one retreat I was doing—I was really very one-pointed, with concentration on changing objects, but with a lot of effort to connect and focus. Like, *no, no, no, connect.* As long as I kept up that effort every single moment, connecting with whatever was arising, there was really steady mindfulness. And even if wanting came, it was just like *wanting*, and I'd notice it as the next arising thing. That's wise attention.

But I started playing with this, and I noticed that when I would deliberately pull the attention back and not note, not land, just kind of pull it back and not be connected—it would just come rushing in, this wanting about anything, just some stupid thing. I was really both amazed and a little bit disheartened, I must say, to see how quickly it arose. Well, what's the point? I mean, there is a point, but at that point I said, *why?* As soon as I pull back—boom—I want this, I want that, I like this, I don't like that.

My only point in saying that is that this samādhi protects us from the obsessive while it's there. But it doesn't uproot. It doesn't possess the wisdom that allows for the seeing through of the tendency, the kind of seeing that really allows the mind to just lose interest, to abandon, to uproot—going all the way to

arahat. But even moment to moment, we all have that capacity.

So this third level, which is the one we're talking about—the latent or underlying tendencies—it doesn't mean that there's some stream of craving and aversion that's part of you, always there. It doesn't mean that, even though sometimes it might feel like it. It means that there's a habit, a tendency in the mind stream, a kind of momentum, so that when the conditions are right and there's still that underlying tendency, greed or aversion or delusion-identification might arise.

Here's an example a yogi gave me a few years ago—I mean, there are a million. She or he, I forget who it was, was walking by, and I thought they were being very mindful, walking through the dining room. There was a bowl of fruit there in the late afternoon, and they thought they were being very mindful. They saw the fruit, didn't notice wanting, and thought they were just walking by with no intention at all. The next thing they knew, their hand shot out and grabbed an apple and kept on going. Where did that come from? Just that moment of not quite noticing what was happening in the mind, and there's this underlying—*yes, apple, want, take, go.* It just acts out really quickly.

Or the times when you're walking and very present, and someone cuts in front of you, and aversion or judgment just surges up. You don't act on it, but it's so surprising because it seems to come from left field. Just the underlying tendency.

So this is a very subtle level we're talking about. Sometimes people have described—and many have—times here where suddenly it seems as if you're seeing craving, for example, or self-judging, or pride, as if it were behind almost everything you do, in a way that's shocking. It's subtle but coming up all the time, and you think, *how could I not have seen this before?* But this is really—you don't get it that it's subtle because it seems like everything's like that, and you must have been so deluded not to notice it. But really it's that the attention is getting much more fine, much more subtle, and you're starting to see a very subtle level of wanting or identification or fear behind movements, behind things in the mind, arising just because the conditions are there.

So this is actually a very useful part of practice—not uplifting, really, but very useful just to see it with wise attention.

That's what we mean in this sutta when he's talking about all the tendencies, all the taints—I don't really like that word—all the stains, the āsavas. He's talking about this level. And what protects us from, or sees through, these levels is paññā, wisdom. He says actually that the subtle tendencies are abandoned not by acts, but by wisely seeing—just by clear seeing.

As someone said today, they were noticing in regard to a certain situation that had kept coming up and triggering wanting in the mind throughout the retreat. Suddenly the mind was sort of disenchanted with it. The situation would come, the same seeing, the same conditions, and just instead of going to wanting, the mind would just go, *don't need to go there.* Not an act of will. That's actually the movement of paññā.

When we talk about real renunciation—by seeing through with wisdom, the clinging is abandoned. It's not an act of will. It just doesn't come up in that moment.

So it's important for all of us to notice when we do actually have those experiences—because you all do, and probably a lot, believe it or not. And you just think, *well, it just didn't come up this time. Maybe it's because I'm not close enough to the experience. I should be there. Where is it?* Notice. That's the seeing of wisdom. That's the dispassion. That's actually the protection—the latent tendency not arising, being abandoned in that moment.

So that's what he's talking about in this sutta. "Bhikkhus, I say there is exhaustion, abandoning of these asavas in one who knows wise attention and unwise attention." You know both of them. "When one attends unwisely, both unarisen asavas, stains, and arisen ones increase. When one attends wisely, unarisen taints do not arise, and arisen ones are abandoned."

I want to talk about wise attention, and then I want to talk about these seven specific ways that he mentions in the sutta—different places to use wise attention.

Wise attention he defines very specifically as knowing—well, it's how we pay attention, and that's the main thing, and what we pay attention to. He defines it as knowing what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit. Now, at first, that sounds like it plays right into our idea of there's a right way and a wrong way. Certain aspects of our experience are fit for attention—that means we're doing it right. And other ones are unfit for attention, and if they're there, we're doing it wrong. This is not what it means.

It's really how we're paying attention. When there is right attitude in the mind at any moment, when the attention, the awareness is meeting whatever's arising without wanting or aversion, without delusion, without that sense of me, any object is the right object. It's wise attention. When the paying attention is colored—and we've said this a million times—with any of these collations, and we don't recognize it, seeing through it, it's unwise attention. It's not so much about the object as about how we're paying attention. But sometimes we can use noticing as we're paying attention to the object and the collations increase—we can use that as a sign: "Oh, this isn't wise attention."

There's no fixed determination in things themselves, in objects themselves. The same experience—for example, aversion—could be a fine subject of wise attention in one moment, and it could be unwise attention in the next moment. It's all in the attitude.

The word translated as "wise attention" in Pali is two words: yoniso manasikara. It might be better to translate it as "appropriate attention," or Andy Olenski, the head of the study center who's a Pali scholar, likes "careful attention." I like the way he breaks down these words. Mana means mind—chitta and the concomitant mental factors with it. Kara is from the same word as kamma; it means action. And so manasikara really means a doing, an action of the mind. Attention—that's usually how it's translated.

Yoniso comes from the word yoni, which is the word for womb. And so Andy likes to translate yoniso as

womb-like: nurturing, supporting, protecting, held in protection—as in sati, mindfulness being our protection. He translates yoniso manasikara as an active quality of mind that is nurturing and supporting. Not hitting, penetrating, beating down the object mercilessly, but a quality of mind that is nurturing and supporting. Supporting what? Balanced awareness, right attitude. Just a moment of presence free from suffering, from kalesha—that's nurturing and supporting clear seeing, discerning wisdom, pañña, in this moment. Feeding or starving, very pragmatically.

That's what's so hard for us to absolutely radically trust—that this quality of yoniso manasikara can meet any object whatsoever. No exceptions. That's what's so hard for us to trust. We keep getting pulled into the belief that our problem is with what's happening, and if we could just change it, we'd be doing better, we'd be suffering less. But really, radically, it's about the attitude and the awareness in any moment.

For example—and I fall into this as much as anyone—there's the sense, just the subtle preference, the subtle sense that it's better attention when things that are coming and going, we see them coming and going. They're clear. We usually feel a little more at ease when the attention can clearly notice. The more precise the better—we see what's happening, it's coming, it's going, we're sensitive, we're tuned in, really feeling a sense of presence. That somehow seems much better than when it's all vague and cloudy and chaotic. But even that can be unwise attention because it's in what's in the attitude that's noticing.

I just read this in a news magazine about a guy named Dean Potter. They said he's a legend in the rock climbing world. He's way past rock climbing now—that's boring.

And what he mostly does is two things. One is called highlining, which means walking across chasms on loosely strung nylon ropes. And the other is base jumping, which I've seen in Switzerland. It's pretty intense. You leap off a really high cliff or mountain with this little kind of parachute on your back. You just jump out, go as far as you can, and pull the parachute in the last two seconds or something. It's a special kind of parachute. Very intense. People die doing it.

Once I was with friends, and we were just sitting on a bench near a big cliff, and we heard this whoosh—a guy had just base jumped. It takes like ten seconds. That's it. It's over. And he had to walk in for an hour carrying his gear and walk out for an hour just to plummet down and pull the parachute at the last minute. It's intense.

So this guy, that's what he does. Now, this is what he says about it: "I'm addicted to the heightened awareness I get when there's a death consequence. My vision is sharper. I'm more sensitive to sounds, my sense of balance, and the beauty all around me. Something sparkles in my mind, and nothing else in life matters."

You can almost think that was good mindfulness, right? But I have a feeling that there's something in his motivation that might have a little bit of kilesa in it. I'm not sure. He's going so far as to think that maybe, if he really concentrates and enters a trance-like state, he could fly. He says, "I know it's insane to think,

but that's all I can think about—going to a place that's not accepted."

So it's not in how it looks. It's not in the object. Can we be that radical to turn around and look?

At the same time, something that is clearly kilesa and suffering—for example, dosa, aversion, unpleasantness, anger, however you want to put it—that can be a perfectly fine object of awareness when we see it. "Oh, that's just anger doing its job." Just noticing anger, how it acts, how it feels in the body, the thoughts that come. Just noticing that with non-judging awareness. It comes, it does its thing, it goes. Really noticing it, though. Not that sense we can often have with any of these things—wanting, anger, self-judgment—where you say, "Oh, I know it's there. I know it's there." But it's running in the background. And this is where the latent tendency is getting more and more strengthened. We don't really turn around and notice it with wise attention. That's not the same thing. That's how it grows.

So this is what we're talking about with wise attention, what the Buddha's talking about. And then he describes seven ways that with wise attention, these latent underlying tendencies come to be abandoned—different ways we can pay attention with wise attention in our practice, in our life. They can be abandoned by insight, by seeing. Second is by restraining. Third is by how we use things. By patience. By avoiding. By removing things. And by developing. Developing means cultivating the seven factors of awakening, which we talked about the other night.

Abandoned by seeing is largely what I've already described. I just want to highlight a couple of things about how, by seeing, by insight, we pay attention—and that we can pay attention and think we're being really mindful because we're so focused on the object that we miss how we're paying attention. As we think we're being mindful, the greed,

Or the sense of self, or whatever it is that we're caught in—it seems to be getting bigger and bigger and bigger, in a way that we're really caught.

The Buddha gives some examples that I find really interesting. It's the hindrances—I won't go through all of them, but I want to highlight a couple. Notice what's being fed and what's being starved when you're giving attention to an experience. Again, it's very pragmatic. Not some idea of how it should look, but just notice what's happening now.

He gives an example with sense desire. It's not that sense desire in itself is the problem, as we've said several times, but in how we pay attention to it. Something that we often don't notice—I often didn't notice until I read it—is that when we pay attention to something, say something beautiful that we want, if you're having what we call a "VR," a vipassana romance with somebody, whenever you see them, the mind kind of looks at them: "Oh, they look so nice," or "I like their hair, I like the way they dress, they look so self-assured." The mind focuses on the attractive aspect, and it's mostly paying attention to, without realizing it, the sense of gratification we're getting from looking at that beautiful thing.

Let's go down from relationship to the smell of pizza. Let's just keep it very basic. You're smelling—ah, that

smells like fresh bread cooking. That smells so good. And there's wanting. You see, "Oh yeah, wanting," but it keeps going. Fresh bread. And you think you're there. You think you're just with smelling. But what's really going on is a sense of, "Wow, that's really nice. I really like it." And you keep focusing on the gratification.

This is kind of subtle, but just notice. If you keep thinking you're present—smell, good smell of bread, smell, good smell of bread—it's getting more and more and more until you're ready to burst into the kitchen crazed. Or you come to lunch and it isn't pizza and it's nothing like bread, and you don't know where that smell was. You smell chocolate cake all day and then it never shows up—has that happened? You just want to die or kill somebody. The transgression—that's when you're happy for the precepts. Then there's a good chance somewhere we weren't just attending with a pure mind. There was wanting in there that wasn't seen. We were attending to the gratification. It's really interesting.

Sometimes in the sitting, when we focus on rapture or sukha, the contentment, we think we're being really present until it goes away and we're so frustrated. We can't understand why, because we weren't noticing the sense of self, the sense of gratification that was going on about it. Gratification is all about the sense of self enjoying—not even enjoying, but the sense of self there.

Don't think about this too much. If it doesn't make sense, just let it go. But pay attention. If anything pleasant that your mind is wanting comes up again while you're here, just explore. If it keeps going, if you notice pleasant, liking, you really feel the liking and it goes away—great, that's wise attention. Liking, pleasant, wanting is a perfectly fine object of attention when you notice it with wise attention. But when you're noticing wanting and it's getting bigger, bigger, bigger, bigger—then check it out.

Same with aversion, and it's just the other side—developed through unwise attention to the repugnant or unpleasant aspect of something. Sayadaw U Tejaniya always uses the example: if you're really angry at someone and you're just kind of churning, you keep looking at them—what happens to the anger? Every time you look at them, it kind of gets triggered again. Or if you have one little rough tooth and all the rest of your teeth are fine, but you just can't keep your tongue away from that rough tooth. And since you're a yogi here and helpless, your mind will then start really freaking out about what you're going to do about the dentist. Unwise attention to the repugnant—it feeds the ill will. You can just notice that happening. Just notice how that can feed it. It's really interesting.

Sayadaw U Pandita says it's like a cow chewing its cud—you know how it swallows and then pulls it up and chews it over again and again. So if you've had any kind of unpleasant experience with anyone here, at work, or anything like that, you notice how later the image comes up, the memory comes up. "Yeah, that really was... yeah, that really was bad. I was bad. They were bad. This is wrong. That is wrong." Like a cow chewing its cud of the unpleasant, over and over again. Notice that.

Then don't judge it. Just notice it. Oh, that's what's happening.

That's unpleasant. And then it becomes an object of wise attention.

So those are just a couple of examples. Oh, just one thing I want to say about sloth and torpor. First, one aspect of it—of course, there's just the tiredness. But one aspect of how sloth and torpor as a hindrance shows up that I found really interesting is this quality of the mind that kind of shrinks back. It shrinks back from experience. It shrinks back from effort. It's the feeling of, "Ah, that's just too hard." My mind goes, "Oh, I just can't do that." And then this picture of getting into bed comes up in my mind. "I'll just go lie down."

But if I focus on that content, it just gets stronger and stronger. "Oh, I can't walk another step." What I don't see in that moment is the sense of identifying with the mental state. But when I realize, "Oh, 'that's just too hard, I just can't do it'—that's a mental state. It's just 'too hard.' It feels like this." In that moment, it's flipped from unwise attention—which was that I was aware of the tiredness, the sloth and torpor, but really identified with it, not seeing that, thinking, "It really is too hard. I really am too tired"—to "Oh, that's just a mental state."

I spent one really difficult retreat when I was in Burma, and this kept coming. It was a really difficult retreat—a lot of painful dukkha stuff was coming up. I'd be walking back and forth on my little porch, and that would arise. This image would come up of me just kind of getting onto the bed. That would be the first image. And then the feeling would be, "Ah, no, there's no way I can keep doing this." And it felt so true. "There's no way. This is unbearable."

And after a few days: "Oh my God, this is just a mental state like any other mental state." As soon as I see that, no problem. It doesn't mean it went away, but we've shifted to wise attention instead of believing it, and that makes all the difference. Then it's a perfectly fine object of wise attention. It doesn't have to get better.

So that's all I want to say about abandoning by seeing.

The next one—the Buddha says, "Abandon by restraining." Here, a bhikkhu, and that's anyone practicing, reflecting wisely—it's always reflecting wisely in each of these, so it's really bringing discerning attention, discerning wisdom—abides with the eye faculty restrained. And then he goes through all the different faculties. "While āsavas and fever of defilement might arise in one who abode unrestrained, there are no taints or fever of defilement in one who abides restrained."

So what do we mean by restrained? Noticing how it's a way of being that actually does not lead onward for these tendencies to arise and to be acted on.

Well, this is pretty basic. I don't have to say a lot because we've talked about it. It follows on the last one. Restraint—it's not so much that you never look or hear or see, right? That's not what we mean by restraint at the sense doors. But rather, bringing in what Buddhadasa calls *sati-paññā*, mindfulness-wisdom, right at the point of sense contact.

Well, this is our whole practice. This is nothing new, right? So I don't have to say too much about it.

But back to the smell of the pizza. Really, when we're fully present with smell—contact, smell, pleasant—or there's the mind thought, "I really like this," liking, pleasant. That's restraint at the sense doors. And of course, it takes a certain willingness and a certain calmness of mind. That's really why we're here meditating.

So this, to begin with, is a meditative form, but it doesn't have to be. It can actually go on into our life where we really notice how, when we're not just present with what's happening—what Sharada talked about—that whole stream of papañca just takes off so quickly, so fast. And what's papañca driven by? All these thoughts, but exactly these latent tendencies. And it's not that it's bad.

Say there's no restraint at the sense doors. "Oh, that pizza smells so good. Let me go sit in the dining room and just smell it some more and smell it some more. Let me think about all the times I had pizza. Let me imagine what they're putting on it." That's not restraint at the sense doors. It's not that it's bad—it's just that you suffer. It's unnecessary, but we think it's taking us into some kind of pleasure. That's how warped we are. So we have to look and see, to keep it simple. But it doesn't mean we completely shut down.

I have a friend years ago who was sitting here, and he decided to really practice what he thought was restraint at the sense doors, so he walked around blindfolded for three days. Everywhere he went, feeling his way around. That's not really restraint. There's no wisdom going to come from that. Sure, it's like really strong concentration—no craving or aversion could arise at the eye door because he couldn't see anything. But that's not really paññā. That's not really wisdom. You take it off, and then you're back where you started from.

So it's not the sense that all sense experience is bad, but it's a sense of really using mindfulness, wisdom, wise attention to see what's leading into more craving, more sense of identification, more becoming in the mind. What leads to more calmness, more quietness, more space, more peace? That's really why we've set it up this way here.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a way of talking about it. He says that our sense doors are like windows. Our senses are our windows to the outside world, and sometimes the wind blows and disturbs everything within us. And he said sometimes we just leave our windows wide open. He asks, "Do you ever find yourself watching an awful TV program, but you just can't get up and turn it off? There's noise, there's gunfire, it's upsetting you, but somehow you don't get up and turn it off. Why do you torture yourself this way? Don't you want to close your windows? Are you afraid of the solitude, the emptiness, the loneliness you might find?"

You don't have to use those words, but how often have we found it? When it gets a little quiet, the mind goes on some kind of rampage. Let's just whip it up. Nothing here is happening. I'll think of the most unpleasant experience in the last ten years and chew the cud of that for a while. At least I know I'm alive.

So in talking about restraint, it's seeing—and this isn't just here, it's in our life—to really look and see. There might be some simplifying that comes, not out of a "should." That's part of what we do here, and I'll talk about that more later in terms of avoiding.

Thich Nhat Hanh again: "A beginning meditator may want to leave the city and go off to the countryside"—like here—"to help close those windows. So there he or she can become quiet with the forest, rediscover, restore herself without being carried away by the chaos of the 'outside world.' The silence, the quietness helps you connect with and remain in awareness."

But when awareness is well-rooted, when it can be maintained more steadily without faltering, then you can return to the city and remain there with less trouble. But before you reach this point, you do need to be careful, nourishing your awareness moment by moment, choosing the surroundings and the sustenance that assist you most.

That's really something we can learn here. And just really small things. What assists us most? Not to hate the world and shut off to it, but to really cultivate trust, this quality of awareness that isn't feeding wanting. Really, and that's what a lot of you have been seeing—really how disturbing getting caught in wanting and aversion and "it's all about me" really is.

In our daily life, with the windows open, with so much going on, we don't even really notice that. And you'll see soon enough, but even now, some little thing happens, and all your sense of self comes up, and all your reactions—I know this happens to everybody—and it's so jarring. If you think about it, you think, wow, this is happening a million times a day in our normal life. How do we get through it? How does anyone get through it? Well, we see how people get through it. Not so good.

So here, in working with restraint at the sense doors, it's just that *sati-paññā* right there at the sense door. Seeing, contact—instead of seeing, judging. Instead of, "Yes, they're doing this. Yes, they're doing it. Oh, I'm judging. That's so bad." Just: seeing, judging. Seeing, judging. It's unpleasant. Unpleasant. That's okay. Just this *sati-paññā* right at the sense doors. It doesn't matter what, but just not jumping on the train and going. And simplifying really can help.

Shankara, who was one of the founders of Advaita Vedanta, says, "We nourish craving and feed attachment by dwelling on the sense objects and seeking our temporary satisfaction in them, in the objective world." The attention keeps going out to the object, out to the object. Wise attention is just noticing the mind that's noticing.

Sogyal Rinpoche writes, "At present our mind faces away from itself." The mind bends towards whatever we experience—the five senses and thoughts of self, past and future—the attention's bending towards that. But one is bound not by perceiving, not by any of the experiences, but by the attachment, by the clinging.

So rather than getting so sucked into the five senses and the thoughts and the mind, just noticing when

there's attachment or aversion getting stronger. And just the noticing of it and being there, right there—attachment's like this, aversion's like this—that's wise attention again. You don't have to get to big mind. You can just notice it right here, moment after moment after moment. And here in our daily life is all fertile ground for it. It doesn't have to be any kind of special experience. But it does help us here to keep it a little bit simple.

Shankara again: "When you cease dwelling upon sense objects, peace will arise in your heart." And we call this liberation while living. Just a moment of liberation while living.

So we don't need to be afraid of the sense objects and don't need to be afraid of the contact, but bringing *sati-paññā* right there. Contact's like this, pleasant's like this, wanting's like this. Don't be afraid of anything. Sayadaw U Pandita said that to me once in an interview when I was—I don't know what was going on—but he basically said, "You don't have to be afraid of anything." And he meant in this term of mindfulness. Mindfulness, awareness doesn't have to be afraid of anything. That's *sati-paññā*. That's restraint at the sense doors.

The next one I like a lot is called, as Ajahn Sucitto describes it, paying attention to the attitude with which we use things. And this is something—he says taints can be abandoned by using.

Sayadaw U Pandita said that to me once in an interview. I don't recall exactly what was going on, but he basically said, "You don't have to be afraid of anything." And he meant this in terms of mindfulness. Mindfulness, awareness doesn't have to be afraid of anything. That's sati-pañña. That's restraint at the sense doors.

The next one I like a lot is called paying attention to the attitude with which we use things. The Buddha says that certain taints can be abandoned by using. "Here, a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, uses a robe only for protection from cold, for protection from heat, from flies. Reflecting wisely, he uses alms food, not for amusement or intoxication of vanity or for embellishment, but just for the endurance and continuance of his body, considering: Thus shall I terminate old feelings—feelings of hunger, feelings of need—without arousing new feelings of greed, of self-interest, and blameless shall I live in comfort and health."

So he's not saying you have to live in total suffering. You can live in comfort and health.

This has been a really interesting one for me—paying attention to the attitude with which we use things. Here on retreat and in our lives: how we use food, how we use clothing, how we use the resources of the environment. Not by comparing it to some model of should—I should keep the heat lower, I should use less gasoline. Not that at all. I mean, that's another question. But in terms of wise attention, we're simply noticing.

If the way I use food is that I go to the store thinking I just need this, but I better buy two more just in case I run out—or you go to the table here, and you're really not very hungry, and you take some food, and then you notice: What if I'm hungry later? I better take more. It doesn't matter if you take more. That's not

the point. The point is what's being strengthened, what's being engendered in the attitude, in the mind, by the way you're relating to using food.

For example, times on retreat—and it's the same in our lives—I would think I might be hungry later after tea, so I'll take a banana at lunch and save it. Then I'd have all these rotten bananas back in my room and half-eaten rice cakes because, of course, I wasn't really hungry later. Noticing what was in the mind: it was tight, fearful, troublesome, cumbersome, and then embarrassed and ashamed.

When it came to the point where I could just say, "Oh, I might be hungry later—well, I'll worry about that then," it goes away. And if I'm hungry later, so what? I'm a little hungry, so what? I can feel some hunger, and the mind just notices hunger, and later it goes away. It's so simple, so much more free and easy than trying to guess and figure out every opportunity, save this and save that. When will I eat it? Now I have to walk all the way back and get it, and where can I eat it, and there's crumbs and there's mice and—never mind. I'll be hungry or I won't. I have no clue. It's not a problem. It's so free and easy, just noticing that.

It doesn't mean we don't take what we need. But just notice. It can work in reverse too. You're really hungry, but you look around and think, well, everyone else is eating so little, so I better not. So you take just a little bit, but you're actually filled with either self-loathing or hunger or fear. It looks like you're doing a very good yogi thing of not eating much, but you're actually torturing yourself. You're feeding ill will. You're feeding wanting. Not helpful.

With this attitude of abandoning these tendencies of mind, it's really about noticing how you use things. How you use clothes. I remember one retreat where I had one particular dress I was wearing. Deep in the retreat, I started to notice that whenever I put that dress on, I would want to catch a glimpse of it in the mirror every time I passed—for some reason, my room at this place had a mirror—because I liked that dress. After a while, it got really painful. It's much nicer not to even think about it. When I think about when I was a nun, you just had two or three exact same sets of clothes. You wear one, wash one, one's drying. It's so simple and easy. You're just using clothing for what it's meant for. This isn't about a should. It's about abandoning these latent underlying tendencies.

How we use things in our life, how we use things in terms of the earth and resources—it really moves from being burdensome to a kind of freedom, a simplicity, a lack of fear, less greed, less wanting. But this isn't something imposed from outside. It's from really looking. Look here at your relationship in each moment to how you're using blankets, food, anything—not as a judgment, but asking what feeds purity of mind, what feeds suffering, craving, desire. It's not always what we think. We just have to get interested in that way.

The next one, which is interesting, is patience. A lot of times when we talk about being patient with difficulty, people think we're only saying that because there's nothing else to do—that it's not really good practice.

But he's saying here that taints can be abandoned by patience, by enduring patience. "A bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, bears cold, heat, hunger, thirst, contact with flies and mosquitoes, burning and creeping things. He endures ill-spoken, unwelcome words and arisen bodily feelings that are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, distressing, and menacing to life." So pretty much any bodily feelings you've had come under those, to some extent.

This sense of patience—it's not gritting your teeth and just shutting down until things get better. That's not patience. That's not wise attention. It's really being present. Patience is an aspect of mettā, of acceptance, but it's really cultivating non-clinging. It's cultivating the heart and mind of non-clinging.

The story I always tell when I talk about patience, whether internal or external, is where the Buddha talks to his son, telling him in terms of equanimity: develop a mind that is like the earth. Whatever is thrown on it, or people spit on it, the earth doesn't react. It accepts everything. I know we hear that as being a doormat, and the next one we'll talk about that, which is avoiding. But in terms of patience, meeting that which is not going to harm us or kill us, meeting that which arises in our practice without feeding reactivity, wanting, ill will—this actually begins to destroy, to abandon these underlying tendencies to aversion. And I can really speak from personal experience that it can happen, they can lessen. It's really true.

When I first went to be a nun in Thailand for about a year, I hadn't spent too much time in Asia. The first two months were really just one moment of aversion after another, having to adapt to the conditions and to being in robes—all the things he said, the heat and the insects and the food. I was so filled with aversion about so many things. I remember when the hot season started, I was in Bangkok, and I'd see the sun coming up in the morning and think, "Oh, another day of sun." It was so hot in those tin-roofed kuṭis in my long, long sleeves. My mind was so reactive.

It took a couple of months until I really started to recognize, "Oh, everything that happens, aversion comes up. There might be something going on." But the sense of patience—it doesn't just happen like that. I was committed, so I kept staying there. I kept looking at my mind. The circumstances were not ones I could leave, but I'd chosen to be there. So the circumstances were just what they were: bugs and heat and forest.

I don't know if you realize that rainforests are incredibly loud. Talk about silence! Mangoes dropping on the tin roof are like little bombs going off. You'd want to meditate—bang, bang, bang all day. It's really intense. And people love to come up and snap pictures in your face when you're the farang, the farang mae chi. You just turn around and keep walking without feeding the aversion.

But being through that, after a year when I went to leave, I was so happy in the same circumstances. The only difference was that the reactions in my mind really were not being triggered. So this latent tendency means when the situation's there for aversion, it comes up. But now the situation's there and it doesn't come up. And it's not just because I was incredibly concentrated.

I know now when I go to Asia—I've been going every year—and really, I knock on wood because I know it's not going to stay that way. But I used to have to go through an aversive time of adapting to things. And the last few years, it just hasn't happened much.

I don't mean aversion never comes, but stuff that used to trigger it just doesn't happen anymore. I remember being really sick once when I was teaching up in Chazwa in Burma, thinking, "I'm really sick and it just doesn't matter." It just didn't matter. The mind was happy. So I can really see from comparing similar situations that when the circumstances are there but the latent tendency doesn't come up, it's not there in that moment. This is from patience, really. It's a very powerful aspect of wise attention.

Okay, this always happens—I'm going to have to go faster through the last two.

*Taints abandoned by avoiding.** This, I think, is really important for us to recognize. The Buddha talks about avoiding dangerous things as a way of abandoning these taints—not just as a way of saving your life, but as a way of freeing our hearts and minds.

So it takes discerning wisdom, and he's just so practical. I mean, he talks about things like avoiding a savage elephant, something that's charging you, or falling into a pit. He's like, "Don't be stupid," right? But he's not just saying that in terms of normal common sense that anyone would have. He's saying this can help you wake up.

Now, avoiding doesn't mean we avoid what we don't like—that's just feeding wanting and ill will. But it is practical. He's not saying that, but some people think, "I ought to be able to be totally, perfectly mindful and non-reactive no matter what's going on internally or externally." Right? You're having the most extreme terror, the most extreme rage. You're aware of it, but it's just getting stronger and stronger and stronger. The mindfulness isn't as strong. The more you try to be with it, the more you're getting lost. And then the mind says, "No, if I was a good yogi, I could just be mindful of this no matter what happens."

No. Avoiding means to skillfully redirect the mind. Pull out of that intense thing that's going on in the mind, because by paying attention to it, you're just feeding the kilesa. So it's not a failure. It's actually advice from the Buddha to direct your attention elsewhere in order to reconnect, to reestablish this balance of wise attention—awareness that's not colored with kilesa.

One or two of you here could relate to that, right? Just notice what you think when you tell yourself, "I should be able to take this no matter what." Now, that's very different from, "Oh, I don't really like this sound in here. I think I need to go somewhere else so I can have quiet to really deepen my practice." Remember, don't look externally—look internally. When you do that, what's being fed? If it's ill will or wanting, then it's not helpful. The avoidance isn't helpful when the avoidance is feeding wanting or ill will. But staying there and being mindful by gum no matter what is not skillful, is not wise attention—not if that's feeding the fear, the ill will, the terror. So this is really important.

I can't read you this passage because I'm running out of time, but there's a sutta where the Buddha is

talking to the nuns and saying, "When you're doing the four foundations—really being present with the body, with the feeling tone, vedana, with the citta, with the mind, with the formations—and the mind gets sluggish or distracted outwardly, or a fever arises in the mind based on the attention to the body, based on the attention to the feelings..." What does he say? He says, "Then you withdraw the mind from that experience and redirect it to something inspiring."

Yes, the Buddha is saying this. Redirect it to something inspiring, or at least something neutral—but get out of there. Direct it to something neutral until it rebalances itself, until it's not so scattered, until the fever's down, and then you come back again to what you were paying attention to. This is avoiding in order to actually abandon these unwholesome underlying tendencies.

And the last one, very tricky, is removing.

Removing means, the Buddha says, that a practitioner reflecting wisely does not endure an arisen thought filled with sensual lust, ill will, or cruelty. He abandons it, removes it. He doesn't endure evil, unprofitable states of mind or experiences. He abandons them.

Now, this is tricky because if you're abandoning it with aversion, that's feeding ill will. So this removal really takes a balance of paññā—discernment—checking the attitude in the mind, and also a kind of resolution that comes from wisdom, a clear seeing. It's like, "No, I don't need to go there."

Say again you have a Vipassana romance or Vipassana vendetta and it keeps coming up. "They're so wonderful. They're so horrible. They did this." It starts. You see it. You feel the wanting. You feel the aversion. And after a while, it's enough already. But not with ill will. Don't have to go there. Don't have to go there. This is really possible when we're seeing clearly.

Years ago, I developed a chronic autoimmune condition. When it first began, I had really strong symptoms. No one knew what it was, it was hard for me to walk, and I had no idea where it was going to go. Thoughts would start coming up in my mind: "I'll never be able to take a walk. I'll never be able to do this." And a lot of fear would come with it. As you know, just from having a twitch in your knee, you understand where that can go from there.

So that was really starting. And I was so grateful for the wisdom and the mindfulness. After a day of that—and the condition went on for a long time before it balanced out—I saw my mind start to do that. And I could really say, "No, I don't need to do that. I have no idea what's going to happen, and that way only goes to suffering."

And that was so clear. It was so clear that to go into those thoughts was completely unhelpful and suffering-inducing that every time they'd start, the suffering was so evident, I could just go, "No, I don't need to do that," and I wouldn't go there.

That's really what we mean by removal—not hating, not getting out the pickaxe, but just with this clear

seeing: "No, I don't have to go there." That's really powerful. And again, it's not feeding these underlying tendencies.

The last way I don't have to elaborate on, which is developing the seven factors of awakening, which Sally spoke about the other night. That's what we're doing here.

So I thank you for your patient attention.

With a liberated mind, I say, Sariputta, one is a great person. Without a liberated mind and heart, I say, one is not a great person.

And how does one have a liberated mind? Here, Sariputta, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having removed covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. As he dwells contemplating the body in the body, the mind becomes dispassionate, and by non-clinging, it is liberated from the taints.

Similarly for contemplating feelings in feelings, mind in mind, phenomena in phenomena. It is in such a way, Sariputta, that one has a liberated mind.

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