Morning Questions and Answers

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 15:49

So just so you know, there are so many questions that there's no way we can ever answer them all. Don't feel—well, feel however you feel, and don't take it personally.

I'm actually really glad this person asked this question, so we can expand on this topic a bit. They're asking us to talk a little bit about how we relate to crying in the practice, in general and in the hall. This person finds that tears come more frequently when they practice on their own, which I think is pretty common. And when they arrive in the hall—I like the way that's said, "when they arrive," you know, it's just what's happening—they're a bit self-conscious and don't want to disturb others.

That's totally normal and natural. I want to expand it to a bigger picture, but first, just to say: of course, always, tears are very normal and natural. Going through strong emotions is a big part of the practice. It's not a mistake or something wrong. What we learn is how to bring mindfulness to the experience.

To answer the specifics about crying: sometimes tears will come in the hall, and in general, most of us are more self-conscious there. You don't want to wail and sob and carry on in the hall—it does kind of get everyone all riled up. So if you have a choice, cry silently in the hall. Outside the hall, it's fine. When tears come, they come. This is normal. And for most of us, we all have a single room, which is a real gift, so you can go and just let whatever's happening happen, with mindfulness.

This is the piece I want to expand on a bit. At some point, most of us, in our periods of practice—not just this one retreat, but in longer periods of intensive practice—there will be times when really strong, difficult emotions come up. Tears can also come when you're really happy or feeling really touched, but that's also a strong emotion. Not all strong emotions are unpleasant; they're still strong emotions.

In terms of the practice, I don't know if we've spoken much about this. We used to call it—and this is just shorthand, don't take it for anything more—the difference between purification and just spinning in our patterns.

It's very common that at some points, and it can be a day or it can last for some time during our intensive practice—and actually this is about the time, two, three, four weeks in, not at the beginning—where it may be triggered by a particular memory. It may not even have much content. It may be some memory or some experience that you know very well. You think, "Oh, I've dealt with this." And it comes up, and there's, with mindfulness, awareness of it—the memory, the story, whatever. But a really deep emotional concomitant can come along with it. It can be really deep sadness or grief or self-loathing, just whatever it might be.

It doesn't mean that's a problem or wrong when we allow it to come up into the field of mindfulness, same as with any strong emotion.

I'll describe the differences. When we call it so-called purification, it means a memory may be coming up—for example, a memory of a time that you felt really sad or hurt, whatever it is. The memory comes, but then the feeling, the emotion comes. And with mindfulness, you're really feeling it. I gesture like this because that's just where I feel stuff. Really strong sadness, for example. Aware of the thoughts. Crying may come. But with mindfulness, we're allowing the sadness to live and move as it does.

Our experience at times, when what we call purification is coming up, is that you think, "Oh, I know this." That's just a thought. Let it come. And when it's coming into the field of mindfulness, allowing with wisdom, sometimes the emotional experience is actually stronger and deeper.

than we've experienced before, or that we remember. And our intellectual, personal minds are going, "What the heck is going on?" That's just a thought. It's coming up into a field. As our mindfulness awareness is getting steady and more continuous, the more subconscious patterns of avoidance aren't functioning so much, because we're not so much picking and choosing what's worth paying attention to.

And so stuff that we've kind of maybe acknowledged—"OK, I see that, fine, very good, take a hike"—it starts to come up. But we allow it with mindfulness. And you can feel it quite deeply. Don't get the idea that, oh, you feel it deeply, good, it's gone, it's over. No, that's not mindfulness. But to say: this is a really big part of practice for most of us at some point. Not for all of us and not in every retreat, but it's important not to think there's something wrong or off, and that if you're properly mindful, this is going to be, "Oh yes, sadness, sadness, la la la, tears, tears, yes, back to emptiness," right? No. Emptiness isn't somewhere else. Whatever's happening is the fuel of the Dhamma, is the fuel of the practice.

This allowing things up in mindfulness—it's really a different way of relating, even from many types of therapy where we've seen it, we know it. It can kind of come up in a deep way. So our practice, how do we relate, is, as with any strong emotion, learning how to meet it with mindfulness. And that's the difference between not getting all lost in the story and completely overwhelmed with story, while really feeling it. You know the story, but you're being with the feeling, letting it live its life. If there's tears, aware of tears. Of course, the mind goes into the story—that's part of it. But allowing the sadness or grief or whatever, self-hatred, just to be as it is in the field of mindfulness.

The other way we're not quite mindful is: "OK, I see it, fine," and we try to shut it down again. Because mindfulness means just noticing whatever arises. "But not this." Well, it's noticing whatever's arising. "This should be over now." Because choiceless means things are going boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. It doesn't mean that. It means choiceless. This is coming up, not your choice. We bring awareness to it. It's an essential part of practice.

I'll give an example from my experience. It just popped into my mind this morning because I learned so

much from it. I was sitting a six-week retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita some ages ago. It was in the middle of the retreat, and my mindfulness was quite stable and even and strong, so I was able to note whatever came. And it started with—I remember, even now I can remember—this visual memory would come up. A note: seeing. It was a particular time in my life that I hadn't really thought about much for quite a while. And then a whole field of sadness came up with it, overwhelming. Overwhelming just meaning I couldn't just go la la la, sadness. I had to feel it. But quite noting: sadness. Seeing the story. Seeing, seeing, because it's all visual. Feeling the sadness. Noting the sadness. Seeing the thoughts. And this would not last all day, but it would be quite strong. And it was happening every day at some point.

Now, when you're meeting with Sayadaw U Pandita, he is like zero interested in content, which is helpful, because this isn't about the content. It's about letting the whole process arise into mindfulness. So I would describe it to him—the noting and just what would come up, the image and the noting and this—but just in terms of "this arose, this arose, this arose." And for days, because this went on for days, he would be, "Yeah, very good. Very good, yogi. This is dukkha. This is how we understand dukkha, the unreliability, the unsatisfactory quality of life." And he was completely supportive. And in case you haven't heard it before: the first noble truth, dukkha, is to be understood.

We don't get to understand it by thinking about it, by saying, "Oh yeah, that makes sense." We go through it with awareness, with steady mindfulness, again and again in many different ways. And at some point we go, "Yeah, this is dukkha." Wisdom comes in and understands how it's created. So it's not a mistake. But our job is to keep coming back into the mindfulness.

He was really supportive. But I started to notice that after it would begin to peter out or change, the image would come again, and I would note that, then the feeling of sadness, then the noting, and see the thoughts. At one point I noticed I was just allowing it, and the thoughts would change to "Oh, poor me." The whole feeling tone became completely different. It was like a little moving away from mindfulness into "Oh, poor me, I have to go through this." It felt completely different. So I would just notice that, mindful again of the feeling.

When I reported to Sayadaw—and again, you don't give him content, just reporting the process—it had started to change. Looking back, it had started to get a little bit of a habit. We were getting a little bit of a jag with it, like, "Oh, I know," and the mindfulness wasn't quite fresh. We were thinking it's how it was a couple of days ago, but it's already changed and we're not quite fresh with it. We think, "Oh yeah, I know what's happening." It's really interesting—Sayadaw could pick up on this. He was amazing that way.

So this one day I went in, I described what sounded like the whole thing, but he picked up that it started with the image, and he said, "You weren't mindful enough with the image. You didn't note it." That's not a criticism. That was absolutely true. And as soon as the mindfulness wasn't there, the whole thing turned into a "me" story, a "poor me," and then it just went on and on. You can feel the difference.

None of it's for judging, but it's really to see and allow. We're going to have these periods where strong

emotions come up, strong memories and such. It's part of practice. Nothing's outside of the realm of what's possible to be mindful of. And of course, with all skillful means, there are going to be times when the mindfulness isn't balanced enough and the thoughts really do take over—you can't quite be mindful. So as we've always said with any emotion, at that point, notice that. And if it's possible, with skillful means, shift the attention elsewhere. Go for a walk. Feel the sensations of your feet. It's not about just spinning in the story.

Or sometimes we're spinning in the story, but there's really a sense of self-gratification. We kind of like it, feeding the "poor me." Noticing that, we shift the attention. Or sometimes we've decided subconsciously, "Okay, that's enough now, I'm going back to practice," and we get into a subtle aversion, pushing it away. That's also not quite mindfulness. And you'll find out if you're doing that, because it'll turn around and let you know.

These are the balances. We call it purification because it's coming up into awareness in a way that isn't trying to push it away but isn't feeding it either. And it really can shift our relationship to the particular story, to the particular mood or emotion—so that there's nothing we need to be afraid of. That's something Sayadaw also said to me one time.

I just wanted to say this is going to be part of practice. It's not a mistake. It doesn't mean something went wrong with your practice. This is where we learn how to bring in mindful awareness—just to see what's happening, not lost in the content, but allowing the emotion to live its life. And when it's gone, notice it's gone. You don't need to bring it back again.

Notice it's gone. Yes, it may arise another time, a different moment. It's not just sitting under there unnoticed, waiting to erupt. It's gone. This is present moment mindfulness.

So I wanted to bring that up and hope you can include it in your practice. And yes, sometimes the crying comes loud, and it's fine in your room. In the hall, of course, we all feel a little self-conscious—that's normal. So if we see someone crying silently in the hall, give them their space. This is a normal part of practice. It's not like we have to go fix it. Please don't go fix it. Leave them alone. We leave each other alone to go through what needs to happen.

At this point in retreat, all different things may be coming up in your practice. We take refuge in the steadiness of mindfulness—not looking to experience for self-gratification or a sense that what's going on is important. Just check: Is mindfulness here? Am I aware? That's our refuge. And then whatever arises due to causes and conditions can be met with mindfulness, and that leads to wisdom.

Thank you for your practice and your presence.

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