Working with Wise Thought and Intention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:45

I thought I'd talk a little bit about both aspects of thought and how thought manifests as intention. These are huge topics, so I can only really touch on a small part of them.

To talk about wise thought or right intention, I have to go back to the so-called first step of the Eightfold Path. It's actually a circle, though that's still the way the Buddha talked about it—as a place where you kind of enter into it. Jack spoke the first night about wise understanding, wise view, and I want to start from there.

But the first thing I want to say is how much I love the format of the Buddhist teachings as a way of supporting us to understand how our mind works and to come into harmony with reality. Even though it may seem really complicated when you look at all the books and the lists and everything, in some way I find it incredibly elegant and simple. Not easy, but simple.

To my understanding, the liberation of heart-mind that the Buddha is talking about—that we're cultivating this practice to recognize—isn't a liberation from the world. It's not a liberation to get away from life and ourselves. It's a liberation, a freedom, from our misunderstanding of the world, of ourselves, of what's really true.

This misunderstanding stems very basically from misperceiving, from not recognizing what's happening in a moment, from recognizing our experience inaccurately. And then, from the way we recognize experience, we think about it and we construct the world and we act and react and have emotions. Can you relate to that?

One of the translations of the first entry into the Eightfold Path—the Eightfold Mandala, if you want to call it that—I actually really love in this context is "right view," because I find it quite literal. The Buddha is saying that when we recognize accurately, when our view, our perception, our recognition of experience is accurate, when it's aligned with how things are, without any effort the natural result of that is wise thought, wise intention, leading into how we act in the world.

The support for that, the key to recognizing accurately, is of course mindfulness, supported by concentration, supported by energy, supported by effort.

The elegance I love is that the freedom, the liberation of our heart and mind, isn't about getting rid of, changing, digging up, hating, clinging, or figuring it all out. It's not about striving and gaining wisdom and digging out all the defilements. It's about the commitment of mindful awareness moment after moment after moment, and then learning to trust that through that steadiness of clear awareness, the way things

are reveals itself.

Because of course—it's already how it is. It's not like we're permanent and if we practice hard enough we become impermanent, and then we're free. We're scared. We don't want to be impermanent. But already, that's how it is. So our not recognizing is what keeps leading us into confusion.

Buddhism isn't about learning and adapting a new set of beliefs. God knows there's plenty of information and plenty of beliefs, plenty to take on. But the question is: does this help me? Does this lead to freedom in the moment of heart and mind? Does this lead to more happiness and peace, or does this lead to more confusion and suffering?

The ultimate knowing is right here in our own hearts and minds. We're not trying to make our experience match some description. We take the descriptions as a tool, as advice, as a reference, and then try it for ourselves. I just love this because it's really so simple.

We're putting in huge effort, it's true, but there's actually much less that we need to do. Because if you think you have to personally, with your little brain, figure it all out, absolutely understand it all, get it all logical, and then put it into practice moment by moment and actualize impermanence, actualize non-self, actualize unreliability—you don't even know what the heck it means, but you've got to actualize it moment to moment—dig up greed, get rid of hatred, cut through delusion, and get going, and every time those things come up it's because you've personally failed... my god, it's exhausting. And it's also impossible.

But what's it like to start to have the trust that if we can just commit our intention to cultivating a steadiness of this loving awareness, of mindful awareness, that things as they have come to be in this moment reveal themselves naturally? We don't have a clue how they are. So quit looking. Settle in with open heart and mind, and the truth reveals itself. Just moment after moment after moment.

It's actually so much more trustworthy.

So in terms of how right view works, accurate perception leads to wise thought or wise intention, and into wise action, and into wise mindfulness. Let me just talk a little bit about thought in general.

I know we talked some in the instructions this morning in the guided meditation. It's one of those where really opening into that space of awareness where things just come and go—thoughts, sensations, moods, sounds, whatever's coming and going. The thought arises like a little star, and then it's gone. No thought matters.

And sometimes people ask, well, if no thought matters at all, how do we do anything? What thought does matter? And if no thought matters at all, how do we get into such a mess? So both: How do we get into such a mess? But also, how do we use thought? Because we do have to make decisions. We do act, as Larry talked about so beautifully last night.

So to start describing a little how thoughts work, first I want to read this great description of thought from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

"This mind is always being carried away by one delusion after another. Thoughts of hatred or attachment suddenly arise without warning, triggered off by circumstances, and unless seen clearly, they quickly take root and proliferate, reinforcing the habitual predominance of hatred, of ill will, or attachment in the mind. However, however strong these thoughts may seem, they are just thoughts and will eventually dissolve back into emptiness."

Have you noticed that? Did you notice that this morning?

"Once you recognize the intrinsic nature of the mind, that empty, wakeful, aware nature, these thoughts that seem to disappear and appear all the time can no longer fool you. As clouds form, last a while, and then dissolve back in the empty sky, so deluded thoughts arise, remain a while, and then vanish in the voidness, the emptiness of mind. In reality, nothing at all has happened."

Can you get a sense of that? Or if it makes you crazy, get a sense of that? In reality, nothing at all has happened. So that's from the level of this kind of ultimate level, where it just... So then what happens? That we get so carried away.

And I love how this works. The Buddha taught that it all starts with this element of perception, of recognition. So anything that happens, there's a sound. We hear it. We're aware of sound. Fine. And perception's a natural mental function that almost immediately will know: it's a bird, or that's a motorcycle, or I don't know what it is—and you know you don't know what it is. Just that recognition. It's so simple.

That happens with pretty much everything. It's useful. It's functional. It helps us kind of know where to come and sit when you come in here. It helps you actually find your way in here. It helps you know what we're doing. It helps us communicate. It's very useful.

And often, it's not accurate, the perception. Have you noticed that? What we perceive, the Buddha goes on to say, we think about. What we think about, the tendency is to complicate with views and assumptions and connections and memories. Then we start to have the feelings and the emotions that go with that complication. And then that leads into a solidification of view, of describing our world. The thoughts describe our world, both for useful and not. And then from that, it coheres into a thought that leads to an intention, a movement, an about-to, that leads to action.

So it's useful that the thoughts can describe and define our world. As I said, you hear the bell, you know "bell." You have a sense of the time of day. You're a person here on a retreat in Yucca Valley, and it's 7:20, and it's time to come into the meditation hall and listen to a talk.

That's a huge amount of thoughts describing a whole experience, isn't it? Useful. Nothing wrong with that

when we know that's what's happening.

But often—and I'm going to use mostly simple retreat examples here because I deliberately want to give a sense of how what we're doing here, just paying attention to our thoughts and our movements and our sense perceptions over and over and over, really is extremely profound, very powerful in opening our minds and hearts to recognizing reality in a more accurate way.

Very often the perception may not be accurate, but we don't know that. A simple example: I remember another retreat, although similar things have happened here, a three-month retreat where the interview schedules go up, same as here. There was a person I knew who really had this thing about being overlooked for interviews, not getting interviews when she was supposed to—a whole story about being a person who was ignored.

So twice in a row, she would go on her day, look at the interview sheet, looking for her name and not see it, and get really upset. How could they overlook me? Again, even after last time I talked to her about it—really upset. Can you relate? And then, how could they do it? The thoughts and the pain and the sadness and the blame and all of this stuff. Writing notes to us: How could you do it?

And then we have a conversation. We said, "No, your name's up there."

"Don't tell me. I looked. I looked."

And if it's too late, if the paper's gone, you'll never convince the person. But sometimes you know the paper's there. You say, "Come on, let's just have a look."

"Oh my god. How could that be?"

And as soon as she sees her name, all of that story, all of that construction is gone, right? Because it was based on an inaccurate perception. Of course, a new one comes in: "I am so stupid. I am so embarrassed." A whole new story comes in.

Well, this is one of the ways thought is working a lot during the day. Have you noticed that at all? And what the Buddha goes on to say is that when it's inaccurate and we don't recognize it, that's when we get into so much trouble and confusion.

Now, the stories, the descriptions of our reality are, of course, based on our own personal experience. We all have our personal histories. And as Larry was talking about last night, we all have our different cultural histories. A group of people—a great example being your board of directors coming together—there's nothing right or wrong, but people each have a very different set of history that's going to affect their perceptions and the description they make of the world, what they think is the useful thing to do, and how that's going to affect their decisions.

Well, there's seven billion of us doing this. What's more amazing is how often we kind of get on the same

page enough.

Knowing that this is what is happening is fine. There's nothing wrong with that. Knowing this—and the Buddha talks about not being attached to views—so we might think, "Well, this is really how I think it should be based on all my experience, and I'm sure of it." But knowing that my perception is colored by my past experience, my views, the things that I like, and knowing someone else's is different—coming to agreement is another thing, but at least having that awareness.

But what the Buddha is talking about on a very subtle, pervasive level—not all the time, but pervasive—is a set of misperceptions that we really don't see through. We don't recognize they're there. And so our unconscious description of ourselves in the world really isn't accurate. This is where we can fall into suffering and confusion.

I like Ajahn Chah, who's so earthy. He picks up a vase—pretend this is a vase—and he says, "You know, you look at this vase and you think it's really beautiful or it's really ugly or it's boring or whatever. It's just a vase. It doesn't care. It's you who are making yourselves crazy about everything."

There's a Zen story.

I have to share another Zen story. I don't know if it's true, but it's a typical kind of Zen master story from Japan. Some wild, aggressive samurai warrior came to this Zen master, just wild and abusive, carrying on and basically ending up saying, "You are a pig! You're a pig!" — which is a huge insult — and threatening him. The Zen master just stood there, the way they do, or supposedly do, very calm, and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

Well, that stopped the samurai for a minute. "I'm a Buddha? How can that be?"

And the Zen master said, "A pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

Yes.

So the basic misperceptions — and Wes mentioned this the other night, and I'm sure if you've done any practice or any reading of Buddhism at all you're familiar with them, but I feel I must mention them — begin with the impermanent, changing nature of all experience. Not that things are kind of the same for a while and then later they'll go away. Constant flux. Constant flux is the way things are.

One of the labels for a powerful, deep level of insight is the recognition of things as they have come to be in this moment — as they have come to be just now. All the causes and conditions that come together in this moment for each one of us to be sitting here, with these particular sensations and particular thoughts, the way that you feel, the moods, the clothes that you're wearing. What causes and conditions come together for that? Start trying to enumerate them and you can never stop. It includes everything in the world that came together in this moment.

And now this moment's already different, isn't it? Your sensations are subtly different. The words you're hearing are subtly different. Whatever moods are arising, whatever's happening, it's again a little bit different. Things as they have come to be in this moment are like this — and now like this.

But our habit, the misperception of not perceiving just this changing nature, leads to assuming permanence. I was going to say "all the time." See, that's how we talk! "All the time we're assuming permanence." Nothing's all the time. Nothing.

Remember the other morning when someone was talking about accepting and saying, "Well, I don't know how it feels. I accept it, but then later it's grumpy." Because we tend to think, "I've done it. It's over. Finished. Now I understand." Right? Have you had a seeing-through, an insight where it felt like something let go? And then even if we know, even if we know, somewhere back there the mind's going, "Finally. I'm done with that one." And when it comes back: "Oh, I wasn't clinging. It's okay. I know it came back. Yeah, that's fine." Now, after ten years, you say, "This is coming again? I've worked on this in therapy. I've worked on this in Rolfing. I've been through this on so many retreats."

I really love what Wes was saying about our personality. Ajahn Sumedho says it's not our personality that gets enlightened. We're going to keep on seeing this stuff. But it's coming and going, coming and going. Still, we assume permanence.

When you're having a really lovely sitting, and then that little niggling pain in the back starts — the one that was there the first two days, the one you thought was going to make you run out of here screaming, but it went away for a while — and now here it is again. Does your mind just go, "In this moment, the arising of burning"? Maybe, great, for a moment. But doesn't it start to jump ahead? "Oh my God, how much longer in this sitting? There's no way I can be with this pain for the rest of these days." The mind just does that. So noticing it.

The same with the unreliability, the sense that...

Pleasure is so fleeting that if we're putting our sense of happiness, of peace into pleasure—pleasant sensation, pleasant experience, getting—we've talked about this. And again, we know it comes and goes, do we? We know that peace isn't about only getting pleasure, do we? On some level, yes, but it keeps getting more and more subtle. That's my experience—more subtle, the ways I find it.

"Oh no, I'm really equanimous. Comes and goes—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. That's cool. I know. It comes and goes." Right? "I'm just in equanimity..." until something really doesn't work. Okay, I guess the equanimity is gone—which is fine to see.

But that unreliability, that unsatisfactoriness, arises if we try to get something out of changing experience that it simply can't offer, because it's always changing.

And the third reason we can't get satisfaction out of changing experience is because we're not here

anyway. There's no "me"—anatta. There's not some solid, unchanging, internal entity called "me." Intellectually, don't even try to think about that right now, because thinking about it can make you crazy. I don't mean really crazy, but a little crazy. Has that ever happened? You start to think, "How can there not be a me?"

Now, the more you think about that, what experience gets stronger? Doubt. Yes, doubt—that's a good one. That gets stronger. For me, what gets stronger is the sense of me. "How can there not be a me? I feel me really clearly. No, there's not me. There's an 'I really want to understand why there's no sense of me.'" And this just gets... anyway, explore it.

I'm going kind of fast here, giving a huge overview, but the habits—the tendencies that we have been exploring here, that we can really see more easily moment to moment—these habits arise in our mind at times, not always. And when they're not seen, they have the function of basically distorting perception.

Again, it's Dingo Khentse: "When sense organs encounter an object"—sort of like this glass or the vase or a sound or a body sensation—"the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in the consciousness." So there's this that initiates seeing, and there's consciousness. "From then on, as your mind reacts to the object influenced by the accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world can seem to be a hell realm." Have you noticed that? "When your mind is peaceful, free from clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure."

And so that's just really an interesting thing to explore simply with awareness, because awareness can see this. And if you don't take it personally, but rather approach it like, "Wow, this is an investigation into how perception and how the mind works"—what's clear recognition and what's not? What's suffering and what's not? Not out of some personal failing, but out of interest—it's just fascinating.

So of course, the main things we can notice are when there's clinging or greed in the mind, when there's ill will, hatred, some form of aversion or fear in the mind, when there's "me, me, me" at the center of it in the mind. Just to give very simple examples. Because these are arising—they're habits. They're arising for all of us much of the time. It's nothing we need to hate or be afraid of or identified with, but really see how it works. As one of my teachers says, we can just see, "That's just greed doing its job. Mindfulness doing its job. Anger doing its job."

So what's greed's job? When greed is there, wanting in the mind, it's just that sense of "this is going to make me happy," leaning towards the pleasant. We've talked about that. But the function, its job, is to kind of blind us, to bring us into a kind of tunnel vision.

My brother used to have this hound dog, a really lovely, very sweet, friendly dog. But it was bred for hunting, so its nose was so sensitive. And it was just enthralled to that nose. It had no freedom from being caught up in scents. I really felt for the dog. So when it would come in the house, if I was visiting, I had to

hide anything in my suitcase and zip it—anything that had any kind of human scent on it, or any kind of garbage. Every time they went out, every wastebasket, every garbage, every food had to be locked away because that dog would come in the house and its nose would just pull it to every new scent, to every kind of food, to every kind of human thing. Dirty underwear? It's in the suitcase ripping it out. Serious. You leave it alone, it's in the wastebasket, ripping up every piece of Kleenex and toilet paper. It was like it had no choice. It had no training—forget about it. It had no choice.

I really feel like that's craving. That's craving. And the promise of it is that it's really going to make us happy. And the delusion is we don't see it. We don't see that.

I have a very good friend, a very wise friend, who is a self-admitted craving type, meaning that's where the mind tends to go when left alone. And this person loves cookies. Just a couple of cookies after lunch. Got to have those couple of cookies, but that's all. So one day we were sitting having a discussion about this, basically about samsara—which is like wanting and getting, or not getting, and either way you're not happy anymore, and wanting again and getting or not getting, and either way you're not happy again, and on and on and on. That's one description of the hound dog. That's one description of our lives. That's one description of all the rounds of rebirth, if you want to go that far. It's not really uplifting.

But we don't tend to see the big picture. We just stay in "this cookie's going to make me happy." So I say to my friend, "Yeah, but this is samsara. This is greed." He goes, "What if you don't get the cookie?" He goes, "No, I get the cookie. I eat it. It's over. There's no craving. It's fine." I said, "Well, what if you don't get the cookie?" He says, "I'll always get a cookie." I don't even know what he was saying. On one level, he meant it. And that's it, isn't it? "Can I get this one? I'll get the next one. Let's not look too closely at this thing."

So that's actually greed or wanting's job. It seduces us with its promise. And it keeps us from seeing accurately. I'll get into that again in a minute.

Aversion, dosa, resistance, fear—just the opposite, isn't it? The attention tunes into something that's unpleasant or we don't like, and then it can almost get fixated on that.

We think about what we think about. We form views and opinions, and this leads into moods. And we're really lost in that whole world of ill will, whether it's towards ourselves or towards another. Have you noticed that?

It happens a lot on retreat, just as wanting does—which, thank God, we're in silence. But with roommates, with other people in the room, we know all of this. What's great about having several days in a retreat, where you can't really get out of the situation, is that sometimes it becomes a wonderful way to learn. And I'm not just saying this pie in the sky—someone really said this to me today. I'm not making it up.

Days and days of aversion and self-blame, or thinking the roommates hate you because you're bothering them, or you're hating them because they're bothering you. They're doing it on purpose, or I'm doing it on purpose—you know, all of that. And when you feel like that, when you're really believing the story, don't

we? The story's either that they're really bad, horrible people, or the story is that I'm a bad, horrible person, or the story is that it's Spirit Rock's fault for putting us together. There's some story, and we believe it.

And then ill will subtly keeps the attention focused on that unpleasant experience, which then feeds the negativity. We get lost in that. And just like Dingo Kenzie says, the whole world becomes a hell realm.

I notice times when I'm kind of grumpy, walking up somewhere, and he says, "Nice sky." Yeah, look at those ants. Ah, cold. Okay, the sun is setting. Another sunset. Come on. What are you all looking at the sunset for? Give me a break. Last night it was so beautiful, the sunset, and tonight it's just—eh. Or like Wes was saying last night, "I was sick of all those beautiful red sunsets. I'm loving this one that's just kind of gray and cloudy."

But when that ill will goes away—and this is what can happen—suddenly the perception clears. And we see, oh, first of all, the noise the roommate's making is just noise. It's not even unpleasant after a while. All the reactions in the mind fall away because the stories, the thoughts about it, fall away. We stop resisting the unpleasant, and the world becomes primordially pure.

In a sense, if you go into the dining room and instead of thinking, "Oh, these people, they've got to fight," you see that everybody's just doing the best they can, trying to eat their oatmeal, whatever it is they want. They're getting oatmeal all together. I just love everybody sharing this pot of oatmeal. The world becomes much purer. Did the situation change so much? But the space in our mind did.

And the third—the delusion aspect—part of it is just not noticing at all, when we're spaced out. Obviously, we don't know what's going on, so we're not going to recognize accurately. But the other delusion aspect, the one that's really more at the bottom, underneath, subtle but pervasive, is this tendency to perceive experience and the world—not every moment, because nothing is every moment, but frequently—through the lens of me.

You might notice that thought is a really good way to observe this, because it shows up in thought a lot. Just see how many thoughts after a perception before it's about me. Let's see how many: "That sunset's so beautiful. Here I am looking at the view."

It's not bad, but we can just notice it. Yet we don't notice it. And someone said today, "What do you mean when you talk about our self-story?"—as if there's one story. I just want you to check tonight, tomorrow. It's fun.

It's not about a good or a bad thing. It just can be fun, because even this self-story—don't take it personally. Everybody's mind is making up a story. How many different stories? About one per perception.

"Oh, here I am looking at the sunset." Maybe you go further in real thought: "I'm so peaceful." Or maybe

then you go, "Oh, I'm so grumpy and I'm not appreciating this sunset. I've been so grumpy all day. In fact, my whole life is one of grumpiness because I'm such a person filled with ill will"—and all your memories and associations pile on. And you walk in here and sit down, and you've forgotten all of that within three minutes. Maybe you're still grumpy and there's a sound and you go, "Oh, that person, how can they do that? It's bothering me." But that's a new story. Or it's just calm. Or there's some wanting—there's a potential of a cookie. Or you're thinking about something else. Or often it's just quite innocuous, like "Here I am looking at the sunset. I wonder what's for lunch. What am I going to wear tomorrow? Oh, this skirt reminds me of this and that."

I've seen times when my mind's bored and I sit in a room wherever I am—I'm always in a lot of different places—and I'll kind of go through all the objects that are mine in the room and see which objects have to do with which people in my life. Like, so-and-so gave me this, and I bought this skirt when I was with so-and-so, and this is from my mother, and I remember when Gavin painted that. Sometimes it kind of warms my heart, because I really get this sense of interconnectedness. But it's also telling myself my Carol story. It's just innocuous, but just notice it.

So notice the sense of me, me, me, and see how it's impermanent. It's changing. There's nothing wrong with it. It's functional. But when we don't notice it, we assume it's steady state. We assume it's the same me. How many different stories have you been through in these six, seven, however many days it's been? Millions, probably. I mean, it's hard to imagine you've just had one story running the whole time. But if we don't look at it, it doesn't feel that way—"Well, I'm the one thinking all these stories, right? What are you talking about? I'm the one thinking all of these." But then there's plenty of times when you're not aware of "I'm the one."

Our tool here—we don't have to figure this all out. I'm bringing it up not so you figure it out, but just to help us drop in a seed of noticing. Because what's so amazing about the tool of mindfulness, of awareness—we've been calling it just kind awareness—is that awareness itself, becoming aware of that wanting mind, that hound dog mind, becoming aware of maha grumpiness, becoming aware of fear, becoming aware of me, me, me—mindfulness itself in that moment isn't grumpy. Mindfulness isn't filled with greed. Mindfulness isn't me, me, me. It's really just pure, like a mirror that reflects what's happening with kindness, with acceptance, without judging. And mindfulness can recognize anything, anything.

So often our habit is to give all our attention to trying to fix things. "Too much me here—I want to get rid of the me." "Too much wanting—I'm going to stop wanting as of now." "I've decided ill will is really suffering. I get that. So I'm giving it up. I'm giving up ill will for Lent." How long does that last?

But mindfulness can simply notice all of it. All of it.

The point I'm trying to hammer home is that through the steadiness of this mindfulness—and I hope you understand that this is what the whole retreat has been cultivating. Has that been coming through? I hope it has. The steadiness of mindfulness, this non-reactive, non-judgmental, non-adding-anything-extra

attention, this fullness of attention to moment after moment of experience, physical and mental, is what creates the conditions that allow wisdom, right view, wise understanding to emerge by itself.

Things as they have come to be—the causes and conditions for wisdom arising in a moment in the mind—require the steadiness of mindfulness, the sincerity of intention. It's out of our control. But it absolutely happens. It's just natural. It's just nature. That's how wisdom works with the steadiness of attention.

Moving from thought to wise intention now: with the steadiness of mindfulness, the wisdom that arises in the face of greed, in the face of ill will or fear, or in the face of cruelty, is that these habits—which are called unwise intentions, unwise not because you're bad, but because they bring further confusion and suffering when we're identified with them, when we're caught in them, and then when those intentions lead to action. When greed leads to action, it brings further confusion and suffering.

Now, don't believe me. You have to bring in mindfulness and just look. Watch greed doing its job. Watch the thoughts in the mind. Watch what actions it leads to. And see for yourself, over and over. It's the looking that lets us see how things are. It's not deciding greed is bad and I'm a bad person. We have to really see it.

And what's so cool—this is what I love about the elegance of it—when there's that steadiness of awareness, I'm just watching: wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting, wanting. And it's easier to do this with little things on retreat. You have more space. You're not so scattered. And things do seem a little more important here than they might at home. You know, if the salad runs out, it's a lot bigger of a deal. So you can notice the wanting. Here, the job is just to bring steady, steady, steady mindfulness. And through the steadiness of mindfulness, it starts to break up because we see, oh, it's always changing. It's always changing.

When we see the changing nature, when we recognize over and over the ephemeralness, the fleetingness of pleasant experience—yes, pleasant experience is pleasant. There's lots of pleasure and gratification and happiness. Sure, that's true in life. We're not saying there's not. Appreciate it. Enjoy it. I'm talking about sensual pleasure, and even the deep gratification of wise intention, of compassion, of mettā, of generosity. But just getting that nice salad when you're hungry and eating it and appreciating the taste—nothing wrong with that. We're really present. Then you chew, and it tastes good. And how long does that taste last? If you're really present, pretty soon you're just gumming that food and swallowing it because you want the next bite. It doesn't last long, the flavor, does it? Do you ever notice that you're going for the next fork and you haven't even swallowed yet?

So we're just noticing that. As we start to see, just naturally, that ephemeral nature of pleasant, the changing nature, the clinging of thinking "this is going to do it for me" naturally eases out. Not because we think it should, but because it doesn't make sense. When we recognize things as they are, in that moment—and just in that moment, it's not forever—but in that moment, clinging lets itself go. Because it

doesn't make any sense.

So for instance, I'm standing in line, and there's no more salad. You think, well, it's easy for me—I'm a teacher.

I can go get some if I want. That's true. But on retreat, too, I remember my first three-month retreat. I was very young, and we'd all go for the food at lunch. That was a big deal, you know. And there was one guy who would come strolling in twenty minutes late every day. Some stuff would always be out. Some would be there, but some would be gone. And I would think, "God, this guy must be enlightened." That's really what I thought—he must be enlightened. Just come strolling in twenty minutes late, and this is gone, and that's gone.

And sometime later, now I can see there are times I'll be in line and I see that whatever it is—the bread's about to be gone. And there are more people ahead of me than there are pieces of bread. And I can watch the wanting. I'm not saying I should or shouldn't. I'm just watching. I'm not even watching—awareness is watching. And the wanting, it's so unpleasant. It's so painful. And the mind recognizes the bread doesn't matter. The wanting doesn't matter. It doesn't say all that, but it just lets go. And there's peace. There's peace. The bread wouldn't really give you peace anyway, trust me. You eat it, you want more, or you ate too much, or it's gone. You're allergic to gluten and you ate it anyway, whatever. That peace that comes from seeing clearly is priceless. And that's available at any time of any day. We don't make it happen. But the steadiness of mindfulness allows it.

So anyway, the three wise intentions. I've got to at least get to them before the end of the talk. With this clear seeing, naturally, greed transforms through renunciation to this natural releasing of wanting, to generosity. It's a natural manifestation of wisdom. And then we can choose to cultivate, and I'm not dismissing that, but I just want you to really trust: when the mind is recognizing accurately, letting go and generosity are our natural response.

In the face of ill will—aversion to something, ill will toward something—with clarity, with wisdom, with the steadiness of awareness, that naturally transforms to friendliness, to metta. And the same with cruelty, which naturally transforms to compassion. The cruelty doesn't have to be that you really want to go out and hurt somebody. It can just be that when someone's in pain, you subtly want to get out of there. This naturally transforms to compassion—the ability to be present with an open heart and mind, present with suffering, your own or another's, with that sense of connectedness. This is the natural response of the wise mind and heart when recognizing accurately. This is really what's so beautiful, I think, about the way the Buddha figured this all out.

So as Larry spoke so beautifully last night, the intentions with which we act really transform the world. And we can bring our awareness to intentions, absolutely. I'll talk about that in a minute. But I want to keep emphasizing that even though the wanting and the ill will and the sense of me, me, me are so familiar—they seem so normal and natural—it's often where the tendency of our mind and heart may go

for refuge. I'm unhappy, I want something. Things are wrong, ill will naturally comes up. It's a habit, but it's not the deepest nature of truth.

The tendency for intentions that lead to thought, speech, and action to come from generosity of heart and mind, to come from friendliness and metta, to come from compassion—this is really the much truer reflection of our nature. And when we talk about thoughts just coming and going and the emptiness of mind, you might think—

How do we function? I'm moving into intention now. When a thought coheres, when it comes together with that little movement—intention is this little movement of heart and mind that leads to speech and action. You can sometimes feel it, that little urge. There's a word in Pali, *cetanā*. It's talking about a particular mental state on a moment-to-moment level—just a little urge. And that can come together with love, it can come together with mettā, it can come together with wanting, it can come together with generosity.

When the Buddha talked about skillfulness or unskillfulness, wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of action, he often said, "By action, by *kamma*"—*kamma* just means action—"I mean intention." The seed of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, the very juice of any action of speech, mind, or body, is in the intention. Our tendency is to look at and evaluate by the results, isn't it? Because that's what we see. But that's the thing that's really out of our control. The intention—what's the motivation for doing something—is really where the alignment with the way things are or the misperception and confusion and suffering lies. That's what leads to more peace or what leads to more suffering.

So when Larry spoke last night about doing something with the overarching intention to bring more good into the world—maybe to do something for homeless people, to work with the environment—in our mind, the idea is to really do something good. But somehow we get so caught up in anger, in fear, in self-righteousness, that the actions themselves, the motivation with which we're doing them, is leading into more anger, leading into more greed, leading into more hatred. Even if the result seems to be what we want, in terms of what's really opening us to peace, to liberation from suffering, that's not a wholesome action, because the intention is increasing hatred and greed. The exact same action, from looking outside, as Larry said so well, could really be done from mettā, from compassion, from kindness. A world of difference.

So to bring it back here, because I just want to use the retreat as an experiment: do something simple like walking from here to the dining room. Wait until the lunch bell rings. If you're always first, wait five minutes. If you're always last, go first. Really see what it's like walking to the lunchroom with that wanting, with whatever it is you feel. If you hate going, go right away and hurry and see how that feels. Another time, do the same walk to the lunchroom, but just with a sense of appreciating your body for being able to walk. Just a sense, for that moment, of feeling the earth—not to be mindful, but just to appreciate that we're alive and we can walk. The action's the same. The intention's so different. Just

noticing that as we move through the day can really start to have a profound effect.

When the unwise intentions of greed, of ill will, of cruelty naturally transform, that, just as with thought, naturally leads to action. And when we act from wise intention—just as when we explore these unwholesome states, if you're really looking, this is what I know, but you look for yourself, don't believe me—it leads to more suffering. When we act from generosity, from mettā, from compassion, when we're really there in it, it's onward leading. It brings so much happiness that we want to do more.

Just a little story. I was in Burma recently with a few friends, and we went to visit some monks. One of the monks where we were staying told us about two monks who had just started their own little monastery just down the road. They were interesting because these two men had become monks in their middle life, in their thirties. They had this little poor dusty plot of land. They didn't have much of anything. And the monk who was our friend said he had gone and talked to them. They'd become monks, but they didn't really know what to do with themselves. They didn't have a real teacher. One had been a businessman, and the other had been a captain in the armed forces. They weren't kind of what you think of as these spiritual guys, really.

So our friend the monk said they were just sitting around in this really dusty, poor place without much of anything, being monks and not knowing what to do with themselves. And he said he suggested to them, "Why don't you? You're both educated men. You've been to college. And there's lots of poor children in this area."

And in Burma, most children need after-school tuition just to be able to pass, even in grade school. And they have to pay for that. These poor children mostly can't even afford to go to school, never mind pay for the tuition. So our friend said, why don't you offer some free tuition to the children?

So the monks kind of said, okay, okay. And we went to visit them, and they had started doing this. They had over a hundred little children who would come every afternoon when school got out at about four, and come early in the morning. We went over, and it was so wonderful.

These two men—if you'd met them without knowing this story, they would have looked like what I used to think of as a schlock monk. They chewed betel nut, and betel nut, it's not a good look. It rots your teeth. You're dripping red juice all the time. You just look really... I mean, really. And so monks and nuns that chew betel nut, you kind of immediately—and this is a perceptual thing, right? One of my friends, she has such a thing about any monk that chews betel nut. Immediately: bad monk. Her mind just does that. So this was really good for her. Bad monk? These guys are just sitting there with a hundred children, and they were loving it, and the two men were loving it.

We were talking to them because my friend Daria speaks fluent Burmese. The younger one was more vocal. He had been a businessman selling, I think, beer and other things. And he'd had to get his parents' permission even at age thirty-nine to become a monk.

And he was saying, "Oh, now I see. To do something for others, this generosity—it's making me so happy. I feel like I wasted the first thirty-five years of my life." He was like born again, but in a really beautiful way. He said, "I never knew how wonderful it is to be able to do something for others. And so I'm so happy to help these children." The children were happy, sitting there as the monks taught them. And he said, "If there's no more I can do here, I know I'm going to spend the rest of my life finding another place, and I'll go there."

They were living in dust. They didn't have a well. Just a little lean-to shack. They had nothing. And then he came over to visit us later, because we offered money to build a well. He came with very detailed plans of how much it was going to cost. And just going on again about how his whole life felt like it had purpose, how happy being able to offer something made him. And from that, he was appreciating the Dharma more and more. He hadn't really studied Dharma much, but he was appreciating it more and more. That happiness of generosity leads to more generosity, leads to more mindfulness, leads to more wisdom. It's just a natural flow in that way. The same with mettā, the same with compassion.

I had so much more to say, but never mind. I guess all I want to leave you with is this sense of trusting the profound, amazing nature of this simple moment-to-moment awareness—that things are already as they are. You are already... your true nature is free from greed, hatred, confusion. The natural effect of wisdom is to act from generosity, from kindness, from compassion. And there's no one here or anywhere that is somehow so weird or twisted a person that that's not their nature.

When we sit this morning and it's just thoughts coming and going in the space of awareness—that's just an opening into exploring that. That's not just true for some people and not for others. But when the mind is caught in greed or stories about me, we can't notice it, that's all. But we can notice the greed. We can just be aware of the greed and notice that awareness isn't greedy.

And knowing, in terms of wise action, in terms of acting from wholesome intention—there isn't any one way it's supposed to look.

You know, it's not like the results should look a certain way, or be the same for each of us.

So just to end with this one story, from a video I saw of Sogyal Rinpoche going to visit some nuns in Tibet—maybe some of you saw it. I think it's called *Blessings*. He went with some Western women, and they went to visit what are called the nuns of Mangchen, in an area high in Tibet where a whole series of nunneries had existed for hundreds of years.

During the Cultural Revolution—maybe twenty years ago, thirty years ago—the nunneries were destroyed and the nuns had to leave. They were very committed nuns. And different things happened to them. Some of them were put in prison. But some of them, the way they chose to respond was to run and hide in caves way up in the hills where they were hidden, where the Chinese Communist government couldn't get to them, because it wouldn't allow them to remain nuns. They destroyed the nunneries, ripped them apart.

So some went and hid. Very tough twenty years. Some died of starvation and hardship. Some barely managed to survive. Others were in prison because they wouldn't disrobe. Others had to disrobe and maybe they went back to their families. And they said they felt that they lived as secret nuns. They were just living a normal life, disrobed, acting in normal ways. But in their hearts, in their minds, they considered themselves nuns.

And so just when Sogyal went back, things had kind of loosened, and all the nuns were now allowed to come back and start rebuilding their nunneries. They were all coming back—from being secret nuns, or hiding and starving in the hills, or being released from jail. And so they were just documenting how now they could put on their robes again, come together as a community, as a sangha, and rebuild these nunneries. I mean, they're dragging stones up these giant mountains by hand, rebuilding.

But there was no one way that they should have acted. They had this depth of pure intention, a deep aspiration of what was really important for them, and that was the guideline in their life. How they manifested and brought their actions into alignment with it was different for each one. But there's such a thread that runs through, and you get a sense of what's really important.

And then they ended it—and this was all in the talk—by saying, "Okay, we can take up the cameras and visit the most senior nun, the most enlightened of us, who lives in some little hut way up at the top." And they go up to see her.

And I know she looked about a hundred and twenty, just really—I mean seriously—just lying in a bed, spinning the prayer wheel. And her eyes, as I remember, so bright and so clear. And she said, "You know, all I can do is lie in this bed. Can't walk, can't do anything. So what I do—I'm spinning my prayer wheel, and all day, all night, all I'm doing is generating thoughts of: may all beings everywhere, may they be happy, may they be peaceful, may they be free from suffering."

What a life.

I'm not saying it should be our life. But there are as many different ways to manifest as there are people. And it comes from the intention—right thought, right intention, seeing accurately, right view—and then it will manifest through us as our personalities.

So may we all, may all beings, be well, peaceful, and free from suffering.

Thank you for listening.

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