Awareness of Intentions and Purifying Aspirations

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:56

The basic theme I want to talk about tonight is something I began a bit the other night about awareness of intentions and purifying aspiration. But really, it's a partial answer—one of many answers—to the question that comes up at this point in any retreat: How do we keep it up, even if we could ever be aware in the first place? How do we keep it up when we leave, when we're faced with all the complexities of life? There are so many pulls on our time and our interest, and we see how hard it is to really be aware with intelligent awareness just standing in the food line, never mind when we've got so much going on at work or at home.

There's no magic answer. You know that now already. But what I want to talk about in general is awareness of intention. As Steve was talking last night when he discussed the cultivation of the paramis, those wholesome qualities, it's another way of looking at the fact that awareness practice—bringing awareness into our life, purifying the heart and mind through the wisdom that arises from awareness—is about transforming our consciousness in all aspects of our life. Every activity can partake of this purification, of this cultivation of wisdom. There's nothing that needs to be outside.

As Steve said, the three pillars of Buddha Dharma are often talked about as dana (generosity), sila (ethical, non-harming conduct), and bhavana (mental cultivation). And that covers all of our life: our thought, our speech, our actions. There's nothing so mundane that it can't play a part in cultivating awareness, wisdom, and purifying our mind and heart. There's nothing so huge and gross and difficult or fantastic that we have to put it aside and say, "No, awareness can't handle this. This is too much, or this is too painful, or this has too much to do with me." There are times awareness isn't strong enough to meet it, sure, of course. But to say that anything's outside—okay, awareness, dukkha, impermanence, anatta—it applies to everything but not this? There's no "not this." But we might notice which are the things we put in that category, because that's where we're stuck.

So how do we keep it up? How do we keep going? How do we transform our lives? The most important thing is that the cultivation of awareness, the cultivation of mindfulness, the continuing willingness to explore this and let our minds and hearts be purified and cultivate wisdom—the most essential thing to make this possible is that we have to want to. Not just, "Oh, this is a good idea," which we all do. Steve was talking about the Dharma binging—it's a funny way of putting it. But we all leave retreat saying, "Yes, I'm going to sit." Of course we mean that on a certain level.

But really, it's about recognizing the difference in your own mind and heart between when awareness is present and when it's not—recognizing the quality of your responses to yourself and life when there's awareness versus when there's not. It has to be something that you recognize for yourself as making a difference. And it has to be not just a good idea, but something you really feel in your heart, in your mind, in whatever way you put it: this is what's most important in my life.

No one can do that for us. I'm not saying you should do it. I care just in that I want people to be awake and happy, but I'm not saying you should do it. I'm saying nothing else can do it for us. And then it's hard as hell, even once we have that. But without it, we kind of drift. We do it a little bit, we don't do it a little bit, we forget why we're doing it.

Haven't those of you who've been practicing a lot hit times where you've been going along really into practice—whether it's your formal sitting or paying attention—and then suddenly, I don't know, it kind of peters out? We got too busy. Or actually, things were going so well we didn't really need it anymore. Have you noticed that one? Luckily, something always happens sooner or later. Ruth Dennison, who's quite elderly now but is one of the first women teachers in Theravada in the West, one of Goenka's dharma sisters, has a very funny way of putting things. She said, "You know, in samsara, there's always a little leak in the canoe." It'll show up. That can wake us up again.

But what I want to talk about is this: even tuning into, whether you're on a retreat or when you leave a retreat, when our awareness has been more purified—we're more tuned into it and we can really feel, yes, whatever way you phrase it yourself, this is really most important. We mean it. And we leave. But like everything, it's not a one-time motivation. It's not a one-time thought. We can't just have the thought and then it runs in the background for the rest of our life. Have you noticed that? The mind is constantly changing. Constantly changing. And the seed of all of our action, as I said last night, the seed of all of our speech, arises in the mind. It's all in the mind.

So it's not a one-time decision. Yes, now I'm committing to making the cultivation of awareness the centerpiece of my life. I can mean that. I can say that a million times. But it will express itself—or not—in the moment-to-moment choices and decisions we make in the mind. How many do we make in a day, through our whole life?

So we start to get interested. None of this is from judging, but from interest. If you leave here and you say, "Yes, I really want to see how I can continue to wake up with awareness, to bring awareness in even to the most mundane," you begin to get interested in noticing your mind, watching your mind, observing the moment-to-moment choices. We make many of them—really small, mundane choices. I don't mean every single one; don't make yourself crazy. But the choices we make... and you might notice: when do we choose awareness? And when—and why—do we choose not-awareness, which we do sometimes.

Getting interested in this really starts to turn our attention even more inward toward the mind, to see that all of these little choices, and the big choices we make—for awareness, for speech, for action, the big

choices in our life, the little ones like what to have for dinner, everything—all motivation comes from within. All choices and actions originate with the mind.

The two aspects of this I want to touch on tonight are: the big one, the overarching sense of aspiration and motivation when I talk about purifying aspiration; and the practice of looking for ourselves, more than once, but really deeply and really honestly, to see what is really important in my life. What is the most important thing in my life? This is not just something superficial, but really a deep inner looking. And then how we use that deep personal understanding to support our moment-to-moment awareness practice—how we use that reference point of our conscious connection (which we have to remind ourselves of) to what's truly, deeply important in our life, and how that can support us in the moment-to-moment motivations, the moment-to-moment intentions that run the way we live.

So that's the macro sense of motivation and intention in the mind, and the micro moment-to-moment ones, as I want to talk about it.

Do you remember two nights ago when I talked about compassion as first manifesting as a motivation and intention in the mind? It all blends together, I know. But I want to expand a bit. It came up in talking to someone today and made me think I wanted to say more about this.

Wise thought, wise intention—intention being that moment in the mind when all the energy in the mind coheres, comes together in that impulse, you could say, that "about to," the mental impulse that leads to even thought (though that's pretty subtle to see), but that leads to speech and action. I remember I talked about just waiting for the impulse to lift the teacup and exploring that. That moment, that little mind-moment of intention—*cetanā*, the word in Pali—arises together in each moment with all the different mental factors in the mind, which makes it wholesome or unwholesome.

This wise thought, wise intention—*sammā-saṅkappa* in Pali—is the second step of the Eightfold Path. Right understanding, right view, leads to how we think about the world. Right thought leads to right action. And that leads to the next factors, which have to do with action: right speech, right action, right livelihood. It's very sensible. It's just how it works, very natural.

But it's not often the way we may tend, without looking, to think about or relate to how we assess the usefulness, the wholesomeness, or the unwholesomeness of our actions—that it all arises in the mind. The Buddha said, "I say *kamma*"—which just means action—"is intention."

But when we look at our actions in the world, there is the internal mental intention that gives rise to them. That's usually the thing we notice the least; it's the most subtle. Then there are the circumstances that may lead us to make a particular action, to make the choice. And then there's the outcome, if it's a particular action we choose. And don't we generally tend to judge or evaluate by the outcome? You know, how somebody receives it, how it works out. But as I said, that's the one that's the least in our control—yet that's the one we take responsibility for. And the circumstances around it—sometimes we're aware of

them, which could lead us to a more appropriate action when we know we're not colored by our own self-interest. Sometimes we don't see them clearly.

The intention, though, is actually the heart of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness. Let me give you a simple example from the suttas, from the Buddha. There was a monk, a *bhikkhu*, who was believed to be completely awakened, which would mean he would never act—he wouldn't even be capable of acting—from hatred or aversion or harming beings or greed. Wouldn't it be nice just to think about that? That it's not even going to happen that you say something from aversion or act from greed.

It's just not going to arise in the mind. Wouldn't that be lovely? Well, that's a possibility, even in moments.

Anyway, so this monk was walking back and forth in the woods, in the forest, doing his walking meditation. He was blind—I forget if I mentioned that. And some of the other monks saw him walking back and forth, and he was treading on ants, on a swarm of ants that he didn't see. He was walking back and forth and killing them.

So the bhikkhus go rushing to the Buddha, saying, "He's supposed to be an arahant! He's killing ants. He can't be." And if you read the suttas, there are many places where the rules the Buddha made for the monks and nuns come from people coming to him saying, "Oh, he's doing that, and she's doing this." You can kind of see—same kind of minds, you know. Not so different. Just because you put on robes doesn't mean you've arrived. It means you're cultivating, but it doesn't mean you're there yet.

So this is one of the places where the Buddha enunciated this teaching. He said there was no way the blind monk could have known the ants were there until he was told. There was absolutely no intention in his mind of ill will or harmfulness or even negligence, even delusion. Because sometimes we can harm beings from delusion, just not taking care to pay attention. Have you ever noticed that? I've noticed if I go in the shower without my glasses on and I see a little dark speck, I can't tell. I think it's just a bit of fluff. I have to actually go really close and look and see, "Oh, it's an ant." And if there's just that "oh, don't bother" attitude—that's delusion. Or just not even noticing that you're not bothering—that's delusion too. That's an intention of delusion.

So the blind monk didn't have that because he couldn't know. And the Buddha said there's no blame in that. There's no unwholesome action in that. Interesting, isn't it? Where we would say killing is bad, full stop. Now, once he knows there are ants there, if he were to say, "Well, I can't see them so it doesn't matter," that's a completely different intention in the mind. Can you feel the difference? And so that's really the seed.

Many of you have been noticing how much of delusion is assumption—how we're all assuming all this stuff about other people. A lot of people have mentioned it. And we do the same thing with intentions. We can never really know another person's intention, can we? So we judge by the action or we judge by how it makes us feel. But we don't know. I mean, half the time we don't know our own intentions, do we? And

the same action can come from many different intentions, motivations in the mind.

The example I always give, because I see it easily in myself: there's somebody you know well and care for who has a particular behavior pattern. Maybe it bothers you, but you can also see it's causing them suffering or alienating people. And your intention, as you think about it away from the situation, is that you want to somehow share this with them. Your motivation as you're contemplating it is actually kindness, right? You're already laughing because you can see all the different ways that can manifest in actuality.

There is the possibility that one could really get in touch with the sense of kindness, the wanting to help. Get in touch with mettā for the person. Check the circumstances—you know, like you don't come in when they've just gotten back from work completely stressed out, their boss was really pounding them, and they feel horrible. And you sit down and say, "Let me give you some feedback, you know, to really help you in the world." Complete obliviousness to their state and the circumstances. So there's a kind of delusion there. It's not the pure mettā intention.

Or you want to say it, and you're waiting for the right moment. But then they do the behavior and it really ticks you off, and you decide now's the right moment. "I've been wanting to tell you this for a while." You get the drift. So the same physical words could come with so many different intentions.

And then, even if you do it with the clearest, most kind intention, how the other person receives it is completely out of our control. Have you ever noticed that?

And can we let that be without having to interpret it all?

So this is where awareness of intention is both a subtle practice and a fact of our own experience. We're not working on awareness of other people's intentions—let's just be aware of our own, seeing when we can be clear about it when we can. And sometimes it's very complex. I'm not saying otherwise. But to begin and continue to bring this into our daily life can be hugely transformative.

Don't make up a big expectation, but just as we start to notice intentions before we speak, before we act, you see that when we notice it, that awareness can really give us a moment of choice. Even in little things, simple little things—not like something horribly bad, but like getting in the car.

Sometimes when I get in the car and I'm driving forty-five minutes here—anywhere is forty-five minutes from here—I may be listening to a particular song, or I may be listening to something specific, a dharma talk or something, and that's fine. Other times I may find myself appreciating the silence, and then suddenly I see my hand going out to turn on the radio. And I pause, curious. Why? Not that I should or shouldn't, but kind of interested. I tune in, and I can see just this restlessness in my mind. I need to do that. I come back, and it's like, I appreciate this. Next moment, turn on the radio. Then I actually turn it on. Then I start noticing—because there's never anything I want to hear on the radio. So the restlessness moved out, turned on the radio. I last ten seconds. Ten seconds! I start flipping the channels. You put it on

that one that scans, and then you can press it. I'm practically driving off the road out of restlessness. I'm exaggerating a little.

But watching this without any "you should" or "you shouldn't"—just watching the intention and where it leads—it really gives us so much information. This is exactly our practice here. But when we come in and say, "No, I shouldn't listen to the radio," and we get tight, we're making the action wrong, but we're not learning anything. Watching the intention, I learn a lot. And I get more and more tuned into the restlessness. So I do that much less. It lasts much less long because I'm noticing, "Oh, that restlessness. And this is increasing the restlessness. It's not so helpful. It's not actually pleasant. I don't need to do that."

And that's wisdom, making that choice. That's not me saying good or bad. Very different.

So the wisdom, tuning in—and this is where the second step of the Eightfold Path, wise intention, right intention, not just any old intention, but the ones that are onward-leading to awakening. And what's so cool about the way it works is what we've been saying all along: simply through steady awareness, noticing what's what, the unwise, the suffering intentions, through wisdom, naturally shift.

The Buddha talks about the unwise intentions of greed, of ill will, and of cruelty. Through awareness, the natural understanding that arises from awareness, the intentions of greed naturally start to transform to renunciation—the letting go of attachment—and to generosity, as Steve talked about last night. Different from "I have to be a generous person." That's a kind of forcing. But naturally: "Oh, it feels better," as he was saying.

Ill will—thinking bad about people, thinking bad about oneself—naturally begins to transform to mettā, to friendliness, to goodwill. And cruelty, which can just be cruel thoughts—it doesn't mean we're out doing anything—transforms to compassion, the ability to just be with suffering, as I talked about the other night.

And this process is natural and normal. It's not like only if you're some super-fine being. This is the natural effect of awareness seeing what's what.

How the suffering intentions work in our mind, what their effect is, and what the effect is of wholesome ones.

A friend of ours, Guy Armstrong, who's also a teacher of this, likes to say that when he looks at how this works—when he sees what we've been saying all along, that with a steadiness of awareness watching yourself do unskillful things, the wisdom that comes naturally starts to transform our habits to wholesomeness—that the wholesomeness, the purity, is more our natural state. He says that's what really gives him heart in the beneficent nature of reality. That he can really trust that.

It may not seem like it. When we look out at the world, that may not be the first thing that hits when you read the news. But when we look inward at our mind, we can really start to see that. But again, it's not a one-time thing—okay, now I see it, the habit's changed.

There's a very famous quotation from the Buddha in this regard, in the sutta where he's talking about the cultivation of wise thought, wise intention. He said, just looking at his own mind before he became the awakened Buddha, he saw that whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind.

Scary, isn't it? If we're not bringing in awareness. But it's just nature, it's just obvious. The natural causes and conditions—whatever habits our mind habitually thinks about, habitually goes in, that's the inclination. That's how we'll respond habitually when there's not awareness. Awareness gives us a moment of choice. That's why it's so powerful, so ultimately transforming.

I want to read you something that speaks to this—this willingness to look and work at it over and over and over. This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, and he's quoting a Buddha story. The Buddha, he says, knew a very miserly person who was unable to give anything away. So this man went to see the Buddha and said, "It is impossible for me to be generous. What should I do?"

And so the Buddha says, "Imagine that your right hand is yourself and your left hand is a poor, unhappy person. So give from your right hand to your left hand some old food which you don't like or need. Try hard to get used to this. Do this until you no longer feel miserly."

We just practice wholesome intention however we can. So the man began the practice, but he was so miserly that at first he could only give away a few leftovers or food he did not like from his right hand to his left hand. Gradually, however, he acquired the habit, and the day arrived when he did not feel quite so miserly. So then he went to the Buddha and said, "Now when I give food from my right to my left hand, I don't feel so miserly."

And the Buddha said, "Good. Now with your right hand, which you take to be yourself, give some gold, silk, or fine clothes to your left hand, which you imagine to be a beggar. Try to see if you can give open-handedly."

The man kept doing it, doing it, until of course he became a great benefactor to the poor, so generous, and became an arhat. So these stories always end that way. But look where we started. We start where we are. This noticing of the habits in our mind, in reference to what's really important—that's what can help us keep tuning in, what can help us keep practicing.

So this is when thoughts matter. And it's a training. It's a training.

This willingness to just look at the small moments of intention—you don't start with having to notice every single one. And it's not that now you have to make the totally right choice with all your actions. But just starting to look at what we do in small moments. A lot of insight can come, a lot of this shifting from unwise to wise intention.

So I'll give another very simple example. It almost sounds so silly to even mention it, but it happened to

me the other morning. This is the kind of little nothing moment in our days where awareness can really show us how it can transform our lives—our thoughts, our intentions—by the choices we make.

This is so small, but I was getting dressed the other morning and I had a little book on my night table, some mystery novel. I was getting dressed, I had my time, and the mind just looked at the book and said, "Oh, I just want to have a look in that book." I could really feel the craving. I didn't even know what it was about. I didn't really want to look at it—there was nothing in the book I wanted to see—but the craving was really strong. I wanted to stop in the middle of what I was doing and pick up that stupid book and start reading it. I'm getting dressed in the morning!

I just let my awareness watch all of that. In the moment I could see it, the choice arose: let's just stay with the awareness. I made the choice—it's all really fast—stay with the awareness, don't act on the wanting. But not shut the whole thing down and say, "Oh, this is bad, just get dressed." I just watched the whole process.

I could see how that tanha, the wanting, can be so strong about something completely inane. I'm sitting there going, "No, I really want to look at that book." And I kept thinking, "I really want to look at that book." And I was just watching all of this. Maybe a minute, two minutes. Then at some point, the craving just completely died away—completely gone. I kept getting dressed. I noticed the craving was completely gone. And the sense of spaciousness, peace, and ease that's available in that moment of renunciation, in that moment when the mind lets go of the attachment to whatever—it doesn't matter to the whatever. Awareness is all that made that possible.

It seems like such a little moment. We wait for the big moments, for the big insights, but these little moments are available all the time. These are moments where the habit of craving is being naturally transformed. It will come up again in the next two minutes—don't get me wrong—but it's being naturally transformed. The habit is usually that craving arises and we just act on it without even noticing. That's the habit that runs our lives.

If we're stuck in "this is good, this is bad," that's not going to be enough to keep us looking. That just feeds our ill will, really. This is where it's so helpful to get a sense, for yourself, of your larger aspiration, your deeper sense of what's really important in your life. This is a place where you look at it honestly, but not with self-deprecation. Say it comes up: "I really want to cultivate bodhicitta, the intention to awaken to save all beings." And then your mind goes, "Who do you think you are?" Don't believe that second thought. It's not about who I am—it's about what's the intention, what's the deeper aspiration that guides my life? This is what's going to give us the strength to actually keep bringing in awareness.

I'll read you this little story from Lama Surya Das. He was talking about his teacher who died some years ago, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. I only met him very briefly, but from all accounts, he was quite an amazingly awakened Tibetan master. He was born in Tibet, lived in Tibet and India, engaged in deep intensive practice in caves, and wandered for years as an unknown beggar in India—a kind of

modern-day Milarepa. The real deal, really filled with love. A very, very deep teacher.

Surya Das was talking about the first time Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was in France—there are quite a few Tibetan monasteries in France. He had grown up in the Himalayas and had never seen a beach. Some of his students took him to one of the beaches in France. He'd never seen a beach, if you can imagine. When he came back to the monastery, he began to give teachings about the first time he'd seen the beach and observed exactly what Westerners do there. He was giving regular teachings, and then all of a sudden he started talking about the beach, about how he and Atulku had gone to the very edge of the ocean. First he said, "It's so big"—in childlike awe. Can you imagine never seeing the ocean?

But then he started excitedly describing what he had seen. There were these people there, and instead of sitting or meditating or doing yoga, these people were just lying there, almost naked, doing nothing. And then when they were tired of lying there, instead of doing something, they just turned over. And then they lay there again for another few hours.

Kempo was truly, genuinely perplexed. He said, "Why were they doing that?" over and over. He couldn't understand it, but he had so much compassion for them. He said, "How could they waste their precious human existence?" He continued, "This lifetime is so short, so tenuous, so precious, so valuable, so necessary—a life not to be squandered but to be used impeccably, usefully, for the benefit and welfare of all. A life to be used for the future, for the next life—not just to lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard."

Kempo was sincerely impassioned now. "I just wanted to go wake them up," he said. "There was a big white chair about fifty meters away, obviously the lifeguard's post, but there were two young people sitting there, so I couldn't go up. But I wanted to badly, because I wanted to climb up there and announce to everybody that it was time to wake up."

You get the sense of the deep compassion. It's not a "stupid people" kind of judgment. It's more like, "Wow, this precious human life"—from somebody who has really dedicated his life in that way.

I share this story not to make us feel bad about ourselves, but to offer an example of that possibility of tuning in. For us, not with judgment, but tuning in with this deep sense of possibility—what is really important in my life? That's up to each one of us. I'm not saying what it should be. I have my opinions, but I'm not prescribing anything. The invitation is simply to really tune into it. It's a powerful force.

What I want to talk about, mostly in terms of our dharma practice, is this sense of consciously connecting within yourself with what your deepest aspiration is. Of course it may change over time—that's fine. That's what I mean when I say we keep purifying, we keep checking in, we keep seeing what's really important. And this aspiration serves as a guideline, a strengthening, a clarifying force in terms of the smaller moments of intention, of motivation, when we have to make decisions.

It's described in some of the Buddhist commentaries that when we have a sense of our overarching

motivation or aspiration—not the moment-to-moment intention but the deeper aspiration—it serves the function of collecting our dispersed energy. It helps us focus and actually accomplish things in our life, supported by reference to this deepest motivation, that we didn't even think we could do.

Without that, we tend to just go through life responding to conditions by reaction or from habit—"Oh yeah, this will be good for now"—but we're not really looking at the big picture. We can drift through life. Not being bad—we can drift through life being good people—but without a sense of a greater aspiration that can truly guide us in our choices, helping us align rather than just drift.

This is something we all know in the ways we make choices. If you have children, if you have family members you need to be responsible for, to take care of, don't you make choices in your life? You give up some things, you choose not to do certain things, you choose to do other things that may be unpleasant or not what you'd most want to be doing if you were just responding to that particular situation. But when you're making the choice in reference to "this is going to serve my child," you do it. And you do it more or less happily. We can actually bring in the compassion, the love, the wholesomeness, the generosity, and do this action that without that higher aspiration we might do out of aversion or resistance. Instead, we're doing it out of mettā. You get a sense of that. It gives us so much more strength and power to accomplish things.

We can apply this in ways that aren't particularly wholesome too, but it can give us enormous focused, collected energy when we have a higher aspiration.

So back to tennis. I was reading the autobiography of Andre Agassi, the great American tennis player. Sports are really a good way to examine qualities of mind, both wholesome and unwholesome. Agassi seemed to be quite honest in his autobiography about all the struggles he went through. He described what it takes for someone to play tennis at the highest level—and I'm sure this applies to any other sport and to many other pursuits as well. From the time he was really young, whether it was forced by his father or later when he chose it himself, almost everything he did—what he ate, how much he slept—had to be evaluated in terms of how it would help or hinder his tennis. They learn to calibrate everything. Once he got married and had kids, he'd have to think, "Can I go to the beach with the kids for an hour?"

Not if it's in the middle of a tournament. Even an hour at the beach would so unbalance his energy, so affect how he had to get it together to go play a match. He couldn't do it. And so for thirty-four years, that was his life. Everything was in service to playing the best tennis he could. That's amazing to think of. I don't want to examine what the motivations were, but that's an amazing quality of commitment and focus. So imagine if we bring that quality to awakening, or to serving all beings. What's possible for us? Then when we have to make decisions, we can refer to what's really important.

There was an interview many, many years ago I read with Aung San Suu Kyi. You're all aware of her story now. It was when she was still under house arrest and had been for quite some years. I don't remember if it was before or after her husband died, but anyway, it was during all the difficult times. And she

said—I'm paraphrasing, I just remembered this in my mind—she said, "People think I'm so amazing, but I'm really nothing unusual at all. I never planned to be the icon of the Burmese democracy movement. All I ever do, if something needs to be done in the name of love, then I'll do it. That's all." Just from that clarity of what was most important to her—in the name of wisdom, in the name of love, then I'll do it. Not some other big thing.

Where our deepest motivation and aspiration takes us, we may not know. It's much more about our motivation than about specific outcomes, in terms of dharma practice, in terms of awareness practice. Yes, our aspiration can be to purify our heart and mind, or to cultivate compassion, bodhicitta, to wake up. But the form it's going to take, we don't know. So it's different from having the aspiration to earn a million dollars and really focusing on that and doing it, or like a tennis player where it's more about the outcome. Here it's really looking deeply at what's the guideline in your life. What's really important? And then realizing that it's a lifetime of moment after moment after moment of just bringing kind awareness to what it is we're doing.

From Dilgo Khyentse again: "The whole thrust of the Buddha's teaching is to master the mind. If you master the mind, you will have mastery over body and speech, and your own and others' suffering can only come to an end. But if the mind is left full of negative emotions, then however perfect the actions of your body and the words you speak might seem, you are far from the path."

And guess how mastery of mind is achieved? Through constant awareness of your mind, of your thoughts, and of your actions. Just cultivating this simple, steady awareness—what we've been doing here the whole week. Maintaining this mindfulness in the practices of tranquility and insight eventually will sustain the recognition of wisdom, even in the midst of ordinary activities and distractions. Mindfulness is thus the very basis, the cure for all samsaric afflictions.

So just this willingness to look deeply, to see what's really important for you. And if it is on the level of cultivating awareness, of cultivating freedom or compassion or something along those lines, then really trusting that awareness, that mindfulness, is the tool, is the key. Let that deeper aspiration fuel our willingness to choose awareness when we notice we might have a moment of choice.

This is how we purify our awareness over and over again, purify our aspiration over and over again. It is work. That's okay. It's at least a lifetime practice. That's okay.

This is Dilgo Khyentse again: "This time, do what is important." This time meaning this lifetime. This is really looking from the vast perspective. So he says, "Throughout our many lifetimes in the past, we have taken many different forms. We've been rich. We've been poor. We've been beaten by our enemies. We've lost everything. We have had all the pleasures of the gods."

We've been the victims of political oppression. We have suffered from diseases. And all of those experiences of happiness and suffering have brought us nothing. But now, in this present life, we have

entered into the path of the Buddha. We've entered into a path of awakening. We have met learned and accomplished teachers. This time we can make such circumstances meaningful and do what is important.

If a merchant visiting an isle of jewels were to return empty-handed without his cargo of gems, he would be ashamed to show his face in public. It's the same for us, who at this very moment have such favorable conditions for the practice.

The Dharma has two aspects: exposition and practice. Exposition is only the work of the mouth, and many there are who do not practice the teachings explained. As the saying goes, many have heard the doctrine, but those who implement it are few. Even those who have practiced a little can get sidetracked and lost. So as far as the Dharma is concerned, practice is more important than teaching and talking about it. The Dharma is something that we really have to do. But we only really have to do it this moment, this moment, this moment.

Returning consciously to clarify your aspiration brings energy, brings faith, brings the willingness to do, brings the trust that this is really what's most important to me. It makes it possible for us to hang in when times get really difficult.

I want to offer two examples—one a reading, one a reflection—about the potential for acting out of habit and drifting, even when we think we're good people, and then the potential when we have deeply internalized our deepest commitment.

A couple of years ago I spent the summer in Munich. After being there many years, I decided I wanted to visit Dachau, the concentration camp they made into a museum. I went one afternoon on the weekend, and I was really glad I went by myself because I could just be quiet and move through it at my own pace.

It had an effect on me different from what I might have expected. What I might have expected was just the horror of it. And there was that, of course. But more than that, it re-inspired me. It re-energized me to rededicate to practice—entrusting practice, entrusting awareness.

The museum was set up thoughtfully, with different rooms and placards describing various aspects of the people who were interned there: all the different races, people who were gay, people who were Roma, people from different countries, Jewish people—all different kinds of people. You got a sense of the vastness of all who were there, local people, people from far away. And then there were placards describing some of the guards, some of the people who lived in the nearby village, all different aspects of the situation.

Often when they would talk about something specific that happened, they would show the range of human responses. People who were interned in the camp who were really heroic, filled with compassion, helping each other. People in the camp who were just the opposite, turning on each other out of fear. Same with the guards. Same with local people. They would always show all different kinds of responses. Each placard would have a picture of someone as an example, so it made it real, made it personal.

I was also watching all the different visitors—people from all over the world, German people and Polish people and people from Japan—going through the museum. You could see people settling, the mind just settling. They'd go from room to room becoming more and more attentive, more and more present. It wasn't like people were just chit-chatting, but it wasn't like they were just going, "Oh, horrible!" and running out. They weren't getting angry. It just hits you on a level.

What inspired me about practice was getting a sense of the vastness. You can't just say a few really evil people did this. So many people were involved. And I don't want to say this is just about Germany in World War II. We can look at how many places in the world just in the last two decades where one ethnic group turns on another ethnic group, one race turning on another race, neighbors turning on neighbors. This can happen anywhere. I don't even have to list all those places, but it's not about one country in one time period. It's about seeing: How can this happen?

And what made it personal was that I really saw—

It's mostly normal people, good people. And it's not like ten million people set out to say, "No, I'm going to slaughter the other ethnic group." It's not like in Rwanda, where the Tutsis and the Hutus made some big plan. How did all the good people get involved in that and act in that way?

And so I could only come back to my own mind, my own experience, seeing how we never know where our next step is going to go. No one in 1932 knew how things were going to end up in 1944 and 1945. Nobody could know that. And so we each make the little decisions that we make in life. If we don't know how our own minds work—and we can only know that from the steadiness of awareness—if I don't know how to be with fear, even a little fear, then if some difficult situation arises and I'm afraid to say something, I might just say, "Well, it's just easier not to do it." The fear runs the show. And it doesn't seem like a big decision in 1932 or whenever, but then it grows. It grows, and we just don't know how we're going to end up acting.

What we frequently think and ponder, that becomes the inclination of our mind. So if my tendency is to think, "That's too difficult of a situation, and it's not my business anyway"... And this could be anything—walking by, seeing two young kids start to fight on the sidewalk in New York. They could be dangerous. I don't know what's happening. They could be on drugs. I should just stay away. That's the right thing to do. And I can see I'm acting from fear. Just go. It's not a big deal. And it's not such a big deal. But our habits strengthen. Our habits strengthen.

When we just end up reacting in life, not knowing how our minds work, not knowing how to bring awareness to the unwholesome intentions... okay, but maybe I should say something. Maybe I should do something. I have no idea how I would act if I were in a situation like that. I've never been in one. I don't know. But all we can do is have this willingness to bring awareness to our intentions here and now. The littlest ones can end up having a huge effect. Because we're just all people. All our minds work the same.

So that's one way this really re-motivated me, re-inspired me. Not to say, "Oh, the world is horrible and people are horrible. Those are horrible people." It's more like, whoa—this is where our human mind can go without wisdom. Without the ability to see, without the ability to be with what's unpleasant in my own mind and to act out of compassion, to act out of wisdom, not out of fear, for some greater purpose that I can tune into for myself. We still never know what's going to happen. That's all we can ever do.

So now I want to read another thing, which is kind of the reverse—not Buddhist, but again a sense of when someone has and keeps reconnecting with the really deep aspiration in their life. And it's, in this case, supported by other people sharing it, just like we talk about sangha here—the power that can have in one's life, to guide one's life.

This is a reading from the autobiography of John Lewis, who is a congressman from Georgia and has been for many years, but he was one of the original Freedom Riders from Nashville, as a student back in 1959 and 1960. He was one of the original group of young students who founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, called SNCC, which when it was founded was really based in Gandhian and Christian principles of nonviolence. They were very deeply committed to that.

In this passage, he's talking about his days then, about the principles of Gandhian nonviolence, which all their actions—the freedom rides, the sit-ins at cafeterias—all of their work was based in this very deep principle of nonviolence. They were just young students, and they were being trained by an African-American minister named Jim Lawson, who had been in India. He'd been a conscientious objector in the Korean War and had studied Gandhian Satyagraha, but was also a Christian minister.

So that's the background. This is John Lewis talking:

"One of the most fundamental principles of the Gandhian notion of Satyagraha, nonviolent action, is that it is not merely a technique of achieving specific goals."

It is not simply a means to attaining political independence or racial desegregation. It is not just a tool to achieve unity and freedom in the world around us. True satyagraha, as Gandhi taught it, is about a fundamental shift inside our own souls. It is rooted in the achievement of inner unity, of inner freedom, of inner certainty—a place we find within ourselves, a calm, sure place. And once found, that place is not swayed or disturbed or affected by the thousands of details of the world around us that bombard us every day.

Then he speaks about suffering from this place. He says, "Suffering is nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering. This is a difficult concept to understand, and it is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence."

"We are talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving

something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us."

And I have to say, this sounds exactly like what Dingo Rinpoche was saying about pure perception. I just want to note that. This is in the Christian context.

"It recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy. This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence."

"And it is a practice. It is a way of life. This is something Lawson stressed over and over again—that this is not just a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when needed. It is not something you turn on or off like a faucet. This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day. It shapes your response to a curt cashier in the grocery store, or a driver cutting you off in traffic, just as surely as it keeps you from striking back at a state trooper who might be kicking you in the ribs because you dared to protest against an oppressive government."

"If you want to create an open society, your means of doing so must be consistent with the society you want to create. Means and ends are absolutely inseparable."

That, to me, is a great example of clear comprehension of deepest aspiration and the moment-to-moment working. And to me, it's a great example of the cultivation of awareness and wisdom, metta, and compassion.

So we just start where we are, and we never give up.

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