Wise Intention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:49

Tonight I want to talk a bit about—well, this sounds grandiose—how do we manifest embodied awakening? Or more specifically, something that I've heard in a couple of questions: what's the relationship between the meditation practice we're doing, this very inward, quiet, subtle practice, and actions in the world? Does it relate at all? Is it some kind of esoteric, isolated, disconnected activity? Obviously the answer is no, but I want to talk a bit about that.

The Buddha was very clear that the way our awakened mind and heart manifests is in our actions. This is a quotation: "A wise person is characterized by her actions. It is through the activities of one's life that one's discernment shines." He also says a fool is characterized by her actions as well. In other words, how we act in the world is reflective of the understanding, the wisdom that's been cultivated, that's grown in our heart, in our mind. So it's obvious, but just to say that what we're doing here is not somehow isolated in any way.

Not that it's an immediate cause and effect—as soon as you see something, you're perfect in the world. But in the big picture, if there's someone you know, or you hear of teachers or whoever, claiming all this wisdom, and you see that they're really acting in unskillful, inappropriate, harmful ways, that's something to really look at, something to really pay attention to.

So I want to talk about this sense that our wisdom manifests in our actions. It's not so straightforward though, is it? The wisdom that manifests isn't just the ideas that non-harming is a good thing—I mean, we could probably sign up for that. That greed causes suffering—maybe you're ready to sign up for that. But the wisdom isn't just the idea that it would be a good thing not to do certain things and to do other things. I think we know that, right? "I'm not going to get angry anymore." Good luck. We can sincerely mean that. We can sincerely mean it. But it's not enough wisdom—moment to moment wisdom—to truly transform how we respond, how we act in the world.

When we don't deeply, truly understand how our minds are working, the habits of our mind—and we've been going on about this the whole time, really emphasizing that the steadiness of awareness allows us to see all the habits that occur, the habits of the kleshas of greed, hatred, and confusion, how they manifest, how they arise, how they act, how they bring us suffering—not as some kind of esoteric exercise just for the hell of it, but because when we don't really know, when we don't really watch and we don't understand how these habits work, and also the beautiful habits, how they transform in the light of awareness—when we don't understand, then even with the so-called best intentions, we find ourselves doing something completely opposite.

I heard this on the radio sometime last year. It really haunted me, on public radio. It was an interview with two men—I came in in the middle of it, so I can't tell you who they were or the whole of what they were talking about. I can only give you this little snippet that haunted me. They were talking about some project they have, working with people in prison for violent crimes, some project of working with interrupting violence. That was the name of it. I missed everything else, except for this little quotation they mentioned from some young man who was in prison for an act of violence. The quote from him was: "I wish I could take back that three to five seconds" of his life when he reacted in a situation with violence that has completely changed and informed the whole rest of his life. Three to five seconds—when we just don't know, we just don't see what our mind and heart, how it's reacting in that moment. It's amazing.

We can see that in ourselves. It may not be a violent crime; it may be that I've had enough cake and you find yourself up there with your hand in the cake again. How did that happen? How could that have happened? That's little, that's not a horrible thing, but it's that same sense of not really being aware of what the mind is doing in that moment.

So that's what I want to talk about: this sense of bringing awareness to the intentions in the heart, in the mind. The Buddha said very clearly, over and over, that the seed of action, the seed of karma, is intention—that motivation in the heart and mind that leads to speech and action.

So in this level of intention, it's that *cetanā*, the word in Pali, that about-to movement—not the macro, which I'll talk about as well, but the micro, the moment-to-moment impulse in the mind and heart that leads to speech and action.

In our practice here, we say over and over that mindfulness, unbiased awareness, doesn't care what's arising. Our job of awareness is simply to see. Whatever's coming up in the mind, whatever mood or emotion or train of thought, we simply need to be present for it. With pure awareness, watch it. Don't try to suppress it. If greed comes, watch it. If fear comes, be with it. If ill will is arising, be present with it. Ill will is like this. We're not saying act it out, but we're not saying suppress it. It's all equal opportunity for awareness.

So then the question comes: when does it matter? Does it ever matter? Does it ever make a difference? And this is where, when we're not completely aware, it does matter. Whatever qualities are in the psyche, the consciousness in a particular moment—whether it's greed or ill will or compassion or equanimity or *mett ā*—they cohere in that moment to form an intention, that about-to movement that leads to speech and action. It matters.

The Buddha was so clear that the seed of action isn't the result, which is how we tend to evaluate it, but it's in the quality of the intention itself, in that internal moment, which makes it wholesome or unwholesome, karmically. So learning through the steadiness of mindfulness practice, really cultivating an interest, a commitment—not just as an interesting practice, but truly seeing how we understand the workings of our mind, how wisdom comes in and understands what leads to suffering and what leads to freedom in our

own mind and heart—is going to impact the way we respond and act in the world.

This is why it takes such a commitment, a willingness on our part to keep showing up for the whole show. It's not in our control. We know that. We space out, we come back. But the willingness to keep looking—I find for myself that over the years the commitment keeps changing, keeps deepening, keeps changing form.

Recently, what re-inspired my commitment was something I've mentioned before, but it had quite an effect. A few years ago, when I was in Germany, I decided I really wanted to visit Dachau, which is set up as a museum—one of the concentration camps. I went there, and I was grateful I went by myself, because I had time to simply walk through and reflect.

It's set up quite skillfully as a museum. They had some of the original buildings, and others were no longer standing—just the foundations. One sense I got was how huge it was. German friends later told me, "But that was one of the small ones."

The museum was arranged with large plaques and posters describing different aspects of the whole situation—the internment camps, the concentration camps, the people who worked there, the things that went on, the different people who were interned. There might be a poster showing all the different nationalities of people in the concentration camp, or people of different sexual orientations, or the Roma, or others—not only Jewish people, but all kinds of people. People who worked there, things doctors did, people who brought in the bread, people in the community who did this and that. They described all these different aspects. So it's huge—so many people involved.

Then often there would be a specific person whose story they would tell. This made it quite immediate for me—it takes it out of the vastness to the personal. We can relate a little better when it's this one person who was the baker, or this one person who went through this particular difficult experience.

In a strange way, what it really did was deepen, really deepen my faith in the Dharma, in our practice, in the depth and power of awareness and steady wisdom to truly transform our hearts and minds. It re-deepened my commitment to keep looking, because the vastness of it took me to the place of recognizing: this is just people. You can't say this is a few really evil people. It's normal people, like me.

And then you look around the world. How many horrific scenarios are happening right now—I don't need to take you through them all; I'm not here to do that—but one could. Horrific scenarios, now, in the past twenty years, throughout all of history, involving thousands and hundreds of thousands of people. They can't all be evil people different from me.

I do not know. I do not know how I would react or respond if I were in a particular situation of genocide, in a concentration camp, or if someone in my family was being threatened unless I did something I felt was wrong. I do not know.

And so the sense that it took me to is a deepening of my willingness, my commitment—and I keep revisiting it—to really look and see: what are the habits of my mind? How will I act in a situation I haven't been in before, one that's scary or difficult or pressured? Just thinking, "Well, I'm a good person, I wouldn't do that"—no. Forget it. Like this young guy in jail, three to five seconds. When the conditions are there, if there are still tendencies to greed or ill will or fear or aversion—yes, there are still tendencies to all of that. And so far, everyone I know has these tendencies.

If we don't want to see it, or if we take it as not personal—this is just the habits that have been cultivated through how we've grown up and what we've learned, what we've been talking about the whole time—if we're afraid to see it or we're not in the habit of looking, if we don't really have that faith in the steadiness of awareness and trust that wisdom really does transform the habits, then we're either going to drown and not look, or we're going to delude ourselves. We just really don't know. We just really don't know.

And so this is where we bring our practice in. This is a laboratory here on retreat, but your mind here—do you think it's a different mind from the one you have in your daily life? No. Maybe you're having some nicer states than you get in daily life. Maybe you're having some really whacked-out states that make you think, "I don't have those in my daily life." Yeah, right. It might be about an orange. It's not about something really important. But the state is similar. This is what we're here to discover.

This commitment to really look, to really look in our mind and heart and see—it's why all the aspects of the path that the Buddha taught, as far as I can understand, of metta, the brahmaviharas, the generosity that Greg talked about, sila, non-harming behavior, meditation—it's not like you do one so you can do the next. All of them are different angles to come in and purify the habits of our heart and mind.

When we talk about the pure mind, moments when it's not acting out of greed, hatred, or confusion, it's not just because it feels good. It's not just, "Oh great, something to get to." It's because the more and more these habits change, the more we can learn to really recognize and rest in the pure heart and mind instead of taking refuge in ill will or fear or greed. I mean, we don't consciously say that's what we're taking refuge in, but where do we go in times of stress? That's what starts to change when the heart and mind begins to be purified. That's what we're doing here.

All those moments where nothing is happening, it's just calm—these are really important moments. Those moments when it's calm and you watch your mind, as I said last time, volunteering for suffering. It's calm, and you'd rather make up something to get upset about. At least then you can explore it. That's the habit of mind, of "me" and aversion popping up.

All these moments of moment-to-moment mindfulness of the mundane. Okay, it's not calm, but you just feel sensation in your foot. You're watching yourself want a third piece of cake. You eat it or you don't eat it, but you pay attention to why you're doing it. Why is sitting, the breath, hearing—so what? It's not "so what." Every moment that's a moment of pure awareness, not filled with greed, hatred, or confusion, is really important. This is the beginning of purification, which just means switching habits. The habits begin

to change. And this is what's going to change our whole life and the way we relate and the way we are with other people—so that we don't have our own three to five seconds of unaware, really violent, really harmful, really selfish behavior. Or not too often.

I want to talk a bit about mindfulness of intention, both in the macro and the micro, because sometimes we get confused in that way. In some of the commentaries, they talk about clear comprehension—sati sampajañña. Sati is mindfulness. Sampajañña is the word often translated as clear comprehension. One way to talk about it is recognizing that our mindfulness practice isn't just a narrow focus but includes a broader range of appropriateness.

And really, what's our purpose? Why are we doing what we're doing?

In the broad, macro sense of intention—and in English we use "motivation" and "intention" somewhat interchangeably, which can be confusing when we apply these terms to both macro and micro levels—I want to offer some clarification, as this has come up here.

When we talk about aspiration, like at the beginning of the retreat when you had your small groups discuss your aspiration for practice, or like the Tibetan practice I mentioned the other day of clarifying your aspiration at the start of a practice period—that's more macro. It's a sense of what's really important here, not just in this moment.

Aspiration, in terms of wholesome aspiration, in terms of what's onward leading, what really brings us energy, brightness, faith, and confidence—what got you here? What keeps you here other than social pressure? That's micro-intention: "I'm here out of fear." But the aspiration... in some moments that's true. We just notice that. That's okay. Social pressure can be useful at times. But the bigger aspiration, whatever that is for you—and that might change from time to time—is really this sense of: What's truly important in my life? It's important to take time to tune into that and see.

I think this story is funny. Lama Surya Das was writing about an incident with one of his teachers who has since died, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was really one of the most profound Dzogchen masters around. Rinpoche had gone to the ocean in France, and Surya writes: "It must have been the first time that Khenpo had seen the beach"—he comes from Tibet, right?—"and observed exactly what Westerners do there."

When he came back to the monastery, he was giving a Dharma talk and suddenly veered off and started talking about the beach. He said, "It was so big!" Then he excitedly described what he had seen: "There were these people there, and instead of sitting and meditating or doing yoga, they 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."

Khenpo was truly, genuinely perplexed. Why were they doing that? He couldn't understand it, but he had so much compassion for them. And this reflects his sense of: How could they waste their precious human existence? This life is so short, so precious, so valuable—not to be squandered, but to be used impeccably,

usefully, for the benefit and welfare of all.

You get a sense of what was important to him. Don't take that as a judgment, but to me it's inspiring. "Not just lounge around all day in the hot sun like a big sleeping lizard!" He got really impassioned. He said, "I just wanted to go wake them up." And he saw this big white chair—obviously the lifeguard's chair—and he said, "But there were two people sitting there, so I couldn't go up. But I wanted really badly to climb up there and announce to everybody that it was time to wake up."

It's funny, but take it as a reminder. And again, this isn't from judgment; this is from really touching in deeply in your heart and mind, honestly—not what you think you should or ought to feel, because that's just disconnection, but what's really important to you. Then, whether every day or once in a while, really take the time to tune in and see what's truly important. Use it as a guideline. This is called clear comprehension of purpose or aspiration. This is the macro level.

But as I've said, while it's really important, it's not enough. Because what really leads to behavior is the moment-to-moment micro intentions that I've been mentioning. As the Buddha said, "Intention, I tell you, is karma"—the movement, the quality in the mind or heart that leads to speech and action.

I know you've all heard this, and it may not be how we normally tend to think. We tend to think—compassion is a good example—that we do something to help.

That's a compassionate action. It may be. It may be. But it really depends on what the motivation is in the mind. We tend to judge by the result, or how it looks. But that's out of our control. Or we judge by the situation around it, but we often don't know the situation. The only thing that's in our control—and if there's mindfulness we do have a moment of choice—is to learn how to get in touch and notice why we're doing what we're doing.

The same action could arise from so many different intentions. I always use the same example because it's just a really easy one. Say you have the idea that there's someone you care about who has a particular kind of behavior that's bringing them suffering, and you really want to help them with that. That impulse could arise in the mind really from a place of caring and compassion. But they're not around then, so you're not saying it then. Our tendency is to just have that thought—oh, that's a good idea—and then we don't pay attention. When the time comes, we just say it. But we're not noticing that just because the idea was coming from compassion three days ago doesn't mean it still is. We assume it's steady state until we do it, and we stop paying attention. That's not the case at all.

So when the time comes to say this compassionate thing, the same phrase could be said from frustration, impatience, hostility, or just complete ignorance. The poor person comes schlepping in at the end of the day, totally exhausted, the kids are screaming, they're trying to make dinner, and you say, "I really have something important to tell you. You've been doing this bad thing for fifteen years and people hate you for it. It would be good to change. Out of all the love in my heart, I'm sharing this"—completely oblivious to

what's going on. The same words. Or one day you could say it and really take the time to stop and connect, and it really does come from compassion. It's the kind of thing we see in the compassion practice—you're saying those phrases and noticing all the different feelings that come with it. That's what we're practicing to see: to really see why we're doing what we're doing.

It's these little moment-to-moment movements that, if we're not aware, the habits of mind will tend to surface. As the Buddha said over and over, what we frequently think and ponder upon, that becomes the inclination of our mind. Which, you know, is a little scary sometimes to think about, but it's really important to see. And that importance can bring in this willingness to really look.

Now, the beauty of the willingness to keep noticing, what we've been saying all along, is that the natural effect of clear seeing, of wisdom, when the mindfulness has momentum—say, going back to wanting to say that compassionate thing, but you keep paying attention, you see how the idea was compassionate, but now you're just ticked off at the person. You can see that, so you don't say it. You don't say it. The wisdom allows us to see the ill will, not flinch away from it, not take it personally, and it gives us this moment of choice.

From the space of wisdom, the habits of greed, of holding on, of ill will, hostility, cruelty—those habits naturally transform in the light of wisdom. That's what's so far out about this, what really lends, in my mind, the sense of trust and confidence, the willingness to look, the willingness to see. Because when we do—and I know you've all been seeing this here at times, and then it rebounds and we get lost again—but there are times when you're really just watching craving, watching craving, even watching the mind act on it, but you still watch it without a lot of judgment. And at some point the wisdom, the paññā, just comes in: I really don't need that. You've had that moment where the mind just puts it down and you think, "Oh, I let go," but you didn't let go. Wisdom saw, and craving stopped arising because it didn't make sense. It's so much easier than thinking you have to figure it out and let go. All we have to do is be willing to trust the awareness enough to keep being steady, to keep looking. This stuff naturally transforms. It's really amazing.

Guy likes to say—maybe he said it in some of his talks here, I don't know—he talks about thinking that it's really a beneficent universe. When he first said it, I thought, with my aversive mind, "Beneficent universe? Are you reading the papers? Are you paying attention to history? How can you say that?" But what he means is this: when there's clear seeing, the natural effect of wisdom is yathābhūta, seeing clearly things as they have come to be in this moment. In the heart-mind of purity, in that moment, a thought of harm does not arise. The thought of "it's all about me, more for me and less for you" doesn't arise. You don't have to let go of it. It is dissipated by itself.

That's the trust. That's the sense of beneficent universe that's so far out. It really gives me the faith and the willingness to keep on looking at all the relatively unpleasant moments when the other habits are popping up. We really need to see them.

So this sense of the macro—having clarity within yourself about what is truly important to you. What is your sense of purpose or aspiration? And that can change, you know, as we go through life and as we go through our practice. That's wonderful if it changes. Just keep checking in.

The way it's described is that it gives us a kind of collectedness—it gathers our dispersed energy. It serves as a guideline, as a reminder. If we don't have an overarching sense of what's really important in life, then even when we're paying attention, we just respond haphazardly. We make this choice, we make that choice, not necessarily in a harmful way, but there's no direction, no focus. Whereas if we have a sense of what's important, it can inform our choices. It collects the dispersed energy.

For example, think of having a family. There are probably many sacrifices and many choices you make where you don't do something you want to do, where you give up all kinds of activities in order to support your kids, to be there for them, to be with the family. And it doesn't even—well, it may sometimes—but generally it's not a resentful thing. It's a choice out of compassion, out of metta, out of generosity. You're just doing the obvious, as one teacher said.

You get a sense of how the family gives collectedness, gathers the dispersed energy. It doesn't mean every moment is filled with total compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity. But when there's a choice to make, the sense of what's really important is something we can reference that truly supports us.

In terms of our practice—which is our whole life, not just sitting here—in terms of continuing to cultivate wisdom and awareness, tuning in to your aspiration can give us great determination, resolution, which is one of the paramis. It's the sense of willingness to keep going even in the face of difficulty.

One example of this was the Chinese Chan master, Master Sheng Yen. I don't know if any of you knew who he was. He died just a few years ago. I had a couple of retreats with him in Taiwan. He was a very inspiring, wonderful being—quite realized, very kind, very relational, a great teacher. In Taiwan, he was kind of like the Dalai Lama of Taiwan, with this huge following, tens of thousands of people. But when he would come and teach here, he was just very simple and relational. It's like being around the Dalai Lama—people around just feel good because he's so kind. He manifests compassion and simplicity and kindness. And it's contagious. Wholesomeness is contagious because it's true for us too.

Anyway, Sheng Yen was wonderful that way. He wrote in his autobiography, describing his life, and this quality of aspiration leading to resolution and clarity in his decisions was very inspiring to me.

He was born in mainland China, way before the revolution, before World War II, into a very poor farming family. He became a monk, a Buddhist monk, when he was quite young out in the country. It was very difficult—not much food, very harsh conditions all over. He basically struggled most of his growing up and his young period of being a monk. It was always a period of deprivation.

After World War II, during the time when the Civil War started going again very strongly, he was in Shanghai, I believe, in a monastery. Just when the communists, when Mao, seemed to be winning in 1949,

and the nationalists went to Taiwan, he said he knew his commitment was to be a Buddhist monk. That was his life. That's what he was. And he realized that if he stayed in mainland China, he wouldn't be able to do that. They were destroying the monasteries, and he'd either be killed or forced to disrobe. So he wanted to get to Taiwan in order to continue being a monk.

Well, he had nothing. He was poor. The only way he could get there was by signing up with the nationalist army, Chiang Kai-shek's army, and then they would take him over. So he did that. He signed up and was enlisted, and he got over to Taiwan. But it wasn't like he could arrive and say, "Okay, thanks a lot. I'm now withdrawing from the army." Fat chance. So he was there at least ten years, serving in the army.

And he said, you know, the whole time he lived as a vegetarian. Often he didn't have enough food. He said only would he ever eat meat if he was actually really starving, but then he would if he had to. He said the whole time, "In my heart, I was a Buddhist monk." But he was in the army and he had to live and do what you're told in the army, right? But somehow, luckily, he got some kind of a job where—well, they weren't really fighting too much—but he didn't have to do any kind of fighting or any kind of violence. But still, he said it was extremely difficult. Extremely difficult.

And then it was through a whole series of really unexpected events that things began to shift. He says it was extremely difficult, almost impossible for anyone to get out of the army ever—not just like in a few years. But somehow, after time, he managed to meet some other Chan masters on the island. And just through a series of events born from his deep commitment, he would take whatever time off he had and go off and do very strenuous practice in caves with these masters. Just really tough.

And at some point, finally—I don't even remember how—through meeting a couple of masters and someone knowing someone in the government and someone writing a letter, he finally got out of the army after ten years. But the thing is, he said he never in all that time ever abandoned his deep aspiration and intention: *I am a Buddhist monk and this is what I'm doing.* And when he got out of the army, the first thing he did was go on a six-year retreat. A six-year retreat. And he was just this lovely, lovely guy.

So the sense of the power of aspiration, of touching into it—we don't know what will unfold. And then it has to inform our moment-to-moment actions and decisions. You couldn't just say, "I'm a Buddhist monk," and then sit back and let it happen. You have to do all these actions, and you don't ever know. We never know how any action's going to turn out. So we have to be as clear as we can in the moment. And then in this moment. And then in this moment. We never can be in charge of what's going to happen.

So that's where, for me, this sense of recommitment from being at Dachau—it keeps coming up these last few years, and it's been quite alive. Sometimes it's a little demoralizing when I'm really looking, but other times it's really inspiring because it makes me want to look and see, okay, what habits are still showing up? And it's in the little things.

I noticed last year, I think, I was on a kind of self-retreat—just relaxed, simple, quiet, very peaceful. And I

remember at some point I was doing a little walking and some little aversive thing came up. No big deal at all, just a little bit of aversion, and then it was gone. And I could see how my mind would go, "That's no big deal, no problem." I mean, it wasn't a problem. It wasn't bothering me or anybody. But I thought, no, wait, come back a minute. That's the habit of aversion showing up in a really mild way. But you know what? That's not acceptable. In the big picture. I mean, in the moment, yeah, it's just what it is. But in the big picture—remember, I think I quoted, or one of us did, the Buddha saying, "Do not settle merely for wholesome states of mind."

Not like, okay, there's a little bit of aversion, a little bit of greed, it comes, it goes, there's a lot of awareness, it's manageable, it's good enough. It's good enough, but no, it wasn't good enough. It re-inspires me to keep looking, to keep seeing, okay, what are the little habits? Let's see them instead of going, "Well, it's good enough," and then stopping paying attention.

So with little things—when you suddenly slam down the phone or get a little annoyed with that person on the other end calling from Social Security, or not answering, or not even a person, that voicemail, the three and a half hours of voicemail. Still, aversion comes up in the mind. Noticing that. Not with judgment, but with interest, with care, with a willingness to see. Because these are the habits that are going to manifest.

I notice for me sometimes when I go to make a compassionate offering to a homeless person, I just feel a little bit of fear—whether I offer or not. Notice that little bit of fear. Just begin to see where the habits are arising, because this seeing with wisdom, with caring, is what allows for their natural transformation. Otherwise, if we don't see these seeds, they can sprout, given the appropriate circumstances.

And probably many of you are aware that I go to Burma. I've been going every year for the last thirteen years or something. And in the last two or three years, I'm sure you're aware because it's in the news, that there started being more violence—Buddhist and Muslim violence—which is really heartbreaking to read about and see. And again, it's like little pockets here and there, and one can have all kinds of ideas about how it's being fomented and how seeds are being planted and directed from external forces, and all of that. And that

could all be true—I think it is true—but still, it's like lots of people, decent people. Not people I know personally, but I know a lot of Burmese people, just people like us. And all of a sudden there's some kind of mob violence that sweeps through. What's that about? And that can't happen if there's not a seed to be triggered.

The seed might be fear. The seed might be fear that's been fed by propaganda, fed by fear of losing your family, fed by all kinds of circumstances. But if we're not aware of how fear comes up in our own mind and heart, how it gets triggered, and we're not able to hang out with it—which fear is a hard one to hang out with—but we haven't had practice hanging out with it, then that's the seed for acting out of it. Get rid of those guys, because if they're gone then I don't have to be afraid.

So this isn't about judging other people, but looking and seeing in my own heart, in my own mind: what are the seeds that still show up? And they're little. It's not a judgment. That's the whole point I really want to make—this commitment to be interested, to see for ourselves. And then we see how naturally, and this is really what's so amazing, how the unwholesome habits, as I mentioned before, really do transform.

I want you to also notice not just the unwholesome habits, but how the wholesome ones are coming up. Not just the purity, but for instance, Greg talked about generosity the other night. The habit—and this is what the Buddha talks about—wise intention. The unwise intention of greed, of holding on, naturally transforms in the light of steady awareness, first to renunciation. Not the renunciation of "oh, good things, pleasant things are bad, put it down." That's called aversion. But a simplicity: okay, I don't need this. And then that transforms to generosity.

The renunciation and the generosity, the wholesome intentions—one way you can tell they're wholesome is because the state of mind and heart is expansive, even joyful. When I touch real renunciation, when the mind just puts down something, there's a sense of simplicity, of ease, of openness. It's not a sense of deprivation at all. And I'm sure Greg talked about generosity, and I know he told stories about the happiness that comes from giving. Really, if you're giving something and thinking, "Oh God, I've got to give this away, but I really wish I could keep it," it's not really generosity. But the sense of, wow, just the happiness that the open-handedness gives us—that's the purified intention, that's the wise intention. Notice it.

It's not feeding the ego to notice the wholesome. I know James has gone on about this a lot, so I don't have to go into it. But it's not feeding the ego to feel the happiness of generosity or the simplicity and ease and openness of renunciation. And in the same way, ill will transforms to friendliness, to mettā, and cruelty or harshness transforms to the wise intention of compassion.

I want to say just a little bit, because there's not much time, about those two, kind of mixing them together, how that happens.

Ill will or cruelty, the unwise intentions, obviously arise when we're in contact with something painful or difficult. The difficulty with compassion—someone mentioned it this morning—is when some really difficult, painful situation with someone else comes up and we feel pain, connected to that. Or difficulty in our own hearts and minds, and we beat ourselves up about it, thinking it shouldn't be there. That's cruelty.

Ill will, which transforms to mettā—ill will comes from really focusing on the unlovable over and over. Whereas mettā comes from the connection of really letting our attention fully connect with the being, starting by seeing the good, but then widening out to connect with them just as they are. Unwise attention to the repugnant aspect of a person or a thing breeds ill will. It's just cause and effect.

So our habit of mind that feeds ill will, the lack of mettā and compassion, is this "get me away from this." I

was sharing with somebody in an interview—Larry Rosenberg, who's really funny. He's a teacher in Cambridge, grew up in Brooklyn. He's like eighty now, hard to believe. Anyway, he used to watch a lot of old movies, and I remember him years ago saying—I have no idea if it's true, but he said it—that he'd read somewhere that they'd done some kind of study about what's the most frequent line in all movies. I mean, who has time to do studies like this? But anyway, one of the most frequent lines was: "Let's get out of here." And so, that's what ill will and cruelty, non-mettā, non-compassion is saying: let's get out of here.

Wisdom and mindfulness are saying, "Let's just be here for a moment."

As Joko Beck says, "Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?" That's just mindfulness. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? That's not the same as "How can I fix it? How can I make it go away? How can I feel better about it?" It's just: can I find the willingness to rest?

That's just the start. That's the start of mindfulness. It hasn't quite transformed yet, but actually it is transformed in that moment when there's the willingness to rest with full presence in the difficult situation. Ill will or cruelty are not arising. The sense of connection—which is really how I think of metta and compassion—is arising. That's a moment of friendliness, of acceptance. That's a moment of wisdom transforming the habit of mind.

If one can stay with that situation in this way of just resting there with awareness, and there is something that can be done to alleviate it, that will be seen more clearly when it's not distorted by fear, by ill will, by needing to fix it so I don't feel pain, or by just not being able to bear another's pain. Then we might jump in and try to help, and maybe we'll see clearly and help—and maybe not. Sometimes compassion is just the ability to be there when there's nothing we can do.

One of my favorite examples of this comes from the beginning of a long poem by Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous Russian poets of the 20th century. She lived in the Soviet Union through the whole period from before World War I, through the Communist Revolution, and all the terrors of the Stalinist regime where twenty million people were arrested and put into the gulag camps. She knew many people—her first husband, her son—who were arrested and imprisoned. She had originally been from a kind of aristocratic class, and many of her friends, when they saw what was coming, emigrated to live in France or Paris. But she made the decision not to leave, in order to bear witness to what was happening in her country.

This is the beginning of a long poem called *Requiem*, about the years from 1935 to 1940, the height of the Stalinist terror, when so many people were being arrested. She writes:

Not under the protection of foreign skies
or saving myself on wings of alien birth,
I was then there with my whole nation,

there where my nation, alas, was.

And then, instead of a preface, she writes: "In the awful days of the Yezhov Terror"—Yezhov was one of the heads of government under Stalin, and there was a period of a few years when they were indiscriminately arresting all kinds of people—"I passed seventeen months in the outer waiting line of the prison in Leningrad."

This was the line where anyone whose relatives had been arrested would wait. Their loved ones would simply be disappeared in the night, and they would go and wait in this line outside the prison, hoping to reach the authorities, to offer a care package, or even to find out where their relatives were. You'd go every day, every day, every day. She did this for seventeen months because her son had been arrested.

She continues: "Once"—she was already quite famous at this time; poetry was very celebrated then—"somebody identified me there, called me by name. Then a woman who was standing behind me in the line, who of course had never heard me called by name and so hadn't known who I was, awoke from her torpor—the torpor typical of all of us there—and asked me, whispering into my ear. We all spoke only in a whisper there. 'And can you describe this?' she asked me. And I answered, 'Yes, I can.' And then the weak shadow of a smile glided over that which had once been her face."

That just gives me chills—the power of compassion. Incredible courage. Incredible willingness to bear witness when you can't change it, when you can't fix it. If there is something to do, hopefully it will be clear, but if there's not, we still don't run away. This is the power of wisdom: not wishing things were different, but the willingness to rest in the dis-ease.

The Dalai Lama was once asked about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society. He said, "Perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state." In other words, we kind of trust it. "If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and trust to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger."

So it just starts by resting where we are. Resting where we are and really seeing how that begins to transform our intentions and our actions.

I'll end with this quotation from Martin Luther King, speaking to this clarity of intention. He says, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person—you refuse to hate him."

He was talking about the periods of the Freedom Rides and the bombings of the churches in Birmingham—horrible, violent stuff. And it's amazing that he could say this: "I have come to see even more that as we move on toward the goal of justice, hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter."

That's really the force of wisdom. It's possible. In just a moment, we can refuse to become bitter—if we have the willingness to keep showing up and watch, and the trust that if we just stay steady, the wisdom will transform this by itself. We don't have to figure it all out. We just have the willingness to hang out with it as it's going on.

Thank you for your attention. Let's sit quietly for a moment.

This is from the Buddha:

I do not see a single other thing so inclined to cause the arising of wholesome states not yet arisen, or if arisen, to cause wholesome states to further develop and increase, as right view. For one with right view, wholesome states not yet arisen do arise, and if arisen, wholesome states are inclined to further develop and increase.

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