Purifying Habits of Heart/Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:59

Tonight what I want to reflect a bit about is something that's been becoming more alive for me in the last few years, more like a realization about the way that everything the Buddha taught—as far as I can tell, all the different aspects that make up all the different teachings—all come from the same place, heading toward the same place of purifying the heart and mind from the habits of greed, of confusion, of delusion.

I want to talk about some different ways of that tonight, ways that you all know, that we all know. But sometimes, I know for me and in talking to people here on retreat, one can get so pulled into whatever technique you're trying to do, or whatever idea we have about nibbana or bust and how to get there. And if you can't do what you think is supposed to be happening, you go to some lesser practice, but it doesn't count because you're just marking time, not really heading for the big end.

What has really inspired me these last few years is that I feel once we start to understand the depth of how subtle and strong these habits of the torments are, but how in any particular moment they can be gone, and all the different ways of purifying—it stops being about retreat and it becomes so clear that everything we do in our life is part of this practice. Not that I pretend to be able in one talk to address everything we do in our life, but just to point in that direction.

So, what is this noble truth of the ending of suffering? It is the complete fading away and extinction of this craving. It's abandonment, liberation and detachment from it. The extinction of greed, the extinction of hate, the extinction of delusion. This indeed is called nibbana.

I bring that up because I want to use it as a kind of reference, a pointer tonight. There are different ways one can think about nibbana, all of which are essentially wrong and useless. But we have to talk—well, I have to talk, you have to listen. This way of looking at it I've found really helpful, rather than some state we're trying to construct the conditions to get to and then it's all okay for the rest of our life. It's the sense of a moment, or increasing moments, where greed, hatred, confusion is not present in that moment of consciousness, in that moment of citta. So it's not a state at all that we're trying to get to, but immediately, here and now—that's all there ever is. What's the quality in this moment of the mind, the heart?

As Buddhadasa says, nibbana is a natural condition. It's the cool state of mind without kilesa, without torments, defilements, whatever word you want to use. The fewer the defilements, the more coolness there is. So one way of talking about nibbana is like the complete extinction. But another way, which is accessible to us here and now, moment to moment, is to trust more, to recognize more the moments when the heart and mind is cool, when in that moment it is free from kilesa. Start to get a taste of that. Start to recognize it.

As Andy Olendzki puts it very succinctly, the mind is not a steady state; it's not a subject that has objects as contents. The mind is activity, the process of cognizing, a flow of events. The events are changing from moment to moment, the action of cognizing everything is changing from moment to moment. That's what makes freedom possible—the mind is changing from moment to moment.

So we can really recognize and explore both the moments when there is this coolness, when the heart-mind is free from the torments, and also the moments when it's not. Our whole life, our whole practice can become really not about hating the torments and trying to get somewhere else, but really getting interested in exploring: How do the torments arise? What is it like when they're not there? What feeds them? How do they starve? How do they work?

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, how do they do their job? We just want to explore. How does craving do its job? How does aversion do its job? How does metta do its job? None of it's personal.

So in any particular moment, cessation of clinging is available.

The next moment it may not be available anymore.

The Dalai Lama offers this profound insight: "When the mind is free of negative emotions and tendencies"—in other words, the three roots of confusion—"it understands and knows all phenomena. It is only because there are obscuring veils between the mind and its object that we are unable to know all things. Once these veils have been removed, no new power is needed. Seeing and being aware is the nature of the mind itself. As long as the mind exists, it has the ability to know, but this ability does not reveal itself until obscurations have been removed. This is what it means to attain enlightenment."

As far as I can tell, all the different things the Buddha talked about, all the ways of meditation practice—dana, sila, bhavana, all the aspects—are different methods, different conditions for recognizing when the heart-mind is obscured and cultivating a shift in those habits. Because they're just habits, right? Since the mind is changing every moment, the habits of greed, aversion, and delusion are really deeply rooted.

If you remember a few weeks ago when we talked about the sutta of the two darts, the habit of resistance to the unpleasant is so strong. Many of you have seen this—how immediately the mind craves the pleasant and ignores the neutral. Many of you have been noticing and talking about that. Often, then, there comes a sense of dismay: "Oh my gosh, there's so much aversion." It's usually framed as "I have so much aversion. I am so deluded. There's so much craving in my mind."

And we remind you: if the Buddha chose craving as the second noble truth, the cause of suffering, you're probably not the only one experiencing frequent moments of craving arising in the mind, right?

But what we're here to do is actually get really interested in exploring. There is a moment of craving—it doesn't mean it's a steady state. Mindfulness is, of course, always the first line of support for purifying. Just

the interest to notice craving, for example, is already a shift from identifying, from being lost in it. We've talked about that a lot.

All of these teachings, all the ways we live our life, give us different tools to help us recognize what habits are arising right now. And if they're torments leading to unwholesome thoughts, speech, and action, then there are all these different tools to help us strengthen the wholesome and starve these unwholesome habits. But the only way that can happen is not from aversion or clinging, but from this wise attitude, from interest, from really wanting to understand.

What I really want to encourage—really, this whole retreat I wanted to encourage—is to have that sense of not taking it personally when you notice how these torments are arising and how they might lead to thought, speech, and action. Because as soon as you take it personally, we're stuck, we're caught, we're feeding it. But when you start to just look at it and see—that's that step, that Tai Chi move, the way Ajahn Sumedho talks about—"Oh, it's like this." That can be the difference between night and day in beginning to explore, understand, and shift the way the habits of mind work.

For me, what it has taken is more and more understanding of this—less thinking I have to have a really good meditation and get to some special place, otherwise it's impossible, but starting to appreciate that from whatever space I'm in, whatever the quality of mind, if there are kleshas present, whether really concentrated or scattered all over the place, quiet and subtle as in retreat or in a really busy experience in life, there are tools available to really continue working to purify, to shift these habits.

It takes trust and interest, a sense of really understanding that this is about our whole life. There's not some piece of our life it's not about. And there's not some piece of our life where it's impossible to notice what's going on in our mind. Maybe not in the incredibly subtle way some of you are experiencing when you get quiet and can notice, for example, the seven factors of awakening and feel how they are, when they're balancing. Sometimes. And then that changes. Why does it change? Because every moment of mind is changing. It's always going to be that way. But that's a subtle kind of awareness.

Just walking through life, walking down a busy city street with all kinds of things happening and you're thinking about going to work and you're late—that doesn't matter. Just noticing the quality of mind right then, it doesn't take huge concentration, it doesn't take effort. It just takes remembering. Walking down the street, noticing rushing. Okay. How hard is that? Noticing rushing—you don't have to then get out your list and go, "Is that one of the kleshas? What do I do about it?" Right there, you're present with it. You can feel the imbalance of the rush. You just notice it.

That kind of noticing can follow us through our life more and more, and then we can begin to more consciously bring in any of the tools that arise for us. So first it's just getting really present, having some trust, having some interest, not taking it so personally.

For me, the more I practice, the more I respect the subtlety and the power of the habits of the torments.

But as Joseph always says, I'd rather see one arising in my mind-heart than not see it. Because not seeing it is when you really don't know how your mind works. Some of you have mentioned this—there was a question the other day about being really mindful and really careful, and all of a sudden you do something that's not careful. Or all of a sudden you've been really mindful. Someone told me—not this retreat—they were really mindful, not craving, really watching their eating, walking, they were in eight precepts, and walking past the table, really, really mindful, and all of a sudden their hands shot out and grabbed some orange and kept on going. Who did that? That wasn't me, you know. We don't know what's sitting down in there sometimes.

I've told this before, but this experience had a really deep effect on me in my life, in terms of once again deepening my respect for the power of the torments when we don't see them. But also, somehow, this really strengthened my faith, my confidence, my willingness to keep exploring no matter what. I don't know why that's how it worked, but I was in Munich one summer and went to visit Dachau, one of the concentration camps—I guess one of the smaller ones—just outside of Munich. I went by myself one afternoon.

It was set up in a really interesting way, like a museum. This is what I remember. It's been a while now, so I don't totally trust memory. If you go and find that's not how I said it was, that's just because memory is unreliable. But this is what I remember and the effect it had.

You go in the different rooms or the different barracks, and there were lots of big posters, notice boards describing different aspects of the people who were incarcerated there, of things that went on, of people outside—maybe the guards or the people in the village who brought in the bread, some of the doctors who worked in the place and did experiments, some of the people in the place who did wonderful things, some of the people who were incarcerated who did terrible things. And they would talk about it and then give examples, a photo of a real person, their little story. So it made it real.

And of course the vastness of it, knowing that's just one place, and the sense of—normal people. That's the thing. The people who were in the concentration camp, the people who were running it, all the villagers around, everyone who's involved in one way or another. It took away any kind of sense I could have of—we like to make up stories that it's all these bad, evil people who do the bad, evil stuff and everyone else, we're just good people. I would never act like that.

Walking through it, I thought, so many people. And that's just one country at one time. We don't have to go through the history of even the twentieth century—the amount of horrific things that human beings do to each other. Genocides and racism and wars and cultural cleansing, on and on. So many people, each individual person involved. All the people doing that can't be some kind of evil monsters. It's impossible. It's people.

Walking through it, what I really got for myself was this sense—and this is why it's strange that this was inspiring to me, but it was—this sense that I don't know, if I were in a position where my family were

threatened, or if I were threatened with torture, what I would do. I've never been in that situation. And so it helped me see that if I don't really know the quality in my own mind and heart, what's coming up in this moment—not how I think I'm going to be, or how I think I should be, or what my idea is of what's right—but if I don't know how to really be present with the suffering that comes in my mind, to really see, even in the little times, when the torments come up, when they don't, how to work with them, how to not feed them, how to move in another direction... If I don't really take that in as the work of my whole life, of every moment, who knows what I would do in a situation I could never imagine being in. Just those sudden moments.

So that somehow inspired me a lot. It keeps reminding me when I think, this is good enough. There's not so much craving right now, this feels good enough. Keep looking, Carol. Keep looking. It's maybe good enough in this moment, but good enough isn't completely liberated. But that's not trying to go somewhere else.

That's just looking right here. You never know.

I was listening to the public radio a couple of years ago. I came in in the middle of an interview, so I actually don't know who was speaking. But there were two men and they were discussing work that they were doing with young men in prisons in the States. Their work was called Interrupting Violence. All I heard was them quoting one of the young men in prison for life that they were working with. And he said, this young man, "I wish that I could take back that three to five seconds of my life when I reacted in this violent way" — a situation that completely ruined someone else's life and ruined his life.

To me, I still get chills at that: three to five seconds when we just lose it. And so if we don't really know our mind, if we don't know how to be with our mind, if we don't really take this seriously — and this is out of love for ourselves and the world, not out of fear, not out of aversion, but really out of recognizing that this is how we can bring freedom and compassion to our own heart and mind and to everyone we come in contact with in the world — we start right here, right now.

This is why there's so much emphasis on recognizing the presence of the torments. I don't really like the word "defilement." But I might keep using *kaleshas* — I like that. Greed, hatred, delusion. Recognizing their presence, recognizing how they act, recognizing their absence. Like I said at the beginning, it's equally, if even more important, to recognize just the simple moments when the heart and mind, as Buddhadasa said, is cool. Cool from the absence of *kalesha*.

Again, I'm paraphrasing Buddhadasa when he says that like everything, *kaleshas* are conditioned. They come together due to conditions, and anything that comes together goes apart when the conditions change. So a lot of what we're learning is what conditions give rise to the *kaleshas* in our experience, what conditions starve them. Certainly that's what we're doing in the meditation. And that's a major piece, but it's not the only piece.

So seeing how they do their job — this is really a profound aspiration. I just want to remind us, we need wise attitude to watch these. When we start falling into this sense of despair that there's so much, that these habits are so deep, that despair is simply another way that aversion is doing its job, making you feel like crap. That's its job. So then we just have to notice again. Notice again. You kind of pull up your socks and notice again. Don't let yourself fall into it. It's just the *kaleshas* obscuring, obscuring the radiant mind, the radiant heart. But that radiance is not gone, it's just obscured.

The more you notice even just little moments of coolness — moments when, whatever, you're sitting here and you're struggling with something or you're just bored or you're feeling your breath but nothing special, and suddenly there's no big deal. There's suddenly no big deal. I'm not talking about suddenly the lights go on and everything explodes and you're floating in *nibbāna*. I'm talking about there's just a moment of coolness, free from *kalesha*. No neon lights. You probably didn't have time to think "it's neutral and I'm bored." That's the next moment when it's gone. But the moment — oh yeah, it's just like this. Notice that. Not cling to it, that'll come next and then it's gone too. But notice, just notice it.

Because this is where the real *saddhā*, the confidence, the faith comes — that oh yes, this isn't some fairy story. The purity of heart and mind, that ease, that peace, that's actually, as Buddhadasa says, accessible in the moment. Just a moment of non-clinging, that's all it is. So noticing those, and that gives the faith to again notice when the clinging comes in.

I want to talk about three ways, called the three rounds of *kalesha*. Three aspects of our practice — by practice now I'm meaning our whole life — that we can work with. This is in the commentaries. These are three different levels of strength, of intensity, that these *kaleshas* show up in our mind, in our heart.

The first round is called the *kaleshas* of transgression. You can guess what that means. That greed or hatred or confusion is so strong that we speak and act from it. Actions of speech and body motivated by greed, hatred, confusion. And the protection from that, what helps to purify that, is *sīla*.

is our commitment to non-harming conduct, to restraint.

And I think, you know, we talk about the power of sila, the power of virtue, of non-harming conduct, and I think sometimes I hadn't always appreciated the purifying power of wholesome restraint. So when a kilesa comes up in your mind as thought and you don't speak from it, and you don't act from it, notice the wholesomeness of that rather than berating yourself for having had the kilesa arise. You say, "Oh no, I'm being so angry." But you didn't go yell at the person, did you? You kept your mouth shut. That's wholesome restraint. We hope you did. That's wholesome restraint. You didn't act on it. That's wholesome restraint.

This is really a huge protection. Not only protecting us, but the rest of the world, of course. But it's also—and this is the part I wanted to point out—it's also weakening at that time the power, the strength, the intensity of the kilesa. The more we practice wholesome restraint of speech and action, the easier it

gets, doesn't it? Have you noticed that? Because the power of that habit, that kilesa habit, is weakening. It's not as strong.

And sometimes, especially on retreat, we just notice that it keeps coming. We think it should—you know, I restrained already, it shouldn't come back anymore. And we don't really notice that it's weakening. So here is something kind of subtle, but it's great to explore.

And this isn't news, but just to say: of course when we act from unwholesome speech or action, we feel bad, the other person feels bad, and it feeds, it strengthens the habit of that kilesa in the mind to keep on going.

I was looking at some notes from a talk I gave a long time ago about something like this. And it was an example that I guess had just happened that week. It must have been a long time ago because it was about calling my parents, and they've been dead for quite a while. But anyway, I noticed I had felt aversion—some kind of anxiety, not like aversion to them, but worry, anxiety, negativity. And not with awareness. You know, when there's awareness of the kilesa, that's already our first protection. But this was without awareness.

So I called them up. The aversion, the anxiety was in my voice, was in the way I talked to them. So then they got all reactive and anxious and worried about their condition—it was a time when they weren't so healthy. So then in our dialogue, in our communication, since I was anxious and negative and then they got more anxious and negative, then I got more anxious and negative about them. Then we hung up. We were all more anxious and negative. And then I talked to my sister and I brought that into it. And the whole thing just kept spiraling, spiraling.

So this isn't like aggressive, horrible. This is still dosa. This is still aversion. And when we're not aware, it's just what happens when we act it out. It's contagious.

But you know what? Wholesome qualities of heart and mind, as we see, are also contagious, aren't they?

So just that sense of sometimes—you know, when teachers are all together, you probably hear what a racket it is in there in the staff dining room sometimes. I mean, there's so much noise and everyone's talking all at once and with a lot of energy. And I can get quite inspired when one of us starts to say something and then just stops. And you can see that was a wise speech moment. Oh, wise speech moment! And there's the tendency, "Oh, come on, say what you were going to say," you know. But it wasn't anything wholesome. And the sense of just stopping is inspiring. Seeing the restraint, just such a simple thing like that, is inspiring—never mind when we manifest non-harming, when we manifest even generosity or compassion.

So here, when you don't act out, that's really purifying the intensity.

Another way that I think I consider part of sila is non-acting, is restraint at the sense doors. So, for

example, many people talk about this.

When you're walking around and you see that you're comparing, right, the mana, and there's the seeing, and unpleasant feeling, and then the whole judgment comes up, and the negativity, and then you're negative back at yourself, and you've really been getting caught in it. But then you decide to bring restraint to the sense door. By restraint, I don't mean walking around blindfolded. Somebody did that here once, a friend years ago. He spent three days walking around here blindfolded when he was on retreat. That doesn't really solve anything, though it could have been interesting.

Restraint can be first that we just choose not to look around. Very simply, not out of fear, not out of negativity, but similar to wise speech, we just don't feed the seeing because the mindfulness isn't strong enough right now to just see it and not react. Or right at the seeing you bring sati-pañña, mindfulness and wisdom, right to the point of seeing. Seeing, just seeing is like this. But you have to have some mindfulness to do that. Sometimes if there's not enough, and the defilements of transgression are strong, you just have a feeling that if you see that person again you're going to go trip them. Then you just restrain at the sense doors. You don't look. That actually can be wholesome.

Not everything needs to be: "I'm so hopeless. I should be in Nibbana and instead I'm just trying not to push somebody." But you're making the choice. You're making the choice not to do that. Notice that. This is serious stuff.

Again, noticing the wholesomeness that comes from non-harming behavior, from restraining action. This is from the Buddha: "For a person endowed with virtue, with non-harming behavior, with sila, there is no need for an act of will: 'May freedom from remorse arise in me.' It is in the nature of things that freedom from remorse arises in a person endowed with virtue."

In other words, when we don't act on the kilesas, when there's a sense of restraint, you can actually feel and appreciate the wholesomeness of freedom from remorse. And it's important, just like with noticing the mind of non-clinging, to notice those moments of wholesomeness. It brings a real kind of freedom from remorse, a real kind of happiness, and a deeper confidence and trust in your own ability to continue to explore, to not have to be afraid when you notice the kilesas coming, but that you can really start to meet them with more strength, with more wisdom.

A friend and I once—I've used this story before too, but it was a funny thing—we were visiting Spirit Rock, or maybe I was teaching there, I don't know. But we went down to the bookstore, which if you've ever been there, has like seven million things in it: books and statues and jewelry and God knows what. You'd spend hours going through it. But I knew I wanted one particular little statue I had seen, and the friend I was with had sometimes done volunteer work in the bookstore. So she knew, because it wasn't on display—it's a help-yourself place, there's not someone serving you there—she knew where in the back room, in the big closets, which closet had statues and where I could find it.

So the two of us were opening the closet. And it's like, you know, floor to ceiling, row after row, hundreds of little statues. So we were piling through the thing, taking the ones out, because the one I wanted was in the back, small like this. As we were doing it, we each picked up a different statue, and they're made of some kind—I don't know what they're made out of—but I picked one up and it had a little sword and I barely touched it and the sword broke. I thought, uh-oh. And then my friend, like a second later, the same thing happened to her. She picked up another one, the sword broke, and we both looked at each other.

We went over this later. We just looked at each other. But we both had the thought go through each of our minds: we could put it back and no one would know. But it just went through, and neither of us had the slightest impulse to actually act on that thought at all. So, you know, we have to go take it to Marianne, we're going to have to pay for it. So we did, and we went to Marianne—she's our friend, but she runs the bookstore—and we were like two little bad schoolgirls: we broke the statues. And she just said, oh yeah, that happens all the time. We just glue it back together, sell it at half price, no problem.

We talked about it later, and we both felt so happy at that sense of confidence—the confidence that there was no way either of us would have the slightest inclination to actually act on that idea, that aversive or greedy thought or whatever it was.

So there's that sense of freedom from remorse, but also an appreciation of the confidence that comes from recognizing that the quality of greed—or whatever kilesa it might be—is getting less strong, a little more transparent, not so much running the show. It gives you confidence to keep on exploring in other aspects of your life. It's not personal, but it's really quite happiness-producing. So notice that. Notice not only the kilesas themselves, but their absence and the effect that has.

The second level is called obsessive torments. You can figure out what that one is, right? You've all been having a lot of fun with obsessive torments here. You're not acting out on greed or hatred or confusion, but the mind—you know what the mind is doing. "I am so useless. This is so horrible. That person is driving me crazy." I don't mean just thoughts that come and go, but you know when you're really spinning in a deep habit. And the suffering is obvious. I don't have to tell you. Whether it's self-judging or what I call vipassana vendetta—when you're just lost in thoughts of revenge and aversion, wondering what you can do, caught in self-hatred or greed. Greed can be incredibly painful. Have you noticed that? It can be so strong. These are called the obsessive torments, this spinning.

We're protected from that when there's unification, a collectedness in the mind—the samādhi. When the mind is sufficiently collected, the hindrances don't really get in. It truly feels like a protected space. Sally gave a whole talk about samādhi and shamatha, where you're really cultivating collectedness of mind. That's part of what is so beautiful and uplifting when the mind is really focused on one object—because it's so collected that greed, hatred, and confusion aren't really arising at that point. That's one of the ways we get drawn in and want to really have that. We think it's a great state, but notice the coolness, or just appreciate a moment of what the pure mind feels like.

But it doesn't only have to be with samatha, with one-pointed concentration. There's the whole khanika samādhi that we talk about, the moment-to-moment-to-moment practice. I don't want to repeat everything we've discussed, but the mindfulness is steady, and the collectedness, the steadiness of the mind, can become very stable. That's what Sayadaw U Pandita was referring to when he used to talk about vipassana jhānas. He was really talking about a level of stability in the observing mind that had the same quality of protection from the kilesas arising. You can be really, really steady with whatever's occurring—steady whether you're using noting or just moment-to-moment mindfulness. Whatever's occurring—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—it doesn't matter. Even if what you're noticing is an unpleasant thought and aversion starts to arise, the mind is so steady that it notices it and then the aversion just goes. There's no space for the kilesas to really get in at that time. It feels like real protection—temporary, conditioned—but genuine.

Again, though, we mustn't hold onto it. If our mind makes this a space we're supposed to get to because this is the place of safety, then we're missing the point. That's just a constructed space. It's useful, first to steady the mind, because when the mind is free from kilesas we can appreciate that coolness, come to understand how it feels, and trust it more. But we shouldn't hold on to a constructed state that is somehow going to protect us if we just stay there. That's not really how wisdom arises—that's how craving arises.

But the protectedness of samādhi, whichever way it manifests—in one-pointed concentration or in khanika samādhi—again, let yourself feel it. When there's steady noting and things are flowing steadily, we tend to get so focused on the object. But notice the quality in the mind that's observing. If you're noticing the seven factors of awakening, or any one of them, also notice that there's an absence of kilesas at that time. Familiarize yourself with this. Really trust it—that sense of purity or ease or however it feels. There are many different ways to experience it. It strengthens confidence. It helps us truly appreciate what's happening.

And then when craving comes in and we start to make this the thing we've got to aim for, the craving becomes all the more obvious.

And so then, if we're really having this commitment—great, I want to explore the absence of craving, the coolness—and now here's the craving, great, this is the thing to explore now. Honestly, I really mean that. I'm not just saying it. Okay, craving is like this. See how it behaves. See how it destroys the ability to recognize the radiant nature of mind.

Then the third aspect is called the latent. The latent torments, the kind of underlying tendency, is described as a seed that, if it's given the proper conditions to sprout, it will sprout. Like the example I gave of that person walking by being so mindful and then suddenly the hand reached out and grabbed. There was just that moment. Mindfulness went away, craving came up, boom, acted on it.

Quite a few people have described similar experiences. You're walking, you're really mindful, you're walking out of the hall, you're really present, you're really steady, you're noticing what's going on, you're starting towards your walking place, and then all of a sudden you find yourself rushing and almost

pushing somebody aside to get to your walking place. You go, wow. How did that happen? I was so mindful. Apparently not in that moment.

What are the conditions? You get interested rather than berating yourself. Mindfulness went away. There was a sight—somebody getting close to my walking place. Sudden craving came up and, unnoticed, in one second you're shoving somebody away and running down. Then you get there. Probably nobody noticed that for a moment, right? But this is what's called the latent. And that's there for all of us. But they only arise when the conditions come together to allow for the arising.

I just want to say, it doesn't mean that sitting down there in the middle of your chest there's all this gunk that's just sitting there and it's always there but you just don't see it, but it's really you down there. Not. Okay? Just given certain conditions, lack of mindfulness, pleasant—craving will come. Lack of mindfulness, unpleasant—aversion will come. But the more we're practicing with this, the less strong these habits get. Every moment of mindfulness is weakening the habit.

Latent greed, hatred, and delusion, the Buddha said, are abandoned not by acts, but by wisely seeing. Wisdom, paññā, is what really uproots the latent defilements. That is really the subtle level that we have the opportunity to explore here in a long retreat, one that is more accessible to us than perhaps in daily life—although it is accessible in daily life when we get familiar with it.

An example of how paññā uproots in the moment is really the same thing with, say, the seeing and the comparing and the unpleasant sight and the self-judgment, the aversion. When there's steady mindfulness, say, of concentration—you can be walking and you're really steadily noting, so there's the protection of the concentration. There could be walking, you're aware of seeing, you recognize unpleasant thought, you recognize comparing come, and the mindfulness keeps going on while the obsessive thoughts about it just don't start. Because there's so much steady mindfulness and concentration, it doesn't have room. But you have the sense that if you let up on the concentration and mindfulness, those thoughts would blossom real easy. You're not holding it out of fear. This is steady, but it's not uprooted.

Then there can be another moment—and this is paññā, the uprooting of the latent tendencies—and people have described this. The same scenario: you're walking, there's the seeing, the comparing starts, but there's enough... suddenly there's just wisdom in the mind. It doesn't go to aversion. And people have described this. Comparing. Everything's changing. What on earth? Who's comparing what to whom? It doesn't make any sense. And it's not an intellectual thing. It's a sudden seeing. It's like, wow, that doesn't make any sense. So the aversion makes no sense, the comparing makes no sense, and the whole thing just dissolves. Have you ever had that experience?

Yes, yes, you have. I know some of you have. But you may not recognize it. You're saying, "Oh, thank God," and then you think, "Well, that's okay. Done with that one." Now we're over māna, we're over conceit. No more comparing is going to happen.

That was a moment. But it's important in that moment to recognize it, because it really is gone in that moment.

Or when you're craving for something, going down to the walking place and you start to put... and suddenly it just doesn't matter where you walk. The craving doesn't make any sense at all. It's just creating suffering, and it simply vanishes in a moment.

That's how paññā, in the clear seeing—that's how wisdom sees how things really are in a moment when there's no kilesa in the mind. And then craving, aversion, comparing—it just doesn't make any sense. That's the abandonment that comes from wisdom. It's not some kind of rigid "I can't, I've got to shut everything out." The wisdom does the work. It's not an act of will, it's nothing personal.

But recognize and appreciate when there are moments like that. Because this is what will strengthen the confidence, the faith, that gives us the energy to come back and be mindful, be present in the next moment, even if it's a difficult moment. To show up again rather than thinking, "Oh no, I thought I had it and now it's over," and then wanting to give up.

Instead: "Right, I really saw how that moment of pure heart-mind worked. In that moment, kilesa doesn't make sense. Okay, let me see now. I'm wanting it back. Let's see how wanting is working in this moment." This really strengthens the wisdom factor.

These three work together. Sometimes the level of sīla is the place where we need to work—restrain at the sense doors because the kilesas are so strong. Great. And then that can lead to steady mindfulness, which can lead to wisdom, and then wisdom can strengthen the faith. And again, we might be back at the place where we're needing the sīla, but they circle around and support and strengthen each other.

I was talking with a friend about this the other day. When you start to feel, here four or five weeks into the retreat, and one particularly painful personal pattern is coming up that you've seen ten million times—you really know it—and you've gone through all these different phases I was describing, even including moments when you saw it clearly with wisdom and it went away, and now it's arising again, it can be easy to think, "All of this work and it's still here. How am I ever going to get rid of it?"

We notice this presence rather than noticing how the habit has been getting weaker, more purified through all these different aspects. Notice when you're now using sensory restraint instead of just feeding the seeing and getting lost in the reactivity—that you do that so much of the time that the whole pattern arises much less than it ever used to. Or when the anguish, the pain of it comes, instead of just getting lost in it, there's enough steadiness of mindfulness and concentration that your attention can really rest compassionately with the pain and be with that. And the practice keeps going on really steadily. And then there are times when it just starts in the mind—"Oh yeah, there's that obsessive thought"—and it just drops away.

It's important to notice that all of these are happening, that the pattern is, as one Tibetan teacher once

said, like having a piece of cloth that you keep washing and washing, and slowly it gets more transparent. First you can't see through it at all—it's just so solid, the pattern. But then you can start to see a little bit of shadow and light through it. You wash it, you wash it, you wash it. And then it's even more threadbare and you can start to see some forms. You wash it, you wash it, you wash it. And it starts to get some little holes and it gets more and more clear. And eventually—not soon, okay, not soon—but at some point it's just kind of holding together with little threads, and it's more and more clear.

So our job is to notice that purification process—not just keep focusing on "look at that thread, it's still there, it's still there, this is hopeless," without noticing how much it's actually been weakening.

When wisdom is not available—and there are times wisdom isn't available—all the other ways the Buddha taught are also ways to help us continue to shift the habits. This is from Ajahn Pasanno: "It is helpful to recognize the tendency that good qualities foster further good qualities, so that we can nurture the appropriate causes for the results we are seeking. Otherwise, we may want to experience the fruits of the practice before the ripening has fully taken place." Does that ring a bell? We don't know when the ripening has taken place, but we can look and see what's going on here and now in this mind, and then use the appropriate support for shifting the habit.

When we realize we're really blinded by ill will, when the aversion is too strong and we're drowning in it, that's when all these tools we've been talking about become supportive—not to run away, but to change the habit. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about when we're blinded by ill will or greed or confusion, before you start trying to fix the environment, recognize the quality of really strong kilesa in the mind, and then refresh the awareness. Change the channel. Bring your awareness to something neutral. It isn't helpful to drown in the difficult state—we've said this again and again.

You might bring attention to a neutral object. When you have pain in your knee and we say "go to hearing," it's because you're just getting lost in aversion. Refreshing the awareness isn't running away. But this applies in life too, not just on retreat. When you're too caught in aversion and notice the mind keeps going to the negative, use some of the tools—for example, what Jaya talked about the other night, where we consciously tune into the lovely. Not as running away, but refreshing the awareness so that we can shift the habit, purify in that moment the habit of aversion. When the mind becomes balanced, you can let go of looking to the lovely. You don't want to look at the lovely so much that it turns into total greed, running around only seeking pleasant. But it can be really useful.

This is one of the ways we practice the brahmavihāras—not as running away, thinking "there's aversion toward that person, let me send mettā." But when aversion or greed is just taking over, and you recognize that's happening, and you see that mindfulness isn't strong enough right now—it's not about sīla, you're not acting on it, but it's becoming obsessive—then you can change the channel to bring in one of the brahmavihāras, if that's possible.

Or in daily life, when we feel like we can hardly even touch meditation, what about practicing dāna,

which Ajahn Jaya talked about last night? This is a beautiful practice of purifying the heart, because it's about intention—not what you give, but the intention of joyfully opening the heart and mind from clinging, whether it's clinging to time, or an idea, or money. This intention of open-hearted sharing is an internal act of shifting, purifying the habit of greed into the openness of renunciation and generosity. It's a beautiful practice. I see it a lot in Burma—it's really embedded in much of the Buddhist culture there. And it brings a kind of happiness that's important to feel, to let yourself feel what that purification, that happy quality of mind, is like.

Working with patience, working with all of the pāramīs. There are times when you might call upon viriya, the pārami of energy. When you notice you're just slumping around with no energy and you couldn't care less, you think, "You know what, I could find a way to just bring up a little bit of energy." Not in a negative, pushing way, but in a way that shifts the habits toward the wholesome. We can really use all these tools in our life. Dāna—big. Sīla—big. Bhāvanā, especially using the brahmavihāras in our life when the concentration, the steadiness, and the wisdom aren't available.

One last thing I use a lot from the Tibetan tradition: sometimes just consciously shifting the attitude with which we're doing activities can really change the sense of the action. The way Mingyur Rinpoche talks about it, a conscious intention of wholesomeness can transform a neutral activity—or even an activity where we're feeling a little negative or like we have to do it—into wholesomeness, into generosity, into compassion.

When you're doing anything, washing yourself here, or doing your work meditation, if you catch yourself thinking "I've got to do this"—not even in a hurry, but just kind of blah, "I'm sick of doing this"—or you're at home brushing your teeth, thinking "brush my teeth again, sankhāra-dukkha, every day brush your teeth, wash your hands," and you can feel that subtle kilesa, shift the awareness, shift the intention. Mingyur would say, when you're washing your hands, think: "May this help to cleanse the hands and minds of all beings." When you're making food: "May this food serve to strengthen my body so that I may act for the benefit of all beings." Not as a should, but really changing from neutral or slightly negative or slightly greedy to wholesome. If you keep thinking of it and doing it, it really has quite a profound effect on shifting the habits, on purifying the habits.

The one example Mingyur gave that I like most is for sleeping.

So this is wonderful. You go to bed at night with the mind of bodhicitta, thinking: "May I aspire that my sleep may be the cause of increased capacity to help all beings attain enlightenment." Isn't that beautiful? You go to sleep and while you're sleeping—or just before you go to sleep—you're purifying your habits of mind simply by shifting the intention. It's a wonderful way to go through life. Not that I go through life like that all the time, but whenever I remember it, it makes one feel so happy. And that happiness is a sign of the wholesome. It really is how we affect all beings.

This working on purifying our habits in all aspects—whatever we're doing in our life, from the most subtle

wisdom practice to something quite broad, like simply holding an intention while you do the dishes: "May this be for the benefit of all beings"—it does somehow affect everyone we come in contact with. All the beauty and the suffering in the world, it starts in our own hearts, doesn't it?

I want to end with a quotation from Eleanor Roosevelt that I encountered in Atlanta. There's a relatively new museum, the Museum of Civil and Human Rights, which I was visiting last year with my family. It's quite a moving museum, because Atlanta was the heart of where Martin Luther King lived. The first two floors present a complete history of the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties, that entire period. It's really well done, very moving. And then on the top floor was the human rights section—a smaller part, but focused on different genocides and human rights abuses that have taken place and that are even taking place now.

I found this quotation from Eleanor Roosevelt there, and to me it applies so directly to this practice. It inspires me to continue to have that willingness to see what's going on in my mind and heart, to meet it with compassion when I can, with interest always, and with the confidence and trust that whatever tool is available to help purify, that's where we need to be. There's not some that's lesser and some that's better.

So from Eleanor Roosevelt: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person. And without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."

The world of the individual person. That's us, where it all starts.

Thank you for your patient attention.

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