Relaxation and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 42:25

I wanted to say a few things about the relaxing aspect of how we do this form of practice.

We've said it a few times, but I want to give a sense that this instruction about relaxing is much more than a superficial introductory thing to do, just so we're not striving in the beginning. It actually goes through many levels of how we're noticing how the mind and heart is working. In my experience, exploring what it truly means to relax with presence in the moment is really the entryway to wisdom—to cultivating and recognizing the quality of awake mind and heart that is free from clinging and free from resistance. So we're not just saying relax in a superficial way, go take naps. That's the beginning of it, but really it goes through many levels.

In the way we start with relaxing, what we've said is just, as you're sitting here, without really aiming the attention, just notice how the posture feels. Sensations in the hands. Hearings arising. There may or may not be meaning, but hearings arising. If there's meaning in thinking, that's just happening. Maybe you feel the way your knees feel, the butt on the cushion. Just whatever's naturally arising in this moment—physical, mental experience. The relaxing is this quality of simply being with just as it is, without resistance or clinging, without needing to explain what it means. Just this now. This is the relaxation of not being in contention with this moment's experience.

Of course, for many of us, as we know, we're meditating, we're sitting here meditating, so we are more aware of what's going on in the mind and body. It can be so easy or habitual for many of us to confuse awareness, presence, mindfulness, with really thinking we need to focus on the object, direct the attention, really see or feel the object clearly—that that's what meditation means. Just noticing when there's this extra effort, which is extra at this point, and it can so easily be overlooked. We're really focusing, trying to see more clearly, know what's happening, give it a name, see the beginning, see the end—all these things, these ideas we have in the back of the mind. And we might overlook the sense of stress, of strain, of exertion that can be arising moment to moment in the mind that's aware.

Rather than this focusing, this directing, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, when that's going on we don't recognize it in a subtle or not so subtle way. That focusing, that looking, that trying is very often driven by wanting—a form of greed. Wanting to see clearly. That little push is a form of greed. Or resistance. Too much thinking is happening. Too many thoughts. Really feel that sensation. Get in there. Resistance. Or trying to match a subtle view in the back of the mind: it should be clearer, I should be able to notice one object at a time. There's lots of thinking and it's all messed up, but there is actually awareness of thinking. But I should be able to pick out each thought. I should be able to stop them as soon as I'm aware. Noticing

that view in the background—unnoticed, it is delusion, trying to make it be a certain way.

So the relaxing isn't about trying to even make that tension stop. Relaxing is: oh, it's like this now. Tension is like this. "Oh good, I saw it, now it should stop"—wanting is like this. The relaxing is just the sense of meeting, just letting reality reveal itself in this moment just as it is.

If our habit is to go into the object, just explore receiving. Awareness receiving hearing, thinking, greed, wanting, confusion, spaced out, whatever. This quality of relaxing is really a moment of being fully present without contention with reality. It's a moment of beginning to recognize that quality in heart-mind when there's awareness not flavored with greed, hatred, or confusion. Not making a big deal of it, but that sense of relaxing—feel how it's different from the striving. We just keep exploring, letting it be. The striving, the wanting things to be different, is going to come up like ten million times, but it's simply another experience that awareness notices. Or not. And in the not noticing, at some point we start to feel some sense of dissonance, some struggle.

It's so easy in that sense of struggle to fall into our habit of thinking something's wrong, I've got to fix it. What am I doing wrong? It shouldn't be like this. Receptive awareness of the struggle: it feels like this. Using Ajahn Sumedho's way—I use it all the time.

Oh, it's like this now. Just opening into this moment.

As our sense of awareness and attention begins to trust this relaxing attitude, this receptive quality of awareness, you might find—you will find over time—that the meditation, and I don't mean just sitting, I mean everything through the day, can really start to be less of a chore. It becomes more interesting, because we're not trying to massage or direct our experience in some kind of way. We replace this trying to make something happen with the quality of interest. What's happening now? How's the mind working right now? Oh, look at that, it really wants things to be different. Oh, that's interesting.

And really, in going through the day, you start to find that this quality of coming back to awareness, remembering awareness, gets easier because the so-called meditation becomes less of a struggle. It's more a kind of interest, just seeing what's going on. How is the reality of the mind-body presenting itself? We're just interested and willing to show up, not trying to make it be different.

When we really start to trust this through the day, it's a huge relief. It's watching what's occurring rather than judging and assessing everything. For me, that quality of interest—I mean it's not always there, nothing's always there—but the quality of interest really comes from not being too identified with experience. So let's just really see what's going on. What qualities in the mind are bringing up suffering? What is the heart and mind like when things are at ease and calm and interested? Just noticing.

So we let interest do the work rather than our ideas, our wanting, our resistance. Some of you know, and some are learning, it can take a while to begin to trust this. So we're just exploring, playing with this now. This relaxation is a quality of really interested presence. As Byron Katie says, if you fight with reality, you

will lose. Just interested in how it is right now.

As Tejaniya says, we're not trying to make things turn out the way we want them to happen, to be happy. We're trying to know what is happening as it is in this moment. That's all. When we want this or that to happen, when we think things should be this way or that way, that is expectation, which gets us caught up in aversion, greed, confusion. So we just notice: it's like this now. Even expectation is like this now.

When we really start to trust this, it's so much easier. And this is the doorway to wisdom, to freedom. When we recognize moment to moment the way reality really is, these delusions of self and needing to fix and greed and aversion don't arise in those moments because they don't make sense. It's not an act of personal will. And that is a huge relief when we start to trust it. You don't have to figure it all out. In fact, we can't. You don't have to make the right thing happen. There's not a right thing. And whatever we think it is, it just gets us all messed up anyway.

That's it right now. What's being received in awareness? What's the quality in the mind that's meeting it? Just now. That's all.

One skillful means we do employ from time to time is really about taking care, refreshing the awareness, not letting the awareness get overwhelmed with greed or resistance. This is for when something's occurring and there's awareness of it, but it's just so difficult, so painful—physical or emotional—or some really pleasant fantasy so strong that even as you're being with it, the resistance, the aversion, or the greed is so much stronger than the awareness. You're just in a fight.

More useful then to make the choice to consciously switch the attention to something more neutral, simple and neutral. That could be hearing, or a neutral sensation, or opening the eyes and just seeing. And it's not so much about the object, but about noticing that we can begin to again recognize the receptive, non-reactive quality of awareness. And then if the difficult experience again calls, fine. Awareness is a bit fresher meeting it again.

So we do employ skillful means, but it's not to get rid of the experience or make it be a certain way. It's always about the quality of refreshing the mind that's aware, bringing it back into presence.

Thank you for listening.

To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

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