Awareness and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 50:11

Sometimes I go through periods when the things happening in the world, the news, just seem to hit me harder than usual, overwhelming me for whatever conditions are present. There's always something happening, but the cycle of fear and hatred and violence, fear and hatred and violence—the big picture we see and the small individual picture—sometimes I can feel quite overwhelmed by it. I imagine I'm not the only one.

The last few weeks were a time like that for me. Occasionally, when I'll be coming on retreat during one of those times, my mind will engage in samsara questioning: How can this commitment, this practice of steady awareness leading to wisdom, possibly match and counter the force of delusion, hatred, fear, and anger in the world? How can it possibly be met? Not whether it's useful, but how can it possibly be stronger?

Actually, in a way, I kind of like it when these questions come up for me because then I take a deeper look. I really reaffirm in my own experience, in my own mind and heart, the power of the awakening heart and mind, the power of the wisdom, the clear seeing that arises from this practice of steady awareness.

What I appreciate about re-recognizing—not rediscovering, it didn't go away—is that this force of truly understanding things as they are, not just intellectually but kinesthetically in our gut, is the power that really transforms our own hearts and minds. I like that I keep reconnecting with that rather than just assuming. Assuming is never the way of awakening. What's happening right now? Look and see. Look and see for myself. Look and see for ourselves. Is this a path? Is this a practice that's actually leading to less pain and suffering and hatred and fear and anger in your own heart and mind? Because that's the place where this practice works.

One of my favorite quotations is from Maha Ghosananda, a wonderful Cambodian monk and peace activist. He was speaking at a conference in D.C. about landmines—you know, there are landmines sprinkled all over the world, many in his home country of Cambodia from the time of the Khmer Rouge. He said that all of the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts. To understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to remove them in the world.

To me, that's one way of saying the essence of the Buddha's teaching, certainly what we can undo, explore, and come to see. This isn't about believing it intellectually—you can think all kinds of things. It's really looking and seeing: What are the landmines in my heart? How are they created on a moment-to-moment basis? How are they dissolved on a moment-to-moment basis?

As Maha Ghosananda said, through understanding, landmines in our hearts are dissolved. Through understanding—not through willpower, not through hating and digging them out, not through saying, "Okay, that's it, I'm never going to be angry again." Have you ever tried that? Does it work? It would be good if it did, but it doesn't.

This is what I want to talk about tonight: how amazing the power of this simple, receptive, moment-to-moment awareness is—awareness that seems like so nothing. The way Alexis was talking about it this morning: just notice you're seeing. Notice I'm seeing? Go around all day noticing I'm seeing and this is going to liberate my heart and mind from suffering? I don't know about that.

But luckily, here you are with nothing else to do. We make it that way on purpose, really, because if you had anything else to do, if you don't have a trust built from your own experience in this, you'd go do the other thing. I'm sure you've tried many things today, most of which probably weren't that interesting—for a while. When you're reading the ingredients on the toilet cleaner, you know you're sinking.

Just notice reading. That's all you have to do. Just notice reading. Wanting. Incredible boredom. That's awareness. That's awareness.

You can't get away from it.

But the Buddha, in his awakening, was speaking about the wisdom, the understanding that frees our hearts and minds. It may seem that this practice is a turning away from all the conflicts, all the difficulties, all the pain in the world. Certainly, as we come to a secluded, supported, relatively safe place like this, we are very privileged to be able to be here. That's not a put-down—it's something we can genuinely appreciate.

But as you see, as we were saying last night and perhaps this morning as well, all the ups and downs of life are going to happen here. Each of us, even though our personal, familial, and cultural histories may be different, each of us is a microcosm of the human condition. And so what we see in the world—this seeming cycle of confusion and fear and violence and hatred—there's also a lot of goodness. It doesn't get as much airplay, but you can find it if you look. We're a microcosm of that.

What we are setting up in a retreat, in our whole life of awareness practice—the Buddha is saying that what he's offering us isn't an escape from the facts of the world, or from connection with people, or from relationships. He's saying that what frees our hearts and minds from suffering is understanding things as they actually are.

The Buddhist path begins and ends with wise understanding, or right view. The first step of the Eightfold Noble Path is right view, but then it's really more like a circle. You move through *sīla*, appropriate non-harming behavior, through meditation, cultivating energy and mindfulness and collectedness of mind, and then it comes back around again to right understanding and right intention. It keeps deepening and spiraling.

What I love about the translation "right view" is that in a way I find it very literal. Viewing, recognizing our experience accurately—as opposed to our ideas and assumptions about what's happening—is actually what frees the heart and mind. The wisdom that arises from accurate recognition is what frees us from the suffering and confusion brought about by the habits of reaction. We're reacting to something we're not even recognizing accurately, so we respond in ways that are inappropriate.

The Buddha, in his awakening, when he came to understand and free the heart and mind, awoke and lived in the same world. So if we're waiting for the bolt of lightning—there was a lot last night. Did it do it? No, here we all still are. If we're waiting for the bolt of lightning to take us into an alternate universe of happiness and freedom, give it up. There's not an alternate. Maybe there is, I don't know. I have a friend who's going on about black holes, showing me pictures and trying to explain them. Maybe there is an alternate universe if you go through a black hole. I have no clue. But that's not what the Buddha is offering us. We don't have to do that. He woke up in the same world. But recognizing it accurately—that's what changed.

So when we understand the landmines in our own heart, that understanding, that accurate recognition, is the wisdom that allows for the habits of mind to release from responding with anger, with hatred, with greed, with self-judgment. This is the liberation of heart-mind that the Buddha's teachings offer us.

Remember, I read from the Dalai Lama the other night: so much of our unhappiness originates within our own minds and hearts, in how we react to the events in our life. That's very much to the point. The suffering the Buddha is talking about, that we can explore here on retreat—even if it seems small, or you might even say insignificant if you want to put yourself down—but it's not helpful to call your suffering insignificant compared to that in the world. The mechanism is the same.

This is what we can truly understand: that the suffering which arises from this moment in our own mind and heart, from how we're perceiving and responding to experience—the suffering arises in this moment. And the freedom from it, the dissolution of the suffering, the compassion and the wisdom, also arises in this moment, in this mind and heart.

The suffering is not because circumstances are as they are. And awakening from suffering doesn't change all the circumstances externally. It's not going to. But it does affect a complete change in how we understand and how we respond, both internally and externally.

We can't simply decide that from now on we're not going to act out of anger. To some extent we can, and that's where the precepts are helpful. We come up against certain strong impulses toward harmful action. Even then, sometimes the energy of anger or greed can be too strong. But often the precepts will bring us up against a wall, and we see what's going on in the heart and mind. "Oh, I don't want to do that." That's great. It's as if the precept is letting wisdom come in and say, "Oh, that's a harmful thing—don't do it."

But the anger might still be arising, right? Yet it's not just about external action—it's also this wisdom of

accurate recognition. And that's all it is. Accurate recognition really changes the heart and mind.

As Martin Luther King said, in talking about nonviolence, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. We not only refuse to shoot a person, we refuse to hate them." That's really the internal place that all of our practice is bringing us into, again and again, moment after moment.

Because just thinking about it, without the experience of really recognizing things as they are—in my mind, it can be easy to think that when these horrible things happen, of course the normal response is anger, fear. Well, that is the normal response. That's the habitual response. But is that the right and appropriate response? What else could be possible?

And then there's someone like Dr. King. Or actually, I was quite inspired a couple of weeks ago. I was listening to the BBC, and they were interviewing people a day or two after all those people in New Zealand were killed in the mosque. I don't know how they do it—they go and interview people who survived it, like the next day. I don't know how you can do that. But anyway, it was very inspiring because they were talking to a man. It seemed like he was an elderly man who had been in the mosque with his wife. And his wife died in the attack and he didn't. They described him in a wheelchair—she had been his caretaker. And they were talking to him maybe two days after his wife had died.

You could hear him talking. He just sounded amazing. He said, "We are one people." And he didn't mean just the people who were worshiping in the mosque. He meant everyone. It may have been just New Zealand or it may have been the world, I don't know. But he wasn't just talking about the people in the mosque. He said, "We're one people." And he said, "Perhaps someone who acts like this, like the killer, is hoping that there will be retaliatory violence from Muslims." But he said, as far as he's concerned, that's not going to happen. "We are one people. We need to change within ourselves to be able to live together."

How can someone have that depth of clarity and connectedness to be able to respond in that way? It's possible. This is really very inspiring to me. It's possible. And this is, you know, one person, one person, one person. It doesn't end all the hatred, but this is where we're starting. This is really what the Buddha is offering us: the same world, recognized differently.

Starting from our own experience, really with interest—look and see what's going on. It's so elegant. When we recognize accurately—

all of the responses of confusion or wanting or whatever—they don't make sense anymore. So they just drop away.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. It's very simple, one I've been using a lot recently, because it's simple but it really illustrates how this works. It's about my young nephew when he was really young, when he was two or three. Now he's old—he's five. Just watching how kids learn, you know.

This is a simple example with those old toys where they have a box with wooden blocks in the shape of circle, square, triangle. And then you have a big wooden box with holes cut in those shapes. The kids just learn to put the blocks in. We say it's not rocket science. But first a kid, you know, you show them and it looks so easy. So they think they can just pick up the block and put it in. But he's not differentiating circle from square from triangle. So he's trying to put the circle in the triangle and it doesn't go. He tries again to put the triangle in the square—it doesn't go.

Different kids based on personality respond differently. But I could see the sense of confusion leading to frustration, leading to a kind of antsiness. If it was an adult trying to do it, the thoughts could be things like, "What's wrong with me?" Turning the frustration inward. "It looks so easy for them. What's the matter with me that I can't do it?" Or more like, "There's a secret the adults aren't telling me. What is it?" And you can just see the frustration building. It doesn't work, it doesn't work, until you just want to throw the thing against the wall and go do something else.

But keep trying and all of a sudden something clicks. The triangle goes in the triangle. And it's like, "Ah, that just seemed like an accident." But all of a sudden something clicks and they see the shapes and they see how it works and it's just normal. It's just a law of nature. It's not like they suddenly had this brilliant change. It's just seeing, "Oh, that's how it works."

And all the frustration goes away, because it doesn't make any sense. It doesn't relate to the actual experience at all. The sense of "I'm stupid" or "they're not letting me know what's going on"—all of that's gone. Okay, yeah, you put the triangle in the triangle. That's just the law of nature, like gravity. And so you stop trying to put the triangle in the circle because that doesn't make any sense. And then, of course, you get bored and move on to something else—but that's extra.

You get a sense of what I mean. That's what we're talking about with right view. That's insight. Oh, it's like that. All my excitement and upsetness and thinking I've got to get angry—that's just because it doesn't relate. This is how it is.

This is the right view that the Buddha is offering us. When we recognize ourselves as we are, moment to moment. Not a big concept, but what's happening right now in this moment? What's actually happening? Not what I think is happening or how I think it ought to be or how my breath ought to be or how it ought to feel if I'm aware every moment—just what's happening now. Oh, sitting, reading the toilet cleaner, boredom. That's what's happening just right here, right now. And you know what? In that moment of awareness, just resting in it, it's totally okay.

You're thinking, "Yeah, right." But no, it's totally okay. In that moment: "Oh, this is what it is now." And all the wanting and the comparing and the looking for something else just drops away. We see that what was making the problem isn't that the experience isn't giving us enough—it's that the heart, the mind, the consciousness in that moment is so covered over, distorted by wanting it to be different, by trying to make something happen, by comparing to some feeling we had in the past. And we're not even recognizing that

this is going on as a kind of overlay upon simply just being here in this moment, fully present with things as they are.

So this beginning to explore what's really going on is the power of this simple, steady, moment-to-moment awareness—mindfulness.

Mingyur Rinpoche said once that if we want to be happy, we need to recognize what causes and conditions lead to well-being. And similarly, if we do not have a clear understanding of the conditions that create suffering, how can we possibly expect to be free from it, to free ourselves from it?

The understanding he's talking about here, again, is not thinking, "Oh, what do I need to make me happy? Let's see—if my body didn't hurt and if I had a new car and I had a better job and there was peace in the world, then I would be happy. Or if at least I could go to bed early, I would be happy." Those are just ideas. Just ideas. The understanding he's talking about is the simple, clear, and accurate perception, recognition of what's happening now—not being in contention with reality. That's mindfulness.

One definition of vipassana meditation, I think this is from U Tejaniya: vipassana meditation is experiencing the mind and body directly from moment to moment with the right understanding. Does that sound familiar, like what we were exploring today? Experiencing the mind and body directly means just this simple awareness, relaxing into experience, just being here with it. Directly—not through the veil of how we think it ought to be, or how it was yesterday, or whatever I like or I don't like. Oh, it's just like this now. It's just like this now. Just feeling the sensations, just noticing seeing is happening.

It seems so simple, so nothing. But the steadiness of this—and it's the steadiness that's the key—starts to reveal just how life is working, the cause and effect of how things are happening. We start to recognize for ourselves.

If all it takes to really feel some liberation from the landmines in our hearts, to be present in a moment of life fully, without feeling in contention, without feeling self-judgment, without it being such a struggle, without needing it to be other—if it's so simple that all we have to do is just recognize what's occurring, why is it so hard?

Because it's simple. And it's really difficult, isn't it? Difficult not in the sense of you have to try harder. Because trying harder... trying harder generally means a sense of wanting to have a certain thing happen or wanting to have a certain thing stop happening. So we try harder. Wanting, wanting, wanting. Get away, get away—I'm trying harder. Aversion, aversion. This is exactly what blocks and obstructs our resting at ease with clear awareness. It's what obstructs accurate recognition. It's what obstructs really awakening.

Not that wanting can't arise, not that aversion can't. It can arise, it can be recognized. But unrecognized—that's really where we get into all these reactions. Like the young child throwing blocks across the room. Really, the frustration and the aversion is unrecognized, and that's what's cultivating the

response. That's what keeps us confused, what keeps us from recognizing what's happening.

From the Buddha: "This liberation, this nibbana, is visible here and now." To what extent is it visible here and now? To the extent that greed, that hatred or fear, that confusion are not present in the heart-mind, are not clouding, are not obstructing our clear presence. When we don't recognize these states, they run the show.

And you can be trying really sincerely, with full effort. And you're mindful of what's happening. You're walking. Let's take walking. As I think Mark said this morning, you can be walking and feeling every single sensation—sixty sensations in the lifting of your foot. That can be done with wisdom, or it can be done with incredible wanting and striving and pushing. You feel mindful because you're present, but what's being missed—the elephant in the room—is how much wanting and forcing is going into that. At the end of a period of walking, you feel like your whole body is just going to break in two. Sometimes I'll notice my tongue is glued to the roof of my mouth.

I feel the sensations, I'm present. What's the problem? But oh, there's a little wanting going on here, not quite noticed—the attitude in the mind.

As the Buddha said, when the heart-mind, the citta, is filled with or obsessed with wanting, greed, or aversion, or ill will, and we don't recognize it, we can't see our own good or the good of another or the good of both. We can't recognize accurately.

And so it's not—we think, "Okay, I'm going to really get rid of greed," and we start hating greed. That's not really the point. It's more like looking and seeing: how does it work? Greed is just another aspect of nature. It's a habit that's been cultivated in the heart-mind. It makes sense. This is pleasant, let me get more of it, because that's the avenue to happiness—that's what we've learned. It's just cause and effect. This is unpleasant, let me get away from it, because it's miserable to be with the unpleasant. Who wants to be with pain? If you can get away, of course you should. But that aversion part is extra. We don't recognize that, and so it distorts. We don't quite know what's going on.

There's a funny, simple example of how that works. I think it was from Andrea Levine. She spoke about how you can't trust your mind—you can't trust your perceptions when they're distorted by greed or aversion. If you can recognize it, that helps. So she gave a simple example: You're eating a big piece of chocolate cake, and there's another big piece, and your mind goes, "Come on, have another piece. It'll be really pleasant. You'll really like it. It's good for you. Have another piece. You deserve it." So you eat the other piece, at which point you're not feeling so well, and your mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you." We think it's the same mind, but that's what craving does—it tells us it's going to make us so happy. So you just can't trust it.

We need to start recognizing that these mental qualities are just habits, forces of nature. We're just nature like everything else. When they're present and unrecognized, they keep us spinning in confusion. It can

really start from just a little "I don't like that sound," all the way up to being caught in rage or fear or terror. It can go really quickly.

And the greed and the aversion—this not wanting to be with what's happening, wanting it to be better—the strongest or most familiar cloud of delusion, the way they show up, is that sense of it all being about me. I don't know if you can relate to this at all, but just the sense of taking whatever's occurring personally.

And that can be just noticing this. Don't take it personally that you take it personally. It's like, "Oh no, I'm doing it again." That's another habit of mind. The thing with steady awareness—remember, awareness isn't picking and choosing. "This is okay to pay attention to. Oh, this is ugly, I don't want to see how much I'm identifying with stuff. So let's pretend it's not happening. All beings, may all beings be happy." No, no, no. Just see what's really happening. Awareness is just interested.

And watching how it all works—that's where the wisdom and the freedom come in. So watching how this sense of taking it personally arises and what the effect of it is, just in small things.

What do I mean by that? Just the sense of, as we're going through the day, there are all these things happening. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, all the different physical sensations. And how many thoughts and moods and emotions and images have come in this day? Millions. Every moment something's arising. I'm really pretty sure—I'd say I'm one hundred percent sure—your mind didn't take every single one of those personally, because it would really be unbearable. Unbearable.

Because when we take it personally, it either is me, or it's mine, or it's happening to me, it's doing it to me. The whole world comes to be about me, and it really just shrinks everything.

So, for example, there's a sound that's unpleasant and it's occurring over and over. That's just what's happening. But when there's that sense of "that sound is affecting my practice, that sound is upsetting me"—then immediately the mind either goes into "I should be able to just be equanimous with it" and gets negative toward oneself, or it goes into "This is a meditation center. They should be a little more in control. Their heat shouldn't make noise. The lightning shouldn't come. The rain—they should have fixed the gutters ages ago so that we wouldn't have to sit in the meditation hall and listen to all this noise. What's the matter with them?"

And it can go on and on. If you're here on a three-month retreat, sometimes we used to have these wars over the windows. How much are they open? How much are they closed? It's just endless. But that's all about me. I shouldn't be hot. I shouldn't be cold. They should make it better. It just complicates everything.

And we really believe that story. It shouldn't be. How can they fix it? It's their fault. It's my fault. How can I get more? And we don't even recognize it. We get completely entranced by the reactions of mind. At some point, we're not even noticing it's an unpleasant sound anymore. We're way down the road—I mean, it might be literally way down the road—but you're way down the road of "how can it be fixed, what's the

matter with them, I should have gone to this other place," whatever it is. And seeing how it shrinks our world.

This is from the Dalai Lama. Because we're paying attention, the steady awareness is really being with our own experience all day, we really are giving a huge amount of attention to seemingly me. So of course we're going to be noticing how much the sense of me taking it personally comes up. But keep watching. Keep watching. Don't stop watching.

The Dalai Lama: "The paradox is that although the drive behind excessive self-focus is to seek greater happiness for yourself, it can end up doing exactly the opposite. When you focus too much on yourself, you become disconnected and alienated from others. In the end, you also become alienated from yourself. With too much self-focus, your vision can become narrow. And with this, even a small problem appears out of proportion and unbalanced."

Maybe you haven't been here long enough to experience this, but there is a phenomenon that occurs on retreat—and occurs off retreat too, but I'm talking about on retreat—that we call "yogi mind." Around day two, day three, it starts to happen.

It's normal, this sense of taking things personally. Something pleasant or unpleasant, a small thing, gets really exaggerated. It becomes so important that you find yourself needing to write a note to the cooks with this incredible vehemence.

I got a note once when I was a cook here long ago. It said, "If I never see another wheat berry for the rest of my life, that would be for the good of all beings." And it was signed "Mettā." These notes are always signed "Mettā." And I believe the people who write them really think, "I am writing this for the good of all beings. If you ever serve this again, I won't be responsible for the other yogis' mind states." Actually, a teacher said that to us once: "If this is served again, I won't be responsible for the mind states of the yogis out there."

Or you burst into the office demanding, "Don't you have this particular kind of cold care in the yogi needs closet?" with this incredible vehemence. We call that yogi mind. The world is shrinking, and it becomes all about me. Whatever's occurring is all about me.

Joseph Goldstein tells a great story—simple but great—about how this works. He was on a retreat, in line for the meal, maybe second in line. Big pots of soup with the covers still on. The person ahead of him took the cover off and dropped it. You can imagine the racket it made, everyone looking. And he says his first thought was, "It wasn't me." You want to stand aside and announce, "What's with me?" That's what our minds do when the world shrinks like this. That's what happens with this sense of taking things personally. And that, again, serves to strengthen the habits of fear and aversion and greed, because we think that's what makes us happy.

We'll talk more about how these patterns work in the coming days. But here's the thing: you don't have to

try to get rid of any of this. This is the beauty, the simplicity, of simple moment-to-moment receptive awareness. Because if you heard Alexis this morning, we're not trying to make anything happen. We're not trying to get rid of anything that's happening. We're just trying to see, to be with this moment's experience as it is. Let life reveal itself. Let life tell its own story in the light of this simple, steady, moment-to-moment presence.

It's so much less we have to do than trying to fix. How can we fix? We don't even know what's happening in the first place, and then we're trying to fix it to match some cockamamie idea we come up with.

Basically, bottom line—maybe I'm wrong, and you'll look and see for yourself—but generally, if you're trying to fix it, you want it to be more pleasant. Just look and see. Don't believe me, but look and see. When you think of being free from suffering, does that include any more unpleasant experience? No, right?

We were just talking today about suttas where the Buddha starts to give a talk, then turns to Ānanda or Sāriputta and says, "My back is hurting. You finish the talk—I'm going to go lie down." Did you ever think of the Buddha having a backache? He had a body, right? The body keeps doing its thing. It doesn't stop. That's not the suffering the Buddha can free us from. The body is still going to grow and decay and get sick. Things are still going to happen in the world.

So if we're trying to get in here and fix our experience, if we're using awareness practice to try to make our experience better—well, in my experience, that agenda keeps slipping in more and more subtly. Don't blame yourself when you notice it. Just check: "I'm being with what is." Is there tension? Is there struggle? Check it. "I'm being with what is... but it would be a little better if it was like that."

Once I was practicing in Burma, having been there quite a long time, doing walking meditation. I was just being present, aware, and it was fine. Awareness was pretty natural, easy, nothing spectacular. But I noticed this little niggling sense, a subtle feeling of struggle or something.

Sometimes it's helpful to take a moment and actually see what's the thought, what's the expectation lurking in the back of the mind. Sometimes it's helpful to bring it up into the light of day, because when you see it, you go, "Oh." This one was: "It could be better." That was the thought. Just a little bit of striving, pushing—it could be better. What could be better? I don't know. I didn't know. It. Something could be better. Walking up and down could be better. Really?

But without recognizing that, there's wanting. It's wanting, it's like this now. Because what we're developing, what we're cultivating, what we're coming to trust—this refuge—is the simplicity and totality of receptive awareness. It's like this, whatever's occurring. The seeing, hearing, smelling, thoughts, thinking, whatever's happening—that's the catalyst to re-recognize awareness. Any moment, whatever's occurring, knowing it's happening: here's the awareness again.

This starts to become more interesting, more enlivening than deriving our sense of happiness, unhappiness, and personal meaning from whatever particular experience is arising. Notice how much we

might think, "Oh, it's going well now because my body's not hurting and I'm really enjoying this food," or whatever it is. Or, "It's really going badly now—there's this sound and there's aversion and there's a tingling and people are moving." But there's actually really steady awareness. That's fine.

The steady awareness, this mindful awareness, the simplicity and honesty of that—just relaxing into whatever's presenting itself due to causes and conditions. We never know what's going to arise in experience in the next moment, do we? You can plan it all out, but we sit down and you never know what's going to arise in the next moment of a sitting. Do you? I love it when I've been on retreat long enough that I sit down and it's like, "Okay, what happens next?"

Our whole life is like that. It's not just a sitting. Whenever you stand up thinking, "I'm going to go walk," and the next thing you know you're sitting in the dining room drinking tea. How did this happen? I thought I was going to walk. Awareness kind of took a holiday and didn't notice all the different motivations coming and going.

All we want to do is just relax into this moment with the simplicity and honesty of awareness, and let life tell its own story. It's so much easier than what we can imagine. But the awareness, the sense of awareness—it's nothing fancy going on. It's almost ephemeral. But like when Alexis asked, "Are you aware of seeing or not?" and you could know you were aware of seeing after he said it—that difference between seeing and not being aware of it and being aware of it is palpable, but really subtle. It's like almost nothing, but it's something.

How do we trust that enough that it can actually be the condition that leads to the wisdom that transforms our understanding of ourselves and of life? That really transforms the habits of our heart and mind from confusion and self-interest and fear and greed to wisdom and compassion. That allows us—like that man in the wheelchair in New Zealand, whatever his natural response—to actually be able, in a moment, to have a sense of more of the connectedness of all of us and not just our own particular story.

The effect of living in this fullness of awareness, just being with what's happening in the heart-mind in this moment, is really the condition that leads to liberating wisdom.

I want to share an experience with a friend I was visiting a couple of years ago. She's an elderly woman in her nineties, a very long-term and deeply serious practitioner with a great deal of wisdom. Her life had been extremely rich and varied and full, all kinds of experiences. But now the body was frail. The mind was still clear, but the body was frail, and she was living in assisted living. Her life had become extremely confined—maybe she could go out of the facility once in a while if her daughter took her, but mostly she stayed in the apartment.

And she said—we were just visiting, she'd been a really deep Dharma practitioner for years—she said, "You know, this is the most interesting time of my life."

I said, "Really? How so?"

She said, "Well, it's just like when I'm walking across the room to go put the tea kettle on. That's everything." She didn't say it this way, but she's so present. Walking across the room, that's all of life right here. There's nothing else. It's so alive. "And when I'm pouring water into the tea kettle, it's just so interesting. It's just all of life right here."

And this wasn't an intellectual thing. This was a deep message from her heart. I could see it's really all of life in that moment, so present in that moment. It's not about the activity that's making her feel interested and alive. It's the quality of the pure heart and mind that isn't lost in stories of me—that in that moment isn't distorted by wanting things different or thinking it could be better. It's just total wakefulness. There's a quality of purity, you could say, in the heart-mind, just not clouded by these confusions.

And it doesn't take some incredible thing in life to be alive and interesting. It's the quality of present moment awareness. Steady, steady, steady. This is really what our practice is.

And just let the knowing, let the wisdom arise by itself. It will. It's a fact of nature, cause and effect. Just like if you plant a seed and water it and there's sunshine—the right conditions—it grows. Nothing we do. Steady awareness without picking and choosing—that's what's so important. Letting all these difficult and beautiful things come and go and being really present, watching it with interest. Reality reveals itself.

And the natural effect of wisdom is that wisdom cultivates, inclines towards the beautiful, the wholesome qualities of heart and mind. The suffering qualities don't make any sense. They become irrelevant. And so they're abandoned in that moment.

I want to end with a couple of quotations from two very different Burmese teachers. One is from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "As mindfulness, awareness, is remembered more and more frequently, gradually it develops its own momentum. We come to appreciate moments of awareness more than we appreciate our entrancements and reactions with whatever the mind is noticing." So we appreciate the awareness more than the reactions.

This is from Sayadaw U Pandita: "When mindfulness, when awareness, is persistently and repeatedly activated"—which is just simply remembering, that's it, repeatedly activated—"wisdom arises. There will be insight into the true nature of body and mind." This is not an act of personal will. You don't have to make it happen. It's just a natural law.

So relax, settle back. What's happening now? That's our job. This moment, and then the next moment. Then we forget for five and a half hours. Then—oh, what's happening now, right now? That's all. Just not being in contention with this moment.

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

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