Unentangled Knowing

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 44:44

Are you aware? Are you aware of being aware? And it doesn't matter what's past, because now—are you aware now? That's our whole practice, that's it.

I wanted to riff some more on the inner tangle and the outer tangle. It's the verse that introduces the Visuddhimagga, which is a really long commentary. It's not the original Pali discourses of the Buddha—it was written in about 500 A.D. in Sri Lanka. Some people really like it and some don't, so I'm not saying anything about the quality, but it's really huge.

The poem is, as Mark said, "The inner tangle and the outer tangle. This generation is entangled in a tangle. And so I ask of Gotama this question: who can untangle this tangle?" And then there's this whole giant book, which goes through all the different practices. The Path of Purification is what it's called.

Here's another description I've been loving lately, the last couple of years, that I think describes the tangle. This is from Thanissaro Bhikkhu. He's talking about samsara:

"Samsara literally means 'wandering on.' Many people think of it as the Buddhist name for the place where we currently live and the place we leave when we go to Nibbana. But in early Buddhist texts, samsara is not the answer to 'where are we?'—it's the answer to 'what are we doing?' It's not a place, it's a process. The tendency to keep creating worlds and then moving into them. As one world falls apart, your mind creates another, and you go there. At the same time, you bump into other people who are creating their own worlds, too."

Does that make sense? And you wonder why none of us know what's going on, creating all these worlds around. But you can see that on a moment-to-moment level. So untangling the tangle is finding a way to move out of this samsara-ing—not going somewhere else to nibbana, but being here in a clearer way.

Ajahn Sumedho, on the same theme, also talks about samsara. He says, "Samsara and nibbana are not places to go, but modes of perception." I love this because to me it cuts to the heart of it. Modes of perception. Samsara is perception from or through personality belief, personality view. Or to just cut to the chase, it's from or through the view of me, me, me—the center of everything. I don't know if you can relate to ever having experienced a moment like that.

So that's samsara-ing, the mode of perception. I did mention a few nights ago that this is how His Holiness the Dalai Lama and also Thich Nhat Hanh describe the source of our confusion and suffering—as being misperception. And this is really the heart of the misperception: perceiving any particular experience of the six sense experiences that come and go as me or mine, or having any kind of perception, in a

moment—this is just moment to moment—of me as a separate ongoing entity.

This isn't something to think about. I mean, God knows we can think about it. But perception isn't something we think through. It's just suddenly you see in a different way. That's what insight is. You can't think your way into insight, but suddenly, boom, you see in a different way. That's the power of continuous receptive awareness.

So back to who can untangle this tangle. There's the whole of the Visuddhimagga, but there's a shortcut. And guess what that shortcut is? Continuous, steady awareness, pure and simple. There's a book called *Pur e and Simple* that contains the teachings of a Thai laywoman from the last century, Upasika Kee. It's thick, but very, very powerful, very clear understanding.

unentangled knowing. And so it fits perfectly. Unentangled knowing is simply, in a moment, the simple, complete awareness of what's happening just as it is without adding anything extra.

So this isn't any new information. But the power of this steady, steady awareness as it begins to get momentum—that's the condition for wisdom. And you could describe wisdom as accurate recognition. When something is recognized accurately, all the confusing responses—the greed, the hatred, the confusion, the stories of me—tend to drop away. It's not like you have to think your way out of them.

Mark's story the other night about when he was in the bathroom is a great example. The music started playing. That's a great story. And it's good to see these stories in our own experience, even little ones, because it's exactly the same process as being in a big, really suffering, tormented story in our minds.

Seeing how samsara-ing works, how the mind creates a world and we enter into it—he didn't create that beautiful marble urinal, that was already there. But he entered into it fully, like, "Wow, this is so amazing." So just seeing how you go in and the mind is already in some kind of "Wow, this is an amazing place." And then the whole thing that went on—the music and all the thoughts about it. What he told us later, he was thinking things like, "I wonder how much it costs for them to put in this sound system. It's so good." So that's not an obviously suffering experience, but it's a world he entered into.

And in the moment when he picked up his phone again and saw, "Oh, this is coming from my phone"—if you don't add any extra, all the other stuff just falls away. The amazing sound system, well, you don't think anymore about it because clearly there isn't an amazing sound system. All the wondering, all the amazement—it drops because it has nothing to do with reality. And that's a moment of wisdom. That's how wisdom functions. The confusion, when the misperception shifts and is recognized accurately, all the confused ideas and responses just fall away. So we don't have to somehow dig them all up and put them aside. For that moment—that's the thing. They don't fall away forever.

But this unentangled knowing, what we're doing here—I'm saying all this to try and give us more and more faith, more and more sense of trust and confidence in this steadiness of awareness, because it so often doesn't seem like that much is happening. But with the continuity of awareness, which as many of

you are saying, you can feel that growing—not having some idea you never space out, of course we do—but the more that there's confidence in awareness... This is a way that Ajahn Sumedho often talks. He talks about having and reminding himself to have confidence in awareness.

What we mostly have confidence in is all our reactions of mind. So when something comes up that's difficult, the natural response, the habit of mind—it's not that we plan it—is aversion. Unpleasant, aversion. We've talked about that. And then how fast that leads to a whole world. This isn't new information. But awareness isn't aversive. It isn't me. It's just watching the whole process. It's not trying to stop it.

But having confidence in the awareness—it's that foreground-background shift. The whole thing goes on, but it's a completely different experience. There's no me in it when there's confidence in it. There's me in the story. But awareness isn't me. And it just is unfolding. And actually, one feels more in it.

It's not unfolding over there somewhere while I remain detached, not really feeling it because I'm aware. Actually, there's no resistance anymore. Resistance is one of the effects of me resisting experience. When there's confidence in awareness, things are seen with continuity.

A moment of awareness, as we've said, isn't feeding the greed or the aversion. It's not feeding the story, and the story is always fed by greed or aversion or the sense of me. And the sense of me—that's really the misperception that feeds greed and aversion anyway. It's rare to find otherwise. I want to say it couldn't be any other way, but I wouldn't dare say that. But it's pretty rare. I'd like you to tell me if you find an example where there's a lot of greed or aversion coming up in your mind but no sense of me involved in it. I don't think so. Even when we're angry about how someone else is being treated, when we're really angry in the aversion—not a sense of kindness, but just really *I'm angry*—there's a way it's about me.

So interesting.

When Ajahn Sumedho talks about having confidence in awareness, that's inspired me a lot because he's about 85 now, I think. He's been practicing as a monk for fifty or sixty years. And what he talks about now all the time—I often listen to him online—is receptive awareness, intuitive awareness, he calls it. That's absolutely just every moment, the steadiness of intuitive awareness, unentangled knowing, to use Ajahn Chah's language. So it's not like that's new to him.

But not so long ago, I was in a small group at some retreat he was teaching. He was talking about how he would have to, at times, take a firm stand, like a resolution in his mind, to have confidence in awareness. He was describing a time at his monastery where there was really a lot of difficulty going on, very difficult stuff. He being the head of it, and some of his decisions were creating some of the difficulty. But anyway, being the head of it, all the stuff that was directed at him—the blame and the anger and everything directed at him. And he said, "My personality doesn't like that. I was really suffering with all this stuff coming at me. I really didn't like it and was starting to get involved in reaction."

And then he said, that's when he knew he had to really take a resolution. Determine—that's the word he used. "I made a determination to have confidence in awareness." That was very inspiring to me.

Resolution, determination—it's a specific quality of mind. It's a mental factor that we can actually experience. And it's neutral, because you could have a determination to do something unwholesome. So it's ethically neutral, depending on what the determination is. But it's a quality of mind that's like—you could say it's the Nike thing: just do it. But without aversion or judgment. Instead of flopping around—maybe I should, maybe I shouldn't, oh, it'd be nice to trust in awareness, but stuff's kind of hard right now, whatever it is—just do it. There's a sense of, in a moment—not forever, just a moment—of stability.

Adhiṭṭhāna is the word in Pali; it means resolution. So when he said "I made a determination," he was tuning into that mental quality in his mind, which we all can, but we often don't think to notice it. And it's not greed or aversion—just take refuge in awareness.

And that's really what we're practicing here. When something difficult or beautiful is going on and we feel all involved in it, taking refuge in awareness is like almost opening to the experience more, but just let the awareness in. We don't create it; just let it in. I find just remembering that again and again, the whole experience becomes all-inclusive, because awareness isn't me. In a moment of just receptive awareness, there's not Carol identifying with anything. When there's identification, then it's *my* awareness—that's different. You can feel the difference. But when it's just receptive awareness, everything's just happening. Not trying to name what's happening, the feelings are there, but it's a completely different way of being, as I'm sure you all know.

And it's nothing we can create with an act of will. I'm sure we've all spent plenty of time trying, and we still will. What we can do is set up the willingness to receive awareness and then just keep setting up that willingness. It seems to come, and then it goes. But the more we are willing to have that confidence, the more we are willing to see, to trust how steady awareness actually begins to release the particular tangle when it's seen accurately.

The tangle just releases. It's nothing we do personally. That's wisdom. Wisdom does the work. The more we recognize when that happens—and it's happening all the time.

Someone said today, you know, just entering into the world, seeing your mind create the world, entering into it, it falls apart and we enter into another world. Like someone said today—I hope you don't mind, you said it in the question period, but it was so perfect: "I'm the best yogi," and it's the whole world. And then the next day, "I'm the worst yogi," and it's the whole world. You're not the only one, right? And we totally believe each world.

And then there's the world of our memories and this and that. And then we're bumping into other people. And thank God we're not talking—that's one of the reasons we don't have talking on retreat, you know.

Other people are in their world. But if they met you in the world where you thought you were God's gift to humankind, and you're talking to them, that's who they think you are. Then the next day, they're going to relate to you because that's who you think you are. But that day, you're no longer God's gift to humankind—you're a worm who doesn't deserve to live on the face of the earth. But they don't know that. And they're going through their different worlds too. And we're trying to have a society here... And we wonder why things are confused.

Sidetracking here. Okay.

I personally actually really enjoy—I love, actually—when there's enough awareness to receive, to see how in a particular experience the sense of me is arising and functioning, and how it is when that goes away. Because it comes and goes; it's just another world. There's not one "me" that we have to see through. It's just another world.

All aspects of the teaching, all aspects of the Buddhist teaching, are working to purify our hearts and minds, transform the habits. But the deepest transformation is through this element of wisdom.

And so, remember—I'm sure many of you know this quote from Shantideva, one of the Dalai Lama's favorite quotes, apparently. It's this: All the happiness I experience comes from wanting other people to be happy. All the suffering I experience comes from wanting only myself to be happy.

And it's easy to hear that as a should, you know, how we should be. But I want to say, I've just been noticing sometimes in little moments how that's actually a literal description. How when there's not that sense of referring it all back to me, the quality of heart and mind that comes out in a situation is actually a sense of happiness, whatever wholesome quality.

A simple little example I noticed last year. I was just sitting at home, and I guess I heard or read something—I must have been listening to news or the radio, I don't even know what. But somebody had done some nice, good thing. And it landed in a moment when my mind and heart was caught in a world of "you're not so good," in a world of very familiar self-judgment, right? So I kind of knew it was there, but not with confidence and awareness—just the kind of, okay, I know it's there, but it was coloring everything.

So the good thing, whatever the person did, was heard, and the immediate reaction was: Why didn't I think to do that? Right away, it's all about me. This good thing happens, and it's all about me—and it's suffering. It's not a happy "all about me."

Then later, I wasn't thinking. I was just watching.

Awareness was just watching that. Then I heard another thing—it was different. I wasn't thinking or trying to redo that experience. But I heard another good thing, something similar. And at that time, there was just an awareness that the other stuff wasn't there. The immediate response was simply, "Isn't that

wonderful?" I felt so happy for the person, just so happy in general for that good thing to happen.

That's mudita, appreciative joy. It just naturally came—not thinking I should have it, nothing to do with me. When there's not the reference point present in the mind, the beautiful qualities come out. So just noticing when that happened, not clinging. I mean, it's gone. Of course we cling—that's the next thing.

But in terms of our steady awareness here, of course we notice when the difficulties are there. It's sort of like Alexis was saying today—you kind of feel some difficulty, and often that's like a little sign. It helps us bring awareness back in. Actually, Anam Thubten talks about that as a smoke signal for awareness, a smoke alarm for awareness. When you start to feel just a little discomfort in your body or mind, it's like, "Ah, bring in awareness again."

But equally important—notice when the difficulty goes. We often go, "Okay, nice," and then maybe space out. Notice the calm or the happiness or the mudita or the compassion. It's really important to let the awareness stay steady, to notice the whole thing. And so that little example with mudita—I've been noticing things like that more and more. That was a small one.

Sometimes, and this is only personal, it's different for everybody, but sometimes not listening to the news... I mean, there's plenty of suffering in the news. And you really have to titrate, pay attention to how much the heart and mind can take in before you're just going into a sinkhole. That's not out of avoidance, but it's always refreshing the awareness so we can open to what's happening. That's in our daily life, not different from retreat.

But I notice when I'm hearing something difficult and I'm in a me-space, it's either "I can't stand it" or "I think I shouldn't have this privilege because so many people are suffering"—which I can feel often. But there are other times when there's not the me, and the same tuning into something really painful or difficult occurs. We get plenty of chances to practice with this, but I'm not practicing. It just happens. There's not the me, and the pain lands. You really feel.

This is when awareness can open to the suffering, the dukkha, without any me-story about it. And it's just natural that some sense of connectedness comes up. I mean, I'm saying this, but it's just, "Oh. Wow, that's so hard. So many people like that." That's just a natural response of compassion. That's what's available when the me-ing isn't there.

Please don't take the sense of seeing that there's a lot of "me" personally, or that you're doing something wrong. I love watching it because it's just a deeply rooted habit based in the misperception that somehow we're a separate being, separate from other things and ongoing—that there's no changing nature. That's the perception, again and again and again.

With steady awareness, you'll see that even though it feels like a steady me, it's changing all the time. Like Tanissaro said, all these different worlds. It's a different me—a happy me, a sad me, this thought, that thought. What you're calling "me" might be a sensation. So just get interested, exploring it.

I wanted to go in a slightly different direction in terms of describing the misperception of a sense of separate self. You probably know how Thich Nhat Hanh always talked about it. He did die a couple of months ago, and I used to read and study with him a lot. I hadn't for quite some time.

And then I went back, watching little short videos of him, and was reminded of how sometimes the way he described things sounded almost too simplistic, or too nice. But there's actually a real depth of reality in it. So I just wanted to share a couple of things I'd written down.

He always talked about emptiness—empty of a separate self—as being really full of everything. If you've heard him at all, he would say a flower is nothing separate; it's full of the whole cosmos. You can't have a flower without the sun, without the oxygen, without the earth, without the earthworms. How did the earth get here? It's geological time—rocks ground down over millions of years. And where did they come from? The universe. It just goes on and on. You can't separate anything out.

He was describing a human being this way: as a human, you're full of your ancestors, the parents, the cells of your parents, back and back and back. Also all animals, minerals, plants. Take away any of these, and humans can't exist. So there's no way anything can really be separate from everything else. It's intellectual when we talk about it, but really, at times, that's what we're pointing to. Not that you have to think that way, but it's a misperception that somehow we're absolutely separate.

I found this note—I don't know who sent it to me, a couple of years ago. Maybe someone here. It's unsigned. But I just saw it today, and I thought, oh, that's kind of sweet: "I still only think about myself, but now I am the world." Delightful.

So how do we continue to discover this emptiness, this fullness? How do we perceive in this way? This is Thich Nhat Hanh again, talking about the kingdom of God, but he just means recognizing reality, freedom: "It's available twenty-four hours a day. The problem is whether we are available to know this. Or are we lost in the past, in the future, in wanting, in aversion?"

With mindfulness, he says, we're fully present in the here and now, fully alive in the here and now. Just one in-breath—no hard labor. Really, that simple. Just one in-breath, and we're fully alive in the here and now.

So you might notice, with awareness, that we all have moments—many moments a day—where there's this simplicity of unentangled knowing, this awareness he's talking about, present in the here and now. Just a moment. Maybe you could be doing anything: drinking tea, looking at the sunset, having pain in your leg. It could be anything. But where it's just completely this, and you may know other things going on, and there's no self-reflection about it. No "what does it mean about me?" No "I'm experiencing this"—although that might arise in the next moment. And it's not like big lights going off. It's just this, this, this.

Let that start to come in. Start to notice the alternate perception. The more the awareness gets steady, the

more accurate perceptions can arise. The tangle—like the little story about the music—as soon as you see it, it drops away. More complicated ones do too. Many people here could describe some big storm that was going on, and then you see it somehow different, and it drops away completely. That's what's going on all the time.

So we're really just willing to have confidence in awareness. And that allows us to open into what's happening. The more we do that, the more we develop real trust—being with the beautiful is really important, recognizing the wholesome. But then we also become less afraid to be with the difficult, because we really start to understand that opening to difficulty also opens us into the sense of us all being in this together. Compassion naturally comes.

I think that's all I want to say. I thought there was some more, but I just want to close with this from the Dalai Lama.

He says, "Every morning I reflect on the truth of interdependence, that nothing exists as it appears. Nothing is separate, but all arising from connected conditions. And this understanding naturally gives rise to compassion for all beings suffering from being in this confusion."

So the steady awareness has the power to really change our understanding in amazing ways. Let's have confidence in awareness, quietly for a while.

May all the wholesome energies arising from our practice together—all of us here in this room, from our sincere intentions throughout the day—may all this wholesome energy be not for ourselves alone, but may we share it with all beings everywhere. May our practice truly be a cause for beings to be safe and protected. May all beings be free from fear. May all beings live with wisdom and compassion.

Thank you all for your sincere Dhamma energy, for being here together.

Continuing awareness now in whatever posture, whatever mode feels most supportive for you to refresh the awareness—whether it's walking or having tea or going outside. Come back to the next sitting if that seems appropriate, or do whatever supports awareness. Just trusting.

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