Awareness and Wise Attitude (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:00

What are you aware of as I begin to speak? Just noticing how it is—aware of body, mind, hearing, mood, emotion. There's a sense of what often happens to me: "Oh, now they're going to speak," and something relaxes. I'm sort of semi-aware but waiting for the entertainment. And I think, well, that isn't entertaining. I better go back to my own awareness.

But we never leave our own awareness. That's the thing.

So I'm going to speak a bit, as you no doubt expected. But please don't let that be some kind of break in awareness. Let awareness notice whatever is naturally occurring. If you missed some of my words, it probably won't make any difference in your life. If you hear them all, it might not make any difference either. So just being with whatever occurs—loving awareness more than needing something special to happen or stop happening.

What I wanted to speak about occurred in my mind last night: one of my favorite things that Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche wrote many years ago. I've always loved it. He says, "The main purpose of these Dharma teachings is to recognize the nature of the non-deluded mind, as well as to discover how the deluded mind works."

I love that. Recognize the nature of the non-deluded. Not create it, not create some amazing condition so finally we can get to a place where the non-deluded mind is sitting waiting for us. But just to recognize, again and again—as well as to discover how the deluded mind works.

Discover. To me, that brings in that quality we've been talking about in wise attitude: interest. Investigation. Allowing the mindful awareness to collect the data when the deluded mind is functioning—on the rare occasions that it shows up—rather than running and hiding and assuming we've failed.

In terms of Rinpoche saying the main purpose of these Dharma teachings, of our Dharma practice: I'm sure you know this, but just to highlight, we're not talking about only this meditation practice. We're not even talking about this way of being within recognizing awareness. Dharma practice for recognizing the non-deluded mind, trusting it, having faith in it, having confidence—that means our Dharma practice is our whole life. And what we're doing here, cultivating to recognize awareness that's available in our whole life, is really important. But the Buddha taught dāna, sīla, bhāvanā—generosity, morality, and

mental cultivation. Our whole life. I just want to highlight that.

But now I'm talking about the slice of life of our practice here. The sense of recognizing and trusting the availability of awareness as soon as we think about it. And after a while, we don't have to think about it. It's arising, recognized naturally as it gets momentum.

And this aspect of getting more and more familiar with tuning into what we call wise attitude—the quality in the mind that's aware. Remember, we've been talking about wise attitude the whole time. But the more that becomes intrinsic, so much a part of recognizing awareness, the attitude in the mind, in the consciousness, becomes more and more obvious.

This is the place I want to speak to this morning: where we're really recognizing more and more moments of non-deluded mind, awareness of the non-deluded mind, and moments when there's awareness and the deluded aspect—the kilesas—is present.

The deluded mind is basically mind that in that moment is influenced by greed, hatred, or delusion, with delusion often manifesting as a sense of "me." When that's arising, not recognized in awareness, it influences perception, feeling tone, thought, action, and views—which is all too often how we're functioning in the world. From perception based on this awareness, but awareness influenced by greed, by aversion, by views. That's how we think about the world. That's how we act.

This awareness, though, and recognizing the awareness, recognizing the quality in the mind when it's deluded—that's an avenue into freedom from that.

So first, recognizing the non-deluded mind. Something that Andrea gave some examples of yesterday afternoon. Just in a little way. I'm not talking about going looking for the big explosion of nibbāna. That's nice. We're talking about moment-to-moment awareness of what's arising in the mind. And there are moments of presence of mind that are not kilesa-ridden.

I'm using kilesa because I don't really like the word "defilement." Kilesa meaning greed, hatred, confusion, sense of self—unrecognized. There are moments when, tuning in to the attitude in the mind that's aware, you might notice you're not really noticing greed or hatred.

There's maybe stability, maybe calm, maybe interest, maybe compassion, maybe just, "Ah, it's like this now." Equanimity. You don't have to make a big deal of it, but noticing—awareness noticing—"Oh yes, that's a moment of non-deluded mind."

And just as we're hopefully all getting more and more at ease with the naturalness, the non-excited flashiness of awareness, getting a sense of that—it's not some special thing—so normally we overlook it in our life. We get sucked into reacting to whatever's happening and just overlook awareness. Hence our practice together.

Often moments of non-deluded mind can be similar. We're looking for oneness, looking for the sense of

love, and it just might be "just like this now." Just peace and space. Just lack of reactivity. Noticing those moments, you don't go clinging to them. Clinging might come, and then that moment's gone and clinging's here. Fine, next moment. But I just want to point that out. Stay with that.

And then there's discovering how the deluded mind works. Now, I would say—I'm not a mathematician or a statistician—I would say at least fifty percent of our practice, really I want to say ninety-two percent, but I'll stick with fifty percent of our practice, is discovering how the deluded mind works. Have you noticed anything about that during these few days? Have you noticed a moment of deluded mind arising? Yes? Thank you.

This is what's so wonderful about what we've been saying about awareness—that we're just recognizing what's the quality, what's the attitude in the mind that's aware. Because as we've said, though we need to keep learning to trust this: when there's greed arising, some kind of aversion, hatred, fear, delusion—and there's delusion under greed and aversion also—but the delusion, say, of a view: "It's supposed to be like this," and it's not, and we're really suffering and we don't catch that view, that attachment to that view. Or anytime there's a sense of me, sense of self, me or mine.

When that's arising in the awareness and we don't recognize it, awareness doesn't recognize it, that's when it colors the perception. Then we speak and act and wonder, "Why is everything so out of sync?" Have you ever noticed you're doing something, you think it should go like this, and it goes like that? Because what we're perceiving and what we're thinking is completely out of sync with reality. This is how the kilesas completely distort our perception, our views, our thoughts. This, folks, is what we're living with.

So just kind of hoping if we practice enough it'll go away—well, it hasn't worked yet for me. If it's worked for any of you, I'd like to know. "I just hope if I do this enough, it'll go away."

But what Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about a lot—not only he, but I've learned so much from the way he speaks about it—is this encouragement: as we keep tuning into the attitude in the mind again and again, it becomes second nature as soon as there's awareness. And not just on retreat, but in our life. So you can't help but notice when there's wanting, when there's some kind of resistance or aversion. And it doesn't have to be so big it's rage—we tend not to miss that. But just the kind of, "I don't want to do this now. This isn't supposed to be happening." Or, "Oh, the greed is so strong." Or, "Oh me, I failed"—here's the sense of self again, believing it.

So our habit—maybe some of our habits, maybe you've transcended this habit, may it be so—the habit is we see this, and sometimes as awareness is strong and you're noticing the greed, the aversion, the sense of self, awareness just keeps on noticing it. So as we've said, that kilesa simply becomes the next arising object—a perfectly fine object to help us re-recognize awareness. No problem.

And sometimes just the awareness of noticing the greed, the aversion, the sense of me—awareness itself,

when it's not distorted by that, is not feeding the kilesa. It's just letting it live its life in the light of awareness. So often, if the kilesa is not so strong and awareness isn't identified, then the kilesa may go away.

Awareness doesn't make the kilesa go away. Sometimes we think—and this is, you know—"I'm being mindful, but the greed is still here. What am I doing wrong?"

Have you ever had that thought? "I'm being mindful of this pain in my knee, and I recognize the awareness, but I still hate it. I'm not being mindful in the right way." This happens because we're imputing to awareness something it doesn't have. The title of one of Sayadaw U Tejaniya's books is *Awareness Alone is Not Enough*. Because it's not awareness that liberates. It's not awareness that releases the attachment. It's wisdom.

Wisdom is a quality that arises in the heart and mind. But the steadiness of awareness, bringing in the data of how the greed is working, how the aversion is working—this steady awareness is the condition that allows wisdom to come in and arise.

Have you ever had a time... let's pick greed. For me, greed is easier to watch somehow. It's not that I don't get caught in it, but I can observe it more easily. With sense of self, you watch it for a while and then boom, you're really caught. But you can really watch greed—"I really want this"—and there are times it just goes. Other times, the greed is really strong, and awareness is watching. But have you ever seen that somehow the greed gets stronger? You can tell. It's taken over. You're about to go with it.

So the habit can be to shut the awareness down. "Well, the awareness wasn't strong enough. It didn't get rid of the greed. I'm going to follow it." So we stop being aware. The greed doesn't want awareness there. It's like what Alexis was talking about when he got in an argument with his partner—you can see the aversion and the delusion, or the wanting to win, takes over. "I don't want to be aware. I want to go with the kilesa." Right? Kilesas have a life of their own. A moment of greed feeds the next moment of greed. A moment of aversion feeds the next moment of aversion. Delusion, of course, the same.

And the same is true with awareness, with sati. A moment of sati feeds the next, and the next, and the next. So it's really important when we become aware that the kilesa has gotten stronger not to check out of the awareness, thinking, "Well, it didn't stop it, so no good." There's awareness, but the wisdom's not there yet. The wisdom isn't strong.

When the wisdom gets really strong, that's the moment where the mind will go—and it's not you, it's not an act of will. It's different from saying, "Okay, I'm not going to go get this. I'm not going to go get this," and the greed's still there, but you're holding yourself back. Fine, that's restraint. And you can be watching the greed, but the greed's still arising. But there's a moment where the mind goes, "I don't need this." And the greed dissipates. Have you ever had a moment like that? Yes.

Aversion too—you're getting angry at somebody and you go, "Wait a minute, maybe I'm not seeing this

right." The aversion dissipates. That's wisdom doing its job. It's not personal will.

And awareness, the steady awareness, brings along wholesome qualities: the interest, the energy to stay with it, the stability of mind to stay with it, the confidence, the faith to stay with it. And then the wisdom arises. *Ah!* This greed isn't really making me happy. It stops.

It doesn't feel like a willful, forceful action because you're not doing it. It's a letting go of doing. But what sets this up is the willingness. When the sense of self is really strong, don't think, "Oh, I failed—sense of self is taking over again." Instead—and this is what Sayadaw U Tejaniya says that has helped me so much—bring awareness along with you while the mind and body is acting out of kilesa. Bring the awareness along.

We don't like to. Why? Because it feels lousy. We don't like how it feels. So we pretend it's not happening and turn off the awareness. This is called delusion. It does not work in any terms of purifying the heart-mind.

Bring along the awareness. As Tejaniya is always saying, watch how greed does its job. I love that. Let's learn how sense of self does its job. Learn how aversion, how resistance does its job. Because that's just nature. The nature of the kilesas—that's a dhamma too. Kilesas are a dhamma too. Any arising phenomenon is a dhamma. It's part of nature. So we can't just turn away from it and hope that bad part of nature will go away. We can see the effects of that in the world in so many ways.

Bring awareness along. And this is where the confidence in awareness, the trust in the Dhamma, is really what feeds our heart and mind. Because sometimes it's a little thing—clinging, wanting to go eat something I shouldn't eat. I can be with that. Sometimes it's a big thing, where it's really painful to watch my stupid personality really identify with itself and go down that road again. Can I bring awareness along?

Awareness is okay to feel the unpleasant. We know this intellectually, but I keep finding it slipping in the back of my mind: "Oh, I want to go to the pleasant. Oh, this can't be right because it's unpleasant. Something's wrong—this experience moment is unpleasant." Hello, vedana! Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—constantly changing every instant. You think if you keep getting more aware, the unpleasant and the neutral go away and you only get pleasant? Somehow that idea is back in there. It's not going to happen.

But awareness—that's okay. The pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. This is what we're learning to recognize and trust. That's the refuge in awareness rather than the refuge in object.

So the wholesome qualities that steady awareness and our trusting it brings along—the first of these is saddhā, faith, confidence in awareness itself, in our practice, in this. Sayadaw U Pandita said to me, "Awareness—you can be with anything." Just confidence. And that gives us the energy, just the willingness to hang with it for this next instant. Who knows how long it's going to last? And it's possible for experience

to get stronger than awareness, and it can't be there—it's too hard. I'll say a little about that at the end, if I remember.

And then there's the mindfulness, of course. And all of this together brings the stability, the samādhi. And these together allow the wisdom to arise. The five spiritual faculties, all coming naturally with our steady awareness. And so this grows and grows.

We start to see and learn how the kilesas do their job. We discover how the deluded mind works. It's really helpful to see.

So when I start to notice aversion arising—hopefully I start to notice when it's arising, not half an hour into it—I'm not afraid of it, not thinking, "Oh God, I failed again." Here's aversion. That's the nature. Given this set of conditions, aversion arises. That's just the nature. But as soon as there's a thought of awareness, awareness also is present. We can watch that without engaging in it. We're feeling it fully. It's not at a distance, but awareness isn't averse. Watch how much wisdom comes in. It doesn't last nearly as long. And more and more, awareness is just understanding the nature of this life of mind and body—recognizing how the non-deluded mind is, discovering how the deluded mind works.

Awareness is equally available, always accessible. The refuge in awareness, the love of awareness rather than the attachment to what's occurring—this is really, as Ajahn Sumedho often talks about, awareness as a doorway to freedom. So we don't make it some big whoo-hoo, just right now. Awareness. And more and more, getting a feeling for the attitude in the mind. Not wanting it to be a certain way. It's like this now. It's like this now. Not leaning into wanting it different. Not expecting how it should be. Just this total, "Ah, it's like this now."

So let's just sit quietly together for some time, as it's like this now.

May this wholesome, beneficial energy that is created through our sincere practice together and alone, through each of our personal dedication to wisdom and compassion, to recognizing and living from goodness, our natural goodness—may these beneficial, wholesome energies spread out and be shared with all beings in all realms in this universe, as well as this world.

May the wholesome energies of our practice be not for ourselves alone, although may it support our awakening from confusion. May it also support the awakening from confusion of all beings.

Really knowing we're not practicing for ourselves alone can be a source of strengthening faith and confidence, willingness to meet whatever arises with awareness and interest and friendliness.

May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings know happiness and the causes of happiness. May all beings live with wisdom and compassion.

For me personally, it's nice to sit together with all of you after days of just sitting alone at home. It's nice. Thank you all for your presence.

One comment I wanted to make—I did remember, which in itself is amazing. We've talked about this before, but I just wanted to remind us that it's a skillful means thing. There are times when you're rested, you're aware, the attitude in the mind is interest, but the object is really one of the kilesas—strong rage or shame or greed or total personality view, identification, whatever it is. And you recognize there's awareness and the willingness to be with. It feels like you're really being aware in a very clear way. But the difficulty of the object is just getting stronger and stronger. That's out of our control.

So in a way, you could say that the energy of the object—the wanting, the fear, whatever—is stronger at that moment than the energy of the awareness, even with your sincere intention. And you can recognize it just because you can feel like it's getting out of control. Of course it was never in control, but you feel like the more you pay attention, the worse it gets—not just unpleasant, but the awareness is just getting too shaky.

So at that point, this is really very important. Remember that our intention here is not to fix the object, not to get to the end of that object, not to see it off. It's not to "note it off," as is sometimes said in the Mahasi system.

Our commitment is to keep on remembering to recognize balanced awareness, to keep refreshing the awareness.

So when the object is too much, this skillful means is to really consciously shift your awareness to some obvious and more neutral experience that's happening right now. It could be anything. It could be some sensation in the body, or your fingers touching, or hearing, or seeing. You're not abandoning awareness—you're shifting to an object that's more neutral, and then you can refresh, re-recognize what awareness with wise attitude feels like. "Oh yeah, right."

It may take a few moments, because the other moments are still having an influence. Let's say you're feeling your finger, but you're still lost in fear—just keep on bringing the awareness, awareness, awareness to something neutral. And then you'll start to recognize balanced awareness again. Refresh the awareness, and do this a lot. It's sort of what Sayadaw would do when he would stick that inhaler thing in his nose—sometimes it takes something strong. But it's just to refresh the awareness. It's not running away.

Running away is when we shut down awareness altogether, which sometimes is what we've got to do. And then awareness will come back, whether we want it to or not. Here it is again. We can't really run away. And that's a wonderful thing.

So I just wanted to put that out as a skillful means. And please don't feel like it's a failure if you use it. It's a success, because you're really seeing that your commitment is to refreshing and re-recognizing balanced awareness, no matter what's happening.

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