Receptive Awareness All the Time

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 12:35

The power of the revelatory aspect of this practice grows through our willingness to remember awareness no matter what we're doing throughout the whole rest of the day.

That's one of the reasons we like this format here. Even if we were teaching a retreat in a more structured retreat center, we wouldn't have regular sitting, walking, sitting, walking. We'd have times that we meet and talk, but then the rest of the day the schedule is open for you to find whatever most supports your remembering awareness.

The walking meditation is similar to the sitting in terms of instructions. It's not, as in some forms of meditation, mindful walking where there's a real structure—that you should go particularly slowly, or that you need to bring the focus just to the sensations of the foot and leg. It's the same as what we're doing in sitting. And then moving through the day, whatever activities arise.

The one aspect I want to emphasize is that the quality of the awareness, the quality of this remembering mindfulness, is a very gentle, wider, receptive quality. It's not about—say you're in the food line—it's not about the mindfulness where there's a sense of "I need to be mindful of feeling my feet on the floor so I don't get lost," or "I need to notice the thoughts in my mind, notice the judgment." There can be this little bit of trying to hold on to mindfulness, or trying to know clearly the way the sensations of the foot feel, or know clearly what's happening as I'm standing in line. That wanting to know clearly, that kind of focus—that's way extra. That's not practicing to trust.

In the beginning it doesn't feel like much, this general receptive, wider field of awareness. When you're walking out of the hall, you're not trying to focus, but you know you're walking. You may feel the whole sense of the body, the sense of space. It may be that hearing comes up. It may be that you notice seeing. It may be that you realize you're thinking about what was said and how can I do it—and then all of a sudden you realize you didn't know you were walking, but you knew you were thinking. So it's just not trying to make the experience be a certain way, but remembering to know what we're doing.

This gentle, background awareness starts to feel more natural. It starts to get more steady, more running in the background. When I say the sense of knowing what you're doing as you're walking to put on your shoes—it's like knowing what you're doing, maybe feeling the body, knowing you're hearing, noticing you're seeing your shoes—but it's not thinking about it. You're not labeling what you're doing. There's not that gripping. It's just this gentle quality: you're feeling your body or your mind, you know you're putting on your shoes.

You let the awareness grow by itself. You're not trying to do it. We do have effort. The effort is just as Andrea said: Am I aware? As soon as you drop that in, you're aware. After a while, you don't even have to say it. You're just tying your shoes and suddenly—oh yeah, aware. It pops back in. And then there's nothing you have to do with it. As soon as there's awareness, it's knowing what is, broad and precise, and that's that moment of awareness. We're never trying to change it or make it better. It's more and more just this awareness that comes with us, that starts to accompany us, that becomes more and more natural and familiar.

Through the day, what gives this practice the wisdom factor is the willingness to remember that. Of course we forget ten million times, but the willingness to remember, whatever you are doing—this is a twenty-four-seven practice. Not having a steady schedule isn't a way of saying kick back, you're not working so hard. It's a way of saying there is no moment that isn't available for awareness, no matter what's happening.

The first times I was starting this practice, I found the walking and the moving through the day actually fed my understanding of it much more than the sitting. Because in the sitting, I would get more caught up in the habits of meditation. If this is new to you, you'll see that.

I did Mahasi practice for years, which I love. It's just different—much more directed focus. It took me quite a while not to be in some kind of struggle. "No, don't direct the focus. Relax. No, don't. No, relax." It was like a nightmare for a while. But in the walking and the moving through the day, somehow the habit wasn't as strong, although I love slow walking.

In fact, the first time a few of us were at Shwe Oo Min with U Tejaniya a long time ago, we were doing walking back and forth. I was with Narayan and Myoshin, two other teachers. We thought we were walking at a normal pace. He would say, "Walk at a normal pace." We thought we were. No way. He'd come up, stop you—he moves around like that. "Why are you going so slowly?" Just like that. "This isn't slow. You want to see slow? No, just walk normal." It was impossible in the beginning. But that's all fun. You're just watching that. It really doesn't matter what speed. Walk slow if you want, but be aware—not because you should.

So it's really whatever you're doing. And in terms of sitting and formal walking, yes, extremely helpful, because the more simple our activities are, the easier it is for us to remember awareness. Sure, you can do it with everything. Sure, go on your computer. Go back to your room and—please don't—go on your computer and say, "See if I can be aware while I'm looking at the news." For goodness sake, let's get real. Keep it simple.

So sitting and walking are really helpful. The amount that you sit and walk isn't some "should" or some ideal. It comes from you being really present. Say in the sitting, you realize—not just "I'm sick of it, time to go," or "It's forty minutes, time to get up"—but you're actually relaxed, aware. What's the motivation to get up? Awareness notices. "Ah, I'm bored." It notices boredom. You get up or you don't, but there's awareness

of boredom and responding to it. Or there's awareness of boredom, it passes, and then you're sitting, and it's calm again.

Same with the walking. But if you see in the sitting, for example, that you're sitting with quite some pain, you're aware of pain—so there's awareness. I mean, there's also the sitting where you're not aware of the pain; you're filled with aversion and you pop up and go. Okay, that happens. You can be aware of that too. Be aware of that. Know that's why you stopped sitting. Just knowing why you're doing what you're doing.

We call it meditation for adults. You know why you're doing what you're doing. And ultimately it's about what supports your continued awareness.

So when I started to say you're in a lot of pain, you're aware of the pain, the aversion is growing, you're aware of the aversion—and you all know how to do this. It's not like a goal in this style that you should be aware long enough until the aversion goes away, or you're aware long enough and the pain goes away. Forget that. We all get caught in that, but forget it.

Sometimes the mindfulness isn't as strong as the aversion or the clinging. We all know this happens. Awareness can notice that too. So you notice that in this particular sitting, the pain is strong. You're aware of the pain. The aversion is getting really strong. You're aware of the aversion. But what's actually occurring is that the aversion is growing and growing and growing. You're saying, "I'm not getting up until it's been an hour." You're gritting your teeth. You're clenching your hands. You're cultivating aversion. That's not really what we need—we know how to do that well enough already.

So just see with wisdom: "Okay, this is strengthening aversion." We all have different thresholds for this. Sometimes you can see it, and awareness comes up enough to be with the aversion. Sometimes not. And it's not like you're going to get it right or you're going to blow it. If you get up too soon, you've ruined your retreat? Come on. You're just watching.

But if you feel like you're feeding aversion, it's perfectly wise, perfectly skillful means, to end the sitting with awareness.

The same applies in walking. You're walking and it feels great, back and forth, back and forth, and you realize it's been a while, it's really comfortable, and you haven't actually been aware for the last fifteen minutes. You're just drifting along pleasantly. It might be time to shift the posture. Awareness in any posture is simply what brings us back into the moment.

So that's all I wanted to say today. But it's so gentle. It's not stressful. It's not tiring. You might feel tired these days—physical tiredness, sure. But if the way we're remembering awareness is bringing up tiredness, that's a sure sign we're putting in too much personal effort. And that's a useful feedback system. "I don't want to be aware." Okay, relax. You're aware right then of relaxing. That's all it takes.

Something is always happening—that's samsara. Something is happening every mind moment. Awareness

is available just to notice that. It's happening anyway. Awareness can simply notice it. It becomes our friend. It becomes our refuge.

So just explore this as we move through the day. Twenty-four seven, just relax. Just relax. I think that's okay.

Find your own rhythm.

Trust yourself.

Finish here.

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