Attending To The Immovable

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:05

I take this opportunity to offer some reflections on the Dharma.

As we enter the heart of our retreat, this very precious opportunity we have to be in a place conducive for wise reflection—the Buddha used the phrase *yoniso manasikara*, which we translate as wise reflection. Tonight I'll talk a little bit about that, about some of what it encourages us to ponder.

When there's a lack of wise reflection, when we're making assumptions in a compulsive, conditioned way about what is true, what is false, what is mine, what is yours, what should be, what shouldn't be—that lack of wise reflection the Buddha called *avijja*. *Vijja* means seeing clearly. The prefix *a* means not—not seeing clearly. It's translated as ignorance, a kind of ignoring of the actuality. We're imagining that our views and opinions are the truth, but there's an unconscious ignoring. We're not really using this instrument we have, this precious instrument within us, inherent in our nature—consciousness that can discern, that can wisely reflect, that can align with and know things the way they actually are. When there's the *avijja*, when there's the ignorance that the Buddha talked about, it is the condition that gives rise to all suffering.

So we've all made the effort, the commendable effort and not easy effort, to let go for a time. It's like a gesture of what the Buddha called *viveka*—leaving the life, the habits, the daily routines, the responsibilities. Yes, they come with us, but we're leaving that circumstance for the sake of retreating, for the sake of cultivating this wise reflection that can illumine the nature of things and liberate us from that which gives rise to and perpetuates suffering, distress, conflict, confusion—what the Buddha called the whole mass of suffering.

I'd like to start with just the outlines of an encounter, a story recorded in the scriptures, the Buddhist teachings, of a meeting between the Venerable Anuruddha and Venerable Sariputra. Sariputra, you remember, is one of the Buddha's chief disciples, foremost in wisdom. This encounter took place before Anuruddha was enlightened. Already he was formidable, a bit intimidating. But he approached Venerable Sariputra because they were colleagues. I don't know if he said "friend" or "venerable sir," but he was respectful, I'm sure.

He said something like—I don't have the exact words recorded—but something like, "My divine eye can see clearly the multifold, thousand-world system." Already at that time he was known for his samadhi; he was good at mindfully staying present. And he was already known for being foremost at this inner vision, being able to see the subtle realms in all the different directions. "With my divine eye I see the thousand-fold world system," he said. "My energy is aroused and unsluggish." He went on to say, "The mindfulness is unshaken. The body is calm. The heart, the *citta*, the mind is concentrated, singular. But I

still suffer. This heart is still not liberated."

When Sariputra answered, he said, "Friend, when you have that thought—'my divine eye, foremost in the Sangha, that can see the thousand-world system'—that is connected to your conceit, this idea about yourself." He said those thoughts of your energy being aroused and unsluggish, the mindfulness unshaken, the body calm, the heart concentrated—that's connected to your restlessness, always having something else to do, somewhere to get to, something to accomplish. And he said, "That thought, when you have the thought 'but I still suffer, the mind is not liberated' from what's called the floods that sweep us and carry us away—when you have that thought, it's connected to your anxiety."

This next phrase is interesting. Sariputra said, "It would be well when those thoughts arise to let them be, to just abandon them and turn your mind to the deathless. Turn your mind to that which never dies."

I'd like to talk this evening about this slight adjustment, slight but profound, of our attention that is so important. It wasn't long after Anuruddha took up that instruction that he was freed.

Remember, when we chant every morning the qualities of the Dharma, the Buddha is talking about this timeless, peaceful nature. He says it's always here and now. It's not somewhere else. We chant it every day: *sanditiko*—that means this peace, unshakeable peace, is not somewhere else. *Akaliko*—it's not bound in time.

It's not only available when I've done it all right and feel I deserve it, or when I've experienced enough pain. It's timeless. It's not just for a Tuesday or a full moon or when Jupiter is at mid-heaven—timeless. It's *ehipassiko*, always inviting us.

So what could that be? What is the Buddha telling Anuruddha, who is being honest about his situation? With his divine eye, he could see all these forms. He was being mindful, making effort. His samādhi was good. But he was doing stuff. And this recurring thought kept arising: "But I'm not free, I'm not enlightened."

The Buddha didn't say you must crush those thoughts. He didn't say you must obliterate them. Something more like abandon—rather than being preoccupied with them—he was talking about a softening, a widening, a letting be. Don't pay attention to that. Turn your mind to that which is not coming, not going.

This is a very important principle in the Dharma. The Buddha once said this heart is luminous. It is already luminous. But we lose touch with it when we get confused by what's moving through the heart. This is a clue. The heart is luminous, but we lose touch with what the Buddha called, on occasion, the original brightness—this source, this true nature. The phrase he used was *pabhassara citta*, radiant heart.

We lose touch with this when we get confused by what's moving through. What's moving through now? Tuesday night, Dharma talk, Kittisaro Dharma talk. Right now the sounds are touching the heart, but do they just stay there? They dissolve. But sometimes we don't notice what's moving through the heart if

we're busy reacting: "I wonder how long he's going to go on tonight."

A little aside: once Ajahn Chah was giving a Dharma talk underneath his hut in Thailand. In the jungle, amid the sounds and the dark, he's in his chair giving the talk. A little way in, one of the novices grabbed his flashlight and turned it on. A beam of light opened up into the room and found the clock on the wall. Big mistake. There was a collective gasp—all the monks knew what that meant. That talk went on for hours.

I won't go on for hours. But notice: we lose touch with what's actually moving through the heart when our thinking takes over—"Oh, it's good, it's not good, I'm wondering if... will it be... like it, not like it." What if we come to the actuality right now? The sights of this hall, shifting as our attention moves and we blink. Those impressions are coming and going, appearing and dissolving in the heart. The sounds.

"Dharma talk" might sound like a noun that could get sent off to the library, given a title. Might be a great talk or, "Oh golly, that was an ordeal." It sounds like a thing. But as we have the chance, through wise reflection, to illuminate a Dharma talk, we find it's full of holes. Sounds that keep dissolving. The Dharma talk appears and dissolves. The sensations of our body, mixed with the sounds of the talk, feeling tones—a cascade of shifting and changing, which we've been contemplating as *anicca*.

Turn your mind to the deathless.

When one really notices change, notices what's arising and ceasing, noticing these thoughts, we can also, with just a slight shift of attention, notice what is not changing. The sounds are shifting and changing within an unmoving listening. That's just a name for it—an unmoving awareness. That's another name.

The name is coming and going. The sounds are moving within the true nature of the name. In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu said, "The name that can be named is not the eternal name." Any name is going to be dissolved. God, the supreme reality—dissolves. Nibbana, with a capital N—it's a name.

The first disciple who had a breakthrough after the Buddha's awakening was one of the five ascetics the Buddha used to practice with. When the Buddha was trying to figure out who might understand his realization, he remembered them. They had a lot of faith in the Bodhisattva, the prince, because he had left all that behind. He was the super-duper ascetic—he could eat less, endure more pain, make more effort than anybody.

You all remember that they abandoned Siddhartha when he had gotten so emaciated and realized he wasn't getting anywhere. He had that memory under the rose apple tree as a child, and he knew he needed to leave behind these ascetic practices. That's when he returned to being with the breathing. He knew he needed to eat something to have the strength to do that. He accepted that offering from Sujata of milk rice, and the five ascetics just left him. "Slacker. He's reverted to luxury."

But after the Buddha was awake, when he was wondering who to try to share this with, he knew they

would understand. He saw with his inner vision, his awakened vision, where they were—outside of Benares in the Deer Park. He made his way there, and as he approached, at first they said, "Hey look, he's coming. We'll let him sit down if he wants, but the slacker—we're not going to do any special things for him." But they couldn't help themselves. They couldn't help but make some gestures of respect.

When he declared he was awakened and would teach them, they said, "That's a bit too far. You're the slacker. You've reverted to luxury." Three times he said, "Look, I've realized the way. You practice it, so will you." They kept saying, "Look, you've reverted to luxury. That's impossible." They had some views.

And then he said, "Have I ever talked this way? Have I ever lied to you? Do you ever remember me lying to you?"

Somehow that penetrated their heart. They listened. He gave that first discourse on the Four Noble Truths. And at the end, the Buddha exclaimed—he saw what had happened during the discourse, during that talk—that one of the disciples, Kondañña, had broken through, had an insight. So he exclaimed, it's right there in the sutra at the end of the discourse: "Kondañña knows! Kondañña knows!"

What does he know? The Buddha restates it: he knows whatever has the nature to arise has the nature to cease. Whatever has the nature to arise has the nature to cease.

Doesn't sound very spectacular. But as I was speaking yesterday morning, that cultivation, that recognition of the changing nature, is so profoundly liberating. We start to see all the things that we think were me and mine, and as we see them coming and going, arising and ceasing, there's the recognition: what is it that's mine? As we see what comes and goes, we start to get the experience of the heart that remains—that which is aware.

Kondañña—it's not in that first sutra, but in a Mahayana discourse, Kondañña speaks a little more about what happened to him, what helped him break through. What's called entering the stream. He touched Nibbana. He knew the deathless.

So when Sariputra is encouraging Anuruddha, "Turn your mind to the deathless," that's what happened to Kondañña in that talk. He realized what he hadn't seen before—what was not coming and going.

He spoke about what helped him see that. He put it like this when he was recounting that experience. It was in an assembly where different disciples were talking about how they broke through. He said, "Of the elders now present in this assembly, I receive that name, Añña Kondañña—the one who knows. Because I was enlightened to the meaning of the words *guest dust*. Guest dust. And I realized the fruition."

And then he gives two similes. These are really helpful, I've found in practice.

It is like a traveler who stops as a guest at a roadside inn, perhaps for the night or perhaps for a meal. When he is finished lodging there or when the meal is finished, he packs his bags and sets out again. He does not remain there at leisure. The host, however, does not go far away. Considering it this way,

Kondañña went on, the one who does not remain is called the guest, and the one that does remain is called the host. Guest, then, means what does not remain.

Like in this talk, the sounds, the words are guests. They do not remain. That's the first image.

Again, the second. When the sky clears up, the morning sun rises with all resplendence, and its golden rays stream into a house through a crevice to reveal particles of dust in the air. The dust dances in the rays of light, but the empty space is motionless. Considering it this way, what is clear and still is called space. What moves is called dust. Dust, then, means that which moves.

We've seen that—the dust, the light, the dust dancing. What if we wanted the dust not to dance? What if we were trying to make them move a certain way? What if we want the guests not to come and go? It is the nature of dust to dance. But what if we let the dust be dust? This gives us a clue when Sāriputta told Anuruddha, "Don't worry about those thoughts. Turn your mind to the deathless." When the dust is dancing, what if we just widen our vision and notice what is not dancing? The space remains untroubled.

Now we can look at this phrase, wisely reflecting—yoniso manasikāra. It points to the same phenomenon. Yoni means womb. It's talking about a space that then gives birth. It's the matrix, the context. Manasikāra means to do. Mana is the mind. So yoniso manasikāra is letting, putting the activity of mind into the womb of awareness. Wise reflection could be called radical reflection. It's returning to the root.

Every sound, every guest of moods and experiences is coming and going, but what remains? When the sound ends, do we just keel over dead? There's still the listening. There's still the knowing. There's the unmoving refuge. Buddha.

So right now, many of us are seeing we're not as accomplished as Anuruddha. But everyone here, we have some effort, some wholesome effort that's really been practiced. There's been some cultivation of presence. We definitely experience, I suspect most of us, some sense of struggle and stress. But Sāriputta and also the Buddha and certainly Ajahn Chah encouraged us to notice what happens if we get so caught up in trying to just get it right—always becoming, always getting on to a little more samādhi, or trying to get rid of that and thinking, "Well, as long as this is there, there's no way I can have a breakthrough."

What if we just let it be dust dancing? All right now, these sounds, these sensations, whatever we happen to be feeling—the mood, the thoughts—just as they are, can we let them be what they actually are? They're conditions that come and go. They're guests. That's their nature. It's like dust dancing. Trying to get the dust to stay a certain way is a recipe for frustration. The Buddha compared it to trying to grab air. You try to grab it, you reap weariness.

Ajahn Chah used a more earthy example. When we want conditions to be what they can't be

We're wanting a happy feeling to stay. We're wanting the painful feelings to be gone. We're wanting that sense of peace and understanding to be solid. But as we start to notice anicca, we realize that actually

every sight, every sound, every feeling, every taste, every smell, every sensation, every perception is just like these sounds—becoming otherwise every instant, like the dust dancing.

And yet, looking for certainty in that which is uncertain, as Ajahn Chah said, we're bound to suffer. He said it's just like going up to a duck and saying, "Why aren't you a chicken?" I mean, ducks are all right, don't get me wrong, but you know—quack, quack. Think, if you cockle-doodle-doo, you could wake people up! Think of the good karma. I don't know if quack-quack is that good karma. He said it's like wanting a duck to be a chicken. Yes, that's what we do when we're wrestling with conditions.

By turning the mind to the deathless, what if for a moment we just let the feelings, let the sounds, let the moods just be as they are? And just widen the attention to notice what remains. Listening is so helpful. The sounds come and go, but the listening remains. The knowing remains. Resting in it.

The womb of awareness is wider. When we're contracted around the particularization, the atomization, we get contracted around me and this and that. We forget that every experience is happening within this ocean-like, boundless presence. So wise reflection is not denying the conditions, but recognizing how they return to this womb, this space, this matrix of awareness.

So it is said: just as form is to space—we're noticing the forms in this room, but we're also recognizing the relationship of these forms to space. We're surrounded right now by boundless space above, below, and all around. It's a fact. Just as form is to space, and silence is to sound, so too is awareness to all experience.

So for a time, rather than—we might still have liking this form, not liking that one—we can just let that be. We're not crushing anything. Whatever the habit happens to be, let it be for now. But just contemplate: just as space is to form, you can't have forms without space. We get so contracted around our opinions about forms that we don't realize—we're coming for this meeting, then in a while this room will be empty. The space remains. Forms come and go. As silence is to sound.

So, just a slight adjustment in our practice. It's not crushing anything. We still notice the thoughts and sounds, but we're noticing that they're coming and going within a silent listening. This is called radical reflection. It's called the Śūraṅgama Samādhi in this famous Mahayana discourse, because śūraṅgama means durable, unshakable. The deathless doesn't shake. The dust dancing in the sunbeam—it's supposed to shake.

So all the feelings we're having now, even the opinion, "Oh gosh, I don't know what this is. I don't know if I can really do it. I haven't had much samādhi. Usually you only have a breakthrough if you really..." What if we let that be dust dancing? That's dancing within a silent listening. Letting be. Letting things come and go by relaxing.

No matter how much we do. That's why Anuruddha couldn't do it. We keep trying to do it. In Zen they call it trying to polish a brick, hoping you get a mirror. It's squeezing the samādhi, wanting a little more, having to get the feelings just right. It's endless. Or as the Buddha said, it's like cooking sand, hoping you're

going to get a nice meal.

He said this clinging at conditions and wanting them—my body, my feelings—wanting those to be stable, that's the problem. That's why recognizing change is so important, because as we see, all these things we're clinging to are shifting, changing. They're like a waterfall.

When we walk up close to a waterfall, it might be a famous waterfall. "I'm going to go see so-and-so waterfall." You might feel an attachment to it. "We've got one of the best waterfalls." But as we get close to it—the thunder sound, the incredible mist—waterfall sounds like a thing, but as we then try to grab it, one can just appreciate it. It's like that dust dancing. When we really start to recognize that actually this life of ours is a cascading waterfall of sights and sounds, feelings and thoughts, wanting that to stay in a certain form is dukkha. That's why there's the relinquishment. That's the insight then into "not mine," because how could it be mine? It's not even a thing. It's an ever-flowing stream.

That's why the bowing is so important. Yes, effort. And a lot of us have beautiful effort here. Effort's important to cultivate presence and investigation and seeing change. But if there's only that yang, trying to get it right, that's the cooking sand hoping for the good meal. It's polishing the brick wanting the mirror. It's still sitting there asking that duck why it's not a chicken.

At some point there's the—and for all of us, we don't have to wait till things are perfect—there's that turning the heart to the unmoving. That's not somewhere else; it's our nature. It's right here. The silence is before the sound. Every sound dissolves.

Our teacher called it "minding the gap." He encouraged us to, yes, notice the thoughts, but even take a simple one: "I'm sitting." Listen to that inner voice, that inner sound. "I'm..." and notice it's vibrating. "...sitting..." and then notice it dissolves. Do we keel over dead? That moment after the thought is just bright knowing. He encouraged us to mind that gap, to attend to the deathless, to this womb, to this original brightness.

The Buddha called it this: "It is this primal bright essence of consciousness that can bring forth all conditions. But because of conditions you consider it to be lost. Living beings lose sight of this original brightness."

It's not somewhere else. It's always right here, inviting us. When we bow, when we relax, when we trust that it's not that we have to get somewhere else—that's endless. "No, no, no, excuse me. When I get there, I'll talk to you. I've got to get there. I've got to get rid of this." That's how conditions can cause us to lose sight of what is always here.

Every sound, every impression emerges and dissolves back into this original brightness. Again, the Buddha put it like this: "It is this primal bright essence of consciousness that can bring forth all conditions. Because of conditions you consider it to be lost, and then living beings lose sight of the original brightness. Therefore, though they use it to the end of their days, they are unaware of it, and without intending, enter

the various destinies of birth and death."

So encouraging us to—yes, there's wonderful effort, but let's not overlook the soft effort sometimes. The just letting things be just like this. And honoring the perfection. The guests are showing themselves; our patterns are showing themselves. "Oh, but I should have been beyond this by now. I mean, I thought... I mean, it was really going good."

So-and-so really tripped me up. I'm not blaming anybody, but I can't believe they call themselves a meditator. I mean, you'd think there would be some screening or something. I know, I know, I shouldn't be worrying...

Just with whatever the pattern is, can it just be perfectly? When it's "me and mine," there's one big heck of a wrestling match going on. But when it's Dharma, then it is Dharma. It's part of nature. Let the dust dance. It's the guests coming and going.

What remains? What is it that's not coming and going? We rest into that. It's this ground of the heart.

I was such a doer. I wanted to do all the toughest practices because I was so strong. I used to be a wrestler. I could walk on my hands in my early days as a monk—a hundred yards. I used to teach the monks aṅga yoga before dawn in the early... I was just a postulant, making extra effort, doing this and that. And that wasn't bad. It's not bad to make effort. But I was just... I didn't have any sense of this. What does it mean that the peace is always here and now, always inviting us?

Well, it took a heavenly messenger to help me. I got typhoid fever, almost died. Months and months of diarrhea, then the fever, then urinating blood, and then really sick. I ended up being laid out for three years. I had to lie down pretty much for three years, feeling a bit like a failure, seeing all kinds of doctors. My teachers, my Western teachers, were worried about me. I was seeing all kinds of healers and doctors. When we moved to Chithurst Monastery in England from Thailand, I had this little attic room where I could just be sick. But I was still trying to get better.

Ajahn Sumedho remembered I was so strong. He remembered me when I had so much energy, and he so wanted me to get better. Then one day he realized, *Golly, I'm just putting a burden on Kittisaro.* I didn't know that's what he was thinking when I was lying there on my floor. I felt like I had a spear in my side for years—just burning, indigestion, internal bleeding. Really pale and thin and collapsed. He came into my room and sat down on the floor next to me and said, "Kittisaro, I just want to apologize."

I said, "You want to apologize?"

"I want to apologize that I've been putting all this stress on you—wanting you to get better, wanting you to get better, wanting you to get better." He said, "Kittisaro, I give you permission to die."

He didn't smile. He just said, "I give you permission to die."

And the relief. I cried for joy.

It's not that I didn't know these practices then, but that really gave me permission just to let being sick be being sick. Let it be a heavenly messenger. Let each of us honor our heavenly messengers—our karmic conditions appearing to us perfectly. Dissolving and flickering in this luminous heart that's never gone anywhere, never will go anywhere, is unstained. This original brightness is not somewhere else.

But that gave me permission. And I loved lying down. That was my practice. Each out-breath, I let go.

What's so wonderful when you're really tired and let go—the floor, the ground holds you. I kept letting go into this ground of awareness. There's a ground floor. It's our nature. Each out-breath, each sound, each word dissolves into this. Each out-breath, letting go. Really contemplating what remains. Pleasure and pain, they are perfect as they are. What remains?

We can do this. We don't have to get typhoid and lie down for three years. In ordinary moments—when Ajahn Chah was walking on alms round with the monks one day, he pointed to a really large boulder. He turned around to the monks and said, "Is that boulder heavy?" The monks were thinking, what is this, a trick question? "Yes, Luang Por, yes, Venerable Father, it's heavy." And Ajahn Chah said, "Nah, it's not heavy if you don't try to lift it."

All of us have patterns. Is the pain in the back heavy when you're trying to shift it, wrestle with it? Is being sick heavy? Yes—when I wanted to try to get better so that I could be a real monk and really do the right stuff, that was carrying a big boulder. When Ajahn Sumedho said, "You have permission to die," I had permission just to let it be. It was still painful, but I wasn't adding anything. It was just relief.

In moments we'll notice ourselves wrestling something, pushing, pulling. And this is important. It's not a waste of time. The Buddha didn't call it a First Noble Truth for nothing. Suffering isn't a waste. As Ajahn Chah would say, if it was a bad thing, he wouldn't call it a noble truth. So we open to it and get a sense for this wrestling. But as we practice letting be, letting go, and trusting that we're letting go into what is always here and now—that's what the Buddha taught. This peace is always here and now.

Even moments of noticing when we're generating suffering, and then a moment when it's just what it is—this is very important. Turning our mind to the deathless. Letting the dust and the sounds keep arising and dissolving into this unmoving, ever bright, fathomless, silent listening.

I'll give Ajahn Chah the last words tonight. I'm so grateful for his example and the example of my teachers—Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho, Master Hsuan Hua—and for my fellow practitioners, who keep encouraging each other.

From Ajahn Chah: "Do everything with a mind that lets go. Do not expect praise or reward. If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end."

May the blessings of this day be shared above, below, and all around. Blessings don't belong to anyone. The more we relax and let them be and let them flow, they expand exponentially—like a pebble dropping into a pool, sending ripples in all directions effortlessly. As we breathe out, so too may the goodness and blessings of our lives extend in all directions, touching all space, all forms, blessing all beings.

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