Shifting Perspective towards Freedom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:08:34

I'm happy to get to spend some time with you again this evening speaking about the Dhamma. First I want to take a moment to appreciate all of our good fortune in being here. It's said that to encounter the Dhamma is rare, and to have the conditions in your life where you can go to practice is also rare—conditions of health, well-being, finding teachers, being in a place that's peaceful enough to do a retreat. You can also appreciate your own wholesomeness, your own sincerity and goodness in choosing to spend the week like this, or for some of you, several weeks.

I feel that for myself also, even on the side of being a teacher. I can tell every time that I'm teaching that this is good for me. I get to hang out with wise people who encourage me to also manifest in the wisest, best way possible. In some way, all of us are on a kind of Dharma detox diet. When you take out all the other inputs you normally take in—all the TV shows or conversations or cartoons or whatever you would otherwise be inputting—and for this week, all that you're taking in is the Dhamma, it's a very purifying activity.

We're in a solid place in the middle of the retreat. We're in the midst of it now, so you're definitely cooking, whether you know it or not. I encourage you to take your own ideas about whether things are going well or not with a grain of salt, or sometimes a giant shake of salt. We're in this cauldron, this process of purification here. The heart and the mind are in some ways being cooked by the Dharma, by your practice, by holding the precepts. Sometimes I think of these square zabutans, and even the chairs, as little Dharma cooker burners. Every time you come in and sit, you're being cooked. So don't worry about what's happening or how many times your mind wanders. Just come back, put your sincere effort in, and the cooking will happen.

I'd like to talk to you about an aspect of the teaching that could be helpful for understanding what we're doing here and for being able to investigate your experience further. There's an aspect of the teaching that describes the way in which we take ourselves to be things. We take ourselves to be solid. We perceive there to be a "me" who is living this life. I want to engage in some inquiry with you through some of the Buddha's frameworks about whether this is actually so in the way we might experience it to be.

There's something called *sakkāya diṭṭhi*. *Diṭṭhi* means view, as in *sammā diṭṭhi*, right view. This particular view is called personality view or identity view, and it is said to be lifted—we are said to be relieved of it—when we reach the first stage of awakening.

Now, just briefly on this matter of awakening and enlightenment stages. You remember the last time I was speaking with you, I was talking about gravity and understanding nature. In a way, you could consider

awakening as alignment with nature, alignment with the truth. In this process of practice, this process of human development and evolution, many people report that as they sit, they find themselves reliving a lot of things that have happened to them and also remembering a lot of things they have done that they might regret—things we've said, actions we've taken, sometimes even from a long time ago, when we were very small.

If this is happening to you, this is a normal part of this aligning process. To me, it's partly a recognition: as we come into alignment, we recognize the ways in which we may have been out of alignment. We experience the pain of that, both the impact it might have had on others, and we might feel some remorse about that, which is actually considered a wholesome thing. So if that's happening for you, allow it to be there. Notice it. If there's a sense of regret or remorse, feel that. Try to avoid steering into guilt, which is when there becomes a sense of self around it—"bad me," "I did this," "I'm always like this." Feel the pain of it, and then forgive yourself. Allow it to be released.

In this process of alignment, it's said that there are different stages in which you sort of click into alignment more fully. When you click into that next level of alignment, you still might be wobbling around, but within a smaller range of wackiness, you could say, or delusion. There are several clicks that can happen. In the first click, you are relieved of this personality view, identity view, *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, which has to do with a false sense of individuality—a false sense of being a completely separate, independent, controlling entity.

So I'll give you some examples of that. We have a view, for example, that I am this body. That would be considered a certain identity view. Either I am this body, this body is me, there's a me who's in this body somewhere, or there's a me who owns this body. And you could say in our practice of mindfulness, we have the opportunity to investigate these claims in some way—to see if this is actually true.

The Buddha very helpfully outlined several different elements of our experience that we have a habit of mistakenly taking to be ourselves. This question of self or not-self is a well-known dilemma in Buddhism and in philosophical pursuits. In one of the suttas, the first one in the Dīgha Nikāya, he talks about sixty-two different views that were held at the time, and he basically refutes each one in various ways—views about the identity of self, views about life, views about cause and effect. In some ways, we've kind of whittled things down, so there may not be as many prevailing views today, but there are still a couple of views about self and not-self that persist.

And yet, in some ways, the Buddha himself didn't really take up this question of what you are or are not. The question he was more interested in helping us with is this question about suffering and the end of suffering. In this approach, the practice we're doing and our inquiry can be focused more around understanding how things work. How does it work that we feel like there is someone here? How does it work that suffering gets created? How does it work that suddenly there is an adversary in our life? What's going on there, and what is the way to be free of that?

This is really a different approach to the question—in some ways, very practical. The Buddha points us to different factors of our human experience that it's particularly helpful for us to understand in order to be free. So our inquiry is more into how what we call a human being, or what we call ourselves, actually operates. And mindfulness is a really helpful tool in trying to understand this.

This is partly why, for some people in the practice, I've given this advice—and others have too—what if you suddenly found yourself in a human body? You're like an alien who has been suddenly embodied. I know there are various films of this sort where an alien comes to Earth and takes up some human body. And in these films, the alien is actually really interested—how do the hands work? What does it feel like to walk? They're trying to drink water through their eyes and then discovering the mouth and what that's like. So what would it be like if you really took this fresh approach to understanding what it is to be a human being? What is this experience like? And then to be particularly interested in the aspects of experience where we start to get snagged, where there's some friction in the flow of experience—where there's a creation of suffering, of difficulty, of strain, of stress.

We have this experience of having a particular point of view and of feeling embodied. But I would suggest that this idea of a "me" in this is actually just a story that we have. This is a mental factor which, when we examine it more closely, doesn't actually have the kind of continuity that it seems.

The Buddha talks about this as one of the distortions that we have. There's a word called vipallāsa—distortions. And this framework of distortions, which can actually be applied to many different areas of life, is where we might have a view, and then that view informs the way that we perceive things. Based on that perception, we then have more thoughts. We think about things in a certain way, and that reinforces our view.

I'll give you a more mundane example of this. In the place where we're staying right now, in the campus here lower down, when I first came to my room, I found that there were some bird neighbors who had taken up residence. There's a bird's nest right above, near the door of my room. And I live in the city, in San Francisco, so when I come here, I get to be in nature. I both enjoy nature, but I also have this sort of idea of myself as someone who likes nature, right? I was just expounding this view actually to Jozen earlier—yesterday, I think it was.

So at first I was happy about these birds, these swallows. But then the first morning I found that my neighbors are on a different schedule than I am. About four a.m. they're all chirping, and the day has already begun for them. Very loudly. So then I had a different idea about my neighbors. Actually, first I accused Greg of chirping—Greg is my human neighbor. And then he told me it was not him. So then I found it was the birds.

You know, this view also arises: "Oh, this is my place. This is the Spirit Rock teacher place."

And then a little later in the day, I was trying to write the Dharma talk, and it turns out on the other side of

the residence there's a nice roof that's very shady, and a group of turkeys likes to hang out there. They're actually not noisy, but they do poop a lot. So there I was, trying to write a Dharma talk—this very high-level activity—and there's a whole bunch of turkeys sitting one foot from me on the porch. I don't know if they could or couldn't see me, but they're looking at me and just pooping.

At first I had this idea: What are you doing here? This is my residence and you're pooping on the porch. But the mind has this view, and in this case, the view is based on human dominance, honestly. There's a certain unperceived human dominance—the humans have built these domiciles, and so this is my place, and you are smaller than me, and you are birds, and thus should be inferior and should know your place. It wasn't played out like this, but really there was a perspective like this.

Fortunately, my mind in some ways doesn't like to hang out in these perspectives too much. I feel like one of the benefits of practice is that we can become less and less tolerant of certain kinds of suffering. So rather than drill down and really hunker down, there's a way in which the mind is like, "What else is possible?" There's always at least one other perspective possible in a situation.

Through practice, this happens almost automatically, and sometimes it feels kind of like those robot vacuum cleaners. If they bump into a wall, they come back, and they'll go like this, and they'll keep going until they find some exit. The mind doesn't want to hang out in these areas of oppositional suffering, so it keeps searching.

In reflection with my turkey neighbors, it was like, "Oh, actually I'm here for this week, but maybe it's their residence. Maybe I'm visiting their area, not they're visiting my area. And maybe if it bothers me that they poop on the porch, I can sweep that away." Then it's interesting being a Dharma teacher because sometimes one's own advice comes back. Recognizing yourself as part of nature. So then it's like, "Oh yeah, actually it's kind of cool to have these birds around." That became somewhat more okay, even though the same thing was happening—even this afternoon they were looking at me and pooping while I'm writing this Dharma talk.

With the ones in front, I realized I could put on earplugs. Also, they've been here before me. And then I started to notice—rather than being caught in my view of "What are you doing? You're wrong"—that every time I opened the door, the bird would fly away. It seemed scared. I am much bigger than this bird, so when I open the door, it gets scared and flies away. This happens every time. I started to tune in: this is actually disruptive to their life too. I think they're being disruptive to my life, but there's another perspective from which I'm interrupting their life as well.

Even just some shift that way—there's a way in which we usually assume ourselves both to be here and also very substantially to be the center of the universe. Everything is in relationship to me, to what's good for me, to how I want things to be. This can cause a lot of suffering, as well as being actually false.

In a more mundane way in regular life: there's a billboard on an area of the highway where there's a lot of

traffic. The billboard is for a bicycle coalition, and it says, "You are not stuck in traffic. You are traffic."

That shift from "everyone else is a problem to me, I have this thing I want to do"—that's the view—to "actually we're all in this together in some way." There's this flow of traffic, and to the other people, I'm in their way. We're all just trying to get home.

In an even more impressive way, a friend of mine had told me about a time that she was

mugged in Oakland. Someone had a gun, and it was late at night. She and her girlfriend were coming back from somewhere, and the person told them to put everything they had in their pockets down on the ground and then run. So they did that. She said she only had about four dollars and a chapstick, and the keys too.

So I asked her later, "Weren't you scared? That's a difficult experience."

And she said, "Yeah, I was scared, but actually I could see that he was scared too. He was holding the hand with the gun and it was shaking. So we were both scared."

This friend is not overtly a practitioner, but that's good practice—shifting perspective. It's not just about you. Even in these extreme situations where it feels like you're being wronged, where this is clearly a problem, where your view is that you are the victim in this—what if we had the ability to access multiple perspectives? The world would be a very different place.

So what can help us in this? Here in retreat, we have a good opportunity to actually investigate in a more detailed way: What is it that we take to be ourselves? The Buddha gives a particular scheme that I've found helpful, which concerns the five aggregates—particular areas of experience, particular ways in which our experience of self gets constructed. It's helpful for us to look into these.

We've already been examining several of them in our practice, but I'd like to mention them all, including a few that haven't been discussed yet.

The first one is form—the physical form. This one we've been practicing with from the very beginning. Usually we take this experience of the body to be a solid entity that we call "myself." Now scientifically, this is also not true. The body is not fully solid. It is actually a mass of shifting and changing cells. Blood is always flowing through. Cells are being born and dying. Everything is always in motion in that which we call our body. And in our experience of it, when we pay attention, we can notice that the experience itself is constantly changing. There is some experience of solidity, of fluidity, of mobility, of temperature.

The Buddha gave metaphors for each of these aspects of experience. For this one, he said it's something that might seem solid but is actually totally insubstantial. The body is like the foam on ocean waves. Through the motion of the wave coming in, sometimes at the top there are bubbles that seem to collect, and it almost appears to be something solid. But it's so insubstantial—it's going to hit the ground and dissolve.

A second aggregate the Buddha talked about is *vedana*, or feeling tone, which Greg mentioned and we discussed this morning. This quality of pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant is actually present in every sense experience—every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch, every mental object. Every sensation has a valence of this sort.

We frequently misperceive this as something solid, something permanent, and as actually being ourselves. We misperceive a body sensation that is unpleasant to be ourselves. We label it "my knee pain," and then we have mental thoughts about that, and we proliferate and create a whole world. When we tune into this in more detail, we notice that feeling tone is actually constantly changing. In this way, it's not ours. It's not me. It's not mine. And it's not changing in the way I would like it to all the time. So I can't really own this. If I owned it, I'd make it do what I wanted, which would be to get more and more pleasant, period.

For feeling tone, the metaphor the Buddha gave was bubbles arising from raindrops on a puddle. It just arises from conditions in a moment, and then it's gone.

Investigate this and see. Check it out. There can be very interesting things to learn. With feeling tone, one area where you can notice this particularly well is in eating meditation, which you have several opportunities for during the day—or even drinking tea meditation, something like that.

Because there are ways in which the feeling tone can be both surprising—like this thing you thought would taste pleasant is actually not as pleasant as you expected. Or when you tune in, the opposite: you thought it was going to be unpleasant, but it's actually pleasant. You can also notice how you can't make it last. It comes, it goes, it fades out so quickly. And when you tune into that, you get a sense of how poignantly futile our attempt to line up pleasant experience for the rest of our lives is as a strategy for well-being.

The third aggregate has been mentioned briefly but not elaborated on so much. This is saññā, or perception. This is a mental factor that involves labeling or recognition that happens automatically in our mind. Sometimes it happens verbally, with a word, and sometimes there's just a knowing without the word. For example, when you take a fork from the silverware drawer, you don't always say "fork" in your mind. Maybe sometimes you do, but you're aware this is the implement with which you can eat your salad. This is an aspect of thought, and when we're talking about mental objects, it arises to the level of a label.

I was speaking about this when we were doing guided meditation with thinking or mind objects. It's noticing when this labeling comes, how it comes without your script. And what's particularly interesting is to notice when it is wrong—when we misperceive something around us. For me, sometimes it's misperceiving something in the environment that I think might be an animal, and then I realize it's actually just a moving leaf or a bush. It's helpful to recognize how often we're misperceiving in this way.

A friend of mine from the city came out for a retreat in springtime. Some of you might have been here in

the spring when the creeks were running full—as Greg mentioned, there was a lot of rain. She told me the first night that she kept hearing these sounds and was thinking, "Wow, there are so many car alarms here. Why don't people turn their car alarms off?" And then she realized it was actually frogs. But her city perspective interpreted the sound as car alarms, as something happening that needed attention.

The particular perception that's most helpful to examine is, of course, this idea of "me" or "mine" that arises in relationship to our body, to experience, to things. The metaphor the Buddha used for perception was of a mirage—something that seems like it is a certain way, but as you approach it, you can see it's not.

The fourth aggregate is called sankhara, translated various ways, but we'll call it mental formations. Perception is one of these, but this category includes aspects of our mental life that arise—all of the emotions, your intentions, all of this. And as Joseph was saying this morning, we can take these to be me or mine. "I own this anger" or "this anger is mine," or even "I am angry, I am this."

The metaphor the Buddha gave for mental formations is about a banana tree trunk. We don't have too many banana trees here, but I've seen them in tropical places. A banana tree is basically like a big stalk. It looks like a solid tree, but it's empty inside. What's interesting for this metaphor is that it's kind of like a big blade of grass with these empty chambers within. And yet it has this huge, fancy production of bananas. The comb of bananas is very big and kind of showy—like strong mental formations. Yet when you examine it, it's actually also empty. It'll fall down. There's nothing there, nothing at the core.

So notice if you have these beliefs sometimes that "I am this emotion, this emotion is me"—or even "I am in this emotion, this emotion is in me," that there is a me related to this.

The fifth aggregate may be the more unusual one to consider, which is viññana, or consciousness. Even the knowing that arises with a sense experience itself is not me or mine. And this too, as it arises with a sense experience and then fades—the metaphor is that it's like a magic show. This consciousness is that which appears and reveals all of the others, this knowing quality.

In our practice, we have so far been examining objects—the experience of the body, body sensations as an object, thoughts as an object, emotions, the energy that moves through, mind states as an object. It could be that even if you're getting pretty good at seeing those all as not me, not mine, coming and going, it can be helpful to turn around and see whether there is a kind of hiding place for identity in the knower. The knower sometimes is also like "the meditator," the one who knows, the one who is directing the practice.

And it's very subtle, the identification that can be there. But also, it's not to be found when you examine it. So I encourage you to check this out. Is there anything personal, permanent, controlling, independent entity in even the knowing? Does it have any characteristics that could be called me or mine?

In some ways, you might feel like, well, what's the problem with that? If I'm able to not cling to or attach to or identify with the body, emotions, thoughts—aren't I doing pretty well? That's pretty good, right? Probably alleviated ninety percent of suffering there.

Ajahn Mahabua, who is one of the forest masters, says whenever there's a center in the knowing, there is dukkha. This is the thing: whenever there is some identification, whenever there is some clinging, however seemingly subtle it is, there still is something we need to protect, something that we want to prevent from being harmed. And something that can be held in opposition to the rest of the world, whether it's experience or birds or the weather or body sensations.

The Buddha pointed these out, particularly these five, as areas for investigation specifically for the purpose of ending suffering. And I really appreciate this. It was like, well, there are these processes by which we seem to exist, and here highlighted are the ones in which we tend to get caught. And here's a practice of mindfulness, a practice of settling the heart and mind and being able to investigate these and to see through this for yourself. Not because you heard it in a lecture or because you read it in a book, but because you've seen for yourself.

As we investigate this body and mind, this human experience, we can see that there's nothing really there in the same way that we usually perceive it to be. This always gets a little bit tricky because there is a way in which we certainly feel like, ah, but there is this uniqueness to this body. Certainly when I'm drinking water, I'm feeling that and not this other person. So it's not saying that there's not a uniqueness to experience or to arising moments, but it's a little bit more like everything is constructed. Everything is constructed, everything is concocted in some way. It arises causally and then it will pass away causally also.

The best metaphor for this, I think, is the rainbow. A rainbow appears and it's beautiful, but it's not really a thing. It's an appearance that's there because of the way the light is shining through the prism or the mist, the rain. But when those things shift, which happens rather quickly, then it's gone. But was it really there to begin with? You can't really take the rainbow home. You can't package it. It arises causally and then when those particular causes and conditions end, it also is no longer apparent. In some ways, this is true about everything in our environment and most particularly about that which we call ourself.

Here's a story that the Buddha told about this, a metaphor for this as well. Supposing there were a king who had never heard the sound of a lute before—a stringed instrument. This king hears the sound of the lute and says, "Wow, that's so beautiful. It's so delightful, tantalizing, intoxicating, ravishing, enthralling. What is this instrument?" And then the people would tell him, "Oh, that is called the lute." And so then he says, "Go and fetch me the lute."

They bring the lute, and then he looks at it and says, "Enough with your lute. Fetch me just the sound. It's the sound that I want of the lute." And they say, "Well, you know, there are many different pieces of it. There's the wood and the skin and the neck and the frame. And when you play it with a certain human effort, then the music comes, but it's really just all these different components."

So the king impatiently says, "Enough with that. I'm going to get the sound." And so he breaks the lute into ten pieces—and still, of course, can't find the sound. Then breaks it again to a hundred pieces and

pulverizes it, and still the sound is not becoming apparent. Finally he decides to burn it in a fire. And having burned it, there's just ashes. So then he's winnowing the ashes, looking for the sound in that. And still it's not coming, obviously. And then eventually the ashes might get washed away or blown away in the wind. And he would say, "Oh, it's a sorry thing, this lute, whatever this lute may be. People have been totally deceived by this." You can't find the sound.

In the same way, the Buddha says, a practitioner can investigate all of these aggregates—can investigate form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. And through investigating these can see whether there's any me or mine or I am within that. And no thoughts of me or mine or I am can be found within these.

So really what we learn as we attend to these is that there is this way in which we could be simply recognizing ourselves as nature—the arising and passing of each of these aspects. But unfortunately, because of delusion, we have a tendency to cling to these, to some aspect of this. We have this tendency to believe these, to take this to be ourselves. And then as they change, particularly as they change in ways that are not pleasing to us, we suffer.

In some ways, through repeated observation of the nature of these different aspects of what we usually call ourselves, through practicing this different kind of knowing with mindfulness, it's possible for us to see over and over again the ways in which the me, the mine, the I, is not found within this. And through this, there can be an effortless letting go, almost in spite of yourself.

The beautiful thing in this teaching is that we're examining, we're able to examine this process by which we're having experience and trying to understand that. And in this way, we have all of the equipment that we need for complete liberation, for complete alignment, right here in this body and mind system.

The Buddha offers another example about how we can relate to this—that these different aspects we usually take to be ourselves cannot actually be ourselves. They're not under our control. They're constantly changing. There's no inherent me or mine in that.

He says, "What do you think, monks, if a person were to gather or burn grass, twigs, branches, and leaves that they found here?" You can imagine here with all the high grass, what if they collected that? You might see the caretakers doing that. "And what if they were going to burn that or throw it away? Would the thought occur to you, 'Oh no, it's us that this person is gathering or burning or cutting down?'" And they say, "Oh no, because those things are not ourselves, nor do they belong to us."

"Even so, monks, whatever is not yours, let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare and happiness. And what isn't yours? Form is not yours. Feeling is not yours. Perception is not yours. Mental formations are not yours. Consciousness is not yours. So let go of these, and your letting go will be for your long-term welfare and happiness."

On the way, of course, in this exploration, a lot of what we encounter is ourselves doing the

opposite—clinging, misidentifying one or more of these to be ourselves. So in the practice, it's also really helpful to hold experience, to hold oneself with a lot of compassion.

Sometimes people come and they're frustrated because they say, "I've been practicing for weeks now, or a certain number of years, and still the mind is wandering, or I got duped by this emotion and was roiled around in it. I spent a lot of my time painting pictures of tigers and running away from them."

My advice is to allow yourself to be very humbled by the power of these habits of mind. It's a very humbling Dharma practice. Very, very humbling. And it's good to hold oneself with a lot of kindness and compassion too. Because you can include however long you have been practicing against however much the rest of your life was when you were not practicing. And if you believe in past lives, then you could include all of those as well. So our efforts here are good. Our efforts here are worthy. Trust that you're learning, you're cooking, whether you know it or not.

But the habitual strategy, the habitual view, the strong view is going to be: I am this body. I am these feelings. I am these emotions. The habitual view is going to be that the road to happiness is by aligning all circumstances to please me, to get everyone to agree with the way that I see the world, and to try to get everyone to follow my script. And as I mentioned, this includes humans and non-humans also. We want the birds to accord to our wishes, and the sounds, the weather.

So a lot of kindness in this approach. Interest and kindness.

Now, we've been doing the mettā practice here for some days, and I know we've practiced with the mettā for yourself. One instruction that could be helpful for the rest of the evening—I'll offer this for you—is to see if you can practice with yourself as you're walking and even as you're doing the things in your evening routine to get ready for bed, as if you were doing them with a quality of kindness.

If you're drinking water, what would it be like to drink water, to feed yourself lovingly? You do it with some care and attention. If you were actually feeding or giving drink to someone you cared about, you would do that with some intimacy.

You do it with some carefulness. What is it like if you brush your teeth with a sense of love, of metta, caring for this body, this precious body? What would it be like if you wash your face, change your clothes with a sense of goodwill, of kindness, of metta? What would it be like if you put yourself to bed with a sense of metta, tucking yourself in? Would you fling yourself on the bed? Would you fling someone you loved onto the bed?

The answer to this is not in words. It's a kind of koan of how we approach life. Like so many things in this practice, it's a lived answer—how we can care for ourselves, how we can care for others. In this way, we're cultivating this loving attention, this kind attention. And when we include that with curiosity and investigation, these are all excellent ingredients for living a good life, both here on retreat and when we go out into the world.

These qualities are also essential for gaining the insight, the kind of deep understanding that leads to greater and greater alignment with the truth, greater and greater freedom from suffering, spending less time in the caves of delusion and more time in freedom. That freedom gives you more space to connect with the world in ways that are true, to connect with nature, to connect with what matters most.

If there are aspects of what you've heard tonight that interest you, I encourage you to investigate them. If there are things that seemed cryptic or confusing, you can either hold them in the question mark basket, you can leave them on the floor here, or just take them as a hypothesis that you're in the laboratory of experience, able to check out for yourself.

Thank you for your practice. May we all be well cooked today and throughout the entire retreat.

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