Wise Attention 2 of 3

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:15

So there are times when it can just be coming in, and I can really just turn to, "Oh, torpor, sloth, dullness." By doing that, the wise attention has actually moved into the awareness. And moment after moment of really turning to the awareness within which one is aware of, "Ah, this is just too hard right now," or "My eyes are just too sleepy," or "My body's just too heavy. This is useless. There's too much sloth and torpor. I can't keep paying attention." Just turn to the awareness and keep noticing it. I'm not saying it magically disappears, but it really shifts from unwise to wise attention. It stops feeding it and begins to starve it.

With restlessness and worry, the Buddha says you can actually pay attention to the stillness of awareness. In other words, it doesn't mean all the phenomena stop coming and going. It doesn't mean you're sitting there so worried about whatever obsessive thought is there and think, "Oh, let me just notice stillness of awareness," and the whole thing falls away. But stillness of awareness is actually accessible. Stillness of awareness means the mind's jumping all around—"I'm worried about this, I'm worried about that"—and awareness notices it all. It's similar to the sloth and torpor one. Just withdraw the energy from getting caught in the stories and the obsessive thoughts. Turn it back to the moment of knowing itself. Knowing obsessive thought. Knowing obsessive thought. That awareness isn't jumping around. It's not going anywhere. It's just in that moment. Everything's happening in the stillness of awareness. Just play with it.

And of course, with uncertainty, it's like quit paying attention to all those thoughts. The Buddha says, at times, really look clearly and see what's what, instead of just speculating about things. Come out of the speculation and just bring your bare attention to know what's arising in this moment. It's really sustained attention, rather than thinking you're going to think your way out of this one, which just keeps feeding the doubt.

Those are some of the examples I wanted to give under the first category, which is how wise attention actually starves these tendencies, with some very specific examples of that.

And this leads into the second, which is how the āsavas, or these habits of mind, are abandoned by what the Buddha calls restraining—in other words, restraint at the sense doors. Now, we think of restraining sometimes as putting someone in a straitjacket—that's our violent image of restraining, or holding somebody back. In a way, it could be that. But restraining is really what Ajahn Buddhadasa calls bringing sati-paññā, mindfulness-wisdom, in at the moment of sense door contact.

So in the moment of seeing, if we're right present with mindfulness-wisdom, we know seeing. We know, "Oh, that's beautiful. It's pleasant." It doesn't expand. It doesn't turn into craving or becoming or some whole papañca about what it means in the future. It just becomes, "Oh yeah, seeing, pleasant."

Mindfulness-wisdom at the point of sense contact—that's really what restraint at the sense doors means.

Without that restraint, as you know, there's a moment you might notice that you're seeing something pleasant, but not quite with the wisdom factor, not quite with strong enough mindfulness. And then it goes off, like I said, with a hindrance to the gratification of the pleasant, the sense of me, and to thoughts about it and what it means. And those thoughts lead to action. This is what we call papañca, proliferation—stories of the past, stories of the future, actions it can lead to—all because just in that moment of sense contact, there wasn't restraint.

Now, sometimes we can think of restraint as being so afraid that the desire or the ill will or the sense of self is going to proliferate that we're almost afraid to look around. I have a friend who some years ago on retreat at the retreat center was working with restraint in this way, which was that he walked around blindfolded all day for several days. He knew the place, you know, up and down the stairs.

That way, you know, he was restraining sense contact at the eye door, which is true. And we can go a little far that way because, of course, there are still the other five senses, right? Sense contact at the ear door, touching sensation, taste, smell, and the mind—we can't really just put a blindfold on that.

Wise attention means both seeing how restraint at the sense door allows the whole proliferation to fall away, and seeing how far down the road we go when there is unwise attention, when we get caught up in lack of restraint.

I'll give you a simple example from my practice. I was practicing one time for about a month in this really beautiful retreat center in South Africa, up in KwaZulu-Natal. It's more lovely than here as far as the environment. One day I came out—the grounds are very beautifully landscaped with a kind of oval drive—right around dawn. All around the whole drive were huge iris bushes, and on this particular dawn, they had all bloomed at once. They hadn't bloomed before, and I still remember it. This was almost ten years ago. So beautiful and subtle—this white with a tiny violet color in the middle. I was just overwhelmed with the beauty.

I did not have wise attention at the sense door. "This is so beautiful." For a moment, it was just appreciating beauty. Then it was, "Ah, so pleasant." I didn't say "so pleasant"—if I had, that would have been wise attention. Instead it was, "How can I hold onto this?" "Oh, my mother would love to see this. She's such a gardener. If only I could take photos."

Of course, I didn't have a camera. But that didn't stop me. I went back in for photos. My friend Gavin—he's over there, he's on retreat, but never mind—I bet he has a camera. So I'm running around the place, looking for my friend who is staying in another part, trying to borrow a camera, all really in service of continuing the sense of pleasant in that moment. Total non-restraint at the sense door.

We're not talking about evil or something. We're talking about what was feeding craving in that moment. This is what we look at: What's increasing in the mind and what's decreasing? What was increasing?

Craving. I finally took the pictures. I brought them home. I showed them to my mother. "Oh yeah, that's nice." Nothing to do with the original experience. It doesn't translate. It was just, "How can I hold on to this? It's so beautiful." Nothing wrong with beauty, but it's that attachment.

So keeping it simple here. Shankara, who was an Advaita master in India centuries ago, points out that we nourish craving. Craving is intensified when we let our thoughts dwell on sense objects and seek temporary satisfaction in those sense objects. That is what increases the habit of craving in our hearts, in our minds.

Practicing with restraint, satipañña, at all the sense doors really just cuts that tendency. It's starving the tendency for craving or for aversion, if you focus in the same way on all the unpleasant things. Some of us are cursed with that particular habit—at least you don't kid yourself that you're enjoying it and that it's nice. You know it's suffering.

This one, you may not quite notice the suffering aspect, but really pay attention and notice. Even when you talk, you can tell yourself, "Oh, this is really good. This is really wholesome. It's a little papañca, a little proliferation, but I'm noticing it. And it's really for the good of all beings, or at least it's for my own well-being right now. I need a little beauty. It's so dreary. There's so much dukkha."

The skillful means isn't about what it looks like. It's about what's being fed in your heart, in your mind. Sometimes, if you're in a real dukkha, in a space of lots of suffering, you go and sit outside, look at the beauty, and it just brings more stillness of awareness, more peace. That's not feeding. That's not lack of restraint. That's skillful means. But if you watch and what's being fed is more, more, more—less peaceful, less peaceful, "I need this object, I don't want that object"—then it's unwise attention. Really notice. We can see the moment-to-moment effect. It's really very useful. You can see how it works.

There's a quotation from Sogyal Rinpoche that I think describes this very well. He's saying that at the present moment, in our unawakened, not very mindful state, our mind faces away from itself. Mind—or you could say attention, or mana, as in manasikāra—the mind bends towards whatever we experience: sight, sound, smell, taste, texture. The mind leans towards it. The attention then is also caught up by thoughts about the past, about the future, and about the present in association with that object. That's the habit of our mind.

Yet restraint of the senses doesn't mean that we then get afraid to have sense contact. Like my friend, you know: "God, if I see anything, I'll get lost in craving, so better to be blind. Better to be deaf. Better to be dead." Rather, it means to see that there can be exquisite presence. It's not the sense contact; it's the clinging.

Sogyal again: "Yet we are not dragged into hell just by experiencing something. Neither are we elevated to a heavenly state by experiencing something." As Tilopa said to Naropa, "Son, you are not bound by perceiving, but by clinging. So cut your clinging, Naropa."

Satipañña, wise attention at the sense door, is really what we mean by restraint of the senses. See the contact, and by wise attention, cut the clinging, or the aversion, or the endless proliferation. And again, as Shankara says, when we cease dwelling upon sense objects, peace will arise in your heart. We call this liberation while living. Liberation while living. Peace will arise in your heart, even if for a moment. Then restraint becomes a beautiful, supportive, happy state.

The third way that the Buddha spoke in this sutta about abandoning all these tendencies, really letting them wither—and this is something useful not only in retreat, but all of these are useful in life, though this one very much in our daily life—is called āsavas that can be abandoned by using. By paying attention to our relationship to how we use things, to how we use the requisites of our life.

He, of course, is talking to monks. And here's an example: "Here, a bhikkhu, reflecting wisely, paying careful attention, uses a robe only for protection from the cold or from heat, for protection from insects and burning, for the purpose of concealing what disturbs conscience." In other words, you're not using it for beautification. You're not dressing for amusement. It's just the way you use your clothes. And he goes on to talk about how we use alms food, how we use resting place, how we use medicines. Those are the four things that a bhikkhu can have. We, of course, can have many more things.

But I have found this so useful and very widespread—on retreat but also in life—to pay attention to the way I use clothes, requisites, you know, where I live, what keeps me warm, things that I think I need. All the things that really expand in a lay life: how we use food, how we relate to food. In other words, do we use these things simply for protection, to keep us comfortable? That's okay—to be healthy, to not be suffering. Or do we get caught in using clothes, food, requisites, supplies, home, for further pleasure? Does the way we relate to our clothes, for example, increase wanting in our mind?

Does it increase a sense of becoming, of who we are? Does it increase our tendency to perceive inaccurately?

So I'll use some simple retreat examples, but really look in your life. It's a fascinating thing. Food. And this isn't—remember, all this is looking carefully. This isn't some judgment: "Oh, I should only eat X amount of food, and if I eat more, then I'm using it for pleasure, I'm using it to increase craving." It could be different at every meal. It's to look and see.

I saw for myself at some point—I think it was on a retreat where I wasn't on eight precepts, which means not eating after noon, but it was just too much trouble to come to tea. It was a three-month course, and it's like a zoo in the dining room when there's a hundred people at mealtime, and it was simply too much trouble. But I would start to worry: what if? And this is really where I see this, looking at how I'm using food or clothes or blankets with this "what if" mind. What if I get hungry later? So maybe I better save some extra from lunch. Maybe I better take two or three pieces of fruit at breakfast. Maybe before I go to the retreat, I have to go buy a bunch of jars of almond butter to have in my room. All of this.

And at some point, as I started to notice how much extra trouble and dukkha and desire saving that food meant. Take the banana—but where can you save it? Here, thank God, we don't have what they have over at IMS, which is this back dining room with shelves. Most of you have sat there, and when you come in the second month of a three-month retreat, it's a crack-up if you're teaching or on staff. These shelves are packed—packed with food and old rotting oranges, and people with seventeen thousand jars of vitamins, and little saved rice with mold growing on it. People are back there cooking, and I'm not talking about people with health needs, I'm talking about all of us. Here you don't have that. God knows what's going on in your rooms, and I don't want to know.

But taking the banana back to the room, and it's up there, and then you're really hungry later—but where can I eat it? It's nine at night. I have to go all the way back to my room. I shouldn't eat in the room. I have to go all the way back down here and eat, but then they'll see me eating, and what will they think? They'll think I went in the kitchen and stole it, and I don't want them thinking that. Or maybe they're hungry, and I'll have to share it with them. Otherwise, I'll feel selfish or whatever. It's like, oh my God, who needs this? Who needs this?

So I'm a little hungry later. It's so much easier. That serves to starve desire, ill will, and sense of self. It just doesn't matter, you know? How are you using it? So it's not the outer appearance. What's increasing? Desire and becoming. "I'm going to become a hungry person. Oh my gosh, I'm becoming a very..."

Or you could not eat. You could eat one tiny little bit of food, and what that's serving in your mind is: "I hope they notice how really abstemious I am. I hope they're noticing what a really ace yogi I am." Well, then I'd say pile your plate with food and eat like a pig, because what you're feeding with being so delicate is a sense of becoming, very strongly. Break it.

When you take three blankets when there are only two apiece because "I might get cold later"—I see myself doing that all the time. And we don't really like it when our comfort level, or what we think we need, is being threatened.

I was listening to a tape of a talk by Ajahn Sumedho at Spirit Rock. He was talking about restraint and renunciation. And he's funny. So I was just listening to this tape, and the audience was really laughing pretty solidly at all the stuff he was saying.

And he was saying it in a humorous way. Now at his retreats, everyone is expected to be on eight precepts. That's just part of the retreat. So partway into this talk, he started talking about how at Spirit Rock everyone's on eight precepts, but he noticed there's a refrigerator especially for yogis with special needs. He said, "I noticed how really very full that refrigerator is. And supposedly here we're all on eight precepts. That means not taking anything extra." And he's laughing, saying this in a light way. Then he said, "I had the idea we should just empty out that fridge and give it all to the homeless." There was not one chuckle in that crowd. It was the most dead kind of silence after he said that. It was, to me, really funny.

So we're looking at this not with a sense of right or wrong, but examining how we're using things. Another example, because there's no way I'm getting through the other four tonight anyway. I noticed on one retreat, in relationship to clothes—this just popped into my mind tonight when I was writing. It can really be very subtle, what we see.

I was on a retreat in Australia with Sayadaw U Pandita, and I had this one dress. It wasn't even a nice dress, but something about the colors I really liked. It just flashed in my mind tonight as I was writing this. I remembered one day I had that dress on, and the room I was in had a big mirror. I didn't particularly look in it, but as I was walking past, I caught a glimpse of myself in that dress, and there was immediate "Oh, that's such pretty colors," and it went into this whole craving.

In a relatively subtle way—it wasn't that I thought I looked so beautiful or that anyone else was noticing me, because nobody was—but just in my own mind, by liking and wearing that particular dress, every time I saw it, craving would come up in my mind. It doesn't mean never wear a nice dress, but if the mindfulness wasn't quite acute enough to notice it, then I could suddenly wake up in a fantasy, some really pleasant craving fantasy that actually got triggered by simply noticing the sight of that dress, liking it, going into "Wow, this is really pretty," and boom—craving really strengthened and off into some fantasy that has nothing whatsoever to do with the dress or clothes or anything. You wouldn't even notice how it got started. This is the subtlety of these habits of mind and the wonderfulness of having this time and this space to explore it. Not with judgment at all, but like, "Wow, that's really interesting."

Perfume is another one. Aside from all the aversion that people get going on retreat—that's just feeding aversion. But again, I like perfume. I like the smell of perfume, on me or on somebody else. I just like the smell. I love pleasant smells. And I can notice when I smell perfume—I really can see, like in the world of fashion, the function of it—because what it does is elicit craving, elicit clinging, whether that moves into sexuality or not. Just the pure clinging. That's the function of the whole fashion world.

I know personally from being a nun, you can bring that same thing into being in robes. The whole purpose of robes is that it cuts that, and it's wonderful. When I just had three robes and it was simply wear the clean one, soak the dirty one, and the other one's drying out—that was great. It was so freeing.

But I've seen nuns and monks who can really get into—I've known monks, nobody present—who have really gotten into the colors of their robe. This is in Thailand, where some robes are too much on the neon orange color, which is kind of the schlock city monk color. And they really want to have that dull forest monk color, being really upset when the robes they were given were way too much on the neon side and not enough on the worn out "I'm a real renunciate forest bhikkhu" side. I don't see any difference between that and wearing perfume and a flower dress. It's just the same qualities of mind.

Granted, living a simpler lifestyle makes it easier because there are fewer things to get lost in, fewer things to have to relate to. But you can see how really valuable this examination is in our life as well. How am I relating to food? Is it increasing desire and clinging and becoming? Or is it bringing me freedom? Just

peace in this moment in the mind. How do I relate to clothes? How do I relate to where I live? How do I relate to medicine? Never mind entertainment and all the rest. You see how really, really helpful this is.

Well, that's it for tonight. We only got through four. I thought we'd get all the way through six and then just talk about the seven factors of enlightenment, which is the seventh one, next week, but I don't think we're going to get there. So I'll just say what the next ones are that we'll talk about next week. Those are the hindrances that are abandoned by patience, or by enduring. And then, because the Buddha doesn't say just endure everything, those that are abandoned by avoiding—avoiding what is harmful or potentially unskillful. The next one is those that are abandoned by removing, and this is really how to not tolerate, which is very different from patience, persistent unskillful thoughts. And the seventh one is through feeding the seven factors of enlightenment, which is also in itself a very helpful balancing and development tool for the meditation practice.

I just want to end by telling you how the Buddha ends this sutta.

After he's gone through it all, he says, "Once one has abandoned the taints that can be removed by these seven ways, then he is called, or she is called, a bhikkhu who dwells restrained with the restraint of all the asavas, one who has severed craving, who has flung off the fetters and has made an end of suffering with the complete understanding and removal of conceit."

Conceit is the comparing and the subtle sense of self. So we're talking about many different ways of working with tendencies that are sometimes gross, sometimes extremely subtle. But this is not an idle or intellectual exercise. As he says over and over, this leads to complete freedom of heart and mind in this very life. And as he says, if it were not possible, I would not tell you to do so.

So may we all come to complete restraint of the asavas in this very life. Or as they say in Burma, may you attain nirvana in the shortest possible time. People just say that to you casually when they pass you in a monastery. Isn't that nice? "May you attain nirvana in the shortest possible time."

And may our practice, may our listening to and speaking the Dhamma, may our sincere efforts in this day and in these last days, may the beneficial energy of this be joined with the beneficial energies of all the three times—past, present, and future—of all beings. And may all these merits, this beneficial energy, be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms, in all states of existence. May all beings be freed from suffering. May all beings be freed from confusion. May our practice be the cause for the liberation of all beings.

Yoniso Manasikara is turning into the endless topic. I have to tell you, I'm really enjoying researching it, because it starts with this sutta that I told you about last week—these seven different ways of applying appropriate attention in our life, in our practice, and by doing so, eventually completely uproot, wither away, even the subtle tendencies, the subtle habits of our mind toward greed, toward wanting to become,

toward delusion.

This is like a manual of skillful means that the Buddha is giving us here in this sutta. What I get excited about is it's not just limited to this one sutta. As I start reading it and then going to other suttas, other discourses, just sticking to what the Buddha said in the discourses, there's so much relevant, really practical material—so much that I'm indulging myself a little by bringing in more quotations from suttas than I normally would, since I would otherwise telescope this whole talk into one. So I hope you can take it. It is the Buddha's words.

Just to remind you very briefly, this first sutta—we're talking about Majjhima Nikaya number two, which is called "All the Asavas." All the asavas, translated as taints—I don't like that—but we could say the deeply underlying habit of the mind to respond or erupt into craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, really personality view, and just basic ignorance, misunderstanding what's what. These subtle underlying tendencies are what the Buddha is saying wise attention or appropriate attention is the tool that can really help us, not to violently remove, but it's as if a seed in our stream of consciousness doesn't get watered, doesn't get watered, doesn't get watered, until finally it so withers that even given the perfect conditions for greed to arise, it doesn't. So that's a possibility. As the Buddha said, if it was not possible, I would not tell you to do so.

We began in talking about the sutta, where he speaks of seven specific ways, seven specific areas of working with this. The first one being asavas or habits, subtle habits abandoned by seeing. And he says, "Bhikkhus, I say that there is an exhaustion of asavas in one who knows and sees, not in one who does not know and see." Who knows and sees what? Wise attention and unwise attention. In other words, we know and understand both wise or appropriate attention and unwise or inappropriate attention. Understanding what both of these can lead to is a huge tool in our practice.

In ones abandoned by seeing, seeing really means how we pay attention. The Buddha defines wise or appropriate attention, yoniso manasikara, as basically knowing what it's appropriate to pay attention to. In other words, in paying attention to this, it leads to a decrease in greed, a decrease in hatred, in wanting to become, a decrease in delusion. Unwise attention leads to an increase in these things.

And how do we discover or know whether these things are increasing or decreasing in ourselves? Simply by mindfulness, right? Not from somebody else telling us. It's often not even by our actions. We can control our actions through sila, and that's essential. But our mind, as you may know—you may have once or twice had the experience of looking good, so to speak, and the mind is just riddled with whatever your particular favorites are.

So the Buddha is saying, still, it's not that only good things are worth attention, only bad things are not worth attention. It's not in the thing at all—it's in how we pay attention, the quality of attention. This is what makes it wise or unwise, appropriate or inappropriate.

So remember, just in closing last week I was talking about the way we pay attention, which is of course the first aspect of this first way of abandoning the āsavas by seeing—which is of course our basic mindfulness.

I don't need to go through that all again. You all really have it down: basic mindfulness. In other words, full and total attention to just what is in this moment, without adding anything extra.

Someone asked me to repeat this, so I will. One way of paying attention in that way, from the Buddha: "Dry up the remains of your past and have nothing for your future. If you do not cling to the present, then you go from place to place in peace." Just in one moment—that's mindfulness. That totality of attention that's not dragging the whole past after us, not projecting into the future, and not analyzing or clinging to or explaining the present. It's not saying, "Yes, this is happening, therefore blah, blah, blah about me." Just pure presence.

And Thanissaro Bhikkhu had a lovely way—he's pointing to something the Buddha said—a lovely way, I thought, of expressing this: noticing just what is present and what is absent in the mind. The mind at the moment is filled with ill will. At the moment there is no mettā. That's just an example. That would be appropriate attention, seeing what's what.

And as Thanissaro points out, that is beginning to enter into emptiness. He's using a phrase from the Buddha in a particular sutta where the Buddha is talking about very gross ways of entering into emptiness, all the way to the ultimate sublime freedom of mind. By emptiness, he simply means the perception that knows this is present, but this moment is empty of that. If ill will is present, the moment is empty of mettā, for example. Just that basic, that simple.

The sutta actually starts by saying if the monk leaves the city and goes into the forest, then he realizes his perception is basically empty of city, empty of people—but it's not empty of trees and forest. That basic.

So when we're simply attending with this quality of non-judging, full attention—your whole being, but not one bit extra—that's this entering into emptiness. Knowing this is here, just this much, nothing extra. This is, again, from Thanissaro, pointing out that this is another way of saying the paragraph that comes in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness Sutta right at the end of each section. After the person has gone through all the different aspects of mindfulness on that foundation—whether mindfulness of body, or feeling, or mind, or mental qualities—this is Thanissaro's translation: "There is mindfulness just to the extent that there is body, or there is feeling, or there is citta, consciousness, or there are dhammas, mental qualities. Mindfulness just that there is body is maintained simply to the extent of knowing and seeing this, and thus he rests independent, not sustained by, not clinging to anything in this world."

Just one moment of pure seeing is entering into that emptiness for a moment. This is really, perhaps, the most subtle but also very accessible to us—perfection of appropriate attention. And in that moment, not only gross or vivid manifestations of the suffering habits of mind aren't being acted out, but even these subtle tendencies are not being fed.

So you all know that. That's kind of the peak, the height of our practice—that which we aspire to every waking moment of the day, right?

But the Buddha, being the practical being it appears that he was, doesn't just say that and then walk away and say, "Okay, it's up to you." He goes on, even just in this one sutta, even in this first section of this one sutta, giving lots of different ways to work at it—all based in wise attention.

So I want to go into some other ways, just in this first part, of how the āsavas are abandoned by seeing—by seeing both wise or appropriate attention and unwise or inappropriate attention.

There's a whole way of describing how both the āsavas and the hindrances are fed by inappropriate or unwise attention that's really quite specific. Attending in the wrong way causes these very subtle tendencies, these habits of our mind, to strengthen. And we're not talking about strengthening anger on the level of going around screaming in the woods and hitting trees. That's one level that's relatively obvious. We're talking on much more subtle levels here, but these levels are very accessible to us when we're in a long, silent retreat like this, just paying attention. You start to notice it without judging.

So it's said that what causes the first of these āsavas, sense desire or desire for sensuality, to arise and increase is unwise attention to gratification in sense pleasure. Not just sense pleasure—that's one thing—but the gratification in the sense. "This really tastes good." For who, you know? Me. "This is so beautiful." And behind it is, "It really makes me feel good." Unwise attention to the gratification in sense pleasure causes the āsava of sense desire to arise and increase.

Unwise attention to gratification in exalted states—meaning high states, meditative states—is what causes the āsava of becoming, of being, to arise and strengthen. Now you might think, "I can't even have—you know, I work all this time and I can't even have a high meditative state." But the teaching didn't say the state itself.

It is unwise attention to the gratification, the clinging, the grasping quality in it. This is really quite profound, because we can actually see this happening.

The third cause is much broader, because it addresses what causes ignorance to arise and increase: unwise attention to any mundane thing in the wrong way. What does this mean? Any mundane thing—mundane means everyday, it means basically everything. Unwise attention to any mundane thing in the wrong way causes ignorance to arise and increase.

The wrong way is, of course, very specific. It is what the Buddha calls perversions, or the turning upside down of perceptions, which we are doing constantly. The four perversions or turning upside down of perceptions are: when we perceive the impermanent as permanent (which, I don't know about you, but that's happening constantly over here); when we perceive the painful as pleasurable; when we perceive what is not-self as self; and when we perceive what is unbeautiful as beautiful.

The first three of these are the three characteristics. We perceive the impermanent as permanent—not seeing anicca, not seeing impermanence. When we perceive the painful as pleasurable, it's not really understanding dukkha. Perceiving not-self as self is not getting anatta. The fourth one, perceiving what is unbeautiful as beautiful, isn't a characteristic that covers all experience. It tends to be more relative to the body—this idea that when we're perceiving our body as this really beautiful thing, this bag of skin over the bones and the blood and the guts and the pus, we don't see all of that. We think, "Wow, isn't this beautiful?"

But I think what's really interesting is this: unwise attention is the proximate or immediate cause for ignorance to arise in a moment. Knowing this is so vital, so helpful. By knowing it, I mean just noticing in a moment how we're attending inaccurately. These upside-down perceptions, these perversions of perception—for example, seeing the impermanent as permanent—lead to a perversion of citta, of thought, of mind. Because then that's how we think about that object or ourselves. And then that leads to perversion of view. That becomes our view: "This is me" or "This is permanent." That leads to our actions in the world.

So it really starts on this most subtle level of perceiving inaccurately and not recognizing it. This is considered āyoniso manasikāra, unwise or inappropriate attention. And just by noticing how this is happening, it can change right back to wise attention. It's not like we're hapless victims, stuck with this with nothing we can do about it.

Let me turn to the five hindrances, because the Buddha speaks about them in the same way—seeing how we pay attention in an unwise or inappropriate way in the moment feeds these hindrances in our mind stream. When we see that, when we pay attention to the appropriate thing in the appropriate way, the hindrances decrease, or if they haven't arisen, they don't arise.

I think this is very useful, not just at the beginning of a retreat. We always talk about hindrances at the beginning of a retreat, and those of you who just came and we've been going on and on might have thought, "Good, now I don't have to hear about the hindrances because the retreat already began." But it's not true that the hindrances just come at the beginning of a retreat. Is that so? Those of you who've been here three months, am I lying?

What is often true is that they come in with a knockout blow at the beginning of a retreat. It's not just subtle sloth and torpor—we can't lift our head off the pillow for three days. They appear in their gross form. But the five hindrances do arise from moment to moment later in retreat as well. This is when it can surprise us, and when learning how to work with wise attention can be both fascinating (you can see I get fascinated with all this) and really liberating.

Instead of just thinking, "Oh my God, my practice was going so well and now ill will and craving are coming and all I can do is wait it out"—doesn't it feel like that sometimes? "I try to know it. It doesn't happen. I just have to wait it out, one foot in front of the other, until it finally goes away and I can keep

practicing." Instead of that, we can really learn what's feeding the arising of this hindrance in this moment, or should we have missed that particular subtle moment of its arising, what's feeding its continuing? What can take away the food? What starves the hindrance, as the Buddha talks about it in another way? It doesn't mean you starve it for one second and it's gone forever, but it begins to lose its strength and gets less.

Oh bhikkhus, I will teach you the feeding and the starving of the five hindrances.

The Buddha does the same for the seven factors of awakening, but we're not going to make it there tonight.

So, feeding the hindrances. What is the food for the arising of unarisen sensual desire and for the growth and increase of sense desire once it's already here? What feeds that in the moment? Again, it's the theme of beauty—to give inappropriate attention to the sign of the beautiful, to the beautiful in something, as well as the gratification in it. This fosters the growth and increase of sense desire.

It doesn't mean we don't see anything beautiful. But just notice—someone said, "Oh, it's so beautiful here. It's so beautiful, it's hard to practice." What's happening in that moment? Notice when you walk outside: "Oh, that's beautiful." There's a way of appreciating beauty that's just pure presence, that's inspiring, that's onward leading. And there's a way of "This is so beautiful, I want more, I want more." That's fostering, increasing the habit of wanting, of craving. And we can watch that. We can watch it in a moment.

What's the food for the arising of unarisen ill will or the growth and increase of it? There is the theme of irritation—to foster inappropriate attention to it. See, he's not saying irritation should or will never arise until you're past third stage. But the inappropriate attention to it—I remember Sayadaw U Pandita saying once, it's like a cow chewing its cud. You know, it calls it up from the stomach where it's storing it and chews it over. Even the word we use in English is similar: it ruminates. And that's what we do. There's some irritation, whether it's something from the so-called past or something that happens right now. It happens, it's gone. Maybe there's unpleasant irritation, it's gone. But then we call it up. We ruminate: "I can't believe that person did that. I just can't believe that would happen in a place like this." Or "I can't believe I did that." Or "I can't believe they think the windows shouldn't be open." Whatever it is. We just chew it over and over like a cow chewing its cud. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that's unwise attention. But sometimes we don't think to look in that way—that that's fostering not just ill will in the moment, but the underlying habit for ill will to arise. And this is really what we're learning to starve: this habit.

What's the food for the arising of unarisen sloth and drowsiness and the continuance of it? There is boredom, weariness, yawning, drowsiness after a meal, and sluggishness of awareness—to give inappropriate attention to these things. To really focus, to really let your attention get sucked down into the drowsiness.

The food for the arising of unarisen restlessness and anxiety or remorse—he just says here there is non-stillness of awareness, to foster inappropriate attention to that. But I have another example from another sutta that I really like, one that is much more of a specific example of how we give inappropriate attention to an experience that leads into this restlessness and worry of mind. The Buddha says an ordinary person who regards body as the self, or the self as being in the body—any of those views—when change occurs to this person's body, it becomes different. You're sitting, you're paying attention, some change occurs to your body. Maybe a subtle change, maybe gross. You look in the mirror after a month and it's like, "Oh my god, I can't believe how I look." Whatever it is. Because of this change and alteration in the body, the bhikkhu's consciousness becomes preoccupied with bodily change. Due to this preoccupation with bodily change, worried thoughts arise and persist, laying a firm hold on his mind.

"Oh, that tingle in my knee wasn't there yesterday. Hmm, that tingle, that twitch, it's a little stronger today. Hmm, at the end of the sitting, this tingle is actually stronger and it's spread a little more." When you get up and walk, is it there?

Is it not there? What makes it come? What makes it go? Is it something I should do about it? Can I leave it alone? Do I have to sit differently? Do I need to see a surgeon? On and on it goes—the mind lays a firm hold through this mental obsession. Through this obsession, we become fearful and distressed, and being full of desire and attachment, we become worried.

Can you relate to any of this? Unwise attention to various thoughts leading to a lack of stillness of mind, based of course on the perversion of perception regarding body as self, not expecting it to change. That's an example of unwise attention.

And then there's doubt and uncertainty, which we talked about the other night. Remember, it's in the first sutta where he says—he phrases it differently here—that there are different phenomena that act as a foothold for uncertainty, and to give inappropriate attention to them is the problem. But remember the example I read last week, where he gives examples of things that are not fit for attention, thoughts that lead to doubt: "What was I in past time? Was I in past time? Was I not? Did I exist before? What was I in the past, and what am I going to be in the future? Will I be in the future? What am I now? Having been such in the past, how will it come in the future?"

You could see this in terms of past lives and future lives. You could see it in terms of your last sitting and your next sitting. You could see it in terms of how good your concentration was yesterday and how good it's going to be tomorrow if you keep going like this. You can think, "Well, last retreat I practiced in this way and that happened. What would happen in this retreat if I practice in this way? But now I'm practicing in that way, and this is happening, but maybe this isn't as good as how it was when I practiced that way in the last retreat." This is unwise attention to various phenomena that foster uncertainty.

It's not that these thoughts arise—sure they arise. But giving unwise attention to them is giving them all the power and getting really lost in them.

And of course, what starves the hindrances is just the opposite of these things. The first, of course, is always simple mindfulness. Rather than being lost in how beautiful this is, in the gratification, in "Can I have more?"—just knowing "beautiful, pleasant." That's enough. For all the hindrances, you know that.

But you also know that at times, that just doesn't cut it. It's gone too far down the road. And at that time, the Buddha gives specific things that starve the hindrances. I'll just mention them very briefly.

Lack of food for sense desire is the theme of unattractiveness. In other words, when we're really caught up—say, let's take a vipassanā romance, and the mind invests that person with everything beautiful, with everything wonderful. So, just to be really classical Theravāda about it, try imagining that person, the thirty-two parts of their body. Just imagine their organs, their liver, their intestines. Imagine the blood, the lymph. You don't have to go too far down the road. It's not that you hate them, but the desire just falls away. It doesn't really hold any juice.

You don't have to even be that classical—just look at the basic unattractiveness, the suffering nature of the desire itself. Just don't feed that sense of gratification in the beauty, in the pleasantness. That's all.

It's the same with ill will, although of course there's also the positive turning of the mind towards mettā. When we're really lost in ill will, turning the mind towards mettā can really function as an antidote.

With sloth and torpor, drowsiness, yawning, the Buddha says to arouse energy, to give appropriate attention to energy. I've also found that simply withdrawing the unwise attention to the tiredness, the fogginess, the sloth and torpor—that actually makes a difference.

It stops feeding it.

An example. Again, we're talking about something somewhat subtle here. We're not talking about when you're so exhausted you can't get out of bed, or you're sitting in here and your head's hitting the floor and you open your mouth and it's all sloth and torpor. Then you need a little grosser intervention.

But when you're more quiet in the mind and you can sometimes either just feel it coming in like a wave, or you can notice that things are getting really fuzzy, or there's just that sense of "it's too hard"—that's actually sloth and torpor. "It's just too hard to be with this right now. I think I need a tea." That's actually, in that tone of voice when it comes in my mind, that's not compassionate, skillful means. That's giving unwise, inappropriate attention to the torpor, to the sluggishness. It's kind of letting that mind state be the veil through which the show's being run.

And I found—and believe me, I have inordinate experience with this particular hindrance; it's my old friend, in and out of retreat.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.