Applying the Practice

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 44:23

So I'd like to begin by just commending everyone here for taking the time out of your lives to come and give yourself this time of retreat. It takes a certain wisdom and a certain kindness to do that, or sometimes a certain desperation. So it's great that you made it here and that you give yourself this time of settling and deepening and opening.

It's not always an easy process. Pretty much everybody here has been on retreat before, so you know that already. We can forget in between retreats how challenging they can be while you're in the middle of them, and then you get to the end and you really feel the fruits and it's like, "Oh, that's great, I want to go back." And then you return to retreat and often the first three days are pretty challenging. A lot of stuff comes up and there's a huge change of gear from the life you've just come from to this very contained and quiet experience where not much is going on. So it's commendable to go on retreat once and even more so to go on retreat numerous times. It takes a certain wisdom that knows this is good medicine and it's worth staying through the challenges.

We just had our first couple of practice interview groups today, and it strikes me that people are in very different places in their practice. There are people who are really new to the practice and people who have been practicing a long time, and those in between. I want to speak a little bit about how we apply ourselves in the practice.

When we first start, for many people at the beginning, it can be really inspiring. It's so uplifting to find in this world that's so much oriented around materialism, consumerism, and being a person, that there's this teaching—this teaching of emptiness and of change and of transformation from who I am when I begin to the potential of being a fully awakened being. That potential is there for all of us, and that can be so hugely inspiring. It still inspires me daily. In the beginning it can bring a lot of energy, a lot of delight, and a strong commitment and energy for the practice.

When we're in that place where it's early days and we're just discovering the practice and the possibilities, we're applying the practice and getting the results often quite quickly. It's often like that in the beginning—you really feel the results of the practice, and it's fantastic. It is wonderful. So at that time when we're beginning, it's really good to throw yourself in fully, even a little recklessly.

I was grateful to have nuns around me when I started practicing, who would encourage me to go past my limits. They would encourage me to do things that I wouldn't consider doing, things that would challenge my perception of what I could do and what I want, who I am and what I can and can't do. So I would try—okay, sister so-and-so is suggesting it and she's keeping an eye on me, so all right, I'll have a go. It was

quite insightful and it opened things up.

There's a time when we can get into a flow of energy where you just want to completely apply yourself to the practice and keep an edge—keep that edge of not having quite enough sleep, eating just a bit less than you really need, practicing that extra half hour or hour. There's a time for that, and it can be a very potent time. So if you're in that place, it's really good to explore. It's also important not to force. It's not about forcing, but about knowing where the edge is and just going a little bit further and seeing what happens.

Then there's a time when we've been practicing for a while where things are settling down and we don't get such quick results anymore. It can seem like maybe there's something wrong because we used to get all of those insights, and now it's kind of a plateau. But that's a natural part of the practice. It's meant to be like that. In the beginning we're making huge leaps and bounds because it's new. And then after a while it's not so new anymore. The breakthroughs that were just on the surface waiting for us to realize have already happened. And perhaps the deeper insights are still a little obscure. So we can be in that in-between state.

This is also an important time in our practice—not to give up. We might give up thinking we're not getting the results we think we should be getting. But actually this is the time to be cultivating patience. The Buddha highly exalted patience as a practice, the supreme practice of patience. So that's the time to be cultivating patience and also to get a little bit more subtle with what we're seeing, with our expectations. We're honing down our attention to the little things, the little changes. It might just be a period of endurance. I certainly had some time where it was just faith, really, that was keeping me going—trusting that the Buddha knows what he's talking about and not being interested in going off in a different direction.

And there's not an awful lot happening. This went on for a couple of years. So I just kept going. The meditation over that time was not very fulfilling. There were not many insights. The predominant feeling I was experiencing was not blissful or joyful. It was quite humdrum, really. It wasn't painful either, just sort of ordinary. And then sometimes doubt would arise—maybe I've made a mistake, maybe I've done something wrong—but it felt kind of too late because I was already committed to this path.

And then there would be remembering: okay, well, what's good in what's happening now? There's living an ethical life, keeping good ethics. This is really, really important. And that's good, that's better than what I was doing before I started practicing. And keeping a certain level of discipline. I'm not a highly disciplined person by nature, which is why I entered a monastery—it provided an external discipline that was really helpful. So keeping a certain discipline, that's good. Even though I wasn't experiencing many fruits of the meditation, I was still putting the time in, still sitting, watching the breath, getting to know what was going on in my heart.

And then learning to receive feedback from others. This is also one of the benefits of living in community—you get to hear how you are, to see yourself from other people's perspectives. And

sometimes it's a little disconcerting. So then learning to receive feedback and thinking, okay, maybe I need to work on that a bit more. Those kinds of things would be going on, even if the actual experience of the meditation practice wasn't that great for a while.

And then we keep going and things shift and change. At some point the joy returned and a certain subtlety could come back. And then the practice has gone through many different landscapes. It's not that it just arrives in one place and stays like that. And that in itself becomes a teaching—that this is a spiritual journey going through many landscapes, and not to give up. Not to give up and turn back, not to give up and just sink down into a swamp, not to refuse to climb that mountain ahead. It's a journey. We keep going, we keep taking another step.

And then there's the time when we need to really assess what is happening in our life and in our practice, to look really carefully. Sometimes we just need to make a subtle change. And sometimes it's when our life seems most challenging, most difficult. Things can build up so huge that we feel like, oh my goodness, I can't possibly face this, it's just too much. What am I going to do next? I don't know.

Sometimes those big times, those overwhelming experiences—my experience has been that what they need is just a little shift of mind. Ironically, just a little shift of mind. From "oh my goodness, it's all too much, I've got to keep it away" or "I've got to dive in and let it consume me"—to just being a little bit more connected to the breath. Just letting the belly relax a little more and soften. Subtle things. Just having a little bit more kindness towards myself. A little bit of interest rather than trepidation about what's going on. These slight shifts of attention are huge—they're like night and day. And it's not a rational thing, it's counterintuitive. It seems like when something's really big, we've got to do something really big to deal with it. But sometimes it's just very subtle shifts that help the whole thing to change.

We're experiencing this life all the time through our conditioning, our perceptions, our fears and desires, hopes and regrets—all of that. If we just keep looking through the same lenses, we keep seeing in the same way. So it's about changing the lens a little bit, or maybe peeking underneath the lens if we can, and seeing our experience fresh—meeting it in the moment rather than treating it as this huge thing in my life that I don't know how to deal with. Instead: well, right now, what is that experience?

This retreat situation is a wonderful support for this, because we've all taken ourselves out of our ordinary life situations to come here. Life's going on out there, and it's going on in here too. We meet our life situation right here in this environment, in this safe place where there's nothing much happening other than a lot of holding, a lot of loving, a lot of support. And then there's what we brought with us. We can meet that right here, without having to have it all sorted out for when we get home. Just now, how it is in this body right now. In my belly right now, in my heart right now—not so much in the mind. The mind tells all kinds of stories. But we can drop down from the thinking into the body, allowing the body to be met, listening to it, meeting the tensions and stresses. Softening around them. Taking a breath.

It's amazing. Taking a breath is kind of miraculous. You can be in the most intense situation, and then you

just take a deep breath.

Everything stops for a moment, and there's a different perspective. Then there's a choice, because we've given ourselves a little bit of space.

So there are times when that's the appropriate way to meet our practice. And we have to discern for ourselves. There's nobody who can tell you, "Okay, now you should do it like this. Now you should totally throw yourself in and really push yourself to the edge. But now it's time to be really subtle." You have to know that. Your wisdom has to know that. And we all have that wisdom if we listen. The wisdom is there, and what we need to do changes. We only know what to do by giving the space to look and listen inwardly. So this is a great opportunity for that.

I also want to mention the five hindrances, which I usually speak about, because I think they're really important to know about. We tend to identify with these and believe in them. The title of this retreat is about taking refuge in what is true, but we often take refuge in what is not true. And each of those five hindrances is not telling us the truth.

The first is sensual desire—having the mind pulled out into sensuality. This is the story that if I just have this nice thing, this delicious thing, this beautiful thing, this comfortable situation, whatever it might be, then I will be whole and everything will be well. That's the story of sense desire. And there may be people here who know how that goes. First of all, it seems harmless enough. You just have that little something and it's nice and you feel good. Then maybe you feel like, "Oh, I need it again." And then, "Well, I'll be fine as long as I have that every day. Twice a day, three times a day, five times a day. I need it."

So that's what happens with sense desire. It never actually satisfies us longer than the shortest of times. And because it gives that little satisfaction, we think it's really doing the job, but it isn't. It's keeping us more and more caught up. It's like drinking salt water. If you're thirsty and you have a drink of salt water, you think, "Oh, thank goodness." It tastes a bit off, not quite right, but thank goodness. Then it just makes you more thirsty and more thirsty until it wears you out completely. That is the truth of sense desire.

It's the first hindrance and one that we all know very well, probably experiencing it numerous times a day. It can latch on to any of the six senses, including mind. So knowing sense desire as sense desire, and if we can, letting go. If we can't help following it, then follow it all the way through. Follow it through the wanting, the getting, the becoming one with, the gratification—how that's there for a while, then it falls away, and then there's the sense of lack again, and then the reaching out to something else. Seeing that whole process. And perhaps noticing the adverse effects on our own body and mind when we repeatedly follow sense desire.

Getting to know it, getting to know its trickery, and also having patience. It's not like the intellect can know it and then we're done. The emotions, the karma, the wanting is still buying into it. The rational mind, clever though it is, doesn't rule us as well as we would like it to. It's the yearnings of the heart. So we need

to go deeper than just the rational. The rational can help, but it's meeting the yearning that actually transforms our addiction to sense desire.

Then there's ill will or aversion, which can be anger, resentment, hatred, irritability, impatience. All of those come under the category of ill will. And this is something we can also take refuge in, oddly enough. I'm sure everybody knows people who defend themselves behind an aversive personality. There's having an aversive personality and knowing it and working with it. And then there's having an aversive personality and believing in it and using it as a defense, as a means to remain right and separate and controlled and safe. It feels safe, but it isn't.

So we can take refuge in the hindrance of ill will, and this is surely a wrong refuge. With ill will, we get to know the feeling—where it resides in us, who we put it onto, the cause of our ill will.

It's not me, it's them, it's that—it's because of those things out there that I'm feeling this. So it seems like that, but really it's arising in the heart, in one's own heart and mind. And that's the only place where we can transform it. We can try to change other people, and if they're willing, they might change a bit. But it probably won't be enough to sort it out in our own heart, because our own heart is generating that ill will.

In this world, in this imperfect world, there will always be something wrong. There will always be something to complain about, always something unsatisfactory. It's made like that. So if we're always looking outside of ourselves for the cause of the ill will in our own hearts, we'll always find something to blame it on, and we'll never experience the freedom of having a heart that is free from ill will. Most of us experience it sometimes and then sometimes we don't, and that's nice. Some experience it more than others.

Getting to know when the hindrance of ill will has arisen, getting to know that that's what it is—it's a hindrance to enlightenment. We don't have to annihilate it. We don't have to have more ill will, judging the ill will, getting into layers and layers of one ill will over another. We don't have to do that. We just need to know it. This is aversion. It feels like this. It's really unpleasant. It's really unpleasant and I don't want to feel it. And then we know that. Then maybe knowing that gives us a little bit more space where we can let it be there and be felt. And then maybe we can bring a little kindness to it, a little mettā to the ill will. Then it starts to feel relieved.

If we don't know it as a hindrance, we believe it. We either believe it's who we are, what we are, or we believe other people are the cause of it. And so we're taking wrong refuge.

The next hindrance is sleepiness and dullness, or sloth and torpor. I've been experiencing quite a lot of that today myself. This can also arise during the changing of gear that we're doing here, from our lives before to this, and also being all together in a group like this. Everything kind of wants to shut down. It's all a bit too much.

Knowing that, for myself today struggling in the meditation with dullness—there's a lot of dullness and a

lot of unconsciousness—there's also a knowing that this is what's going on now, and why, and that it will change, and also that I need to put in a little bit more energy. That's different from "Oh no, I'm just such a hopeless meditator" or "How embarrassing, all these people are seeing me nodding." That's selfing, and that doesn't free us; that just gets us more entrenched. But it's more like: okay, sleepiness, dullness, the body is heavy and dull, the mind is sleepy, the eyes are sleepy. There are things we can do—stand up, open our eyes, take some deep breaths. And maybe at the beginning of a retreat, the thing to do is to take a rest. The first day or two is often helpful. Take a nap, if I may say that, and then be more refreshed. But don't keep doing it throughout the retreat. That's buying into the hindrance again.

Then there's the hindrance of restlessness, which we all experience in different ways. The mind being restless, coming up with lots of thoughts and ideas and opinions. Or the body being agitated, restless. Knowing restlessness—it's very believable. We feel like we've got to move from it. When there's restlessness, we feel like we've got to do something. All we need to do in this context is know: this is restlessness and agitation.

Worry and anxiety also come along with restlessness. They kind of come together. It's like a little bit too much energy that's not grounded—the opposite of sleepy and dull. Too much energy that's ungrounded. And then we start worrying, getting agitated.

Knowing that as restlessness, the hindrance of restlessness and agitation. Not me, not mine, not personal, not personality, but a hindrance that is arising in that moment. We can use things like being particularly aware of the out-breath, letting go on the out-breath.

That can really help to ease the restlessness. And also focusing more strongly on the breath—sometimes that can help to just pull ourselves out of the restlessness. We have to experiment ourselves and see what works.

Sometimes just bringing the intention of calming this body, calming this mind, calming the bodily formation, calming the mental formations. Sometimes just that intention, those words, can help to ground us a little bit. But most important is the mindfulness and the understanding that this is a hindrance, not who and what I am. This is changing.

And then the hindrance of doubt. So whenever I say you have to use your own wisdom to know what to do, I'm sure lots of people will be going, "But what am I supposed to do? Should I do this? Should I do that? Am I at the beginning of my practice? Am I in the middle? What do I do?" So then that happens. We do that. I used to really want someone to just tell me what to do. Just tell me. And it's like, well, no. You have to know. I have to know. We have to know for ourselves.

Doubt will come in and it'll keep us spinning for eternity if we let it. So once we find ourselves caught in doubt—should I do this or should I do that? What should I be doing? I'm not sure—then we recognize, "Oh, there's doubt. The hindrance of doubt is present in the mind."

The way out of that endless loop of doubt is understanding one of the tricks of doubt, one of its lies and stories: it tells us that if we just stay with this long enough, if we just keep thinking about it, we're going to get the answer. Just keep going around long enough and you're going to get it. It's there somewhere. So that's the story, the lie of doubt.

Whereas the Buddha recommends us to use our discernment. What is the most wholesome thing to do? What is the most beneficial? What is beneficial? What is not beneficial? What is wholesome? What is unwholesome? And you may find that this can be very clear: "Okay, that's unwholesome, I'm not going to do that. I'll just work with this, it's more wholesome."

It might be that whichever way you go is going to be wholesome, so then you go into doubt again. But the thing is, if it's wholesome both ways, it doesn't actually matter which way you go. You just choose one and do it and see what happens. And if it's not going the way you think it should be going, or where you want to go after some time, try the other one. See what happens.

Because it's not like life is set out in some clear trajectory and we just have to know exactly what we do when. It's influenced by what we bring to it in the moment. Our life unfolds through what we bring to it in the moment. This is why knowing what is wholesome and what is unwholesome is really, really important. Because if we're carelessly cultivating unwholesome qualities and justifying them in our minds, that's influencing how things will be for us in the next moment, and the next, and the next. And so we get more and more entrenched.

Whereas if we can recognize when we are defending or justifying or judging or desiring or complaining—all of those things—or getting caught going round and round in circles not sure what to do, when we recognize, then we can choose to do what is wholesome. And sometimes we can drop what's going on and turn towards something that actually cultivates something more directly wholesome.

So there's ill will. I remember one of my first retreats I did in Amaravati, I had so much anger towards the person teaching the retreat. I felt so angry because there was so little silence. I just wanted silence.

I wanted to sit with other people in silence. There was almost no silence through the whole retreat—everything was guided. It was driving me crazy, and I was getting more and more angry. At one point I realized this isn't going to change, and it's a ten-day retreat. I need to do something. So with that energy of anger, I started to practice metta. And then the anger, the energy of anger, started to turn into the energy of metta. By the end I was totally blissed out on metta—I loved the teacher.

So sometimes it's like that, where we actually turn the energy around. And sometimes we can't do that, and all we can do is bring mindfulness to what is going on. We're holding it within our mindful awareness and we're not acting on it. That's already very powerful.

Sometimes the habit is so strong that we can't help acting on it. Then we act on it and we need to bring the discernment, the clarity, and the honesty to acknowledge: okay, I lost it there, or I'm going down that road

again. I know I'm doing it and I kind of can't stop right now. I know it's not going to have good results. And then maybe we can acknowledge it to the people we live with. Because when we're not able to hold those kilesas with mindfulness, they spill out onto other people, and other people have to deal with them. The energy that we can't deal with—that's what happens. When we can't manage it, we generously give it to other people. And then they have to deal with it in whatever way they are able to, or not.

Once we start to wake up to that and be aware of it, then it becomes the humbling practice of acknowledging it. That can help give us an incentive to get on and start transforming the stuff that's here, because we don't want to keep being in that position where we're dumping on people and then having to apologize all the time. It's just kind of humiliating.

So these are ways that we can gradually transform the habits of our hearts and minds—transform them into the path, the path of awakening. It's not about becoming a good person who's all nice all the time, sweetness and light. It's not about that. It's about truth, and about aligning oneself with what is wholesome, what is good. And sometimes truth is hard to hear, hard to receive, hard to know. It's not always nice. But it's truth. So it's good. It's beautiful.

There are many ways that we can take refuge in what is not true, and if we don't have that simple map of the hindrances, we can so easily just get caught again and again in them—take them to be who and what we are, or take them to be caused by something outside of ourselves, or justify them. It's important to remember that we're on a path, there's a direction we want to go in, and then there's a road going off to the right with flashing neon signs saying, "Come this way, come this way." If we're not mindful and we don't know what's going on, we just get duped by it. We just go there. "Oh, that looks interesting. Let's go down there and see where we get to." And then we get way off track into some place we never wanted to go.

So to remember, to keep in mind the bigger intention of our practice. And if you aren't quite clear what it is, then take this time to get clear over these days. What is the greater intention of my practice? Am I just looking for a little bit of calm? Or is there something a bit more profound, a bit deeper, that's brought us here, that's drawing us to keep turning towards what we find here?

The path unfolds differently for every person, every individual. Who knows why and how and where it will take us. But we just need to know what's going on here, on our own path, where we are right now on this path of practice. That's all we need to know. We don't need to compare ourselves to others. We don't need to judge what's going on. We just need to know it and acknowledge it and take a step from here—or a leap, sometimes, from here. And wherever we are is good. It's good, and it's not the end.

So there's not a dead end here. If we turn and look and feel, "Oh my goodness, I'm just such a mess. After all these years, I'm just such a mess" — it can be like that. And then, well, *sadhu, sadhu, sadhu*. There's an ability, there's a strength and an awareness that can turn towards that mess. Without that, we're just going to pretend we're not a mess for the rest of our life. But with the awareness, we can turn towards it with

some kindness, some understanding, some listening, and start to turn it around.

If when we turn and look here and we think, "Wow, I am so awesome, I am the best in the world," then you better ask a few more questions. Go and spend a bit of time with your family and ask them what they think about you. Don't stop there, because if that's where you've come to, it's not the end.

So we need to just keep on looking really honestly and keep on meeting our experience honestly — not being harsh towards ourselves or beating down on ourselves, but being interested and kind and encouraging.

When we apply mindfulness and turn it onto what's going on here, and what we find is not very inspiring — which sometimes it is like that — we can get too involved in what we find. We get too involved in the object of our mind and not enough in the awareness itself. Every time mindfulness arises and we turn and see what's going on, this is a wonderful moment. This is an awakening moment. If we're awakening to what is beautiful and inspiring, that's wonderful — there's joy in that. And if we're awakening to what is kind of grungy and uninspiring, that is also wonderful because it gives us a chance to transform. And if we're turning to what is kind of nothing in particular, if we can turn towards that and stay with it, that's pretty inspiring. That's not easy, and it's a large part of our lives, so it's actually very important.

So we have this time and these supportive conditions to turn towards our own body, mind, and heart. To learn to trust our own wisdom and exploration. And to experiment a little bit with what we find. What's the right thing to do? Don't just do what you've always done. Experiment a little bit. Be interested, curious, creative. And we will see what transforms over these days.

So I'd like to offer that tonight.

Anodana yantama kathaya sadhu karam tatamase. Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu. Anumodana.

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