No Person, No Problem

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 44:07

I know there's still a bit of confusion about the difference between samadhi or shamatha and vipassana, especially among some of the people who are rather new. There's an old Indian teaching story which may be of some help.

Apparently, there was a king who was also a very great yogi and meditation master. Someone came to him wanting to study with him, to also master what he knew. So the king said, "All right, here's your first training. Go through the entire palace with a bucket of hot oil on your head without spilling one drop."

This candidate went through the entire palace successfully with his bucket of oil on his head, went into every room, came back, and had not spilled a drop. He was very pleased with himself and thought he had completed the exercise.

The king then asked him, "Well, what's going on in the palace? Any intrigues going on? Who's sleeping with who? Any power plays, plots to kill me?"

He said, "Well, I don't know. I was so concentrated on not spilling any of the oil that I didn't notice what was going on."

So the king said, "Okay, now go back through the palace with the same bucket of oil on your head. Don't spill a drop, but give me a full report about what's going on."

That's what we're learning. We're learning how to do both.

The retreat has moved into the choiceless awareness aspect of practice, where when the mind is more calm or concentrated, we have the option of sitting quietly and being receptive to whatever turns up, to learning about it, to seeing its nature. Sometimes the term impermanence is used. Anatta, emptiness, no self.

I read a segment of Joseph Stalin's biography written by someone. I assume everyone knows he was a mass murderer and dictator; otherwise, what I'm about to say will make no sense. At any rate, he had a high-level assistant, one of his close assistants, who one day started to complain to him about someone who was just a little bit lower, who was his assistant. He was saying, "I don't know about Ivan. He's disagreeable and seems to have a lot of ambition and gives me a hard time. He's become a problem."

Stalin got quiet, supposedly, and thought for a moment, and then he said, "Hmm. No person, no problem."

The next day, Ivan was gone.

And I realized, wow—this is good, sound Buddhist teaching. Only old Joseph was a little on the coarse side. He didn't drop down to a level where he could understand it didn't have to be so messy.

That's our challenge. You hear all these book titles and sayings: nobody home, the lights are on but there's nobody home, going nowhere, being nobody. Do you really know what that means? We buy these books, we read them. That's what it means. No person, no problem. Only we have to do it ourselves. It's bloodless and very gentle—not always pleasant.

I'm going to come at this notion of selfhood by way of impermanence. In the Anapanasati Sutta, it's dealt with in the thirteenth contemplation, where the Buddha says to be aware of impermanence with every in-breath and out-breath. Because every time you breathe in and you breathe out, you're aware that all formations are impermanent. That's a little bit closer to the quote. That means everything having to do with the mind and body is impermanent as you sit and breathe—though it's not limited to sitting, really. As you're mindful and breathe, you begin to see that all forms are in a state of flux.

When you read Buddha's texts, if you see anicca, that's impermanence. If you see it with two other terms—dukkha, suffering, and anatta, not-self—these are called the three universal characteristics that our practice is designed to probe. We're designed to probe into the mind and body and to see these principles at work, to see if they're indeed there. Are they really universal principles of human existence?

If you see anicca along with dukkha, which means unsatisfactoriness, or anatta, which means not-self, then it simply means impermanence.

But if you see it alone, as in this thirteenth contemplation where just impermanence is mentioned, it stands for all three. The reason it stands for all three is because if you deeply, profoundly see into impermanence, you'll see that the other two are really expressions of it.

When you deeply see how everything is changing constantly—and there are many levels, as we mentioned the other evening, depths of seeing this and levels of precision of seeing this—when you see this, some of what you learn, of course, is that a great deal of what we call suffering is because everything is uncertain. Everything keeps changing. The body keeps changing. Society keeps changing. Whatever level that you look at, wherever you look, you can see: when there's something unhappy, or if the body is unhealthy, or there's an earthquake, that means life has rearranged itself in some way because nothing is autonomous. Nothing has a core. Everything is dependent on other things which themselves are also impermanent.

So it's a staggering process of movement and uncertainty because it unfolds definitely. It's not asking for our permission. It's constantly unfolding. It's ungovernable. It's not concerned with what we think. It's constantly happening. And when it affects us in a certain way, we call it suffering because it's uncertain. We never know what the result will be. That grows quite naturally out of seeing impermanence. You begin to see that so much of our suffering is because of that. It's not simply the obvious—that we get old,

we get sick, and we die. It's just that from moment to moment, change itself sometimes becomes burdensome.

It's also liberating, because if there were no change, for one thing, why would we bother practicing here? We'd just be hopeless, frozen into our ignorant state. But we're not. So impermanence is not all bad news. It's just news. But what we do with it, of course, we often make it into bad news.

And anatta—perhaps even more obviously to you—how could something be a solid self, an autonomous, independent self, if it's endlessly going through changes? Every representation that comes up in the mind, notions and images, characterizations of ourselves, they come and they go. They're inconsistent, they're contradictory. They change almost like fashions, the way we regard ourselves. So there's nothing that you can really point to and say, "That's really me"—although we behave as if that's so.

When you see impermanence, and if you look for it, see it in whatever realm—because it's everywhere, you can't miss it—when you see it at the level of mind, it's just a natural discovery to understand that that which we have clung to as being something solid is an illusion. As you probe more and more deeply into the mind to try to find out what's there or who you are, you'll see that it's ungraspable. Perhaps you already see that.

In the sutta, to make it a little bit more concrete, recall we've talked about the foundation of the body. Remember the four foundations of mindfulness? The foundation of feelings, the foundations of the mind itself. One way in which the practice is done classically—and you need a lot of time for it—is that you go through each contemplation, and as you practice it, at some point you begin to see from the inside that everything is changing.

So even with the breath, you start with breathing. Even if I had never mentioned this, if you've been following the breath for quite a few days now, you must know that the breath keeps changing. And it changes in all kinds of ways. It's extremely delicate. It's very sensitive. The breath can be very smooth, fine, gentle, just a joy to be breathing. And one ugly thought—it's changed. All of a sudden, it's a bumpy ride. The breath is now labored and shallow and not enjoyable. It's not enjoyable to be breathing.

And so you could just take the realm of breathing, just breathing alone, and as you get to know breathing, you can learn the law of impermanence from breath moment to breath moment.

It's all there.

As for anatta, some of you—one person definitely had an anatta experience today. I don't want to set up expectations, although the striving has already begun. There are a fair number of people who want to get these insights that you've heard about. You don't know what they are, but you know you want them. We're not sure what these insights are, but we know we want them, because it's valued here, right? It's a good thing. I don't know what it is, but I want it.

Sometimes this may happen to you. You're sitting and breathing, and the breath becomes very, very smooth. You're not forcing it. You're not controlling it. The attention is continuous. And suddenly there's a feeling as if you're being breathed. It's absolutely and totally effortless. Sometimes it feels like you're being breathed from on high somewhere.

In that moment—and you may have already had moments of it, sometimes it can last for a while—there's definitely breathing happening. In, out, in, out. That's going on. But see if you can find the breather. You won't be able to find the breather. What you'll be able to find is the mind saying, "Oh yes, I'm the breather." But that's a thought. Or the mind might even concoct an image of itself as some wonderful yogi. That's an image. You watch it, it falls away, decomposes.

So what is happening is there's definitely breathing going on, but no one could be found who's doing the breathing. That's a taste of it. That's a taste of anatta.

And not only that—it's wonderful. Because, you see, the ego can never be happy. I don't know if you're beginning to see that yet. Impossible. The ego will never be happy. No matter what you do with it, for it, because of it—nourish it, enhance it, win awards for it, become a trillionaire—it's never going to be happy. It's just in its nature. It's impossible.

Well, in that moment when you're being breathed, the ego is taking a little vacation, and you're just sitting and breathing.

So our natural koan—for those of you who've been in the Zen tradition, I know some of you have—would be: Who's breathing? That's the big question finally. It's all about that. There is breathing, but who's doing it? Who's breathing?

You can examine any aspect of the breath. By examine, I mean just be aware of it—or of expressions in the body, bodily sensations. By now you've seen that as well. It's just torture to be sitting here, and then you just love sitting here. You can't wait for the bell to ring, or the bell is ringing too soon. You're just getting started. It's just so lovely. Why did the bell have to ring?

The body itself is going through tremendous changes. As the mind calms down, awareness can become staggering if it gets very precise, almost microscopic.

You're going to see that it's just a field of energy. A number of you are seeing that already. This word *body* makes it sound like it's solid, but it's just a process. Turn to the mind, and the process is even more so. So it's just a mind-body process, and there's nothing outside of it. That's another meaning of what we're talking about.

As you get to see the body, as you breathe in and breathe out, it's of course a wonderful field to begin learning about impermanence and also this absence of selfhood—that there's no one who owns it or controls it or who *is* it.

Now here I'm trying to also tie up some of the loose ends from interviews and things that are going on in the retreat. Some people seemed a little unclear about what the nature of the body actually is. Because in that first field of mindfulness, remember the Buddha's phrase, "seeing the body in the body"—there's a lot of valuable learning that comes out of that. Of course, the most important learning is we're learning how to be free. But one of the objectives that the Buddha sets for us, in his own words, is to begin to see that there is this body. No one's denying that there's a body. But the body is not me and it's not mine.

What in the world does that mean?

As you begin to practice self-knowing, and begin to see your actual relationship with your body, and then tune into other people's relationships to their bodies—whether it's through the mass media or just the way people talk—we're showing our relationship to the body in so many ways. You can see that it's very clear that we do identify with the body. We do think the body is me and that it is mine.

One extreme is tremendous involvement with it, whether you want to call it narcissism or something not as insulting—just endlessly preoccupied with beautifying it and strengthening it and making it young and making it last, all kinds of things. Now there's nothing wrong with any of those activities except where they're done in the service of enhancing this sense of self, which remember is being suggested is just a concoction.

Or you get the other extreme of alienation from the body, either through some indifference or perhaps some spiritual sense of superiority that you're into higher things. Or you don't like your body, so you turn away from it, for whatever reason. But both of them are caught in the body. Whether you're fighting with it or glorifying it, you're caught in the body. And the body is important material from which you're building up a sense of "I am, I am this"—whatever that image is that you're constructing.

So what the Buddha offers are a number of exercises, which we don't have time to go into, all of which are designed to balance us so that finally we slip out of those extremes. And my understanding of it is that you can take very good care of the body. In fact, you should. It's sacred. And it doesn't follow that you have to be egocentrically involved in the body. Not at all.

The best image I have for all this comes from the first Dharma teacher that I had, which was J. Krishnamurti. He used this image a lot, and it's always been very helpful to me. When we would talk about things like this, he would say, "Well, yes, it's true, you're not the body, and you don't own the body, and it's not you, and so forth. But try living your life without it." What he would say is that the relationship is very much like a cavalry soldier. You're going into combat on your horse. And although you aren't your horse, you'd better take very, very good care of that horse if you want to survive. So there can be a very beautiful relationship to the body that isn't necessarily in the service of vanity or used to build up this sense of me.

Similarly with feelings. I think by now we've all had many of them—thousands, for all I know, millions of

feelings since we've been here. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. They come and go, don't they? None of them are here now. Point to any feeling that you've had today. Is it here now? Any taste, any smell, any bodily sensation that's pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, sounds—they constantly change.

Moreover, if you examine them closely, they also lack self, unless you impute self to it. *My* feeling. This is happening to *me*. *I* am having a good feeling. *I'm* having a bad feeling. This painful feeling in my body is *m y* body and *I'm* suffering.

I think, as you know, we've been over this: the direct perception of pain in the body discloses pain. No one's denying there's pain. But if the mind comes in and identifies with that pain and claims it, appropriates it as part of itself, then you have torment, not just pain. Because the pain is happening to *me*, the most important being on the whole planet, in the whole universe. And it's being attacked by this pain.

And it just shouldn't be happening, but it is.

So some of this insight work is seeing the difference between mind and body, letting go of the commentator—if you recall, the announcer who's always telling you what's going on—and just working with the sensations. The same applies to the other mind states.

When we go to the mind directly, remember we talked about three of the main modes. The mind is very often in wanting something, often called greed or craving. Or not wanting, sometimes called aversion or aggression. Or confusion, ignorance, where the mind is spinning around, not quite sure what to do or where it is, characterized by a lot of darkness.

None of those mind states remain either. We don't just grasp all the time. We don't just attack all the time. And sometimes we're not confused—we're pretty decisive and clear as to what we want. So all of that field is another rich field for seeing how life is constantly changing. Everything's changing, and it's not changing in ways that we can control.

You can take a vow: "I'm only going to have saintly mind states for this retreat." Good luck. The mind has a mind of its own. It doesn't care. It will churn up what it's going to churn up due to conditions that are beyond our grasp. It's too complex for us to understand. And it doesn't last because those conditions are based on other conditions that are impermanent. And so you can learn that.

Now, if you attach to, let's say, mind moments when there's craving—I want—then of course you have larger than life. "I want." And when we're living under the influence of self-centeredness, like under the influence of alcohol, it's the same thing. Then "I want" can do all kinds of things that are destructive, because it's got to get what it really wants. And it's I who want it. It's not just that the mind has some wanting in it—it's that I want. So when people are under the influence of that, get out of the way.

We see all of that is changing. And when you pay attention, it's very clear that there's no one who owns these states. They're just formations. They're aspects of nature. Just as clouds come and go, just as the tides

come in and go out, just as the sun rises and sets, just as birds fly—anything can point to nature. And in the Buddhist teaching, the mind is considered part of nature.

So we're all naturalists here. Instead of watching birds, we're watching—well, we're watching birds, but they're in our mind. And we see them come and we see them go according to a lawfulness that is out of our control.

So what? In a number of places, the Buddha gave the most concise treatment of what his whole teaching was about. And it comes down to, slightly paraphrased: under no conditions attach to anything whatsoever as being me or mine.

That's what we've been talking about. To attach to anything whatsoever as being me or mine is what is called avijja—ignorance. When you attach to things as being me or mine, you're in a state of what is called ignorance.

And we've been brought up to do that. We've been brought up to construct a sense of me, to become a somebody. We are encouraged to do it. We're rewarded for doing it. We're constantly goaded into doing it. And if you don't, then you feel like you're nothing. So it's powerful. And we've been brought up to believe that it leads to happiness.

Now, this is what is called ignorant knowledge in the Buddhist teachings, or knowledge that is not knowledge, literally. Any knowledge that does not help us eradicate ignorance—and therefore suffering, because ignorance leads to suffering—doesn't have quite the same respect in this tradition.

Under no conditions attach to anything whatsoever as being me or mine. What we're doing all day long is attaching to things as me or mine. And if you look at it, you can see that we're constantly being born into one or another state, where we're this or we're that, getting X or getting Y.

The Buddha also said that birth is suffering. On one level, this means the physical pain of being born. But also, if you're born, then that means there's a body. If you have a body, then it must get old, it must get sick, and it must die. So just to be born is suffering.

Now, a lot of us New Agers and so forth, we don't like that one too much. But can you deny it? Here's what I'm trying to get at. There's another way of understanding it—there was also an inner teaching of it, where being born isn't referring literally to the body. When the Buddha says that birth is suffering, what he's talking about is birth of the ego, birth of me, birth of I and mine.

Because we aren't in that state all the time. If we were in the state of me and mine all the time, attached to it, we would be insane. Just everything would be taken personally. Absolutely everything would be taken personally.

What is being said is that from moment to moment, things happen to us. We see something, we think of something, something is shown to us, we smell or hear something, we eat something, and this process goes

to work. There's a contact and a feeling. And if the feeling is a very pleasant feeling, then we grasp after it and then we get attached. And then almost simultaneously is the birth of me and mine.

In Buddhist circles, you hear that attachment is suffering. Attachment is virtually synonymous with me or mine. Anytime you're suffering, look and see: Why am I suffering? Am I attached to something? And if you find that you are, you'll see—well, who's attached? You'll see it's me. It's happening to me. I wanted that and I'm not getting it. Or I have it, but it's being taken away. And it's an affront to something, some psychic something in us that can actually be observed. It's very subtle and very deep and very powerful, but it can be observed.

What the Buddha is saying—you hear terms like *samsara* or *puthujjana*, which means a worldly one. Worldly doesn't necessarily mean that the only people who would not be worldly would be monks or nuns. It doesn't really mean that. It means the mode of living. When your living is always under the influence of me or mine, when the energy that drives your actions and thoughts is constantly me or mine, then that is *samsara*. Because we are creating suffering, and very often, much of the time, not realizing that we are doing it to each other—whether it's on an individual level, or just look around at the planet.

The identifications with ethnic groups is to the point of insanity. Here we are, supposedly highly sophisticated, decked out in modern clothing with modern cars—caveman, tilt-down man and woman. It's the worst of tribalism. I don't want to get political, but this is our subject. We're part of that. We're not out of that. We're not exempt from that. The same dynamic that produces this attachment to me and mine—whether the mine are objects, buildings, practices, religions, children—it's just writ large when it becomes a country or an ethnic group or a race or whatever.

So that dynamic should concern us because we're destroying each other. It's not a joke. It really isn't. And yet the only person who can help us is ourselves—to at least help ourselves step out of that.

What's also being suggested is that this dynamic of greed, hatred, and delusion, me and mine, cuts through all social classes. It cuts through all—whether you're educated or ignorant, whether you're a farmer or a professor, whether you're a Nobel Peace Prize winner or you're a street person, whether you're dressed up or in tattered clothes, young, old, prosperous, poor. What it's saying is if you look closely, the dynamic is the same. The wealthy person may be driving themselves crazy around money, having so much and wanting more. The poor person is doing the same thing by not having it. But it's not the money per se that is the torment. It's that we identify with it and we use it as the basis to build up a sense of me or mine.

So what the Buddha is saying is don't get caught in all the different forms, how we're dressed up, the clothing we're wearing.

Underneath it, this dynamic is constantly at work. It can be highly refined, where what your mere mind is built up out of is an idea, a theory, or anything at all. And the proof comes out in the pudding—no matter how we speak and no matter how we dress, if we've not done any work on this, it shows up. We make life

difficult for ourselves and others because that dynamic is at work. It's got a lot of force.

It's a little bit like this: in Japan, they have a traditional kind of show where they dress monkeys up for a classical play, which is a little bit like our Shakespeare—a battle scene. You have one set of monkeys on one side of the stage and another set on the other side. One set of monkeys are decked out as certain soldiers in those outfits that the Japanese know all too well, with a famous general in his outfit. And on the other side, they're decked out in a different kind of outfit. Everyone's familiar with the play, and they're all having a good time because the monkeys are dressed up in these outfits and performing.

One time, apparently, someone in the middle of one of these performances threw a banana on the stage. And they all just—they were monkeys. That was the end of the show. You get my drift?

So none of us can be really cocky. Spiritual materials get used in the same way. Trungpa Rinpoche coined a very important term: spiritual materialism. All the different statuses and achievements and accomplishments and levels of this and levels of that—which is really the best method, and which brand of Tibetan Buddhism, or is it Theravada, is that the major vehicle or the tiny vehicle, or Zen, but is it Soto or Rinzai? It's not so different. So our challenge is seeing that.

Now, maybe this sounds insurmountable. But don't give up—it's not hopeless, because the truth is we're practicing weakening the sense of mere mind, whether you know it or not. Every time you're mindful, really in the moment, fully there with that attention—when you are really fully there, what's happening is, when it's really developed, it's called doerless doing. There's just the doing, and you're too involved in the doing to build a status out of it, or for the action to be driven from that place of me or mine. Rather, it's just happening.

Moreover, when me or mine turns up, if mindfulness is there alongside of it, it's not so dangerous. When we're awake, so many of these so-called negative states have come and gone, but they're really not dangerous when we're aware of them. They're just what they are. They come and they go. It's when we're unaware that we slip back, get caught in them, and then of course we're nourishing me or mine again.

All of us have tasted moments when we're free of that. As I mentioned, I don't think we would have gotten this far if we didn't get a break every day. We get a break sometimes gratuitously—just very good conditions. You're with friends that you love. It's nice weather. Everything is just working out. And everyone is relaxed and kind and not preoccupied with themselves. And we're just happy. Everyone's just happy.

Usually it doesn't last all that long because something happens to get the machinery going again. Who's got what and who's where and who's on top of who and who's underneath and who's equal—it starts in again.

Or when you get strong samadhi, you're given a respite. When the mind is very, very concentrated, it's not unusual that there isn't this sense of mere mind. There's just that concentration. So that gives you a break, and that's part of why it's so fulfilling and nourishing and refreshing when we enter into quiet, when the

mind becomes still out of concentration. We've given it a rest, whether we know it or not.

Unfortunately, the concentration, as useful as it is and as helpful and as remedial as it can be, doesn't uproot this tendency to attach to things as being mere mind. Ajahn Chah used the image of putting a big stone on top of grass—it holds it down, but then when you move the stone away, the grass starts up again. And that's, of course, where insight comes in, or vipassanā, or wisdom—the uprooting of it. When we begin to see clearly with our own minds, with our own eyes, this process at work—

And in the seeing, we start to weaken it, take some of the sting out of it. We don't burn ourselves so much with ourselves. We're burning ourselves.

Do you want to be a monkey running after bananas your whole life? I don't, even if they're organic.

When we're sitting in choiceless awareness, just sitting and breathing, all of this is happening. From time to time, something happens in the body. If we attach to it and appropriate it as being me or mine, then we're caught. If we see it for what it is—bodily sensations—we're free.

When feelings come and go, if they're prominent and turn up, if we grasp onto them, hold them tightly, claim them, use them as materials to build up a sense of self, then once again, that's what we're strengthening. Ignorance, our vāsanās—we're under the influence of our vāsanās. And the same with the mind states.

And so just sitting and breathing, we're watching the show, the coming and the going. And when we're attentive and that flow happens, everything just arises and passes away, even if it's just for a few moments to begin with. There's no problem. The problem is unawareness. As soon as we take our eye off the road, we're liable to have an accident.

Mindfulness and discernment, working together as comrades. As we attend to things, we begin to see their nature. We begin to see what's happening. And we learn. We learn how to be free, how to get free of our own self-enslavement.

Trungpa Rinpoche once was giving out protective cords, these cords that you put around your neck that the Tibetans give you. Jack Kornfield told me this story: Trungpa gave him one and put it on his neck, and Jack asked him, "Well, what does this protective cord protect you from?" Trungpa looked at him a little annoyed and said, "From yourself, of course."

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