Trust

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 45:30

What I want to talk about tonight is the quality of trust—what it is in our practice, in our lives, how it manifests, and also what prevents or hides the manifestation of trust in our minds and in our practices.

Where trust really begins, of course, is with the ability to trust inwardly, to trust ourselves. And that requires the quality of soft receptivity, the quality of openness, the ability to unconditionally accept oneself as one is in each moment, as each moment changes. In order to accept, it implies that one must first see clearly what the truth is—just the truth of ourselves in each moment. Until we see it, it's pretty hard to accept it. And so this trust, this faith in ourselves, in the Dharma, in the reality of what we see in the moment, arises just out of our own clear seeing, out of nothing else.

Seeing the actuality of ourselves, of life—the trust which comes from that is the expression of real inner security. The quality of mind associated with both clear seeing and the arising of trust, trust in what is true, is the quality of total letting go. Or as one of my currently favorite authors, a man who calls himself J. John Noe, puts it, it's a quality of radical acceptance. It's a phrase I really like—radical acceptance. He defines radical acceptance as the radical acknowledgement of the presence of truth at this very moment. The only thing to do is to do nothing but accept truth in all things, as all things, at all times, in all forms, in all ways. To let go, to accept, it is necessary only to give up your concerns and your fears.

Another way of putting it, from a rather different tradition—Sayadaw U Pandita said, "Unless there is softness and receptivity of mind, unless one totally surrenders, it will be almost impossible to receive anything." Unless one totally surrenders. In this context, I'm not seeing surrender as surrender to a teacher or to an outer authority, but to the truth of the moment. And that's trust.

One way that I can often begin to familiarize myself with that experience—that sense of softness, open receptivity, clarity of mind—is the state of total listening, which I'm sure you've all experienced just during this retreat at one time or another. It's that state when you're sitting, the mind is really quiet, very clear, quite attentive, and the attention is just on the listening. There's a real sense of openness. Sounds arise, persist, pass away. They're perceived very clearly, but there's not a sense of clinging, there's not a sense of pushing away, there's not a sense of wondering what sounds are going to come next or wishing that last sound could have stayed. There's no grasping going on. There's no fear or avoidance going on and no holding. To me, that's a way of experiencing that sense of trust.

Trust isn't a sense that, "Well, now I've seen clearly, I understand how this works. I can relax, settle back, I've got it. Things will just continue on the way they are and trust is here and I can trust and it'll just be the way I like it to be. Things will be comfortable." I find I do that a lot in meditation on a real subtle level.

And that's not trust at all. That's making up my own mentally created model of how things are or how they should be, and then looking to that model for security—which is a far cry from trust.

For instance, a more specific way of looking at that: say there's some particular pattern that's been going on in the meditation—a pattern of some emotion that arises, and then from that emotion tension arises, unpleasant sensation, aversion and fear. This pattern's been around a while. It's one that one's pretty familiar with. It comes up in a lot of sittings. And suddenly, in one sitting, for whatever reason, one sees it very clearly with real acceptance, real allowing. It's just a series of processes. There's no aversion. There's no clinging. In that moment, that's trust.

And perhaps in that moment of seeing clearly, the pattern goes away. After it goes away, there could be a moment of pleasantness, delight, joy. If there's not mindfulness then, it can be almost immediately followed by grasping of the mind, immediately the creation of a new model, a new structure: "Oh, so when there's something like that happening, if I look at it in just this way, it'll go away." In that moment, there's no longer trust. It's a movement away from trust, from seeing what is. It's the movement of grasping—grasping for a mind-created model of what should be, of how it will be comfortable, safe, secure.

From this we can see that trust is not a static quality. It's not something we can gain. It's not something that, once experienced or known, is then there in every situation, in every mind moment. It's really a vital quality, very energetic. It takes place, it arises, on a moment-to-moment level. It's also not passive, because it requires the energy of mindfulness, of real clear attention to what is true in each moment.

And it also requires the active, open, and total acceptance of that reality as it is—without referring back to a model, with no comparison to any other thing, just as it is.

It's not that trust in ourselves in the moment is so unknown to us. As I said, it's not something that we don't have now that has to be achieved or attained. It's not something separate from our present experience or beyond our understanding—though sometimes it may seem completely out of our present experience. We can feel so alienated from that sense of deep inner trust, so separate from our own experience in the moment, that we cannot see ourselves clearly, much less unconditionally accept what we're seeing and be able to trust in that understanding.

So what prevents this? What prevents our living with trust, our living in trust?

We spend so much of our lives, on so many levels, searching for security, for stability, for something in the world we can rely on, something we can trust. And it's this search itself which actually prevents the manifestation of trust. Because when we're looking for security, all we can ever find is insecurity.

Krishnamurti says, "To seek the truth is to deny it." When you think about it, it's a very sweeping and powerful statement. Because to seek anything is a movement away from the reality of what's happening right now. It's an avoidance, a denial of truth.

So before we can live in trust, live with deep inner security, we must first look honestly at our lives, at the movements of our minds, to see just where we are grasping for security. Right now, what am I placing my trust in, really, right now? What am I hoping will make my world safe, secure, predictable? Because it's not that we don't have trust, but that we place it in things which can never provide the security we seek, because they'll never stay the same. They're bound to change.

This is another quote, from John Noe. Here he uses the word faith, and I'm using it interchangeably with trust:

"It is not a matter of whether or not faith is present in your life. It is. It is only a question of whether you place your faith in truth and reality or in your considerations, abstractions, judgments, and thoughts about it. Do not doubt that you are currently practicing faith. Consider only where it is placed. Do you place your faith in fear, resistance, and avoidance? Or do you place it in the very form of life you try to manipulate and limit? Radical acceptance is the practice of faith."

So where are we placing our faith right now? What are some of the things that we tend to look to for the security we seek? The list is endless, and some are quite obvious—some of the ways that we try to structure our environment, structure our outer world, so that we can feel safe, so that we think we can know what to expect and trust that it won't change. Just some of the first things that come to mind are stable relationships, a good job or fulfilling job, a comfortable and secure living situation, a compatible circle of friends, this body.

It's not to say that any of these things themselves are wrong or contrary to living in trust. Obviously they're rich fields for growth and understanding when we view them with the right attitude, when we're really clear about our relationship to these things. We see them clearly as they are and know deeply—not just intellectually, "yes, sure, things change and I can't rely on it"—but really know that none of these circumstances will last, or else we won't last. And so we're not relying on them unconsciously for security. We're not using them as ways to avoid being alone with ourselves, ways to avoid looking clearly at the reality of ourselves, the reality of each moment.

Are we using any of these situations to mask the awareness of the fact that our life, that the world, is in constant flux, constant change, and that there's no security to be found in it anywhere? If we are clinging to these outer circumstances for security, that clinging, that movement of grasping, is a movement away from clear seeing. It's a movement away from truth, and it's a separation from living with inner trust.

When we begin to look to see whether and to what degree we're placing trust in externals, it can be kind of tricky to determine if we're not looking really clearly, because it can vary from moment to moment. For example, take a steady relationship. There can be a time when we're really seeing the relationship, we're seeing ourselves in it quite clearly. We appreciate it as it is, we know it's not going to last, and it's really an opportunity for growth, and we're using it that way. There's a lot of love and compassion and understanding. That can be an expression of trust. The next day we could be holding on to it for dear life

and in a panic because it's going to end. In that moment we're using it to hide from the reality and to avoid being with ourselves. So it takes a lot of clarity, a lot of looking, all the time.

One clear indication of whether we're using these circumstances to try and find security where there is none to be found is whether we're beginning to develop or experience a sense of dependency on any of these circumstances—dependency on them for stability, for safety, or for happiness, for contentment. Because if we're dependent on something for security, implicit in that dependence is fear. Fear that the situation will change.

And where there's fear, there's insecurity. So the very fact of relying on something, the very fact of dependence on something for happiness, actually brings about the opposite of what we're seeking. The dependence promotes fear and insecurity. And when we're fearful, obviously we're not living in a state of trust. We're living in a state of avoidance, a state of grasping.

This is a quote from the Buddha in the Sutta Nipata, talking about dependence and fear. He says, "One insight is that there is trembling for one who is dependent. The other is that the one who is independent does not tremble. The independent person does not tremble or get confused. But a person who is dependent on something is clutching, grasping at existence in one form or another, and cannot escape from existences, from becoming. There is grave danger in being dependent. Therefore, relying on nothing, the mindful monk wanders on, free from clinging, relying on nothing."

So when I look at the quality of trust, it seems to me that at the core of the lack of trust I feel in myself, the core of my feelings of insecurity, is actually the movement of grasping itself. Because the movement of grasping is a distortion of clear seeing. It's a rejection of truth in that moment when there's grasping. It's avoidance. And when I can't see what's real, I certainly can't accept it. There's no possibility for trust to arise. If we're separated from reality, we're unconsciously denying it.

This grasping for security, the attempt to structure our environment to meet our own concepts of what will provide safety, is certainly not restricted to the obvious external examples I mentioned before. You've probably noticed that the movement of grasping tends to arise in the mind on a fairly regular basis. So I want to mention a few of the common mental constructs or patterns that we create as we sit here and then clutch at for security. The list is probably endless, so I'll just mention a few that came to my mind.

The first one was knowledge—how being able to accumulate a certain body of knowledge about anything can lead one to feel secure. It's something to fall back on, especially if we're more knowledgeable about something than everyone else. Then we can really feel safe. And when I thought about knowledge, it led right into views and opinions, which is a different area, but I saw how often my mind confuses my views and opinions with knowledge. I'm so sure they're right, although they're just views and opinions.

This comes up a lot in my mind when I'm on retreat, in relation to the actual practice itself. For example, say I have a really clear sitting, and whatever that particular experience of mindfulness was during that

sitting—maybe things were just really sharp, there was a lot of clarity, a certain movement of energy, it really doesn't matter what—my mind takes up that particular experience and forms a model. "Oh yes, this is how things really are. When one sees clearly, this is the reality of things." The mind makes up that model but doesn't see the movement of grasping in it, the holding on to it. And there's a grasping and carrying of that model of "how things really are" based on one experience throughout the sitting, into the retreat. That's a view, that's an opinion, but the mind takes it as knowledge.

Then say further into the retreat, the whole show changes—everything becomes more microscopic, or the energy moves in a different way, or whatever—some experience, and it doesn't matter what it is, goes away. In that moment the mind goes, "Oh, so that other way, it wasn't really like that at all. I was just grasping. I set up a model, but now I really see how it is." In one moment, it sees the other grasping and does the same thing again. It's really amazing. Then I can see it and do it again.

So that is the way the mind makes up a view, takes it to be knowledge, and then grasps onto it for security. It's tempting to build up a storehouse of knowledge about the meditation, about reality, as a platform of security rather than experiencing the meditation, experiencing the moment as it is. Again, that's trust in the wrong thing—looking outside of the moment, outside of reality, for some experience which won't change, some experience to refer back to for security, instead of taking refuge in this moment only, instead of trusting in the awareness of the living presence.

Another construct along similar lines that the mind tends to grasp at is this whole concept of what is and isn't good meditation, real meditation, the right way to do it—which I think most of you are probably familiar with. One example of how we do that on a rather gross level is that after having a particular experience the mind has grasped onto as "the real thing"—this is really meditation—we may find ourselves structuring our whole day in order to recreate the conditions from which that particular experience arose. For example, say you happened to be walking on the walking path when that happened, at a certain speed, in a certain way. So the mind goes, "Well, okay, if I walk right after lunch when no one else is there, and I turn off the lights—or turn on the lights, depending which group you belong to—and I hold my hands in this certain way," and so on, "then I can repeat that experience," which is obviously much more desirable than what's happening right now. Is this freedom? Is this trust in awareness?

And we do it all the time.

So the last particular I want to mention—as I noted, knowledge, views and opinions, what is and what isn't right meditation—the last kind of big one that came to my mind was our tendency to look to some outer authority for security, something to rely on, to tell us what's true. That could be a teacher. It could be, in this situation, another person at the retreat that the mind has grasped onto as someone who really knows what they're doing—the model yogi—imitating everything that they do, the way they move, the way they eat. It could be something we've read. It doesn't really matter what, because often, especially in a situation like this, the authority is not being imposed from the outside. Usually we're giving the power to the outer

authority by seeking refuge in something apart from our own awareness.

And so each time that we do that, each time that we reach out for security, we're accentuating insecurity. Relying on outer authority can lead to confusion because we're alienated from inner trust in that moment. We're not trusting our own ability to see clearly. We're looking for someone else to tell us what clear seeing is, or what we should be seeing if we were seeing clearly in each moment. And when we do that, we become increasingly unable to accept loss, to accept change, because we're looking for permanence. And we become increasingly unable to experience trust because the things we're trusting in keep belying it.

So, as I said before, it's the movement of grasping itself which distorts. When there's grasping in the mind, as I'm sure you've noticed, it creates a sense of imbalance in the mind, and you can even feel it in the body. When there's grasping at some object, we can't see clearly either the object that the mind is grasping at or anything else being experienced in that moment, because of the distortion created by the energy of grasping.

An easy example: say in the afternoon you smell bread cooking in the kitchen. It smells really good. The idea comes into the mind, "Oh, we're having muffins for tea." And there's grasping onto that idea that we don't really see clearly. Then tea comes and there's peanuts. No word about the bread. "Well, I guess the staff's having another party, and we're getting peanuts. Uh-huh. Okay. That's all right. That's okay. I can really accept that." But at that moment, as we're sitting eating the peanuts, how clearly are we seeing the thought that it's just a thought? "I wanted muffins. The smell was pleasant. I wanted muffins." It's just a thought. How clearly are we seeing that? And how clearly are we experiencing the reality of eating the peanuts? It's just taste, movement, sensation. The grasping distorts both the object grasped at—the thought "I wanted muffins"—and the reality of what we're actually experiencing, which is eating peanuts.

So to work with this, we need the basic willingness to directly confront our insecurities, to look directly at how fear and grasping are manufactured in our mind on a moment-to-moment basis. Because when we don't see it, we're in bondage to it. And when we're in bondage to grasping and fear, we can't know trust. We're looking for something outside of the truth of the moment. And where can trust begin except right now? There is no other time. There's only now.

The most helpful tool to look at grasping is obviously mindfulness. And one of the clearest ways to begin to observe grasping as it arises is to be aware of it through the links of dependent origination that Joseph talked about the other night—especially in this context, the links where contact gives rise to feeling, which gives rise to craving. It's at this point in the chain that we can see grasping arise clearly, and it's also at this point that we can really see how powerful mindfulness is.

Going back to the example of smelling the muffins: at that point, the contact would be the contact of the nose and the smell of the muffins and smelling consciousness. That's contact, which gives rise to the feeling of pleasantness associated with the smell, which gives rise to craving, wanting the muffins. If there's no mindfulness at that point, the craving moves on to give rise to grasping. And that grasping is

like really grabbing hold, really grabbing hold of the idea. Then the whole chain of becoming proceeds on from that—all the wildness that the mind manufactures around this experience of wanting muffins, grasping at muffins.

Now the same process can occur, but when there's really clear mindfulness, we see the contact, we see the smell arise, we see the feeling arise of pleasantness, and we may see the craving arise.

Craving may not arise at all at that point; we may simply see the feeling arise. But if we're seeing clearly, craving may arise without necessarily proceeding onto grasping—without the whole becoming, the whole chain.

In that moment of mindfulness, the entire chain of becoming is broken at the point where craving does not move into grasping. And it's not that we're stopping it, not through any act of will. It's simply that in seeing clearly the contact, feeling, and craving, we recognize quite directly that there's nothing to grasp at. Mindfulness is established. It's not blinded by grasping. It's really settled in the truth of the moment, seeing this process clearly for what it is—just a conditioned, impersonal process.

The condition of contact arises. Because of the smell, the pleasant feeling arises. Because of the pleasant feeling, craving arises. And that's all that's happening. It's really very simple. When there's mindfulness present in that process, we see that the grasping is truly extra. We also see that there's nothing worth grasping onto.

This process continues—this whole cycle of dependent origination, this whole cycle of contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming. It continues on a moment-by-moment basis. While we certainly can't rely on having seen it clearly in the last moment, thinking we don't really need to look in this moment, that the last moment will free us from the bondage of craving now—we can't rely on that. But it's also true that each moment of mindfulness helps to condition the arising of future moments of mindfulness. Each time we clearly see and let go of the arising of grasping, we're weakening its hold on the mind.

And so trust arises on this same moment-to-moment basis. In each moment that we are seeing the reality of the moment that clearly, without the unseen movement of grasping or resistance or denial, in that moment there is trust.

As we begin to see this process of grasping more clearly, we begin to understand that even the slightest movement of grasping in the mind, just the slightest movement of it, leads to insecurity. Just the slightest movement of grasping leads us away from trust. Through this we come to see that nothing—nothing—is worth grasping onto. Not even ideas of unity, ideas of truth. Because no body, no thing, no idea, no concept can provide us with any security in this world.

This takes me back to that previous quote from the Buddha, which I just want to read the end part of again: "There is grave danger in being dependent. Therefore, relying on nothing, the mindful monk wanders on, free from clinging." I don't think the words were chosen lightly. Grave danger in being

dependent. Relying on nothing.

When we are seeing clearly this reality of how things are, we begin to realize that we are really living with utter insecurity—that there's nothing in the world which can provide security. And when we really see and accept that, in that moment there's trust. In that moment there's no movement of grasping. That stillness, that utter stillness of mind, allows for the arising of trust and wisdom—the stillness of mind when there's no movement of grasping, no movement of avoidance.

Let me share an example from a couple of years ago, of how when the mind stops needing security so much, real trust can arise—needing the security of role, of location, or in my case, needing to know what was going to happen in the next moment.

I had been talked into, under great duress, going to another city to lead a weekend retreat, which I'd never done anything like before. I was totally petrified. I tried everything I could to get out of it, short of just flatly refusing. I tried to talk my way out of it to anyone who would listen, but I couldn't. I couldn't get out of it.

So I went. I had no familiarity with the location. I knew nobody there. It was a totally unfamiliar role. I had no past experience of doing the same thing. I just didn't have a clue how it would go. I didn't know if I could do it, and the thought terrified me. I was totally insecure, but I wasn't accepting the fact of the fear. I wasn't seeing that I was needing the security of knowing what would happen, that I was needing approval from other people, needing to be told, "You're great, it'll go fine, don't worry." Many people could tell me that, but I didn't believe it. I just wasn't seeing clearly how I was looking for security in the external situation. There was absolutely no trust.

Right before the thing started—it was in a room at a university and they were registering people—I went downstairs. There happened to be a chapel on the floor below, and I had nothing else to do, so I thought I might as well meditate. I was really sick of reading over the talk.

I'd really had it, so I said, well, I'll just sit. And in that moment, as soon as I quieted down, I confronted the fear and the insecurity and all that—everything just shifted. It was really interesting. None of that went away, but this incredible sense of trust arose. Not so much in the situation, not in myself, not in personality. The fear didn't go away, but trust arose in the seeing and the acceptance of the situation as it was in that moment—of the fear, and of knowing that since I had absolutely no idea of what should happen or what would be appropriate to happen, then what I wanted to happen didn't matter. And I could just trust in whatever was happening in that moment.

It was quite a powerful experience for me because it wasn't as if the fear or the insecurity went away. It was all still there, but there was this very strong sense of just being quite present with it. And the trust was like a palpable sense. It was really interesting.

From that experience is when I understood that trust is really very simple. I mean, this has been a lot of

words, but it really is very simple because it's really not any different from awareness. It just comes down to the fact that there's nothing to do but see each moment's reality utterly clearly and acknowledge and accept that reality fully.

Sayadaw U Pandita uses the simile that clinging to anything for security is like trying to scoop up water in a butterfly net. I like that simile. It just shows the utter futility of it. And Krishnamurti says that reality has no continuity. No continuity. It is from moment to moment, ever new, ever fresh. I like that. Reality has no continuity.

So can we learn to live with that fact—that there's no continuity in reality? Can we live with the understanding that no security can be found anywhere in this world, that there's nowhere to take a stand outside of this moment, and that this moment has no continuity with the last moment or the next moment, because there's only this moment?

Or do we prefer, as I heard Christopher Titmuss say some time ago, to continue fooling ourselves, to continue hiding from reality by grasping at false security, by living with false trust? As long as we allow ourselves to prefer the illusion of being secure, we deny ourselves the chance to know what it means to be free. And in that we're denying ourselves the quality of trust.

As I said, all it takes is looking directly at reality right now and seeing clearly our fear and the grasping. When we are seeing clearly, each moment that we see clearly the nature of life, the nature of our existence, in that moment we have no more need to grasp at either external situations or at mind-created concepts for security. We have no need to grasp because from our own clear seeing, from the awareness of truth as it is from moment to moment, there's no more need to avoid. Because in that clear seeing there is trust, and in that trust is the end of grasping, the end of fear—because we see that there's no more need to grasp at anything. All that we need is right here in this moment.

I just want to end with a one-line quote from John Daido Loori again. He says, "We cannot love anything until we love and appreciate what is present in each moment." Until we love and appreciate what is present in each moment. It's really very simple.

Thank you.

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