Opening Talk

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 34:30

This is really quite a moment. We're beginning tonight, the start of three months together.

I just want you to know that all the emotions you've described—feeling joy, excitement, apprehension, terror, wondering what you've gotten yourself into—I go through the same thing, whichever side or role I'm playing in a retreat. I'm sitting here thinking, "Three months? We're all here for three months? What's it going to be like?"

I think it's really natural to feel this way, but especially when you're a yogi, because this is such a journey into the unknown. As Joseph mentioned last night, each moment is an opening into the complete unknown. Actually, our whole life is that anyway, but we usually don't confront that reality with such direct, head-on looking as we're doing here, really every moment. And it's scary. The mind doesn't really like it very much.

I think that brings up a lot of our apprehension about what's going to happen. We tend to want some kind of pattern or a map—just let me know what I'm going to go through. If I have the hindrances in three days, that's okay as long as I know it. We don't like being in this space where we don't know what's going to happen in the next moment. And so the mind throws up all kinds of obstacles.

I was reflecting on this tonight and I realized that every retreat I've ever done, no matter how long or how much I'm into it, somewhere in the first week when I start getting really bogged down in the hindrances and I'm really slogging, I hit a day—and it usually lasts about a day—where I think, "Oh my God, I can't believe I did this to myself again. I should have known better." And it passes. Don't believe it. It's just the mind throwing up resistance out of a space of difficulty and fear. And no matter how many retreats any of us have done, we never know what's going to happen in the next moment of this retreat. That's just part of what the whole journey is about.

So I want to say a few things about attitudes that can help us as we begin this journey. Then Sharon will lead us in the refuges and the precepts, and we'll formally begin this period of silence, this remarkable thing that all of us are choosing to do together here this fall.

One of the things I've found tremendously helpful—Joseph touched on it a bit last night—is to give some attention to what expectations you're bringing into this retreat. What are the ideas, the pictures in your mind? Sometimes even consciously reflecting on them can help. Not that they're bad, but to know what they are, to bring them into conscious knowing.

Ideas about, for example, what a good retreat should feel like. What I expect to happen, what should

happen. Lots of emotion. No emotion. Incredible peace. A lot of intensity. Really smooth and even. But no, that's dull—something really deep has to happen. Just notice what those ideas are. Things we've read. Whatever ideas we have about what it means to be enlightened. Notice what they are without a lot of judgment, and then put them down. It's extra baggage. It's stuff we carry around with us, and when we don't see it, it keeps us held in what we already know. It's what prevents us from being fully present and opening into the truth of this moment, the unknown truth of this moment. It keeps us in comparing and judging and disappointment.

I'll probably say this next thing a hundred times, but this practice is not about getting to, reaching, attaining some specific state of mind or body, some place where we can then hang out and know, "Ah, now it's right, now I've done it." It's not about that at all. It's about developing a quality of observing power, or mindfulness—a quality of clear, precise, yet very loving attention, regardless of what is happening. And that's without exceptions: regardless of what is happening. It's this quality of connected attention that we're developing.

So when I begin a retreat, I usually consciously check for expectations. I go, "Got that one, got that one, now I know what they all are." And somewhere in the middle, or not so far from the beginning, when I hit into my first period of discouragement, disappointment, or frustration, rather than using that as a way to judge myself or evaluate—"Okay, I'm blowing it. This practice is wrong. I shouldn't have done this retreat. It's not the right time"—rather than using the frustration as a sign that there's something wrong, I see it as a signal. Okay, there's some expectation I'm not aware of.

There's some idea I have of what should be happening that I'm not aware of. So what is it? I can use the sense of discouragement as a signal to see what it is that I think should be happening that isn't. Because it's this comparison with our unseen idea that's bringing about the sense of frustration and disappointment.

Often merely the seeing—oh, right, I thought it should be pleasant all the time—can just allow us to again open to whatever it is that's happening. It's so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that if I'm having a difficult time, or even if unpleasant sensations are arising in the body, that means something's wrong. I've got to fix it. That means I'm doing something wrong, or there's something wrong with the practice. That's just not true. It just isn't true. Who in life has even a whole day of nothing but pleasant experience? It's not reality.

And hard times in our practice here are not just something that we put up with. They're actually a vital part of the practice. It's highs and it's lows and it's all the in-betweens. Developing this quality of clear observing power and open spaciousness of attention—acceptance with the hard times is just as important. Sometimes even more important. I find I've learned so much more, in a way, from the difficult times in practice. They're really vital.

Now, that's easy to say, sitting here. We can all give ourselves a little pep talk, and I would do that to

myself all the time when I'm sitting. But when something really difficult comes along, that little pep talk—"Yeah, fine, right, this is vital. Uh-huh, good"—doesn't really always keep us there, get us over the hump.

Another attitude that is essential in allowing us to be present with this spaciousness—and it's something that we all are developing just through the hours of sitting and walking and sitting and walking—is what we usually call patience. By patience, I don't mean just this sense of, "Okay, I can last through this until it's over." That's not at all what I mean. That's more like aversion—a kind of silent endurance. We hate this, but I'll sit with it until it goes away.

By patience, I'm really talking about a much broader quality of being. It encompasses attention, spacious acceptance, even appreciation, full presence with what's happening. With ourselves, with our restless, desiring, angry, doubting minds. With our aching, restless bodies. With our noisy, restless neighbor. With the job we don't like, with the schedule we don't like, with our experience we don't like. With days on end of sleepiness. With days on end of restlessness. With the cold. With whatever is going on. This broad, open quality of patience.

The best description that I know comes from Suzuki Roshi, the great Zen master. He writes: "The usual translation of the Japanese word *nin* is patience, but perhaps constancy is a better word. You must force yourself to be patient. But in constancy, there is only the unchanging ability to accept things as they are. Constancy is the way we cultivate our own spirit. Constancy is our way of continuous practice. We should always live as if we are the dark, empty sky. The sky is always the sky. Even though clouds and lightning come, the sky is not disturbed. Even if the flashing of enlightenment comes, after it passes, our practice forgets all about it. Then it is ready for another enlightenment."

This quality of true patience, constancy—we're always present, always there, prepared with our attention for whatever flashing comes. We can appreciate it, really appreciate it, and then forget about it as it goes. It's a beautiful quality of mind. And often in the long hours when it seems like nothing much is going on—another lifting, another placing, another breath—this quality of constancy, which also implies mindfulness, is being developed very deeply in our being. It's a very important and beautiful quality.

Along with this, our specific practice here helps us develop a very clear, direct, observing power of mind—a very strong power of mindfulness—which enables us to experience, to see the nature of ourselves, of our mind and body, the nature of reality, in a radically different way. A way that we often just don't experience in our busy lives. We don't take the time to really be able to look and experience in this way.

And it's really wonderful. This technique requires the development of a concentrated, continuous, precise quality of attention. And it does require a great deal of energy and effort.

Equally important, I feel, is that this development of focused attention is also held with an attitude of mind

and heart characterized by spaciousness and acceptance of whatever's happening, by genuine interest in whatever's happening. Whatever is happening is okay. Anything that comes up in a moment is okay. And I think it's the putting of these two qualities together—the sense of concentrated, continuous, energetic focus held with a spacious attitude—that really allows our practice to develop quite fully.

A couple of hints in working with developing this observing power. And we'll talk more about all of these as the course goes on.

First, and we've mentioned this briefly: as you're moving through the day, not just in the sitting and walking but really everything else that you're doing, begin to work with slowing down, with doing one thing at a time. Ostensibly that might seem easy, but as we start to focus more closely, we see how easy it actually is to do two or three things at once. So begin here, as you're moving around, to break our habitual patterns of rushing, of doing rote activities without really having our mind on them.

Slowing down—that's one thing that really helps. You go to wash your face, just slow down. Just wash your face. As you begin to move a little more slowly, you find that it's much easier in the slowness to bring your attention into the actual experience in a much less superficial way. So there's washing the face and really being with the sensations of the movement of the arm, the wetness on your hand, the coldness of the water, the impatience in your mind. Simply being there with that.

Notice also how easy it is to want to wash your face and brush your teeth and plan what you're going to do in the next half hour all at the same time. And in noticing that, okay, begin again. It's a constant beginning again, back to feeling the movements of the hand as you wash the face. It's really simple. There's always right now, what I'm doing, to come back to. It's a continual beginning again. It's not something esoteric and difficult. It's just our willingness to be here now—for washing my face, for doing the dishes.

So doing one thing at a time and being willing to slow down so that we're really there in the experience. It's one wonderful thing about these three months: there's nowhere to hurry to. It's quite a gift you've given yourselves. Three months of no need to hurry. So when you find that you're hurrying—which undoubtedly will arise from time to time—you're hurrying to wash your face in order to get to the sitting so then you can meditate. Oh, whoa, wait a minute. That moment of washing your face is the meditation. That moment is this moment of your life, and that's all there is—this moment of life. And so our practice is to wake up, be present, connect with our life in this moment, not to hurry and get this moment over with so we can be present in the next moment.

This willingness to come back over and over to just be with, very simply, our experience—whatever we're doing—is what we're talking about when we're talking about continuity of mindfulness, continuity of awareness. And it's an extremely important and powerful part of this practice. I would say for myself and my practice, it has been at least as important a part of the practice as the formal sitting and walking. At times more so, because when there's this sense of real presence with what you're doing, connection with the sensations of the movement, the movement in your mind, it doesn't matter if you miss the whole

sitting because you're very present for washing your face and walking through the dining room. That's the practice. It's not that you have to be sitting on the cushion at a certain time. It's really a very powerful part of the practice.

And I'd like to mention also, just briefly, that we can bring this same care to our yogi job. Sometimes this seems to be a little bit outside our area of what's worth paying attention to. I don't mean going microscopically slowly so that it takes you seven hours to wash the lunch dishes. Obviously, we have to take a little care with the sense of the total situation. But our yogi job is just as important a time. It's a moment, several moments, an hour of our life in which we can cultivate the qualities of mindful attention, concentration, connection with our experience.

And sometimes there's a tendency to discount it and want to hurry through it, get it over. Well, it's in the way. I have to move too fast. It's a disruption, a distraction. And I myself have often felt this way. I'd rather not do a yogi job; I just want to really be slow and sit and walk and sit and walk. And because I kind of have an in when I come here to do retreats, I often don't have to do a yogi job. But the last retreat I did here, last year, I said, oh, I'll be good—I'll sign up and vacuum. And it turned out to be a wonderful part of my practice. I was really amazed.

I thought, I've been missing this all these years. It was a really powerful part of developing the continuity. It was not only not a break in the continuity—it developed it even stronger. So I didn't have to hold on to the fear that if I move faster, it's all going to go away. It doesn't necessarily happen that way.

And I found that the attitude of thinking "this job doesn't count as the practice, it's outside of the practice"—that's missing the whole idea of the practice. Because nothing is outside of the practice. Nothing in our life, here or in our life outside of here. But especially here, since that's what we're concerned with now—nothing we do here is outside of the practice. It's all a vital part of developing our awareness and understanding.

So again, in the job you're moving more quickly, perhaps, but still there's always our bare experience to come back to. The feeling of the arms moving the vacuum. The coldness of the water as you're washing the dishes. The sense of feeling disgruntled or impatient or whatever arises in your mind. Whatever's going on, there's always the present experience to come back to.

This is what we're talking about when we speak of a willingness to totally surrender to the moment. It doesn't matter what's happening in the moment. Can I surrender my being into being totally here? Feeling it, being with it very fully, with power and force of attention, and this quality of acceptance.

And that's what these three months are. It's really just this moment. A lot of these moments—I don't know how many. But it always just comes back to this moment. There's nothing else. And in this moment, our strongest friend and ally is this power of attention. It can always be present as soon as we remember that we've spaced out—and then we're awake again. We can again focus our attention on whatever's

happening. There's nowhere else to go. And really, for these three months, there's nothing else worth doing.

I want to close with this quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian teacher: "Do not undervalue attention. It means interest and also love. To know, to do, to discover, to create—you must give your heart to it, which means attention."

It's a privilege to share this three-month journey with you.

Traditionally, we've begun retreats by undertaking the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. The Three Refuges are taking refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, and in the Sangha. The act of taking refuge is something we'll probably be talking about much more extensively throughout the retreat, but just briefly, it's holding a sense primarily of what's possible for us.

All of you have given up a lot—of one kind or another—in order to be here. You've particularly given up all that which is familiar: the things that you might touch in with every day to remind yourself of who you are, what your values are, what you're going to get done, what you're going to accomplish that day.

Coming here, very often we have to let go of a lot of that. We're not speaking to one another, so there's not a kind of social portrayal of ourselves as being a certain person. We're not upholding an image of ourselves by how we dress—God knows—and all of the various ways we might in the world take on a role and feel secure about who we are.

Coming to a place like this, we let go of many of these aspects of our being and undertake, as Carol said, a journey of investigation or exploration. We're willing to let go of the merely familiar to see freshly and completely what is true for us.

But we don't do that without a context. It's not that we do this without any sense of security or understanding about what we're undertaking. This is taking refuge. It's providing the context. It's understanding why we're doing what we're doing and how we can do it in the most skillful way possible—which means the happiest way possible, and one that feels most complete.

We take refuge in the Buddha both as a sign of respect to the historical figure who lived 2,500 years ago, who was a pathfinder, who delineated a way for us so that we're not just coming in, sitting down, and trying to sort out of the confusion of our minds how to move forward. There is a path—a very clear path—that is laid out. We don't need to struggle to try to discover it as though there were no wisdom to sustain us.

We also take refuge in the Buddha as a symbol of our own potential. In all of the stories within this tradition about the Buddha, he is always described as being a human being—not a divine being. He's described as a human being who achieved or attained everything that he came to know through the

power of his own awareness. It's also taught that this degree of understanding, this degree of purification of the mind, is possible for all of us as human beings, as who we are. So we take refuge in the Buddha also as a means of affirming our own potential for enlightenment, for freedom, for purification.

It's an act of recognition, really, that this is our potential.

We take refuge in the Dhamma, which can be translated as the teachings, or the way, or the truth, or the laws of nature. It's taking refuge in seeing things as they truly are. Joseph mentioned the other day surrendering to the Dhamma—surrendering to how things are in this moment. So we're not struggling and we're not fighting and we're not trying to deny what is happening, but we're seeing the truth of it, whatever it is. And understanding that this relative truth in this moment is our vehicle to a more ultimate or absolute truth. So we learn to trust our own experience and to use it in a way that is wise and skillful. We take refuge in the Dhamma.

We take refuge in the Sangha, which also has many meanings. The Sangha traditionally has meant the order of ordained monks and nuns who have preserved the teachings throughout all of these centuries, which has been an immeasurable gift. It means those beings who have practiced and attained a degree of purification of mind. Once again, it's an affirmation of what is possible for a human being. And in a very contemporary sense, it has come to mean the widest possible community of those who walk this path. So it's like we're all taking refuge, in that sense, in one another—with an understanding that in coming together here, even though we are silent and we're practicing aloneness and we're not making eye contact, really we could never be completely alone. We are supporting one another all of the time. This is the three refuges.

We then undertake five precepts, which are the absolutely essential foundation for the community to live here harmoniously and for our own practice to be empowered. In the world as we know it, as is convenient, as is culturally ordained, we don't think particularly of happiness and power as being tied up with our own virtue, our own actions, and the kind of strength that comes from living harmoniously and living simply, being straight and being honest. Yet there's tremendous strength and power that comes from that. It is really for the sake of making the practice as intense as possible and as deep as possible that again and again we call to mind this foundation. We understand that we must make this kind of commitment for our own sake, so we're not in any way weakening the power of our mind even as we need it to do this exploration.

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