Inner Contentment

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:05

Last night Michelle spoke about opening and understanding. I want to speak tonight a little about some of the habits of mind, the inclinations of mind that block, that hinder what seems like it should be a natural process of opening. These habits block our touching, our living with a sense of inner contentment. They keep us from knowing that we are complete and whole in ourselves.

When we're just going along normally, there's not a real attentiveness or care. There's not mindfulness in our experience in a moment. The natural way that our minds—that all of us—react to situations, these really deeply ingrained patterns of response, of habit, is our natural kind of way of being. Or it feels like our natural way of being because it's so familiar to us.

These root habits or patterns I've spoken of before are that when we come in contact with the pleasant, the impulse is of craving, of wanting. When there's contact with some unpleasant experience, the impulse is of pushing away, aversion, hatred in the strong sense of talking about it. And in contact with neutral, the impulse is just not seeing what's going on or spacing out. It's really a root habit of perceiving, a habit of reacting, that keeps us so out of touch with what's true, but it feels so natural. Of course, that's the natural way to be. How else would one respond?

There's a little cartoon I got from a friend's refrigerator. Refrigerators seem to be a great place to find important information. It says, "Science has noted three basic types." You wander alone down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle, solitary yet surrounded—just like here. You think, "These people are..." and it's multiple choice. A: my brothers, my sisters. B: perverts, probably pickaxe murderers. C: I sure could go for a chili dog.

Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse: A: I know what he feels. He feels hope. He feels fear. B: Why is that pervert looking at me? C: Maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

Then the last one: further down, construction workers are tearing the street to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of A: the path of life, B: the highway to hell, C: rocky road, my favorite flavor.

It's natural, part of our experience. What's really quite fascinating to me is the subtlety of these tendencies of mind. Because not only can these energies of greed, of hatred, of delusion inform our reaction, they are also so subtle that they can actually color our perception so deeply that we don't even consciously, accurately perceive what's happening. That's even prior to the response.

Here's an example. I read in a book by a friend of ours about psychological tests that were testing just this kind of perception and how it's skewed by desire, by aversion. In this one test, they had a four-minute

video of a very fast basketball game, and the subjects were told to count how many times the ball passed. There's a sense of focusing, of really wanting to see that particular aspect. So they did that and were questioned at the end about how many times the ball was passed.

In the meantime, throughout the basketball court during this fast game, they had a woman in white with a white parasol come stately walking from one side to the other. Nobody mentioned it later when they were asked about how many times the ball was passed. In fact, when they asked the subjects about it, they said, "I never saw that," and absolutely would not believe that had been part of the video—until it was shown again. And then it's like, "How could I miss that?"

This is how the habit, the impulse of craving, can distort our perception so that we really consciously are not relating to what's actually going on.

You can see this both with craving and with aversion just in our day-to-day life. When you walk down a street, do you ever notice that what you particularly notice is kind of the set that your mind has? If I'm hungry, I'll notice restaurants. If you're looking to buy a new car, you notice the kinds of cars that drive by. If you have a particular aversion—like on retreats sometimes people get, you know, the opposite of a vipassana romance, a vendetta, a vipassana vendetta, where someone just drives you crazy—there's a setup of aversion. Do you ever notice that somehow you see that person more than everybody else in the whole retreat?

These habits are very strong. They arise frequently, almost automatically when we're not aware, when mindfulness is not present in our experience. They arise based on our not seeing or knowing in that moment what is true—that we are complete and whole in ourselves, that there is nothing to want, that nothing can give us lasting satisfaction. When we truly know this, craving doesn't arise.

Our mindfulness practice gives us the space, the opportunity to actually become aware of these habits, these patterns of mind. Sometimes painfully so. In fact, often people will come and talk about how aware they've become of craving, how aware they are of aversion. It seems like that's all they see. So now we not only notice craving, we judge it. And then we're back into that same tunnel vision—craving and aversion are all we notice. It can be very frustrating, very discouraging, because it can seem as if we're getting worse, that things are more difficult, that we're more caught in these unskillful patterns of mind than before we started paying attention. The sense of living in inner contentment might seem much more removed than before we began practice.

Of course, I'm going to say that this is not an accurate perception. It really does help to have patience and some faith, because it may seem that we're drowning in these habits—or in the noticing of these habits—but truly, this beginning to see, to know how the mind reacts to pleasant, to unpleasant, to neutral, is opening up space for a whole different possibility of how we can be in life, how we can relate to life. A whole possibility of living in our true potential, of being with the truth of things just as they are.

A couple of expressions of this. From the Tao Te Ching: "The Tao never does anything, yet through it all things are done. If powerful men and women could center themselves in it, the whole world would be transformed by itself in its natural rhythms. People would be content with their simple everyday lives, in harmony, free of desire. When there is no desire, all things are at peace."

And another: "The way is perfect, like vast space where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess. Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things."

So it is through choosing to accept or reject that we do not see the true nature of things. These habits grow and blind us through inattention. The care, the attention of mindfulness, the opening up to see what's really going on—this is what opens up the potential to see and know the true nature of things. It allows understanding to arise quite naturally. As Michelle said, we don't need to force it. It arises quite naturally, through seeing and not fighting these seemingly inherent habits of mind.

As we see, and as understanding arises spontaneously, what we can actually begin to notice in our moment-to-moment experience—as a result, as an effect of understanding—is that our attitude, the way we think in a particular situation, begins to change. Another way of saying it: we begin to notice from time to time, on rare occasions, that the inclination of aversion or anger might actually not arise, and instead what arises is compassion, caring. The inclination of greed, of grasping, suddenly and spontaneously gives way to renunciation, to non-greed, to a sense of contentment.

A simple example of how this change in attitude happens quite naturally. Thich Nhat Hanh uses this example often. I appreciate him because he's so simple, so down to earth. He talks about a small brother and sister. The younger sister is sick—whining, complaining, yelling, driving her brother crazy. It's unpleasant. His attitude is one of anger and annoyance. When his mother explains to him, in a way he can understand, how his sister feels—that she's sick, she has a fever, a headache, she hurts—in a way that he can see and relate to, without any forcing, his attitude spontaneously transforms to one of compassion, of feeling-with.

So it's nothing esoteric. It's the natural result of understanding that our attitudes of mind begin to shift. The Buddha spoke about this—actually, the second stage of the Eightfold Path is that of wise attitude, wise thought, wise intention, as it is variously translated. The first stage is understanding. And how we understand our lives, the world, is what gives rise to how we think about the world.

What our attitude is, how it arises in a particular situation. And of course the next three stages are concerned with wise action in the world. So how we think, how we relate, what our attitude is in a situation is what gives rise to how we act.

The Buddha was so practical. It doesn't seem like he talked about anything just for the heck of it. From what I've read, it's all very practically directed to helping us understand the nature of our minds and how to be free from suffering and confusion.

In speaking about this wise aspiration, wise intention, there is also a very practical application—helping us see that when there's mindfulness, there are times when we actually do have a choice where the mind dwells. In other words, these strong habits of aversion, craving, and confusion will arise quite naturally. With mindfulness, there are times when we have the space of choice. The Buddha said that what we reflect upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. It seems obvious.

When we're doing formal metta practice, one aspect of what's happening is that we're deliberately choosing where to let the mind dwell. We're choosing to move it from unthinking aversion and confusion to a deliberate dwelling in thoughts of love and kindness. This has great power. With our work of mindfulness, it's quite obvious. We can notice when this happens, and we can also notice how we can use this rather obvious principle.

An easy example: sitting here, a pleasant thought of home arises, and it turns from craving into really strong grasping. Grasping is the next step after craving. There's an impulse of craving—the example given is like looking for something in the dark. Grasping is when you grab it, you seize it, you've got it. You're really in the grip of it now.

So this impulse to go home comes up and turns into really strong grasping. That's the mind motivated by greed. And we can sit here, really feel it, and quite deliberately decide not to do that—quite deliberately bringing up the intention to renounce that particular grasping, that particular desire, for the purpose of something that seems more important: for the purpose of understanding. Simple. But this is the kind of space of choice that mindfulness opens up to us.

While this transformation happens quite naturally from understanding, being aware of the possibility and of what these strong habits can transform into, there are also times when we can use this quite consciously and be surprised at how much power that can have to change how we're relating, to change our confusion with experiences. We don't have to be enslaved by our habits of thought. We don't have to feel like constant victims.

Wise attitude can also be looked at as a willingness to greet any moment—each moment—as a chance to learn rather than as something we've got to fight against or just put up with. In any moment there's the possibility of choice, the possibility of growth and transformation.

The attitude that craving can transform into is really one word: renunciation. I like much better the sense of inner contentment, also of non-greed, actively of generosity. The sense of inner contentment—not being caught up in needing, in acquiring, in wanting—basically arises from the understanding that we're full and complete in this moment and that nothing outside is going to bring us any kind of lasting happiness. It's not really an intellectual understanding. It's more a visceral one in the moments.

In that inner contentment, which is a very deep and profound touching of truth, there is the space to deeply appreciate whatever is here right now. When we're caught in grasping, that's just the thing we

can't do—appreciate what's here and now.

Moments of this wholeness, this completeness, this inner contentment arise quite frequently in our life on retreat. Those times of clarity, of fullness, of deep appreciation. And it doesn't matter what's happening in that moment—whether you're drinking a cup of tea or hearing a birdsong, just taking a step, watching the filter of light on the leaves, or brushing your teeth. It really doesn't matter what's happening. These moments are so full. The truth is emptiness, but another way of experiencing it is sometimes fullness—such a fullness that the thought of wanting anything or pushing anything away is inconceivable, just makes no sense. That inner contentment exists because there's no desire, no aversion in the mind.

I want to speak about the four different areas of grasping, of being aware of what areas we get easily pulled into, somehow thinking this is going to make us happy. The first is the most obvious, the one I tend to think of when I speak or think of craving: sense desire. Objects, relationships, sexuality, food, whatever. The five physical senses and the mind. The area of sense pleasures is the first area of grasping.

In our society, when we speak about renunciation, that's usually what comes to mind for me—either extreme asceticism or in any way giving up sense desires. It's definitely not a big thrill in our society. It's not really supported. It's not even respected so much. In the East, when people become monks or nuns in Buddhist countries, even though the majority of people don't want to live that way themselves, there's a tremendous respect for the willingness to give up sense pleasures on a certain level.

In our society, we're bombarded with possibilities for sensual fulfillment. Just reading the New York Times magazine presents things to want that I never would have even thought of. Have you ever had the experience of looking at an ad or hearing something on television and suddenly being gripped with desire for something you never knew existed half an hour ago? It's like this blast, and inner peace is gone.

The Buddha said often that his teachings were contrary to the ways of the world. And it's really true in this area—in all the areas of grasping, but particularly in the area of sensual grasping, the pull is very strong. I haven't been all over the world, but I feel that we in the West are somehow so inundated with possibilities for sensual gratification that it's really hard for us to even get a feeling for what it's like to renounce some of that. We could renounce so much and still be bombarded. It's just incomprehensible to me how much stuff we have.

I want to talk a little later about the joys of renunciation, because they're very real. But in the way that we've been brought up, with the constant information we get from the media, from other people, it's considered very strange not to want things. I got a television a couple of months ago, the first time I've ever had one. I thought it was really strange to have one, but I would meet friends who couldn't comprehend that I did not have a TV—as if that were some extreme form of suffering, which it definitely was not. It was a pleasure not to have one.

So that's the first area of grasping, and perhaps the most obvious to us.

The second area of grasping is grasping at views, grasping at opinions. This one is really fascinating to me. It's so easy to get caught in this—views about explaining the nature of the world, explaining the nature of ourselves, views about spirituality, views about politics. It just goes on and on. Views about the nature of this body, views about death.

It's defined as thinking, anytime you think, "This alone is true, everything else is false"—only usually we don't bring it to consciousness that clearly. Then we're grasping at a view. Remember, it's the grasping that's the root of confusion and suffering. When we're grasping at a particular view, a particular explanation of the world, a particular way we think things are, it leads us to perceive—again, it's like tunnel vision—it leads us to perceive the world, to perceive information in the light of the particular view that we hold. We discount any facts that come our way that don't fit it, unless the fact is so overwhelming we can't avoid it anymore.

I remember Roger in one of his talks at the last retreat speaking about near-death experiences and a man who was a complete atheist—that's a view. He would reject any kind of spiritual experience that anyone told him about, anything that would seem to suggest the existence of some greater power. But then when he had such an incredible near-death experience that he couldn't deny the truth of it, he said, "Well, maybe I was mistaken." Sometimes it takes a huge knock over the head to shake us out of grasping at views—sometimes even to notice the views that we're holding.

The Buddha tells a story about a man in a small village who had a son. He was a widower. He went away one day to work, and in the meantime bandits came, kidnapped his son, and burned his house and the rest of the village. So there was no one there to tell him what had happened. He came home terribly distraught, of course, found some bones of a child in the ashes, and said, "This is my son." He lovingly wrapped them in a velvet bag and carried them with him. He rebuilt his house.

Quite some time later, his son escaped from the bandits and came home late, like at midnight, banging on the door: "Father, father, let me in!" By this time, the father had so grasped onto the idea that these bones were his son, that his son was dead—that was his grief, that was his life—that he just said, "Go away. My son's dead. Don't come to torment me like this." The son banged again. The father said, "Go away." He wouldn't open the door. Eventually the son went away, and they never saw each other again.

The Buddha says, you know, somewhere, sometime, you take something to be the truth. And if you cling to it so much, when the truth comes and knocks at your door, you won't let it in.

It's fascinating and it's very subtle. Views—we form them, we grasp onto them on a moment-to-moment basis. It's not some solid, unchanging thing. Nothing is. But perhaps you can start to notice over the course of the days together here. Notice how we'll have a particular experience, and it's amazing—immediately we'll formulate some view explaining it: "This is what this means, and now I know what practice is." Then without realizing it, we grasp that as the truth, use it to evaluate the rest of our experience, and the net result is conflict.

This is what happens when we grasp at a view. We come into conflict with others who don't agree with our view. We come into conflict with ourselves.

So notice: I've been with three breaths of very distinct sensations. This is good concentration. This is what's supposed to happen. And when that doesn't happen at the next sitting, that view of "this is good concentration" is used as a club. Or: I'm not having enough emotions. I must be suppressing. The last retreat was more emotions. And then that becomes a view. Or: I'm having too many emotions. I'm not concentrated enough. People sitting right next to each other will each be holding these different views. If they could switch, then they'd be happy.

I've noticed often when I'm sitting that this will come up. I'll be caught in it for a while and go, "Oh, that's a view. An opinion." It drops away. And immediately a new view is formed. It's really quite interesting to watch.

View in itself is not a problem. We certainly need to formulate views and opinions to exist in this world. We need to vote. We need to make choices. If you have money, you need to decide how to spend it, where to invest it, who to give it to, which organization you like better. We need to have views. It's the grasping. It's the not seeing a view as a view, taking it to be the truth. That's where we come into conflict.

In talking about or thinking about the idea of renouncing, of giving up the grasping, is it harder to give up grasping after some physical object or at a view of how we think life is? I find the latter much more difficult to really renounce.

And the views come down to our mistaken, our inaccurate view that things are unchanging, that somehow we're not going to die, that this is a solid body here, that we are a solid, separate self-entity. When our views are threatened or challenged, often the result in the moment is a lot of fear. It can be very scary. It's like having the ground shaken out from under us.

Often in a meditation retreat, when someone has an experience of anicca, of impermanence—the body dissolving, or any other kind of sense of impermanence, or just a little quick hit of no-self, of "there's no me here, things are just happening"—what is ultimately quite freeing, in that moment, is very often accompanied by terror. Real terror. In fact, sometimes if someone says they've had a momentary experience of anatta and they're just in a panic, we'll think, "Oh yeah, they probably really did." Because the fear of having our view shaken, of having our idea of the world shaken, can be so strong. But the grasping at the view is what's keeping us feeling separate. It's what's bringing us into conflict with the way things are.

The third and fourth types of grasping I don't want to go into so much. The third one is grasping at rites and rituals, which could be described as the view—again, it's a view—that a person is able to purify oneself or free oneself from suffering by means of external outward rules and rituals. In other words, as the Buddha said, we need the raft to get to the other shore, but then you don't carry the raft along on your

back once you get there. We don't mistake the pointing finger for the moon. Devotional rituals, that's one form of ritual, can be very helpful. In a way, sitting in formal meditation practice is a method, is a ritual, extremely helpful. But we don't mistake the outer form for the truth of who we are.

The fourth field of grasping—and this is like a whole talk in itself—is grasping at the idea of self. It's really a view again. It's grasping at the idea, often not on the conscious level, that there's some permanent unchanging essence sort of sitting here viewing the world that comes and goes. Or the way I can relate to it on a more immediate experiential level is the grasping onto, the identifying with, any particular experience in a moment as being me.

A simple example: sitting, there's an unpleasant sound that someone near you is making. You notice the sound, you notice unpleasant, aversion, anger. Why is that person doing that? Or self-judging.

How can I be so horrible as to be so angry at that person? That is the movement of identification. That's the impulse, the grasping at that particular experience as being me. My anger, my judgment, my self-righteousness. We might not be saying all that or even clearly knowing it, but it's quite a different experience. You can feel then, if you turn the attention onto it, how solid the sense of "me" becomes. In that moment, I'm angry, I'm judging, I'm suffering.

The same experience without the grasping, without the identification—you could have that same experience in the very next moment. Where there's hearing, it's unpleasant, there's aversion, but there's no grasping around that, and it just goes. And there is no real sense of "me" in that moment. Nothing so special, just not the grasping at the self-idea.

So you can start to notice how and where the self-idea is grasped at. When does that arise as a grasping in any particular moment? It's a becoming that happens over and over on a moment-to-moment basis. It's not some solid self-idea waiting there that we're knocking out with a hammer, finally going to chip it away for good. It's something that arises on a moment-to-moment basis, and we can notice when it's solid, what's the grasping at that moment, and when it's not.

So these are the four areas of grasping. I wanted to mention them all because often when I think about it, when I feel the sense of renunciation and the beauty of inner contentment, I sometimes forget about the last three and tend to just focus on the sensual, sense pleasures aspect. So I just wanted to broaden it a bit.

When we start to tune in to the nature of grasping, the nature of craving, we can't really help but notice that it's not so wonderful. It's not really so pleasant, and ultimately more suffering arises from the craving than pleasure comes from getting what we want. In that way, this natural renunciation, this getting in touch with inner contentment, comes quite by itself.

But this space to make a choice also arises quite often. It can be helpful just to reflect a bit on the nature of craving and the joy, the benefit, so to speak, of renunciation, because sometimes that can help us in that moment make a choice. As I said, our society often thinks of renunciation as equaling suffering. When I

was a nun in Thailand, I felt people respected what I was doing a lot, but I really felt, out of that respect, they were treating me as though I were giving up so much. On a physical plane that was true. But there was this real sense that renunciation is so hard to do.

But it isn't. Once we've actually done it, what arises is a joy, an appreciation that is so much more powerful than any sense gratification.

This is from a Christian priest, speaking about the renunciation of celibacy. He says, "To be alive is to love. The ultimate purpose of monastic life is to create an environment for lovers. One reason for being celibate is to be a greater lover. The only reason to renounce one particular pleasure is to enjoy the unbearable pleasure of God's company."

I really love the feeling of that. Renouncing one particular pleasure to enjoy the company of the truth.

One little haiku I love that just gives me the feeling of the self-feeding nature of desire and also the futility of it: "Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto." We do that, and desire breeds desire. It just keeps us looking in the wrong direction, and it's futile. It keeps us in bondage.

As we begin to naturally experience renunciation, Suzuki Roshi said a lovely thing: renunciation does not so much mean giving up the things of the world as accepting that they go away. It's lovely. This begins to arise quite naturally in our experience as we feel and know the futility and the pain of this energy of grasping and desire. Craving arises and grips the heart because we're not knowing and seeing what is true—as if something outside can give us security, can give us wholeness, the sense of inner contentment.

There's a word in Buddhism—this is from Thich Nhat Hanh—*apranihita,* which means wishlessness. The idea is that you do not put something in front of you and run after it, because everything is already here in yourself. That's the sense, that's the inner contentment—really knowing that everything is already here in yourself. It begins to arise quite naturally.

But as I said, it can also be helpful to deliberately work with making a choice of renouncing. Renouncing a particular desire—to get up and leave in the middle of a sitting.

Anyway, by the end of that time where there was really no outlet, the desires for the most part fell away, and the space of appreciation, the space of contentment with just what was—you know, so it was really humid, but there was contentment with seeing the humidity and the dewdrops on the trees, just appreciating the beauty of that instead of the mind immediately racing to do something to make it more comfortable. Just that contentment with what is.

And that's really the strongest, most powerful teaching from that whole time for me, and one that has been strong with me ever since then. I honestly know that the depth of that learning would not have been possible without the outer renunciation and the inner renunciation of desire and grasping that went along with it.

That's, I think, one of the powerful lessons of a meditation retreat. You all are in a state of very strong natural renunciation even to be here, to go through the day, to live the way we're living here. And that opens up the possibility of moving out of these habits of greed and aversion and confusion and touching what is true.

Geshe Raptin, a Tibetan teacher, said, "Having great compassion for oneself is the same as renunciation"—renouncing the delusion, the attachment that keeps one bound to samsara, to this endless cycling of suffering. The point of renunciation is a development of love and compassion for oneself. Only then is compassion for others possible.

So far from being an avenue to greater suffering and discontent, working with and noticing this attitude, this shift of attitude in our being—the willingness to just let go of grasping in this moment, that's all, just in this moment—is actually an act of great compassion and love for ourselves.

Sometimes people ask, you know, "If I give up desire—not all desire is going to go, but I'm willing to renounce desire in the moment, to not just move towards pleasant and away from unpleasant—does that mean everything is just all neutral and boring? That you can't tell what's pretty from what's ugly and life's just one dull gray blur?" There's often a fear of this.

And it's really not so. We're not giving up seeing how things are, not giving up being able to tell differences on the relative level of life. What we're giving up in that moment of renouncing is the craving, the fear that this particular thing is going to change, the needing for this particular experience to be in my life right now in order for me to be happy—giving up the craving that binds us to samsara.

The Buddha said, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it."

That's the space of inner contentment.

In fact, there's so much more in the world that's beautiful, that we never even notice when we're in the grip of grasping. When we're living in the space of inner contentment, there's so much more beauty in the world than we're ever aware of in our normal state of dull habit.

I want to end with one more reading from the Tao Te Ching—this feeling of just living in the simplicity of inner contentment:

Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings but contemplate their return. Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity. If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kind-hearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you. And when death comes, you are ready.

Everything is already here in ourselves.

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