Closing Talk: Integrating Practice into Daily Life

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:01

We'd like to spend a little time talking about the subject of returning to our daily lives and bringing the meditation back into our workaday world.

Let me start by prefacing Mike and Carol's comments by saying that no teacher that I know of has this completely down. All of our responses are incomplete; the book is still being written, so to speak. So given that, we can start discussing from the point of view that each one of us has.

What I'd like to do is just talk briefly about the first two rungs on the Eightfold Path, the first two steps. I think it will become obvious that given the right orientation to life, given the right attitude to life, the practice unfolds in a moment-to-moment quality just through our interfacing with that right attitude.

It's sometimes easier to start where we should start rather than to try to go straight to mindfulness and being meticulously aware moment after moment, doing everything—picking up the coffee cup, opening the door. We lose that ability very quickly in the hubbub of a very active and hectic existence unless we have the right attitude on which to approach our living experience.

The first rung of Buddhism is right understanding, having a sense of what the purpose of life is all about. The purpose of life, as it's being conveyed through the television sets and movie screens, is very much based on quantity—the more the better. The bumper sticker reads, "The person who has the most toys when they die, wins." This is sort of the way we govern our existence.

But on a more introspective level, that also means we have to look at our own ambition, our own sense of gain, our own sense of priorities. What is it that we're doing, and how is it that we're approaching life? Are we approaching it on a quantitative basis? Self-improvement is part of that. In many, many subtle ways, we're involved in that competitive striving. And it has left us rather poverty-stricken—inwardly poverty-stricken.

At some point we have to change over, re-look, and reassess our lives so that we gain a renewed understanding and appreciation for the quality of the time that we spend here on earth. That change, that flip from quantity to quality, is really the movement from unskillful to skillful understanding.

When we're focused on quality—the quality of our life—then we start appreciating ourselves in the moment as it's expressed in its fullness. We start expressing an appreciation for just being in relationship, regardless of how that relationship moves, or the motivations for being in that relationship, or whatever

happens eventually to that relationship. Just the bare expression of relating to someone else, relating to life, smelling the flowers—not trying to grow gardens and gardens of flowers, but being able to appreciate a single flower—is really a shift. You can feel the impact and the orientation, the posture that would have if we would just embrace it.

Now, given that right orientation, that right understanding, we have to have the right attitude that we bring to that understanding. And that is the attitude of learning—being able to say that every situation in this process I have the ability to open to and to learn and to grow from, regardless of what is happening. Every situation is the optimum strategy for our own personal growth. There's nowhere else I need to go to grow when the opportunity is laid bare before me.

This means that all of the problems, the perceived difficulties that we have with people, with ourselves, with our job—all of that, all of our own personal suffering—is an opportunity to move in a different direction. Ajahn Chah used to say that there are two types of suffering: the suffering that leads to greater suffering, and the suffering that ends suffering. When we grow and open ourselves to those areas of ourselves that are less than complete, imperfect, we are moving away from these problems as being personal problems to being opportunities for our own growth.

I leave you with that as being the main focus, the main intention, the main way that we should be leaving the retreat. If you have gained some techniques which are helpful to you along the way about being mindful in the moment, then so much the better. Certainly for people who use their hands a lot, as we all do from time to time—like in dishwashing and laundry—there will be that immediate groundedness in mindfulness.

But to assume that we'll be able to carry that moment-to-moment mindfulness, that meticulous, careful attention in most of the ways we live, didn't prove true for me. If you're able to do it, fine. I just needed a different direction. I needed myself to say, okay, what's all this about now? What are we really doing here with this mindfulness? Mindfulness accesses ourselves, accesses our relationships so that we can learn from them. So let's go to the learning. And when we learn, we're already awake. We're alive. We have to be participating in that moment fully, and therefore we are mindful. It's putting the horse in proper relationship to the cart.

The other thing I would encourage you: if there was a word or a description that rested well with you this weekend—like "true and useful" or "generosity" or "love" or "learning"—I would encourage you to take that word and move it into your life, into a field of investigation, to see how deeply you could move with that word. Like, let's take generosity. I think it resonates with me. I'd like to be a generous person.

So I'm going to find out what it is that keeps me from being generous. I'm going to see if I can make a life statement, a posture to the world that will be in terms of generosity, in terms of service, because it resonates with me. It feels like that's the way people should live. It's the way I should live.

And so I move out into my life with that sense of generosity. And suddenly I feel myself very caught in my own problems, in my own selfish desires, in my own way of life, at the expense of everything else. And I look at myself and say, this doesn't feel generous. Now what is it that is inhibiting that generosity? What is it that's inhibiting my ability to serve and to reach out beyond myself?

And so we start looking at the things that inhibit that. What we'll find, almost always, is that it's our personal suffering that inhibits our ability to listen and to move out beyond our own patterns.

They talk about acceptance in dying. If I can share with you a story about a nine-year-old girl with cystic fibrosis who was dying. Frequently when people die, they get lost in their own drama in a way that keeps them or prohibits them from being able to listen or to reach out beyond their own pain—which is what our problems do in relationship to our generosity.

But this young girl, nine years old, whose mother and father had just recently split up in divorce—the divorce was instigated by the mother, but both parents had rejoined to come to their dying daughter's bed. There was obviously a lot of pain in the father, who was suffering both the pain of the separation and the pain of seeing his daughter at the end of her life.

And this young girl—I had the privilege of being there—she said, "Okay, I would like everybody out of the room." There was the mother, the father, and myself. We thought she was trying to send people out of the room so she could die alone. She was craning her neck so that she could breathe, because in the end stage of cystic fibrosis, it's very difficult to pull in the amount of air that you need. We felt she was very close to dying.

She asked everybody to leave. And after everybody had left, she got up and drew a big "I love you" poster for her father. Then she asked people to come back into the room and offered that to her father—reaching out beyond her pain to be able to touch somebody else's, even as she was dying.

That's generosity. And we need to understand that this is not always available to us. To be able to explore and investigate why, and what inhibits that natural expression of heart—we all have that natural expression. Understanding what inhibits us allows it to occur in its normal and natural way.

I leave you with that, and my appreciation for all of us having been together this weekend.

Since Rodney began with the first two steps of the Eightfold Path, I'll round it out by talking about the remaining six steps, which are really two segments. The Eightfold Path is what the Buddha offered as a way of living that both actualizes our understanding of truth—of who we are, of our interconnectedness—and also a way of living that helps us keep waking up. As Rodney said, it helps us keep investigating, helps us keep seeing to the roots of our experience, to the roots of our suffering. Why is this situation so difficult? Where am I attached and confused here? How can I touch the truth?

The second segment contains three steps, and the third segment contains three steps. Both are really fundamental tools for use in our lives to help keep us awake.

The first three of these deal basically with our speech and our actions, our expressions of ourselves in the world, in our relationships with others. They give us a way to reflect back on ourselves. How am I behaving? How am I speaking, and why? What effect do my actions and speech have on others, and what effect does that have on myself?

It's really back to those five precepts that we talked about at the beginning, but simplified into wise speech, wise actions, and wise livelihood—including all the active aspects of our life and really giving attention to them.

Why speak? How do I relate to others through my speech? When I use untrue or wounding speech, rather than making ourselves bad, we really look and see why. What was the deep inner pain in me that brought about this harsh response to someone, or this actually untrue expression?

Not again as "I will never again tell a lie" or "I will never again bark at somebody in an unkind way." Please don't set yourselves up for that. It's not about that kind of rigidity at all. It's much more a pointing to let's use our lives to wake up, and let's use all aspects of our lives as a way to pay attention, as a pointing to truth, as an area to learn, as Ravi said.

So this second portion of the Eightfold Path points to looking at our speech, looking at our actions—basically actions of harming, actions of stealing, actions of misusing our sexuality in ways that are harmful to ourselves or others, misusing power, misusing authority. Basically, any action that harms another, and seeing almost immediately, really feeling in ourselves, that that harms ourself.

Working with our speech and actions, you can see how it actualizes the sense of our oneness with each other, with all beings. And at least in my experience, it's an infinite area of exploration—far more subtle than it would seem from just thinking, "Well, I just will work with not lying, I'll work with not killing." It's a very subtle area, one for ongoing investigation of our intentions, of our motivation.

You know, because it's all about what we mean, what's our intention in our actions. So if you're walking and you don't see and you step on an ant, and there's really no intention whatsoever to hurt that ant—there still might be pain in ourselves, compassion, when we realize that it's been killed through our step, and that's appropriate. But there's no need for blame. But then other times, when we see a bunch of ants and think, "I can't be bothered to walk around, I'll just walk through them"—that's a little different. And so we just look at how we act, and why, and how we feel after doing that. Because I've done that, and I feel so much worse than if I had just taken two minutes and walked around the ants. So we continue to explore.

And with our livelihood—how do we make a living? The Buddha specifies this quite directly: not making a living in arms trading or in selling drugs, the things that obviously bring harm to people. And again, for

me it's been an ongoing exploration of really looking at what my relation to livelihood is, what's the truest expression of who I am and how I want to be in the world. And whatever we're doing, what's our intention in doing it? Of course we have to have a livelihood to make money—of course that's part of the intention. But also, how do we actualize that? How do we relate to it?

Whatever we're doing, it doesn't matter if it's something that seems socially really responsible, or if my job is sweeping a driveway, or taking care of kids, or working in a supermarket. All of these relate with people, relate with our environment, and we can do that with an attitude of connectedness and caring. It doesn't matter so much what the surface livelihood looks like—it's much more our inner relationship to it.

And as I said on the first night, working and giving attention to our actions, our speech, our relations to ourselves and others is an indispensable foundation for a life of awakening. It's an indispensable foundation for being able to continue questioning really honestly. And as Rodney said, if you have the attitude of questioning, sooner or later you start questioning how your actions and speech are, so it all works together. But really giving attention to this area lays a basis of harmony with ourselves, harmony with others, with life, with what is—a foundation that can help us continue to open in very deep ways to the potential for peace and happiness, for harmony in our life as it is now.

The last segment of the path is really the tools, in a way, that we've been learning in the formal sitting and walking in mindfulness meditation here—the tools of mindfulness, concentration, and energy. The willingness to give energy and commitment to our awakening, to our questioning, to caring about ourselves, really.

One of the things that somehow took me years to understand—I was really slow about this—is that, as Rodney said, mindfulness and concentration, that very careful quality of attention that lets us be somewhat microscopic and present and minute in our experience on a retreat—that level of mindfulness is not going to last, most likely, when you walk out the door. You start driving on the highway and reading the signs, and you might make it a few miles before you suddenly have to turn on the radio. Nowadays, talk on the phone. I was driving with a friend in L.A. and she's talking on the phone, switching lanes, drinking a cup of coffee, and talking to me. I was a nervous wreck. And then I saw everyone else on the freeway doing the same thing. It was really scary.

But in other ways, we can all relate. How often, if we're eating alone, do we have to have a newspaper to read, or listen to the news, or something? Just eating somehow isn't enough. But you can see here from eating what an incredibly rich and varied and full activity eating really is, if we would but pay attention.

So in our daily lives, the same quiet, microscopic quality of mindfulness is generally not available, nor is the concentration—that real sense of one-pointedness, of just sticking with one thing at a time. It's available, but not in the same degree that it is here. Of course mindfulness is available in the larger lens of clear comprehension that Rodney spoke of.

The third quality, and the one that lets us be mindful, wake up to what we're doing, be concentrated enough to at least just do two things at a time instead of four—the one that lets us keep questioning, that turns difficult situations in our lives into potentials for growth—is the last aspect of the path, and that's wise effort.

This is what took me so long somehow to put together. Maybe that's my particular bugaboo; yours might be something else. On a retreat, we're putting in an immense amount of energy, of effort, through our willingness to look, to sit, to walk, to bring our attention back to the here and now, whatever we're doing, over and over and over. How many times in these three and a half days have you woken up and realized, "Oh, I'm spacing out," and just gently come back to the walking, to the eating, to the sitting? That's effort—just that willingness to see what's so.

When I do a retreat, I'll put in a tremendous amount of effort. And for years I thought then I could just walk out the door and cruise—that that was all you needed to do, and life just takes care of itself. But it just isn't so. What we learn on retreat is really what is possible for us as human beings—that it's possible, and we can develop that quality more, to be, as Rodney was saying this morning, in the middle of the storm and really have an island of peace.

We can touch that peace from moment to moment. And it's in our daily lives that the storms really rage. It's so easy to forget that this, too, is the opportunity. This is a storm. It might be a lot more complicated than what we experience on retreat. Instead of just me and my mind, there really are three other minds involved.

Now that you know how complicated your mind is, can you imagine what's going on when you get four of you together and you're all in some kind of storm? You're all projecting and imagining. You don't even hardly know what's going on for you, and you all think you're going to relate in some reasonable way. No wonder things can get so out of hand so quickly.

I remember one teacher said to me once, "The worst thing you can do—and we all do it—is put yourself at the mercy of another person's mind, now that you know how crazy yours is." And we all do it, letting other people judge us and taking that in and accepting it as true.

But the willingness to say, whatever's going on in our life, however difficult the situation is, "Right now, I can wake up"—that's the effort. And the tool we have is just this mindfulness, this meditation. You can wake up. As Thích Nhất Hạnh says, just take three breaths. Just stop, take three breaths, connect with your breath, connect with your body, with this moment. That can make a huge difference.

You don't always say, "Let's have this argument after I go meditate for an hour." But we can say, "Let's just take three breaths and really connect with what centeredness is and start again." Really connect. Let yourself connect with the other person, with their pain and their confusion, and start again.

Sitting a little bit every day really helps us stay in touch with this possibility. If you sit forty-five minutes,

great. If you can sit an hour, great. If you can sit two and a half minutes, great. Don't get into judging that you should be doing more. Appreciate what you are doing so that it's a joy rather than some grim duty.

There are many ways to continue waking up, many ways to remember: How can I wake up in this moment? How can I at least just connect with this moment? A lot of the formal meditation opens us to the possibility and gives us some tools. Hopefully that's what you might have touched this weekend.

Rather than trying to cover everything we could think of about coming back into daily life or how to keep practice awake, we wanted to see if you have any questions. Please feel free to share. If you've done this a lot, you'll often have more helpful things to say than we do. As Rodney said, everyone has a slightly different experience, and I haven't met anyone who really has it down, who is always awake.

A participant asked about the connection between generosity and family, and whether people can give too much.

*Rodney:** I do think so. And usually that comes from not really understanding one's boundaries and giving too much, giving in excess. It's often based upon a need within oneself to feel appreciated through generosity or to receive something in return.

The generosity I'm speaking of is really a life posture in which we know our boundaries very well. We give what we can and we don't give what we can't, and we keep that well defined. Yet it's keeping ourselves on the edge of our selfishness, so we're always exploring how we can be more generous—but not to a fault.

In every situation, we could always be giving more, but we're on the edge of what we can possibly give. We look at that edge to see where we're holding back, where we're protecting ourselves, why we need to do that, and who it is we're protecting. And we also see what we're able to give and share within that limit. As we grow in the practice, that boundary becomes more transparent and permeable.

Another participant asked about the loving-kindness meditation from the previous evening.

In a way, this goes into the core of compassion. What I was saying last night—"May I be happy," or "I deserve to be happy"—that's also okay. I was talking about mettā, loving-kindness, which is a sort of unbounded love for yourself and for all beings. Compassion is really an aspect of that.

Compassion is a little more specific in that it's that love turned towards your pain, or turned towards others' pain and suffering. There is actually a similar compassion meditation where you would focus on yourself or another being and say the words, "May you be free from suffering." It's more tuned into the suffering aspect, but with love. Whereas with loving kindness, you can feel that same wish for love even toward someone who's really happy and doesn't seem to be suffering.

We'll practice again at the end this morning. It can be quite peaceful and calming. And for some people, actually, the compassion aspect is more alive and more accessible, and that's fine.

Is there anything constant? I'm not trying to be flippant, but I invite you to really examine your experience to see if there is anything constant. My answers come through my own experience, and they mean very little to you unless you've explored everything within yourself—your body and mind—to come to your own conclusions about that.

One thing that we sense as permanent is some abiding soul or self within this process. We haven't spoken too much about that this weekend, but it's worth a great deal of inquiry as to whether that is what we think it to be. To examine that, to see whether there is something back there that maintains itself through time, unperturbed and undisturbed, or whether there are just qualities that come and go within a whole process that we call personhood. So I invite us all to inquire into that.

Faith is one of the really vital aspects of awakening—the sense of trust and having to make an inference beyond our actual experiential knowledge, or else none of us would ever even start looking. It gives us a sense of confidence. And then, through our own experience, our own experiential understanding, what gets added to it they actually call verified faith. It's no longer because of something someone said; you have a sense that it's really verified from your own experience. Both of those are really necessary.

I think it depends upon what your need is in a particular situation. There are times when sitting, your heart just longs to sit and to do long retreats and just to spend quiet time. It calls out with that kind of urgency. And there's something that needs to be done in relationship to that sitting practice; it's calling out for growth in that area.

At other times we feel very alive and awake and active and energetic and in movement, which is much of our life, most of our life actually. If it just ended up that meditation was defined by the time we spent on retreat, then it wouldn't be very useful, to be honest. We have to be able to carry it out into interfacing with life, to experience how—because there's a part of ourselves that doesn't get touched in the same way on the pillow as it does when you're talking to your mother.

The walking meditation is an expression of meditation in movement. It's the bridge between ourselves in stillness and in activity. It requires the same kind of effort to bring that same quality of attentiveness to ourselves in movement—perhaps more effort than we do in stillness when we're not moving. The body's at rest; it's a little easier to focus on. And you can spend, if you have half an hour a day, walking if that feels more comfortable to you, more fitting for your own heart. Or you can spend it sitting if you say, "Oh boy, I just want to quiet down here." It's what calls out for you to do. Sitting and walking are equally valuable at different times in anyone's practice.

The time of day is a matter of personal preference. I personally prefer to get up and sit first thing in the morning. And actually, it's nice if you can do it just before you go to bed too—a little of both times is good.

I think the most important thing for helping establish some stability in daily practice is to pick a regular time that you know you can maintain, and a realistic amount of time. Saying "now I'm going to sit two

hours a day" is really hard. But if you know you can get up and do it in the morning for half an hour before you do anything else, and you make it a regular part of your day, I think that's the most helpful.

And then you could add ten minutes over your lunch break. I know people who go and sit in their car in the parking lot at work and sit for ten or fifteen minutes at lunch, and they say it really helps their day be much more balanced and focused.

Regarding sitting with a tape that has affirmations—for doing Vipassana, I wouldn't recommend that, since it's very much about just being with what is right now. Metta is perhaps the closest thing to affirmations, but even that is trying to get in touch with the actual feeling as it's manifesting now. So from the point of view of Vipassana, I would suggest sitting in silence and really just being with the breath, the body, the thoughts and emotions as they are now.

Something that's really helpful is sitting with other people. Even if it's only once a week or once a month, it gives some juice and sense of community to the practice.

One participant shared: "What I frequently do is look at areas of myself where there's some blindness, some areas of selfishness, and give myself a positive affirmation such as 'I can listen to people.' When I'm starting to do ten thousand things and not really listening, having that reminder points me towards where I'm not listening and reawakens me to my potential to listen."

Yes, and as Carol said, the way I use it is to point myself towards the experience of how it is that I'm not listening, rather than using it as some kind of mantra that I just repeat mechanically.

I'm not sure I can say anything that hasn't been said this weekend because there's no secret teaching here. It's been communicated as best we're able in the course of these three days together. To understand this, and to be patient with the process of coming to that point, is probably more important than any single thing that we do.

To know that we're going to get stuck and we're going to react, and to keep the attitude that as long as I'm learning from this, it's not going to add more reaction to that which is already there. The right orientation to all of this going on in whatever hectic environment we live in is to really work upon our own reactivity in that situation. And ultimately that will have the most benefit on everyone around us.

There is no little trick, but in a way we can each find our own little reminders. For example, if there's a particular kind of situation you call "high drama"—a way that you get sucked in or a way that you feel—you can find a particular thing that works for you, something quick to get you back to the present for just a second. The trick will be to remember it.

As I said before, take three breaths. For me, if I just remember to bring my awareness back from out there, involved in the mania, and come back and drop into feeling my body—that's enough. It takes no time; it just takes remembering. Then you have one particular thing to do when you remember, and it can land

you in the moment. "Oh right, this is high drama." And once you recognize it's high drama, even for an instant, you might have the possibility of choosing for this minute not to get involved in it, because now you've recognized it and in that moment you're not a participant in it.

Some people use the sound of bells or clocks to wake them up. Or you could use the recognition itself—when you say "I can't stand this thing," oh, high drama! As soon as you can name it, you're aware. Just come back and feel your body. For an instant, you're out of it. And it expands from there. You find your own ways to do that.

Someone asked about running and whether it's possible to practice mindfulness while running. Sure, it's possible. But they also shared that sometimes they let their mind wander during runs, and it's become the most beautiful time of their life.

That sounds good to me. It doesn't sound exactly mindful, but in this life that we live, we all need periods of time when we can reflect on situations or when we can allow creativity to come up. It's true that when you're sitting, sometimes you get the most creative ideas, but if you were jumping up and drawing and writing the whole time, you'd never have the quietness.

But if you're an architect, say, you've got to have creative ideas once in a while and let them roll. So this sounds like a very conscious period when you're letting the subconscious and unconscious flow in a very fluid and creative way. In a very broad sense, it's not moment-to-moment mindfulness, but you are aware of what's happening. You're aware that you're letting the thoughts run.

You're aware that creative ideas are coming. You're sort of present with that. And I think that's really important. It's different from just the mind going chit-chit-chit-chit all the time.

So we wanted to end with about ten minutes of loving-kindness meditation together. Please let yourselves get comfortable. Stretch for a minute if you need to.

Sitting in space, here and now, feeling your body on the chair or the cushion. Just let your mind, your heart, your body relax. Relax into here and now. Just forget all the trying to create, to be, to be different. Forget all the judgments and comparisons. Even forget all the ideas about who you are, all your self-identifications. And just feel yourself alive here and now, without limitations or descriptions. Notice the sense of living presence.

In some ways, this living presence can manifest as loving-kindness—all-embracing, all-connecting loving-kindness. Begin by feeling the sensations in your heart center area, sensations of life, living energy of the universe. Let this living energy manifest as love, as a gentle friendliness. Let this loving energy radiate outwards and fill your whole being. In a way, knowing that who you are is this love. How can you be separate from it?

Loving yourself just as you are right now, it doesn't even make sense to have some limitation or exception

on it. Just showering love still in your body. And out of this deep love, wishing for yourself the deepest peace and happiness that you would wish out of all-embracing love.

May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering. May I live with a heart of compassion.

Really deeply wishing this happiness for yourself. You, as much as any other being in the universe, deserve it.

May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering. May I move with a heart of compassion.

Now bring to heart, to mind, the image of someone dear to you that you easily feel love for—not sexual and not complicated. Someone you feel a lot of love and appreciation for. Perhaps a benefactor, someone who has really helped you somewhere along in your life. Holding their image in your heart, feeling and directing this all-embracing loving energy towards this person. Feeling in this love the deep wishes for happiness for them that you would also wish for yourself.

May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be free from suffering. May you live with love and compassion.

Feeling how this energy of loving-kindness encompasses our dear friend in the same way it encompasses us, no different.

Just now, for a minute or so, if any other images come to heart—perhaps people you're going back to see, family members, friends, co-workers—just focus on the parts of them that you easily love, on their so-called good part, and then feel this loving energy for the entirety of these beings.

Really wishing: May you be happy. May you truly be happy. May you live in peace. May you be free from suffering. May you live with love and compassion.

The connection through loving-kindness dissolves all differences, all judgments and separations. A connection from one heart to another. Feeling our deep unity, really. Our deep interconnectedness.

Now include all of us here in this room in the circle of this unbounded energy of loving-kindness. Appreciation for the support we've given each other through our steady inquiry and presence. Letting this loving energy extend to the staff, the cooks, the maintenance workers, the managers, the office people upstairs, people in the front office. Everyone trying as best as possible to express their understanding and love. Letting the loving energy extend outwards in all directions. As the Buddha said, all beings only want to be happy.

May it truly be so.

May all suffering beings find relief—those who are seemingly causing the suffering, those who are dying, those in prison, those who are sick, those just being born. We are all equal in that we only truly want happiness and peace.

May all beings everywhere be free from suffering.

May all beings know true peace and happiness.

May all beings live with a heart of love and compassion.

May all beings know the truth.

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