# Intentions and Thoughts

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:34

I received a letter from a dharma group in the mail, and it had a little advertisement in it that said: "Deepen your meditations, improve concentration and absorption, dissolve distractions and inner chatter." It was an ad for a hypnotherapist. So I'm just offering that—if that's the way you want to go, you can go.

After the instructions this morning, when Sharon just mentioned we were going to pay attention to thought, everybody cracked up. It made me think maybe that would be something to talk about tonight: working with awareness of thought.

I can't promise what the hypnotherapist promises—that you will dissolve all distractions and inner chatter. Nor is that the aim of the meditation. When working with thought, it's really about learning to understand the nature of thought, just as we bring our attention to understand the nature of every other experience. And within that wise understanding lies freedom. It's not about getting rid of thought, although all of us, at some point, spend a large amount of our time thinking about how we can meditate in order to get rid of thought. That's not what it's about.

Thought is an amazing thing, isn't it? We'd really be lost without it. It's incredible—we need it. It creates so much. It's a wonderful tool, when it's a tool. Unfortunately, a lot of the time it can feel as if we're victims of our thoughts.

This is from the Buddha: "How can a troubled mind understand the way? Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own thoughts, unguarded. But once mastered, once understood, no one can help you as much—not even your father or your mother."

Thoughts are incredibly powerful. Yet if we could look at a thought just as a thought, what is it? Right now, deliberately think a thought: "It snowed last night." Poof. What is that? It's nothing. How is it that we get so caught up in such a struggle, so imprisoned by our thoughts? How did they become so problematic?

One way is that we confuse the thought itself for the reality of what we're thinking about. Here is a short poem from the Polish woman who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, Wisława Szymborska. It's called "The Three Oddest Words":

*When I pronounce the word future,*
*The first syllable already belongs to the past.*
*When I pronounce the word silence, I destroy it.*
*When I pronounce the word nothing,*

*I make something no non-being can hold.*

The thought, the word, is just that—it's nothing else. It's not the actuality of what the thought or the word symbolizes. But this is a hard lesson. It's hard for us to really believe that, because we get so attached and identified—either to the thought, or the reaction we have to it, or how it makes us feel, or what it means—that actually we don't even notice what a thought itself is.

From Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "Myriads of thoughts have run through our minds, but all they have done is increase our confusion and dissatisfaction. When a rainbow appears, we see many beautiful colors, yet a rainbow is not something we can actually clothe ourselves in or wear as an ornament. It simply appears through the conjunction of various conditions. Thoughts arise in the mind in just the same way, through the conjunction of various conditions. They have no tangible reality or intrinsic existence at all."

He's not speaking metaphorically here. This is actual: they have no tangible reality at all. "There is therefore no logical reason why they should have so much power over us, nor any reason why we should be enslaved by them. Once we recognize that thoughts are intrinsically empty, they will no longer have the power to deceive us."

They're not bad. Once we recognize what a thought itself actually is, it doesn't have the power to deceive us, and then we can use it in a way that's helpful.

But again, it's that we don't see, we don't know how to use our wise attention to recognize the transparent nature of a thought. We get so hooked in, as I said, from our reactions, from the sense of who I am and how this thought affects me or reflects me or *is* me.

And I want to say: just because a thought occurs frequently, or arises together with a strong emotion, does not make it more accurate. It does not make it more true—although that's often what we tend to think.

Like, "It snowed last night." Now that happens to be in the realm of relative reality, an accurate thought. There's no big thing necessarily connected with it. But "I am a stupid jerk"—because it keeps arising, because it comes with a lot of baggage attached to it—it's actually less true than the other. We can learn to look at the thought itself as distinct from the sense of self and story that grows around it.

Some of you may have read Mark Epstein's book, *Thoughts Without a Thinker*. Just the title says it all. The thoughts are without a thinker. Now, use your thought and think about that. If the thought doesn't have a thinker, it's really not a problem. Actually, the thought's not the problem. The thinker's the problem.

I don't know if anyone here has mentioned one of Joseph Goldstein's more brilliant recommendations along this line of getting a sense of thoughts without a thinker, which is to imagine that every thought that arises that you're aware of comes from the person behind you. It's brilliant, isn't it? If it's not your thought, it's really not problematic. Just some weird thought that came and went, just like a sound. This is a really good way to approach it because, you see, it's the thinker that gives it all the oomph, not the thought.

So we can begin to learn how to bring wise attention to the experience of thinking, or thought itself. And by itself, it's the same as we bring attention to sensations, to emotions, to our breath. By just meeting it with bare attention, we begin to see through various layers of where we get hooked—which I can't pretend to talk about all of them tonight. I just want to talk about a couple.

One is on the level—actually it's the moment pre-thought—of what we call basic perception. Now, perception in Buddhist psychology is a very specific quality that arises in every moment of consciousness. When there's a sense contact—a moment when there's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, or mental activity—when there's a moment... take something simple like hearing. There's something that makes a sound. There's an ear door, an ear that works. And there's consciousness. If you were in a coma, we wouldn't say hearing was occurring. So when those three things come together—a sound, an ear door that works, and consciousness—that's called contact, a moment of hearing.

Perception is said to arise in every moment that there's contact like that. And it is what we would call the quality of recognition or discernment. So with a finger snap, for example, it might not even be a whole thought, but it's recognizing. It's based really on memory and it arises out of being aware of what's happening.

But that perception—often people have said, when we talk in the interviews about opening to hearing, someone will say, "Oh, you know, I can be with the bare experience, but of course right away my mind's going, 'Well, that's a bird, and that's a car going by...'" Yeah, that's perception. There's some way, if it's something we've heard or known before, we recognize it.

Now, I don't know if Sharon mentioned at this retreat, but at the last retreat she talked about her favorite word in Pali: *papañca*. Papañca is generally translated as proliferation—this proliferation of mind that just goes wild on something. More technically, it's said that in a moment of perception, what often happens is, first, we often don't even recognize perception happening and we're on to the thoughts about it. Our reactions are the next thing it reminds us of. This is what's called papañca.

What one perceives, it's said in the texts, one thinks about. And then what one thinks about, there's associations and memories and on and on and on. And it says these notions then assail and overwhelm a person. It's the tendency of the imagination to break loose and run riot. These are from the old commentaries. This is papañca. We have one perception—finger snap—and when we're not really attentive, the mind just does a riff on it, goes into this whole papañca, and you wake up who knows where. And that's just a normal tendency.

Now what confuses it even further is this: if we're aware, we can bring our wise attention back to the original sense contact, the perception—finger snap—and nothing much happens. That's a lot of what we're doing in meditation practice. We're learning how to just be with the breath rather than the whole story of how uptight and type A I am because my breath is shallow. We're learning how to just walk. Learning how to just feel a sensation in the knee rather than the whole story about being in the hospital. All of that is just

coming back to the bare experience.

But often we don't recognize this perception part. And what gets really interesting is that on the level of basic perception, a lot of the time our perception is not correct—and we don't know it. The Dalai Lama said once that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. So it's not only that the imagination meets the perception, breaks loose and runs riot. First of all, it met a perception that wasn't even accurate, and then goes wild on that. No wonder we don't know what's happening. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge.

Mistaken perception is said to occur when, in that moment of contact, the consciousness is colored with one of our three friends that Sharon mentioned last night: delusion, greed, or aversion. These can actually color the perception itself, and we don't realize it if we don't know they're present.

Take Sharon's example of the chili pepper. Biting down on the chili pepper, if you go to the bare experience, it's stinging and hot. That's just how it is. But the perception of chili pepper could be colored with "I want to get out of this country, I can't believe people eat this food, this is horrible." Or it could be colored with "this is an indication of something healthy." And then the papañca goes off in two completely different directions, when really it's just stinging and hot—and everything else is extra.

This quality of mistaken perception can be more or less obvious. I remember one time I was in the hospital. I'd been there a few days, and when they give you drugs and such, the mind can go into a kind of weird state, definitely. One morning, real early, like five o'clock, a nurse came. It was her job to wake me up and get me out of bed to weigh me—that was really important, how much I weighed. My consciousness was filled with paranoia, which I didn't realize. And I actually visually perceived her as demonic. It's really how I saw her. And the poor lady—because I reacted according to the perception—I screamed. I don't remember what I said.

But the next day, the same lady had to come at the same time, get me out of bed, and weigh me again. This time I didn't have that paranoia coloring my perception. Instead, I saw what was probably more accurate: a nice-looking lady who looked a little scared. I felt really bad.

But that's an example of how, when the perception is that distorted, don't we really believe that's how it is? If someone else had a different notion, we'd say, "Look, I know what I see. Don't tell me otherwise." How often do we do that?

This is why it's so tricky, because the bottom line of this practice is that you absolutely can only open to wisdom through your own experience. It has to come down to trusting your own experience. But you see the layers of subtlety here—we have to keep looking, not take anything for granted, because superficially our own experience can be absolutely not correct. And then we can take that mistaken perception way down the road.

Greed and aversion can really color perception. They're a little more noticeable. But delusion—this quality

of confusion or just not knowing—that's actually harder to recognize when it's present. One of the things we do when we don't actually know what the perception is, is make something up based on past experience and go from there.

A story—I know I've told this before, but it's a perfect story, so I'll tell it again.

I was teaching in Vancouver and staying in a friend's apartment by myself at night. It was a daytime, non-residential retreat, so I'd go home to her apartment each evening. And before bed, I was reading a book about the civil war in Beirut by a reporter who had lived there during those ten years. It was really gripping and interesting. But you can imagine reading that just before you go to bed—that was the state of mind I was in. A kind of paranoia, cars blowing up on the streets, a guerrilla war going on in the city.

I fell asleep in that state where you're not really deep. And I woke up to these loud booming sounds. I lay there for a while, you know, how you slowly come into consciousness and you don't know where you are or what's going on. That's delusion right there. And then I just heard this booming, and the mind immediately goes: artillery firing.

Now, sometimes I teach in Southern California near a Marine base where they actually do artillery firing all night. It sounded and felt a little bit like that. So I thought, okay, this is artillery firing. And part of my mind says, "I don't think so, Carol." But I said, who knows? Just because it's Vancouver, you never know when civil war could break out.

I got quite agitated. I jumped out of bed, looking out the windows. I didn't see anything. I said, well, that's natural—there's nobody on the street because, you know. I turned on the radio trying to get news. I said, well, of course there's no news because the first place they ever go, they want to lull everybody into thinking it's normal. Really, I worked myself into it.

This went on for about ten minutes. I thought, should I call up my friends? No, that's too stupid. I did have some element of knowing, some little tiny thread of knowing. I think there's delusion happening here.

And finally I walked to the front window and I didn't see anything, but it looked over a field that had had a world exposition some years ago. Somehow seeing that, I just knew it was fireworks. Although it was no holiday—I don't know why there would have been fireworks—but I knew that. Okay, right. It clicked in. I went back to bed.

But that's what we do. We take some perception, fill in the blanks, and then make up a whole story based on it. We act and react, and we're lucky if we find out within ten minutes what's going on.

That's delusion. Not quite knowing, and not really knowing that we don't know.

And this is, in a way, what's underlying a lot of the confusion that leads us to get so wrapped up in identifying with thoughts, or holding onto them, or running away from them. We use thoughts based on any perception to tell a whole story, and then we believe that story—even though it changes the next

minute and we don't seem to notice that.

So our practice is one of coming back to the bare experience and not taking anything for granted. It's not that you want to dig everything up and question and get all unstable. Just look fresh in every moment. Because when we don't look, we might be making assumptions based on misperceptions we don't even know are happening.

There's a story I love from Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and anthropologist, from his book *An Anthropologist on Mars*. One of his stories is about a man who was basically blind from the time he was five until sometime in his fifties, and had pretty well adapted. He worked as a masseuse and had his life. He was quite at ease, at home in his world. His perception of things was put together based on hearing and touch.

At some point around when he was fifty, they found they could do an operation that would give him back his sight, which he hadn't had since he was five. So they do the operation. Everyone's standing around so excited, taking off the bandages, thinking he's going to be so happy to see.

And Oliver Sacks says, you know, when the bandages were removed in the first moment, the man had no idea what he was seeing. Everything was just a blur—light, movement, all mixed up, meaningless. And out of one part of the blur came a voice that said "well," and only then did he realize that this chaos of light and shadow must be a face—the face of his surgeon. But he didn't really see that. He just knew that voices come out of faces, so that must be a face.

It was really interesting because actually his life got a lot harder from that time on. The perceptions never really came together the way they do for someone like me, having been born sighted, where it seems like that's just how things are.

The way the mind puts together all this visual information—I don't question it. It seems like an accurate perception. But as Oliver Sacks said, we can't really imagine his confusion because if you're born with the full complement of senses, we've learned how to correlate all of our senses to create a sighted world from the beginning. When we open our eyes each morning, it's upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning to see. We've learned to give meaning to visual objects, to have concepts that accompany them.

But when he opened his eyes after being blind for 45 years, there were no visual memories to support a perception. There was no world of experience and meaning awaiting him. He saw, but what he saw had no coherence. His brain could make no sense of the visual perceptions. And it was stressful. His life got chaotic. It was an enormous strain. When he finally couldn't take it anymore, he'd close his eyes and go back to not being able to see. And then he'd feel at ease and sure and could shave himself or eat or do whatever he needed to do.

I love that because it's not just in that field, but in our whole experience of who we take ourselves to be as an unchanging, distinctive, solid human being. That's what's going on all the time. We are not—if we're

not really looking, if we're taking it for granted—my body's solid, my sense of who I am is solid. And in fact, it's changing all the time. I'm not saying this to make you believe that, but just to have us look.

When the Buddha talked about mind moments, about how fast thought moves, a mind moment is every moment that there's a new experience—something that is translated to seventeen trillion in the blink of an eye. It's fast. It's fast. And he said no wonder things seem solid, because it's changing so quickly we don't notice the change.

What we learn to do physically, emotionally, mentally is to keep bringing our attention to the experience over and over, and then suddenly we'll perceive a discontinuity. Sometimes people notice this in meditation physically, where they're sitting and we just assume it's my solid body, and suddenly there's just an experience of a sensation coming and going, coming and going, in a vast expanse. It suddenly isn't within this solid body. And then that goes away again. And we think, well, that was kind of a neat experience. But we don't really consider—hmm, maybe that's just as valid as this lump of solid flesh that I drag around with me most of the time. Maybe that's also true.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, look deeply. We look deeply. We never stop at the surface appearance. You don't have to think about this, but this is what our mindfulness practice leads us into.

Since I want to talk about this in terms of thought, we see how, when we continue to look deeply and consistently, thoughts are arising and passing, describing ourselves and our world to us almost constantly. And if we don't look, we don't even realize it. We take those descriptions to be true and accurate and react from them, just like I took the war in Vancouver to be true and accurate.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once that the world appears to you to be so overwhelmingly real because you think about it all the time. Cease thinking about it and it will dissolve into thin mist. And we think, well, do I actually want it to dissolve into thin mist? Do I want to feel like thin mist? Maybe not. And we start thinking about it. But all of these series of thoughts, unobserved, unrecognized—rather than just seeing them as the perception of "oh, that's a thought"—they contribute to maintaining this false perception or assumption of an unchanging solid self. Each of these contributes to the vast proliferation of becoming—becoming this, becoming that—over and over, that keeps us locked in this cycle of confusion and keeps us reacting to thoughts. Because again, if the thought has nothing to do with you, it's really not a problem. But how many of the thoughts are describing us, our reactions, defining us, giving us a sense of meaning? And we don't maybe quite want that to dissolve into thin mist.

But it gets really ultimately fascinating, and I find it sometimes hilarious, to really begin paying attention to these thoughts as they describe things rather than just believing them. To notice how that comes from the simplest perception.

I'll give the basic kind of things that happen on a retreat, but you can expand it out to our life. You're just sitting, minding your own business, feeling very mindful, and somebody goes rushing by, gets a cup of tea,

slops it down, and you think, hmm, I'm pretty mindful here. I'm doing pretty good.

Now, what's actually happened there? Seeing, and then the perception based on memory of "that doesn't look very mindful to me." And then some kind of pleasant feeling, another thought, "I'm doing better than that." Comparing, which is ego conceit. We don't notice; those are just things arising. And from that: I'm pretty mindful here. Within thirty seconds, you know, we're meeting the Dalai Lama. We're opening spiritual centers. Somehow every yogi here is bowing down to us, and we remember everything great we ever did in our life and all the things that show what a success we are. Everything—our whole life is here in that moment, but selectively chosen.

And then after that, however long that was, we wake up and say, "Huh, maybe they're slurping their tea, but they might know they're doing it. Whereas I, on the other hand, don't even know where I am. I think I'm in Dharamsala." So actually, I'm not doing too well at all.

And again, it's the same thing. There's just a perception of a thought, again seeing that person, another memory, and an unpleasant feeling. And then you drag in everything—all the times you've failed in your life, all the unfinished business, all the unkind things you've said, all the moments you weren't mindful, all the completely unfair judgments and comparisons you've made of other people, what a total worthless jerk you are. And again, your whole life. And again, selectively chosen.

In each of these movements, if we're not seeing what's actually happening—that it's just a series of thoughts coming together with different emotions and memories—if we're not seeing that, each of them feels really real. It's me. And if we don't look at it, it seems like the same me, although actually they're totally different me's. But it feels like the same me. And we're doing this all the time, with any little perception.

I remember walking in a retreat once and I looked out the window and it was snowing. Okay, seeing. That's all that was happening—seeing. From that seeing, I went into a whole thing about snow and my childhood and what it felt like and pleasant feelings and snow days off from school. Just seeing whiteness, that was it. All the time we do that if we don't pay attention.

There's a great line from Lily Tomlin where she says, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific."

Our tendency is to try and think our way out of this. When really our practice, as the Dalai Lama says, to have a correct perception we need to have a direct encounter. In other words, wise attention—it simply is our challenge to notice: this is a whole story, explanations, concepts, self-definitions. What's actually happening? Bring wise attention to the bare fact of experience.

A thought. Just like that thought, "It snowed today." Or "I'm the most worthless yogi here." Or "I'm incredible, I'm brilliant." Or "That person is hopeless." Whatever it is, it's just a thought. Tightness. Unpleasantness. Burning. Memory. Bringing our attention to simply meet the experience as it is.

It's radical. It's always available to us. And it's not that if we do this we're going to get so into bare experience that we forget who we are or where we live, that we can't find our zafu in the hall anymore. Somehow all of that still works. But it's just being able to come out of these stories and meet the bare experience.

That's what we've been doing. That's what the whole mindfulness practice is. And learning to do it with thoughts is exactly the same. It can seem a little trickier, absolutely, because thoughts are actually so ephemeral. Something we give so much power to is actually the most ephemeral of our experience. So it's learning to bring a skill to it, that's all—to recognize thought as thought.

One approach is what I mentioned before: just because a thought comes with strong emotion doesn't make it more real. It's very helpful when there's a lot of repetitive thought to recognize—and this is like a kinesthetic way, the way it feels to me—to recognize thinking and drop my attention under it, to recognize and touch the emotion that's going along with it. Seeing that they feed each other, but they're not the same thing.

Another way, when you're looking at thought itself and bringing attention to thought itself, is to rest in this quality that Sharon spoke of, that we've all spoken of—spaciousness. So that it's not just glomming onto the thought, but seeing it in the vast space of awareness.

The image Sharon talked about, of the bird flying through the sky—that's a perfect image. If we think of any thought that comes as the bird, but our awareness is the sky, the thought really isn't such a problem. We notice the thought, it kind of comes through and flies out. No matter what kind of bird it is, whether it's a beautiful parrot or a lovely nightingale or a turkey vulture, it doesn't really matter.

But instead of that, we don't notice the sky and we get caught up—*I've got to have this bird, I've got to have this bird*—and we throw up nets and we try to hold on to it. We can't, but we get completely bent out of shape. Or it's flying by and it's hideous. We think, *Oh my God, get rid of it. Get out the air rifle. Pop it away.* Actually, that makes it hang around longer because it gets a little hurt. It flutters down. It goes around our head. If we'd left it alone and just noticed it flying through the sky, it would just fly on out. But we get so involved in the reactions.

If you can just have the inclination to notice the space around thoughts, the space between thoughts—it takes them out of being so deadly important, every thought. And in terms of sitting here on the cushion, it really doesn't matter what thought arises. Because you're going to sit here until the bell rings, you know. Even if it's just from shame, you're still going to do it. So no matter how strong the thought is, just notice the space around it. Notice what it does. Let it go away.

Space is actually a wonderful metaphor—not just for making things more relaxed, more nice, just kind of spacing out. That quality of spaciousness that allows us to bring a clear knowing to what is, is what actually allows our understanding to deepen, to see underneath that surface reality and open quite

profoundly to the truth.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho. He's talking about space as a metaphor. He says Buddha wisdom is very humbling, very humbling. "Knowing the unconditioned"—now the unconditioned is another word for nirvana or true nature, freedom—"is knowing the unconditioned very interesting or fascinating? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma. It's going to be incredibly fascinating to know, something blissful, something ecstatic.' And so you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Look at the space in this room. Is it interesting to look at?" He says, "Not to me. The space in this room is just like the space in the other room. It's the things in this room that we get involved in. They're interesting or uninteresting, attractive, good, bad, ugly, whatever. But the space—there's not really much you can say about it. It has no quality except being spacious. And to be really spacious one has to be patient. As there is nothing that one can grasp, one recognizes space only by not clinging to the objects in the room."

When you let go, when you stop your absorptions, your judgments, your criticisms, your evaluations, your clinging to the people and the things in the room, you begin to experience the space of it. But that takes a lot of patience and a lot of humility. Humility in that we can just let go of how important our assessments and attitudes and reactions are. We get that sense of the space by not clinging or reacting to the objects in the room. We begin to recognize the space. And that space, that not clinging, is what allows us to begin to recognize the great wisdom of the Buddha, the great wisdom that is really the potential of all of our hearts and minds, where we really begin to have a correct perception of who and what we really are, of what is true.

And at this point, the question often comes up: Well, what is it, just some kind of space, space out? That's what's true? Is this it? Actually, this came up in a few groups. Is this it? You just let go of reacting and being aversive and clinging and you're left with a traffic jam and not being upset. Is that it? We sit here and thoughts come and go and we're at peace with them.

Is that it? Yes and no. It's not that we're just left with a kind of spaciousness, a seeing the emptiness of thoughts, of our sense experience, that they come and go and have no intrinsic selfness, and so who cares? It doesn't matter what happens. Sometimes when people hear talk about emptiness, it can be misunderstood as "well, nothing really matters, so it doesn't matter what I do," and there's a kind of no sense of responsibility. It's not that at all.

So the question becomes—staying with thoughts—where do these thoughts begin to matter? How does this deep understanding that we are not our thoughts, we are not our sense experiences, we are not this temporal coming and going—how does that manifest in our lives? Because it's not nihilistic. It allows us to see through this sense of separateness, this sense of trying desperately to hold on to constantly changing experience for a sense of security, which breeds only fear.

When we see through that, what we see is not the emptiness of nothingness, of non-caring, but the

emptiness that leads us into our intrinsic wholeness, our absolute connectedness. To me, there are two quotations that express this beautifully. One is John Muir saying, "I find if I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe." That's emptiness. When we're not clinging to anything, that's how we can experience our lives. That's how we can experience the world.

And then this gives rise naturally to the balancing aspect of great wisdom, which is great compassion. It's the reflexive expression of our clear seeing, of wise understanding, that we begin to meet ourselves and the world with great compassion. In fact, wisdom and compassion are often spoken of as the two wings of the bird of the Buddha Dharma. A bird can't fly without both wings. Great wisdom can't really arise without great compassion, and vice versa.

So it's right at this point of wisdom and compassion that we see how we can begin to recognize and use thinking in a way that comes from truly understanding the nature of life, the nature of who we are, and the nature of thought. You know the quotation from Nisargadatta, it's really well known: "Wisdom tells me I'm nothing, love tells me I'm everything, between the two my life flows." It's really like that. When we see that we're nothing—I'm not all these thoughts about my past and my future and even my present—when I see that, then I see that I'm everything.

How does that manifest in our lives? This is where I think the Buddha laid out his teachings so elegantly, so brilliantly. When these factors of mind—when you have a thought coming together with greed or hatred, or coming together with compassion—when these thoughts manifest as intention, the application of mind, the energetic direction of mind that gives rise to speech and action, these intentions often manifest as thought. So when a thought is coming as intention and we act on it, then it makes a difference, then it matters. If you're sitting here on the cushion, the most murderous, awful thoughts—they really are empty. But when the thought manifests as intention, a murderous thought becomes truly a murderous action, and it matters.

This is where the Buddha's teachings are so elegant. When he laid out his Eightfold Path, the way to live a life of awakening, the first step is understanding—wise understanding, right understanding—how we understand ourselves and the world. And how we understand ourselves to be gives rise to the second step, which is translated as wise intention, wise thought. And the intentions and thoughts give rise to the next steps: speech, action, and livelihood—how we live our lives in relationship to ourselves and others. So this is where they come together. How we understand things to be gives rise to how we are motivated to speak and act in the world. It's just so elegant to me.

You can see this clearly. If we're in a moment where we're feeling unsafe or paranoid, very separate, feeling that we need to protect ourselves and that other people are a threat, then our speech and actions will be motivated accordingly. The intention comes together with that state of mind, and the intention arises from fear. That will be how we speak and act.

But if in another moment we're touching that place of just seeing that things are as they are—someone

said to me today, "It's just breathing, just touching the floor"—in that moment, it's so clear there's nothing in excess, nothing that needs to be gotten rid of, nothing missing. In that moment, the sense of what Thich Nhat Hanh calls wishlessness, the sense of touching everything—if I touch this, it touches everything in the universe—then the natural purification of our intentions happens. Out of that moment, an intention of desire or greed or hatred is simply not going to arise. It just isn't. When you're in one of those states, you don't think, "Well, let me run and get the last muffin."

Who cares? Everything's perfect.

I love the way Thich Nhat Hanh describes it. He says, "The idea is that you do not put something in front of yourself and run after it, because everything is already here in yourself."

Don't try to think, "How am I going to experience my whole life like that?" Just a moment. Our whole life is only a moment, ever. It's only this moment. Each time we are awake in a moment of recognizing that sense of everything being here in ourselves—that if I touch anything, it's connected to everything—the natural result is that our thoughts and intentions purify to ones of letting go, of generosity or non-greed, of love and compassion.

You can see this happening in little ways on retreats all the time. Notice it in yourselves. So often people describe how somebody in the hall is coughing or sniffling, and all the things they go through—from feeling annoyed to thinking "I should be compassionate," which is not the same as the natural arising of it. But that thought is still coming from some understanding that somehow compassion is a more natural response. We're just not totally there yet, but still, honor that.

But not really being there takes really being honest, paying attention to our intentions—attending to the wanting to kill, to turning the anger in on oneself, to just resting in that anger for a moment. And suddenly, as if effortlessly, there's actual compassion. It's like, "Oh, wow, that must be really uncomfortable having a cold. May they be free from their suffering." And so often people say, "Where did that come from? I didn't make it happen."

That's what happens as our moments of wisdom increase, as we touch our true nature and honor it more and more—our intentions of how we relate in little moments and in big moments purify. That's the P word. Sometimes people hate that word, but it really happens. They transform. They change. It gets easier for compassionate and loving and non-greedy intentions to arise than for actions and speech based on neediness, fear, and cruelty.

Learning to recognize when thought is manifesting as intention is a wonderful tool, both here and in our lives. It comes into play whenever we're making decisions, when we're having to make choices. If we can just notice "I'm about to say or do something"—which isn't always possible, but if we can—it gives us a moment of choice. And that's so wonderful, because so often then, in that choice, we'll be able to choose consciously to come from our connectedness rather than from our fear.

Sometimes it might seem a little bit forced, but that's okay. It's still better than coming from our fear or our greed. And other times we won't be able to make that choice, but we'll be able to see what's happening. You still meet that with kindness. And in that kindness, again, meeting the bare experience—like meeting that anger at the person in the hall—naturally again, some compassion may arise.

Sometimes we work on it very consciously in our lives. It's not that we just sit back and wait. But once we understand, once we've had moments where we've touched this truth, it can become a very deliberate intention to cultivate these purified intentions.

A person who inspires me a lot with her compassionate action in the world is Sister Chan Khong, the woman who works with Thich Nhat Hanh. What's interesting is that as our understanding of emptiness deepens, it doesn't lead to passivity. Actually, the compassion and the mettā and the non-greed lead to a much more active engagement, in whatever form. Our sense of vibrant aliveness, of real connectedness with our experience and with others, gets palpably stronger—because we are connected. That's what lets us see the truth.

Sister Chan Khong has basically, from what I read in her autobiography, spent her whole life since she was young involved in social work—in the middle of the Vietnam War, working in very difficult circumstances. Not being a perfect human being, I'm not saying that; we all have our stuff. But with this dedication. What inspired me is that, at least from what I could tell from her autobiography, she doesn't take it for granted. Even at this point, she's working very consciously to choose to act from intentions that grow from understanding, from compassion rather than from anger.

She talks about being involved in recent years in a campaign of writing letters to the government in Vietnam, who had been arresting many nuns and monks and artists. She said, "Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew I had to do walking meditation." Now, is that one's normal response? "I'm angry, I better do walking meditation." So that in itself is very interesting.

She continues, "Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

To me, that kind of encompasses it all—the deep seeing of our interconnectedness, the emptiness of our thoughts of anger, of our reactions, the commitment to acting from the awareness of our interconnectedness and knowing we can't always access it. And that's okay. But knowing that if we have the choice, we'll make it to come from our deepest understanding, knowing that it's a process, that it's our whole life. And it gets so that it's less and less something amazing and more and more the natural expression of understanding.

Shantideva says it in a way I love: "Even though I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

And just one last thing is noticing how both consciously and naturally the intentions that can inspire us in our spiritual journey—which at times is boring as hell and at other times incredibly arduous and at other times so wonderful—really do begin to expand from the intention of my own happiness and peace to that word we often use of bodhicitta, that sense of a deep commitment to awaken so that I may serve all beings and help awaken all beings.

I've noticed in myself—I was talking to someone today who was noticing this herself—that in the beginning when one hears that and thinks, "Well, I'm practicing for the sake of all beings," it can actually sound quite egotistical. Like, who do I think I am practicing for all beings? But that's our misunderstanding. It really starts to change when the motivation begins to shift and move and take on this vastness beyond our limited sense of my own personal happiness, my own personal freedom. Truly there become moments when you're practicing for the awakening of all beings. It's not egotistical at all. It actually brings such a vastness of connectedness and compassion, a strength and a courage that lets you sit through things, look at things, hang with things, that if it was just for you, you'd say, "I think I'll go get a pizza now. That's enough. I don't really need to wake up now."

But when you really get it—that you can't awaken without all beings, and that practice really is to affect all beings—it brings such a depth, such a power to what we're doing that again it keeps bringing us back into a deeper and deeper understanding. And it lends such a meaning to our lives. Not in the big sense, but that even the most ordinary activities become activities of awakening.

So I just want to end with a quotation from Geshe Rabten, who's a Tibetan teacher, because I really like the way he says this. He says for himself, "All actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings."

It's just a possibility. All actions—washing the dishes, changing the diaper, eating your soup—for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings. That's kind of like the ultimate purification of intention. But starting where we are, that's the aspiration.

---

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