Question and Answer

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 45:29

The question was about doing metta as a concentration practice and two different experiences of it. Sometimes the focus is very much on the phrases and they're very clear and it feels very concentrated, though not particularly emotional. Other times it's a real heartfelt feeling that doesn't feel so concentrated.

When there's that heartfelt feeling, are you aware of the phrases or the beings you're sending metta to? Yes, exactly—sometimes both at once.

This was my experience too. There are three streams of focus: the feeling, which comes and goes; the phrases; and the person you're sending metta to, or all beings. I found that at times one would really be highlighted, or maybe two, and it seemed kind of awkward, like they weren't all coming together.

But they do all come together. I remember it took me ages where I could really focus on the phrases and the sense of the person, but metta just wasn't there. I didn't feel hateful or anything, but I wasn't really in the feeling. After some time, the phrases themselves became imbued with the feeling. I'd have to pull back and focus, being really clear with the phrases or the person, and begin to feel the meaning with each phrase—consciously feel the sense of myself meaning that phrase. Not as a heavy thing, but just a reminder.

For some weeks, it was like jumping back and forth, and then they all came together. So don't worry. It is like that with the different streams.

Another question came about sending metta to all beings. When mentally scanning the earth or thinking about different beings, sometimes it's difficult because there are many beings now doing horrible things, and it's hard to send loving-kindness to them.

Very true. Are you doing loving-kindness as a full-time practice, or just at times during the day? Part-time—yes, it is difficult. And metta is meant to be done in the way that's easiest. That's why before we do all beings, when we're going through ourselves, a benefactor, a friend, the last being we come to is the difficult one—someone doing atrocities or someone we've had a hard time with in our life—because it is difficult to really genuinely feel the connection of loving-kindness with a being like that.

So first, know that this is normal. Second, don't try to push it or do the most difficult metta first. If I sit down and I'm not really in the flow and I think, "Well, I'll send metta to the people killing each other in Rwanda," I can't get to metta with that. It's just too appalling.

But if you want to work toward that, at a time when you really are feeling the loving-kindness flowing,

start in the way that's easiest and then gradually expand. In working with difficult or hateful people, we still try to tune into their lovable aspects with metta. That's hard, especially with people you don't know—when all you know about them is the horrible things they do.

For me, I try to tune into the fact that whatever they're doing is from ignorance, and in some twisted way, what they're doing is somehow what they think will bring them happiness. Or they're doing it out of fear of retribution for themselves.

Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh, has some beautiful passages in her recent autobiography where she talks about times during the war in Vietnam when their friends had been killed by grenades or deliberately killed by people from either side of the conflict—they never knew who. She would have to write eulogies for them, and she would meditate on it for days until she could feel some sense of connection with the people who had killed her friends. It could take a long time.

One time, she got to a place of understanding because someone had survived and reported that the killers had said, "We have to do this." She took that and really meditated on it until she felt that they were doing it because if they didn't kill her friends, they themselves would be killed. So it's like out of fear—and you can come to understand the humanity even behind horrible things. That's one way to access it.

But again, for doing loving-kindness here, the practice is really to cultivate the feeling in yourself and begin to spread it out—not to be super-metta warriors, beaming with love for all beings every moment. So don't force it. If you're getting tight around it, pull back and do what's easy, what comes clear.

You identify it and probably picture it. But it's likely a survival mechanism in a way—you know what's making the sound and whether or not it's a danger to you.

"So I guess what I'd like to know is, is there any advantage to knowing sound in some other way than that? Why would one cultivate the capacity for just hearing sound with no picture of it and no identity?"

His question is about sound, but it really applies to all the senses—that when the sound arises, he doesn't just hear the sound. There's an immediate mental picture of airplane, and they almost come together. You never just get the sound without that. It might be helpful to know it's an airplane as opposed to something potentially dangerous, so perhaps it's a survival mechanism. Is there any point to knowing just bare sound without that arising image?

There can be. It's true that there's the immediate perception of what it is and then the superimposed mental image. There are really three different things going on there, but it all happens so quickly. We are really geared to the perception—the recognition, the identification of what it is. Definitely, it helps us a lot in our day-to-day life to know what's what, what's the sound, what's the sight.

The danger of it, and the reason it's helpful to just recognize hearing as hearing at times—and it happens sometimes in a long retreat where that visual image might not arise—is because our perception is not

always accurate. Many times, and we'll talk about this more, we might be responding to a sound and the mental image that arises is actually not what is creating that sound.

In an even more subtle way, many of our perceptions give us the sense that we're a solid, unchanging self. And it seems really true—that's the arising image or thought or feeling that arises with sense contact over and over and over. So we think, "This is me, I'm solid." That's just the truth. And we can go through life in real delusion.

So certainly, a lot of what we're doing when we say "just come close to the sense contact, just notice what it is"—it's not to deny the perception, but it's to bring in the possibility that our perception might not be accurate. It opens up a whole field of investigation. It jars us loose from the solidity of thinking we know what we are. So it is very helpful.

"Well, an interesting observation in relation to what you just said. Yesterday, in listening to sounds, I heard a lawnmower being started up. It sounded like a car that wouldn't start. And then finally, it started."

Exactly. We can get ourselves into a lot of trouble by misperceiving. That's really one of the roots of ignorance.

Okay, we need to stop. So have an insightful day, free of misperception.

I want to make a few more clarifications in our ongoing illumination of the nature of practice.

"Do you reflect about dreams when you wake up in the morning, or not at all?"

The question is about dreams. Does one—or do I personally, I'm not sure which—reflect on them?

"No, just in practice, because I've experienced that sometimes dreams showed me some strong patterns of behavior, identifications, goals, and so on."

So it's about the skillfulness of reflecting on one's dreams when you wake up. Can it be helpful? She goes on to say she has found it very helpful in illuminating patterns of behavior and roles—or should one cut it altogether?

I think at times, as you described, it can be helpful if the reflection is really kept to a minimum. For myself, it's not every dream by any means. It certainly isn't getting into dream analysis. In most cases, I can treat my dreams very much like my thoughts—okay, it's done, it's over, there's nothing to think about.

Occasionally, though, you can feel that a dream has some power in it, that there really is some strong sense of intentionality or some pattern revealed in it. I usually tend to feel that emotionally. If there's something lingering when you wake up, then really pay attention to that. You're paying attention to what's happening in the moment—that lingering, that sense. A short reflection can be helpful, the same as a

psychological insight that might arise in your sitting. We give some conscious reflection time to it.

With reflection though, really be aware—I find the actual usefulness of reflection time is pretty short. And then what we're calling reflection becomes "oh yeah, and that happened, oh yeah, this, and then..." It's the same thing—just spinning. It's not reflection anymore. It's just letting off into thinking.

So be really watchful for that difference, and it's usually shorter than we think—like one thought we need for reflection, and then it changes quality.

The question is about whether yogi mind states can persist after retreat. I suppose I need some clarification. Do you mean being in tune with aversion, or do you mean out of control aversion? Or desire? That kind of explosive quality?

So you mean getting locked into some desire or aversion about a particular person in the retreat and then for the next year having no way to change your mind. Hopefully nothing is that solid and unchanging that it will persist the same without movement for a year. But as I said last night, that sort of exaggerated quality of wanting or aversion—we call it yogi mind, but as I said, we could also call it staff mind, or a teacher might experience it. We all experience that at times in our life, when we find ourselves doing really stupid things or really out of control. We've experienced that exaggeration of mental state.

So it certainly can happen out of retreat. And I think I have experienced coming out of a retreat—not for a whole year—but maybe for a little while after the retreat, it can vary where I haven't quite sort of closed up or balanced up again at the end of the retreat. Because in the retreat we get very vulnerable, very open, with exaggerated mental states. And also we kind of regress, so that around November, you know—exactly, she put her thumb in her mouth.

So everyone's internal rhythm is different, and it's possible for retreat to end and we're still back there, you know, at two and a half. That's one of the reasons we have integration week—to sort of get the armor back on. So things could be a little exaggerated afterwards. But that you'd stay locked into it for a year? I don't think that's so likely unless you're really not looking at it for a year. Or there's something that came up in relationship to that person, some really deep wound or some deep holding or resentment that is still there and you're not really seeing, haven't really moved through, and so it's still active. It just is more practice. I wouldn't worry about being out of control from now on. No, no, it passes.

The question is some confusion about whether in doing metta, it's just for the cultivation of that quality in ourselves, or if there's some magical aspect where the metta really does affect the people that we're sending it to. I don't know if I like to use the word magical.

Technically, in doing it, it's a cultivation of intention in our practice. So in the doing of it, I'm really cultivating the intention that truly wishes well to myself or whoever, the person. I'm not at all focusing on a sense of effect—that if I really wish well, then the person's suffering will go away, then they'll be okay. It's really bringing the attention to the intention, for that feeling, that mental state, that brahmavihara to

arise in us more and more easily.

And on the other hand, it is said in the commentaries that if you're really, really concentrated, it does affect the person. And certainly there are many stories of the Buddha. Like there's one story where by the power of his metta, he stopped a raging elephant. He just stood there and this elephant was raging, killing everyone in its path. And he just stood there and radiated metta. The elephant felt it and stopped.

And actually, often after a retreat or after a period of doing metta, I've had the experience where it seems magical, where I'm going out in the world and just doing my thing and people respond with this real warmth. A friend once was watching this and didn't know what had been going on. She said, "What is in your body? Why are people being so nice to you?"

So something definitely does communicate and is felt, but in doing it, the focus is on our own intention, not trying to change. You can't change someone's karma.

And if I do that, then it would change all the time. Should I just drop the noting altogether?

The question is, as he's with the breath and noting with rising and falling, but he loses rising and falling. Changes to hearing or changes to something else? Changes to something else—it's almost like the in-breath seems like it's falling or something, or else he's getting confused.

I see. So somehow you're still in the experience of the breath, but rising and falling doesn't seem to fit what's actually happening. But you're continuing to note rising and falling, and it gets confusing.

I'd certainly say if you're noting anything like rising and falling and it doesn't seem to be matching what's happening, leading to mental confusion, it's not helpful. As soon as the noting starts to somehow seem that it's not fitting, it pulls away from the sinking into the experience, which is the point of the mental labeling in the first place.

So if you're finding a dissonance, and that's creating any kind of mental activity, maybe at that point actually drop the noting. I mean, for this point with the breath, because you could really start thinking, "Now does it feel like rising? Last time it felt like falling. Now is it rising?" You know, it's like, please.

If you really know it's hearing, note hearing. If you know it's pressure, note pressure. Or otherwise, you could just be very carefully with the breath, and when rising and falling seems to fit again, use it.

I'd say that's in distinction to, say, noting rising, falling, or in-out, which seems to fit, but you're noticing a lot of other sensations. For example, during the rising, you might notice there's pressure, tingling, burning. Don't try to note all of those sensations—that's not what I'm saying. I'm just saying when there's this dissonance.

Noting is never meant to lead to more thinking or analyzing. That's not the point. If it gets like that, just simplify. Use a really generic note like "sensation" or "emotion" or "thing happening" just to get your

attention into it.

Another question is about doing metta practice while walking. When one is doing full-time metta practice or any of the Brahma-viharas, you do it all the time—sitting, walking, eating, whatever you're doing. And if you're not doing it full-time, it could still be quite fine if you're doing it, say, once or twice a day here now, to do it while walking.

Essentially, it's just the same as sitting. You're walking back and forth, the same as in the Vipassana walking, but you don't pay attention to the walking. In other words, the mindfulness is not with the walking or your physical sensations at all. You do exactly the same thing: you bring up a sense of yourself if you're sending it to yourself, or the benefactor, or the friend, whoever. You really do just the same—you hold the image of the person, have a sense of it, although please do walk with your eyes open. And repeat the phrases, and if the feeling is there, sink into that. It's exactly the same.

In that walking, you might find you don't have to focus so much on going slowly. Often you can tell people who are doing metta because they don't have that slow mindfulness of their movements that happens when you're being mindful of mind and body in Vipassana.

Sometimes I find for myself, when I'm walking with the metta, even if I'm staying with dear friend, starting with myself for five or ten minutes and then moving to the dear friend, I might find that if it starts to feel a little tight or encapsulated, and say a chickadee goes by or a dog comes by, then just for the next set of phrases I'll send it to that being. It's just a nice way of opening it up and connecting to whoever's around. Somebody walks by, a squirrel goes up the tree, whatever. I found myself sending it to the crickets a lot last year. It's just a way to open up the field a bit but still be connected, and then again go back to whoever your subject is. It's fun doing it in the city.

Quiet day. That's nice. That's how I feel too.

You're keeping a graph.

So that I'm not feeling full at the first sitting, but I'm not starving at 10:30—something like that. I can keep going, working to that end, trying to not feel too full and not end up being hungry. Is there anything you have to say about that? And also, is there some innate benefit in just not eating a whole lot—like not eating dinner? I could pay attention to hunger, hunger. I can do that, but is there some innate benefit?

The question was about eating. It's really two questions. One is he's just sharing that he's in the process of finding exactly the right amount to eat—so he's not too full and not too hungry. I don't have a whole lot to say about that except please don't get too tight around it, because it changes all the time. The balance shifts. Some days you might, if you really pay attention when you're eating, come to sense: okay, that's enough now. Rather than looking outside and trying to think about how much food would be enough.

The second question is whether there's some innate value in, say, not eating much—for example, not

eating dinner. He says he knows he could just be with hunger, hunger. But is there some innate value in that?

Really exploring that is one of the points of taking eight precepts. You know the eight precepts—the one that really changes things for us here is that you don't eat solid food after noon. Of course, all the monks and nuns, all ordained people live that way. And in Buddhist countries, anyone who is coming to a monastery or going on a retreat, most retreats are conducted in that manner, where you don't eat in the afternoon.

It's different for different people. I myself, of course, lived that way for a year or so when I was in Thailand. And I found, for myself and given my body type, it was really fine. I found I didn't actually need any food after noon. And it's not just noting hunger, hunger. Actually that passes fairly quickly, at least it did for me. And it wasn't this actual craving for food. What it did was release this whole amount of energy and obsession and mental thought that went into food—what can I have, when will I eat, how much will I eat. From noon on you just knew that was something you didn't think about. It actually was great. It gives so much time and freedom, really. Like when you fast, all of a sudden there's so much time in your day that you didn't have before. Not eating in the afternoon can really open that up.

And it also, of course, is very instrumental in showing us relationships we might have to food, or to fear of not having enough. Of course, in monasteries you don't see other people eating in the afternoon because nobody's doing it. So that's harder here.

But I must say we haven't been pushing it so much this retreat because we've also found that for quite a few people, on a long retreat, it's physically quite difficult for them. We have quite a few friends who lose a lot of weight when they're on eight precepts and get a little bit weak. And it's not so much obsession in the mind, but that physically it's hard on them. They come back from Birmingham, Joseph comes back twenty pounds lighter. It's hard to imagine—where does he lose it from?

So we're not pushing it, but personally, I found it very interesting to play with. My first three-month retreat I ever did, you could decide to do it or not. I did it, I think, for about six weeks. And I had a kitchen job putting out the tea. One of the maintenance guys, who's since turned into one of my good friends—but I didn't know him then—every day I was putting out the tea, he'd come in and make a cheese and tomato sandwich. And every day he'd go, "Carol, you want a cheese and tomato sandwich?" I was craving cheese so much. And I'd say, "No, Rodney, I'm on eight precepts." The next day, the same thing. It went on for a month.

It was a real test. It's worth playing with.

There's no guarantees with these practices. You don't say, okay, I don't eat dinner and I suddenly drop three levels in samadhi. There's no guarantees. Certainly, overeating is one of the five obsessions with senses that the Buddha talks about. And in this society, mostly we're not too heavy on the starvation side.

So I would say, if you have a lot of questions coming up about it, explore it for yourself. But there is no automatic formula where if you don't eat after noon, your practice suddenly gets better. Sorry.

One of the techniques for dealing with sleepiness is to visualize white light, which is true. Bringing light into the mind is supposed to help. But not everyone finds it easy. I think different techniques might work better for different minds. For instance, some people can visualize very easily and some people can't. So I don't think there's one technique that's easy across the board.

You might try, though I wouldn't make a big thing about it, visualizing like a circle. Just imagine seeing it, so to speak, rather than trying to bring it in. Imagine that you're seeing a circle of white light. Don't push too hard, and just see if it expands. Go to the other techniques if it doesn't help. Or sit with the eyes open and then when it's light inside, close the eyes.

Yesterday morning, in response to a question about working with angry thoughts and the difficulty of not getting caught up identifying with them, Joseph recommended dipping down into the body level, the sensation, to feel the contraction. Someone tried this and found it was fine in the sitting, but in the walking they got into some sense of struggle about how much to stop or when to start walking again.

The thing is, if it's really strong, these contractions, so strong that you want to stay with it instead of starting to walk—then it becomes standing. So what? Standing is fine. Stay with it. Let it be there, really explore it. You might find, you know, it's not like we do better however many walking passes we make. We're not keeping a record. So if you spend the whole walking period and you only go from here to there, but you're present, great.

You might find, though, as emotions come and go, as the feeling begins to fade but is still present, you don't have to wait until it's totally, completely gone to start walking again. When it's not so engrossing, when it's not catching your mind so much, when you still have some background sensations but they're no longer overwhelming—you can go ahead and reconnect with the walking at that point and start moving. If the anger zooms up again, stop again. That's my song. It doesn't need to feel like a struggle. Just be with what's predominant, not some idea of what you should be doing.

One practitioner raised a question about working with intention—not the intention propelling the practice, but intention itself as an object of awareness. He'd been starting to work with it, and it seemed like there was just too much to do now before every step. There's feeling, and feeling goes away, and then keeping track of thinking—it felt like everything was getting jammed up. Was it useful to let go of noticing thinking?

This is what starts to happen: you begin to realize it's not just adding intention as another thing to notice. God knows there's an intention before every single movement or thought. You're not going to notice all of them. Trying to catch every one—this cat-at-a-mouse-hole kind of energy—isn't so helpful because you get really tense. It's like jumping into the next moment. *What am I missing? I'm missing it.* Just settle back.

You're not going to catch every intention, just as it's quite difficult at times to notice every thought. Things are happening so quickly. And in fact, as the practice goes on, rather than feeling calmer, you might notice just more and more things happening—seventeen million, or is it trillion, in the blink of an eye. That's how fast. So there's no way we're going to notice them all.

Working with this practice, yes, it is helpful to notice intention. It's extremely helpful because it's that link that really helps us see cause and effect. It really helps us see how the mind gives rise to some intention and the body moves. There's an unpleasant sensation in the body; it gives rise to some intention and the desire to move. Just this cause and effect—it can really lead us into a deeper experience of impersonality, of anattā. You see how we identify with the intention, but it's really just another arising phenomenon based on conditions. So it is very useful to explore, just as thoughts are.

But not to set up the idea that now you're going to notice every intention, or now you're going to notice every thought, or every sensation when you lift your arm. We work with a sense of settling back and relaxing in this moment, and then noticing what arises as predominant experience. So sometimes intention—maybe before turning or before beginning a step—might be more noticeable. Maybe you don't notice the intention because there's this big thought of "I'm so sick of this," and that's the predominant experience. Do you see what I mean? It's having the fluidity of momentary concentration to notice what's up.

If we set the mind too strongly looking for intention, you might notice more intentions, but the thoughts could be completely derailing your mindfulness and leading you into judgment. You don't notice it because you're so busy looking at intention. It's subtle.

Someone observed that the feeling of intention is subtle—you need to make some effort to look for it. You can, but pick big movements. For example, the ones I use a lot when I'm first starting and haven't begun to feel it, because it is subtle. It's hard to describe. It's not really physical sometimes. It's sort of a mental click.

It's hard to describe. It might be physical, it might not be. It can be different for different people, and at different times for you it can be different as well.

So pick large, obvious movements—say, about to stand up, or about to start walking. When I'm walking, if I'm not yet at the point of noticing the beginning of each step, I can really try to notice intending to stop, intending to turn, intending to start again. You can play with it during walking meditation. It's a good place to explore this. Just stop. And see if you notice what that feeling is just before you take the step.

I know Joseph has this story about how he was waiting for intention one time while walking, and he stood there for half an hour because he couldn't find it. So you can do that—there's nowhere to go. And you might be feeling it without knowing it. You might be looking so hard that you're not just noticing what's already there.

So just pick big things. Reaching, turning—those are good ones.

Have a mindful day filled with intentionality.

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