Question and Answer

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:55

The question is about how to skillfully work with memories—strong memories that come up over and over with emotion attached and story. Is it skillful sometimes to really go into it in a cathartic kind of way?

There are different qualities and intensity of memories that come up, and I think how we deal with them can vary depending on that intensity.

For example, when one sits there are often floods of memories—everything from when you were two years old, just little snippets of stuff. They might have a little feeling attached, but they're not really killers. And then you can just really notice it: seeing, or remembering. If there's a feeling, an emotion attached, definitely notice and note that, always. But then let it go.

Then there's more intense ones that really come back over and over, up to the level of intensity of maybe past trauma that's been repressed. That can surface as memory on retreat. And that's a whole other level. The strongest level of real suppressed trauma can at times, when it surfaces on retreat, blow you away. It just can be too intense, and so there's different ways of dealing with it. You certainly can't just say "memory, memory" and dismiss it. No way. And going into it is, at times, unavoidable—but at times going into it is too overwhelming and you need to skillfully back off. So that's a whole other level.

The medium level, and this happens a lot on retreat, is strong memories coming up with visual images, words, thoughts, and emotion attached. I think there's a balance. I find when a strong memory keeps coming over and over, or any strong thought, for sure I would note "remembering." But I'd also be really careful to feel, notice and feel, and really fully allow in my body the emotion that's happening with it. To let that happen for as long as it happens. To be wary that in noting "remembering," I'm not sort of pushing it away and saying, "Okay, stop now. Right, there's sadness. Right, okay, on to the next thing." But really feel in the body, bring the attention into the physical experience of that emotion, and note it and be with it until it fades.

I'm a little leery of saying this, but I will anyway. Once in a while I've found that some particular strand of memory—that comes maybe in a lot of different ways with a strong emotion associated—has a feeling that there's something underneath it. Once in a great while, really once a retreat, I have found it useful to actually stop, reflect on it a bit, go into the content. Not so much thinking about it, but let myself really notice the content of all these memories, because it's usually a lot of different ones. And underneath, often there's some psychological understanding about myself or my personality patterns, or some way I've been relating throughout my life to a particular experience. I'm getting that information through the different memories that are coming up and the emotion.

But as I say, that's once in a great while. Mostly, by far, the real understanding—both psychological and more on the level of dharmic truths—has come from simply allowing it fully to be there, the expression of the memory, but not going into thinking about the content.

But yet there's this little subtle resistance that I can't get into it, because I'm afraid it's the old Catholic in me or something that doesn't want to give it up. I've heard Bhikkhu Kamala talk about possession and all of this. I don't know where I am. But I mean, just real journeys. Nothing needs to be noted. It's all happening by itself. And it's extremely pleasant.

The question is something about trust and songs in the mind. The sense of I—that's what I get from it.

Well, the one piece I guess is it seems like the experience is happening by itself, perhaps moving into what might be perceived as a deeper level, which we can't necessarily trust that one. But the sense of subtle resistance in the mind—maybe it's manifesting in all these whacked-out ways like songs and this and that, or the kind of fear of just letting go and letting the process happen. Is that sort of the nub of it?

It's a good point. You're right, the resistance, that sense of I arising and passing. It seems to have its own intelligence—or lack of, I would really say.

That's our practice. If we could at any moment completely, completely let go of any attachment whatsoever, no matter how subtle, in that moment we'd experience our true nature. There would be no problem. And theoretically it's simple. But your question really points to why, in some ways, we do this difficult practice—so many of us, our whole life—because the subtle clutching itself, or the resistance to whatever's happening, can be experienced as the sense of self. And you're right, it seems to have an incredibly intuitive way of catching us so we'll grasp at it. It's got just the right way for the resistance to come up that will really grab at us, or just the right song or whatever to make us get sidetracked, or fear, or whatever.

It's our practice. And the sense of trust isn't a trust that I know what's going to come next. That's what we usually tend to think of as trust—if I do this, then this will happen, it's familiar, I know what it means, and I can relax. The trust is like when the leaves flutter down: they don't know where they're going to land. They don't know what's going to happen. They just let go of the tree, and that's it.

So intellectually we can know that. The subtle resistances that come up, the fear—all of it's just part of the show. None of it is something we have to get rid of. None of it. That having to get rid of is just another agenda. But the simple opening of the attention into the resistance, into the fear, even into Popeye and Olive Oyl—it's just stuff happening. And you're right, it does it all by itself. You and the resistance. Just somehow we can learn to trust that much.

So, it's time for walking. Do you have any questions about your practice?

Yogi: I've got a question about the breath as an anchor, and some considerations about observing the

breath in the nostrils versus the abdomen. Here's some background: for me, it's easier to get concentrated with the breath in the nostrils. However, there's one drawback to that. There tends to be a component of visualization. So it's not body in the body with the breath—it's sort of seen with the breath. And that leads to conceptualization. My experience with the breath in the abdomen is that it does ground you more, connect you with the body, and tends to be more conducive towards mindfulness. What are your thoughts on that?

His question is about using the breath as an anchor and the differences he's noticed in his experience between being with the breath in the nostrils and in the abdomen.

What are my thoughts about that? Of course, there's no one way for everybody, for sure. Just one question: when you talk about being with the breath in the nostrils and there's this component of visualization, is there also a component of physical experience? Are you using noting? Do you note the visual as seeing?

This is something I don't have a lot of experience with, though I've just been noticing it lately. Certainly one isn't right or wrong. I think there is, for many people—not everybody, but for many—a tendency with the breath in the nostrils where some can find it much more focusing, but the other side is that for some people it feels much more heady, and for different reasons could lead into more thinking or more tightness.

Whereas in the abdomen—again, this is not true for everybody all the time, so please don't think your practice should be this way—moving into the abdomen can be a kind of deeper moving into the body. In some ways it's a larger experience and it might not seem so finely focused. That's my experience. If I'm moving with the abdomen, I get much more into mindfulness of all the various things that happen. I don't stay with it as one-pointed as when I'm with the breath at the nostrils.

And I've heard—I'm not sure this is gospel truth—but I've heard passed down that one of the reasons Mahasi Sayadaw really taught noting the rising and falling at the abdomen is that you have to really fight to get up to your nose from there. One reason I've heard is that they thought people tended to get too one-pointed and concentrated at the nose, and the idea is to open up to all experience, not just hone in.

But the thing about the visualization—that can happen at the abdomen too. That happens for me. Or with any experience where you think you're feeling it but there's this visual overlay. If you can not think of that as a problem but note precisely what the experience is—if it's the feeling tone, note the feeling; if it's sensation, note that; but when the visuals are in the forefront, just note seeing—then it doesn't matter. You're within a foundation of mindfulness. Maybe not the one you want. Does that make sense?

The next question is about whether, when many sensations are happening in the body, it's fruitful to let the attention be with them in changing patterns as they're happening, more or less at some points abandoning the breath. Or should you try and go back to the breath anyway? And similarly, should you

try and stay with a sensation until it ends, even if a lot of other things are happening?

This comes up a lot. As always, there's no absolutely tried and true answer, but the tendency would be that we're not trying to control what we pay attention to or to control experience. In other words, we're using the breath as a way to steady and focus the attention—or the body, or hearing, whatever you're using—but it's not because the breath is better. It's not that we want to stay with it, and the better your sitting is the more you're with the breath. That's not true at all.

Everyone's practice will differ, and your practice will differ at different times. But there will be times when there are a lot of sensations or a lot of visualizations or a lot of things happening, and the attention can be quite present with each one as it occurs by itself. Know what's happening. Don't try to hold on to the breath at all—it's just another form of trying to control experience.

There can be times—I know I'll take two breaths, and it might be twenty minutes before I'm noting breath again. But I've been noting consistently, steadily, that whole time. It's just that so many different things are happening. So if a lot's happening and you can be with it, know what's happening. See what happens to it.

Fine. If you're trying to be with a lot of sensations and it turns into a mishmash where you don't know what's happening—you know a lot of sensations, but you're nowhere, not able to land on anything or truly know it—that's when you consolidate and go back to the breath.

Similarly, if there's a lot happening, don't try to stay with any particular sensation until its end. In a way, that's a kind of holding on. There are going to be times when no matter what you do, you don't see the endings of things, and you can't change that. There are times you'll only be with something in the middle—just when you know tingling, a pain arises somewhere else, and just when you know burning, itching arises. It's just like that.

The mind doesn't like this. It wants to know, "I'll just stay with this until it ends, and then that." But it's simply not like that sometimes. Again, if it's going really fast and you can't tell what's happening, that's when you come back to the breath. But then let go of it and open up again, and you notice a lot.

One student shared: "I thought I discovered something very useful just now. When I'm with a very strong sensation of pain, whatever it is, I discovered that when I go back to the breath and concentrate there, the pain really diminishes. It becomes secondary."

She discovered that with strong pain, when she went back to the breath and really stayed with it, the pain became secondary, and that was quite wonderful. But now she's concerned—could this be used as a form of avoidance or control?

It could be. But it also can be skillful. See, this is what's so complicated. What's happening for one person is different than what's happening for another, which is why these question periods are tricky. You can't take what's said to one person and necessarily apply it to yourself.

In working with strong physical pain, it most likely isn't going to change really quickly or just go away when you notice it, especially early on in a retreat. There's a balance between moving into it—noticing it very carefully and gently, but fully present with it, noting it, noticing whether it's burning or tingling, what happens to it, with a mind that's non-reactive, just being there—and knowing when to step back.

When the pain lasts some time, the mind can begin to tighten. You begin to get aversive or you're just fighting with it. It's skillful then to go back to the breath and let that pain recede, reconnect and refocus, calm with the breath. That can be very skillful. When you again notice the pain, though, it's not to hide in the breath, but to then move back, explore it as if for the first time, and then again return to the breath as a way to keep the attention soft and pliable—not to avoid what's unpleasant by just staying with the breath.

Does that make sense? And keep talking about it in your interviews, because it will clarify.

Notice how even sitting inside we're so affected by the wind. We're not separate at all. I think it's interesting to notice.

One student asked about merit—what the term means. Joseph had said a little bit about it, that it's not gold stars, and that helped. And then he said, well, it is. The questioner couldn't remember what came after.

I actually don't think I'm the right person to ask, to tell you the truth. I'm being really honest. It's a concept that I don't relate to very well, and so I actually don't want to say something because I don't think I could be that helpful.

Another student began: "I've got a question, but I'll give you a preliminary question first. The key to the whole thing is that the five skandhas are all impermanent, and I go, yeah, yeah, yeah. But then you get to consciousness. The Buddha asked, is consciousness permanent or impermanent? And yeah—but wait a minute..."

That's not my experience. I mean, it may be somebody's experience, but consciousness feels continuous to me. It's a sticking point for me. So let me ask you a two-part question. What does it mean to say that consciousness is impermanent? And even if it is, why is that unsatisfactory? Why is that dukkha automatically, necessarily?

His question relates to the sutta Joseph read last night about the five skandhas being impermanent. He's saying that in his own experience, he doesn't experience consciousness as being impermanent. And he's asking, why is that unsatisfactory if it is impermanent? He also said, you know, if we all understood that, of course we'd be enlightened. And that's true.

Just because you don't experience consciousness as being impermanent—and I think that's the whole point of our practice, not just consciousness but any of the five skandhas—even if we intellectually understand or think we understand that it is impermanent, or we intellectually say no it's not, neither one

of those makes much difference. The whole thing of the practice, the reason we do this, is to keep exploring, keep looking, really with an open mind, to viscerally, over and over, experience what your actual experience is—consciousness or whichever of the skandhas.

If you don't experience it as impermanent, that's great, because you're really looking at what you are able to tell for yourself and not trying to make your experience fit an image. And so if you keep looking, I think you'll see that it is impermanent, but it's so subtle. All of the skandhas are arising and passing much more rapidly than we typically notice. And in some ways consciousness—that arising of knowing that arises together with whatever is known—is a very subtle thing to even notice, to have that be the main thing we're aware of. It's very subtle.

And so the identification with it is also quite easy to arise, that sense of "I know." Even though the knowing is coming and going, somehow that identification can easily come with each knowing, and there's this sense of continuity that actually isn't there. It's sort of strung together as a subtle memory from each last one. But the most important thing is not to believe it because you hear it. Keep looking, keep looking, keep looking.

And why is that unsatisfactory? You could think of unsatisfactory not necessarily in the nature of immense suffering, but unsatisfactory in the nature of there's nowhere to rest. There's nowhere to take a stand. There is nothing but just this constant, constant moving. A sense of satisfactory would be some place to finally land—ah—and there isn't. There just isn't. So I take it personally at that level of unsatisfactory. But don't think about all this too much. Just keep looking. Just keep looking.

The next question was about helpful hints on skillfully dealing with anger that arises at the perceived unskillful behavior of others, especially in silence.

The question is about anger arising in the mind and heart, especially in relationship to other people here—something which no one else has experienced during these weeks—and how to deal with it. One thing she did was try compassion, which often doesn't cut it at that moment. Another was sort of saying, well, it's my ego bumping against the other person's, and that didn't do it either.

I was thinking, actually—you said bumping into it—maybe someone's used that image before of how they clean potatoes in Korea or something. They put them all in a huge, big barrel of water and just keep stirring them around and bump them all into each other. And that way they get clean. So for some reason that occurred to me in the sitting room. I must have been picking something up.

It is in the kitchen, yes.

Really, the thing is coming back to the fact of the anger in your own experience. Both of the things you mentioned are sort of rationalizations. And compassion toward someone when we're actually angry is a

way of trying to sidestep accepting the anger. It doesn't work for just that reason. You know, "may you be free from suffering"—but you're the one who's suffering.

Compassion toward yourself might help, but the first step really is to just tune in to your own body-mind experience and accept and tune in to the fact that anger is arising. Feel it in the body, notice it in the mind, keep coming back to the physical experience. Note it very clearly, because that can help you stay there and not go off into the story. If the story's hooked into self-righteousness—yes, they really are, that person really is acting like a jerk—that self-righteousness can really keep feeding it.

And often here in the silence, it works both ways. Because of the silence, you can't really work it out with the person. I actually think that's a gift, because then we come back and really deal with what's going on in ourselves about it. Whether or not it seems justified in terms of the situation, unless something incredibly harmful is going on, mostly there's no need to say something. It's really a chance to work with the experience of anger in ourselves. And it's not easy—it's really painful.

So it's really about pulling back that sense of needing to blame, needing to figure out who's right and who's wrong, which is so much what we try to do. And knowing that in the world, of course, we would be able to get in touch with our own anger, see what's clearly so, and not act out of a deluded attachment or fear from the anger. But when you can really be centered in the experience of anger, be with it, let it come—it does fade, and then we can act in a more appropriate way without all the fire in the mind of anger.

Here there's just a lot of opportunity to be with what comes up in ourselves and take back the blame that we so easily put out on whatever the situation is with the other person. And not blaming oneself either. Seeing that conditions have come together and I am really angry. Okay. Feel the anger. That's okay. It's simply coming up. We don't have to hate it, and we don't try to sidestep it, but really be in it without being driven by it. And notice—it doesn't last all that long. It might come and go, but it doesn't consume us necessarily the way we think. It might feel like it for a while, but that's really our work here. It's a good one.

Just a practical note: if you feel anger is consuming you and you're going to do something, please talk to one of the teachers rather than act, because we think we're acting when we're calm and often we're not. That's one of the reasons we really ask everyone to just stay in your own experience, because it's so easy to affect each other so much anyway. Even in reaching out to do what we think is nice, we have no idea what space the other person is in. It can escalate amazingly because you don't know—you don't know how sensitive and open you are now. The slightest nuance sets up huge reverberations in each other's minds and bodies. It's just how it is right now.

Question from the room: Why is it that we really can't be objective in seeing where we are right now? You just mentioned we're a lot more sensitive than we realize, and I've seen from experience that that's true. But why does this just feel like normal, everyday life? In a way, now it actually is normal everyday life for

the next few weeks—it's just the same. I see things, I hear things, I feel things, I think things. I don't talk, I don't read or anything. I always have a sense at the end of a retreat that I've wasted my time. Really. I've done about fifteen retreats, and at the end of each retreat it feels like a waste of my time. Often it takes months, and I'm still seeing subtle changes, subtle ways I'm relating to life differently. I've never really understood why you just can't see that happening when you're in the middle of it.

You know what I'm asking? Why does it seem so normal, and why can't we tell in the middle of it what's going on? Why can't we be objective?

When you say you feel like you've wasted your time at the end of each retreat, but then you see changes later—does that mean you don't feel like you wasted your time once those changes appear?

No, it's just a feeling I have. I used to think it was counterproductive. But now I've progressed to the point where they just feel like a waste of time. I realize that's just the impression.

Right, clearly. Actually, in a way, in my mind you've answered your own question. Saying that you feel it's a waste of time is an impression you have. You know that's not actually how it is for you. That's sort of how it is on retreat.

We're not objective because we're not objective. We're identified. We are so in the middle of experience, whatever our particular experience is—even though that can change wildly from day to day—but we're so in the middle of it. And we're getting really inside, so delicate, so subtle in what we're experiencing that we're not relating to our experience as if from an outside reference point.

Because we're saying, quit comparing, quit thinking about what it was like six months ago and what it'll be like when you're back in daily life. Just be totally here in this experience. And so without that outer reference point, there isn't really anything to compare to. So yes, it feels like daily life. And in another way, you don't really have the tools here—and it wouldn't be so helpful anyway—to be trying to assess what's actually going on.

It's sort of like you're in a boat and you've been put out to sea, and you've lost sight of the shore, which is your daily life. And you haven't come to the other shore, which is back in your daily life. You're just at sea, and the little things that happen at sea are everything. There's nothing to bounce it off of, to see.

So, for example, when something happens and you get angry, you might get so furious. And if you could compare it to daily life—well, if that person cut across my walking path, would I be murderous? Probably not. But the experience is so vivid, so real, that we don't stop and make that comparison, which is fine. It's not necessarily helpful to make it. It's more useful to just go into the anger and be there. But we are losing touch with our daily life, our regular ways that we assess experience. And since everyone else here is doing the same thing, it seems really normal that we don't.

So, have a normal day. Tonight there will be a talk, but there won't be a talk tomorrow night. Not normal. Pretend today's tomorrow.

Are there any questions this morning? Quiet minds finally. This is it, the last moment, the peak moment of your whole retreat.

One thing I wanted to say, sort of as an adjunct to the talk last night: there's still quite a lot of time left in this retreat, but it might be a good point—just a feeling I've been getting sitting here and talking to people—to notice in a very gentle way if you've fallen into certain habits of how you're relating to your practice. Not routine necessarily—there's nothing wrong with a routine—but it can become a rut. And a rut can be comfortable even though it might be difficult.

You might have established a certain habit of how you're relating to practice that, for instance, might have felt like wise effort and now is really pushing. Or you might have had to back off a while ago, and now you're in a routine of being good to yourself but you're actually really spacing out.

Our mind so easily forgets that each moment is fresh and new. We think we've discovered the right balance and we don't have to look anymore. We don't like it that every single moment requires fresh presence and fresh looking.

I don't mean to make a big deal out of this, but it's something I've noticed in my own practice a lot. It's very easy to think I've got it figured out and be in some kind of a rut—hide in a rut, even though it's not a comfortable one.

So, please continue.

Questions about working with intention or noticing intention arose. Someone had set the intention to have a seamless day but had a terrible morning, and wondered if the intention was one of desire instead of a so-called good intention.

I think it's complicated. For one thing, intention is arising in almost every moment. So I could say, "I have the intention to have a seamless day." That could be arising as desire in that moment—an intention associated with desire. It could be an intention associated with resolution, which is skillful, or intention associated with aversion. That thought manifesting as intention could be associated with many different mental states. It might have been a skillful one or not. I can't know, not being there. It might have been associated with desire.

But even if it's extremely skillful, resolute—"I will have a seamless day"—that's arising in one mind moment. That intention, that single one alone, cannot control what happens in the day. It's like the next mind moment, that intention might not arise. An unpleasant sensation might arise. There's aversion. And there isn't really the intention, say, to notice it, and we get carried off.

So it's much more complex because so many intentions arise with every thought, every speech, every

action. We're not going to notice them all. And each of them can be associated with any of the mental states.

Not to be discouraged. Sometimes it sounds like—as in the story of the strength of the bodhisattva's intention last night—"I will someday be a Buddha." Well, that didn't happen that morning. It was eons and eons of so many lifetimes and so many ups and downs. That intention might have run like a thread, arising over and over again in all those lifetimes, along with fear and lust and hatred and generosity and all the other things.

Someone asked whether the intention had come and gone or whether it was continuous, making a thread.

It arose again. That intention could make it likely for a similar intention to arise in the next moment, and for another similar one to arise in a later moment. So it's the thread of conditionality, of cause and effect. It's not that same one intention, but the strength of it could make it arise again.

Just as the strength of our intention to be mindful here—that might give rise to mindfulness in the next moment, and then the next moment might be a total space-out. Suddenly we wake up again, mindful. Again there's the intention of mindfulness arising on the strength of it having been conditioned. But it's not the same one making it happen. It's happening over and over and over. One moment conditions the next.

So a clear intention like having a seamless day—that doesn't mean the day is going to automatically be seamless. But you might notice you're spacing out ten minutes later, half an hour later, and it would make it easier for the intention—"Right, I want to really be clear today"—to arise again, and to arise again later the next time you notice you're spacing out. Do you see what I mean? It's much more complicated than just "I have it and then it happens."

And when we don't notice or make a clear intention, then the intention for discouragement, the intention for restlessness arises. We don't notice it, and the next moment's more restless. Another intention with restlessness arises. The next moment's more restless, the next moment's more. We're not noticing it, but intentions are still arising and strengthening the ease with which that mental state arises again in another moment.

She's saying the mind and body seem to be separate in that two different things are actually happening. One, sometimes she feels physical expression of emotion, but there's actually no mental or emotional content. So it's physical experience, basically, with no emotional or mental trigger. And other times she's experiencing very strong, ugly thoughts, but no physical or even emotional manifestation. They just come and go like a flower.

I wouldn't say that the mind and body are disconnected. I mean, those are two very different experiences. And sometimes we can have emotion that expresses itself physically, and there is no story going with it. It's just what it is. We're so used to having a story that we want to make one up.

And I would even caution you. There are times I've experienced what I would call fear in the body. But when I really looked, it wasn't fear. There was no fear going on. It was just physical manifestation that had nothing actually to do with fear. And I was calling it fear out of old conditioning.

So I would look, if you can, when you have a strong physical manifestation that feels like anxiety. Really look and see if there's actually no anxiety there. It may be simply physical experience. It's not separate from mind because the knowing of that is *nāma*, is the mind. There's the knowing and there's the physical experience. They're not separated. But it's not always that there's an emotion and there's a feeling in the body and they have to happen together, or that every feeling means an emotion.

And similarly with thoughts. What you're experiencing is really just the fact that a thought arises and passes. It can be just like a balloon. It just comes and goes and the content makes no difference at all. You weren't identified with that thought. It just kind of—ah, that was really ugly. Ah, that was really beautiful. Gone. Nothing.

And again, at that moment, that isn't a physical experience. That's a mental experience. But it doesn't have to be that we grip on and have an identified emotional reaction to every thought that appears. In fact, it's beginning to see that thoughts arise, that sounds arise, that sensations arise, that smells arise. No difference. So that's quite common.

I'm just saying, don't assume. Don't assume that because you have a little quiver, it's anxiety. Really look.

We make so many assumptions from past conditioning. This is a great deal of what keeps us in our not seeing clearly, in our delusion. So I'm not saying it is or isn't anxiety, but really look. Don't assume. Don't assume it's anything. Be with the actual, bare experience without any interpretation. And just see what happens to it, how it behaves. Watch it come and go.

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