Question and Answer

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 42:16

So welcome to our lovely New England winters. It goes on like this for months and months. Any questions about your practice?

Anything I might say would be my own opinion and interpretation of what he's saying, which I don't think I should presume. I think he's being inspirational and speaking to what he sees as the need now for mutual support and growth in keeping the Buddha Dharma alive, and in continuing to deepen and find ways to bring Buddha Dharma into practice in our present-day world, in our present-day conditions.

Right now, at this moment, if we're waiting for a Buddha to come down the pipe in the next eon, we're kind of putting it off. And what we have to look to now—it does seem to me that if we're looking to one person, at least the way things are going in the West, looking to one teacher to exhibit perfection, we do have eons to wait.

It seems that more in the culture of Buddhism coming to the West, there's a growing sense of having to not pull back from teachers entirely—the sense of devotion to masters can really awaken our hearts—but the practice of giving over to a master all perfection keeps being blown apart. I don't even have to go into it, but you know what I mean. One master after another gets caught in some kind of scandal—sexual, money, power, whatever—and it's been continuing this fall. Not here, of course. But then we don't claim to be any kind of masters. Couldn't get away with that.

So this is totally my sense of what he's saying: use teachers, use great beings, but spread it out to appreciate and support one another as a sense of sangha. I mean, it's really amazing. Everybody here, a hundred people—really a hundred and twenty if you count the ones coming for the first six weeks—so devoted, in whatever form it takes in each of our minds, to awakening, to living a life of integrity, a life of harmlessness. It's powerful. That's what I think is going to help awaken the planet. And so that's my view of what he's saying. I could be completely off.

As for what's happening as Buddhism comes to the West and starts to grow, I have an opinion, though I don't like speaking first.

There are different aspects of Buddhism in Asia. There's Theravada Buddhism, which is basically what this practice comes from, and that's more Southeast Asian. Whereas Zen, say, is Japan, Korea, used to be China, and there's still some in China. So there are different facets. I certainly am more grounded in the Theravada tradition.

If you look at just the countries that were the real strongholds of Theravada: Sri Lanka is in the middle of

a civil war and really struggling. Thailand still has a lot of practice, as does Burma, but Burma is in an atrocious sort of civil war. Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam was a stronghold of Buddhism—it's sort of decaying, with politics taking over. In many ways it's not dead by any manner of means, but it certainly doesn't enjoy the flourishing support that it did quite some years ago.

So yes, it does seem like Buddhism is moving out of the Southeast Asian countries and more into the West, and of course changing as it does so. Because at least in those countries there's the support of the culture. For instance, in Thailand, if you say, "I'm trying to observe the five precepts in my daily life," that's more or less understood, respected, and supported. And here, if you say that kind of thing in a lot of situations—you go to a party and you say, "Well, I don't really drink, I'm observing the five precepts"—you're kind of looked down on sometimes. So there's not quite the same support here culturally, but maybe that's what Thich Nhat Hanh was talking about. We can help it grow. Opinion, opinion only.

As for the observation about Buddhism not really taking hold in certain regions, I certainly share that observation. At least, I know the Vipassana scene—I don't know Zen or Tibetan as well—but it certainly seems to me to be more than predominantly white middle class.

And so I can't speak from within the Black or Hispanic communities. That, I think, is actually part of the limitation—a group of white middle-class people brought at least the Theravada Vipassana over and started teaching it, and it seems to be emerging from within that particular culture. I don't know if it's partly about the leisure time that's necessary to devote to this practice. I can't speak from other cultures, so I can't say why it hasn't taken root there. I certainly share your observation. It's only a small pocket, and it hasn't spread throughout the country or taken root in all the different cultures. There are so many cultures in this country. So it's a severe limitation. I really agree. That's all I can say.

Question from a participant about studying continuously with one teacher in Theravada Buddhism in the States.

Continuously? Well, I know that Bhante Gunaratana has a small monastery retreat center in West Virginia called Bhavana Society, and I think he's there quite a good deal of the time. I know people who have gone and spent a year or so there, so that would be under his guidance to some extent. He travels also, but that would be one option.

In this little Vipassana world here at Spirit Rock, the teachers are pretty much on the move, and it's mostly discrete retreats or sitting groups. Lucila Nanda, again these are both monks, is in the Bay Area of California, but I don't believe he has any kind of retreat facility. If you don't want to stay at a retreat facility, you could live in Cambridge and practice at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center with Larry and Ryan on a day basis. There's lots of that kind of ongoing connection if you settle in a city where there's a sitting group—you could have continuous contact with a teacher. There's not a residential facility that I can think of other than Bhavana, and maybe Ajahn Sobin in Southern California.

The teacher then addresses the group.

Please sink into your practice. Seriously. You're not doing yourself any favors by thinking about all this stuff. There's nowhere to go. Please, we're still in silence. You're not doing yourself or anyone else any favors by talking. I really hope we don't have to say this every day for the next three weeks. Please really settle into the practice. You're here—really be here in this moment. It's the only moment. Anything we're thinking of a month from now is only a thought. It doesn't matter how powerful—it's only a thought. Really just be here now. That's all there is to do. And it's everything.

A participant asks about the separation between body, heart, and mind in how the teachings are presented, and whether this separation dissolves with deepening practice.

And with less deepening practice it doesn't exist either. It seems to be a distinction in your experience between the mind and the heart. I think in my experience too, and I think in a lot of us, there seems to be a distinction between the mind and the heart.

I think part of it is actually a linguistic distinction we make here in this country that's unnecessary. The word *citta* in Pali is used for both mind and heart. There's not like... and often mind is pointed to here. So I actually, well, I'm rooted in this culture, but I think we certainly exacerbate that sense of difference talking about the mind, the mind. When we talk about metta as the practice of the heart, okay, that's a way of speaking that I think can exaggerate that seeming distinction. It's a way of also bringing home the fact that many people talk about their practice, experiencing it all in their head and as if seeing it from the head. And we're a very head-oriented culture.

In my experience, though, it's true, as my practice goes on, I begin to experience everything as if it's arising from here, whether it's thoughts, sensations, whatever—that there actually isn't a distinction. And I remember one talk Sayadaw U Pandita gave, I don't know, sometime when I was sitting, where he actually talked about that, which surprised me because I didn't know if it was just my own weirdness, but actually he talked about how that's how it is, that everything arises from the heart, so to speak. It's not actually arising from the physical heart. It just seems that way.

But you can even begin looking now rather than thinking, "Oh, if my practice deepens, I'll see that distinction fall away." You can even notice many ways that we are creating, through the way we describe experience, through the way we perceive or interpret experience, that we're creating the sense of a distinction.

All I can say is it's true and it's difficult using language in a way that doesn't create dualism. Difficult. I find it impossible. Don't let yourself get hung up on words, whether it's words you're hearing from us or the way they're being interpreted through your own experience. When you notice you're having a hang-up and it seems to be around words, it's not worth getting caught in it. Really, it's true. Drop it and go to your own experience and see what's really going on.

The next question is about when he feels strong energy or so-called positive energy rising, and at some point he notices it changes to restlessness. Where before he didn't catch it until he was about to jump off the cushion, now he's catching it sooner, wondering if he's doing something wrong or if it's just happening or what.

It's a good question because it points to one of the ways that we work—I mentioned it briefly in my last talk—which is balancing the different factors of the seven factors of enlightenment. And one of the balances is between the tranquilizing factors and the energetic ones. One easy way to look at it, though it's not always this simple, is the balance between energy and concentration.

So often what happens as all the factors are building, as mindfulness increases, energy can get very strong. There comes a lot of energy in this practice. And often when we don't see what's happening, the tendency is to just let it build. If the energy gets really high and we don't quite notice, we're paying attention to the energy, but there are actually ways that we can work to bring up, to balance the energy with concentration, with calm, or with equanimity, rather than let the energy just keep building. If it builds too much without that balance, it does turn into restlessness.

So it's not like a right or wrong. It's just really to notice the way these mental factors are arising and how they work together. So for instance, when you can feel building energy, if you can, when you notice it, bring in mindfulness—really continue to note it, to be aware of it on a very steady, ongoing basis. And you can also bring in concentration. So for example, if there's strong energy and it's in a sitting, and it's not to restlessness yet but you see it sort of building, you could get a little bit one-pointed on the breath for a while—not to block out the energy, simply to bring in some concentration and calm, and then open up again. Or if you're doing the walking, you can get really absorbed in just feeling the bottom of the feet. This isn't a forcing. You're not trying to force the energy down.

You're using that energy in the service of balancing the practice—balancing mindfulness and concentration. So that's one way to work with it. And really, that's what all the instructions about restlessness are trying to accomplish. At this stage of retreat, when you're noticing the subtlety of energy coming up, you can bring in some one-pointed concentration or some equanimity. If you see there's energy and you're starting to become really reactive to whatever's happening, start really noticing pleasant and unpleasant, liking and disliking. That's one of the ways—not that it makes equanimity come automatically—but noticing the reaction, noticing the pleasant and unpleasant, tends to bring more of the spaciousness of equanimity into the mind.

One question that arose was whether acute awareness of pleasant and unpleasant is itself a sign of restlessness. Not necessarily. You could be very clearly aware of pleasant and unpleasant and be totally equanimous, or you could be acutely aware of subtleties and really what you're noticing is the reaction itself. Those are two different things. But even suspecting it might be restlessness suggests there's some to-ing and fro-ing around the pleasant and unpleasant, and you're noticing it on a more subtle level. It

doesn't have to be restlessness—in a way it is restlessness, but we're also starting to see what actually goes on, how subtle this pulling toward the pleasant and avoiding the unpleasant really is. It's extremely subtle. It's happening on levels far beyond just the huge, obvious desire and aversion. So it's really helpful to see it. When you start to feel like you're truly lost in the reactions, that's when we need to work with equanimity.

Another sign of restlessness isn't always physical. It's the mind jumping all over the place, or worrying—an agitated mind. That's another manifestation.

Someone shared that a few times during this retreat, she'd had hours of almost hysterical reaction to sensations, waking up the next morning thinking, "What was that?" You know, sensations become unpleasant and the mind really goes into aversion or fear. She felt almost embarrassed to say it. But you're not alone. Almost everyone, at some point on retreat, has times when they feel like they're going off the deep end. It's part of it. It's not a mistake. You could say it's an imbalance, but it's actually a necessary part of this process.

If you were just even, even, even all the time, you'd never truly get the suffering of attachment and aversion. You'd never understand how much we're gripped by wanting things to be the way we think they should be. If we could see it all neat and tidy, we'd never really get it. So for some reason, part of how this process works is that things become incredibly exaggerated. If you pull back the next day and look, it seems extreme. But in that moment, the forces you're gripped by—they're exaggerated in relationship to the particular experience. They're not really exaggerated in relationship to how they actually run our lives.

In a way, you're seeing it on a microscopic, exaggerated level. There is an imbalance for sure, and we're really identified and caught in those times when we feel like we're going over the edge. That it comes back to balance in a day or two—that's fine. If it goes on for a month, okay, something is out of balance and needs to be adjusted.

One student shared, "I cried for two hours about sensations I felt in my body and the awesomeness of life. And then the next morning I woke up and thought, God, they were just sensations."

I know. And you don't normally do that, right? That's why we come here, so you can have such an experience. There's also a kind of beauty to this—it's not always just difficult. In a way, we get so sensitive that sometimes we can be crying or seem imbalanced out of just an appreciation of the awesomeness of life. As you say, many of us don't often feel or experience life with that level of connection and vulnerability consciously in our daily lives.

It really is, in some ways, like peeling away layers of protection or confusion—or just not quite feeling or seeing through them when we're so busy and running around. So I don't think that's exactly yogi mind. It's part of the process, an important part of it. And sure, the next day you think, "Just sensations, what's the

big deal?" That's true from that vantage point. It is. But at the time it's happening, it's a valid, real experience.

So just be as present as you can within it. You don't have to say, "Hey, come on, this is just a sensation. What am I weeping about?" You don't have to do that. But just keep the balance. If you can stay somewhat mindful—know that you're crying, know the feeling of awesomeness, know the sensation, know if it's pleasant or not—just keep coming back. That's really all you need to do, and not worry about it.

Another student asked about the energizing factors—rapture, restlessness, excitement. She mentioned feeling a lot of energy arising, knowing it's near the end of the retreat, and then refined her question to ask more about rapture.

When we talk about the energizing factors, usually we refer to the helpful ones, which doesn't include restlessness and excitement. When we discuss the seven factors of enlightenment, the energizing ones are rapture, investigation, and effort—or energy itself. They're best understood, all three of them, when we realize that they're balanced with the calming ones: concentration, tranquility, and equanimity. And then mindfulness serves as the overarching balance for all of them.

What can feel like restlessness—an overabundance of energy—in gross terms can be physical, or it can manifest as that feeling where you just want to run around and talk to people and do things, this really high energy. Rather than seeing it as something to get rid of, when we've been in deep practice, we have the facility to bring up the calming factors to balance that, rather than just blowing it all out. That's a lot of what you all actually have the potential to explore and play with now.

One thing about this kind of high energy is that it turns into restlessness when we don't bring in mindfulness. Notice the energy. Turn the mindfulness into being present with feeling and noticing the energy, rather than saying, "Oh, this is uncomfortable, I have to do something about it." You can use concentration—not in a stifling way, but in a calm way. If in the sitting your mind's all over, just count the breaths, one to ten and start over. Or in the walking, just walk very aware of the sensation of the foot rather than trying to take in too much. That can sometimes bring in a little bit of one-pointedness, which can help balance the excitability.

Notice it, and know that it's contagious. It really is. We think we're these separate beings, but actually we're just not separate. We pick up each other's energy, and that's part of why coming to the end of a retreat—no matter how committed you might be, how deep in your practice—there's no way the mind doesn't start thinking, the body doesn't start picking up each other's energy. It's just the law of nature. But what we can do is not hate it, keep being mindful of it, keep balancing it.

Now, rapture per se is an energizing factor that can manifest in different ways.

And one way rapture manifests is just this really keen interest in what's going on. Not the kind of interest that we manufacture—"Let me get interested in the breath" in order to bring in some concentration—but

those times when the breath is just sparkly and you are simply drawn into it and it's so fascinating. Or excitement, or whatever's happening. This kind of real keen, deep interest—that's a manifestation of rapture. As are lots of weird physical manifestations that you wouldn't necessarily think of as being rapture.

Marjorie raised a question. The more she sees, the more she's struck by the split between her inner experience and her outer experience. Over time, there's no question she experiences the inner as something real—her eyes able to experience everything that happens, healing, life, everything. And then she opens her eyes and everything is the same old solid. She was curious why the inner doesn't translate to the outer. It doesn't seem to.

Yes, hopefully they will continue to come together. Her question is how the inner doesn't translate to the outer experience—meaning internally she can experience herself as being nothing but energy, impermanence seems clear, and when she opens her eyes, solid and normal again.

First of all, it can be different for different people. But I also experience that sight is in some way the most solid sense. I can just know there's nothing but energy, but the interpretation that goes along with my sight is really deeply ingrained.

But first I'd say that now it might seem like the inner doesn't translate to the outer. And certainly we need to function. If we went through life and all we saw was pulsating energy and we really couldn't bring it into form, it would be difficult. There are moments—I've had moments when it is like that on retreat, and I'm really glad I'm on retreat and don't have to function. That's, I think, one of the purposes of this intense so-called inner work.

And I say "so-called" because as we continue to practice, that functional division between inner and outer, which is helpful, we more and more begin to experience as a functional interpretation. Even if I open up and see things as solid, the experience that that's not how it is becomes more deeply understood—more cellular, you might say.

You're right, we've spent at least this lifetime so conditioned to see things as separate, to experience things as separate, that that conditioning springs up. It's a very strong habit. And even a few years of sitting and practicing and really deeply experiencing in a so-called inward way that it's nothing but energy, there's no solidity, there's no permanence, it's all connected—we open our eyes and it's solid. A few years of that isn't enough to make the whole conditioning we've had go away.

But it begins to become more permeable. You can see it's conditioning and don't necessarily believe it, but we can use it. And we can use our practice—the formal practice—because I don't think practice stops when we stop sitting or when we walk out of here. The experiences and the deep understanding, the visceral understandings that come over and over and over through the deep inner looking, do begin to permeate the way we live and the way we relate. You might not experience everything visually as that,

but the understanding of what's so is what begins to permeate. You'll see it really does start to change how we relate.

Another practitioner shared something along the same lines. Sometimes sitting here he feels very confused, doesn't know what's what. So he tries opening his eyes and there doesn't seem to be confusion. He shuts his eyes and there's total confusion. Opens them again and there's no confusion. He hasn't been able to figure it out—wondering if he's walking around confused all the time in his everyday life.

I don't know. All I can say is keep looking. In a question like that I certainly can't say. But when you're sitting with your eyes closed and noticing confusion, can you just note it and be with it, or do you open your eyes because you don't like it?

He said it takes him a while to realize that it's just confusion. Once he starts noticing it, it's clear it's confusion, but he's still feeling it. So he got curious—what happens if he opens his eyes? It was a way of exploring that.

It just wasn't clear to me what was going on between opening my eyes and shutting my eyes. That's why I was interested in your perspective.

I could make things up, but not knowing quite your experience, I wouldn't want to. I'd say, since it was confusion, of course you're not clear what's going on—that's the nature of confusion. My tendency would be, not to focus on what's happened, but to hang out with confusion more rather than trying to move out of it. Really keep exploring confusion until you get familiar with it. Then when you open your eyes, you can have it sort of in the back of your mind—okay, things seem solid, things seem clear—and just maintain an open sense of awareness and notice if there's confusion with that too.

Also, I know for me, that sense of the world springing into solidity that Marjorie was talking about with opening the eyes is a very strong experience. So it might be that that just gets so strong it takes you out of the confusion of not quite knowing what's what. I don't know if that's particularly helpful. It might be good to hang out with not knowing what's what.

When things are starting to dissolve?

Yes, different things. One is, again, with every experience—every sense experience, every mental experience—it's actually happening so quickly that it's not like I'm looking at you and it's one long solid experience. It's visual image arising, you know, 17 trillion times in a second. Just as internally with the eyes closed, as the mind gets more concentrated and more still, there are times when the perception is of things coming incredibly quickly—arising and passing, arising and passing. The same is true of the visual field. There are times when the mind is quite concentrated and still that visual experience can begin also to be coming and going. And there are also periods in practice when what is noticed is the dissolution of everything. It's just that way for a while. And that will include the visual as well. Everything just is dissolving.

Hopefully it will pass?

Yes. And until it does, don't drive down the freeway.

Please really appreciate this day. When we fully appreciate something, we don't hold onto it when it ends.

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