Mindfulness In Action

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:53

Sometimes when I'm just walking down here from our little house, being with the beauty and the expansiveness, the feeling is just so complete and wonderful and mysterious. I was just feeling that now, and I had to say it. It's so hard to come and speak a lot of words, as if somehow the words are trying to point to something that is so ineffable. Sometimes it seems like a real dichotomy.

What I want to speak about tonight is hopefully going to be of practical help in developing and noticing the expanded quality of awareness, of mindfulness. That's what's really important to us when we leave here—in our daily activities, when we're involved in the world of action, of choice, of decisions, of so much coming at us. One of the questions that comes up a lot is: how does this precision with the breath, this being in such quietness, transfer? How is it going to help us? Of course it helps us, but it's not the whole picture.

There are some corollary aspects to mindfulness that we've been alluding to. This isn't going to be new information, but I want to bring it out more clearly because it helps to give conscious attention to these areas in our daily life. In fact, it's what makes this practice really deepen and begin to extend as tendrils throughout all of our activities.

As is fortunate in Theravada Buddhism, everything is broken down into lists and nice, convenient ways of talking about it. It's actually very helpful for remembering because it was an oral tradition for five hundred years, so it seems like that was a helpful way for people to remember.

The corollary to mindfulness—which is bare attention, this nonviolent, open, accepting, clear attention—and concentration, which is that steadiness of mind that connects, the corollary to mindfulness is what usually translates as clear comprehension. Mostly, when the Buddha talks about mindfulness, he would always talk about mindfulness and clear comprehension together.

Clear comprehension, in the various ways I'll point to it, is basically about expanding out of the microscopic experience—not abandoning that, but expanding out of it to the whole context within which we are speaking, acting, being, relating. At first, it doesn't always feel like mindfulness because we're used to that microscopic concentrated form. When you leave here, one thing we don't guarantee much, but one thing I can guarantee is that over time, that microscopic clarity and concentration will go. That's one of the few things we can guarantee. So if that's what we're thinking of as what mindfulness is, and the only way for wisdom to arise in our life, then we're going to be really frustrated and disappointed. It's an important piece, but it's not the whole piece. Even so, we never abandon this piece of the clear seeing, the mindfulness.

The first aspect of this clear comprehension, coming into the world of action, of speech, of choices—and this we've spoken of, but I want to highlight it—is beginning to pay very conscious attention to the experience of our intentions in our speech, in our action. I can't express enough how vital to transformation awareness of intentions can be. It's absolutely crucial. It can change the whole way we relate to our lives.

As Joseph has said often, intention is the seed through which an action has the karmic results for ourselves of being either wholesome—leading to freedom from suffering, to happiness, to peace—or unwholesome, bringing more suffering on ourselves.

But there's a paradox when we talk about this and look at the way we've been practicing here on retreat, where we say: sit or walk, be fully present with whatever arises—wholesome, unwholesome, love, mindfulness, rage, murderous rage, self-hatred, anxiety, fear, joy—they're all the same. Be with them, open to them, don't try to change them. Watch every thought come and go. No thought is more important than any other.

It's pretty natural out of this for questions to arise: well, how do you act? How do you make any choice? What about social activism? What about affecting change in the world if this is the attitude we bring to every experience?

On one side, that's the attitude of wisdom. As Joseph said last night, there are the two sides: wisdom and compassion. That's the wisdom of really seeing the emptiness of things. Where these arising states of mind, especially mental states, do make a huge difference—where they do start to matter—is when a mental state, a mental factor is arising that brings about and informs an intention to speak or act. A thought of anger can come and go. Or a thought of anger can come and give rise to the intention: I'm really going to let that so-and-so have it.

And you can say it, and then you can actually go and do it. So that's more than a passing thought. It's turned into an action. It's become the intention for an action that could bring suffering both to ourselves and another person.

So we have this paradox: nothing matters, and every intention that arises in our heart and mind matters totally in that moment.

There's a saying I find beautiful from Padmasambhava, who is the founder of Tibetan Buddhism, you could say. He expresses this paradox: "Though my view is as spacious as the sky, my actions and my respect for cause and effect are as fine as grains of barley flour."

How do we hold both of those? A view as spacious as the sky—non-judging, non-grasping, non-clinging—and at the same time, such attention, such respect for the intentions leading to action, and such respect for the consequences of acting from either wholesome or unwholesome motivations.

If we didn't have the spacious view, it would be easy to get either incredibly judgmental with ourselves when our intentions aren't so hot, or to fall into a kind of fear of hell—you know, if I did too many bad things, I'm going to go to hell. If you read some of the Tibetan texts, they talk very graphically in those terms. But it doesn't have to be this kind of dread or panic. Rather, it's a real respect that if we act in ways that come from anger, from fear, from hatred, from greed, from delusion, somewhere those results are going to manifest in our own heart and mind, if not outwardly.

And so this willingness, this ability, this interest to bring mindfulness to intention—this is the crucial point where we actually have a choice, where we can affect change in the way we are in the world, in our actions, and in the way we relate to ourselves and other beings. It's the moment of choice. It's the moment of potential transformation.

Without awareness of intention, it can seem that we're just acting habitually, reactively, out of control. If I have a temper and certain things make me angry, it just comes up, I say the thing, I feel bad later, and I keep repeating that cycle over and over. There's no freedom in that. There's no transformation in that. I feel bad later, tell myself I won't do it again. But when the next time happens, without mindfulness, there's no choice, no sense of being able not to do it again.

When there's that moment of noticing the intention, there's a moment of seeing: Ah, that's not so helpful. That would lead to suffering. Maybe I won't do it.

This is called mindfulness wisdom, *satipaññā*. The mindfulness with which we can notice our motivation, and the wisdom that tells us this might lead to suffering for myself and others. It can just be an intuitive sense—it doesn't have to go into words like that. Maybe it's not such a good idea. Maybe I'll just zipper my mouth and walk out the door before something else comes out of it.

Now, as we've noticed, we gave the instruction to pay attention to intention the other day. And as some people have said, "Forget it, I haven't even noticed that." It's very subtle at times—that sense of just about to. But often, and in daily life you might notice it more this way, intention can manifest as thought. Like what I just said: "I'm going to really let that so-and-so have it." It's a thought, but it's the manifestation of an intention of anger or vengeance or rage. We can use the content of those thoughts to give us a clue about the intention, because the intention actually informs that thought.

If we don't notice the intention, it'll rise again more strongly and lead to speech. And an even stronger intention leads to action.

So we practice having that moment of choice. The mindfulness practice we do here might seem a little like a mindfulness exercise. You itch, you notice the intention, you tell yourself don't lift your arm—and the next thing you know, you're scratching it. You don't know how that happened. Another time you notice the intention, tell yourself don't lift your arm, and then you catch it, as Fred said, halfway up.

That's huge. That's huge, because that moment of catching is the moment of potential for mindfulness

wisdom to come in, for us to have a choice.

I hope this leads to understanding why, when we're faced with action, when we're faced with a difficult situation—and of course it's more complicated with difficult situations—but when we have to act, why is it important to be present? Because if we're not present, we might act quite easily, and it might be that the actions are effective in the outer world, getting the result we think we want. But the reactions might actually be increasing pain to ourselves.

I might be getting in big trouble bringing this up as an example, but what if you had a toxic waste dump in your backyard and it was going to hurt your child?

And that's a real situation. Mindfulness doesn't mean we sit and be aware of our feelings, aware that things came about due to causes, acknowledge it's not personal, and conclude there's nothing to do. So what if it hurts our child? It hurts it, but that's what's happening. No—it doesn't stop there.

Mindfulness gives us the opportunity to sit, notice the whole situation, and also notice the emotions that arise in us, the intentions to act that emerge from it. And we can see: there might be what seems like a very good course of action. Perhaps we would move, perhaps we could go and really give hell to the people who created the toxic waste dump, perhaps we can motivate a whole big cause to clean it up—whatever. But if we can keep paying attention also to our own emotions and intentions, we might do the same action in vastly different ways.

We could do what seems like it would effect change out of rage, panic, vengefulness. We might go to the people responsible for the dump and just blast them, hate them, or try to change them out of a really strong will. And first of all, we'd probably be met with a similar kind of energy. But even without that, acting from such deep anger or panic or fear is really harming ourselves. It's like bringing in such a darkness. It's making it easier for us to act from anger, to act from hatred, to act from fear in the future—even if it seems to get helpful results.

Being aware of the intention doesn't mean we don't have to act. But sometimes we can just sit and be with the anger, be with what's happening, and give it time. We can use the wisdom to see if we can find a way to consciously connect with the humanity—as much as Joseph mentioned in his talk last night—to not just act from our immediate reactions, but to find a way underneath. To act from more serenity, from more calm. To find some sense of common humanity with the people we're needing to work with, and see if we can work from a different motivation.

I'm not saying it's easy. And these things are incredibly complex. I'm not trying to say it's simple. But these moments of paying attention—only if we're present do we have the opportunity to act from the wisdom that grows from mindfulness. And to act from a different intention transforms our lives. It's what purifies our conduct. It's what purifies our mind. It's what really—and I'm only speaking for myself now—one of the main aspirations of meditation practice: to really transform myself from a person who tends to act

from greed, from hatred, from delusion, to someone who acts with much more awareness, with connection, with compassion. That's the place I have to start before I feel like I can expect that from anybody else in the world.

And we do have a choice—much more than we think. Different intentions may arise, but when we have that awareness and the willingness to look, we do have a choice of how we act. It's quite amazing how much choice we have. Again, I'm not saying it's easy. And sometimes I'll deliberately pick situations to explore that: to see if I can take really decisive, effective action without coming from the habits of rage or the habits of anger. Personally, I find that very difficult.

A couple of years ago, I signed up for a self-defense course for women called Model Mugging. Extremely intense. I know—I can tell you the reasons why, but when I look back now I can't believe I did it. It's set up in five or six sessions, each five or six hours long, deliberately so that it's really intense. It's really meant to push you to the limits of your capacity in whatever way. It's called Model Mugging because they have these guys all dressed up like they're the muggers, with padding all over them—giant padded helmets, padding everywhere. Because what you're taught to do is specific moves: kicking, gouging, all of this. I know, it's intense. But you have to do it at full strength. That's why these guys are so padded—so that you actually have to pull out of yourself the energy it would require to repel an attack.

The reason I consciously told myself to do it—this might seem really bizarre—was that I noticed fear of violence would come up in situations where it was completely uncalled for, just from my conditioning as a woman. I don't even have a history of violence, and I still have this fear that's very ingrained. I would notice that this fear would actually get in the way of my feeling connection and compassion with other people. Walking in the city, I'd see a homeless man and the fear would come up and block my sense of common humanity, my willingness to go over and meet him. I really didn't like that. I wanted to do something to change it. So I chose this course.

I really went into it trying to see if I could find the place of acting very fully without coming from rage or fear. I'm not saying I found that, but it was a very interesting exercise. And I found out later, talking to a friend who did the same course in another state, that the teachers I had actually weren't so skillful because they didn't emphasize that. For my friend, they really emphasized finding that place—when the attacker would come and you'd have certain things you're supposed to do, but they might break out of the script.

So it wasn't really always just scripted, and you had to respond spontaneously. In her class, they really emphasized finding—not coming from terror or anger, not immediately just flailing—but really finding the still place inside that wasn't affected by that terror or anger. Just being patient and watchful, and then responding like a coil spring. The energy comes out and you respond, but it's not hatred or anger. It's just what you need to do to defend yourself. You stop as soon as that's done. You don't keep wailing on the guy. You stop and go call the police. That's how they teach it.

Mine, on the other hand—you get in a circle at the first class and the teacher says, "All right, let's go kick ass." I thought, "Oh, I don't know if I'm in the right place here."

It was an interesting experience. I still think it's possible. I found once in a while, because I wouldn't really get angry—I didn't have that—but I would sometimes get afraid. And I would find that action would come out quite spontaneously. I'm not sure I found the place of real clear decisive action in the face of something that's clearly inappropriate and wrong without it coming from anger. I certainly never felt compassionate toward the guys, I have to say that. But I still believe it's possible, and finding ways in our life to activate that—not just assuming it's too much and we can't do it.

At any rate, in any particular situation when we're confronted with choices and decisions, learning how to tune into intention, noticing how it manifests in you, knowing that it often won't be obvious. Sitting here and there's the intention to scratch an itch—that's sort of obvious, although we often don't even actually notice what's fueling that intention, whether it's desire, whether it's aversion, whether it's restlessness. But it's not a huge big deal.

In life, however, there could be layers of subtlety of intention. For example, at work someone asks you to take on another responsibility even though you feel overloaded, and you agree. Do we notice what the intention is behind it? It could be many things. It could be a real willingness, a real dedication to the bigger picture. It could be total codependence and trying to take care of everyone else, even if you burn out in the process. It could be fear of what people would think, or protecting our self-image, or trying to be the perfect person in all ways. It could be a lot of things.

Some of those intentions won't be conscious to us at first. If we have tendencies of personality or mind that we haven't quite let come up into the light yet, we might not notice them. And so that's what the more clear mindfulness practice is about. Working with intention takes a lot of clarity, but also a lot of honesty. It's not about trying to make ourselves look good to ourselves. It's not about pretending I'm acting from compassion when I really wish this person would drop through a hole in the ground. It's about being really honest and not judging that.

This is where we go back to the spaciousness of awareness. If I want to be compassionate but really I hate this person's guts, it's to be really honest about that without any judgment. And in that honesty, that's the place where we can see the painful, unwholesome mental state. Be with it. Allow it. Don't try to change it, but not act on it. Eventually it will move off and something more profound can take its place.

In our daily life, the one other aspect of intention that I want to touch on—picking up on what Joseph spoke about last night—is intention in the macro aspect. You could call it our aspiration, a sense of our deepest, most heartfelt purpose in this life. This is also spoken of as a real beacon, a real guiding light.

When we need to make choices, we might be aware of our more immediate intention, but sometimes the intention could seem fine and we still have choices. How do we make them? Should I live in California?

Should I live in Barre? Should I take this meditation course or not? Should I do this or that?

They both seem fine. Neither one's bad. Neither one's particularly harmful. Having a really clear, heartfelt sense of what our highest aspiration is can guide us through such moments. Joseph mentioned last night the bodhicitta as an aspiration—a sense of real deep commitment to awaken for the benefit of all beings. That might be an aspiration that deeply motivates us as we meet situations in our life. That might not be your aspiration. It's not that there's any one aspiration that it's supposed to be.

But what I've found has been deeply personal in the last few years: the honest tuning into my highest aspiration and really bringing it consciously into awareness, clarifying it, even verbalizing it, truly acknowledging it to myself—and not just once, but when faced with decisions—has been an enormously powerful change of motivation and actually an aspect of transformation in how I live my life, in the choices I make. It's merely bringing that intention to light, that aspiration, and honoring it. That in itself can have a powerful transforming effect, even without knowing how.

In my own experience and in talking with other people, I find often it's something we think we know—what our aspiration is—but we haven't really been quite so conscious about it, haven't quite embraced it quite so fully, honored it really, and honored ourselves by honoring that aspiration.

Another thing that people often say, and I felt myself when this first came into my consciousness: it just kind of arose from nowhere. It's like, "Oh, that's really a powerful aspiration. Who am I to think that I could live up to that?" You know, just a piece of dirt or whatever. But it's easy for that doubt to arise.

The one that first arose—and it might change as our understanding of ourselves and life changes over the years—but what first arose in my mind on a retreat was a deep sense, and it came up in words and surprised me, as though: "I want to serve the truth, the Dharma, in whatever way that needs to happen in my life." And I thought, "Oh." A real, almost a sense of shame came over me. It was really interesting—almost a shame to acknowledge that—and then all the worthlessness and all the feelings of "that's too high an aspiration for someone like you to have."

Now, if anyone else would say that was their experience, of course you'd say, "That's silly. Of course that's beautiful. Anyone can have whatever aspiration." But just to notice: there might be this kind of backlighting of our tendencies. Don't let it get in the way. Really bringing this aspiration up and then using it as a conscious reference point when confronted with confusing or difficult decisions—I found it's been amazing, really fascinating, and powerful in a way that I don't understand, sort of beyond reasoning. The honoring, the acknowledging of the intention, the aspiration itself seemed to begin to change things without my consciously trying to do anything.

So, just as a personal example again: soon after that aspiration came, I acknowledged it. I had no idea what that meant or what I should do, and I didn't try to figure it out or change anything. I was working as a manager then at our retreat center, IMS in Barre. It must have been '83, '84, I don't know. Fine, I just

went back to my work, which I also felt was serving the Dharma, helping this retreat center run.

Sometime later, maybe only a couple of months—and I had no sense of wanting to teach at all. It's not sort of... let's put it this way: it's harder than not teaching. A couple of months after that, there was a weekend retreat happening in Vancouver, the other side of the country, and the teacher who was going to teach got really sick and couldn't do it. Everyone else was busy. A couple of other teachers, good friends of mine, decided I should do it, which I thought was not a good idea in any way, shape, or form. And I said no.

And these people—one of them was Sharon, actually—she's not usually pushing. She's usually, "Okay, you don't want to do it, fine." But she wouldn't stop. She wouldn't let up. She kept pushing and talking to me and telling me what to do. Another friend would call me up in California like forty-five minutes a day trying to talk me into it. So they wouldn't let me be. I kept saying, "No, no, no."

And then finally, it kind of arose in my mind: "Didn't you just acknowledge this aspiration a couple of months ago? And that it didn't matter what form it took—you were just willing to do whatever was needed?" It was kind of like Fred this morning. It was kind of like, "Oh yeah... oh yeah, I remember that. Oh yeah." And as soon as that came into my awareness, there was no choice anymore. It was obvious.

It's not that it makes the doing of it easier. Often, when I'm aware of really feeling in tune with my highest aspiration, it's sometimes the harder choice. But the attitude with which you meet the choice is totally different.

I was like a basket case going to do this retreat. It didn't make it all calm and easy. I remember hoping the car would crash on the way to the retreat—but only I would get hurt, not the guy driving—you know, stuff like that. But the attitude is really okay. This is my practice: the fear, the pain, the self-image, all this stuff. This is my practice to be with. And whatever comes up, it's whatever needs to happen. If somehow this is going to serve the truth and also help me awaken to freedom, then it's what has to happen. And it gives such a resolution, a strength of purpose and clarity to go through whatever little blips life happens to send to us.

That's just my little personal example. But what I found is it's not like that just happened once; I continue reconnecting in a really heartfelt way with what my aspiration is, really reaffirming, reconnecting. It's not just a thought, but a whole experiential dropping into what is really true, what is really most profound for me, and not being afraid of that. And it's okay if it changes too—that's how it does, you know, shift over the years. But it's a wonderful reference point for resolution, and it gives such conviction and strength to do things we would never have thought possible, because it was in service of an aspiration or a truth that is much greater than ourselves. It takes us out of personal self-referencing. It takes us out of the comfort zone for sure.

One of my little sayings I say when I find myself in this choice again is: "Do I want to be comfortable, or do I want to be free?" And as soon as that comes up—oh, yeah.

So that's something that's been really helpful to me. And again, working with intention, whether it's in the service of our highest aspiration or even just wanting to be as wholesome as possible in our day-to-day life when it doesn't seem to have a big effect—it's important to have the spaciousness to know that we're not going to always be totally right on with either wholesome intentions or totally right on target with something we do in service of our higher aspiration.

I want to share that because I spent years beating myself up every time I did something I didn't consider dharmic. If I watched some stupid show on TV for half an hour, I'd go, "Oh, half an hour! I should have been meditating. I should have been reading the Dharma. I should have been helping beings or something. Instead I watched MASH for the 55th time." Really, it was a lot of suffering, because I'd sort of do more of the thing I was dreading. It's just like here in practice: when you hate something that's happening in your mind, it keeps coming back. So I'd watch more TV because I hated the way I was feeling about watching TV. It makes a lot of sense.

Have some spaciousness. Have some kindness with yourselves and know that we're going to deviate. It's okay. Partly because there's not always awareness of our intentions, partly because the intentions are so complex, like the example I gave of taking on more stuff at work.

I used to have the impression when I'd go home to visit my parents—we have quite a good relationship—I'm really going home to really be there for them, to really spend time together. Consciously, that was my intention. That's really in line with my highest aspiration. And I'd get there, and within two nights, I'm off by myself. I'm reading. I'm watching videos. I'm doing whatever. They're there in the other room doing crossword puzzles. We're hardly speaking. And it's not angry—we're just separate. And I really did this for years. I'd go to bed, and as I'd go to bed, I'd just be filled with self-recrimination for about twenty minutes.

You know, you're selfish. You're a jerk. You come down to be with them. They want to be here with you. Then I'd go to bed. Then I'd wake up, and the next day would be just the same. Then I'd go to bed filled with self-recrimination again. I couldn't understand what wasn't matching.

And it's partly this: when we have an aspiration and we're trying to force our outer activity to match it, but there's not really either a deep seeing of what's going on in us or an acceptance of it.

So when I finally quit hating myself and just paid attention—when I was watching the video, when I was reading, when I decided to get up and leave the room with my parents—first, I could see that partly I was coming down exhausted. I had really been around people continually, and I needed some space of peace and quiet, which actually my family was giving me. They were fine that I needed that. They were offering me a gift. So I began to take that gift more and not hate myself for it.

And then, when there wasn't that tension, I found quite naturally I would turn off the video or the book and go in and sit down and chat. Because there wasn't that tension anymore. I had accepted my other

intentions, and then we finally begin to harmonize much more organically with what we hold as our highest aspirations.

This sense of spaciousness, bringing it all up into the light, not just trying to meet some ideal we've made up—that will never work. We've got to include all of ourselves. And then we can harmonize much more naturally. And we must be willing to bring some consciousness into that process.

I want to share from someone who inspires me greatly. Her name is Sister Phương, or Sister Chân Không. She's the woman who works with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Master who was mentioned before. She has been working with him since the sixties in Vietnam, so she was also very active during the Vietnam War, simply trying to help people who were suffering from the war without taking sides, watching friends get killed, herself being thrown in jail, seeing more pain and suffering than I could ever imagine. And that was only in the sixties. She was also kicked out of Vietnam, couldn't go back because she'd probably be thrown in jail. But she's completely devoted to a life of freedom and compassion through her practice, and also one of activism—helping those who are suffering, being actively engaged in working with Vietnamese refugees, working with people in prison in Vietnam.

Having met her, I can say she's one of the most dynamic, energetic people I know. In the time I could think, "Wouldn't it be nice to do such and such," she would have done fifteen things. And there's no hierarchy in her service. She'll either spray out somebody's cabin that has spiders, or be packing boxes of medicine to send to Vietnam, or be collecting money for Vietnamese orphans, or getting up and giving a Dharma talk.

But here's what inspires me: after all these years of deep commitment to her understanding and to activism, it still doesn't come automatically that, faced with a difficult situation, she naturally responds with compassion. What inspires me is her patience and her commitment to work with this consciously.

This is a paragraph from her autobiography. She's talking about the present day, where she's working with news of arrests in Vietnam—monks, artists, nuns, people being thrown in jail. She tries to go through whatever channel she might have access to, any figure in power there, to see if she can get them out of jail:

"Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry, and I knew that I had to do walking meditation. 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."

And she goes on to describe some of the changes she's managed to affect. So it's not easy, it's not simple. But if we can have a commitment to what's truly important for each one of us, that can bring the

resolution and the patience to truly act in as appropriate and wholesome a way as possible—ways we might not think we could, just from sitting casually where we are.

So that's working with intentions. The second aspect of this broadening—broadening the field of mindfulness, broadening the field of awareness—is really a sense of spatial broadening. Classically, it's called working with skillful means, the clear comprehension of suitability, of what's appropriate in any situation.

What it means is this: when we're making a decision, choosing an action, we're not only looking at our own intention and its wholesomeness, but we have to locate ourselves and the situation in the context of the whole. It's really broadening mindfulness from the microscopic—how do the sensations feel when I lift my foot—to being aware that we are part of a whole situation. We can't really take ourselves separately.

Sometimes on a meditation retreat such as this, where we're really learning to develop focus, we lose sight of this aspect of clear comprehension of the whole situation. So you find people moving incredibly slowly through the doorway with forty people behind them. We run into this in the three-month course a lot—someone's just going so slowly in the food line. You just want to wake them up.

This is not where our practice is leading us. We're tuning into the whole situation and seeing that what's appropriate, totally appropriate in one situation, could be really not so appropriate at all in another situation. And so we have to bring in a real flexibility, a real adaptability. And again, this brings in wisdom. It brings in mindfulness wisdom, satipaññā—mindfulness to notice what we're doing and the wisdom to see what's appropriate in the broader situation.

This highlights the wisdom of impermanence—that what's appropriate in one situation is going to be different in another situation. For example, what we played with on retreat here, talking about balanced effort: at one point your effort, the energy, might be balanced and calm. It's the morning, and there's something difficult going on, and you can just sit and go right into it. There's a calmness and you're present, and it's fine. It may not be great, but it's fine. You can be with it.

Later in the afternoon, it seems that the same painful experience is arising. You try to do the same thing, but you forget to notice that the internal conditions are totally different. The energy is really low. There's a kind of restless, distracted mind. Aversion is coming up very easily. And instead of noticing that things are impermanent, that everything is a result of cause and effect, and that the situation is different now from in the morning, calling for a different response—instead of seeing all that, we just barrel ahead. Both responses could have been undertaken with a really clear, wholesome intention. But if we don't see the bigger picture, our wholesome intention is going to be misguided because there's not the wisdom of seeing what's appropriate.

So that's a lot of what we're trying to bring out in working with skillful means in meditation. Of course, it's exactly the same in our life—seeing impermanence, seeing how we're affected by so many different

causes.

One that's really interesting to me, something I've noticed a lot on retreats, is the weather. Not just the obvious—it's cold and I don't like it, or it's hot and I like it or don't like it—but very often when there's a shift in weather patterns on a retreat, like when the barometer drops as a storm's coming, there's a kind of buildup and it affects people's mental states. You just see in person after person over a day or so that there starts to be this kind of anxiety, a kind of pressure building up. And it's so rare that someone actually doesn't take it completely personally. They're finding a story to explain it, and you're saying, "Well, you know, it could just be the weather." And they say, "The weather? Are you telling me that I'm all upset, that I have this fear and this anxiety because of the weather?" We're so easy to think of ourselves as isolated and not really look at the whole picture.

When it was cold here the first couple of days—when I'm cold now, I really notice the kind of, it feels as if the cellular structure of my body changes. I'm sure that's not so, but there's a tightness, there's a resistance. I'm much more aversive. New experiences are not met with an open heart. And as soon as the sun comes out and it's warm, everything's wonderful. Whatever comes up, I'm really ready to be with. I can't really take credit for either one of those. It's just a cause and effect response.

Once I was on a retreat, an Upandita retreat. Upandita retreats give really good stories because they're so intense and you really notice any variation. About a month in—and one of the ways of practice there is to move very, very slowly, like that person in the food line, noting every sensation, every emotion, you're just really there—so it was about a month in and I was doing walking meditation in my hallway. Very slow. It was in Barre in the summer. It was very humid, and it was building up to a thunderstorm. The humidity was hanging in the air so heavily. I felt like I was walking through molasses. I could hardly lift my foot. And the insects, the birds were really still. There was just this pregnancy, this heaviness. You could hardly move. And just silence throughout the building.

And then the thunderstorm let loose, one of these all-at-once torrents of rain, from heaviness to total rain in one second. And so much energy was released, I felt like dancing down the hall.

And I would have thought it was just me, except that right at that moment I felt that change – it's a hallway with a door on either end – at each end the door just flew open, slammed open, and two different yogis, who both the last I'd seen them had been moving as slowly as I, came running down both sides of the hall. I don't know what they were doing. They kind of tore through the hall and out the other door. I thought, what? What's going on? And it was so clear. None of this is personal. We're affected by so many different conditions.

Just to begin to expand our view of cause and effect, of interrelatedness, of situation – to see that. And then we can make our choices, our decisions, a little more intentionally based on what's going on.

In speech, which is a huge area of mindfulness – wise speech, and finding the intention before we speak –

I find that really tricky. But in a bigger sense, the Buddha gave the guideline for wise speech of saying what is true and what is useful, so that what is useful is tuning into the clear comprehensions. And also, I would add, finding the appropriate time. I've learned if I want to have a real heart-to-heart relationship talk or do some processing, eleven o'clock at night is really not a good time to initiate that particular occurrence. I learned this years ago, unfortunately, from many experiences. Sometimes we dance and it takes a long time. But really seeing what's appropriate – when to say something to someone when they're receptive enough to hear it, and not when I think they should hear it. And then again, looking at what's my intention. Is it coming from a sense of wanting to be useful? Is it coming from some subtle sense of wanting to get even or wanting to prove I'm right? Just really looking at all of that.

Taking in the wider circumstances doesn't deny using our really skillful mindfulness to come into experience and intention, but it means for sure remembering to widen. Not like a friend of mine who was having acupuncture and, you know, they burn moxa on you and burn it down. The way this practitioner does it, you burn it down until you just feel it burning and then you say, and he takes it off so it doesn't really burn you. My friend was lying there, noting to himself, "burning, burning, burning," but forgot to say anything. And so he really burned himself quite badly because he forgot to just speak. That's mindfulness without clear comprehension. That's not what we want to do.

Clear comprehension of the bigger situation – our interdependence, our interrelatedness, the fact that all the conditions change. You'll notice that now in retreat as we're coming to the last day of practice. I wonder if there's anyone who hasn't noticed a shift in the content of your thoughts, in the kinds of emotions that come up, in the way you relate to each other, to particular experience. I've never known a retreat where that didn't happen. I think it must be almost impossible because the conditions are slightly changing. It's not that you're losing your practice, just the conditions are changing, and then we catch it from each other.

The last area I want to mention, and skillful means brings us to it, is one that people mostly think to ask about. It's called the domain of meditation, but it really means: how do we make the meditation our life, or how do we make our life our practice? If you think of meditation not just as the sitting and walking formally here, but as the attitude of investigation and the attitude of willingness to be present, how can we bring that more fully into our life?

The two things I've been saying before have a lot to do with this – widening the scope and looking at intentions. Thich Nhat Hanh said we have walls in our mind which separate our practice time from our non-practice time. When we're practicing, we practice intensively. When we're not practicing, we practice not practicing intensively. So the trick is how to break down those walls, which are self-created. It's really an attitude.

In my mind, the question I ask is: What am I considering as somehow outside of my practice? What is either too difficult to pay attention to or too familiar to pay attention to or too boring? What part of my life

do I let just run on habits? Really question this with yourself. When you go home, really see – is it taking a shower in the morning? Is it all day at work? Is it when we get in a really difficult situation and if I were to pay attention, I'd have to really acknowledge my anger and I'd rather just spit it out?

I see this a lot being with friends who practice and who can really call you on things when you're starting to get really identified. If I'm really getting identified with a point of view and anger is starting to come up, and that person can say, "Hmm, why don't you try being mindful of anger?" – I can tell if it's at that moment outside of what I want to consider practice by whether I want to strangle them or whether I'm willing to come back.

Sometimes that's the worst thing you can say to somebody when they're really caught up. "Don't you think you could be mindful of that?" Find a more skillful way. But help them, because that's what sangha is about—helping each other to wake up, not just colluding in our falling asleep, in our unwholesome patterns. That's not helping us, and it's not helping them.

Our challenge is: Where are we falling asleep? Where do we not think it's worthwhile to pay attention? And again, it doesn't mean that we can only pay attention if we're really concentrated, if the mindfulness has this sparkly, precise, microscopic quality, because a lot of times it won't. But the trick to waking up doesn't take time, and it doesn't take having all these clear qualities of mind. It simply takes remembering. Sometimes this has been called the practice of remembrance, because all we have to do is remember—oh yes, turn my attention around and come back to see what's going on with me.

If I'm sitting in a meeting, for example, paying attention to what's being said, feeling attentive, and I have a kind of generalized sense of being tuned into the whole situation—which includes me. The whole situation isn't everybody else with me somehow shut out of it. The whole situation includes me. And I can be very attentive. I'll notice, even though I'm not microscopically aware, if a feeling of anxiety arises, or a sense of anger, or somehow I just freeze or tighten up. I'll notice that that's happening.

The remembering doesn't take time. It just takes turning my attention inward and feeling that, rather than acting blindly from it. Just feel the anger. Notice it. Feel it in the body. Maybe that means I don't say anything for a minute and let other people talk. But even that can give enough space around it that I can then say something or do what I need to do with more freedom. Maybe it's almost as if here's the anger, and I sort of step over here and then act. That's how it feels to me. It's not denying it, but it's giving us again the space of choice.

When you notice something clutching or grasping in your experience, rather than resisting it, use it as a wake-up call. Turn the attention around. Pay attention. Be present.

You can find all kinds of skillful means for waking up. Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about a mindfulness bell—they'll ring the bell every hour, you stop and breathe three times, just come out of the craziness and be present. You can use the telephone, a clock that rings, a beeper watch, ambulance sirens. We can find

all kinds of ways to remind ourselves to wake up, to just pay attention. It isn't difficult. It's just the willingness, the commitment.

Sitting every day can really set a tone. It's not that the sitting is going to be so fantastic necessarily, but it makes it easier to remember, to come back. And whatever we're doing, we can simply feel the breath. In the middle of the tenth phone call, getting more and more frantic—just stop. Feel your hand on the phone. Take three breaths. You're present. That can make a huge difference. You can do that many times in a day. It doesn't get in the way of the day. And it totally changes how we relate. We begin to find the awareness of presence in our life easily expanding outward.

You can do this with children. Thich Nhat Hanh talks a lot about this—having the place where you sit or go with the kids as a kind of breathing room.

When you're upset, or you and your spouse are upset, you say, "Okay, I'm going to go to the breathing room" before you have a fight—you go sit and be with the breath, just be with it and calm down a little bit. And then when the children see that, and they've said they want to try, you go with them. Maybe just three breaths, but gently including your whole family, including all aspects of life in a very gentle way in how you wake up.

The last thing I'll say—because I could go on about this for hours—is that there are many ways you can find to use situations to wake up. Seeing the difficult situations, rather than viewing them as a curse, if we can meet them with interest, if we can meet a difficult situation as a way to learn how to shift from habitual patterns of response to a more connected, compassionate level, it changes the whole attitude. It makes it sort of interesting.

This willingness to make every aspect of our life equally important as practice—it might sound a little daunting. But my experience is that it's not mindfulness for the sake of mindfulness, just to somehow say, "I could be totally mindful in a day." It's much more about how, for me, it imbues all the activities of life with quite a depth of meaning. Rather than just doing the mundane things to get on to something important, even the mundane activities, even washing the dishes—in this moment, this is the vehicle for really awakening, for being fully present.

Even if my aspiration is to awaken to serve all beings, washing the dishes in this moment might be the most profound expression of that, depending on how I relate. Our deepest aspiration can manifest in as many different ways as there are people. I'm not trying to find some way that looks right. Using this sense of making our life our practice—even brushing our teeth, it doesn't matter what—I find it imbues all of life with a really profound meaning. And it doesn't mean becoming a contemplative, but it means entering life much more fully.

I want to end with this little statement. This is by a Sufi person from about a thousand years ago:

The true woman or man of God sits in the midst of her fellow men and rises and eats and sleeps and marries

and buys and sells and gives and takes in the bazaars and spends the days with other people—and yet never forgets God even for a single moment.

It doesn't have to be a sense of separation between the two. Whatever we do can be practice.

Let's just sit for a couple of minutes.

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