Q&A

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 48:15

You could all hear that, questions about eating. Some magic trick other than paying attention and noting what happens. Would that there was.

You're right, eating is an extremely, sometimes very intense activity during the day for many people. It often comes up in interviews. A whole range of stuff can go on, as I'm sure you all know.

There really isn't a magic trick, but part of it is going into the cafeteria first with a sort of intention. I set my intention: okay, let me really explore what goes on. Not an intention to somehow change. Often some of the difficulty that comes around eating is that people either think they're eating too much or too little, or they're wanting to have less greed or judgment or whatever. So it's a setup before going in: "I want to have less of this or more of that." And the eating experience becomes a struggle before it even begins.

So it's a combination of going in with the intention to be mindful, but that also means acceptance—just the clear being with what is, without necessarily trying to change. A real acceptance.

And then I find in eating, as in all activities, all large activities through the day, that the precise mindfulness helps. For example, standing in line, really feeling your body, using the body sensations to come back to. Standing in line, really feeling the body, really grounding. Reaching with the arm, you can note: "reaching, reaching" as you reach for the plate. "Touching" as you touch the coldness of the plate and move it back. That helps to stay grounded in the present moment.

And in that, if I'm touching the plate, I'm standing, and a lot of thinking starts, I see myself leaning forward, wishing the people ahead would hurry up—you notice that more. If you're grounded in just the sensations of standing, you notice when you start to lean forward, when annoyance starts to arise. And rather than "Oh, I'm bad, I should be a good yogi and be calm," it's just "Oh, annoyance, annoyance." Come back and feel the sensations of annoyance in your body. Notice the thoughts. Notice the seeing contact that gives rise. Seeing, it's unpleasant, they're going too slow, annoyance. So you can get closer and closer to the sense door contact. That's the kind of precision aspect of mindfulness.

But in a situation like the dining room, we also need to bring in clear comprehension—the other aspect that goes with mindfulness of being aware of the totality of the situation. Sometimes you'll see someone going through the line looking so perfectly mindful, but so slow, and there's forty people behind them. It's not really a balanced mindfulness. Mindfulness needs to include clear comprehension of the whole situation. It's knowing when it's appropriate to go slow, knowing there's a whole situation. Then when you get to your place, if you want to take two hours to eat and feel every mouthful, that's fine. So it's kind of

both of those.

And you're right. When you're eating, lifting, you might feel lifting, and then forty-five thoughts between lifting and swallowing, and we didn't notice chewing. Okay. When did you wake up? Swallowing. Right there. Note swallowing. Never mind the thoughts you missed.

And if you somehow in the swallowing you're feeling really tense, somehow those thoughts you missed brought up tension, then you notice tension, right? Then you don't have to retrace it all, but start where you are. You notice tension, tension, tension. Just like that.

It takes infinite patience and not any expectations.

Questions about rebirth and the kind of, he gets obsessed, would like to believe it, doesn't really, why is it mentioned so much if it's not relevant?

You probably should ask Joseph, because you might not have noticed, but I've actually never mentioned it. I don't mean to imply that I don't believe it's true or that it's not relevant. From my own experience, I can't remember my previous rebirth and I don't know the next. So for me, it's on the level of a belief. Deeper than a belief, I have a faith because it makes total sense, but I have no proof. And I can't offer you anything stronger than that.

You're right, in some ways. Well, I do know—in some way I have a faith that we just keep going, that rebirth happens, because it doesn't make sense otherwise. If I didn't believe that, it would be sort of completely nihilistic—just do whatever you want and this is it. You've got to get out in this lifetime. Doesn't look good. For me, I'm only talking for me. And I can experience karma within this lifetime, and it makes sense to me that it would continue, but I don't have proof for that.

As far as belief goes, Joseph says you don't have to believe it because believing anything is only a view. Views and opinions are helpful at times. If we are attached to them, they're hindrances. They can block our freedom, our understanding. And if you're trying to create a view that you want to believe because maybe it would make you feel better, that kind of wanting it is what's going to lead to the obsession of mind. I don't think something as subtle as rebirth, we can just decide to believe it or not. It doesn't work that way. Somehow the belief has to come out of a faith that is there, that arises from your own experience. And experience could be many different things.

So personally, I think if with rebirth or anything else you hear any of us say, if it engenders a lot of confusion in your mind, it doesn't mean it's right or wrong, but to try and think through it can engender doubt and a lot of, as you say, obsessive thinking. And that experience is not helpful. Doubt is a hindrance. And at that time, whatever it is—rebirth, karma, not-self, whatever it is—when the mind is caught in that obsessive thinking, or wanting to believe it, or hearing it's making us upset, at that time of obsession it's not helpful to keep trying to figure it out. It's just turned into the hindrance of doubt. And so at that time, really note it as doubt, wanting, obsession, whatever it is. Put it on the side.

Many things, many doctrines—I use that word—of Buddhism, that twenty years ago I couldn't relate to, made no sense. It was true, you don't need it to practice. You absolutely do not need any of these doctrines to practice. We only need to pay attention to what's happening right now. And out of that, understanding will come. You don't have to try to direct your experience to meet some doctrine you've heard us say. Forget the doctrines. Just bring all your attention to being with present moment experience. And understanding and freedom will come out of that.

Whether or not that ever results in you being able to take the view of rebirth and say, "Yes, this is true"—if you can leave that aside and just really be with your experience, I think the faith and understanding will come that will take the pressure off of "Oh my god, only this lifetime, I'm gonna make it or bust." A kind of deeper faith will come where you see that is actually an irrelevant thought in some way. And that needs to come from—it will come from—your own experience if you just keep looking. So noticing doubt, doubt, doubt. Any kind of analytical thought can turn into doubt. Just notice that, okay, now's not the time, and come back to this moment.

Okay, it's time for me to go talk and for you to go walk.

Do you have any questions about your practice this morning?

There's a lot of aversion.

You mean like a lot of different things that happen trigger the aversion? Is that what you mean?

If it was one thing, it would trigger it, but there's strong identification with that. That's why there's all this reaction. Most of the thoughts, even if they—

But you see it, you're mindful of it.

Still it's—

It's painful.

If you couldn't hear the question: How do we work with aversion that seems quite strong, with strong identification? A particular thing keeps triggering the aversion, but there's a strong identification with it. We see it, we see the thoughts of being the victim, but we still feel really caught in it. It could last all day easily. It's really suffering.

When that's going on with me, or when any particular thing triggers us and it seems to go on for a long time—whether it's aversion, sorrow, or greed—we know we're seeing it on some level. There's some mindfulness, definitely. But it keeps getting triggered. I assume the trigger keeps happening over and over. It's not like it happened once three weeks ago. At least the trigger might be a memory of what happened, arising again and again. Can you notice points where it keeps getting re-triggered? Like it starts, you get into the aversion, then the trigger happens again and it just keeps going—spinning out of control.

So I try to come in at whatever level I can at a particular moment. It takes, I feel, a great deal of patience. Acceptance that this is happening. Seeing if there's judging of oneself—that this ought to stop. "I'm seeing it, so it ought to stop." I find this is one of the biggest hooks that keeps it going for me: on some level I think because I'm seeing it, it ought to stop. "By this time in the retreat, enough already. There's no excuse for this to be happening."

Really notice how that kind of judgment adds on top of it. It's like aversion to the aversion, in multiple regression. And actually, it's not the original trigger anymore sometimes. It's these subtle thoughts—"this shouldn't be going on"—that become the aversion of the moment, if you know what I mean.

So I try to come in with attention wherever I can. If it's only at the level of massive aversion, then I do stomping aversion meditation. "Aversion, aversion. Hating, hating. I hate everybody and everything." And just feeling that in my body. It's very important to keep coming back to feeling the experience physically, if you can, in this moment. A hundred million times, pull out of the train of thought—whatever it is, whether it's about the trigger, or the subtle "why is this still happening," or trying to analyze. All of which takes you out of it. Just come back and feel the aversion for the hundred millionth time. "I know this already, I don't need to feel it now." Feel it. That's what's happening. Land in the middle of it.

Over and over, with as much acceptance as you can muster: this is just what's happening. Because what I find is that the more I can do that, the more I can accept the whole sordid train of events, the more I land in the middle of it over and over, I start to see what is actually the hook of identification.

It might seem like the identification is with the whole story, but there might actually be one little piece of the experience that the sense of identification is really gripping around. It might be the unpleasantness of the trigger. The identification might be with a subtle thought: "This shouldn't be happening." It might be with a view: "My practice should be better than this by now." It might be that the trigger elicits an unpleasant physical sensation that we don't quite notice, and the aversion is actually being triggered over and over from that unpleasant physical sensation—we just don't quite see it.

Do you see what I mean? There are lots of different little pieces. But we have to start by accepting that the whole thing is happening, or we can't get to the more subtle levels of seeing the different component parts and where the identification comes in.

"Well, I think with me, acceptance is really no problem. As soon as I get my balance, I try to just accept it. What I needed to hear was that mindfulness doesn't necessarily mean it's going to go away."

No, it doesn't. We get caught in that view.

"Right now, I think for me, if I see where I'm identified, great. But sometimes the identification runs so deep, I'm never going to get through it. It's not that crucial to see how I'm identified."

Although in some ways, I wouldn't say identification runs deep. I would just say it arises frequently,

moment to moment.

It's not some deep thing hidden down there. It's just arising in a moment around a momentary experience. So it's not that it's necessarily so hard to see. Actually, for me, I'll simply notice the thing that's really hooking me. I can see the different pieces. And if some piece comes up—like, "Oh, I'm really angry now"—I go, "Oh, uh-huh, that's where it's poking at me." Just on that level, nothing more subtle than that. But you make a good point. We often think mindfulness means the experience should go away, and that's not the case at all.

A student asked about working with aversion to physical pain—how there seems to be a lot of fear around it, and how sometimes when moving attention into the pain, it gets worse. Even when trying to stay with it, stay with it, stay with it, it just feels unbearable.

There are many different ways of working with physical pain, and it's very important, as she noted, to be aware not only of the physical sensation but also of the mind's relationship to it. It's true that sometimes when we move attention into an unpleasant sensation, it gets more intense. That absolutely happens. And the point isn't to bring our attention to it in order to make it go away. We see immediately if that was our intention, because as soon as it gets more intense, we think, "Oh, pull back, this isn't working."

So it's really important in working with pain to find a balance—being able to move into it very gently with calm attention, simply because that's what's happening. Explore the sensations with a balanced, equanimous mind, but notice when the mind is not balanced or equanimous. When there's fear, when there's aversion, when there's contraction—be able to note and notice that. In the moment of fear, that's perhaps the strongest experience, not the pain. And they're two different experiences, although they go together. Really notice the quality of mind that's with the unpleasant, difficult sensation.

It's not necessarily the most skillful thing to just stay with it, stay with it, stay with it. If we're staying with unpleasant sensation and the experience is, "This is unbearable, this is unbearable, I can't handle this"—that's not mindfulness. There's a quality of real aversion, of contraction, of fear in that, which is very important to notice and feel. In fact, it might be helpful to move away from the pain, to reconnect with either your primary focus or hearing or something else that's happening, to re-establish a more balanced quality of awareness. Then move back to the difficult sensation with a more calm mind. You'll notice then, "Oh yes, this is more equanimous," and you'll notice when the aversion starts to come in. Notice that, soften again.

I've had sittings where I could sit a long time with strong pain because the mind could go into it in a very calm way and not get really tight. The next sitting, the mind was tired. As soon as I touched the pain, it was gritting-the-teeth time. And you could sit like that, gritting your teeth and hating it for an hour, but look at what's being cultivated in the mind. Is that mindfulness? Is it equanimity? Or is it subtle aversion and willpower? That's not the point.

When it feels like you can't move away, you can often go into it, notice the aversion, then back out and give it a bigger focus. You don't have to be precise when the mind gets tight. Really be within the field of the whole room—not even just your body, but the whole room. The pain is there, but there's this much more spacious quality of awareness that can help to ease it some. Go back and forth with that, noticing the mind states.

And of course, sometimes if it's at such a point that you just feel overwhelmed and moving would help, that could be an appropriate time to shift, if that's done with awareness of the intention and quite mindfully. So it's a process of balance. And for all of us, there are times where moving doesn't help, the mind is tight and constricted, trying to open up doesn't help. We're in aversion. And that's our practice at that moment.

There's no fixed approach—it's going back and forth between it all.

Okay, time to walk. Thank you.

Any questions this morning about practice?

A participant asks about "stomping meditation" mentioned earlier in the retreat.

I'd like to clarify what I meant about stomping. And also, you mentioned that at the beginning of the retreat I described going out into the woods when very angry and stomping up and down, and that I called it unskillful. Did I say that? I don't think so—I certainly wouldn't have meant it was unskillful.

When I've mentioned stomping meditation, so to speak, I really mean it for those times when the feeling of anger, for example, is so strong that trying to sit or walk very slowly downstairs just feels impossible—the energy is so intense that it feels as if you're going to explode or scream or do something unskillful around a lot of people.

I've practiced this myself. I go off where no one's around, and I really am stomping up and down, and I am aware of anger. There is a modicum of mindfulness there, in a broad sense. Not the refined awareness of noticing the perception that gives rise to unpleasantness, that gives rise to anger—we're not operating on that level. But there's a feeling in the body that's unmistakable, and I feel my foot hitting the ground. You're present. *Anger, anger.* I might be stomping, screaming inside, *anger, anger, anger.* And it calms down a little.

That's what I mean by stomping. And I don't think it's unskillful. It's much better than just imploding and trying to pretend you're sending loving-kindness to all beings. Just acknowledge what's happening. Sometimes I do find it useful to move the energy when it's so big there's no choice. We walk more briskly, go where there's no one around.

Another participant raises a related question about the expression of strong emotions, particularly referencing Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching that expressing anger waters the seeds and makes it stronger.

I would say that's true, and I would make a distinction between the two things we're talking about here.

When I talk about stomping, as I said, it's still with some mindfulness. I'm not stomping while saying, "Right, that person who made me angry is wrong, I'm right, let's get going, let's do something." That is nurturing the seeds of anger. That's being caught in the story, identification with right or wrong—thinking I should be angry, or hating yourself for being angry. That's expressing it physically but not with mindfulness; it's feeding the anger. I would call that watering the seeds of anger. I've seen that in myself.

One time on retreat, I was very angry at someone over something that happened. I kept feeling the anger, and it felt mindful, but there was real identification. I just kept going over the story: "Yeah, I should be angry, and that was wrong of him to do." At one point, I noticed the anger was just getting stronger and stronger each time I recommitted to the belief that I was right to be angry, that I deserved to be angry, that this was really a rotten thing to happen. That's definitely watering the seeds of anger. I could feel it sprout.

Stomping is different—it's bringing mindfulness in on whatever level we can to the experience of anger itself. Yes, anger is present. Don't pretend it's not present.

That's not mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh also says you have to treat your anger with gentleness, with kindness, like a younger brother or sister. You can't treat your anger with violence.

There's something here for both sides, but it's about finding the balance in mindfulness—truly acknowledging what's happening with total acceptance and non-violence. If anger is happening, we need to truly acknowledge it. We can't pretend it's not there. But with mindfulness, we're simply acknowledging anger itself: its presence, its physical expression in the body, the pain, the images in the mind that are happening in this moment.

Feeding it, watering it in the way Thich Nhat Hanh spoke of, is getting really identified with the story, keeping it going, acting it out, and then actually doing something out of the space of "yes, this is justified." Or it's not—we hate ourselves and beat ourselves up for being angry. Do you see the difference? One is bringing in mindfulness in whatever way we can, precise or huge, it doesn't matter. The other is just diving in and saying, "Yeah, let's really get going on this anger."

It's our delicate balance in practice—not to suppress and pretend that something unpleasant isn't there, and not to really fan the bonfire and let it take over. It's a balancing act that we're all dancing all the time. It's tricky.

Someone asked about awakening—is it a state? Like one pops into it, or is it something to be constantly maintained? Are we already awakened and experiencing it moment by moment without knowing it? When one is awakened, does one still practice?

There are many different ways this could be answered, so please don't think I'm giving a definitive answer. There's a Tibetan saying I like: it's easy to become awakened, but it's hard to stay awakened.

Sometimes I think it could be said like this: first of all, awakening is not a state, not something to be maintained. That would imply a conditioned state where if you set up the right conditions and hold them, that state will stay. Forget it. There isn't any such state. In a way, the whole talk about becoming enlightened can imply we're going somewhere, and when we get there—plop—here we are, all the work is done.

When you read the suttas, the arahants seem to be in that state. Perhaps so. None of us here are there, and it's not the sense of anyone I've met that they feel their work is finished, that there's no more need to practice, that they've got it.

My experience—on a much different level from the arahants, we won't even talk about it in the same breath—is not of some state to get to, but of a recognition of something. It's not even a thing. It's what is always true, always what we truly are. Only we don't recognize it. The potential of recognition is here now, always. It's not somewhere else. It's never somewhere else. The whole problem with craving is that it takes us away from right here, which is the only place and time to recognize our potential of awakening.

I personally feel that recognition is possible in many moments, and then we forget, we lose it, we can't remember. At times when there's an insight of anything—"Oh, that's so obvious, that's so true"—we've all had that. "I'll live like this now, forever," you know, it's so clear. And how long before the next thing comes along? Even though it was so clear, we can't by will make it happen again.

So that's the dance. The whole practice is one of constant re-recognition and letting go. But there's no state to maintain.

Someone asked: when you have a thought that ricochets through a whole series of events and you end up thinking, "Where did that come from?"—how useful is it to actually trace it back to its source, the trigger, which takes quite a bit of effort and is itself thinking? But sometimes it can be quite interesting.

It can be interesting. Overall, I don't know how useful it is.

I have found it at times interesting just to see how far we can get and how really disconnected we are in our thoughts from present moment experience. So for instance, finding yourself on the coast of Mexico and wondering how you got there, then tracing it back to the fact that your little finger is cold. It can be interesting, once or twice, just to see the way things work in this world.

Or if I'm waking up in the middle of something very emotional or difficult, sometimes to trace it back and see, "Oh, there's something difficult happening here and now, and I've projected it into this thing that happened ten years ago." That I sometimes find useful or interesting.

But I really want to qualify this, because it can turn into a real "how can I amuse myself" sort of mind game—let's trace back all the thoughts. And it is ultimately just more thinking. So I would say with great caution, occasionally it can be useful and instructive. If you're doing it more than really occasionally, look

at the motivation. It's just another way to pass the time and not feel the pain in the knee. So I would just check that out. And I don't think that's just earlier in the retreat—that's still happening, isn't it?

One yogi asked about something from an earlier talk where I spoke about sensation in the knee, but also how we might have an image of that. What I was saying—I didn't mean to imply that only because of the image of knee is there discomfort or aversion or reaction. What I was trying to say is that there's sensation, unpleasant. We might be identified, or the grasping of self might be around that sensation. What I've found for myself is that quite often there is an image as well as the sensation—an image that's fleeting or often not noticed—and that the real identification, what I might be calling identification with the body or that sensation, is actually in that moment the contraction of sense of self around the image. And I often don't notice the image. I don't mean to imply that if you notice the image, that necessarily means there's no identification or reaction to the sensation either. Both could be present.

In addition to that, this yogi mentioned the wind blowing that morning. Obviously hearing it and noticing, it was very difficult not to conjure up images of the trees and the snow and the area. He kept noting and seeing images, and it kind of dissipated a little bit, but it felt like it was just back and forth. Is that useful or a problem?

No, it's just what's happening. I think the only reason it would so-called take us away to be in the image is if we don't realize it's seeing and we're sitting here really thinking we're in the trees and the snow. But when you know this is hearing, you know this is seeing or imaging—that's just what's happening. There's hearing arising, there's seeing arising. There's no problem. One isn't better, just as long as we know what's what. No, it's not a problem.

Another yogi brought up a tension he perceived: A few days ago, someone said they can't find enough words for labeling. And I said that sometimes it's recommended to label as if you were a child, meaning non-verbally. There are some kinds of practice happening that way. On the other side, the teachers always point out how extremely precise you can be.

What I would say is this: The sensation must be very precisely experienced, but the labeling may be quite general. The precision is in the knowing, in the direct experience—not necessarily in finding exactly the right word. This means one thing: before you come to teach and report, you have to do the work of actually experiencing. If you wouldn't report, if this all would have been non-verbal, that's fine. And when you just label "hearing" or "smelling," this is more of a stress on the process, on the nature of this sensation. It doesn't need to be "the smell in the right part of the nose or the left part of the nose." The discrepancy you're sensing between precision and being more general—that's actually not a real discrepancy. The precision is in the experience itself, in the quality of attention. The label can remain simple.

You notice you don't like it, right? There's a lot of ways I could go with this. The first thing that comes out of me is... there isn't any perfect way. And it's all going to be precise, and it's all going to match up

perfectly. And if we could just really let go of thinking it's all going to be perfectly matched, always precise or always general, or whatever.

Sometimes I think—this is my opinion, only my opinion—we can get a little sidetracked into trying to make the reports so precise and perfect that more emphasis can get put on trying to describe it accurately to the teacher. Yes, it needs to be somewhat clear, but too much emphasis and energy and concern and desire can go into trying to make the report accurate. I don't think personally that that's as useful as being precisely with your experience. That's where the understanding is going to come.

And I've found for myself there are times when—your first part of the question—you can be with a sensation and you just know it's burning. And you can tell it changes to tingling. And you're not thinking about that so much. But there are times, as Steve said, where you might almost be in a pre-verbal state, where that part of the mind that's very verbal, very rational, very adult, isn't working so well. And maybe somebody noticed that during this retreat. And when it's not, don't worry about it.

To be really with the sensation, there are times I'll just note "sensing." Because it's not worth moving away from the experience to try and find the perfect word. So if I'm in a state like that—first of all, none of us is Sayadaw U Pandita. We're not going to cream you for coming in and not describing whether you felt the sensation in the left nostril or the right nostril. You could say, right?

And you can say, "I felt I was with it, but somehow today the words were not clear." And that's actually a clear perception. When you can say that, it's different from coming in and saying, "Well, I don't know, it was some kind of sensation, I don't know, I wasn't really there with it." Those are two different experiences, and you can describe them differently. It's not always going to be so precise. And you don't have to then later make up some precise words in order to tell us about it if that isn't really accurate from your experience.

Most important is to just try and convey your experience as close as you can to how it was at the time. Words will not always really be so accurate, you know, because we're really trying to convey something that's beyond words.

And in the same vein about the smelling and the hearing—you're right, smelling and hearing is not that precise. But I think it's helpful because it is bringing our attention to the process, which is the point. So if I'm just noticing "smelling," it's not as precise as "acrid, bitter odor that reminded me of a chemical explosion in the fourth grade." But it is more important to be with the smelling aspect, with the process. Actually, being a little less involved in the content is fine. It's just all that's really happening is the six sense experiences. So just resting a little more generally is really okay. It's really okay.

And don't worry so much that we have to get it precise to describe it either to the teacher or to ourself. Sometimes the words aren't there. It's really okay.

Okay, it's time to walk. Thank you for listening.

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