Living Our Deepest Purpose

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:25

I was really happy last night when Joseph ended his talk by reminding us all that the purpose of our practice is freedom of heart, of mind. Really, the purpose of our practice is awakening in each moment.

Sometimes I think it's possible for each of us at different times to become a bit myopic in the way that we practice, to be a bit narrowly focused. By really narrow-sighted or close-looking, I mean we can get into thinking in the moment that our practice is about just getting clearer and more precise noticing of everything. We can really work ourselves into quite a snit, trying to get each sensation a little clearer, our noting a little more precise. Sometimes I know for myself, at the end of a retreat or in the middle of a retreat, it somehow seems like the whole reason for my practice has become to be a really good meditator. I kind of lose sight that there's actually a larger purpose than just being the best possible yogi going.

Sometimes people have said to me that they feel their mindfulness is quite good, but somehow they're feeling more disconnected from others or from the situation—somehow very mindful but also rather separate. That's in the moment-to-moment picture. And in the bigger picture, somehow we've learned how to be very mindful but we feel so rarefied, so sensitive. How can we possibly not only carry this into life but actually live a life in this world? Somehow, the more we practice, the more we wonder: are we practicing to avoid life? Is that what it's about?

Obviously, I'm not going to say that's what it's about. I think it's just the reverse. There's a Sufi saying that the true man or woman of God—now substitute for God our Buddhist lingo; you can substitute Dharma or truth or awareness—sits in the middle of her fellow men or women and rises and eats and sleeps and marries and buys and sells, gives and takes in the bazaar and spends her days with other people, and yet never forgets the truth even for a single moment.

To me, that really inspires me. That's, in a way, the way I think of practicing: to be able to live fully in the midst of the world, without aversion, without avoidance, and yet to stay connected with truth, never forgetting it for a single moment.

So tonight in speaking I want to highlight an aspect of mindfulness that we've mentioned but not talked about a whole lot—one that I think helps in broadening our perspective, in bringing us out of this sometimes sense of being a little too rarefied, a little too separate. It's this quality called in Pali *sampajañña*, translated in English as clear comprehension. Often when right mindfulness is spoken of, it actually means the combination called *sati-sampajañña*: mindfulness and clear comprehension.

We've often been speaking of mindfulness, *sati*, as this quality of very clear connection, knowing what's

happening, very precise, and of course non-coercive, non-judging. As we practice in this way, our mindfulness can get quite microscopic. It gets sort of mixed with all the other enlightenment factors—with the kind of starry glitz of concentration sometimes, with the real calmness of tranquility and equanimity, with the energizing factors. All of those are together, but I find we can often think that if we don't have all that intensity or the starry quality or the microscopic precision, we've lost or abandoned mindfulness.

What clear comprehension does is bring mindfulness into a wider focus, because actually we can get so precisely microscopic and be quite out of balance. It's fine when we're just sitting on the cushion; it's absolutely appropriate. But when we move out of the isolation and are engaged in any activity where we need to interact with others, make choices or decisions, or even—God forbid—speak, then we move out of this kind of secluded microscopic quality of mindfulness and need to bring in the aspects of clear comprehension.

These, of course, in the classic Theravada way, are broken down into four different areas. The two main areas are awareness or clear comprehension of our intention or purpose, and of the appropriateness or wider suitability of an action—looking at what we're doing in the context of the bigger picture. This seems obvious, but sometimes we have to bring it in consciously.

I think a good place to look at this might be in your yogi job meditation. It was brought home to me quite clearly a few years ago when I took the job of vegetable chopper, which is a really great job. It can be lots of fun, and it requires a lot of interaction, a lot of cooperation. I could really see the difference between when I was trying to hold on to mindfulness in the very precise, focused way—kind of a samādhi concentration mindfulness, just chopping the carrot, feeling every sensation of movement of the hand and chopping the carrot—and, you know, ten minutes later you've chopped one carrot. Meanwhile, everyone else has to work like mad because you're going so slow. You're not getting the work done, and there's something lacking in this, not really taking in the whole picture. It can feel that to let go of that and open up is losing something. I could tend to hold on tightly to my idea of mindfulness and concentration, but in effect not be appropriate in the situation.

To bring in clear comprehension means to broaden my sense of purpose. The small purpose is to be as mindful as possible, to get good meditation. Let go of the small purpose and open to the larger one: we're all here together as a group to do this job, to cut up the vegetables in order to help the cooks serve all the yogis lunch. It's actually quite a lovely purpose. And to let go of my sense of being just one separate person and see that I'm part of a continual flow and change. The situation is always changing. When you can let go of the intensity, the inward focus, and really begin to move and shift with the flow of things, you can see that if someone else has a lot to do and I'm finished, you don't just walk out and say, "Good, I'm done." You help the other person because it's not just my job or your job—it's our job. And to see that what works one day, the next day the situation might be totally different. Or I come in with a particular preference—I'll do anything but I don't want to have to peel the beets—and I need to be able to let go of that. If I get there and I'm handed the beets, can I just let go and peel the beets and actually enjoy peeling

the beets as part of the larger purpose of what's happening?

It went from a feeling of trying to hold on tightly to some form of meditation to get somewhere, to a real open-flowing sense of connectedness. What I found in that ease is that true mindfulness and concentration actually developed much more naturally without this sort of artificial separation, without this forcing to be microscopic. What I thought was letting go of mindfulness to open up to the big picture, to the whole shifting situation, was actually a deepening into the broader qualities of mindfulness.

And this is really, to me, what our practice is about—not to just get stuck in trying to be microscopic. So on a retreat level, that's an example of the difference between *sati* just on its own, just the microscopic precision, and *sati* combined with clear comprehension of purpose and appropriateness or suitability, matching our actions and decisions to what's actually happening in the bigger picture.

So I want to talk a little more about each of these areas.

This first area, clear comprehension of purpose, of course on the moment-to-moment level, is what we've talked about often: knowing our intention before we take an action, before we say something. This is obvious. And when we're in tune with, able to notice our intention, as many of you have noticed through practice, that moment of noticing intention gives us a moment of choice. Do I really want to do this? Is this really going to be beneficial action—beneficial for myself, beneficial for others? And it's wonderful to have that moment to reflect.

On a larger, more overarching level of our experience, this clear comprehension of purpose can refer not just to the momentary intention as it arises prior to each action, but also to a larger sense of what is really my truest, my deepest purpose in this life, in my life. And I have personally found that consciously tuning into this—what is my deepest purpose—being willing to clarify that for oneself, becomes a very powerful and inspiring beacon in our life.

Without a sense of what is really my deepest purpose, I can take decisions haphazardly: well, this feels good, or I don't know, this kind of has the right feel, or maybe this would be good. But we're just acting at random, and our energy can get a bit dispersed. There are so many possibilities that we are confronted with, especially in our culture. Where to work, where to live, should I move, should I switch jobs, should I switch relationships? It's just endless in our culture. And to have a deep sense, a guide light of what is really most deeply true for me in my life—I have found this really inspiring, very profound. It can be a powerful cause for transformation in our life and how we live our life.

And it's interesting, because I've found in myself and also in speaking with other people—often here, actually—that someone has had a very profound and touching moment, an inner sense of something that's deeply true for them, which I would call getting in touch with their truest purpose, their deepest purpose. And people tend to be almost embarrassed, very shy to say so. What I've often found—I found it in myself, and when I hear it in others I feel really sad—is there's often a sense of: who am I to dare to

have a really profound purpose, deeply connected to truth or to serving beings or to whatever it happens to be for you? I'm not saying there's a right purpose.

But for example, when it first came up for me consciously, quite some time ago, I was on a short self-retreat. Out of nowhere—I wasn't sitting there thinking, what's my deepest purpose in life? I was just following the breath—out of nowhere came a very deeply felt sense: my life is really about serving the Dharma, and I dedicate my life to that, whatever it means.

And I thought, where did that come from? And the next moment was: who do you think you are? You little twit.

It was really interesting. Those two voices clearly came from such different places. One of them was just the usual self-judgment, the second one. The first one felt very profound and didn't feel like Carol persona at all. It was very moving, and I could tell there was something true about it. It was also very scary, and immediately: well, what does that mean? How can I do that? I'm planning out the next ten years.

What's interesting is, forget all of that. You don't have to plan out anything. But when it comes up for you—and sometimes we can just connect with our real inner purity, which is there for all of us and will manifest in probably a slightly different way for each one of us—when we touch that, when it arises, I beg you, really honor it in yourself. Never mind all the voices that say you have no right, or you have nothing to offer, or it's too scary, I might have to change my life. It's true, we might have to change our life. But that's not so bad sometimes. And we don't have to know any of that ahead of time. In fact, we can't.

But to really honor, amidst all the multiplicity, that depth of beauty and commitment, that manifestation of truth—once you consciously acknowledge it to yourself, it can become a conscious reference point when you need to make decisions, either life-changing decisions or smaller decisions. Granted, I don't mean every time you're trying to decide what to have for dinner: well, my purpose is to serve the Dharma, should I have French fries or baked potato? I'm not talking on that level. And I made myself crazy like that for a while, so I hope you'll spare yourselves.

But in seemingly big decisions, when we remember our purpose—and not just something in the mind, but reconnect with it in our hearts—actually the decision becomes obvious. And it's very energizing.

It takes out a lot of confusion.

I've told this story many times before, but it's such a good example that I will share it again. Sometime after this sense arose that my life was about serving the Dharma, I actually forgot about it. I was a manager here at that time—this was some time ago, 1984 I think—and I wasn't thinking about anything in the future. I was just here to practice, and that was it.

Through a series of circumstances, a weekend meditation course needed to be taught. It was all planned, and the person who was going to teach it got sick. No one else could do it. A couple of friends of mine here,

other teachers, decided I should go do it. I thought that was a really bad idea. A very, very poor idea. And I basically said, "No. No way."

These two friends embarked on this campaign of intimidation to make me do it. They just wouldn't stop. It was interesting because one of them—it was not her personality to be pushy. And they just kept at me. I was saying, "No, no."

Then suddenly this memory came up. Oh yeah, right. My purpose in life is to serve the Dharma. And I don't get to choose really how that's going to manifest. It doesn't mean the way I like it. That's not part of the contract necessarily.

As soon as I remembered that, it became so clear that my intention in saying no was totally fear—self-preservation and avoidance of humiliation. That was basically my reason to say no, and it doesn't stand up under scrutiny. There was really nothing else to think about, so I said, "Okay, I'll do it."

It was such a lesson. The fear didn't go away. The whole flight—it was in Vancouver—the whole flight from here to Vancouver was horrible. I was just in terror. Up until the moment I started teaching, and then somehow the Dharma takes over. It's really amazing.

But the lesson was that once it was clear how my action would align with my purpose, then everything else that arises from that decision—the fear and the panic and all of that—is clearly part of practice. It's what I can use to grow, to understand the emptiness of fear, to realize that fear doesn't mean I can't do something. It was so empowering to know that once I'm in alignment with my purpose, everything else is okay. That doesn't mean everything else is comfortable.

In fact, I often ask myself now when I'm wavering about something: Do I want to be comfortable, or do I want to be free? As soon as I phrase it that way, again, it's kind of, "Oh, okay, can't really hide from this one." It's obvious.

So it's just a little experience, but it's a way of seeing that when you acknowledge to yourself what's truly valuable in your life, and you reconnect with that, it is a powerful force—both energizing us to do things that are of value to ourselves and others, and also a force of transformation in how we live our lives.

One teacher said once that in every moment of activity, we are committing ourselves to something. It's a question of what. Are we willing to look?

We shouldn't use this, though, as another way to beat ourselves with a club because this particular activity is not serving the Dharma. It's not another way to make ourselves wrong or bad. But it's a way to deeply inspire us, to keep our connection to truth alive in our lives. It's really a wonderful help in this.

Of course, we need our practice, the mindfulness of being present, to even remember to question our motivation.

And we need the aspect of mindfulness that is non-judging, that is willing to honestly see why we're doing what we're doing and not to judge it.

This tuning into our deepest purpose has to be what's really true for us, not some idea of what we wish. For a while—really some years, I think it was actually before the story I told—I had this sense that I should live a very dharmic life, whatever that meant. It wasn't clearly defined. But that "should" is always a kind of giveaway. If you tune into your purpose and it comes out as "I should be like this," watch out. Because it often means it's an ideal that we try to live up to by judging ourselves or trying to twist ourselves to fit an outer ideal.

When I had this idea that I should live a dharmic life, every time I would go to a movie or watch a TV show or just waste time—not somehow be studying or practicing or going out doing good or I don't know what—and it was a lot of my time, believe me—every moment that I felt I wasted, I would berate myself so heavily. It was as if I was walking around with this weight of guilt all the time for not being pure enough, not being dharmic enough. It's horrible. It is not a helpful way to live. This is not what I'm talking about.

But I found that when we really tune into our purpose in a genuine way, with compassion, with mettā for ourselves, and with mindfulness, then the times when we deviate, we see it, we accept it. Because of course we're going to deviate. You may have noticed that this happens sometimes here in your practice. I mean, even with big intentions. "I'm not going to look at the bulletin board again until tea time." Clear intention, and you walk out, and the next thing you know—"I know I don't have interviews today, but let's memorize everybody"—how did I get here? Clear intention, but we forget, and we deviate. It's okay.

I remember one retreat I was teaching in California. It's always embarrassing when you make your intentions out loud. We were sitting at the table at lunch, eating pieces of watermelon off a platter, and I said, "Okay, this is the last piece—it's really making me sick." Of course, a minute later I was eating another piece, and all the other staff people gleefully said, "Ah, look at you! You just said it was making you sick. So much for your intentions."

We're going to deviate when there's not awareness of our intention. We're back with habit. Often, as well, many of our decisions are incredibly complex. Even being able to tell what our motivation is for entering a particular relationship—my God, how complicated is that? Or for leaving a relationship. Or just some of the complicated things you might have to do in your job. Of course there's a multiplicity of purposes and intentions in something like that, not to mention the subconscious ones that we might not be able to tune into. So not to blame, but simply to pay attention with a kind of kindness.

What I found has happened for me over the years is that when I finally stopped beating myself up for not being totally pure and dharmic in every moment of existence and said, "Okay, you want to watch a really stupid show on TV? Go ahead, watch it with all my love, watch this show"—and then watch it with attention—about halfway through I'd go, "You know, this is really stupid," and I'd turn it off. The interest was just gone. And I found, just as you find in your practice here, that the purpose, the deepest purpose,

begins to come in more naturally. Our actions and choices begin to harmonize much more naturally.

So here, for example, our purpose might be to be a good yogi, to be mindful, or it might be to have good sittings, it might be to get back to that bliss—whatever our purpose is, let's be honest about it. And you're there for a while, and then of course the next day you're just overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions and it's gone. I know everybody here has had this experience, and it just feels like it's all gone down the drain, whatever our story is about it.

What's so interesting—and I've noticed this in talking to a lot of people just in this last week or two—is that we're really starting to get it. At first we start fighting: "Oh no, the thinking, the emotions, I've got to get back to how it was before, get back to the breath, get back to the breath." But we've started to learn that the forcing of motivation doesn't work. And time after time, people have said—sooner now, much sooner—they're giving that up and saying, "Okay, agitation. Okay, restlessness. Okay, endless thinking. That's fine." And lo and behold, with much less struggle and much sooner than expected, the mind and heart come back into balance. All of a sudden there seems to be mindfulness, there seems to be energy, there seems to be a modicum of equanimity, and we think, "Where did this come from? I didn't make it happen."

But it comes much more naturally, and in that we develop a much deeper faith and trust that when we fall out of our purpose, we don't have to panic. The times of connection with it have so deepened our understanding and the power of heart and mind that we come back into balance much more naturally and easily. And just as this happens day to day on retreat, it can happen week to week or year to year in our life.

And yet, we do need to actively keep coming back to stay in touch with our purpose. There are so many things that come up in our lives, so many possibilities pulling us in so many directions.

I can't remember if I've read this before, but I love this verse from the Japanese poet Izumi Shikibu, expressing the different pulls on our hearts, on our intentions:

Although I try to hold the single thought of Buddha's teaching in my heart, I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well.

Just lovely. I try to hold a single thought of Buddha's teaching, but I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well. I love it because we also hear the beauty sometimes of the crickets' voices—not hating them. And we will move in different directions. But when we can hold our purpose with deep love and connection, with real trust and faith in the purity of the Dharma, and in the understanding that we ourselves are manifestations of that purity, then again and again our purpose will resurface easily, and we'll reconnect with it.

We do sometimes have to actively find ways to help us reconnect. One I want to mention, because it's been coming up in my heart a lot these last few weeks, is sangha—we help each other reconnect. Sometimes in

the silence here, simply by seeing another person's commitment, you don't know what's going on inside them, but when we're in one of those "I've had it, I'm out of here, why am I doing this?" moments, just seeing somebody else, it's not that we want to mimic them, but it retouches that place of faith, that place of trust in us.

Finding, or having the good karma to connect with, even from a distance, really wise beings—to connect with teachers or beings who are somewhat awakened—has been an incredible good fortune in my life. Some of the teachers I've been with... I remember one time I flew across the country for a weekend to be at a huge symposium with the Dalai Lama, something like six thousand people. It's not like we were having some personal connection, but just being in the presence of beings whose lives are so clearly dedicated to awakening and to the service of others. It doesn't have to be particularly Buddhist, but to let that in, to even search it out at times, can so deeply awaken and reconnect us to that place of faith, of inspiration. It doesn't mean we have to follow that teacher—I don't mean that. But just to be with other wise people, other people committed to a path of awakening, committed to a life of compassion, to me it somehow bypasses the rational and awakens quite deeply a resonance with my true purpose in life.

There's a Tibetan saying that if you look into the essence of devotion—and devotion here can mean faith in the Dharma too, it doesn't have to be personal devotion—if you look into the essence of devotion, you meet naked awareness directly. They feed each other. So in moments of just sitting with a really peaceful or wise or compassionate being, it can touch that in us, reconnect us.

And at different times each one of us might be that wise or awakened or compassionate being. We don't have to be it every moment, but we can be it for each other at various times. It's such a gift for us as teachers being able to share this time with you, because at times each one of you is lighting up—a little Buddha, a little awakened being. You usually don't know it at the time, but there's a sense of little rays coming out. I'm exaggerating, but there's a sense of purity just manifest, and it touches all of us in silence or in speech, whether we know it or not, and it deeply helps us continue on this path.

One of the reasons we all talk so much about our practice time in Asia is, I feel, in this light. In Asia you have a combination. First, I don't know if there are more wise beings, but at least up until recently, Asia has been more supportive of a really spiritually dedicated life. Being in Thailand or Burma, you feel the incredible faith of the people in the Dharma itself, and that faith manifesting as such generosity to support anyone who is so committed to Dharma that they will dedicate their lives as a monk or nun. Even people who might come to sit in a monastery for five days would be supported. There's such faith.

I want to say it's pure—of course it's not always so pure, it's contaminated with all the kilesas just like we are—but it's so alive, and you get the sense of yes, this is really true. It is possible to live like this. To come in contact with teachers and nuns and monks and renunciates who have dedicated their lives to awakening in a very conscious way, it's so inspirational. Combined with a simplicity of life in Asia—I find simplicity in my life makes it much easier to even remember that I would like to connect with my deepest

purpose. It's easier to remember when I'm not running around trying to do ten different things in ten different places in one day, on the highway every fifteen minutes. It's easier to remember.

But it doesn't have to be Asia. I want to bring that out. I remember myself in the first three-month retreats I did here—well, actually my first practice was in Asia, so I guess I already had that hit of "Asia's so wonderful for practice." But often people think, "Well, if I really want to do it, I have to go to Asia." That's baloney. The truth is everywhere. There are wise beings, committed beings everywhere—all sitting here in this room. It's not about where; it's about finding our purpose and finding ways to keep connecting to it.

One of the people I really hold in my heart as someone who inspired me deeply, though I didn't realize it at the time, is my piano teacher from junior high school. She was a woman about my grandmother's age who was a Christian Scientist, which I didn't know anything about. I'm sure I still don't really understand it. But what I got from her was that she really, deeply in her life, was trying to live truth. And to her, truth was really manifested as love. The phrase "God is love" is what she based her life on, and she truly lived that way—a struggling person who was dedicated to living a life of love.

And it was a revelation to me that this was possible—that people lived so sincerely, and it wasn't some kind of hokey idea, but that someone could dedicate their life to living that way and just be a normal person. I still know her, actually. She's ninety-two now, living in Maine. She's gone through hardship, like everyone. But just that depth of commitment deeply inspired me. And I think we can find that really all around us when we look.

So looking to awakened people isn't about restricting ourselves to some sense of elitism. It's more about opening up to seeing the beauty and truth everywhere in life.

And yes, it's true that as we tune into our deepest aspiration and begin to use that as a beacon, a guideline in making choices, there might be changes that come in our life. When we think of it from now—oh my goodness, will I have to give up this or that? How will I be able to keep doing whatever it is I'm doing?—it can be scary or overwhelming. I hate the thought of this. I don't want to live like a nun in Thailand. Get over it. It isn't like that.

I've found for myself that whenever I've made a decision out of really tuning into my commitment to serve the Dharma, and it's not too egocentric, the decision at the time might feel like giving up. Often, when I look at how I've lived my life now, on one level it's amazing. I feel incredibly blessed in the life that I have. I could never have imagined this. On the other hand, it's also meant that I'm on the road most of the year. I have very little feeling of a settled home life. I've not had children, and I'm clearly not going to have children or any kind of family life in the normal sense. At times I could look at it and say, well, that's really a huge renunciation, something I really gave up.

But it happens so gradually that there's no sense of renunciation at all. It's really that things that distract us from what's truly important just sort of fall away. And I mean, this looks different for everyone. I'm not

upholding the way my life has been as the way it should be—I only have myself to use as an example. But it doesn't feel so much like renunciation as like an opening to such a greater possibility, to be able, from time to time, to connect with truth and inspiration.

A friend of mine told me—this is a paraphrase—about Anandamayi Ma, an Indian woman saint, a great saint of the last century. Some people were coming to her and really lauding her for being such a great renunciate, for having given up the world and for living so simply. And she just started laughing and laughing and laughing. They said, "What's so funny?" And she said, "You're the ones who are the renunciates. In living the life that you're living, you're giving up the great joy of living in God's presence. You're the renunciates."

And it's really true, in whatever words, in whatever way we contact that in our life.

So we needn't have some harsh ideal of how one should live. We can contact the presence of truth living life in any form. There's a poem by Rumi—the last two lines I love: "Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

Whatever we do in our life, when it can come from this connection to what is truly valuable, what is our true purpose—having children, washing the dishes, raking the lawn, cleaning the sewer—it doesn't matter what we're doing when we're doing it with an attitude of: How can I awaken in this moment? How can this activity be in the service of awakening and of compassion for all beings, as Geshe Rapten said?

To me, this is what clear comprehension of purpose, of deeper aspiration, brings into our life—this overarching sense where truth begins to shine through all aspects of life.

And this brings in the last two parts of clear comprehension, which begin to develop naturally when we meet life with this clear sense of purpose. They're really the aspects of making our life our practice, and recognizing truth or reality or non-delusion everywhere. The insights we have aren't just some isolated "Ah, anicca, yes, everything comes and goes"—precisely noticing the ending of sensation and the beginning of the breath on the cushion. Rather, these insights translate into our life. We begin obviously to see truth everywhere when we have this sense of overarching purpose, because the truth begins to shine out everywhere. Not just in Asia, not just in spiritual situations, not just when we're on retreat.

Because we begin to look with the eyes or listen with the ears of truth. And the truth shines everywhere. It cannot be hidden. All of life, even the most difficult circumstances—perhaps in a way especially the most difficult circumstances—become the avenues for awakening.

Sometimes on leaving a retreat, or even during a retreat, we find that we're so much more attuned to the suffering aspect of life, the impermanent aspect, and it can feel a little overwhelming. I remember once at the end of a three-month retreat, for some reason I decided to go to the mall in Worcester and walk around. I don't know if it was good or bad. It was a suffering experience, for sure. I just felt it—the suffering on everybody's face.

But that suffering doesn't have to be a bad thing, because I found that really it's the avenue into connection with all beings, the avenue into compassion. When we close down, hating the pain, we're separate. But when we can look through the eyes of truth to see that yes, this is a suffering being, this is a suffering experience—mine or another's—when we open to it, it's actually an avenue in. It's a connection to all other beings, an avenue into our interconnectedness, our non-separation.

This can happen spontaneously, as this man was describing. It can also happen through reflection, through consciously bringing in this non-delusion. Once I was in the hospital, lying there in a lot of pain, and it's easy to start feeling rather self-centered and caught up in one's own story. I noticed this happening, and I consciously began to expand, to reflect. I was in a room with three other women, old women, all suffering—actually a lot more than I was. And I just started: oh gosh, just in this room, the four of us. And how many people, how many rooms, just in this hospital? And how many hospitals just in this little area of a few towns—there's five or six, just in this little area. I kept expanding out into really an infinite number of people in pain in hospitals at that moment, or at this moment. It started as a somewhat intellectual exercise, but before long my whole sense of self-concern and isolation had vanished, and I felt this really loving connection with all beings. Sometimes it's all beings in pain, sometimes it's all beings in joy. But whatever the situation, it can consciously be an avenue into interconnectedness.

The truth shines everywhere, no matter what we're doing. We can really use this.

One other little story, just to illustrate that no matter what we're doing, in this moment we can awaken. There's a book of poems by the nuns who were women practitioners at the time of the Buddha, containing little stories of each woman's life and what led to her poem. There's one woman whose name they don't have—she's simply called "an anonymous wife," the wife of a Brahmin in Vesali, where the Buddha spoke often. She was quite devoted to the Buddha and wanted to become a nun, but her husband would not allow her to. You had to have your husband's permission, and theoretically husbands had to have their wives' permission too, just so you know it was sort of fair. But her husband didn't give her permission.

So she kept up her duties, her obligations as a Brahmin wife, while continuing to be sincerely devoted to truth. And it's said that one day while she was cooking the curry in the kitchen, the vegetables caught fire. With a real loud crackling fire, the whole meal just burned up. And in that moment of watching the whole meal go up in flames, she had such a deep insight into impermanence that she became free—a third stage of enlightenment. Third stage, mind you, not just the first.

So you could even be burning your food and that could be your avenue for awakening. It really isn't the activity; it's the attitude we bring. Nothing is too mundane.

In tuning into this broader aspect of clear comprehension—a sense of your deepest purpose—I'd really encourage you not to be intimidated. Connect with what that is for yourself, and don't undervalue, don't underestimate the strength of your commitment. I know you know all the moments you haven't been wanting to be mindful, all the times you've wished you never set foot on this path. I realize we have those

moments. But I hate to tell you: it's too late. You can't turn back now. We cannot go back to ignorance. And it wouldn't be so good if you could, really. It wouldn't be so good.

But don't underestimate yourself. I just want to share this, from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche: "Ask yourself, how many of the billions of inhabitants of this planet have any idea of how rare it is to have been born as a human being? How many of those who understand the rarity of human birth ever think of using that chance to practice the Dharma?"

How many of those who think of practice actually do? How many of those who start continue? How many of those who continue attain ultimate realization?

I just want to stop here and say all of you are continuing. All of us are continuing. So don't be saying, "Yeah, I'm back there in the beginning, I'm someone who doesn't appreciate." Appreciate the depth of your commitment. Who would have thought, at your first weekend retreat or the first sitting group you went to, that you'd end up at a three-month course? That depth of commitment just creeps up on us. But it's here now for each of us.

As long as you fail to recognize the true value of human existence, you will fritter your life away in futile activity and distraction. When life comes all too soon to its inevitable end, you will not have achieved anything worthwhile at all. But once you really see the unique opportunity that our human life can bring, you will definitely direct your energy into its true worth by putting the Dharma into practice.

I just want to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to all of you for being some of the rare beings who are putting the Dharma into practice, who are realizing in your action, in your speech, in your thoughts, in your intentions, the real value of the truth and of a human life—and are being part of the rare inhabitants of this planet who let the truth really shine through and light up the world for everyone else.

It's been a real honor for me to be able to share this time with each of you. And there's nobody here who isn't exhibiting that quality of deep purpose and commitment. Whether your little mind wants to let you believe it or not, it's really true.

So thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

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