Wisdom and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 20:20

Tonight I want to speak about compassion and wisdom.

A lot of the emphasis in this particular style of practice is on the development of wisdom, on the uncovering of the nature of things as they really are. And sometimes questions come up, both in interviews and in our hearts and minds: What's the point of it? When we come to the place of emptiness, where all things arise and pass, when we emphasize so much in our practice that we're not here to achieve any particular state of heart or mind, that we're not here to change anything, that it really doesn't matter what's happening—the question comes up: Well, I didn't come here to stay the same, really. So what are we doing this for?

I'm being a little facetious, but the question does come up in that way. It's easy at times to forget that the Buddha's teaching is comprised of two wings—a bird has two wings to fly—that of great wisdom and great compassion. So I want to speak a little tonight about how they come together, with the emphasis more on compassion. This is really just an introduction.

The wisdom of emptiness, of no separate self, of impermanence—that there's nothing to cling to—this experience of liberation through non-clinging is really in some ways the crux of what we speak about, of what our practice is about. And in a moment of that experience, or really more in the moments after that experience when we're thinking about it, or thinking ahead to what it's going to be like in daily life, questions come up about the world of action. How does this wisdom of emptiness, this freedom of non-reactivity, manifest in the world of choice, in the world of interrelationship with other beings, in the world where we have decisions to make and actions to take? How does wisdom translate?

It's here that the second wing of compassion comes into flower. We need to really see and understand the importance of this, because the natural expression of wisdom is love and compassion. It's almost not something we have to crank up. In a moment of knowing things as they really are, deeply, the natural manifestation of that is love and compassion. Sometimes one side is highlighted, sometimes another in our experience, but a really rich, developed wisdom will have both aspects.

We can see in ourselves times when the impermanence, the emptiness, the no-self is really strong. There can be a real peace, a loveliness in that, a sense of freedom, but it can also feel somewhat cool, a bit removed. Not indifferent, but you could see how it could go in that direction. And then on the other side, there are times when we're just practicing karuna, compassion, or metta, loving-kindness. A lot of the questions that come up around that are: Well, this is nice when it's working. It feels lovely. It's a really good mental state—which seems to be fostering the sense of self. Or: Metta is just seeing the nice side of

things. I've had people actually say to me that they are resistant to the idea of metta because to them it gives the sense of being a wimp—you just love everything, you accept everything, you forgive everything, and you just let people walk all over you.

We can see how both of these are exaggerated, but also how a true, deep, rich freedom of heart and mind encompasses both.

One place where wisdom or understanding and compassion or metta come together is in this aspect of mind: the mental factor of intention. I really love the way the Buddha put these things together. He had such an incredible mind.

When we're sitting, when we're walking, when we're here on retreat and to a great extent insulated from having to make any huge decisions—certainly any life decisions; we wish, we beg you not to make any life decisions while you're here—then you can sit and walk and watch every state of mind and heart come and go and really see that none of it is who you are. A moment of aversion, a moment of love, a moment of reactivity, a moment of boredom, a moment of wisdom—all are empty. They can all come and go, and the vivid, awake nature of mind doesn't care. Awareness doesn't really care what's arising within it. It's untouched, unstained, and we can experience that.

But where these states of heart and mind, where the way we understand reality, ourselves, and the world does begin to matter, does begin to have an effect, is when these states of heart and mind become the factors that give rise to intentions.

As you know, we've spoken of intention. It's this inclination of mind that gives rise to action, that gives rise to speech. It often manifests as a thought, but not always—that little "about to" that we've been talking about through the retreat, that you've been noticing and experimenting with in your sittings and walkings.

Intention, of course, doesn't arise without conditioning. It's conditioned by the previous moments and by whatever state of heart and mind is accompanying it. This is where the state of heart and mind that's giving rise to intention does begin to matter. When the Buddha speaks of karma, wholesome and unwholesome karma, the word karma translates simply as action. And as we've said, the seed, the heart, the strength of all action is not in how it looks or in the result that comes from the action or speech, but completely in the intention that gives rise to that action. That's why we give so much emphasis to beginning to be able to even notice that there's an intention at all before an action, and then noticing what actually is the nature of that intention—what states of heart and mind are giving rise to it.

This volition, this impulse, is the crux of what is creating wholesome or unwholesome karma, actions, and results in our own lives and in the lives of others with whom we come into contact.

So, for example, the same action that from the outside might look identical could be motivated by many different intentions. And we, looking on from the outside, can never really know what somebody else's

intention is—unless we have developed the psychic power of mind-reading, which some people think teachers have cultivated.

Once when I was in Thailand, staying in a monastery in Bangkok that many Western monks would come through to get their visas, a number of them arrived from a forest monastery in northeastern Thailand. They were convinced that their Ajahn could read their every thought, even when they were in Bangkok. It was really interesting, because they were so paranoid about it. It wasn't like, "Oh, he can read my mind, so I'll maintain perfect sila." They did maintain their conduct, but with this total paranoia. Very interesting.

From the outside, though, we normal worldlings cannot read each other's minds. But what we can do is look in our own mind and heart and see what intention is giving rise to an action. This is a different way of looking at our activities from what we're normally used to in daily life. We tend to judge an activity by its results. Was it a good thing to do? It was if it got the results we wanted, or if we came off looking good, or if people feel good, or whatever. But you could do something with a really clear intention that doesn't turn out the way you want. And in this aspect of karma, that's not what matters. It's the intention.

So if you get up now and start coughing and run out of the hall, there could be numerous intentions giving rise to that action. It could be one of total terror—that you look like a fool and have to get out of here because people are going to hate you. It could be real compassion, just genuinely feeling like, "I might be bothering people, I might upset the talk," and so you leave. It might be self-consciousness. It might be anger. It might be relief that you can get out of here. It could be a lot of different things. And the action looks exactly the same.

Knowing the importance of intention, seeing how the Buddha placed this in the second step of the Eightfold Path, you see how significant it is. The first stage of the Eightfold Path is right understanding or wise understanding—the beginning of the path, how we understand ourselves, how we understand the world, which of course is deepening and changing throughout our whole practice. But we begin with how we understand things, how we understand the world. And that leads into the second step, which is variously translated as wise thought, right thought, or right intention.

How we understand ourselves and the world gives rise to how we think about things, our intentions, which lead to the third, fourth, and fifth stages of the path: right speech, right action, and right livelihood. So it's right at this crux of intention that wisdom and understanding intersect with all the choices, all the actions, all the ways that we as active, connected human beings are and act in the world.

When the Buddha spoke about right thought as this second stage of the path, or right intention, he was very clear about what the three so-called right intentions are. And the point I really want to make clearly tonight is that these right intentions arise naturally through our understanding, through the wisdom that arises from mindfulness. It's not some fluke that happens simply from paying attention.

The three right thoughts or right intentions the Buddha spoke of are: renunciation or generosity,

counteracting the tendency to greed; metta or friendliness, counteracting the tendency to ill will; and compassion, which arises out of clear seeing and counteracts the habit of cruelty.

I want to speak tonight about this way of looking at compassion—that it is the natural manifestation of a heart and mind of understanding. It is much more the manifestation of who we really are than all these kilesas we talk about so ceaselessly, that we've made such friends with, that we feel so much at home with: greed, hatred, and delusion. It's time for us to really recognize that compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity are our true home. These are really the intentions that arise out of clear seeing. And we can begin to feel more at home with these, recognize these, rest in these, and not think it's some mistake when they happen to arise in our experience.

It's true that the seed of intention ultimately flowers—or as Ruth Denison describes karma: you don't get away with nothing. At some point it manifests. And we can see this in the world, God knows, in politics with all the rhetoric. Oh, because we just had the election—you all are really lucky you haven't had to listen to all this stuff for a month. Just rhetoric, rhetoric, rhetoric. And I really think many of the politicians believe what they say about wanting to help the country and show kindness to all beings. But when we see where the actions actually lead, at some point it's quite obvious what intentions are actually guiding decisions and behavior.

I don't want to just dump on the politicians—it's not like they're the only ones on this planet. But friends, good friends who do a lot of environmental work, will talk often about starting with really clear intentions of caring for the planet and running into so much suffering, so much delusion, so much greed, that the motivation naturally turns to frustration and anger. They may continue to act with great energy and caring, and the actions seem good in themselves, but because the intention starts turning to anger, the people themselves—it's as if the anger begins to eat them up.

And in this way, an intention, even if the actions are for the good, will flower. We can't really hide from it.

So what we do here—and this is what I mean by let's not just pick out the politicians—is we look in ourselves. Someone said to me on a retreat last year, I think during one of the periods when Bosnia was really strong in the news, and it's a valid question. It was a question really: What good are we doing here? Sitting here watching our minds, our thoughts, our emotions come and go, the breath come and go, cultivating thoughts of goodwill and compassion—just sitting here safe and secure. What good is this doing anybody when people in Bosnia are killing each other?

In the past I would have thought my answer was a nice rationalization. I really believe it's true now—not as a start, but as something fundamental.

To begin with, what we're doing is very powerful because we're bringing all our care, our honesty, our compassion to ourselves, to look with great honesty at why we're doing what we're doing—just in our little actions day to day here. And we discover both great wisdom, great compassion, great love. And we do run

into our old friends, the torments of mind, from time to time.

And we see, when we look deeply, there's a level on which I'm not really any different from somebody in Bosnia or Rwanda who really loses it and kills somebody. I mean, how many of us have had really serious murderous fantasies here?

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