Morning Instructions Myoshin #1

Myoshin Kelley · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:19:52

I wanted to begin the instruction period this morning by emphasizing a couple of qualities that I think are very helpful to our practice.

As a teacher, I know it's my great aspiration to help you practice in a way that doesn't perpetuate suffering. Sometimes the very way we approach our practice seems to be loaded and filled with ideas that actually work against the practice. In my own journey, it has felt like there's been a continual uncovering of these ideas—ideas I don't even realize are there. But what I've come to see is that practice is really very simple.

This was evident in Joseph's instruction last night: to sit and know that you are sitting. It's so simple on one level to just know what our experience is. Vipassana, or insight meditation, is a practice to see things as they are in their nature. And yet many times we're so selective about what we want to see. We want to see peace, calm, tranquility. We don't want to see anger, aversion. We don't want unpleasant physical sensations. But it's to see it all and to know it in its nature. If we can let our practice be very simple, it brings a great ease.

Our job is just to recognize what the mind is knowing. And this knowing happens spontaneously. As we are sitting here right now, there can be many experiences that are known. We may know body sensations. There may be a knowing of sound—sounds outside, sounds in the room, sound of my voice. There may be mind states that are known. Maybe there's restlessness, agitation, or calmness, peace. At times there may be thoughts that are occurring. Just in pointing to any of these experiences, we can see that there is a simplicity in just knowing this. We don't need to create what is known. We don't need to fabricate it in any way. It simply needs to be recognized.

So we can practice from a place of recognizing what is being known. And yes, this will change a lot. It can change very rapidly at times. The steadiness comes from just paying attention to this process—what the mind is recognizing. The practice is simple in recognizing our experience, whatever it is. The complication, of course, comes in that we have habits of distraction, habits of not paying attention, habits of attachment, aversion. We also need to recognize this. But we can see if we can practice in a way that allows the unfolding, allows the Dhamma to reveal itself. We don't have to create the Dhamma. It's here right now.

With this simplicity, it's also helpful to relax, to see where the tension comes in, to see where the wanting happens, and see if we can relax. There's a sense of settling back. The quality of receptivity helps to strengthen this relaxation—a sense of receiving experience. Receiving the breath, receiving sounds,

receiving thoughts. It's not that we want to perpetuate the thoughts, but to know that this is what is occurring in our experience in this moment.

With this simplicity, this quality of relaxation, we also need to have interest in this process. What is occurring? What is happening? What is being known? We probably know from our own experience that if someone is speaking and we have no interest, it's really hard to connect, to pay attention. But if this interest is there, it brings a steadiness, a willingness to look, to see. And this interest is a non-interfering interest. What is the mind recognizing? What is being known? It's like turning a light on in the mind—just to see, to know, to understand. And of course this is nothing we can force.

The practice is really about relaxing into the unfolding, turning up as best we can in each moment without being hypervigilant. Finding the ease of just recognizing this experience.

So in the sitting meditation, finding a stable posture where the body feels relaxed and at ease as much as possible, where it feels supported—supported by the earth—where there's an uprightness that supports wakefulness. And to sit and know that you're sitting. Knowing our experience, whatever it may be.

When sensations in the body are prevalent, it's a way to know the nature of the body. To know pressure, heat, tightness, coolness. Knowing this body directly and immediately as it is. Maybe sensations of breath. Sounds. Knowing what the mind is recognizing.

Noticing if there's a quality of relaxation here, the sense of settling back and receiving experience as it is, or if there's a sense of wanting, wanting to create. Seeing if we can settle back and receive. Receiving this experience as it is.

When the mind starts to wander or many thoughts arise, we can just recognize that thinking is occurring. Recognizing whatever is being known, and doing this as often as possible.

There may be times when the thoughts seem endless and have such a strong pull, or there's some sense of confusion, where it might be helpful to be with a stable object for a period of time—such as the breath, the sitting posture, or hearing—returning the awareness, the attention to these experiences. And after a period of time, once again, practicing with the simplicity of recognizing what is being known.

There's no one object that is better than any other object. It's just the recognition of what is being known. Moment by moment, recognizing sounds, thoughts, mind states—whatever is present, as it is.

Three simple guidelines: relax, recognize awareness, and stay interested. Recognizing what is being known in this moment.

Noticing if there's any sense of struggle happening. Can you relax with this and know the experience as it is? This moment, without needing to create or modify. Remembering that at times it may be helpful to let the mind rest with one aspect of experience—with hearing, with the body sensations, sitting, with the breath.

So our practice is to train the mind to be present. And this practice is not limited to our sitting meditation. The continuity that we need to help concentration deepen, to help the mind stabilize, is a training that comes moment to moment. With each moment that there is this recognition of what is being known, when we start to put moments together, there comes a great power and stability in the mind and we can recognize what is. But it relies upon us doing this moment by moment.

If we have one moment of mindfulness and seven hours later have another moment of mindfulness, mindfulness is not so strong. But if we really work with just setting in our minds this intention to know, to be present for what's occurring, and we just keep returning to this—so we get lost many times, but we just stay steady in the recognition when we have the opportunity—if we can work with that steadiness in an easeful way, our practice can really unfold quite naturally.

If we start to have demands about it, it can get quite painful. If we get discouraged and judge, it also becomes very painful. So this morning I'd just like to encourage you to see if you can set this intention to recognize what the mind is knowing in any moment, whether you're sitting, walking, standing, or lying down. The Buddha talked about practicing in all four postures. We practice from the time we wake up to the time we fall asleep—but in an easeful way, steady. It's the steadiness that really helps us.

So in a few moments I'm going to give some instruction for the walking meditation. But first, to see if there are any questions. Tomorrow the instructions will continue and we will also begin the interview process. What we're giving in the hall is very general instruction. Everyone may need tweaking here and there, which you can get in guidance from your teachers.

Each of you will be working with two teachers, alternating between them throughout the retreat. Tomorrow, half of the group will be seen, and the next day, the other half. So if when the lists go up your name isn't there, don't worry—you should be on the next day's list. During those interviews, you will receive more individual guidance.

Right now, if I've said something that totally confuses you and you feel like you just won't make it through the day without getting a question answered, please feel free to ask. But just know that more specific guidance will be coming your way.

Someone asks about the shift in instruction from focusing on the breath to opening up to everything.

There are many different ways to practice, and at times different emphasis is given to different aspects of practice. There can be times when it is very helpful to let the mind rest with the breath. If we sit down and find that we are lost in thought for long periods of time, or there's such a sense of instability and restlessness—which can be worked with, but may be feeling overwhelming for some reason—it may be helpful to let the mind steady on the breath, to really allow that to be the place the attention returns to. Other experiences arise, and we just come back to the breath. That can be a very helpful way of practice, and at times it's been given strong emphasis.

What I think we're trying to encourage here—what I've seen happen in my own teaching—is that some people will set that up as *that's* what needs to happen in practice, *that's* what the mind should be doing. Then you sit down and have all kinds of experiences. There may be recognition of those experiences, but you have the idea that the mind should be on the breath—and then you're a failure, you're no good. But really, the training can be to simply be mindful in any moment and to know what is occurring.

Hopefully within the instructions we give, there will be a place for both. There will be a place where, when it's really helpful, we allow the mind to connect and sustain attention with one particular aspect of experience. And also, we don't set up a hierarchy of that being better than some other experience. This allows us to open to the totality of what the mind is aware of.

Within that, I think we are emphasizing a lot more openness than we maybe have in past retreats here. For myself, that comes from what I'm finding helpful—that's my offering of what I'm finding helpful. It's not to diminish any other way of practice. That's where, in saying you'll receive individual instruction, some of you may find it works better to really work with the breath, sound, or body in a slightly more directed way. It's always an interesting challenge to sit with a large group of people and offer instruction that's helpful to everyone.

One of the things I know is that when I really shifted into a more simple way of practice, I discovered how much subtle striving I had. It was suddenly evident—wow, I really wanted to sustain on an object. I had an underlying idea that if my practice was going well, I'd be really calm, and objects would be known in perfect ease. That didn't allow for a lot of what was actually happening. And then suddenly there was just this sense of, "Oh, yeah, anger is happening, and this is what can be known." It just felt like I was able to include experience on another level.

Another question comes about experiencing allergies and itchiness, and wanting guidance about when to just be with it or when it's okay to move.

I'd like to say that the underlay here is not a right or a wrong, but to be mindful. Whether you're sitting with itchiness, irritation, whether there is the need to move, to scratch your nose—let mindfulness be the base, not the activity, not the experience. So there's complete freedom, in a sense.

And yet, in our lives, we have such habits that as soon as we hit discomfort, we move, we change. It's just amazing to see how deeply ingrained that is.

If we're first responding from that habit, but we're mindful of it, we begin to see it. And that might become instructive in itself. This is a way that wisdom unfolds within the practice. We see, "Oh, it's just this knee-jerk reaction to something that's unpleasant." Okay.

Having interest in this whole situation can be really helpful. As I said in the beginning of the sitting, it's not an interfering interest, but just like opening the mind to this experience. What's happening here? Not with an idea about how one should be or what one should do with it, but just, "Oh, what's happening

here?"

Then it's the opportunity to know the nature of the body—that there's tingling, there might be warmth, there might be various sensations that come with that. Can that just be known as it is? And then maybe we see that there's reaction in the mind, there's agitation, there's not liking. Be aware of that. That's okay. This is what's happening. This is your practice. Just remembering: you don't need to get rid of this to practice. You practice with this.

We will find, if mindfulness is present, that sometimes wisdom comes in and something needs to change. But it's seen with wisdom rather than being that knee-jerk reaction. Maybe we become aware that there is a scent that is triggering it, and perhaps if we sat somewhere else, we wouldn't have that scent. That's just an example. But when we pay attention, more information comes, understanding deepens, and a wise response can happen.

I encourage you to let it be there. It's okay. On one level, just be with both body and mind as it's occurring. As reaction happens, see if that can be let go of or let be, relaxing with this. And then at times we may, on the relative level, need to do something different.

I'd like to move on to the walking instruction. To begin this, I'd like for us to stand up and do a short exercise together. If you'd like to stand up—which is probably a helpful stretch at this point—and then find a place where you'll be able to take a couple of steps in front of you without bumping into anyone or anything.

Standing with your feet about shoulder width apart. Standing is a posture in itself, so mindfulness of standing. We begin right there, once again, with simply knowing this experience. Noticing if there's any tension, any holding, and just seeing if there can be a relaxing with.

As you're standing, bring the awareness to the top of your head. Just notice if any sensations are present, or if it's just a sense of this part of the body.

Let the attention come down to your forehead and the area around your eyes. See what's present, what the mind recognizes. Maybe tightness, moisture. Relaxing with.

Bring the attention to the area of the cheekbones and the jaw. Just noticing, receiving.

In the mouth—sensations in the mouth. Tingling, moisture, vibrations.

Then bring the attention to the back of the head, down into the neck, and the shoulders. Notice if there's a difference in the sensations of each shoulder.

Bring the attention down into the upper arm, the elbows, the lower arms, the wrists, the hands.

The fingertips. And bringing the attention up into the chest, the front of the chest, whatever sensations are present, the back of the chest, down into the abdomen. The pelvic area. The hips. Down into the upper

thigh, the knees, the lower legs, the ankles, and the feet.

With the basis of walking, knowing that you are walking, beginning to lift your right heel and know the experience, pushing the foot forward and dropping it down. If you need to open your eyes to keep your balance, this is fine. Slowly lifting the left heel. Knowing the experience, moving forward, dropping it. And bringing your right foot to be beside your left. Standing, and knowing that you are standing. Knowing the experience of this body, this mind, as it is. Simple and direct in its immediacy.

Taking a few steps to find your cushion again, and once again sitting down, continuing the practice as you do so.

So, walking meditation. Letting it be simple. But I like to do this exercise because it helps us get in touch with knowing the experience of the body within the body. Just that sense of allowing what transpires to arise, be known, and disappear.

When we're doing walking meditation, first we want to really notice if we have an attitude about it. I know for myself, when I first was doing meditation, sitting was the real practice, and walking was what you did when you couldn't sit anymore. Not helpful. So really working with continuity, even from the time you get up from your cushion, letting it all be practice.

With walking meditation, although it's simply to walk and know that you are walking, it can be helpful to find somewhere where you can walk back and forth, just because our habits are so strong. I've seen this in my own mind on retreat where walking comes along, and oh, well, we may need to go to the toilet—and that's very real, not to discourage you from that. But, you know, go walking, then have a cup of tea. Oh, go and check out what's happening in the garden. Oh, I think there's something in my room I need. We can find ways of walking all over, fueled by needing distraction.

And so just to help simplify and to work—so often in our lives when we're walking, we're going somewhere and the mind is ahead of itself. We want to have that sense of receiving experience, that sense of receptivity, settling back, to take one step and know that walking is occurring. That sense of receiving, settling back.

Sometimes, for some people, it's helpful to slow down. I like to say around speed, it's really to walk at the speed that best supports mindfulness. And that will change in the course of a day. There's nothing holy about going really, really slow. And if the mind is really agitated, it might not be so helpful. It's really to see what helps to connect and know experience.

Just to walk and know you're walking. And within that experience of walking, it will be very much like sitting. Sometimes we may be aware of the legs moving, the soles of the feet, the sense of the body moving through space. Sometimes there will be a thought—to recognize thinking is occurring. Sometimes there may be sounds—to recognize hearing is occurring. So again, it's very similar to the sitting practice, but it's done walking, done in movement, done actively with activity in the body. Yet it's that same basis: simply

knowing what is occurring.

And again, at times it may be helpful to let the mind stabilize on one aspect of experience, where for a period of time we're being aware of the movement of the legs, or the movement of the whole body, or of hearing. What helps connect and know this experience? And then, if there's a sense of stability, one opens again to the totality of experience.

In walking, it's really helpful to be inclusive of seeing, because we will be seeing. If we're not seeing, we'll bump into walls and people. And yet, so often we don't recognize when seeing is occurring. It's just to notice. Seeing happens in the same way hearing happens.

We simply notice that hearing happened—the knowing of it occurred. In the same way, when our eyes are open, seeing happens. It's the recognition of this natural process. Sometimes seeing moves into looking, where there's an intention, a more active engagement, perhaps an interest in the specifics of what's being seen. We simply recognize that movement of mind.

We can be inclusive of all experience, and when it's helpful, we let attention rest with just one aspect. Really let this practice be a play that happens throughout the whole day. I'm talking now about walking, but it applies to eating, to our yogi jobs, to showering—it applies to everything we do. Just doing this moment by moment in an easeful way.

A question was asked about whether it's helpful to alternate systematically through seeing, hearing, moving, touching, or simply to open to everything.

This is something we have to pay attention to—the effects of how we practice and what's helpful for us individually. For some people at some times, it will be very helpful to systematically move through each sense door. If that's a way of practice you're familiar with, and it really helps you to connect, to know your experience, then that's fine—because it doesn't matter what your experience is, what matters is that you're aware of it.

However, if out of that systematic approach you find that rigidity or tightness develops in how you're practicing, then you might want to open up more to everything.

It's really important that we notice the effect of how we practice. We can't do that in a harsh or judgmental way. But it's like noticing that moving through seeing, hearing, moving, touching is helping to stabilize awareness—we see that, and yes, it's helpful. Then there might come a point where it's just not as helpful anymore, where that approach is bringing in a tightness. And then we let it go.

There are many, many tools of practice. For myself, it's been helpful to keep practice as simple as possible, and then bring in a tool only when it's needed. It's like digging a well—sometimes you hit different terrain, and things destabilize for a while. As a means of helping to stabilize, one brings in a skillful means. And then when stability returns, we can let the tool go.

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