Morning Instructions Myoshin #4

Myoshin Kelley · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:02:21

As we enter into this period of formal sitting meditation, as we enter into any day of practice, it can be helpful to notice the attitude with which we're approaching. Whether our attitude carries within it seeds of greed, aversion, and delusion, or whether the attitude is that of simply wanting to see things as they are—an attitude that invites receptivity, openness, acceptance.

Many times the way in which we're approaching the practice has within it greed, aversion, and delusion. If it's not seeing, we simply plant seeds of greed, aversion, and delusion. We find greed in our wanting, striving, pushing, forcing. We find aversion too, which becomes very tiring—trying to block out experience, get rid of, not wanting. And sometimes we practice in a way that we want to disconnect, disengage, which will only lead to further confusion and doesn't lead to true wisdom.

It's very helpful to notice if any of these tendencies are there. And in the seeing, not to be judgmental or harsh—perhaps in the seeing of it, it simply lets go. We see the leaning forward, the anticipation. And in that recognition, it's like, "Oh, we don't need to do this." There's a settling back. In this way, whatever our attitude is becomes instructive. We learn from it. It helps us to establish an attitude that is helpful, that is useful.

So checking the very stance in which we're sitting here—sometimes it's reflected in the body. Sometimes there's a sense of putting on the cloak of meditation, something we do. Just noticing if there's a tightness with that. And in the seeing of the tightness, is there relaxation? Relaxing both body and mind as best we can. There can be a sense of having climbed up to the top of the mountain and then just sitting there, knowing that relaxing is happening.

Sometimes awareness of the facial muscles will reveal to us if there are levels of holding, tightness. Just noticing. Relaxing into presence. Receiving this moment as it is. Life's lessons arriving on our doorstep to be understood.

This body, its sensations—being able to know it, to know the nature of this body: heat, pressure, tightness. This mind. Awareness of the activities of mind. The moods of the mind. The states of mind that Rebecca spoke of yesterday. Seeing how the mind is at times colored or has an atmosphere. Fear. Anger. Joy. Contentment.

Many times the experience in this moment will be the awareness of thinking, thoughts arising—a natural process. Just as the ears hear, the eyes see, the mind thinks. Can we recognize this? To see thought as thought, a natural process. There's often the tendency to identify with these thoughts, to become these

thoughts. Many times we find ourselves immersed in a thought world where there's such deep involvement that everything else disappears. We live in a fantasy, a memory. We live in some plan for the future, totally taken up by this thought and become involved with it.

Just needing to recognize the awareness of thinking mind, noticing the difference between being lost in the thought and knowing that thinking is occurring. It may flip back and forth—a sense of being involved, and then awareness of thinking.

Being involved, awareness of thinking. Each moment that there is mindfulness is a moment of receiving data. When moments of mindfulness string together, we find that through each of these moments of receiving data, it grows into information. As information grows, it becomes understanding.

Paying attention to thought without rejecting it, but really wanting to understand what is happening here—we begin to see cause and effect. We begin to see how there can be a thought in the mind, a thought of anger, and it has an effect. There may be a great volatility in the mind. The body may become tense. Or maybe there's a thought of fear. We keep thinking about something horrible about to happen, and we can see that the mind state of fear begins to accelerate, strengthen. We pay attention and we come to understand this, to see this.

When there's enough information, wisdom comes forth. Wisdom understands: we don't need to do this. It's not useful. It's not helpful. And this understanding arises not from a place of aversion, not from not wanting, but through understanding.

Many times these thoughts will have a strong pull—deeply habituated, something that holds complete enchantment over us. We meet it with interest. What's so compelling? What's happening here? It can be a joyful interest. Notice if in that interest there tends to be judgment: "Oh look, here you go again." Or is it, "Wow, look at this! What's so compelling about this thought that keeps replaying itself over and over, and we don't even like it? It's not pleasant, it's unpleasant."

Perhaps we drop into an energetic sense. Feel the pull. Let it be revealed what the pull is towards. It might be some pleasantness. Self-righteousness can have this sense of puffing oneself up—there can be a pull to that. Whatever it is, let it reveal itself.

This interest brings a steadiness. It's that willingness to look at a compelling story and to know its components: the mind state that's present, the thoughts that feed it, the impact of those thoughts. Notice if within this story there's the weaving of "I am." Notice the effect when it's "I am my sadness" versus when it's just sadness.

If we find the stories so compelling that there's a sense of getting sucked into them, we can turn the attention to some other aspect of experience, letting balance return to the mind. Or we can work with recognizing—if the story seems to come out of a state of fear—recognizing the fear, opening to it for a moment, and then noticing a more neutral aspect of experience: the breath, hearing, the body posture.

Resting the mind there for a moment, and then returning attention to the fear. Alternating between what's difficult and what's neutral helps bring steadiness in the face of difficulty, rather than being pulled into and identified with the experience.

All aspects of experience are to be known. No part left out.

Before I open it up to questions this morning, I wanted to review a little bit about the eight precepts. Annie spoke about these precepts on our opening night, and for some of you it may have been new, or just settling into the retreat, you may not have been quite ready to take the eight precepts. Just by way of invitation for those of you who would like to, this evening we will once again be chanting the precepts, and if you feel moved to take eight precepts, this is an opportunity. Of course, you can do this any day—you can simply chant the eight precepts to yourself. But I wanted to speak a little more about them in case they are new to you.

I suppose first to begin with: why would we even do this? It can be simply a level of greater simplicity. I know for myself, when I've taken eight precepts, after the midday meal, life gets quite simple. One sits and walks, sits and walks, and maybe has a cup of tea or a glass of juice at some point.

One of the things this practice revealed to me was just how much, in the morning, my mind could obsess with food. What's for lunch? Will I like it? Will I get enough? Just how many thoughts there were around this. And suddenly, with the precept, that was simply gone. It was another level of simplicity—a way of looking to see what's extra, what can be let go of.

I really want to emphasize in speaking about these eight precepts that if you decide to take them, it doesn't make you better than anyone else or more of a renunciate. We all have different needs. For some people, not having anything after the midday meal would be too much for the body, too much for the energy system. It's really about looking for ourselves to see what, for us, is extra. Can we let go of it? It's using the container in just a slightly different way—having things that we're not doing that the mind might bump up against, which we can learn from, reflect something back to us. So simply see whether in your body-mind experience it makes sense to work in a slightly different way.

The sixth precept is to undertake the precept to refrain from eating at the wrong time, which means after the midday meal. So if you're taking this precept, after lunch there's no longer taking of solid food. If it's a clear liquid, it's fine. If it's clear juice, it's fine. And there will be juice put out for all of those who are on eight precepts.

Some people take medication, and medication is okay to take—some of it may need to be taken in the evening. Sometimes food needs to be taken with that medication. So then it's really seeing, okay, maybe a banana is what needs to be eaten with that medication. But it might start to turn into, later in our mind, "Well, with my banana, I think I need to have some cereal and milk and yogurt." And then we see there's a great proliferation. It's really just looking at what's truly needed here.

The next precept is to undertake the precept to refrain from dancing, singing, music, going to shows, wearing garlands, and beautifying oneself with perfumes and cosmetics. I think it's pretty self-explanatory, but there are interesting levels to the precept. They're not black and white. I was on eight precepts, and then one day noticed that I really liked for my socks to match my outfit. I'd never been aware of it. And so it was just seeing, here was a level of beautifying oneself, adorning oneself. It's interesting. I love the precepts as a basis of investigation, as a basis of seeing what's the intention, the motivation behind what I do.

The eighth precept is to undertake the precept to refrain from using high and luxurious seats and beds. Your beds have been offered to you. But it's to see—it's this whole thing around comfort that we have. I've watched at times going for the most comfortable seat, putting pillows here and there, and that's a form of making it luxurious. Just noticing. And so can we really renounce and just work with what's here?

It may be that we have a certain back pain, back injury, and to take away the cushion completely is just going to injure the back. It doesn't seem like there's much point in that. But when we keep doing things from the perspective of wanting more comfort, more pleasure—that's what we need to notice.

You can take these precepts for the remainder of the retreat. That's one way to do it. Another way is to take the precepts on what's called observance days. These are days of the month according to the moon's phases that in traditional Buddhist countries, many people would go to the monastery and practice for that day. Lay people would undertake for a day to live by the eight precepts—not eating after the midday meal, simply simplifying for that day.

It's also possible that we may decide to take them and then discover we have hypoglycemia.

The energy system really can't handle it. That's okay. You can shift. It's not like you undertake this and you are chained to it forever. We're using it as exploration.

I think the kitchen does need to know if we are, for periods of time, doing the eight precepts so that they can put out tea accordingly. So just let the kitchen know.

Someone asked about where the line is with what's allowable. There is no distinctive line. What we find is that in different traditions, there are different allowables. In the Thai forest tradition, as it has come to the West—and I'm not quite sure if it's also true in Thailand—cheese, because it was made from certain products, was considered an allowable. And I think from the Thai tradition, cheese and chocolate were both allowables. Dark chocolate, that is—without the milk.

What to say? I never found it a healthy diet. I never found what it did for me so helpful. But I would say, if it's placed on the eight precept table, you can consider it an allowable, and then you can see for yourself whether it really fits to do that.

One of the things for me is this: if I sat all afternoon thinking about whether there would be cheese,

whether there would be chocolate—I mean, you work with that. That's what comes up. And I think this really does point to the fact that there is no clear line, and that what is really useful is looking at what's happening in the mind. What's the underlying intention, motivation? Let that teach you.

Someone raised the experience of having music arise in the mind. That seems to be the way it is for some people, especially if we've had a lot of input from music. And again, it's really about looking at the relationship to it as it arises—that it's arising out of conditions, part of those conditions being that our world is filled with music, and so it's reflected. It comes back.

Notice how you're relating to that. Is there judgment? "It shouldn't be this way." Not wanting, or liking. Notice where that pull to hum along, to become involved, comes in. Really be interested in this, because that interest brings a freshness of mind to it.

What can happen is it gets perpetuated by a roteness of mind, by not seeing it clearly, by just letting it play and play and play. It's not that you're stopping it with mindfulness, but that you're recognizing it, and then you're seeing if it's being fed or not being fed.

Another interesting aspect I've heard—it's not so much been in my own experience, but I've heard people say that recognizing the mood in the mind can be really helpful. Because it's like on a happy day you get a happy tune, on a sad day you get a sad tune. And so by paying attention to what's there, you can really come into just the knowing of the totality of that experience.

Chanting is fine. Again, it comes down to intention. What's the intention? Chanting isn't done as a way of entertaining oneself through melody. And if it is, perhaps you might want to renounce your chanting. But for the most part, when we chant, we're aligning our hearts with something wholesome. These are the chants that we're offering, and it's a turning of the mind towards that which is wholesome. So it's not done by way of amusement—it's done from a wholesome motivation.

We're using these precepts here from the perspective of how we're working on this retreat. In this retreat, we all have different occupations, we come from different ways of life, different walks of life, so much different conditioning, so many different things we might do in our lives. And in being here, we're really just simplifying as a way to understand more clearly, to see more clearly the workings of the mind. That's the perspective from which we're doing this.

This isn't a statement that classical music is unwholesome. It's in no way meant to say that. What it may direct you towards is simply a deepening understanding of what's being touched, where that's coming from. It's like taking any career in life—there can be mixed motivations. Some of it may be wholesome. Sometimes we create our music out of wanting to enhance a sense of self, wanting to strengthen some unwholesome quality. And so this inquiry will help us to see if there are underlying things there. But it's not a statement about the music in itself, because that can come from very different places.

It's to notice what happens as we become aware of thinking. And that is one experience. It's already

passed—it finishes. But actually, I want to do a very short exercise. I promise it will just be a couple of minutes. I'm running a little bit over, but just a very short exercise, because I think we can be more aware of thinking than we realize.

So just for a moment, sit with your eyes closed. And I want you to think. I want you to think without having a break between thoughts. It doesn't matter what the thought is. It can be totally gibberish. You can think about what you're wearing. You can think about what's happening. You can think about anything. Just keep thinking. And see if, as you're thinking, there is an awareness of thinking. That awareness is not involved in the thought. It's just knowing. But keep thinking. Keep the thoughts going. Keep perpetuating them.

It's their awareness. It's their knowing. Knowing that's not involved.

You can stop thinking.

So really, just to know with thoughts, there are a couple of really common experiences. The awareness of thinking happens, and the thought, like everything else, is subject to impermanence. It ceases, disappears. It's also possible the thought continues. Can we be aware of the thought without being involved in it?

It's very much like an old man sitting on a bench watching children play. He's watching these children, but he's not involved, he's not doing. Just that sense of awareness that this is occurring.

And it will be different at different times. It's just to see what happens. Sometimes we may notice in the recognition of thought, there can be a sense of subtly cutting off, pushing away. And that can just be noticed too.

Okay, so another day of practice. Great blessing. May the blessings of the Dhamma shower upon you.

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