The View That Supports Understanding

Myoshin Kelley · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 56:58

I want to begin tonight by just saying what's foremost in my heart this evening. And that is a deep appreciation for the work that you're all doing here.

I've had a couple of days where the events of the world—and this is not some catastrophic thing that's happened, but the ongoing current events of the world—have just really been saddening me. And then, you know, receiving appeals in the mail from all different kinds of organizations. Usually a couple times a year, I'll either collect them or as they come in, realize I just can't give to everybody. But when I would receive them, both through the mail and email, it was like every time I looked, it just spoke to my heart—something else that was calling upon me to give to what's a very worthy cause.

And it just caused me to reflect on the world we live in, the level of delusion in the world, the level of ignorance, unwise actions. And just the knowing that it's hard to see in the world what's helpful, what's useful.

Then I just so appreciate the fact that we are gathered here really to look so deeply into the roots of suffering, the cause of suffering. That we're pulled here by that movement of the heart to alleviate the pain. For me today, there were so many tender moments of that—that if I didn't feel like I was doing this work, I would probably feel broken by it, knowing that it would be too much to bear. But knowing what we're doing, having some inkling of what's possible, helps me to be with it. It helps me to realize that on every level in life I can only do the best that I can, but that there is this necessity to do this work, to look deeply.

Last night, Joseph ended the last part of his talk by speaking about wisdom. And I wanted to continue speaking about wisdom this evening. In particular tonight, speaking about wisdom by way of right view and some of the things the Buddha pointed to.

The wisdom aspect of this practice is so important. It really distinguishes it. And in my own experience, I have to say that the taste of wisdom is like no other taste. The taste of seeing clearly. The taste of deepening understanding. And in our lives we have moments of this, and probably those moments where we had some sniff of the truth is a part of what brought us here.

The path of wisdom is the path that we're following through this meditation practice that we're doing. It's a way of deepening our understanding. And as Joseph said last night, right view is where we are able to see things in their nature as they are. And this is what our practice helps us to do.

This practice is insight meditation, where we have insight into the three characteristics that are common

to all experience—that these experiences are all impermanent in their nature, that they're all unsatisfactory due to their impermanence, that they're not lasting, that we can't find happiness in the experiences, and that they're all insubstantial. This is what we come to see, and in the seeing, understand more clearly the causes of suffering. And in understanding the causes of suffering, we stop acting in ways that perpetuate the pain, the distress, and rest in the way things are.

The path as the Buddha laid it out both begins and ends with wisdom. This is when he was speaking about what's called the Noble Eightfold Path. I'm just briefly going to mention the eight factors—I'm not going into the different aspects of the Eightfold Path tonight—but it's right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The wisdom aspect of this path is right view, or right understanding, and right intention.

It always interested me that the Buddha said the path begins with this. But I can see there are a couple of good reasons why this is so. In order to follow this path, there has to be a glimmer of wisdom—somewhere we've tasted of the sense of possibility, where we have some enough inspiration to begin to move on the journey, to want to, to aspire to wake up. So we need to have some small voice of wisdom in there to begin the journey.

But the Buddha also, by beginning with right view, was speaking to the fact that it's helpful to have a context for the work that we're doing here. This is a different kind of wisdom.

And just to say that in the teachings there are three kinds of wisdom. The first is *sutta maya paññ̃a*, which is information that we gather. We hear the teachings, we get instruction, and this is a type of wisdom. This is a type of information, because it's going to be really helpful to us if we get information that is correct, that is useful. Coming to a retreat, receiving dharma talks and instructions—this is all a way that we're gathering this information.

And then you've probably noticed as you sit there that this information is with you. It could be the voice in the back of the mind saying, "Why don't you try this?" Or it might be giving some perspective to what you're doing. An example of this would be how we keep talking about seeing things in their nature rather than seeing something as being mine. There's a difference between experiencing fear and seeing the nature of fear—the way the mind is when fear is present—versus what's happening when it's the story about *my* fear and the thoughts are perpetuating it. Sometimes when we're really caught in the fear, if we remember this piece of information—see it in its nature, see it as it is, knowing this is just fear, this is the nature of fear—this information that we then process, digest, and examine in our own experience becomes another level of wisdom, which is called *cintā maya paññ̃a*, where we're actually applying what we've heard.

And then we keep applying what we've heard, and we find at some point that there's direct experience and the understanding that comes from it. This is *bhāvanā maya paññ̃a*. This is an intuitive wisdom that we can't force, that we can't make happen. But it comes about through this steadiness of mind, this

application of mindfulness. And out of that comes a deepening wisdom.

So tonight in my talk, much of what I'm going to be speaking about is really on the level of giving you some information, some aspects of right view that the Buddha pointed to. I often get this picture of the Buddha sitting at the top of the mountain, having climbed to the top of the mountain. He knows the potential of the journey, what's possible as human beings. And sitting there, he can view the terrain, and he points to what needs to be seen in order to free the mind.

He's a very pragmatic teacher. He pointed toward what is useful for us—what is useful for us who are sitting at the bottom of the mountain and don't often see so clearly. Because we have habits of misperception, habits where we're just moved in habituated ways and can't always distinguish what the truth is.

He explained that there are levels of distortion that happen. It's not because we're bad, horrible beings that we don't see clearly, but simply because we don't have the steadiness of mind to recognize things as they are. He said we experience distortion by way of distortion of perception, by way of distortion of thoughts, and distortion of views.

This first piece, distortion of perception, is where there's some experience through any of the sense doors and it's not seen clearly, yet we believe that whatever we saw is the way things are and live as if that's true. We see it in many different ways.

I had an experience on retreat once where I was sharing a room with a friend. It was a very tiny room, and there was only enough space that if I was getting dressed and she needed to go to the bathroom, I had to move out of her way. One day this was happening—she wanted to go to the bathroom, I moved out of her way, and I'm getting dressed, practicing mindfulness as best I can. She goes into the bathroom, and I know she's gone into the bathroom.

Then a few minutes later, all of a sudden, I see something—it's like seeing something out of the corner of your eye. It was jarring in the seeing of it. And then in the next moment, there's the seeing of a bald head. And then in the next moment, fear arose really strongly, and there's the thought, "It's an alien. It's an alien."

A moment before, I had been alone. My friend had gone into the bathroom. She was a nun, so she had a shaved head. But in that moment of misperception, there was fear, panic, and it all started to perpetuate.

We have many moments of misperception in our lives. Walking outside at night, constantly coming over here tonight—just moments of misperception.

There was a thump in the woods beside me. First there was simply the hearing, and then this whole flurry of possible interpretations arose. Then I realized it was just something falling from a tree. But in these moments of misperception, we can have strong reactions. And many times we don't check them out. We

don't look. We don't have the stability that we're cultivating to see more clearly.

From these perceptions, thoughts form. And these thoughts, which were based on misperceptions to begin with, we totally believe to be true. Being on retreat is such a wonderful place to explore this. Because our fellow yogis—do we have stories about them? Maybe the odd one. Or maybe it's just me that does it. But we get one piece of information and we make up an entire story about it.

I think Vipassana romance was mentioned earlier—how on retreat we can sometimes experience a strong attraction to somebody. And out of that, we may start to build stories. I had a friend who was once sitting retreat, and during that time she became attracted to another person. At the end of the retreat, she was talking to me about her experience, and she spoke as if she had found her soulmate. She said, "When we would be in close proximity to each other, the vibrations between us would be dancing." He would often sit near where she sat, and it was this complete love affair as they ate together in silence. They both did yoga, and lo and behold, they practiced at the same time. "After tea, I like to go outside," she said, "and he would follow."

She was in a state of enchantment as she told me about it. The sad part was that he had already left the retreat. But she had some stick-with-it-ness. She asked questions, found out who he was, where he lived, discovered his phone number. She called him up and described who she was—the love of his life, his soulmate.

He responded by saying, "Oh, I think I vaguely remember who you are."

But she had this whole story going. It's sad, isn't it? And how much do we do this in our lives? We make up stories about everything. They're based on misperception, on not seeing clearly. And then we live as if they are true. These thoughts, which were not based on truth, start to solidify even more. They become our views, our opinions about how things are.

I'd like to share a story that I think is classic in describing this aspect of views. This is an actual transcript of a radio conversation between a U.S. naval ship and the Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October 1995.

Americans: "Please divert your course fifteen degrees to the north to avoid a collision."

Canadians: "Recommend that you divert your course fifteen degrees to the south to avoid a collision."

Americans: "This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert your course."

Canadians: "No, I say again, you divert your course."

Americans: "This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States Atlantic Fleet. We are accompanied by three destroyers, three cruisers, and numerous support vessels. I demand that you change your course fifteen degrees north—that's one-five degrees north—or countermeasures

will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship."

Canadians: "This is a lighthouse. Your call."

Wars happen from attachment to views which are based on distorted perceptions—these habits that have solidified until we become bound in them. The Buddha said that because of these distortions, we take what is impermanent to be permanent, what is unsatisfactory to be satisfactory, what is not self to be self, and what is unlovely to be lovely.

So, if we have this tendency towards misperception, we need to look towards what will help us see clearly. So far in the retreat, we've been giving many instructions and information to help us do this. But tonight I wanted to speak about two aspects of right view that the Buddha spoke about.

He said it was really helpful to come to understand karma, the laws of cause and effect. This is not the promised karma talk—I'm just going to be touching upon it tonight—because it is something that we can look to over and over again in our experience. It becomes so clear through practicing. If we have some framework for understanding it in a simple way, that can be immensely helpful.

I am not one of the great intellectual scholars of this time. What I have learned mostly comes from my practice, and so I can only speak of it in very simple terms. Karma has many layers to it, complexities to it. But in my own experience, it has been so immensely helpful to just really begin to see the cause and effect at work in my mind. Just as simple as seeing when anger is present, the effect of it. When that anger is fed, the effect of it. When loving-kindness is in the mind, the effect of it. It's like it's just greeting us as we sit here. But if we've never heard of it, it might take a while to really understand that's what's being seen.

So the law of karma—karma literally means action. Technically, it means volitional action. It's where what we do, what we say, has an effect. There's an impact. It plants seeds out of which further conditions will arise.

I heard the saying once about karma that it means you don't get away with anything. On one level, it's really true—we don't get away with anything. But I think that can have a connotation that's a little bit negative. For myself, when I first heard about karma, I thought it was going to be where all of the bad things I ever did in my life came back to me. I didn't reflect on the wholesome. Karma was bad news. And yet there's wholesome karma. So it's really just this understanding that how we meet life in this moment has consequences.

If somebody comes and vents their anger on us and we vent right back, that's going to have consequences. When we meet life with a heart of generosity, that too has consequences. If you think of somebody you know who just by their nature is very generous—the atmosphere that is around them, that people tend to trust them, people are at ease around them, it's easy to be with them—there's an effect from it.

We find that there's wholesome karma, or wholesome actions, wholesome volition. That is where the

action is skillful, helpful on the journey of awakening, spiritually beneficial, and it ripens as happiness and good fortune.

And then there's unwholesome karma—actions which lead to more suffering. They're unskillful, cause pain to ourselves or others, are rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion, and they ripen as states of anger, jealousy, frustration, laziness.

We have a choice in our life as to what seeds we plant. The results of past actions will ripen when conditions are right, and that we don't have control over. But in a moment where anger is arising in us—which can be a result of unwholesome past actions—we could sit there and get really judgmental of ourselves. "Oh, look at you, idiot. You must have done something really bad in the past, and this is what's happening to you now." But is that helpful? No, it's not helpful. But if we sit by way of not being victim to anger, but facing anger, looking to what can be understood, how this can be known in a helpful way, we're not perpetuating those seeds.

There's an old Cherokee story. One evening, an old Cherokee was telling his grandson about a battle that was going on inside him. He said, "My son, it is between two wolves. One is evil—anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good—joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith."

The grandson thought about this for a moment, and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one I feed."

If we feed our habits of anger, jealousy, pride—this is what will win. This is what we'll see the effect of in our lives. We can see it clearly on a day when we so-called get up out of bed on the wrong side, where aversion is present. And instead of being mindful of it, we feed it. Everywhere we go, that aversion hits us in the face. Or we can feed the seeds of loving-kindness, generosity, wisdom.

We can really develop a sense of how karma works through working with the precepts, living the precepts. The very immediate thing that becomes quite knowable very quickly in practice is that we see the results of our past actions when we sit down in silence—the memories that come back. If we did things we don't feel good about, they will often repeatedly arise in the mind. If we're not mindful, this will lead us into guilt, feeling horrible about ourselves. But if we have been living life skillfully, as we sit down, we sit down with the joy of virtue, and the mind finds it easy to collect itself. It's not continually replaying these tapes.

Just to say that if we are sitting here and having a lot of memories from the past come up, this is where we can really plant the wholesome seeds—in having that willingness to acknowledge, see, and feel in this moment the impact of that memory, without perpetuating the story, but just allowing whatever needs to be felt to be there.

There's a dog that's been in my life. His name is Max. Max was bred from a pit bull and a bull mastiff. In meeting Max, being around him, I came to see something of what the karma of having pit bull genetics may be—where it tends to be that when he's backed into a corner, he moves into aggression. It's almost like it's in his cells.

What I noticed with Max is that one day I was out walking, down around the back of the loop, and sometimes they shift cow manure from one field to another, dropping it all along the road. Max had this great taste for cow manure. He loved to eat it. And Max would also then like to turn around and kiss me, as dogs do, and he had a huge tongue. So you can imagine this was not such an exciting proposal. Besides, just the thought of what he was eating was a bit strong for me. So I was trying to get him to stop, and I kept telling him, "No, no, no." But he wasn't listening. A pit bull can fixate on something, and they just want what they want. And then finally I just hit him. I whacked him, and he bit me. At first it wasn't a bad bite—he just put his teeth around my hand.

It was shocking. But then I did reflect on how I had hit him first. It took me a while to realize that.

What was interesting to me about Max was that this was how he would react when backed into a corner. But then he would go into remorse. He would feel bad about what he did. Having watched Max do this a number of times, and now he's much older—very old in fact—I really have the sense that he has worked through this pattern. I don't know, I could be really projecting here. Which it sounds like I might be. But he's not prone to it in the same way.

It's like we have these habits—our past karma ripening, not always in the way that we like. But if we pay attention, if we look, understanding can come. Just in the moment of mindfulness, we can see something of the effects. In the moment when anger is really strong in the mind and it's recognized, mindfulness has a coolness to it—that coolness that comes from clear seeing. I've seen, when I've been in a heated argument and I just had that one moment of recognition, for that moment the whole momentum of the anger is stopped. There's a coolness.

So it's really through our practice, looking to see cause and effect. Not looking by figuring out, but allowing it to reveal itself as we look. It can be seen.

I have found the understanding of karma to be very empowering. And this is not just because of the sense of having a deepening understanding of planting wholesome seeds—though that's really helpful. It's also that in moments where I've done something that was not based in wisdom, something done out of the habituated mind, not seeing clearly, just in the recognition of that, I realize that I am responsible for my own karma. This is a seat I can sit in. I can take this seat.

One time I said something publicly that I felt was really unskillful.

Actually, somebody pointed out to me that it was unskillful. And then I went, okay, it's unskillful. Then I recognized it. And it was really hard to be with until the phrase of equanimity came to me: all beings are

owners of their own karma. With that, there was a sense of empowerment. Okay, I will live with the consequences, but I will learn.

It's so different when we have this desire, this interest in learning from whatever happens. I always have my own definition of karma—it's this personalized package of wake-up pills. The lessons in life we need to learn come to us as a result of past actions.

There's something very freeing, too, in the aspect of it being cause and effect. Things are unfolding according to natural laws. The peace that's so freeing in this is the peace that sometimes people are fearful of—that there is this selflessness in that there's no solid I, me, mine that this is all referring back to, but that causes and conditions are governed by laws and unfolding according to those laws. And with that, this selflessness doesn't mean that everything is chaotic, random. There are laws governing it. And karma is one of these laws governing that unfolding. It's a lawful process. It's nature. Nature unfolding.

Understanding karma really helps us to pay attention to what we do, what we say, how we live. Because these are the laws that govern the world in which we live. This is from a sutra called "The Wise and the Foolish": *Do not take lightly small misdeeds, believing they can do no harm. Even a tiny spark of fire can set alight a mountain of hay.* Even the smallest acts can bring great benefit. So both with misdeeds and great acts, they can have consequences. Taking care, looking, and understanding this law in our own experience.

The Buddha also talked about right view as being the realization in our own experience, our own understanding of the Four Noble Truths—that this understanding of these truths leads to liberation. This is not a full talk on the Four Noble Truths, of course, but just touching on them. I'm giving this information as a framework, that part of wisdom that gives context, so we have some idea of what we're looking into, why we're sitting with suffering.

Why would anybody want to do this? Earlier in my life, I chose the path of celebration. I thought, we're having life, don't we want to rejoice? But I didn't understand that one needed to look deeply into suffering to find true happiness. It was that understanding that would unbind the heart. Without that deep understanding, happiness is only temporary. It's only a state of joy, a state of happiness. The real peace comes from understanding.

So just briefly, the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is the truth of suffering—that there is suffering, that there are unsavory aspects to this experience of mind and body. In my younger life, I was kind of brought up in the Barbie doll culture, where there was always this happy face given to life, where suffering was denied, not seen. Out of that, what happens is that when we hit something where there is suffering in our life—which can come about through the aging process, through sickness, through encounters with death—when we hit that, if we don't understand the truth of suffering, we think we've done something wrong. We're to blame. We take suffering personally. And that's painful.

So the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, is meant to stop us from taking suffering personally and to help us recognize the unpleasant elements without defining ourselves by them. If every time in our meditation practice we hit unpleasant experience and we define ourselves by it, it becomes miserable, horrible. Whereas, as Joseph pointed to this morning, we just recognize unpleasant experience as unpleasant experience. We know it as a feeling tone of some experience, and it's not referring back to I, me, mine. There's so much more ease.

The second noble truth is the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is craving. We see craving in the desire for sense pleasure, the desire to be, the sense of self—I am. And we also find a craving at times not to be. We want to annihilate, get rid of, not to exist anymore. In our practice, we look into craving in all of its forms, to investigate it, to see it, so that we can understand.

I keep saying, as Joseph said... But it's our teacher. Not meaning him—though he is too—but the craving, when it's here. Look. We're so afraid of our suffering, so afraid that it will be overwhelming. And yet it's our teacher. We're looking the wrong way. But looking with that refuge of awareness, of mindfulness—let it speak. Because when we see it clearly, the mind lets go of its own accord. When we understand.

And then there we are, right in the third noble truth: the cessation of suffering. From seeing for ourselves. This is to be realized.

And the fourth noble truth is the Noble Eightfold Path, the path that the Buddha laid out. This is to be developed. This is what we're doing here in our practice.

Right view—in the beginning, we don't have it in our own experience. We don't see clearly. But looking towards these aspects of experience, that's what the Buddha was pointing to. Sitting on top of the mountain, he was trying to point towards what is helpful in our own experience, what we can look toward that will help us see things as they are. Understanding the law of karma. Looking into suffering, the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering.

So in our practice, can we take our seat? Can we look at whatever's meeting us? Look directly. Not through our usual habituated ways of seeing. Not through the thinking about, figuring out, analyzing. But really letting life speak to us. Learning. Listening. Letting that wisdom deepen of its own accord.

I'd like to share a teaching from Sayadaw U Tejaniya: "Once you truly understand the benefits of the practice, you will never stop practicing. You will always keep going wherever you are. When you are really able to apply the Dharma in your life and start seeing the difference it makes, then the qualities of the Dharma will become obvious. The qualities of the Dharma will come alive for you. They will become meaningful to you."

And this is what's happening as we do this work, as we practice.

By way of inspiration, I'd like to close with a poem from a Chinese Buddhist nun who lived in the

thirteenth century. Her name was Miaozong:

In the shade of two trees and the hanging green of the cliffs,
one lamp for a thousand years broke open upon the dark barriers.
I too now realize that phenomena are nothing but a magic show
and happily grow old among the mist, the rivers, and the stones.

May the wholesome energy that arises from our practice be dedicated to the welfare and liberation of all beings everywhere.

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