Nature of Insight

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:04:25

After Joseph's beautiful talk last night about cultivating wisdom and the perception of insight into impermanence, I wanted to talk a little bit tonight about the nature of insight, of wisdom. What is it? How does it arise? What supports its arising?

This is insight meditation, so what do we mean by insight? Insight is really an aspect of wisdom, paññā, a mental factor that comes and goes in the mind stream like any other mental factor. It's not something we can create by willpower. I don't know if you believe that yet, but it's true.

So what actually is an insight? Is it something created new, some new thing or way of being that suddenly comes into being that hasn't been here before, that now we're somehow different and new, or the world is different and new, some new way of thinking about things? Does the situation change? No, no, no, no to any of that.

Remember the quotation Joseph read where the Buddha said that the perception of impermanence, the perception of anicca, basically leads to the ending of the conceit of self. And really, that's what insight is. It's a shift of perception. We experience it not as a thought. Insight is basically not thought. It's a kind of aha. Something in the mind shifts and we perceive a particular situation in a new way, from another angle. Has everything changed, or is it just that our view has changed? Really, something in the mind lets go and we're able to see in a new way.

In speaking of the Eightfold Path beginning with right view, sometimes I think that's actually quite literal. Right view: accurate perception, accurately seeing ourselves and the world as it is. So it's not a matter of thinking. Of course we'll think about it. Thinking will come, but that's usually after.

The example I always use, because for me it really works well, of what I mean by this, what insight really is, is those Magic Eye graphics. You know what I mean. They used to have books and books of them, where you look and it's just little graphic designs. There's nothing, no picture that you can tell what it is. When you look, it's just red and green, red and green, little designs. If you look in the right way, and the right way happens to be steadily, without looking away, but relaxed, unfocused, suddenly out pops some other literal design, like a spaceship or dinosaurs or whatever.

Now, if you go to that and you haven't seen it before and you say, "I know there's dinosaurs. I'm looking for dinosaurs," you won't see it. And some people never really get the knack. But once you've done it once or twice, you see the steady, steady way of looking, unfocused, relaxed, and boom, out pops the thing. And it doesn't last, does it? It goes back and you see it the other way again. But having had that shift of

perception, you know that that's possible. You know that there's both ways of looking at that particular experience.

Once you learn how to do it and you practice, you go through the whole book—oh, this is a dinosaur, this is a spaceship—you learn how to do it. The first time is amazing. Wow. By the end of it, it's like, oh yeah, well, that's how it is. You don't have to think about it anymore. It's made a shift in your mind stream, a shift in your understanding.

Even though the seeing of the dinosaurs doesn't stay, the knowing that it's that way—the first time it's amazing, but then it starts to have an effect on your mind stream. Until it's just our whole view, our whole understanding that we didn't even know we were clinging to has changed, and we know there's something else in that. And it's no big deal. You don't have to have an argument with someone about it. You can't show anyone else. But if someone came up to you and said, "No, that's not true," you don't have to get all upset. You're not defending a view. You just know—oh, well, it is.

I'm sorry you can't see it. You know, there's nothing to get upset about.

So that really, to me, works very well with insight—whether it's insight into impermanence, into not-self, whether it's insight into a particular problem, a personality problem, a mathematical problem (not that I know anything about that), or a scientific problem. Something lets go that we didn't know we were holding to. It's like this, this is right, and we don't even know—oh, we see it from another angle. That's just a quick aha moment.

And as I was saying, the moment just doesn't last but a second. I don't know, maybe it's longer than a yoctosecond or whatever it is. It's a little more measurable, but it doesn't last very long. But the time is irrelevant. It has an effect on our understanding, on our mind stream. Something has changed. We're never quite so fixed. Yet we can't hold on to that moment of insight, that sense of, "Ah, it's really different."

We try. First there's just a thought, because that's how most of us—maybe not everyone, but for most of us—really thinking is how we kind of... it comes secondary, but it's how we think we're understanding something, holding on. "Oh yeah, I really do see something. That emotion wasn't here before, and now it's here, and it'll go away. I really do get it that it's all impermanent."

But that thought's really not carrying anything. It's describing, but it's not really carrying the freshness of the insight. You'll notice the first one or two thoughts is kind of, "Oh, that's interesting," and then it goes on and on. And it's okay—cut it. Two thoughts is enough. Just go back to what's happening in this next moment.

But we say, "No, let me feel that again. It is impermanent. It is impermanent. I'm really seeing impermanence everywhere." And it's long gone. It's just become a concept again.

But the moment of insight—and this is what's really interesting—it can happen with any kind of

experience. It doesn't have to only be in some really deep, subtle state. It's just that shift of perception. It's about the quality of the mind at that moment, not about the quality of the experience itself.

Here's an example—this is one any of you could have said. Someone told me this at a retreat a few years ago. She was having a very uncomfortable sitting, a lot of restlessness. Not dying pain, but restlessness, really uncomfortable, couldn't sit still. So she stood up to just stand and be with standing. Well, standing, she was still really restless, uncomfortable. And of course, when you're standing, you're one step closer to being able to walk and just walk on out of the hall. So she was standing there thinking, "This is really stupid. I should just leave and fix it." You know, that would fix it. The problem is this restlessness, this uncomfortableness. Fixing it would be to just get the heck out of here. Of course, she was at the back of the hall, and it was a crowded hall and hard to get out. That probably had something to do with why she didn't leave.

But anyway, as she stood there, just kept noticing, she suddenly became aware—and it was very profound for her. How did she say it? "Oh, it's just uncomfortable sensation. That's what's happening. An aversion in the mind." But really seeing: oh, uncomfortable sensation and aversion, and that's all it is. It's really not a problem.

So in seeing the uncomfortable instead of the whole story about "I have to do something, this can't be borne," in seeing aversion where aversion simply becomes another arising mental experience at that point—oh, no problem. And it was really very profound for her, seeing that the freedom, the ease, the peace wasn't about getting rid of the situation. I mean, that's what we've been talking about the whole time. And that's what we each know. But when we have an experience like that for ourselves, it really deepens our insight.

That's a moment of wisdom. And it really deepens our faith, our trust. *Oh yes, that really is true. This really might be the way.* And it's very different from someone telling us, from thinking about it. That shift can happen in any moment with any experience. It's not about getting a better experience to have a better insight.

So that's where I want to go with this—talking about what supports, what enables this shift of perception. This non-willpowered suddenly letting go of the beliefs, the ideas, the viewpoints we're holding to that we don't even know we're holding to. When the Buddha talked about the perception of impermanence, it's not that we're consciously going around saying, "I perceive permanence, I want to perceive permanence." We don't even think in those terms. Unconsciously, we're perceiving permanence and not even knowing it—the assumption of permanence, just as he was talking about that.

When insight arises, when wisdom—*paññā*—arises in the mind, it arises because in that moment the quality of mind, of heart, of consciousness (these are all kind of the same thing) is in a state of openness, of non-clinging. It's interesting—the Buddha said that the supreme state of sublime peace has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely, liberation through non-clinging. Liberation through non-clinging

could be thought of or seen as the end of our path. In a way, that's what they say is the experience of the Arhat. But it's not only the end of the path. It's the moment-to-moment unfolding of the path. Wisdom insight arises only in a mind moment that is free from clinging, that is not contracted and closed around the incredible starring role of me, me, me—where there's just like a fraction of a millimeter of space for something other to be perceived.

So what supports this opening, this purity, this non-clinging quality of mind? That's really, in some ways, what you could say the practice is about. It's not that the experience needs to change. Suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering in this particular experience, in the big picture—doesn't really change. The mind that's holding to something, that's colored by *kilesa*, by greed, by fear, by aversion, by views, by me, me, me—something in it allows it to open. Clinging doesn't arise.

Moment by moment, steady awareness—that's what we're practicing here—leads to a kind of stability. The continuity allows for the *kilesa* to be seen and not fed, allows for wisdom to arise. But that's not the only way. There are other things I want to talk about tonight.

We tend, especially in a meditation retreat, because that's what we're here for—to meditate, right? We didn't come here to have everything be the same as our daily life, probably. We came here to meditate. We came here to meditate for whatever reasons we say to ourselves, and we probably all have different language for it. But one is to purify the mind, to free our heart and mind from suffering. Because we're here in a meditation retreat, that's what we talk about, that's what we're focused on—moment-to-moment mindfulness. And I'm not trying to change that focus. It's a good focus, a useful focus. Moment-to-moment mindfulness really is the most direct way to allow for wisdom to arise.

But that's the thing: wisdom arises just by our moment-to-moment awareness and interest, not through our willpower and not through getting the right content, the right experience, the right meditation, the correct way of walking or sitting or breathing, the correct free-flowing attention, the correct choiceless awareness. We get so focused at times on *doing* the meditation, just doing it, doing it correctly, that—I don't know if you've noticed—we can be really, really sincere, working very carefully, trying not to strive, really doing everything as best we can. But at times it can start to feel very self-obsessed. It all becomes about *my* meditation. I mean, I spent a long time in that state. It comes and goes like anything. But there are times when we're really trying, and yet the focus all becomes on how's my meditation doing, getting my meditation better—and this noise is disturbing my meditation. I could feel it walking through the lunchroom today.

Walking around the lunchroom so carefully, protecting the cocoon of my meditation—whatever the heck is going on in my meditation. But there are times, and we all go in and out of this, when there's nothing to protect because there's no meditation. There's just this moment of awareness. Whatever's happening doesn't matter. And in that, there's openness. There's that possibility for insight to arise.

Now, as soon as I've said this, the mind goes, "Okay, openness... possibility..." You know, it's just what our

minds do. But because insight arises spontaneously, in a moment of real purity of mind, of consciousness that's not clinging, not self-referencing or obsessed—we can't create that. You just can't. And I don't know why we can't believe that. It would spare us so much suffering. But we can't create it. We can't make insight happen out of willpower. We can't make wisdom arise.

So it's a tricky thing, because we can incline our mind towards the wisdom of what we've already understood or known. Taking impermanence again—there are ways we've all experienced impermanence. We can incline our mind in that direction, remembering, reminding ourselves: "Oh yeah, right, stuff is impermanent." But you can't sit down and say, "I will now have an insight into impermanence." You can't. I mean, you can sit down and do that, but you can't say, "I'm going to now notice the beginning and ending of every arising experience." Have you tried that today? I bet a lot of you have. I just knew when I heard him say that, I knew that's what the mind was going to do. And sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't—because guess what? It's not in our control.

So inclining the mind to the wisdom of "Yes, impermanence is a truth, and I have experienced that"—that's useful. But then we can't make the wisdom arise again. It's like the letting go: spontaneous, and staying really present.

Usually that's what we talk about as the supports for wisdom, for insight—the steadiness of mindfulness, this bare attention, non-judging, without concepts, the non-striving, the continuity, and the stability that grows from mindfulness and becomes samadhi. But that's not all we have to call on. It's not like it's that or nothing. When your mindfulness isn't steady, when you're feeling so obsessed with the meditation that it's just becoming one dismal, dark, new way to suffer—am I making that up, or have you experienced that? "Oh my God, life was bad enough, and now on top of it I have to be the bad meditator."

A good friend of mine was sitting for a few weeks over at the Forest Refuge last month when I was there, and he was talking to me about how we discuss the attitude of mind, just checking the attitude of mind—which is really what I'm talking about tonight. He said, really sincerely—and this is someone who's been sitting forever and who knows better—"So the attitude of mind... I mean, is there ever an attitude that isn't kilesa? Is there ever a moment, an attitude of mind, when you check it that isn't greed, hatred, or delusion? Because that's all I ever see."

Which, of course, isn't true. It wasn't even true for him. But sometimes we get so focused, zoomed into the kilesa aspect, the defilement, the torments of mind—usually when things aren't going the way we like them to, or they're unpleasant. And yes, they're the source of the suffering. I mean, it's good to notice them—I'm not saying otherwise. We've been talking about understanding them as freeing.

But there are times we get so fixated that even the noticing becomes problematic. Like when I mentioned that woman noticing the aversion—she noticed it with a mind that was not holding. The aversion becomes the object, but the mind that's noticing it is clear, pure, non-clinging. Aversion's not a problem. But there are other times when the mind that notices greed, aversion, self-judgment, or fear isn't quite totally pure

and non-clinging. It's really colored, identified with that particular kilesa.

It's just seeing through it. And the more we really try to be moment-to-moment mindfulness, the more we really try to let go, it just seems like we're digging ourselves—it feels like at that moment—into a deeper and deeper hole. And you can't figure it out because technically you're doing everything you should be doing. You're doing the practice right. You're not just sloughing off. But everything's just kind of spiraling, spiraling.

Out of control is okay. Unpleasant is okay. But there are times when the more you seem to be mindful, the more it seems like you're feeding the unwholesome. Have you ever had that experience? It's usually the time when you come into an interview and I say, "Okay, you need to shift the focus of attention." And the person usually feels like they've failed. "I have to switch the focus of attention because I wasn't good enough to get through this."

How much the mind at that point is colored by—that moment of mind is colored by—self-judgment or wanting or attachment to a view, and we can't see it. Far from being bright and open and non-clinging with the possibility for insight or wisdom, it's just contracting on itself.

So at this point, it's really where we can learn that there are other ways to brighten, to bring the mind into readiness for insight.

I want to read this part of a sutta. I really love it. It just made me see that this is how the Buddha worked.

It says, "When the Buddha, the Blessed One, was staying in Rājagaha, at the Squirrel Sanctuary, at that time in Rājagaha there was a leper named Suppabuddha, a poor, miserable wretch of a person. And at that time, the Blessed One was sitting, surrounded by a large assembly, teaching the Dhamma. Suppabuddha saw the large gathering of people from far off, and he thought, 'Without a doubt, someone there must be distributing food. So why don't I go over to that large group of people and get some food?'

"So he went over to the group of people, and then he saw the Blessed One sitting there teaching the Dhamma, and he realized, 'Oh, there's no one distributing food in this large gathering. That's Gotama, the contemplative, sitting surrounded by a large assembly teaching the Dhamma. Why don't I listen to the Dhamma since I'm here?' So he sat down.

"Now the Blessed One, comprehending the minds of the entire assembly with his awareness"—this is one of the special powers of a Buddha; there are often suttas where he does this—"asked himself, 'Now who here is capable of really understanding the Dhamma? Who here is really capable of waking up?'" Don't you wish we could do that and say the right thing? Sorry—we have to do it ourselves.

"And he saw Suppabuddha, the leper, sitting in the assembly. And on seeing him, the thought occurred to him"—and it's always like that; it's never "he thought," it's "the thought occurred to him," it just came through—"'This person here is capable of understanding the Dhamma.'

"So aiming specifically at Suppabuddha, the Buddha gave a step-by-step talk: a talk on generosity, on giving; a talk on virtue, on non-harming conduct; a talk on the heavens. He talked about the drawbacks, the suffering, and the corruption of sense desire, of sense passions, and the rewards, the happiness of renunciation. Then, when he saw that Suppabuddha the leper's mind was ready, malleable, free from hindrances, elated, and bright, then he gave the Dhamma talk peculiar to the awakened ones—that is, the Four Noble Truths."

So he very carefully talked about all these other qualities of our life, of our practice, that brighten the mind, that free the heart, that open us out from our self-absorbed tendencies. And then when he could tell the mind was ready—and of course, even that "poor, miserable wretch of a person," on hearing this: "Just as a clean cloth"—and this is how the mind is when it's not colored with kilesa—"just as a clean cloth, free of stains, would properly absorb a dye, in the same way, as Suppabuddha was sitting in that very seat, the dustless, stainless Dhamma eye arose within him: 'Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.'" That's one of those little lines that shows he was a stream-enterer.

I really love that—that sense that it's not always the most helpful or appropriate thing to just hone in with all your energy on getting more precise, on being more mindful, on seeing more clearly, thinking that's going to make insight happen. It just doesn't always work. Yes, it's great, and it's our first line of refuge, no question. But sometimes we can call on lots of other qualities that open us out, that open the mind and heart into the spaciousness, the openness of non-clinging.

He was talking, and he said something that I thought was really interesting. He was describing how we tend to really try to see the object of our awareness more clearly much of the time. We think, "Oh, it's a cloud. I've got to see it clearly, see it clearly." We get so focused on the object. And the object can be mental too, remember. But we forget that really the path is about purifying the mind.

And so he said—this is what I thought was really interesting—that we can't force the insight. He said the quality of mind, of consciousness, the state of mind, is matched with the object that it can observe. Actually, he said the mind will perceive the object that it deserves. That was his language.

So basically he was saying that if the state of mind is filled with, identified with wanting, with dislike or aversion, with clinging to views, with "this is all about me," that quality of mind can try as hard as it wants. It's not going to see Nibbāna. It's only going to see through kilesa in a moment. And so as long as we're looking through what he calls "kilesa mind"—let's take a mind that's colored and we don't recognize the wanting, the striving, the dislike, the self-judging, the views; we don't recognize that—he said that all a mind like that can recognize is concepts. It sees the concept and takes the concept for reality. It's interesting.

So like that woman I talked about standing in pain, she would see through a mind with aversion that this unpleasant restlessness is my problem and I need to get rid of it to fix it, and that's just how it is. The Vipassanā mind, he calls it, can observe things just as they are. Vipassanā mind meaning connected,

awake, free from clinging. Without bringing in concept, it can recognize things just as they are. It can see concept. It can see that concept: "Oh, I thought this is the only way to get rid of this pain, by walking out." But now I see: this is unpleasant experience, it feels like this. This is aversion in the mind, it's like that. Nothing changed but how it's observed. Kilesa mind, Vipassanā mind.

So that's when we talk about turning around and just noticing what's the attitude of mind. It is not always kilesa mind. A great deal of the time it's not. It's really, really helpful for us to also recognize that. Recognize when there is wisdom, clear seeing, just seeing things as they are without adding anything extra. Recognize when there's mettā, when there's compassion, when there's sympathetic joy or equanimity. Recognize when there's gratitude, when there's generosity, when there's non-harming moral conduct, which can be of thought, not just of speech and body.

And all of these are also practices that we can call on consciously to brighten, to make our mind more malleable, more elated, more flexible, more open. When we feel that we're practicing as hard as we can and as sincerely as we can and we're just getting tighter and tighter and it's more and more about me, then maybe for a moment we could call on some of these other ways of brightening the mind, opening the mind and heart.

So I just want to mention a few of them. Each of them is a talk in itself, right? But recognizing, again, that the insight wisdom can arise in relationship to any experience. And the most mundane experience can be the source of really profound insight. So when we're getting upset, thinking our experience isn't subtle enough, and we're just sitting in fear, and then we get up and go eat, and it feels like our normal everyday consciousness, and we want something special—you know, we're looking out to object, to experience. Turn around and look at the attitude of mind. It's in the little things sometimes that something lets go. Like that woman standing there—and really a whole other way of being, of freedom, is perceived as possible.

There was someone else at the Forest Refuge, and she was having lots of insights. And it seemed like most of them, when she would talk about them, came when she was doing her vacuuming—yogi work meditation.

I love that because it really shows how we're just meeting everything as our path of waking up. We're not focusing only on some particular activity.

Sometimes people don't even know they're striving. You're really very committedly being continuous, not tense. And there could be such a tiny, tiny little bit of wanting or pushing that we really can't even notice it until it drops. Sometimes I know for me it would drop, like when you go into the toilet. Just something—you just quit trying to be so mindful, and insight can come. Or you're drinking your tea, or she's doing her vacuuming, or whatever. So never give up, but don't try too hard.

Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a very wonderful Dzogchen master, talks about bodhicitta, the awakened and noble mind and heart. But this is broader than that. He says the difference between the impure and the

pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow. For example, we live alone, we rarely consider the infinity of sentient beings. The more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, disregarding the well-being, happiness, and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha is one who considers the infinity of beings rather than being concerned only with his own ego and individuality. Thus the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of mind. And that is precisely what we call bodhicitta—literally, to grow and develop that enlightened attitude. The concept of growth is used here for the passing from a completely narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open, loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings.

So all these step-by-step ways that the Buddha mentioned in that sutta to Suppabuddha, and a couple I'm going to mention—they're all moving in that direction. From the narrow, constricted heart and mind centering around me, driven by greed and fear, toward the open heart and mind, the mind of non-clinging. This open mind will instinctively consider other beings' needs. But it's not that we have to be thinking that. It's just that when we're not centered here, the energy is available to respond to whatever presents itself to us, to respond to other beings. There's not this sense of me and other. It's just this.

And so, in support of insight, the supports for wisdom are all these different ways that the Buddha mentions, all working towards this brightening, lightening, opening the heart and mind. Mostly they're happy, joyful qualities. But it's not about cultivating them because we want to feel good. That's both the old motivation of how we used to do everything. And then sometimes we get so cautious, so fearful that we might fall back into wanting to feel good, that we get focused on the negative, like my friend. When we're really feeling the happiness of a generous thought that comes up, the mind goes, "You're just clinging to the pleasant"—and instead of the openness that we could really appreciate, it's like, "No, I have to do it right." But we don't recognize that.

So really, we can cultivate the wholesome. It's one of the four right efforts—recognizing wholesome states of mind that have arisen and helping them increase, and cultivating unarisen wholesome states of mind. That's a piece of wisdom. That's not, "Oh, I don't like what's happening and I want to feel good." That's not a wholesome state of mind.

I want to briefly mention bodhicitta, even though that wasn't in the sutta. Relative bodhicitta, being a noble or awakened heart-mind—Tibetans always talk about it as a motivation that we can consciously cultivate, if we choose, to feed our whole life, our whole practice. Very simply, you could say it is cultivating an altruistic attitude, cultivating an attitude just as Nyoshul Khenpo said: not only about me, but caring for the infinity of all beings. Okay, we can't go that far yet. But just that sense of "may my practice be not for myself alone, but may my awakening be so that I can then be of service to help awaken all beings"—something like that. Of course, we don't start out feeling that. At first it might seem really very far away, but we can cultivate it.

In fact, Sogyal Rinpoche talks about it a lot. In one of his books he says it's really okay to practice bodhicitta. Because in the beginning, he says, this enlightened attitude has two aspects. This is relative bodhicitta—cultivating this sincere wish, and it's not sincere at first, maybe. That's what he means when he says we cultivate it: may I really awaken in order to help all beings awaken. So he says the enlightened attitude has two aspects. One is the urge in ourselves to purify our negativity, to come out of our suffering. And the second is the sincere desire to benefit all beings through our awakening—to awaken in order to bring others to awakening. So these two aspects.

It's really compassion for self and others. And always remember with this practice, and also with all the Brahma Viharas, that when we're connecting with all beings—with metta, with bodhicitta, with compassion—you are one of the all beings. Sometimes people practice for all beings and forget this one here. So compassion for all beings includes oneself.

In talking about cultivating this, at first it may seem too highfalutin. You know, "I'm just sitting here. It's all I can do to get through the sitting. And when I say, 'May I awaken to serve all beings,' it just sounds completely phony." So, as some teachers say, it's okay if it's artificial at first. It's not what we're used to. We haven't been thinking this way before, so we need to deliberately bring it up. We need to deliberately shift our heart and mind that way. So just try it. If you're inclined, just say it to yourself at the beginning of a sitting, at the end of a sitting, at the beginning of the day. And see what happens. Just see what happens.

So again, he said that if you cultivate the correct motivation in your own heart—just do that—it'll turn into bodhicitta all by itself. And I have found actually in my practice that's true. You may for many years be practicing for whatever your own particular motivation is: to free myself from suffering, to free yourself from a particular pattern that's causing too much suffering, to experience more love, to be compassionate, to awaken, whatever. And it's pretty normal that even when it's wholesome, it's pretty much about me in the beginning. I mean, that's all we know.

But slowly, slowly, those motivations begin to open up as the wisdom deepens, as the sense of self being so solid begins to be seen through. As impermanence becomes clearer, as there are more and more moments of insight, of seeing through that blind, unconscious holding to all the views—"it's all about me and I have to do this to make myself happy"—they just naturally start to get more transparent. You don't have to try so hard to root it out. That's too much "me doing." It just gets more transparent. It does start to turn into bodhicitta by itself.

I have a friend I haven't seen for a few years, but he's one of—I think I could safely say—the more aversive people I know. And I know a lot of aversive people. Aversive, sincerely practicing, but very aversive. And with that, really most of it turned toward himself: very, very self-judgmental, feeling like he could never really practice or do anything good, really down on himself.

He was talking to me after a three-month course where he'd been just saying this bodhicitta intention to himself: "May I awaken to be of service, to awaken all beings." And then, wham, wham—"Who are you?

How can you even say that? How can you even..." Just so much self-hatred would come up, and cynicism: "You don't feel anything. This just shows you're just..." All the stuff you can think of about yourself.

But he said he just kept on doing it. And something really started to change. I've had the same experience—not quite to the negative intensity of his—but where it stops being just words and you start to really feel something. Not "Oh, I'm so great, awakening for all beings," or that I'm awakened or anything, but the motivation starts to shift.

This is the way Tsoknyi Rinpoche describes the effect of that, which is really quite lovely—and he's funny too. He says it gives us courage. It opens the mind and heart. When it stops being all about me first, but really, somehow, I'm doing this for all beings—then there are times when you feel like, "I've had enough. I'm out of here. The hindrances are too strong." And something comes in: "Well, it's not just for you, you know." And it's not an ego thing, like "I'm going to serve all beings." It's more like, "Okay, just one more step. One more breath."

It expands the possibilities. It expands our mind and heart. The way Sayadaw U Tejaniya puts it is that it's the antidote to our chicken heart. It expands our chicken heart and gives us courage to be here for the next moment, for the next moment, for the next moment.

And it may sound like it's strengthening the sense of ego and self, but it's actually not. It's just the reverse. It's really quite lovely and very supportive—just to keep going. We don't have to know where it's going, or get into thinking, "Well, how is this going to help anybody?" That's just thinking. But it's this really deep motivation: May what I say and do awaken me to awaken all beings. Just try it, play with it, and see what effect it has.

Sometimes we can't access it, of course. All of these things I'm mentioning are skillful means. Sometimes we can access them, sometimes not. Sometimes we need to, sometimes not. So just seeing which ones are helpful.

I'll mention the others very briefly, and we'll talk about them more as the retreat goes on. All four Brahma Viharas: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, equanimity. Compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity we'll go through in the evenings here. And loving-kindness was done in the first six weeks, and most of you are familiar with it.

These are also—even though the phrases we use are about me wishing for you, and it seems very me-and-other oriented—in the moment, in a mind moment when there's any of the four Brahma Viharas, it actually partakes of the vastness of the impersonal nature of the open heart and mind. When any of those four are present, there's not clinging in the heart and mind. It is not all about me. The distinctions, the separations break down. And so, again, with any of these four, it really opens, brightens, makes the mind and heart softer, more flexible. At the same time it's softer, it's also not so brittle—more flexible, not so easily shaken.

You know, when you're really feeling metta, really feeling it, and you walk through the dining room, you don't so much feel like you have to protect anything, do you? It's not like they're all out there waiting to ruin my meditation. It's just, here we are. It's a very different feeling.

Dana, or generosity—the first thing that the Buddha spoke about and really is pretty much the first thing he seemed to always teach when he started teaching, especially to lay people. We've talked about generosity and we'll talk about it again. The one point I really want to make about it tonight is something I didn't really understand until I'd spent a lot of time practicing in Thailand and also in Burma.

We hear about generosity as a way of creating merit, wholesome karma, wholesome results of doing good for people, of caring. But the big secret about it is that it's actually a source of incredible happiness in our own mind and heart when we're expressing generosity through thought or speech or action. The act of generosity, the intention of generosity in the mind, is a source of real brightness. It really brings a kind of happiness, a kind of elation to the mind that I hadn't really gotten before I'd seen it in action and experienced the effects going both ways.

I was a nun in Thailand for about a year, many years ago. At first I was really uncomfortable—and the same going to Burma—really uncomfortable with how generous people were to me in little things. I'm not saying everyone's perfect, everything's wonderful, but there's a quality of generosity in the Dhamma culture, and often in many places in Burma especially, just the regular culture, of spontaneously offering time, gifts.

I was offered so much support when I was a nun in Thailand—my robes, my food everywhere. People would give me the best kuti or whatever they could have there for women to stay in. I was just treated so kindly, with such care. And my first response was, "No, not me, I'm not worth it," or "I really don't need it, I have enough money myself, I don't need to take from you." And you see, that just cuts it. There's this open generosity and wanting to push it back. But that's not the way.

What one really sees is that in the people offering, there's so much happiness. They're really happy to offer. And when I would open and receive, that happiness would affect me. Then it just becomes like a circle.

I notice at times when I was in various monasteries in Burma or Thailand—and other things go on too, this isn't the only thing—but over time I would find certain aspects of my heart getting brighter and brighter and happier. There was a lot of suffering, but also a brightness, a lightness that could open to the suffering. I just felt really inspired and uplifted. And some of this was from the generosity.

A friend of mine put it in a good way. She had come to a retreat in Burma a couple of years ago, and she hadn't been there much at all. She was telling me later that she didn't quite notice it at the beginning—it kind of crept up on her. She was an acupuncturist, and she came to a study retreat in Sagaing. Then I took her across the street to the hospital to meet some Burmese acupuncturists who were practicing there. She

wasn't training them; she just met them. They were so kind to her and friendly. They took her into Mandalay and introduced her to a really famous acupuncturist from China. Then they took her to meet this wonderful old teacher, a Sayadaw. Then they took her to dinner. And then she met a Chinese teacher that she'd actually studied with in China who happened to be in Mandalay. It just kept happening—all this kind of magical, happy stuff kept unfolding. It's like that sometimes. Sometimes it's just the other way.

And then at the guest houses where she stayed, people went so out of their way to take care of her, to be kind. She said she started to notice that she was just getting happier and happier, feeling more and more open, wanting to offer and give and share. And not out of a sense of "I should." It starts that way because we're not used to it, but really a kind of happiness that opens the heart. The non-clinging is just the natural response, and then the heart is open, it's brighter, you start to see more, you start to experience more, you start to have some insights.

But for her, it was just this happiness. She came home and she saw how receiving the generosity—and the happiness of the person giving—had made her happy. She saw that when she came home, her friends who didn't really know anything about what she'd been doing or her meditation, they noticed something different in her. Being around her, they would start to feel happier, more open, more generous. And it can kind of roll like that.

Then she said also that back here, it started to kind of go away again. It didn't feel as supported. But that's just... I mean, there's a lot more to say about generosity, but I just wanted to bring out how it functions as a way of brightening and opening the heart and mind. Even just a generous thought—and here, please, please don't go around doing and saying things to other people here, like "I'm going to write everybody a note to be generous" or whatever—but just sometimes a generous thought will come up in your mind. What we can do is notice it. Notice that's an attitude of mine too. Appreciate it.

Sometimes when we're really down or kind of tight, you can actually reflect on, contemplate your past generosity. Not as an ego thing—"Aren't I something great?"—but just bring up, feel moments when you've thought or said or done something that's really from that open-hearted generosity. And you experience, again, the brightness, the uplifting of that, kind of like karmic result, vipāka. It's really quite helpful.

Similarly with sīla, with non-harming behavior, moral conduct. Certainly it's in order to protect other people and to protect ourselves. But the Buddha talked about the brightness of it as the bliss of blamelessness, freedom from remorse. This is a really happy state. This is a state that really allows us to relax, to open the heart and mind.

I imagine that most of you, in the time you've been here, have had some unwholesome thing, some stupid thing you did in the past arise in your consciousness, right? We all have done at least one or two stupid, unintelligent, harmful things. And it's painful when they come up. Even if it's met with wisdom, met with openness—that remorse is still painful. But it's healing if we don't pile on top of it guilt and present-moment aversion.

The freedom from remorse, the bliss of blamelessness, is a very profound aspect of non-clinging, of opening the heart and mind, of strengthening the mind, of support for wisdom, for insight.

I have to read this. It's a little aside, but I have to. From a news magazine, under a little column called "Only in America": A California perfume company has introduced the world's first biblically-themed fragrance called Virtue. From the perfumer: "It's based on years of scriptural research. It includes frankincense and myrrh in a blend of three-thousand-year-old scents."

Retailing at $80 for a bottle, Virtue will enable its wearer to smell like Christ and many of the saints, says CEO Rick Larimore. I won't tell you what I think they must have smelled like schlepping around in the desert all the time, but probably that's not what the perfume smells like.

Anyway, this is the main point. This is the CEO of the perfume company again: "Many individuals of high spiritual attainment give off a fragrance attributed to their virtue." So if you think that person near you is wearing a scented product, maybe you just don't recognize what you're actually perceiving.

On a serious note, the Buddha—and I'm not going to read this whole sutta, but it's one of these progressive teachings where this leads to that, leads to that—in this one he says: What is the purpose of skillful virtues? What is their reward? He says skillful virtues have freedom from remorse as their purpose, Ananda, and freedom from remorse as their reward.

And what's the purpose of freedom from remorse? It goes on and on. Freedom from remorse has joy as its purpose; joy is its reward. And it goes from joy to rapture, rapture to serenity, serenity to sukha, sukha to concentration, concentration to knowledge and vision of things as they actually are. Knowledge and vision of things as they actually are leads to disenchantment as its purpose and its reward. Disenchantment has dispassion as its purpose. And what's the purpose of dispassion? What's its reward? Dispassion has knowledge and vision of release as its purpose, knowledge and vision of release as its reward. In this way, Ananda, skillful virtues lead step by step to the consummation of arahatship—just to draw the links very clearly.

But there are times when we're nowhere able to be dispassionate, to see things clearly. But we can be calling on our sila, our skillful virtues. And no matter what we've done in the past, skillful virtues, sila, moral conduct can start right now.

Even Angulimala—you know this story, I'm not going to go into it—but the mass murderer who killed 999 people, when he met the Buddha, and the Buddha really helped him see through it, he became a bhikkhu. Even then, he began right then the cultivation of skillful virtue.

There's an interesting little story in the sutta about him. After he became a monk, and he was very sincere—he'd reached first stage anyway—he went into a village for alms and saw a woman giving birth and in a lot of pain and suffering, and he was really touched. He came back to the Buddha and said, "Ah, so much suffering. I wish I could help."

So the Buddha says—this was a common blessing then—"Go and say to her: 'Sister, since I was born, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth, may there be well-being for you and your child.'"

He goes, "Buddha? Wouldn't that be a lie? I mean, I've intentionally killed many living beings."

The Buddha says, "Okay. Then go and say: 'Sister, since I was born in the noble birth, since I was born in the Dhamma, I do not recall intentionally killing a living being. Through this truth, may there be well-being for you and the child.'"

And it says, and there was.

Just taking a stand on that profound truth: skillful virtues begin now. Non-harming speech, non-harming thoughts, non-harming action. And in calling on them, we can actually contemplate, reflect on, call up times of skillful virtue as a way to brighten, to open the contracted heart and mind, to support faith and trust.

Again, this is something many times we don't do so much in the West, but it really is a source of wholesome happiness sometimes. You might have to get over a little feeling of, "Ugh, this is so egocentric." That's aversion. But when you're purely calling up wholesome things you've done and those memories come, don't shy away or be afraid to look. Feel the wholesomeness. Feel the brightness.

And in the one minute left, the last thing I want to mention is gratitude. One time, Sayadaw U Pandita was giving a talk here, and I didn't have notes so I can't remember all of it, but he talked about five kinds of rare beings, rare people.

One of them was a Buddha, so that's pretty rare. But one was someone who really feels and expresses gratitude.

In terms of opening oneself to gratitude—this is something I actually often practice both on and off retreat. When my mind and heart feel contracted and narrow, just focused on my little self or on what's wrong, or overwhelmed with suffering, mine or another's, I consciously call on gratitude. Whether it's gratitude to the Buddha, to your teachers, to our circumstances, gratitude for human birth, or it can just be gratitude for little things. It still brings this openness, this inspiration of mind, this purity of mind stream.

Sometimes on retreat, I remember getting in bed at night, one of those nights when you think, thank God, tomorrow is a new day. Hopefully things change and we'll wake up and it'll all be okay again. This state will be gone. And I would just start bringing in some gratitude. I'm grateful for—and I might start really mundane. Again, like with bodhicitta, not feeling anything yet. I'm grateful to have a bed to sleep in. I'm grateful to have enough warmth. I'm grateful I had enough to eat today. I'm grateful for the dharma. And just start, and sometimes I'd have to think of things, but really pretty soon, unless it's a particularly

contracted state, some little glimmer of actual gratitude would come, and then things would just start pouring—more than I could even think of, things that surprised me.

It's not so much about the content. It's just about touching again that attitude, that wholesome attitude of heart and mind, really supporting this orientation.

It's not so much about feeling good. It really isn't. Feeling good comes along with these things as a nice side benefit. But it's really about calling on these different ways to enlighten, to support the purity of consciousness, to help support the mind of non-clinging. Here and now as the means to the end of awakening. But it's only in this moment, experienced fully at times in this moment, here and now. Something we can all be really grateful for.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

I wanted to share this bodhicitta prayer from the Twelfth Gyalwang Drukchen Rinpoche. I just really like it:

I call on you, my teachers, regard me with compassion.
I sincerely wish to receive your blessings.
Please regard your child's longing desire.
Please bless me with the resolve to attain realization.
Please bless me to have a steady and smooth mind
so that for this life and those to follow
as a true practitioner whose heart and mind are in accord
the special intention to help others is spontaneously present.
May I be able to benefit measureless beings.

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