Pith Practice Teachings

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 40:40

Good evening to you. Saturday night. Here we are again.

I'm going to give you some pith teachings tonight. You know, the Tibetans do this—they'll offer something like the thirty-six mind training slogans, boiling down what practice is about and how to practice into these little bite-sized nuggets. You receive a lot of teachings, many Dharma talks, and a lot of instructions, and you may still be wondering: What's going on? What am I supposed to be doing? What's it about? What's the point of it? There should be a point, but it might not be quite clear. So here are some pith teachings, the CliffsNotes version of meditation practice.

The first thing is to understand the context. The context for the practice here is the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of the Buddha. All the teachings offered here are expressions of this particular framework for understanding reality and working with it.

A second point related to this is that it's true Dharma is universal medicine, meaning that no matter what your difficulty or distress is, it will be helpful to you. However, even though it's helpful in many different ways and on many different levels, the Dharma as taught by the Buddha and as expressed here is really aimed at helping you find, through your own direct experience, liberation from suffering. All the other benefits that might be there for you—stress reduction, improvements to your health, emotional healing, psychological insight—these may be benefits, but they're not really what the practice is directly aimed at here. They're very fortunate associative goods that can come forth, but they're not really directly spoken to in the instructions or in the teachings. So that's the context.

Now the second piece is understanding your main task in insight practice. Here it is, within the framework—listen carefully—of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path: develop a mindful connection with your mind stream and maintain it. That is all. Understanding arises and deepens organically if this happens. Is it that simple? Yes.

Mettā practice, your main task: Within the framework of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, develop an intention to offer loving-kindness to specific individuals and groups. Using specific repetitive phrases, connect with these individuals and groups and offer mettā. Keep doing this with progressively more difficult individuals and groups. That is all. Mettā strengthens and develops organically if this is done. Is it this simple? Yes.

Now at about this point, probably something is not feeling right to you. Because I've just said that it's simple. And it is simple. In fact, it's so simple, it's really hard to do. There are reasons for that. A way to say

it is that in attempting to do this, we run across deeply conditioned and habituated patterns of mind, which are cross-currents to our main task. We're very often identified with these kinds of cross-currents or lost in them. What that means is that mindful continuity is lost when these cross-currents arise, unless we somehow bring them into our mindful continuity.

There are a lot of different techniques which can be offered to work with these individual hindrances and cross-currents—that's a whole separate talk. But I want to talk mostly about particular trade secrets, how you can minimize and avoid some of this getting lost in these cross-currents.

I'll start by using an equestrian image for you. Any horse-riding people here in the group? There's a phrase used in the equestrian world about taking your seat and keeping your seat in relationship to riding horses. Basically what it means is: there's you, there's the horse, and then there's the saddle, which is where you should be. In order to take our seat in terms of these main tasks, to get ready to understand the basic thing—the feet in the stirrups, the hands on the reins—there are some basic principles that are good to know, and I'm going to tell you these secrets right now.

The first thing is rule number one: practice occurs only in the present tense. Some of the people who have come to see me have heard this from me quite frequently. A memory or thought of the past is a present experience.

A thought of the future is a present experience. An image of the future is a present-time seeing, or perhaps a present-time fantasizing. What you are experiencing is actually now. It's always now. Recognizing that it's now, now, now, now is very important because it's the only time you need to relate to. Everything you experience arises in the now—it's all here, experienced in sequence. Now, now, now, now.

That's principle number one.

Principle number two is related to this: connect with what is actually happening. Now this is another one that sounds really simple, but as we know, it can be challenging. We need to recognize and acknowledge the real, actual experience. What are you actually experiencing? Keep it very simple. What's right on top of the pile? What's most predominant? It's simple and hard enough to do just that, but that's where you want to be.

So you have to work with what you do have, versus what you want, don't want, should want, should have, shouldn't have, did have, could have, must have. Really note the arising of the if-only mind: "If I only had better material to be mindful of, it would be going well."

Principle number three: know that whatever is arising is not a mistake. It's not a mistake. Attempting to edit the universe is very labor intensive. Whatever it is in that moment, given the totality of factors present, it couldn't be anything different than what it is. It couldn't be anything different. Therefore, it is not a mistake. This is another way of saying: practice with what you've got. Acknowledge it and accept it. Awakening can happen with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral alike.

Four: recognize that practice is a journey through a landscape not yet known. You might have a general idea about where practice goes, but you really have no idea what you specifically will experience getting there. You have no basis for comparison—which is not to say that comparing mind won't arise. It will arise, but you have no basis for comparison because you've never been there.

Here's a red-light thought. When this thought comes up in your mind, know that you have fallen into opposition: "This shouldn't be happening." This is another version of "it's a mistake." It's a flashing red light telling you that an unfounded view is being contradicted by actual experience. When the choice is between an opinion and reality, it's best to stick with reality.

You're not going to think, double-think, or triple-think your way to success with this kind of endeavor. Although practice includes cognition and thought, it's really more based upon the willingness to connect in a trusting, open way with what you actually experience—and to notice it. If you can, abandon all assumptions because, as a wise one said, whatever you think it will be, things are always other than that.

Principle five: have integrity of effort, but do not be insistent upon specific experiences. The key is being persistent, but not insistent. You don't know what should happen next. Really, you don't. It's a surprise.

Every moment is reality's little surprise for us. And since you don't actually control what will arise next, unseen expectations are doomed to being thwarted, and this in turn tends to lead to feelings of defeat and frustration.

Fixed expectations are another way of stating the boundaries you have for what you find acceptable or desirable. They come from delusion, and they are a form of suffering.

Principle 6 says: Experience is always new and does not repeat itself.

Experience is always presenting itself anew. If you were experiencing anger yesterday and you're experiencing anger today, these are two different arisings. They might feel similar or familiar, but they're actually different things. The question is, can you bring a fresh mind to these arisings?

I received a significant correction on this one. The first time I did a three-month retreat here, I was having a lot of anger. I went into an interview with Sharon Salzberg and said something like, "Well, my anger is back. It's here. It's always there, waiting. I can feel it's always just underneath." And she said, "It's not always there."

By the way, you aren't always angry, sad, fearful, anxious, or craving. You might want to notice that. You're not actually always in those states. They're all temporary states. You may have the habit of looking for them, and you may have a deep identification with their occurrence in your mind stream, but they are not actually always present. You would have been screaming out of here by now if they were.

Principle 7: The more the experience is about You—capital Y-O-U—the more difficult practice will be.

Identification is a really common experience, and if it's unseen, it's always suffering. When your ego is attempting to run the practice, it always ends badly. But it's a very common thing to happen.

Consider what's been said previously: what is happening is always conditioned and conditional. Thus it's not directly under your control. If you take ownership of it, if you take up a position for or against what's happening, the experience becomes either inflating or threatening. These are the conditions for aversion and craving to arise—better known as suffering.

There's a Zen teaching along the lines of: "The great way is not difficult for one who has no preferences." See if you can view what arises as a naturally occurring phenomenon, more like a weather system that might be interesting and impactful, but isn't personal. The question is, can you be a weather watcher?

Those are all tips related to taking your seat—getting things set up in your mind, establishing some parameters to keep you on board in your practice. But then the question comes: what happens when you fall off the horse?

And it does happen, of course. You lose it.

The first thing to realize is that there will be periods—you may have observed this—where the crosscurrents to practice are strong and the horse is really bucking. Sometimes you will fall off. Practically speaking, it's unavoidable. There's no way to completely prevent it. Sometimes the horse will step on your head and run away into the woods. If you never fell off the horse, you wouldn't need to be here. You would be out riding pleasantly in the countryside somewhere.

So here are some tips about working with these periods.

The first is that restoring mindfulness and balance of mind is always task number one. All of the techniques, all of the advice the teachers give you, all of the instructions in the morning, all the coaching about how to work with particular hindrances—advice like, "Instead of doing linear walking practice today, go walk in the woods and just be generally aware of what's going on"—

You know, you're trying too hard—drop the eight precepts, go take a big long nap. These are all coachings designed to restore balance and restore mindfulness. They all have one purpose.

With these changes in instructions or coaching, teachers are trying to help you find the right angle of entry into what you're experiencing. Consider the difference between a nice clean dive below the surface into a pool and a belly flop. The angle of entry into things is really important, and sometimes it's not obvious. The adjustments that a teacher makes are to help you find the right angle of entry, particularly with things that are difficult. That's the first principle.

The second principle is this: there will be dark and difficult periods. Do not let this deter you or shake your confidence. Difficulty is intrinsic to the process. When you consider what the main task is, you can understand why—because practice entails opening into direct contact with our habituated tendencies.

That's what you see when you sit down and try to do these practices. You see what comes up in the mind stream that runs counter to our stated intention to be with the breath, be with walking, be with metta. We attempt to select the channel, and we start hearing all the static.

Our habituated tendencies run deep, and they can also be very subtle and difficult to see, and they can be painful. There's another aspect about these tendencies that's important to notice: we are very often deeply identified with these cross currents, these conditioned arisings in the mind. We claim them as me and mine, which makes it very difficult to maintain a mindful relationship with them. When we consider what arises in our mind or in our practice as evidence in the court of "Am I good enough?"—we suffer.

Practice is like a long distance run, and it tests courage. It tests resolve and motivation. These are all strengths, attributes of mind that are developed as part of practice. Our courage deepens, our strength of mind deepens, we get in touch with what's important to us—or we're not able to continue. These things are intrinsically developed as part of the process, even though the process is not directly aimed at them. Like all matches with a worthy opponent—in this case, our habituated tendencies—sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. All loss is temporary, however, with persistence and integrity of effort.

Number three: War on the ego, war on the self-sense, is conducted by the ego. We can do some very interesting things with this not-self or no-self teaching. We can take it to mean that there actually is some demolition work that we need to do. But really, we don't need to get rid of our ego or our self-sense in the way suggested by a wrecking ball or a surgical removal. As you proceed, you'll come to see that these are just more arising phenomena, and they are already empty of self. It's not that you have it and you have to get rid of it. It's that there's a misunderstanding of what's going on, which will rectify itself if you pay close attention. You don't need to suppress the ego or the self-sense or attack them. These are just thoughts, beliefs, and body sensations which arise when conditions are present for them to arise. They are not an enemy. They are also not an identity.

Number four: When you are out of balance and disconnected from the main task, notice if there is an agenda present. Often there is an attempt to impose something or prove something, and a failure to actually acknowledge, accept, and open to what's actually there. The question is: What are you trying to make happen, and why? Usually there's some sort of craving present that isn't being seen—craving for a preferred or desired or imagined outcome that has become laden with some investment of self.

Number five: The story of you, of me—the story is usually dense with identification. Going around and around with it in its own terms is not conducive to liberation. We all have a story.

We have many stories. And by story I mean an associative train of thought that happens in the present but which pulls in the past as if it's going on now, and brings in the future as if it's going on now, and kind of takes over—obscuring or obfuscating what can be directly known and directly investigated, what is actually tangibly present.

One thing to know about this is that it's very common. It's the narrative of us as individuals, and we all have a story constructed—a sad story or a happy story, a tragic story or a hopeful story, or some versions of all of them.

Part of the role of teachers is to open to you with respect and compassion, to engage with your enlightened potential and encourage its emergence. Therefore, teachers will generally resist addressing the identified self, except to point it out and assist you in dropping identification with it. So if you sometimes wonder why you might not get quite the response in interviews that you expect, it's probably related to that. It's not because there's not care and concern and metta. It's because they understand that continued enmeshment in the story does not serve your aspirations or well-being.

Number six: crazy corners.

Once we establish our connection with our mind stream, we may wish we didn't! We can be rather shocked by what arises. "Oh my goodness, I'm having these horrible thoughts of hatred," or "I'm experiencing this intense lust. I feel so bad. I was walking in the dining hall and I saw somebody walking really slowly and I felt all this rage and competition—I just wanted to shove them into the table." Maybe not this nice group of people. Maybe nobody ever gets those.

But we might be rather shocked by what arises, especially if we have an identified view of what is acceptable to arise in our mind stream. Then the tendency is to close and just ricochet off that stuff. "It's so bad, it's so bad. I'm so bad. I'm getting nowhere. I thought I came here to get better—I'm getting worse." No, you're seeing the cross currents. You're seeing the cross currents.

What we do with all of these cross currents is we give them a mindfulness wrap. We make the mindfulness big enough to encompass them. This is how we tame them—we bring them into the circle of awareness. We don't push them out. We don't orphan any of these. But it can be kind of shocking.

You could put it this way: there's a lot of weird stuff in there. There just is, and you're not unique in this regard. It's just delusion in the mind stream, and we are all somewhat nuts. I mean, we are. We are all kind of crazy. There's some crazy stuff in there. There just is.

Number seven: The more honestly and specifically you describe your experience to your teachers, the better they will be able to help you.

If you go in and start with a kind of vague ramble about what happened three days ago, don't be surprised if the teacher says, "So what was your sitting like this morning before you came in here?" They're trying to bring you into present tense. They're trying to get you to be specific enough so they can get an idea about what's happening in the practice in order to guide you.

Being a dharma teacher is a little bit like being a driver's ed teacher, except you're not in the same car. So you say, "Okay, here's the wheel. When you go like this, it goes over there. When you go like this, it goes

over there. You step on this and it starts to go. But if it goes too fast, you step on this and then it stops. But don't step on it too hard."

Here's the flicker. Put on your—okay. And roll up the window. Bye. Tell me how it goes.

So it's an important thing to be really honest with the teachers about how your practice is going. Because you could have an unnecessary wreck. If there's something significant that could be clarified, you might spare yourself a good deal of pain.

The teachers know all about the crazy corners and the hindrances from their own practice. Believe me. You should hear some of the stories that go on in the dining hall. We've all been there. We've all had some spin-outs. We've all had unusual experiences. We've all had difficult experiences.

So if embarrassment should arise, or the desire to present a particular version of yourself to the teacher should arise, hopefully you'll just let go of that and come as you are. Just the facts.

That about covers the secrets. But in closing, I do have an awakening poem with an equestrian theme—since you're all riding the wild horse of mind:

I've ridden the dark horse, I've ridden the white.
Butt smack in the saddle, holding on tight.
Let go of the reins, the horse carries me.
Deep fear arises, just letting it be.
The horse and the rider are moving as one.
The road we are riding dissolves in the sun.
No longer a rider, no longer a horse,
No longer a saddle to hit with a butt.

Let's sit for a moment.

May the merit of our practice be for the awakening and well-being of all, everywhere, in all dimensions. And may our practice be a cause and condition of our own awakening, and that of many others.

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