Delusion and Ignorance

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:48

Tonight I want to talk about the humble topic of the nature of ignorance. Hopefully we'll clear it up in half an hour.

I said the last time I spoke that the Dalai Lama had said all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception, and that's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience and true knowledge. So what brings about this mistaken perception? And what exactly are we even talking about when we discuss perception and mistaken perception?

Stephen spoke the other night of papañca—that quality, that process where a simple experience like a sound becomes so quickly hidden in all the proliferation that follows it through the agile activities of our mind. We end up relating to something that isn't happening at all. This is one way that misperception takes place.

In our complex psychology, sitting here, somebody makes a sound. Even simpler than that, there's just the hearing of a sound. And the papañca immediately starts. It's unpleasant. We associate it with lack of respect. It reminds us of how in our childhood we were treated as not being worthwhile, leading to all the times we are now treated as not being worthwhile, the immensity of the pain that comes with that, the anger. You see what I mean? By this time, the next time that sound arises, it's almost impossible to relate to a sound. We're relating to a whole conglomerate of things that isn't happening except in the thinking process.

This is one way of misperception, and it's fueled, as we've spoken of so often, by what we call the kilesas—greed, hatred, ignorance, delusion. These are sometimes translated as afflictions of the mind, or torments of the mind, or defilements. I don't really like the word defilements, so I'll prefer to use afflictions.

Now this misperception can happen on an even more basic level, and this actually fascinates me. Let me define perception first. Perception is that quality of mind present in every mind moment. It's one of the five aggregates. So with consciousness, feeling, volition, perception, and rupa—material form—it's going to be part of our experience in every mind moment. Perception means simply the quality of recognition or discernment of something.

When the kilesas are present, when they're afflicting the mind, often even this very basic first perception is distorted. That leads to all kinds of confusion, all kinds of reactions based on having perceived something that isn't actually true in the first place. When that sound comes again, the perception could be

so distorted you couldn't even recognize it as a sound, as somebody coughing. It might take a whole different discernment in the mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh says, "When you look at a pencil, you perceive it"—meaning you recognize it, you discern it. "But the pencil itself may be different from the pencil in your mind." This is the root of our problem: these afflictions that bring about this basic mistake in the way we perceive our experience. I feel that to understand the nature of these afflictions, of these delusions, is really the key to our practice.

These afflictions—greed, hatred, and the root one of all of them, ignorance—these are the tormenting aspects of consciousness that our whole practice addresses. The practice of morality, of concentration, the development of wisdom—these are working together to clarify these aspects of mind, to purify the mind from these tormenting delusions. Purifying means seeing through them, no longer being in bondage to these afflictions, and eventually uprooting them altogether. It doesn't mean hating them or hating ourselves because they arise in the mind.

I used to have a huge resistance to hearing the kilesas talked about, and one hears them talked about a lot. It's really one of the key points of the Buddha's teaching. But I would hear about kilesas, hear them translated as defilements, and I didn't even want to think about it, much less hear talk about it. Even the word defilement—I'd come away thinking, "Oh, I'm so defiled, it's so disgusting." Buddhism sounds so negative when you look at it from this aspect.

The more I would look in practice, of course, the more I would see greed, hatred, and delusion arising. And the more negative a turn of mind I could come to have, so that I would come away from a talk about it feeling like the nature of my disgusting tendencies of mind was just being hammered into me. One comes to wonder sometimes: in Buddhism, is this what we're saying our intrinsic nature is? This continual arising over and over of greed, hatred, and delusion? Obviously not, or we wouldn't be here. But it made me not want to look.

Over the years, I've actually come to flip about it completely. Far from being negative, I find the teaching about working with afflictions and seeing them is incredibly positive. It offers us the possibility to understand and move out of the suffering that we're in.

The reason it was so negative for me—and it's back to delusion again, of course—is that rather than hearing about these as something to learn about, to observe, to come to be familiar with and thus see through, I was identifying with them. So when greed would arise, very often it would be "my greed, I'm a greedy person, I'm disgusting." And that's really different.

The more we come to look, the more we see that these afflictions are actually not our intrinsic nature. They only hide the clarity, the light, the peace that's available in the mind. But we're so used to having these afflictions be the way that we move and react to situations. They're so pervasive, they arise so frequently, that we come to think that's who we are and how we normally relate to situations. It's really

easy to identify with them, and sometimes it can seem overwhelming. It can seem really discouraging, because the more we look, the more we see this, the more it reinforces our idea that we're really hopeless—whenever we identify with them.

But we need to know what we're dealing with. We need to investigate and understand the nature of these forces in the mind, learn to recognize when they're present and when they're not present. From this comes the power to see through them, to not be in bondage to them. The mind begins to purify. And this is what we're doing with our mindfulness practice.

Again, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, to understand something we need to have a direct encounter. If we're resistant to or afraid to look at these qualities in our mind, we never can have a direct encounter with them. We'll keep on being led by them, being lost in them.

So, for example, when ignorance is present, when delusion is present in the mind—you're having a sitting where your mind is dull and heavy and vague. You know you're trying. You're really trying to note things, you're trying to come back to the breath, and it's just all this fuzzy, amorphous heaviness. Now, it's probably rare to note, "Oh, there's delusion present in the mind." Much more common to think, "I am really incapable of doing this practice. I blew it. I did something wrong. It was the apple I ate. It was the extra hour of sleep. It was that moment of greed three and a half hours ago. This is it—I blew it." Or to project it outward: "This whole thing is a waste of time."

But when we can say, "Oh right, at this moment I'm heavy, there's cloudiness, there's dullness, confusion—delusion is present in the mind," it's very powerful. From moments of doing this, we begin to see that ignorance is not some monolithic, unchanging, ever-present experience driving our lives. It arises and passes moment to moment, due to conditions, just like anything else.

I find this a very positive understanding. It's a very helpful thing for me to see: "Oh yes, it's not hopeless. It's impermanent."

In this way, meditation is a very healing process—healing the mind of the afflictions, purifying the mind. Often the body comes to healing as well. But in order to heal, we must look at the nature of the disease. We can't hide from it. We can't pretend it's not present and wish it would go away.

So what are some general characteristics of the afflictions, ways that can possibly help us recognize when they're present in the mind? The first is that when there's affliction—when there's ignorance or greed or hatred—it introduces a distortion, a misperception. In other words, it's called an affliction to the extent that we see things not the way that they are. We see them one way and they really are another way, and we just don't know this.

So we end up with this distorted sense of reality. Our perception is out of sync with what's really going on—it doesn't correspond to what's actually happening. And then we build from this foundation and just get further and further away from what is. We wonder why we're confused.

The root of this, the root misperception of ignorance, stems from our fundamental misperception of ourselves, of who we are. This is really the root wrong seeing, wrong view, that gives rise to all the other confusion. Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "The obstacles to clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain. The very freedom from this is the natural state."

Now, the desire for pleasure and the fear of pain—here you have basic greed and hatred—stem again from the basic distortion in our perception of ourselves: from seeing ourselves as some permanent, unchanging entity, autonomous, separate from each other, separate from nature. And once this mistaken way of looking at things has entered into our perception, once it has kind of gelled into how we think we're seeing things, all of our emotional responses, our reactions to situations, the constructions and formulations that get built in our mind—they're all built upon this initial mistaken way of seeing.

So the further we go with our constructions, the further we get away from what's really going on, from what we really are. And we end up feeling confused, alienated, wondering why we feel separate and not quite connected with our experience. We don't quite see—even though we might know it in our mind on a thinking level—that this sense of perception is taking place moment to moment on a very basic, immediate level, not through the process of thought so much.

And so we expect things to be one way, even though in our mind we know they're not. We expect them to be permanent. We keep thinking we're going to find something solid out there, or in here, to give us satisfaction. We think we're some unchanging, abiding self that can be satisfied. And because that's what we think we perceive, our experience is never going to quite work. It's never going to quite jive—because we're in conflict with reality.

It's like a simple example: if we look up at the sky and see some beautiful star, astronomers can tell us that actually that star died ten million years ago and we're just looking at light. It's not there anymore. Or even watching a sunset—they can tell us that just as it's going down behind the hill, actually that happened eight minutes ago. We're just seeing the light because it takes eight minutes to get from the sun to here. We're not quite perceiving things exactly as they are. We're not living in the world we think we're living in. The pencil you perceive may be different from the pencil in your mind.

And so the second quality is this: misperception introduces a quality of disturbance, obviously, because we're in a sense of conflict with what's going on. It's like a friend of mine gave this example: our life is continually spent as if we're trying to pound a square peg into a round hole. Our mind is the square peg and reality is the round hole. And we just spend our life pounding and pounding and pounding, wondering why it doesn't work—never really stopping to investigate that these two don't match.

And so we keep on having expectations based on something that isn't true. Those expectations aren't met. We don't quite understand what's wrong. And we end up with this pervasive sense of disturbance. It really can be quite deep—not just when there's something obvious creating a lot of suffering, but in little day-to-day routine things. An underlying tone of uneasiness. Something doesn't quite jibe. And it's easy to

internalize that as "there's something wrong with me," or "there's something wrong with life," or "there's something wrong with"—you name it, whatever happens to be going on at the time.

Here's an example, just a simple everyday event, showing how not quite seeing things the way they are leads to a sense of being out of touch. This is all too common, unfortunately. A couple of years ago, some of the staff and teachers here belonged to a health club where we could go swimming and exercise. So during the three-month course, after a long, hard day, a friend and I were really tired and in a rather negative frame of mind. He said, "Let's go swimming—we'll really feel good. That'll really help." So we looked forward to it all day, got ready, went swimming, and got there. Now, the way I'm describing it, I was not observing it with this clarity at the time. This is more in retrospect.

It's chilly down there. They don't keep it very warm, and I'm quite sensitive to cold. So there I was getting on my swimsuit and freezing, thinking, "I can't wait to get in the water. This is really unpleasant." I jumped in the water, which was even colder, and just started swimming really fast to warm up. After a couple of laps I warmed up, and then I was just moving through the laps, moving through the laps, thinking, "This is really boring. If I hurry up, I can get into the sauna."

So I did my laps, just kind of dragging through it. "Phew, that's done. Now I can go get in the sauna." The sauna was really nice—for about three minutes. Then the board I was lying on started to get hard. Then I started to sweat. Then I started to get really hot and dizzy. "I've got to get out of here. This is really unpleasant." I went out—it was really cold, which was unpleasant—and stayed out until I'd cooled off. Then I thought, "Let me jump back in the sauna," which was nice for one and a half minutes this time. I could stand it for maybe five minutes. I got out, took a shower, went up, and met my friend. He was in the other locker room. And we both said, "Wow, that was really great."

Then we started talking about it. Had I not gone back and examined it, I would have come away with the perception that it was really great. So how come I didn't actually, deep down, feel really great from this experience? This is, as I said, all too common. We're just out of sync, not looking at what's actually going on. I thought there was some permanent "me" that was going to be made happy and fulfilled, that there was some experience out there that was going to do it, and that being happy was about having all pleasant things around me to begin with. When we don't question our perceptions, we're going to get this underlying sense of dissatisfaction and wonder why.

The third quality of these afflictions is that they are so habitual. They have incredibly addictive qualities of mind. We're so used to seeing in this way. We're so used to the basic one—seeing ourselves as abiding, as permanent, as separate, autonomous. We're so used to acting out of desire and aversion on very subtle levels that it's very hard to break out of it. It's hard to even see that it's happening. It becomes our habitual mode of response when we're not working with mindfulness. When we are working with mindfulness, that's the power, that's the tool that enables us to break out of this habitual nature.

For myself, I've found it very important to respect the power of this conditioning. By conditioning and

habit, I'm really using them somewhat interchangeably. What I mean is that the more a particular mode of responding, or state of mind, is maintained or sustained in our experience, it's just that much easier, that much more likely for that particular mode or way of responding to arise again.

Now, of course, this also works for positive qualities—cultivating a sense of *mettā*, cultivating equanimity. It's also easier for those to arise. Cultivating mindfulness. That's why every moment of mindfulness, the continuity, has such power. Because it's making it that much easier for mindfulness to arise in the next moment. And when we're not cultivating mindfulness—as most of our lives we haven't been—without knowing it, we've been cultivating the afflictions.

The Buddha wouldn't, at least from what I've read, ever talk very much about the beginnings of things. It used to drive me crazy. How did we all get into this predicament? Why, if our intrinsic nature is so light and peaceful, are we tormented by these qualities of mind? Why are we so easily prey to these afflictions? He never gave an answer. He would say things like, "The mind has been afflicted since beginningless time." And he would also say, "What I'm teaching you is all you need to know to come out of suffering."

I'm teaching suffering and the end of suffering. And so if you take what he says and put it into practice, we can come to the end of suffering. He was basically saying it's no use trying to figure out the beginnings of things. In fact, there were four things that would drive a person mad to think about them. I can't recall all four, so don't ask. But one of them was the beginnings of things. It hasn't stopped me from thinking about it, but...

Anyway, that the mind has been afflicted since beginningless time—you can take it, as I do, as a symbol of the depth and power of these habits of mind. Not in a negative or pessimistic way, but in a way that invites us to respect it, so that we understand something important: in the moments when we've really seen clearly and we really are free from delusion or greed or hatred, but then it comes back again so strongly later on, we need not be discouraged. It's just been so habitual, so pervasive for so long that it's not going to simply vanish like that.

That's why it's so important to learn to recognize these qualities, to understand these deeply ingrained habits. Because when we don't see them, we're assenting to this view of reality without even knowing it. And the whole society assents to this mistaken view of reality. It becomes the agreed-upon assumption.

A couple of examples from just reading the newspaper the other day—a most instructive way to discover some of the assumptions we're all living with. One was an article about a television advertisement where some attractive woman appeared in close-up. I don't remember what she was advertising, but she said, "I've had it with reality. I want illusion." And this is meant to sell something, so it's designed to appeal to us.

The second one isn't funny; it's quite upsetting. It was a headline in the Globe about a proposal to Congress to ease the assassination ban. This was a serious headline—like easing the milk tax or something. Ease the

ban on assassinations, mostly regarding foreign governments. This represents a warped view of reality, of what's real, of what's wholesome and what isn't—that it's acceptable to assassinate in the name of peace.

When we don't take the time or the energy or the care to investigate our perceptions and our assumptions, we're all assenting to this. It's so close that we can't even see it's there, but it's affecting us. We're so accustomed to seeing things this way that even when we begin to look, it's very difficult not to perceive through these afflictions.

Someone told me about a science fiction movie—I didn't see it—where some creatures glommed onto people's faces, and you could see through them. People would see through as if the creature weren't there, but it's right on you, infiltrating and taking over. It's kind of like that. These afflictions aren't our nature. They're not necessarily part of us, but we're so used to them just sitting there that we think that's what the world looks like.

Sometimes it seems like one of the most difficult things on this path is learning how to step out of seeing in this mistaken way. It's hard, for just the reason I mentioned: it's first hard simply to discern that we are seeing in a mistaken way. And there's another reason—as we begin to move toward a different understanding, a different perception, it meets with great resistance, both internally and externally.

Internally, a simple example: say you're caught in some difficult process—an emotional state, a memory, a whole conglomeration of things—something very painful and difficult, with a lot of suffering. And you're really bringing mindfulness to it, and suddenly there's a moment where you see so clearly: "Oh, it's thoughts and emotions and sensations," with a real sense that there's nothing solid here. In that moment, there's no problem. It's a moment of perceiving impermanence—impermanence of the mind-body process—on a really deep level, perceiving things as they actually are, rather than the solid sense of "me" and "this concept" and "the suffering."

In that moment there's no problem. But so often—not always, but often—the next reaction is one of tremendous threat. The mind will skitter off, back into the problem, even though it means much more suffering, back to the old way of seeing things. It feels safer. It feels solid. It feels like there's something here.

Often it seems as though the tendency to misperceive is so strong, we've gotten so comfortable with it, that there's almost a preference to see things that way rather than to move out into the truth: yes, there's nothing here but changing sensations and thoughts and feelings. Even though the accurate perception is much more freeing, internally, it's scary.

It's often threatening. It means changing one's whole view of the world.

And I've often found externally, when you start to change your habitual ways of responding to situations—your habitual modes of behavior—you find that the people who are your friends become uncomfortable with the new ways you're acting, the new ways you're behaving.

When I first got into practice, for instance, not out of a sense of moralism but just for some reason, I didn't want to drink anymore. So I just stopped. I never said anything about it. I didn't have a sense that it was bad—I was just seeing that it wasn't helpful. And this was very threatening to others. I actually ended up going in a different direction from my friends. This is different from moral railing at someone that makes them feel like you're on their case. It's just that you're beginning to see through the societal assumed perceptions. Just as it's scary internally when you sit here, it's scary to other people externally sometimes.

So we often don't get a lot of support for this change if we're not with sangha or other people who are working in a similar way. And this again is hard. It makes it tempting or easier to fall back into the old ways of seeing, because they're so deeply ingrained anyway.

That's the habitual, pervasive nature of these afflictions of mind—they arise so strongly and so frequently.

But the fourth quality, and this is really the important one to remember, is that they are not our intrinsic nature. They only obscure it, like clouds obscuring the sun. This is from Kalu Rinpoche: "When you practice the Dharma, the clouds of sorrow will drift away and the sun of wisdom and joy will be shining in the clear sky of your mind."

That's what it's like. The clouds of sorrow will drift away and the sun of wisdom and joy will be shining in the clear light of your mind. It's just that sometimes we take the clouds to be all there is. We take them to be unchanging.

In each moment of our experience, there are certain qualities—these five aggregates—that are intrinsic to the nature of our existence in that moment, to the structure of consciousness: feeling, perception, consciousness, volition, rupa. Those are there. You're not going to have a moment as a human being where one of those isn't happening. But these afflictions—greed, hatred, ignorance—these are not intrinsic. They do not have to be there in every moment of our existence.

It's very important to know this: that they can disappear. They can drift away like clouds. We can transcend and overcome them. Otherwise, practice doesn't make any sense.

When you're discouraged, it can be helpful to reflect on this and also to realize that often it's discouraging because we're beginning to see these afflictions more clearly. Before, these afflictions were so comfortable that we didn't even know they were here. When we begin to pay attention, to work with mindfulness, we see them more and more. This is really the beginning of the healing process. But it's also a very painful part of the healing process—like sometimes taking a very painful medicine.

I have a friend who was in chemotherapy for a while, and she'd say she knew it was good for her, but it made her so sick she'd just sit and look at the pill for half an hour or an hour before she could get herself to take it, because she knew she was going to be in the bathroom sick the whole night. Sometimes it almost feels that bad, turning around and looking at these things in our mind. But it's the only way to come to understand and be free of them.

So that's the path of our practice: to learn to tell the difference between these obscuring, obstructive qualities of mind and the real pure nature of our mind and heart.

I want to talk a little bit specifically about the quality of ignorance, the affliction of ignorance, because that really is the root one—the root misperception.

First, just to begin to get a feel for it, let's get familiar with what it feels like when our mind is filled with ignorance. It's dark, heavy, confused, foggy, sluggish. I have this description from Nyanaponika that I really like, of a mind strongly under the influence of delusion:

"There's a general heaviness and unwieldiness of the mental processes. Force of habit predominates. Changes and adaptations are undertaken slowly and unwillingly and to the smallest degree possible."

Thought is rigid, inclined to dogma. It takes long to learn from experience or advice. Affections and aversions are fixed and biased. In general, the character proves more or less inaccessible.

I love that description.

So if you ever have a moment—a rare moment—when you recognize any of those qualities, instead of saying, "Oh, I'm a rigid, fixed, biased person," you could say, "Oh, ignorance is present in this moment." Just see if that makes a difference in your relationship to it.

Also helpful is learning to recognize when ignorance is present and when it's absent. When it's absent, the mind is facile, flexible. You can really see what's happening clearly. You can note it clearly—it comes and it goes. Helpful not to say, "Wow, I'm such a good yogi," but rather to recognize that there's not delusion in the mind now. There are other positive qualities present—mindfulness, concentration, energy.

So that's one aspect of ignorance. The other is this wrong view, this distortion. Because of the fogginess, because of the darkness and the cloudiness, we see wrongly.

The classic example given is of someone walking in the woods at twilight. It's not completely dark. You can make out the trees, you can make out bigger shapes, you can sort of see the path. But you can't see little things very clearly. You can't quite tell what's going on over there in the shadows. And you see a vine or a rope hanging from a tree, and the mind mistakes it for a snake because of the obscuring quality present in that moment.

In that moment of mistaking the vine for a snake, that mistaken recognition leads to a strong reaction of mind—of fear. "I know there's poisonous snakes in this area." You whirl around and see other vines, and they're all snakes, and there's a sense of panic. The whole way we perceive the woods changes based on this initial mistaken perception. It's dangerous. One is scared. The woods are unfriendly. They're dark. They're evil. On and on.

If we think that we perceive a snake due to this cloudiness, we're unable to see clearly. That mistaken

perception will inform all our actions. We will behave as though we saw a snake. We'll never know the difference.

But if one, even though filled with fear, kept on going and got closer—or suddenly the moon came up and you could see that that vine is actually a vine—the whole problem goes away. It's like, "Oh, no problem, that's a vine." Now nothing in the situation has actually changed except that our perception has become accurate. Our relationship to the situation is all that's changed. Recognizing it wrong affects everything. It affects our entire relationship to the experience.

There's an addendum that works the other way. When I was in Thailand staying in one forest monastery where there were a lot of poisonous snakes, one would be on the lookout for them. I was walking in the woods one day and there was this big green vine. I didn't pay any attention to it, walked up close, and it actually was a snake. So it works both ways.

This is what we're doing all the time in our perception of our mind and body, of who we are. We're continually mistaking it to be something it isn't. This is basic wrong view. We take the input that we get on a moment-to-moment basis of who we are, what we are, and we organize it in a way that's not correct. And then we act on that incorrect perception and build our life on it.

This changing mind-body process—constantly arising sensations, images, sounds, thoughts—is always in a transitional stage, never in stasis, always becoming.

We somehow reorganize it and perceive it as solid, unchanging, permanent, separate from everything else, autonomous—you know, "I can do whatever I want, nothing affects me and I affect no one else."

Now, while some misperceptions are easier to see through—you get close to the rope and you can see it's not a snake—this one is how we've always viewed the world, and it's not so easy to see through. It's also being recreated, this misperception, on a moment-to-moment level. So just seeing through it once isn't enough. We see through it deeper and deeper, on more and more powerful levels. But since this is how we've organized the world, it is very hard to see through.

Take an example of a time when you've misperceived something. Say you're misperceiving the rope as a snake. Reflect on how real that misperception was. I mean, the mind was absolutely convinced that's the way things are.

Two other examples—and you can probably think of times in your own life. One is from James Thurber, whom I used to read a lot when I was a kid. He had this whole essay—I can't remember most of the details—but he was almost blind, and it was about how he broke his glasses once and didn't have glasses for three days and all the wonderful things he was seeing in the world because he couldn't perceive accurately. The one I remember is he would look out of his apartment in New York, up on the fifth floor or the tenth floor, and this magnificent dog just kept lying on the ledge on the same side of the apartment next door. He kept wondering, what's it doing out on the ledge on the tenth floor? It was so magnificent

and it just held its pose, very regal. After three days when he got his glasses, he found out it was made out of stone. Now, for those three days, that dog was absolutely a real living dog in his mind.

Another one is from a friend of mine. He was walking in England with his wife at twilight—good time for misperception. The twilight is like the ignorance in our mind. They were out in the country, and at the far end of a field by some bushes, he saw a whole flock of big white geese walking across the field. They were kind of big and their necks were twisted funny, but he said, "Look at those funny white geese walking across the field." And she said, "Those aren't geese, those are cows." She went on to explain how they're the kind of cows—I don't remember what kind—but they're black on either end and white in the middle. It was dark and they were up against some dark bushes, and so all he saw was the white, and it formed into something that was geese in his mind. They were geese, absolutely geese. And then you know how once you see it as cows, they can never really be geese again. They're cows.

So we do that a lot. When you notice that happening, reflect on it. Notice how the process of misperception happens. It's not that different from how we take this thing to be solid and permanent. Reflect on how real everything was when we were in the misperception, because it's that same way—it's that real that we think we're this separate, solid, eternal being.

Another thing that makes it hard to see through is that often we tend to reject or deny input that's coming in that doesn't fit with our mistaken perception. We've gotten so used to that perception that we just block out or deny or don't trust our perception when we perceive something else.

A simple example: often people have said in interviews, "Objects are coming and I just can't stay with one object very long. I just don't have enough mindfulness. My mind's just too scattered. I just can't stay with objects." And often it's because, yeah, you can't stay with objects long because the objects are changing constantly. It's the absolute bare experience of impermanence.

Nothing is staying long—neither the object, nor the attention, nor the mindfulness, nor the consciousness. It's all changing moment to moment. But we actually deny that experience by making a permanent "I can't stay with the object, there's something wrong with me," instead of opening to the fact that it's all constantly coming and going.

We do that a lot. What's important in these moments is to notice when you tend to reject a certain experience or perception, and to see where that rejection is coming from. It's important to let in these experiences. Often if it's some kind of psychic experience or some sense of interconnectedness, we put it down as weird or far out or kind of a fringe thing—as if, again, thinking that we're really separate, that we're autonomous. It's important to take in, to notice the times when this perception is belied, when you see the other way.

When I was sitting here this summer, one really hot afternoon, I was doing my walking meditation in the Hall of the Catskills. It was one of these days just before a huge thunderstorm, where it's incredibly hot

and sultry. You feel like you're walking through a swamp, just walking. It was all I could do just to move. There was this sense of heaviness and something impending. Absolute stillness. Usually people were walking somewhere up and down the hall, coming to their rooms or passing through, very mindfully, but there was always some activity. During this period of about twenty minutes, absolutely nothing. It was like the whole world was dead still. It was all I could do just to keep myself walking. I felt like I was moving against the energy.

And suddenly the thunderstorm just hit. A wild storm. Within ten seconds it was pouring rain, thundering. Within a minute, people were tearing through the hall. Doors were slamming. People that I hadn't seen move faster than a snail's pace for three weeks were running at top speed down the hall, throwing open doors, checking the windows. I myself was filled with energy and having to hold myself back.

I thought, *wow*—it's not like there's a thunderstorm and there's me and those are two separate things happening. It was so clearly one happening, one experience, and not a sense of separation or inner or outer or different people, or "there's nature and it happens to have an effect on me." It was so clear that I *was* nature. So was everyone else. We were all part of the same process. It was a very powerful moment for me. And then it all just kind of died down back to normal—"lifting, moving, placing, separate from this other person who's walking in my way."

So the more that we see these things, the more that we notice, pay attention, come to understand the nature of ignorance, the nature of these afflictions—know when they're present and when they're not—the less we identify with them, the less we move out of a space of confused perception. And then the clouds really do begin to thin out. It really does happen.

And what's so beautiful is that, in a way, nothing really changes. We're always afraid we'll lose something, you know. But it's like when you see that the geese are cows, nothing's any different. The cows were always cows, and they're still cows. The only thing that's lost is a mistaken image of what was happening. Nothing changes, but everything changes.

Because there's a really crucial difference. The way we perceive ourselves as separate, autonomous, unchanging—it feels secure, but actually it's really painful. When we're coming from perceiving ourselves this way, and then relating to life from this place, it makes everyone else, everything else separate. Things become so difficult, so unsatisfying. There's conflict. It hurts. Life is hard.

When we're seeing without that, when we're seeing the changing nature, and there's nowhere to take hold, and there's no solid core—it's like a huge burden has been lifted off. And things are just how they are. It's really so simple.

It's just how things always were. And life can even be enjoyable. Thich Nhat Hanh says that practicing Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life. That doesn't mean every moment you're sitting here you should be enjoying—sorry to say. But the relationship to life can actually become one of deep appreciation and joy,

rather than this niggling, ongoing conflict of pounding the square peg into the round hole.

And so when we're seeing without these misperceptions, even the difficult times are okay.

I want to end with this little quotation from the Tao Te Ching:

Empty your mind of all thoughts. Let your heart be at peace. Watch the turmoil of beings, but contemplate their return. Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source. Returning to the source is serenity. If you don't realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kind-hearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king. Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you. And when death comes, you are ready.

So we're learning to deal with whatever life brings us.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

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