Living in Three Dimensions

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:33

A theme that comes up often through retreat, and I noticed it some in the group today, could be phrased various ways. One is this issue—this seeming issue—of control, or letting go of control. It's only a seeming issue, since it's really not our choice, but it seems like an issue. Or the sense of opening into the unknown, the sense of life as a mystery, and the alternative ways of meeting that as either wonderful or petrifying, and sometimes both at once.

I know when I began my meditation practice, and for the first twenty years—I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Only the first fifteen—I was really practicing from this deep motivation of understanding, really wanting to understand life and suffering and what things were about. But it took me quite some time to realize that my idea of understanding was basically acquiring a body of knowledge, that I would somehow get the explanation, or the right way to think about things, or the perfect description, and then I would know what things were about. I'd come to some resting place of, "I don't have to think about this anymore, now I know, I got the final explanation."

Or if it was not a series of thoughts or descriptions, I was looking for the definitive experience. Once had, everything is explained, everything is understood, and you just cruise from then on. Or in the practice itself, trying to figure out the right way to meet every situation that arises so that you're doing the practice correctly. You find out, well, what do I do if this happens? What do I do if that happens? And we're acquiring a list, a manual, of the correct response to each situation, which is impossible to ever have.

There's something that seems quite common, quite deep in us, this yearning for a sense of definitive knowledge, understanding. We often—at least I did—equated wisdom with this type of knowledge. And the more we practice, the more we find out that it's not that way at all. As we move more deeply into meeting our experience moment to moment, rather than coming closer to the nugget of how to look at things that's going to just clear everything up, we find that we're moving more deeply into—as our friend and teacher Joseph Goldstein says, his favorite mantra now is, "Who knows?" You ask about something, he goes, "Well, who knows?" We're moving more deeply into the mystery. And sometimes that's scary.

But if we look in our experience, when we are trying to control with knowledge, this sense of explanation, description, having the right knowledge actually creates in us a sense of limitation. We think we've got it covered. But we're covering ourselves in a nice little square box, and that's it. It creates separation, limitation. It solidifies and limits our world to what we can know and describe. And we try to know more and more and describe more and more, but it leaves out everything else that we don't know. We feel as though this is giving us security, but in a way, it's imprisoning us. You know Krishnamurti's book, *Freedom*

from the Known? We're imprisoning ourselves in a cage of the known, of what we can know and describe, and really who we are and what we are—the world is so vast.

This is probably my favorite newspaper article of all time. I see it as a metaphor for what I'm talking about now: our thirst for knowledge and discovering the vastness. It's a science article from the New York Times of a few years ago, talking about astronomers. At this point—and I'm sure it's out of date because it's a few years old—they had just discovered the largest galaxy ever detected. That galaxy includes more than 100 trillion stars. The galaxy is 6 million light years in diameter. We know we can understand this, right? And this galaxy, with 100 trillion stars, the newest one, is 60 times bigger than our galaxy, the Milky Way. That's our galaxy, in case you didn't know—we personally, Earth, own the galaxy of the Milky Way. This new galaxy of 100 trillion stars is located in the middle of a larger clump of galaxies, a thousand galaxies. So this galaxy is in a clump of a thousand galaxies.

Okay, that's just a lead-in. Now, the astronomers in this article are puzzled. I don't even get what they're puzzled about. They're puzzled because there doesn't appear to be enough matter, measurable matter, in the universe to account for all this clumping together of galaxies. And so since they can't account for it with measurable matter, the scientists proposed the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to the prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this missing matter.

That's a true article. That's exactly what it's like when we start to turn our attention to our moment-to-moment experience in meditation. The more we look, the less we can explain everything.

And that's only a problem if we need to explain everything. If we don't, then we're open to discover moment to moment that who and what we think we are, the way we've been living, has been so much less, so much more limited than what is actually available to us.

Our practice is a moment-to-moment exploration of how to meet our experience with this freshness, with this sense of wonder, rather than bringing our preconceived notions of "this is matter, and this is how matter behaves, and if something doesn't fit into that, then we've got to make something up." Couldn't we just leave it open to discovery?

When we meet our experience that way, anything becomes so amazing. You know Thich Nhat Hanh's description—it's kind of classic now—that the real miracle is walking on this earth or taking a breath. Anything, when you bring this beginner's mind... Suzuki Roshi, the great Zen master, used to say, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind, there are few." We bring beginner's mind to everything, and whatever you look at becomes so filled with wonder. A plant. Our bodies. Falling in love—what's going on there? What's going on with birth, with death? A strawberry. Whoever figured out that the inside of kapok trees could be used to stuff a zafu—that's amazing.

When we bring a freshness to our experience, we move out of what Einstein called an optical delusion of

consciousness that limits us to a sense of feeling we're just this mind, this body, these thoughts, these emotions. Really, when we can move out of the expert's mind and meet things fresh... I was actually feeling it today. It's as if when we're caught in our descriptions, our opinions, our viewpoints of things, we're living in two dimensions, just running along on the surface. And there's this whole third dimension that's available to us to move and breathe in. But we have to let go of our opinions about things and really meet experience with an open heart and mind.

That's what our practice is about. That's what we're learning how to do. And we can learn how to do it. Sometimes it's fearful to the mind that likes to know everything, that likes to have all the descriptions. But that's okay. A little fear is okay.

So I want to talk a bit tonight about some of the ways we—starting very simply with how we use thought, this thinking process, which we will begin including in the instructions tomorrow—how we use thought, and even prior to thought, to construct these limiting descriptions of others, of ourselves, of our life, without even realizing that we're doing it. And once we recognize the way that we're limited by seeking for answers, just the recognition helps us open and move beyond that.

The Buddha, when he spoke about the second noble truth—that clinging, craving is the real cause of our confusion, our isolation, our anguish—mostly we might tend to think of clinging as being to sense objects, with states of mind being a sense object. Actually, he included a second field of clinging, and this, I think, is even more insidious and imprisoning: our attachment to our opinions, to our views, basically to our mental constructs of things.

I think it's insidious because if we're really attached to our opinions, we don't think it's an opinion. It's the truth of how things are. Everyone else is just a little too dull to pick it up, or too stubborn.

So I want to start with the obvious, but build up, because this has huge implications for how we relate to our lives, for whether we really can perceive our basic goodness or not.

Of course we use descriptions, explanations, opinions. Nothing wrong with that. We need them. How else are we going to vote? How are we going to decide what to do when you go home on Friday night, Saturday night? We need concepts to show your passport at the border. We need things like that. It's the attachment that causes the difficulty—this sense of "this is true, everything else is false."

When we realize we're feeling that way about something, is it possible just to let in the possibility that maybe it could be only my personal opinion, and someone else's opinion could also be valid? It's hard.

A good place to look at this, at least in the States—maybe it's not as strong here—is around opinions about what is healthy and proper food to eat, on or off a retreat. I think it's much mellower here. It's fairly intense in the States.

Why is that funny? It really is. People come with strong opinions about what's healthy, and the cooks often

have to accommodate a lot of special needs. We have a whole table we call the special needs table. I was teaching one retreat with some environmentalists who didn't usually sit, and at the end of it this rancher said, "Special needs? I think special needs should be bacon and eggs." He had trouble with the vegetarian food.

At the meditation center where I live in Massachusetts, every summer there's a retreat for young adults, teenagers between thirteen and eighteen. Last year there were about fifty teenagers on this retreat, and Michelle McDonald, one of the teachers, told me this story. They had two or three kids, teenagers from the inner city in New York, really from the ghetto. They came, and the food was much like here—very healthy, vegetarian, not much refined sugar—and these kids literally, physically couldn't adjust to the diet. When you come from sugar, fast food, and grease to beans and lettuce, their systems were going into withdrawal. They were literally ill—diarrhea, sick to their stomach.

Michelle went to the cooks and said, "These kids need some sugar." The cooks would not put any sugar out. They would not do it. "All these kids don't need sugar, and all the other kids would eat it," and so on. After much negotiating, she got the cooks to agree to give these three or four kids who were having a problem their own little private stash of sugar, but they had to keep it hidden.

I thought, these kids are from the streets. They must think we're so weird. They come from where cocaine and heroin are out in the open, and here they have to hide their white sugar.

But it's really about seeing. A firmly held belief about what's good could be true for many people. It could be true for you. But when we are locked in, attached to our description, our belief, it's so scary in a way, so uncomfortable to think it might not be true, that there's a way we actually block perceptions that don't fit our beliefs. Has anybody ever noticed that? It's really quite interesting.

The first step is even to be able to recognize some of the beliefs, some of the descriptions we hold. We won't recognize all of them. But just for a moment, reflect. In your practice here, which is a good place to look. In your life. In your description of yourself. Who you think you are—now that's a loaded one. How you think other people see you. Just hold the possibility it might be a momentary description that in another minute is completely not true. That can be scary.

Our opinions about other people. Just as a daily life example, if you live with somebody else—your opinions about how things should be done in the house, how clean the house should be, who should do which chores—to even hold the possibility that the way I know it should be is only my opinion.

My partner and I went through years of this. He moved into the house after I was already living there, so you know how that is already. It's my house, and he's moving in and changing things around. And I have, I guess I would have to say, a slight neurosis about the white counters, which I wanted to keep white. We both drink a lot of tea. If you don't clean the tea up immediately, it stains the white counters, which of course we can't have. And that is just so obvious that one would think it's simply the facts of life. It's like

the first noble truth: when you spill the tea, you wipe it up. You don't sit down and drink the tea.

Now, my partner has another relationship to life, which is to enjoy it. So he's a real tea meister. He makes a lovely pot of tea and says, "Why don't we sit down and drink it with some relaxation while it's warm, instead of cleaning the counter like a fiend?"

I'm a little embarrassed to say this, except that I know it's not me. It's just conditions.

Four years it took before it really entered my heart with some space. Oh, it's an opinion I'm holding. It's possible that his way is just as right as mine. I'm not saying I let go of the opinion, but noticing it makes some space. It really does. I could meet him with some kindness. I could actually meet him.

That's a small example, but actually a small example like that can lead to a lot of suffering. The Buddha said, in one of my favorite quotations, "For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world annoying people." Not only other people—we actually annoy ourselves. It's a lot of suffering.

Notice throughout the rest of this retreat how we relate to our meditation practice. It's a wonderful place to observe how we take specific perceptions—not the whole range, but specific perceptions—and construct an explanation or view out of them. This is good practice, or this is rotten practice, and we simply don't hear or see the balancing views and perceptions.

We get to see this in interviews. It's a real privilege and honor to talk to so many people. We get to see, in a string of conversations with different practitioners, the exact opposite experiences happening—and how we don't let that in. Sharda's teachings about emotions last night and this morning offer a great example. Someone who's having really strong emotions will come and say, "I'm swept away by emotions. I have no mindfulness. I hardly feel a breath. I'm doing it wrong," despite whatever we say up here. The next person comes in and says, "You know, I'm just not having very strong emotions. I'm with the breath a lot of the time, and when emotion comes I notice it and it goes away. I must be suppressing. I'm just not doing it right."

And as much as we talk about choiceless awareness and using the breath as a tool, I've had people come to me after years of practice saying, "Oh, you mean I don't have to be with the breath every moment? It's okay to open up and feel sensations?" I'm serious. After years. We all give the same instructions, more or less. Do you remember Sharda or myself on either of the days talking about continuity? Does anyone remember us mentioning that? Some do, some don't. That's how it is.

On the long three-month course we teach, we go on and on about continuity. I had a good friend—it was maybe his fourth three-month course—and he came up to me one year and said, "You know, it's really great, all this talk about continuity. How come you're mentioning it this year? I don't remember you talking about it before." We didn't just bring it up that year.

Watch how we do this. I'll have a sitting where the breath is really open and free, the attention feels like it's within the breath, and without realizing it, the thoughts come: "Oh, this is what mindfulness feels like." And when it changes, then it's wrong—I have to get back to how mindfulness is supposed to feel. And then it moves to something we like even better, and we think, "Oh, that other one wasn't really it, but this is really it."

Watch how we do that. As soon as the thought can come and we don't have to cling to it, we're not imprisoned. But when we don't see it, it's as if our awareness has snapped shut, and any perception outside of what we've decided is the way things are somehow doesn't register for a while.

She came to me after the fifth day. It was her first retreat. And she said she had just been in agony, sitting cross-legged on the floor the whole time in pain. But the agony was more that she was giving herself a terribly hard time, completely beating herself up, because she couldn't just sit in peace and bliss on the floor cross-legged. And that's what you have to do, obviously, to do the practice correctly. Despite everything we said.

She told me it was the fifth day, and I was talking about something, and she was looking at me and it registered. Oh, she's sitting on a chair. She's been sitting on a chair the whole time. It must be possible to meditate and sit on a chair.

When she really let it in, she let it in. And when she was telling me this, she wasn't really checking with me. But just to see what the mind can do, how locked in we get to our opinions and descriptions. And what's really scary is as soon as we see through it, the mind goes on to the next one. Well, I can sit on a chair, but it always has to be clear and vibrant and alert, or I have to go back to the floor, or whatever. It's just what our minds do.

As long as we see it, it's not a problem. When we don't see it, what's happening? We're freezing experience, as if everything's always going to be the way this particular set of conditions can be described. And of course, it's never really going to be exactly this way again.

So when we are attached to an opinion, a description, an explanation—when we're really attached to it—in that moment, it's like a complete denial of impermanence, of conditionality. Especially in practice: this is the right way to do it. The whole way of working with skillful means, with wise effort, is being able to be open and unbiased to conditions as they are right now. And how they were five minutes ago is already different.

That's why when we say stay with the breath, get really focused, notice the beginning and the middle and really be precise—that's helpful if the conditions are such that your energy is low, you're really spaced out, you don't have a clue where you are. But if you're really tight, if you're holding onto the breath for dear life, if you're hitting each breath with a whip saying get concentrated, get focused, then the instruction to really be precise and notice every feeling in the breath is not helpful. It would be much

more helpful to let go of the breath completely and open to hearing, for example.

It's always in flux. It's always opening into a mystery. The last minute might give us some information, but it can never tell us what's going to happen in the next minute. When we can live in this way, it isn't scary. It's wonderful. Life is so alive. We're so present in it.

But the mind doesn't like that too much—the mind that thinks it can know everything. By mind, I mean our thought processes, our emotions, a little mind. It really thinks that by having everything explained and all possible conditions accounted for, we can rest secure. We can rest at ease. And we keep on trying. We keep on trying to do that.

So that's sort of the obvious level of opinions, descriptions, views, and how we get attached. We'll often recognize it after we're attached, when we feel like we're bumping up against a stone wall somewhere. When you're halfway through the retreat and you start feeling really disappointed and frustrated, rather than looking at what's wrong, back up and think: What did I think was supposed to happen? What was my idea? And once you see that, you can just get bigger than it.

On a level down—a more subtle level—a place that our opinions, our descriptions, our views can form and be inaccurate, incorrect, and we still get attached without knowing it, is on the level of perception, just prior to thinking about something.

In the Buddhist terminology, perception is a very specific function of the mind. Our experience consists of our six sense experience: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, feeling with the body, and mental experience—a thought and emotion arising. Those six experiences just happening over and over and over, about which we then expand on and think about and describe. And we think our description is the experience. But the description is the description, and the experience is the experience. It's really helpful not to confuse the two.

So there's a basic sense experience. For example, hearing.

Hearing is an easier one to see this with. You notice how when you're in the hearing meditation and you hear a sound, almost right away the mind goes, "Oh, bird." But once in a while, it might not go "bird." It's just the sound. The perception is that moment of mental recognition immediately following on the bare sense experience. So there's hearing, "Oh, bird call." Hearing, "Oh, that's the bell." Seeing, without even thinking the thought, you know—I know that's a rug, that's a zafu. That's perception. It's really a thought process, and it's based on memory and our prior experience.

So sometimes we might hear a sound, and we really don't know what it is. What's fun, if that happens, is if you can just stay on that level of bare hearing—just play with staying there—so that we can see the perception is the next stage of the experience, but it's not necessarily the same as the sense experience. Do you get a sense of what I mean? Hearing is fun to play with because sometimes you can just hear the bird call and not get off into, "Is that a crow? Is that a pigeon?" It's just the sound.

In that moment of the sense impression—the seeing, the hearing, the emotion—and then the recognition, often in that moment there happens to be some emotion, some mental state that's present. And we perceive the experience as if through the glasses, the colored glasses of that mental state. It can completely color and distort the way we perceive or recognize what's happening.

A simple example: ignorance or delusion would be the baseline state of heart or mind that would distort our perception. A simple example is if I don't have my glasses on, I really don't see too clearly. So if I walk on back to my neurotic house again—and the house isn't neurotic—but if I'm walking around my house and I don't have my glasses on, everything looks really clean, and I feel very happy. We have wood floors. "Oh, the floors are clean. The rugs are clean. Isn't it nice?" Then I'm reading. I walk through the house with my glasses on half an hour later. "Oh my God. Look at that in the corner. Look at this." And I'm not very happy. I get kind of dissatisfied. The perception is distorted. That's one example.

Take it if in your mind is the coloring of the mood or the emotion of worthlessness, self-hatred. I don't know if that's familiar to anybody here, but it's one that I have a lot. It can just color everything. I've learned, actually, to recognize when worthlessness or self-judgment is present. I can feel it physically. I've learned to recognize how it feels, and I know that I then cannot trust my perceptions of experience.

So for example, you're feeling like that at work, or even here. Someone walks in the room, and as they walk in they really frown, and immediately you think, "Oh God, what did I do wrong? They don't like me." You know, here you can project like crazy. A woman was telling me this at the last retreat—at work she'd see some guy really frowning, looking at her, and she went off and did a whole story, realizing later the guy wasn't even seeing her. He was just thinking about a fight he had with his wife that morning. It had nothing to do with her.

You know how we can do that? We can build, can't we? If you don't check it out with the person or with yourself, you could go through the whole day building a whole reality about why that person doesn't like me. And depending on our particular tendencies, go into self-hatred or anger or fear or whatever. And actually, we're making it all up. The perception was inaccurate. We do that all the time.

Sometimes really visibly—like when you're really angry at somebody, or just angry, and someone comes in, they can really look ugly. When you're really in love with somebody, or maybe you just have a crush on someone, everything about them is fascinating, beautiful. You love the way they look. Six months later, when the whole thing's passed, you look at that person and you think, "How could they have changed so?"

It's really great—extremely scary to me sometimes, but immensely liberating—to begin to see the power of our perceptions and to learn that we can't always trust them. It's scary, too, to the mind that wants security, that wants to know how it is. Because here we come to really the most subtle and powerful

unrecognized misperception and constructed wrong explanation of all. And that's the sense—the often unthought, unspoken sense that we carry so frequently, if it's not examined—of who and what we actually

are.

Unexamined, it certainly feels to me as though I'm Carol and that's Sharda and I know the difference. I end with this body, and for all the talk of not identifying with the body, when something goes wrong, it bothers us. It bothers me. I'd rather it didn't. It doesn't bother me as much when something goes wrong with Sharda's body as it does when something goes wrong with mine. I feel compassion, but it has a slightly different tinge than when it's mine. The same with our emotions. We feel limited to this frame of these thoughts, these emotions, and we don't know how to look beyond it. We don't question it. And it's really a basic misinterpretation of our perceptions, happening so quickly that it's hard to see through.

Let me give you an example, an analogy of sorts, for the way our perceptions seem impossible to see through—it just seems that's how they are. You know Oliver Sacks, the anthropological neurologist? One of his fascinating articles, perhaps some of you have read it, in *An Anthropologist on Mars*, describes a man who was blind for most of his life and then had an operation. He was blind from the time he was four or five until his fifties, had adjusted quite well, had a job as a masseur, and got along fine. His predominant way of defining and describing and controlling the world was touch. He was quite at home. Then they discovered an operation that could restore his sight.

Everyone was around him as they took off the bandages. They were all so excited—he's going to be so happy to be able to see his fiancée, see his doctor. And of course, when the bandages were taken off, he could see. But none of it made any sense. It was just a blur.

Oliver Sacks goes on from this to say that what we see is so clearly a person, a zabuton, a rug, a clock—we've learned to see by putting together memory and what we've been taught and descriptions of the world. We all assume we see the same way, but actually we don't know how other people see. And it's not that way at all. This man never really could adjust to the sighted world. At times it would get so stressful—like eating or shaving—he just couldn't take it anymore, and he'd close his eyes and eat like a blind person, shave like a blind person. And ah, he could relax again, because that was his way of naming and being in the world.

So just to take in the possibility that the way we see things is only one possible construct of seeing. What about the other ninety-nine percent of undetectable matter? Maybe there's all this stuff right here in this room we can't see or hear. Who knows? Just to let in that possibility.

Because it's really the same with our bodies, with our sense of ourselves as being emotion, as thought. One of the things that can get interesting in a retreat is that we begin to have physical perceptions that don't fit in with what we're used to of our body. Suddenly, some people in the group are talking about how the abdomen feels huge. Suddenly you feel fifty feet tall. Suddenly your hands feel like they're swollen. You feel like you're completely tilted over and you open your eyes and you're sitting quite straight. This stuff can happen. It's no big deal. It's not something to try for. It's got nothing to do with wisdom. I'm just saying sometimes it happens.

When we let it in, how often the mind gets frightened. *No, what's happening to my body?* Nothing. It's just not ever the way you thought it was. This is another way of experiencing it. Sometimes the sense of structure goes completely away and it's just sensations coming and going in space. It's just another way of experiencing it.

Technically, sensations, thoughts, emotions—all these six sense impressions—are just arising and being perceived so quickly that everything seems solid. But you know how when things are so close together it seems solid, but actually it's not.

Sometimes we begin to experience our body that way. Sometimes, as the Buddha said once, if you must identify with some part of your experience and think it's permanent, at least it makes more sense to do it with the body, because the mind is changing so much more quickly. But actually, I find I identify much more with my mind.

So begin to just question—not even think about what your view is and question it, but just hold, as you go through the day: Do you feel like you're the same person, the same you? All your experiences have changed, but sort of, I feel like I'm the same Carol I was yesterday, even though if I look, the thoughts are completely different, the emotions are completely different, my physical sensations are quite different from what they were yesterday. What exactly am I holding to as the description of the sense of Carol?

Watch your thoughts as you go through the days, assuming thoughts are still arising. Notice how many of your thoughts—and I'm sure this is different for different people—how many of your thoughts are a little self-description. I find I'm going through the day telling the Carol story. And by the end of the day, it feels like it's been one Carol, one story all day. But really, look, it's completely changing all the time. One sense impression will arise, out of which we construct a whole story, select memories, select certain perceptions, and say, "Yes, that's me." The next moment, we completely flip.

I remember one time I was teaching a retreat, and my mom was real sick at that time. She'd just been diagnosed with kidney cancer. I was walking in a beautiful place. A memory of my mother came up, a feeling of sadness, just noticing. And then I kind of clutched at the feeling of sadness. "Oh, I'm so sad." Memories came of all the different times in my life I was sad, how sad life is. I was walking in a beautiful place. The flowers are dying. Everything comes to an end. At this time you see the impermanence, but you don't see the beauty of it—just everything's sad, everything's awful, all the times I've been sick. Just this whole heaviness, this sense of Carol.

Five minutes later—not even—that thought had passed. The sadness had passed. I looked up. It was a lovely evening. There were some roses there. I smelled them. Ah, the beauty of life. I'm so fortunate to be able to be in these beautiful places, to have this blessed life where I get to share Dharma with people, to travel. Life is just one big blessing when you open into the beauty.

Totally different experiences. Both of which I embraced equally as being me. And without examining

them, I would have said that was one continuous Carol—when it was just a sense impression, the emotion of sadness, the smell of the rose, and a whole construct of specially selected memories and perceptions that bolstered that particular story.

Once I was on a retreat, and I had just seen a movie prior to the retreat. I don't know if any of you did that or have had the experience that you then have to watch that movie a lot for the time that you're sitting, and it was a long retreat. But it hit me halfway through. It would be Harrison Ford doing his number running around. Then Carol would be doing her number running around. Then Harrison Ford. Then Carol. And absolutely no difference. The Carol story wasn't any more real. It was just more thoughts and emotions. The Harrison Ford story brought up thoughts and emotions too. In the moment, that's all that was happening. Thoughts, emotions, memories, sensations. That's it. And everything else we construct, and without looking, it feels continuous and solid.

Can we stand that? Can we stand to be without our self-stories? For some reason it's really scary. Now that's the real paradox of practice, because the source of our most anguish is the same self-story. So putting it down is actually such a relief.

It's this huge burden—all the things I think about Carol and what she does and how she feels. I can just put it down and feel sadness. Fine. Fear. Okay. I don't like it. Okay. Now there's real bliss. Fine. It's just what it is. But somehow we can't stand that. We want to make a story out of it.

We never know what's going to arise in the next moment, despite what we may think. This retreat gives us the illusion, as do our day planners and our lives, that we really have things under control. The schedule's pretty rigid, the bell rings, you all come here to sit—it's a miracle, you know, that it really happens. So we do have this illusion. I know where I'm supposed to be through the end of 1999. But it's an illusion. I don't really know. I don't really know where I'll be in the next moment. Anything could happen.

It's not that we give up plans—we do what we need to do—but we just know it's "as if." Who really knows? We think that's scary, but really this letting go into the unknown is an act of radical trust, of radical acceptance that truth is revealing itself in this moment if I can really just be here for it.

Some friends told me about being at Holy Mountain Arunachala in southern India, where Ramana Maharshi had his ashram. They had climbed up to the top of this mountain in the very early morning hours. Just as it was getting light—it's very rocky with some bushes and branches—there were these mountain monkeys. They were telling me these monkeys are kind of wild, not like the monkeys below that will come into your room if they think you have a banana. These ones are wild, and they said it was amazing to watch because they would be way up high and they would just let go of the rock or the tree and throw themselves into space as if they could fly, with either reckless abandon or total trust that they would come down to some rock or some branch that they could hold onto. And as far as my friends could see, they always did.

It's that sort of abandonment—okay, just dive into this moment. We have no idea what it will provide. But even if we try to hold back, it's still going to be here. It's still the same. We let go into it. We put down the burden and life becomes so alive. We move into that third dimension. We begin to be able to touch, to recognize the vastness—so much vaster, so much deeper, so much richer than all our descriptions and our self-explanations and our thoughts about what truth is. Because its vastness is beyond any thought, any description. Any description limits it, sets limits, and so immediately isn't true.

The only way we can recognize this, rest in this, touch it, is by just for that moment putting down all our descriptions, all our knowledge, all our explanations. You can't think about this. I mean, you can think about it endlessly, but it won't do any good. And it's not to try and stop thought—just to see that awareness is bigger than any thought or any explanation. Use the explanations, but don't try to hold them. Don't try to let them define our reality. Be open with wonder to meet this moment.

That's really all we can do, and that's what our practice is. The moment, the experience, the truth reveals itself. Not only do we not have to do anything, our very doing gets in the way. If we can just, like that monkey, dive with abandon into this knee pain, into this sound, into this fear, into this moment of peace—whatever it is. And when it changes, meet the next one with wonder and openness. That's when we begin to actualize our potential to live in a much deeper and richer and vaster way than we ever could imagine is possible from thinking about it.

Don't hate our thoughts. Use them.

But don't let ourselves be defined by them.

And then we'll see—as John Muir said... it's not that you come to some sense of nihilistic "who cares, nothing matters." It's just the reverse. We find—this is what John Muir said—he said, "I find when I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe."

That's really what we find: that place of compassionate connection beyond, greater than, vaster than the world of knowledge and description.

It's like coming home.

It's not *like* coming home. It *is* coming home.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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