Anicca: A Doorway To Awakening

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:17

Tonight I thought I would talk a bit about the insight into anicca, impermanence. It's a natural following on what I talked about last week—clinging—because the Buddha stressed so often the power, the importance of really understanding, really seeing the impermanence of all phenomena, and also pointing to how that understanding can actually be liberating understanding.

There are many places where he quite explicitly states that seeing impermanence leads to the end of clinging. For example, in one of a million different places where he's talking about abandoning identity view, or sakkāya-diṭṭhi, someone says, "Venerable Sir, how should one know, how should one see, for the view of self to be abandoned?" And he says, "Bhikkhu, when one knows and sees the eye as impermanent, the view of self is abandoned. When one knows and sees forms as impermanent, eye consciousness as impermanent, eye contact as impermanent—when one knows and sees whatever feeling arises with eye contact as the condition as impermanent—then the view of self is abandoned." And he goes, of course, through the ear and all the relations with the ear, smell, taste, body, mind. Clearly, once identity view begins to be abandoned, clinging to all forms begins to be abandoned. Wrong view, he goes on in that same sutta to say, is abandoned under the same conditions.

I find contemplating and focusing on this insight into impermanence to be quite interesting. I like talking about it because, as much as the Buddha stressed it, when we think about it, it doesn't sound so esoteric. In terms of the three characteristics of existence—impermanence, the characteristic of dukkha or unreliability, and the characteristic of anattā, not-self, out of control—the most obvious of these, the least esoteric really, would seem to be anicca, impermanence. In some ways, at least to me, the concept of anicca isn't really that difficult to twist our conceptual mind around. Whereas as soon as we talk about anattā, something kind of seizes up in many people's minds. With anicca, it's like, "Yeah, sure. I understand that. That makes sense."

So why is it that it's actually so difficult—at least from my experience—to actively live moment to moment from the knowing of impermanence, within the knowing of impermanence? Both on the macro level—the level of world systems, of our own life, of people we know, of events in the world—even on that big level, we can say, "Sure, I know everything changes." But do we really live from that? All the way down to the more micro level, what I just read: Do you live every moment of your life recognizing that the contact which arises when the eye door and the form and consciousness come together is impermanent? On that level, we can say, "Well, yeah, I don't see it." But on the bigger level, what's fascinating to me about studying impermanence is that it should be obvious. And yet, is that really, cellularly, how we relate to our experience moment to moment?

The Buddha says over and over: whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying and could not be seen as me or mine. That's often, in many of the suttas, the ultimate argument he gives. "Well, so you see that's impermanent. Obviously, it's unsatisfying, can't be seen as me or mine, right?" And they all go, "Yes, Bhante."

But I wonder. Does each of us actually believe that? One, do we believe that everything's impermanent? That's one thing. But the second is, do we really, on a cellular level, buy the fact that if something's impermanent, it's inherently unsatisfying? Or do we give it a nod, a conceptual nod? "Yeah, I know it's unsatisfying, but as long as it's here, I'm really going to go for it. I'm going to enjoy it while it's here. And I know it's impermanent—impermanent, impermanent, anicca." And we're living a complete delusion that we don't really notice.

If this is true, look and see for yourself. What would be the effect on my life, on my moment-to-moment stream of consciousness, on how I related to myself and life, if I truly—truly in my cells—knew that everything I experience is impermanent, including me? How would I relate, or would I relate, to things differently?

And not to take that as a should, or some conceptual answer. Not "I should come up with, 'Oh, if I were free of clinging, if I knew everything was impermanent, then I would be open and flowing and accepting'" or whatever. That's just a lot of baloney. It's just some story we're making up. But taking that as a pointing, an investigation in my moment-to-moment awareness—which is something you have the luxury to do here in this silence, in this beautiful white stillness. It's too cold to want to do anything else.

So that's great. It's going to get really cold tonight and tomorrow. Wonderful conditions to explore. How would I relate differently? Would I relate differently if I really knew that things were impermanent?

And I see in my own life how I know things change, but when something new goes wrong with my body, when someone like my parents or someone I love suddenly gets really sick, some conditions that have been together for many, many years fall apart—is my first response, "Oh, the conditions for supporting a healthy body have changed. That's how it is now"? Not usually. I'm only speaking for myself. Not usually. Sometimes I can get around to that, but it takes a little rubbing against the grain for a while.

I know I've mentioned this other times, but my parents in the last five years have really been declining. And in the last year, another whole kind of leap—both my parents in different ways—another whole leap, and also financial difficulties where they never had that. Not really difficulties, but just having to worry, which we never had before. And it's been really interesting to watch that place when each new shift happens, where my mind just starts—the first response is, "No, this isn't supposed to happen. What did I do wrong? Or what did they do wrong? Or what's wrong with the system?" There's definitely something wrong with the system that we all get old and cranky and die. I mean, definitely that wasn't figured out right.

I have to say I've been happy to see over the last five years that I roll with each new thing more easily. Like I really go, "Oh, it's not something I did wrong. It's not that I should be able to figure it all out so that nobody suffers." It's like, duh. What do I talk about all the time? But to see how that's the first place the mind goes when something goes wrong.

And that's in the big picture—which one really can't argue too hard that I'm never going to get old, one's parents won't get old, the people we love won't get sick, won't die, won't go away. Of course that's going to happen. Yet still there's such resistance to it. And that's fascinating to me, as much as I've been paying attention to my mind and body process and to the processes of many, many people and to the world around me. Still there's that tendency to hold. I think it's really fascinating.

Big picture, little picture. How do you relate to experience today? If you had a really pleasant or a really mellow or a really flowing mindful time and it changed, was your first response, "Well, the conditions that led to that flowing time have fallen apart and now it's like this"? Maybe that would be nice. It's nice when that happens, isn't it? How often, though, we just... "It's that person who walked too close to me. That's what did it." Or, "It's that I ate too many beans at lunch. I should have known better. I should have known better that if I ate the right things, I would have been able to keep my energy and my mindfulness and concentration in balance. It's my own fault for being selfish and greedy and weak, right?" And then you go on a whole downward spiral. It's a trip, isn't it?

The Buddha said, "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." And I see in my mind that the times we really get it—that nothing is lasting for more than a moment, there is no resting place—that is somehow to the mind that likes to control and know what's going on, somehow deeply uncomfortable. And so I, in myself, see how there's a tendency of the mind stream just to want—this is where the clinging comes in—to want to hold on to something as steady. That sense of, even though I know it's not going to last long, at least it's here now. And it gives me, in my experience, this feeling of somewhere to rest, something to hold on to in this sense of being in the middle of an earthquake all the time. The mind doesn't like it, so it tries to hold on. But of course the poignancy is just that—that holding on creates the friction, creates the sense of fear, of being kind of out of sync with how things are.

It's actually what creates the problem. But holding on to a momentary sense of peace and ease seems like a natural response to the total unreliability of life. And yet it's this denial of impermanence that is the suffering.

I once attended a three-day teaching that His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave, and he said something that's obvious about anicca, but that struck me. It's been really helpful in my exploring of it.

Basically, in my words, cellularly we know intellectually that things change. We wouldn't argue about it. But cellularly, we don't really quite believe it. We're still holding, as I said.

And this is what His Holiness said. He said we think that we really understand impermanence, but the

way we tend to understand it, or the way we tend to think we're experiencing it, it's kind of long-term impermanence. We know that whatever's born is going to die. We know that in the big picture, if I'm born, I'll die. This puppy's born, it will die. This cold evening is born, it will change. We know that.

But we may have the tendency to think, or not even to think, but to assume: this thing is born, it exists for a while, and then it goes away. And that's the place—"exists for a while"—that's the place we're holding on, where we're not seeing really the radical nature of anicca. It exists for a while, shorter or longer, unchanged, then conditions change and it goes away.

And His Holiness is saying, no way. Change is happening moment to moment. Nothing is existing for a while, stable, and then it goes away.

I find that really, really helpful because all experience is in constant flow, constant flux, constant change. The conditions are always changing. But some part of us really hates this. And so maybe our kind of compromise is: okay, I'll give you things are born and they die. I'll give you I know that mental states change. But in this state here, give me something to hold onto that's not changing.

So maybe the times of stability get shorter. Maybe it goes from the fifty years of my life to the last three years. Maybe it goes from the last three years to this retreat. Maybe it goes down to this day. Maybe it goes down to this sitting. Maybe it's down to just five minutes. But still, there's some way it can be so easy to hold out, to resist really seeing that change is completely momentary.

And when we don't see that, what we're often doing—and this I love to watch in my practice, in my life—is assuming permanence. Just this last month, in various groups and meetings, we've been figuring out schedules for 2006. I was in a meeting where we were saying, okay, on July 12th at 4:30 Eastern Standard Time, we're going to have a conference call. And someone says, I'll be in Hawaii, so that's okay for me, that's this time, and that's this time on the West Coast, and this time on the East Coast. Oh, okay, 4:30 July 12th, Wednesday. And it may really happen, which is amazing, totally amazing. But how much we do that, often without a second thought.

Or here on retreat, the practice has been going however it's been going, and you're calling it whatever you're calling it—good, bad, boring, slogging, fulfilling, whatever. Isn't it easy when it gets a certain way, we kind of think, well, that's how the last sitting was, and this is how the next sitting will be. I had this kind of experience, and this is how it's going to keep going. Bad or good, whether you like it or you don't, it doesn't matter. You're in a really difficult, judging, reactive mental state, and from that mental state, we project the whole rest of our life. We know it, and we do it anyway. It's amazing.

If you stopped for a second and thought, has this mental state been here for my whole life? You probably, hopefully, could say, no, I don't think so. It feels like it. But I do kind of remember that time three years ago when I had a happy moment—because you're in a depressive mental state.

But really deep down in that moment, there are times when we really believe that this is how it is. This is

how it's going to feel.

And the same when the mind is concentrated or happy or blissful. I'm sure you've all heard Sharon's story—I've heard it so many times it's like I remember it better than my own stories—when she was in India back when she was young and she had a period of incredibly blissful, free practice. From that state, she projected that's how her whole life would be. She'd imagine herself floating down the streets of New York, filled with happiness and bliss.

Don't we do that? How many retreats have I done that? I always project how I'll be leaving—the bodhisattva of the world, just filled with light and love. And sometimes I am, and sometimes I'm not. And even if I am, it doesn't last.

Anyway, the sense of how easy it is to just say, "Oh, this is permanent." I want to tell a couple of stories from the Buddha, because it's not like we're the stupid ones and everyone else always got it. The Buddha was talking to people about the necessity to see impermanence all the time. I love reading the suttas, so I want to share a couple of examples.

One monk came to the Buddha. His name was Assaji, and he was troubled—he was sick and tormented by remorse and regret. The Buddha said, "Why are you troubled? Have you done something bad?"

He said, "No, but formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations, otherwise being concentrated. But now I cannot obtain concentration."

He was really upset about this, saying, "If I can't obtain concentration, it occurs to me, let me not fall away." In other words, he was afraid he was losing the path because he couldn't obtain concentration, and he used to be able to. He was sick. I can really relate to that.

The Buddha—I'm going to paraphrase because it's long—basically said that those who think concentration is the essence of this practice, and who believe that failing to obtain it means they're falling away, that's delusion. That is not the essence of this practice. Liberation is the essence of this practice.

And then he goes into the whole teaching: "What do you think? Is form permanent or impermanent?" He goes through everything—a pleasant feeling, is it permanent or impermanent? A neither-pleasant-nor-painful feeling. A painful feeling. And he basically says: when you see this is all impermanent, then you understand. "I have a feeling that ends when the body ends." That's how you understand it.

So basically, if you're sick and you can't obtain concentration, you understand: yes, conditions have changed. That's how it is. Essentially, haven't I told you a million times? Everything's impermanent.

And then, even more to the point—and I know you know this story, but I really like it—during the period when the Buddha was in his last illness, there's a whole long sutta covering those days. Ananda, his attendant who was beloved to him and had been with him for twenty-five years, was taking care of the

Buddha. He knew the Buddha was dying; they'd had conversations about it.

At a certain point, when the Buddha announced that he had decided he was going to die, Ananda realized he had missed his opportunity. Some weeks prior, he could have asked the Buddha to extend his life, but he missed the hints and didn't do it. So when the Buddha was basically saying, "Yes, now I'm going to die," Ananda said, "No, don't." He asked him three times, and the Buddha said, "It's too late. You should have done it previously, and now I'm going to die."

They had a long talk, and then Ananda slipped away. The Venerable Ananda went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost: "Alas, I'm still a learner with much to do"—he wasn't completely enlightened—"and the teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me." He was basically sobbing and weeping.

Of course the Buddha knew, but he inquired of the monks where Ananda was, and they told him. So he said to a certain monk, "Go, monk, and say to Ananda from me: 'Friend Ananda, the teacher summons you.'"

Ananda came, and the Lord said, "Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable?"

He's not being impatient, but just—how many times do I have to say this?

All things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other. So how could it be, Ananda? Since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away? For a long time you have been in the Tathagata's presence."

And then the Buddha goes on and really praises Ananda. He says, "You have shown loving-kindness in act of body, speech, and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly and unstintingly. Make the effort, and in a short time you will be free of delusion."

But that is really his core teaching. How can it be that whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay, subject to separation and becoming other? How can it be that it should not pass away?

I find it a little heartening—heartening in terms of recognizing that we're not so lost—that even Ananda is quite stricken with grief at the loss, the coming loss. It hasn't even happened yet, which is also interesting. But even this great disciple is grieving for his beloved teacher. The Buddha is constantly having to remind people of the radical, radical nature of impermanence, because we keep getting lost in that, not really seeing it. We keep assuming permanence.

I have a friend who is quite wise, and a few years ago he had gone through a very difficult period, and then at this particular time he was very happy. We were just talking somewhere, and he said, "I'm so happy. I wonder how it will change." Just very simply, because it's true. It will. It did. And then it changes again. We relate very differently, don't we, when we have that cellular understanding. "I'm really

happy—I wonder how it will change." "I'm really having a hard time right now, there's a lot of suffering around in people I know—how's that going to change?"

It gives us a real flexibility when we're not holding to something that should be a certain way. We can actually respond to circumstances as they are, to see them clearly. And that's the point. Impermanence isn't fearful or scary. It's just how it is. When that's our experience, when that's what we see, what we know, then there's that living in harmony with how things are. We quit feeling like we're sandpaper going against the grain.

One friend said to me—I wrote down what she said, she's done many years of practice—this was on a retreat. She says, "Oh, all these years of practice. I always thought, 'I get it. Everything around is always changing.' But suddenly," she said, "I see—oh, I'm part of that. I'm also in constant change and constant ebb and flow."

That's quite significant. When we really, in a moment, can have just that cellular knowing, we let go of all ideas and shoulds and assuming permanence, and we're really right there for whatever's happening.

There's another friend—I think I've told this before, but maybe not here—a friend whom I haven't seen for quite some years. He used to come and sit with us in Yucca Valley. At that time, I thought of him as somewhat elderly, though I don't know, he was probably not that old. He was a farmer from the Midwest, had kind of a hard physical life. He would come every year and sit with us.

Then one year he didn't come for a couple of years. The next year he showed up, and he'd had very severe heart problems. I don't think he'd had a heart attack, but he'd had to have open heart surgery. He said he'd had to have one heart valve replaced. They replaced it, I guess, with the heart valve from a pig. This is what he said. And then he had a whole lot of jokes about stopping when he came to cornfields and oinking and stuff like that. But that was an aside—that's the kind of guy he was.

He was describing his experience. He was also someone who felt that, despite being very devoted to practice, he never had any concentration. He felt he was never getting anywhere, never had good states, was never continuous with mindfulness. These were what he thought. Certainly not someone who was like, "I'm an ace yogi," but totally dedicated.

When he came back, he was telling us about his surgery. He said after the surgery it seemed to go well. He woke up in intensive care, hooked up to machines from every orifice and his heart, all these machines going. It seemed fine at first, but then something started going wrong. The machines started beeping and making noise, and the little lines started—I don't know, they either go wild or they go flat, whichever was bad, something anyway. He got it that something really serious was going wrong.

At first, he said, his mind goes, "Oh my God, I don't want to die."

And then the next thought was: if this is your last breath, let's be here for it. And he just felt his breath,

and passed out, and woke up—and obviously he was okay. But he said, "I know now something was happening in this meditation. That's really the fruit of it." What's really happening now? Let's be here for this breath. Quite lovely.

But how is it—and this is also interesting to me—that we keep getting, as if it were, fooled again? Pulled back in somehow to relating to, reacting to experience as if it's betrayed me by changing, or not understanding why I'm suffering.

This is the Buddha again. I quite like this sutta. He's talking about agitation:

How is there agitation due to clinging? An unawakened person who regards material form as self, or self as possessing material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form—those are the four different ways that through clinging we grow personality view. The point is, we think we are form. *This material form of his changes and becomes otherwise. With the change and becoming otherwise of that material form, his consciousness becomes preoccupied with the change of material form. Agitated mental states born of preoccupation with the change of material form arise and remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is obsessed, he is anxious, distressed, and concerned. And due to clinging, he becomes agitated.*

Can any of you relate to that? Due to change in material form—our own or others—our mind becomes preoccupied, consciousness becomes preoccupied, and the mind becomes agitated and obsessed.

And of course he doesn't stop with material form. Feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Just a pleasant feeling changes. Does your consciousness ever become preoccupied with that change? Obsessed? Agitated? Perception, mental formations, emotions, states of mind, and consciousness—the five khandhas.

I love this sutta because I can relate it very immediately to my experience, all of it. An emotion we have changes, and we somehow thought it was me. We become obsessed, preoccupied with that change, and our mind gets agitated. We suffer. Feeling tone, consciousness, definitely form—we can't miss that one. And it doesn't even have to be sickness, does it? You could just be having a bad hair day and get obsessed with it, or a no-hair day for some of you. Why did I ever shave my head? That was insane.

Non-agitation through non-clinging is, of course, just the reverse. We don't get agitated when these things change.

These things are happening really often and very subtly. How often is there form, or a memory of form in the past, or a wishing form would be such and such a way in the future, or thinking about the possibility of a mental state now changing in the future—good or bad, either way? And the agitation, the obsession, the preoccupation—how much of our mental energy is spent that way? I'd wager a fair amount when we're not really mindful, when the mind isn't calm.

Something I also find very interesting in my own explorations: there are times when I know, say there's a

sense of a mental formation, a sankhara, a particular state of mind, and it's changing. I really see it's changing, and I know it's not me. I know. I'm really aware. It's a compound experience, and it's going away, and it isn't me. And still, there's this real strong sense of clinging, sense of self, the agitation and the suffering. And my rational mind, my conscious mind, will be saying, "What's the clinging here? What's the sense of permanence?"

What is it that's the hook? This is personality view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Where is it coming from? I'm really clear that this mood is not me, or that this thing going on in the body—the body's not me. I'm really clear about that. But still, there's something about this sadness or this fear or this happiness that keeps sucking me in, kind of hooking me. And I can't quite get at it—what is the clinging to? What is it that's somehow being held, not in a thinking way, but subconsciously, as permanent?

Again, this is something to explore if you have a similar experience. I'll just tell you what I often see in myself. It's not so much the emotion at that time, or the thought, or the sense of body, but the subtle feeling of "I am" that comes together with the clinging to that. And that is so subtle. When we're not aware of it, we don't notice it at all, but when we become aware of it, it seems to be everywhere. When we're not aware of it, it can be quite subtle—so familiar, so comfortable, that unexamined it feels very permanent. That's the subtle sense of self that feels like it's always here.

Sometimes I see this in my meditation practice now; it's easier for me to notice there than when I'm busy. I remember one retreat where this image would come up in my mind. I'd notice it—I was pretty concentrated—I'd notice it as seeing. A feeling of real grief and sadness would come with it. I'd see that right away. There wasn't really any clinging to it. There weren't any more stories going on. And still, consciousness would keep getting into this real, real dukkha around it—real sadness. And part of my mind was sitting back, watching, going, "What's the hook here? This is nothing but dukkha. I can see it's just thinking. There's nothing else going on. What is the hook?" It was really a mystery. And it was really suffering, too.

I noticed that because I was so focused on the emotion, the thought—the object, so to speak—I didn't really turn around and notice that subtle clinging, that sense of "me" having that emotion, or being that emotion, or the emotion being in me—those ways that the Buddha describes personality view. Without examination, without investigation, that sense of "me," which is just arising in that moment, feels permanent. And that's really what the clinging is about—that sense of permanent "me." It's subtly pleasurable, even if it's arising in conjunction with something that's really unpleasurable, at least in my experience. That's what keeps the clinging and the sense of permanence going.

This is why, I think, because it can be so subtle, the steadiness of mindfulness—moment-to-moment mindfulness in retreat—is so helpful and important. We can really begin to see how lack of continuity of mindfulness actually hides impermanence. Impermanence can be quite subtle.

Here is a simile that was given by the monk Nandaka to some of the nuns. He says: "Sisters, suppose an oil

lamp is burning. Its oil is impermanent and subject to change. The wick is impermanent and subject to change. The flame is impermanent and subject to change. And its radiance is impermanent and subject to change. Now, would anyone be speaking rightly who spoke thus: 'While this oil lamp is burning, its oil, wick, and flame are impermanent and subject to change, but its radiance is permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change'?" And they say, "No." And he says, "Good, good, sisters. So it is with a noble disciple who sees this as it actually is with proper wisdom."

I love that simile because intellectually it seems obvious, but the subtlety of the radiance—you know, it's easy to feel that as permanent. The subtlety of the sense of self, not looked at, can feel permanent. It's so subtle we don't even know it's there. And so really, the moment-to-moment continuity that leads to steadiness of attention is what's going to help us see this.

The Buddha said again: "Develop concentration, monks. A concentrated monk discerns things as they actually are present. And what does he discern as it actually is present?" Can you guess what I'm going to say? "He discerns as it actually is present that the eye is impermanent and inconstant. Forms are inconstant. Eye consciousness is inconstant."

Eye contact is inconstant. Whatever arises in dependence on eye contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither pleasure nor pain—that too is inconstant. And so through, of course, all the senses.

Now, if your mind has gone to, "That's why I need concentration and I don't have it, and that's why I can never understand impermanence, and that's why I might as well give up"—please see that as a thought and put it aside. Notice that the continuity of mindfulness at times, everyone here... it doesn't have to be fifth jhāna. We can notice contact. You can notice seeing. We notice that it's impermanent. Just bring your attention to seeing. As you walk around, it's changing every second. Bring your attention to hearing. At the ear door, it's constantly changing. The mind door, it's always changing. The body, the sensations of breath, the sensations throughout the body. Just be content with the steadiness of attention that lets us notice that.

Don't try to grasp, thinking "Now I have the insight into anicca and I am free." Sometimes we want to overlay that. We want some sense of fulfillment. "Now I'm getting anicca." Instead, just be content to notice moment after moment after moment. And it starts to break down the perversion of perception that sees the permanent in what is impermanent. And it happens. You don't have to make it happen. Just trust. Just trust that with the steadiness of mindfulness, it does break down. Sometimes it's more dramatic. Sometimes it's like getting wet in a fog, the way Suzuki Roshi talks about. You never know when you got wet, but you're really drenched.

Sometimes we don't quite realize that we're making something permanent or seeing with incorrect perception. But the actual suffering, the grief, the sadness that comes with the ending of something—Ānanda's sadness when the Buddha got sick and was going to die—rather than berating ourselves for that, I really like to take that as a wake-up call, and actually not be afraid of or judge the poignancy, the sadness, even the grief that comes along on our path.

For me, the fear or the dislike of the grief, the loss and all, is one of those thoughts: "I don't want to feel the loss, so therefore I won't acknowledge that everything's changing." That kind of warped thinking keeps us in denial. But actually, if we're not afraid of that, we can be much more open to things as they are. And I find Ānanda's grief really quite touching and poignant. It humanizes him, but it also becomes the source for looking and seeing: yes, this grief is because I'm not really seeing things how they are. I can feel the grief, and I can use it to let me pay more attention.

There are also many stories where the Buddha used the perception of change or impermanence as a kind of shocking device to wake people up—either people who were already in grief or people who were so much in denial of impermanence that they had a perfect little life put together. And he would break them out of it.

My favorite story in that way is about a woman named Khemā, who at this point was not a nun. She was the truly beautiful chief consort of King Bimbisāra. He had many consorts, many wives, but she was very beautiful, very vain, really enjoyed pleasure, really enjoyed beauty. The Buddha would come around and teach—the king was a follower of the Buddha—but Khemā never wanted to go and hear him because she had heard that he kind of put down sensual pleasure and talked about renunciation. And she basically thought, "I'm not interested in that." So she wouldn't go hear the Buddha.

It's kind of like how we're afraid sometimes. We're afraid to hear how things are. "Don't take my suffering away from me. I think I'm happy."

So the king fooled her. He hired a wandering poet and singer to compose beautiful poems and songs about this particular pleasure grove where he was going to have the Buddha come teach. Khemā heard these poems, this song about this really beautiful pleasure grove, and loving pleasure as she did, she said, "Well, I guess I have to go see it—anything that beautiful."

So he tricked her. She went, and when she got there, the Buddha was teaching to a great crowd of people. And of course, with his omniscient vision, he saw her coming and knew exactly where she was at. As soon as she came in, before she even said anything or before she had a chance to run away, he created with his psychic powers, just for her, the image of an incredibly beautiful celestial female being—like a hundred times more beautiful than Kema.

She just loved beauty, so she was entranced. And as she was watching this, the Buddha made this image gradually, gradually decay and get old and withered—her teeth fall out, her skin get wrinkled, get sick and die. Kema watched all this, and he got her. She said, "Oh wow, if that can happen to such a beautiful being, it's going to happen to me."

And once he had her, of course, he gave her a little Dhamma discourse on how clinging to pleasure is just putting yourself in prison. She's an example—also a good feminist story—because she's an example of a rare lay person, man or female, who in hearing one Dhamma talk became completely awakened. She

became an arahant right there, listening to that.

It's quite interesting, isn't it? "Don't talk to me about this stuff. I know how it is." But just by seeing the impermanence, it cut through all her delusion.

There are other stories—and I'm just using stories of women, but it's with men too—of women who came to the Buddha in so much grief. You know the one of Kisa Gotami, whose baby had died? She came to the Buddha, couldn't accept that her baby had died, and just couldn't get there. She was really in denial, carrying around the dead baby with her for days.

The Buddha said, "Okay, well, you bring me a small mustard seed from a house that has not had death, and I will help your baby." So she got all excited. And you know the story—she went from house to house to house to house, and there was no house where there hadn't been death. After a while, she got it. The mind lets go. She came back, put her baby down, was ready to hear the Buddha's teachings and practice.

And just one last one, my favorite, because it's the way the Buddha would so directly speak truth. I won't tell you the whole long story, but the woman Patachara had gone through enormous suffering. She had left her parents. Both her children and her husband died when she was giving birth to her second child. She picked up the baby and her other little baby, started home to her parents. Both her kids died in a raging flood. She got to her parents' home—there had just been a storm that had made the kids die—and the roof of the house had fallen in. Both her parents and her brother had died. All this in a twenty-four hour period. She went mad.

She was wandering around for months or years, naked and crazy, and people threw things at her. Finally she came around the Buddha, and the Buddha's disciples tried to drive her away. "Get away! Don't bother the Blessed One." They threw things. And he, of course, told them to stop. A man gave her a cloak, and the Buddha said, "Sister, recover your presence of mind." And she was sane again.

Then she told him the whole story. This is the translation, so I don't know if it's exactly word for word accurate, but it captures the sense. We might say, "Oh yeah, that's really hard, so much grief." He just said, "Don't think you've come to someone who can change that. Don't think you've come to someone who can help that." He said, "In all your lives, you've cried more tears for the deaths of loved ones than there are waters in the ocean."

Isn't that interesting? Is that what we tend to say to someone who comes in grief? And it's not just this grief—it's endless lifetimes of grief. That sobered her up. "Oh, okay, let me really understand this."

I don't know, just somehow I love it—the sense of not being afraid to really face the radical, uncompromising quality of impermanence.

It's moment to moment. It's always. It's every experience we have. And facing that doesn't take us into more dukkha. It doesn't take us into depression and an unbearable quality of life. We do need to face our

grief and our holding on and our sadness. But really, we stop being sandpaper rubbing up against experience. And it gives us the potential to really open into the unknown.

I don't know what's really going to happen on Wednesday, July 12th at 4:30 Eastern Standard Time this summer. I really don't have a clue whether I'll actually be here on the East Coast. So we make our plans and then we're just open to whatever it is that might happen. And that leads, I think, to such a beauty and appreciation of life, of the moment, of the fragility and the beauty. It allows us to be really present in a tender, open way—as the Tibetans say, ceaselessly responsive to experience rather than needing to control it.

I want to end by reading from two different people who I think really speak to the power and flexibility and beauty, the responsive quality that's possible when we're open to impermanence.

The first comes from the biography of Issan Dorsey, a Zen teacher in San Francisco who opened the Maitri Hospice in the late 1980s for men dying of AIDS. He opened the hospice not really knowing how it was going to work—he was kind of flying by the seat of his pants. This is a quotation from another man who was doing it with him. They said:

"We've always dealt with whatever came to the door. We started the hospice because death came to the door"—a friend of theirs who was dying of AIDS. "You can deal with a complex changing situation because you don't have to control it. You don't have to force it into an ideal pattern. You actually allow it to be whatever it is, and thus you allow yourself to adapt to what it becomes. Because this is the way we proceed—we respond to the immediacy of the situation—therefore, we're very practical."

That's so different from having an idea: this is how it should be, this is how we are, this is what we can do. It's just all a big flow, and we're able to be so much more responsive—and also much more courageous.

I'll end with this, from an interview with Dr. Ariyaratne, the founder and leader of the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka. He's a Buddhist, a peace activist, a social activist working with poor people. Sarvodaya means "the awakening of all," the awakening of the whole person. This is from an interview with him:

"In 1952, a gangster was asked to kill me. I was trying to serve the students in our communities who were in need, and some people's financial or other interests were threatened, so they gave a contract killer some money to kill me. I heard about it. So I went to him, and I told him, 'This is what I'm doing. If you want to kill me, do it now—not in my school or with my students, because then those places would have a bad name after them.' I don't want other people's blood to be shed. At that time, and even now, I have that courage. To let others live, if necessary, you sacrifice. You're not foolish to throw away your life like that. It is a spiritual motivation, because every moment we are born, we exist, and we pass away. Every moment. In our mind or our body, is there anything that is permanent for two seconds? Without our knowledge, it's changing. Impermanence is a law. And when you understand that, when you practice it, you get a lot of

courage. And even in death, you see life."

Obviously the man didn't kill him. He was very impressed and didn't kill him.

So the power of impermanence—to free our heart and mind from suffering and to open us into a life that is so much more connected and responsive and flexible.

Thank you for listening.

To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.