Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 52:47

Tonight I want to talk about impermanence.

The Buddha talks about three doorways to the deathless, really. The understanding—the cellular, the really living insight understanding—of impermanence, and or of dukkha, and or of anatta, the truth of non-self. These are like different doorways into the real opening of heart and mind in a moment, to seeing and understanding life, ourselves, mind and body the way it is.

Recognizing, seeing things the way they are, even in a moment, releases the heart and mind from clinging—only for a moment. It's a good moment. It releases the heart and mind from clinging, from confusion, from all these endless stories of me, me, me. It's a huge relief.

I read this quotation from the Buddha a couple of weeks ago, where he said: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit 'I am.'"

As I told you, that basically means complete liberation of heart and mind—those four phrases together. It's powerful. The perception of impermanence developed and cultivated.

To me, it's a mystery and it's not a mystery, but one of the mysteries of practice is: if this is how it is—and we should say this is how it is, pretty much everything, more than pretty much—things are impermanent. Why isn't that our perception? And how can we develop and cultivate that perception?

It's really quite interesting to me to explore, to keep reminding myself. I'll say a few things tonight—no way to cover the field. But it is difficult to truly, cellularly know, to live, to act from that knowing that all phenomena are in constant shift and change.

What would it be like? These are questions I ask myself sometimes. One is: Do I truly believe, live from, accept that truth? Not "oh yeah, that's right, everything's impermanent"—just conceptual knowledge. It's useful, but not enough. I really mean live from that truth. And what would be the effect of living, really responding, just knowing that that's how things are? How would it affect our responses, our actions, our decisions, how we meet the moments of our life?

Do we even—and this is now at a conceptual level—do we even believe it? Do we believe what the Buddha says quite often? In a lot of his talks, in his suttas, the way he describes the proof of anatta, of no self, he'll go through the sense doors or the five khandhas and he'll say: You see how they're impermanent? And anything that is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying. Anything impermanent cannot be held to as me

or mine. He says that often as a definitive proof.

I find it worth exploring myself. Do I actually believe that? Do we believe, even if we know things are impermanent, that this makes them inherently unsatisfying? It doesn't mean not pleasurable—sure, pleasurable in a moment—but inherently unsatisfying, nothing we can hold to for any reliability, any lasting satisfaction.

It's really radical. Radical. Do we live from that? And yet it's in our face, in our perception, constantly.

This is the Buddha again: "Bhikkhus, there is no form, no feeling tone or vedana, no perception, no volitional formations"—which is all the thoughts, the moods, the formations of mind, the motivations—"and no consciousness."

Those are the five khandhas that make up a person. There's no moment of that which is permanent, stable, eternal. Nothing that is not subject to change, that will remain the same like eternity itself.

And then the Blessed One took up a little bit of dirt under his fingernail, and he said to that bhikkhu, "There's not even this much form"—a little bit of dirt under his fingernail—"not even this much form that is stable, that is not subject to change, that is eternal." And he went on through all the five khandhas. Not even this much that's not subject to change.

And he said, "If there were this much form, consciousness, or anything that was not subject to change, that was permanent, then this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of dukkha, of suffering, could not be discerned. But because there is not even this much form that is permanent, then it is possible—this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering, of dukkha."

Not even this much.

Is that how we live? Is that how we respond, relate to life? Do we really have that cellularly in our knowing? For me, there are moments—rare moments—when I actually know that. But there are many moments when that's not the perception.

So I want to talk a little about three different ways I see that we don't let this in. And I'm sure you can recognize other ways for yourself. Hopefully this sparks your own investigation—not thinking about, but investigation.

One is, of course, what I talked about a couple weeks ago: the basic misperception. We see things as being permanent. We just don't perceive the changing nature. "See" could be hear, smell, taste—but we don't perceive the changing nature.

Another way is simply inattention, which contributes to the misperception. We're zoning out. "Oh yeah, this has always been here. It always will be here." We don't even know what is here, but we just think something's always been here. Never going to change.

And another one, I think, is a kind of first noble truth response: our instinctive or habitual resistance, fear, or pulling back from sadness, from the unpleasant, from the sense of loss. The sense of sadness that comes often in our normal lives—we unliberated, not completely enlightened human beings—when we are face-to-face with change. Often, not always. Sometimes change is beautiful. But often when we're confronted with change, it touches this place of loss, of sadness, of fear. And that's the whole second noble truth. We shrink back from that. We just don't quite let it in. As if it's a problem. As if sadness is a problem instead of just being part of life. No, but it feels wrong. Things shouldn't be changing.

Even in really big ways, in our whole culture, there are ways it's enshrined that we don't really include the great changes in the common culture. How old people are put away, sick people are put away in little enclaves. Death—we don't see it so much unless we choose to work in hospice or hospital. It's not so much part of ordinary life.

A couple of years ago, when I was helping to teach a retreat in Upper Burma near Sagaing—which is a beautiful spot on the banks of the Irrawaddy River, with tons of nunneries and monasteries—one day after lunch, the other Western teachers and translators and friends, about five of us, went for a walk along the river. We got about five minutes down the road, and along there was a stone wall looking down over the river, quite big, a broad river. And there were about fifty or sixty people gathered—the nuns from the two nunneries nearby. We knew some of them, along with other villagers.

So we stopped, and with us was the translator who could speak fluent Burmese. We talked to some of the nuns we knew. Mostly older, but there was also the Inyeti—she's like the cutest little nun in the world. She was six at that time, and we'd known her since she was four. So cute in her little pink robes. She came running over and was talking to us.

It turned out what had happened, what everyone was waiting for, was this: three young novice monks—about eleven, twelve, thirteen years old. It's very common for young boys to become monks for a while. They stay in the monasteries and get their schooling that way. These three had been out playing on the river, and one of them—who, it turns out, had just come from a far province a week ago and wasn't used to being near the river—had gone under. And he hadn't come up.

And they were looking for him. Well, it had been an hour, so he pretty much knew.

So they were looking for him, and everyone was gathering around. As we waited for a while, they found his body, pulled it up in a boat, carried it. They were just right on the road, and then right on the other side of the road was a big kind of sala, an open platform that was covered, part of the nunnery that was right there. So they carried him over very respectfully, put him on a bed that was on that platform, did everything they could to try and revive him. Of course, they couldn't—it had been an hour.

And then, seeing that he was dead, some of the monks ran and got fresh robes. They made him all nice. Now, mind you, the whole village—all the nuns and the monks and the laypeople—were all there and part

of this. It was carried out really right in the middle of everything. And so everyone was there. This little six-year-old nun also—she was telling us she sort of knew him. He was a little bit of a relative, and everybody knows everybody there. It's very small. People know what's going on.

And so they were really sad, really sad. But everyone was there dealing with it. They sent someone off to his parents, which was going to take 24 hours to get to them. And in the meantime, they made shifts to sit there and chant and be with his body until his parents came. They were sad. People were upset. Little Linechi, she was upset. But it wasn't that the adult nuns were saying, "Oh, no, no, you shouldn't see this. This isn't something for a child to see." She knew everything that was going on. The sadness was there. The care. The including of his death as part of life.

The young monks he'd been playing with—of course, they'd run off. They were scared they'd get in trouble. So the nuns and monks were worried about them too. They went to find them, make sure they were okay, include them. They included us, brought us up. And there was just this sense that was really beautiful in a way—that this is a very touching part of life. The whole village, everyone there, shared it. It was just as sad as it would be for us, but it wasn't weird or something to hide or something to shut off.

And I thought how, here, if someone came up after an hour, when it was clear they were dead—not when maybe they could still be revived, but when it was clear—we'd have to call 911, the sirens, the flashing lights, the heart paddles, the whole thing. And that sense of community, of this being a part of life, wouldn't be there.

It really affected us all deeply. As we were leaving, one of our friends, a good friend of mine, said to me, "You know, I'm 47 years old, American. I'm 47 years old. I have never seen a dead person before." Just living a normal life in Silicon Valley.

I don't know, it just touched me in this way—how kind of split off the major changes are, the major transitions. And this is the big one, of course: birth and death. If we don't even open to that, if it's even hidden from us... never mind the fact that every single moment of our life is a constant transition. We're just not put in the modality to notice that. We have our habits, our attention trained to look for stability, to look for familiarity, to look for comfort. And it's more upsetting when things change.

When I, or someone I know, or even my elderly mother suddenly gets a disease or becomes sick, does my mind go, "Oh, the conditions for a healthy body have changed. Now there's sickness"? That's not the first reaction that comes up in my mind. Even with my elderly mother, even with myself—it's "Oh, no." And then maybe I can get there, and maybe I can't.

But it's just kind of like taking for granted when things are going along in a relatively okay way. Of course, that's how it's supposed to be. And when a difficulty or a change comes, something's gone wrong. So that's part of not letting in the perception that I see—it's kind of threatening, scary, uncomfortable, kept out, not really consciously.

Another thing we don't notice—and this is something I really got clearly one time at a teaching His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave—he was talking about how we assume permanence and we don't notice the momentariness of change. We say, yeah, we really know things change, and we can see something starts, my life starts, and it goes on for a while, and then it ends. Or the day starts and it goes on for a while and then it ends. Or the sitting starts and it goes on for a while and then it ends. But there's no persistence, no starting a period of persistence, staying the same and then change. There's no persistence for more than an instant. It's constantly arising and changing, arising and changing, arising and changing.

We don't tend to really recognize that. And it's true, it's happening so quickly that often we can't literally perceive it. But then on top of that not perceiving, we also don't look carefully enough. That's what a lot of our formal meditation practice supports us in doing—looking more carefully. And then on top of the not recognizing, there's just an assumption.

When people come into interviews and say, "Well, what happened in your sitting?" it's funny because people say, "What happened in my sitting? It was an hour. So much stuff happened. How can I say what happened in the sitting?" And that's right. It's a ridiculous question, what happened in your sitting. It would take an hour to describe what happened in the sitting, because every instant is different. So just in the way we communicate, we make big, sweeping assumptions.

I mean, it's okay to be able to communicate. It's okay that I more or less look the same as I did yesterday, so we can recognize each other. But it's not really the same. The whole thing about bad hair days—your hair is never really, unless it's shaved off, exactly the same day to day, which is a source of distress sometimes and happiness others. Little things, but big.

I was just talking to a friend yesterday who I haven't seen for a few years. He used to come here and sit a lot, but he's been home. And he said, "Well, but I see your pictures, and you look just the same." And I said, "Yeah, it's the same picture for ten years. Of course I look just the same." But he somehow didn't want to let that in. He goes, "Oh, no, it's a new thing that you're doing." I said, "Yeah, new thing, same picture." That's what we like to think—oh yeah, you look just as young as ever. I'm afraid not.

So never mind the big things. The momentariness of anicca, this constant, subtle shifting, is something that first is difficult to perceive, but it's also masked by lack of continuity in our awareness. There's actually a word for this in Pali: *santati*. Mahasi Sayadaw talks about it. He describes santati as mistaking a series of successive phenomena for a single phenomenon. For example, you're seeing or hearing something repeatedly, moment after moment after moment—say I'm looking at that chair, and it seems like it's staying steady, that I'm seeing it over a prolonged period. And so I think the thing I'm currently seeing is the same thing I saw before.

So I think that chair is the same. But it's also positing that this I, this consciousness, this body is the same. And it's all just going along the same until I turn my head. Then I'm seeing something different. But without actually looking carefully, I'm still positing that this I and this consciousness and this body are the

same.

So santati, this continuity of phenomena and also the fast continuity of consciousness and of the sense door contact—it causes us to think that the thing we're currently seeing is the same thing we were seeing a second ago. It's a little disorienting to think that might not be true, isn't it? How can we function if this isn't the same as it was before?

The whole world's going to fall apart. How are we going to function? You know, the mind goes off into that trip.

And this is what's so great, because the perception of anicca really frees our heart and mind from clinging. It's not that going to the land of anicca from the land of permanence is what frees our heart and mind from clinging. It's already anicca. It's already that way. So if fear comes up just kind of spontaneously—oh no, how can that be?—okay, we just notice the fear. That's fine. But if you really let yourself get into the thinking about how can we function if everything's changing, and all of that, notice that is a complete waste of time. And just, if it's happening, fine, blah blah blah, but don't give it any energy. It's already that way.

The same is true with no-self. It's not like you have a self and you're going to get rid of it and then you won't know who you are. It's already that way. And this really helps me—I've said this before, but it just keeps coming back. The whole nature of insight is not about creating a different reality. It's about just that little shift of perception that recognizes what's already here in a different way. That's all. That's all it is.

I always use the example of those Magic Eye images that are just geometrical forms with no particular thing you can recognize. And if you look at it—steady but soft, right? You can't look for something. Steady, soft gaze, not trying, relax, and just stay there. And all of a sudden, a three-dimensional image pops out. Now, do you think that it wasn't there and then something happened and all of a sudden this 3D image popped out? Or was it maybe always there? We just needed that little shift of perception. Both ways of perceiving can be there. They both are there.

So in terms of impermanence, the perception of impermanence—even in a moment when we really are experiencing that constant rising and passing, rising and passing, the constant change of things—there might be fear in a moment. But just noticing that come and go too, that moment of experiencing in that way really frees something in that moment, something that we never really knew we knew. And even though that perception doesn't stay, that's probably how we function in the world. We go back to being able to recognize each other, and the room is still the same, and we know what objects are, and the table doesn't move generally. We're perceiving permanence.

But it's different to have a perception that's a conventional reality and useful, and we know that's what it is, and we're using it. That's different from once we know it's in constant change, but we can use the conventional reality. That's great. But when we don't know there's another reality, then the way we relate

to the conventional perception of permanence is what leads us to clinging, to holding on, to fear—to basically relating in a way that isn't in sync with how things are. Square peg in the round hole, you know?

Remember that definition of dukkha? Like the axle rod fitting into the hole of the wheel and it doesn't really fit. So it's always not quite fitting—bad fit, not quite. It's a great description of dukkha. Part of that is we're not perceiving impermanence, so we're always relating as though this has got to stay, this has got to stay. Or this is going to stay and I want it to go, oh my God—instead of opening to the mystery, to the wonder.

So the second aspect I wanted to talk about is something that, for me, this is the way I experience it. Maybe it's not so for you. But there's the tendency, of course, to cling to what is familiar or beautiful, what I love, or just comfortable. And there's the sadness, the poignancy, the sense of loss that is a part of life for we unenlightened human beings on this earth. There's no way—no way to not experience loss, to not experience change.

And for most of us, I feel that the sadness that can come, from poignancy all the way to grief, is part of the play of being human in this world. Just like joy is. Just like compassion and love are. Just like anger is. I'm not saying we should feel grief or sadness, but I'm saying we don't need to be afraid of it, or pull back from it, or block the openness of our mind and heart, our consciousness, to recognize change out of a kind of instinctive fear of the sadness.

Clinging is so interesting, so poignant, because in some ways it's our unconscious strategy for happiness. If I hold on to this—this person, this relationship, this life situation, this finally perfect moment of mindfulness after all these months—clinging feels like the natural response. It's going to make me happy. And of course, as we know on this level, clinging is the very thing that actually blocks the ease, the happiness, the peace.

I experience clinging as a kind of intuitive but unfortunately wrong response to the unreliability of life, the shakiness. When I was talking before about everything being in constant change, my thinking mind, even as I say it, doesn't like that. I get a little feeling here. Everything's constantly shifting? No, I need something solid.

It's like being in an earthquake. Years ago, when I was teaching at Yucca Valley, we had an earthquake in the middle of the dharma talk. I was talking and everything went *shhhh*. I'd never been in an earthquake, and it wasn't a bad one. I thought, "Oh, this is kind of cool." But then later we had a much bigger one. I was outside, and because I was outside and no one was hurt, I could just experience it—the ground going, everything shaking.

Then for the next three days, every five or ten minutes, there was an aftershock, some of them quite big. So it stopped being so cool. Every few minutes everything starts shaking, whether you're lying in bed, sitting, eating, whatever. And the radio kept saying, "Thirty-five percent chance of the big one"—making

everything sound as bad as it could be. So you sit there, everything starts rolling, and you think: Is this the big one? Do I have to run outside? Wait it out a little more?

You just couldn't settle. It was almost physical. The body just couldn't settle. And I really understood: you can't rely on this earth to be solid. The earth isn't solid. You can't rely on anything never to change, to always be there. It felt actually biological after a couple of days—it wasn't that my mind was so afraid, it was just the adrenaline, the unsettled quality in the body. But I got that sense of how much I didn't like it. I wanted to think there could be some steady, solid thing that I don't have to think about, where I don't have to let in impermanence.

I'm not giving this example as how the wisdom of impermanence, the perception of impermanence, frees us. This is an example of how resistance to impermanence causes this little bit of angst, this dukkha, this square peg in the round hole—it just shouldn't be like this. I want to settle instead of just rolling with it. Yes, it was unpleasant. Half the time things are unpleasant. That's how it is anyway. Half the time they're not.

So I get a sense that clinging is the response, the reaction to that unsettledness. And it's so poignant because it just doesn't work.

Galway Kinnell has a little snippet from a long poem:

You cry, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard
as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I have stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
Little Maud, yet perhaps this is the reason you cry.
This the nightmare you wake crying from:
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

I like that line: *as if clinging could save us*. It's really so poignant. But we can open to the poignancy. When we open to that, it's so touching. It opens us into beauty, like he says, *while my broken arms heal themselves around you*. When we don't fight it, it opens us into the mystery and the wonder of the world.

The Buddha said, "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful."

I like to think of this as cellular anicca—the cellular perception of impermanence, just letting it in. It really leads us into a deep connection and acceptance of what's happening now. It allows us to recognize, to be

fully present and engaged in just what's happening now. Not holding to what was two seconds ago, ten years ago. Not busily constructing what could happen in the future, for bad or good, some kind of resting place. Not to need one is cool and peaceful, even just for a moment.

And yet it's really natural to resist, and to feel real sadness at change and loss. Even in the suttas there's plenty of it. The most famous example, of course, is Ananda, the Buddha's longtime attendant for twenty-five years. I'm sure you know the story of when the Buddha told Ananda he was going to die within three months. Ananda kind of disappears. The Buddha is sitting there in his assembly, and of course he knows—he can know, if he turns his mind to anyone, what's going on in their mind. So he turns to the other monks and asks, "Where is Ananda, O monks?"

Ananda had gone into his lodging. It's so lovely—the sutta actually gives the posture: "He stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost." He's leaning against his doorpost and crying: "Alas, the teacher is passing away, who is so compassionate to me."

It's really touching. Ananda comes across as very human, very kind, very accessible. He almost embodies what we could relate to if we were partially enlightened like he is. We can really relate to that.

So the Buddha calls him and says, "Enough, Ananda." Now, he's saying this kindly, not "you stupid jerk." He's saying it kindly: "Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that 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?" It's just impossible.

He's not saying don't care, but just pointing to the fact that a great deal of our lamenting, our struggle, is really resisting what's already happening. But the feeling of loss can still be there without all the grief, without all the aversion.

There's another place—I may misquote it a little, but it's the right drift—where the Buddha says, after his two chief disciples Sariputta and Moggallana both died before him, he's looking at the assembly and saying, "It's as if this assembly is empty for me." Empty. He meant empty because it's empty of Sariputta, empty of Moggallana. They're nowhere to be seen.

He's not beating his head against the doorpost, weeping and wailing and saying things come together and go apart, the end of every meeting is parting. But he's noticing they're gone. He's noticing the loss.

So for me, I try to let the sadness, the sense of resistance, be a wake-up call rather than something to resist or think is bad or wrong—to just look and see: What's going on now? What's being resisted? And I find when I open into "oh yeah, this is changing"—really, by the time I'm saying this is changing, it probably already changed three days ago—but "oh yeah, this is changing," the holding on lets go. And then by itself—it's not like I say, "now I will open into being more connected"—it just happens by itself.

The response becomes more flexible, more appropriate.

There's the story of a friend of ours, a friend of mine who used to come and sit at Yucca Valley for many years—an older man who lives as a farmer in the middle of the country, doesn't know anyone else where he is that meditates. He would always come every year, one of these people who would say, "Oh, I really can't do it right, I don't know what I'm doing," but really dedicated, devoted. Sometimes he'd call up and share how when he was driving on his tractor, he'd be contemplating the Four Noble Truths or looking at his experience—really quite lovely. But one of those people who would think, "I can't meditate, I can't concentrate," you know, so that's for nothing.

Anyway, he told us that a few years ago he had to have open heart surgery where they replaced a valve. The surgery went okay, but then he was in the intensive care unit that night or the next day. And as he said—he's very funny—hooked up with a tube to every orifice. Then all of a sudden, everything started beeping and going wild, which isn't good. If you're in intensive care on these machines and they start beeping, it's not a good sign. He was lying there going, "Oh my God, I'm dying. Something's going on." And he was really present, he said. He thought, "This might be my last breath." He started panicking, and then the thought just came out of nowhere: if this is my last breath, let me really be here for it. And he just completely surrendered into that breath and then went unconscious.

Obviously, it wasn't his last breath. Later he woke up and freaked out and all of that. But that kind of—we never know. We don't know what seeds we're planting. We don't know when our attention is truly called, when the focus has to be there, and boom, here we are. Impermanence presents itself and the response is appropriate. It's flexible. It's connected. It's nothing we can plan, but we can trust actually that that's how it shows up.

So continuity of awareness, continuity of mindfulness—and I don't mean for two seconds. I mean that willingness we have. Of course we space out, but the willingness to really keep coming back into moment-to-moment awareness all day, every day. It's that continuity that actually reveals change on these quick and subtle levels. Because when we're just noticing moment to moment what's happening—and again, it's mindfulness that isn't conceptual, not what we think we're seeing or what we want to see or what we wish it was or what we think it is, but just what's happening now, now, now, that bare attention—that starts to reveal. You don't even have to think about it. Just keep noticing moment to moment. It reveals impermanence. It reveals the change.

You're sitting, you're walking, you're just noticing sensations in your body. For a while, the conceptual overlay might be "my back is always hurting" or "I always have this knot in my neck." But when you're looking moment to moment, it's rarely the same for two seconds together. Nothing's always. Nothing's always.

And I can't say how many times people come into interviews—and I do it myself—saying, "It's always like this. I always feel that. This is here all the time." And I'll say, "Frequently, or often?" And the person will

go, "Yeah, frequently, often, yeah, yeah, no matter." Inside you know—yeah, it's always here, don't tell me. But when we really look, we notice when something's here. We may not see everything end. We're not always going to see things end. Something else starts and we're involved in the other thing. But notice when you're saying, "Well, I always feel this aversion." Right now you don't feel it, but it's always under there. No—notice that right now it isn't here. It's really gone. Notice the gone-ness of things as well as their presence.

A friend of ours, a friend of mine was describing this, the whole sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. Sakkāya—Sayadaw U Lak Khana defines sakkāya as just the flow of nāma-rūpa, the six sense doors, contact going on and on and on. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi—diṭṭhi is view—is in a moment when any of that six sense door experience, the body and the mind, is clung to in that moment, identified with in that moment as "me" or "mine." That's a sense of identity view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. In the bigger picture, the way Ajahn Sumedho uses the term sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like our personality view—our view, our sense of our personality, our familiar, comfortable sense of self. Even if you hate it, it's comfortable, or what we think our personality is.

And it's an effect of not seeing impermanence. We have certain habits that come up frequently—different ones of us may have different permutations of the habits—but nothing is always there. Steady awareness shows this.

I'm leading up to this: a friend of mine was telling me at a retreat, she was cooking at this retreat, and she considers herself a very aversive type person. And as she was saying to me—I've known her a long time—everyone else also says, "Yes, you're a very aversive type person." So she is someone who, at times, can manifest aversion once in a while.

But she noticed that was her sakkāya-diṭṭhi, her personality view: "Aversive type, I manifest aversion, that's the kind of person I am." But she was sitting for a couple of days during this long retreat, and she just brought in steady continuity of mindfulness, of sati—just to notice without prior conception the thoughts, the moods, what was coming up in her mind over and over.

And she said, as she looked steadily, yeah, aversion would come up, but also there were many kind, generous moments, many thoughts of compassion, many generous actions, a lot of just normal boring stuff, some desire—the whole range. She said maybe ten percent of the thoughts and moods were aversive.

So when you really look, you see that the overview, the concept, tends to cling to certain ones, string them together in the mind and say, "I'm aversive. That's what's always going on." The steadiness of mindfulness, when we're really committed to just noticing what's happening now—and when we space out, we're committed to notice again—you don't have to get all "let me see impermanence." That's just how it is. Just be willing to show up for what is without any preconception. The perception of impermanence is going to show up. There's no way for it not to.

And that's the other thing I was saying: just notice the gone-ness of things—of moods, of thoughts. A lot of people have said this to me in the last couple months. They'll be talking about some mood or some habit of mind, and they'll say, "Well, it was there a lot, and then it was gone away, but it was just underground. I didn't notice it, but it was still there."

Notice when your mind makes that assumption: "I didn't notice something, but it was still there." How do you know that? I mean, looking at what we really know, not our assumptions. And our assumptions are so familiar, we don't even notice we're making these assumptions a lot of the time. Again, familiar assumptions are another place we sometimes try to land for reliability, for comfort, for ease. "I may have a rotten personality, but at least I'm familiar with it and I can rely on it."

My friend—she could rely on herself to be aversive. I know she felt a little disoriented to find she had a lot of kind and loving thoughts. "Wait, that's not me."

I know after I did a long mettā retreat and I came out of it—not that I was spewing mettā everywhere; that would have been nice—I was just being me. But I have an aversive tendency, which means not anger, but just I'll notice what's wrong with things. The mind will go to the unpleasant first and go, "Well, that could be better."

And my mind would start doing that, and then completely spontaneously, the next moment, the consciousness would notice something pleasant, something beautiful about a person or a situation. "Oh yeah, but there's this thing." And the first couple times, I would go, "Who said that? Where did that come from? Who is that? That doesn't fit my image."

So we let the image go.

Ajahn Chah offers the practice when we're assuming permanence—notice when we're assuming permanence. He offers the practice of just reminding yourself as you go through the day, in any situation: "This too is uncertain." It could be a little ruffling at times, but just reminding with anything, "This too is uncertain." Not to scare us—and it opens us into actually the beauty of connectedness, of appreciation.

When the Buddha says the fact that something's impermanent means that it's inherently unsatisfying, unreliable, it doesn't mean we can't appreciate what's beautiful. It doesn't mean we don't love or care. It just means we don't look to that experience, that person, that sensation, that mood to give us something it can't give—which is any kind of permanence, any reliability in this world. But that doesn't make it bad or worthless. It doesn't mean we should be afraid of love or beauty.

It actually, in my experience, allows for much more appreciation of life, much more love, much more presence. It's really Krishnamurti's phrase—freedom from the known. That's what our whole practice is. Mindfulness is a moment-to-moment opening into the unknown. We never really know what's going to arise in the next moment. Never. We assume, and a lot of times the assumptions are more or less accurate—which is really too bad in a way, because that's what keeps us assuming.

This is uncertain.

Just in the last two days, I was told two stories—the shocking kind. One friend was telling me about her stepmother, an older woman who woke up one morning with her legs kind of numb, and within six hours was completely paralyzed by some kind of virus, something strange they couldn't identify. This was years ago. She's fought back; she can walk now, for a while with crutches, but she's never really gotten back to normal. Completely—who knows? Someone else told me a similar story about a person who just had a stroke like that, overnight. You're fine, and boom—paralyzed. Who knows?

Now, if we go around scared to death of that, that's not perception of impermanence; that's fear. But when we just open into that—wow, who knows?—it makes me just here, really alive. I can appreciate the poignancy. It actually has a kind of touching sense, that harbinger of change.

I don't know how it is for you, but when I see the geese, when I hear and see them flying over in the fall—I saw a flock today—it touches something really quite deep. It's beautiful. It's kind of sad. It's just this sense of real connectedness, and who knows? Who knows? And I feel so alive in that moment. I'm not looking forward or back. I'm just really here.

Freedom from the known.

It allows us to really open past the clinging, past the assumptions, past the dukkha, to just fall into that experience of the heart and mind of non-clinging. The Buddha's description of the supreme state of sublime peace: liberation through non-clinging. The coolness of not needing to find something to take refuge in.

I want to end with this poem from Billy Collins, because it gives me that feeling. He calls it "Aimless Love":

This morning, as I walked along the lake shore, I fell in love with a wren, and later in the day with a mouse the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

In the shadows of an autumn evening, I fell for a seamstress still at her machine in the tailor's window, and later for a bowl of broth, steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

This is the best kind of love, I thought, without recompense, without gifts or unkind words, without suspicion or silence on the telephone.

The love of the chestnut, the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel. No lust, no slam of the door. The love of the miniature orange tree, the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower, the highway that cuts across Florida.

No waiting, no huffiness or rancor, just a twinge every now and then for the wren who had built her nest on a low branch overhanging the water, and for the dead mouse, still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up in a field on its tripod, ready for the next arrow.

After I carried the mouse by the tail to a pile of leaves in the woods, I found myself standing at the bathroom sink, gazing down affectionately at the soap, so patient and soluble, so at home in its pale green soap dish.

I could feel myself falling again as I felt it turning in my wet hands and caught the scent of lavender and stone.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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