Insight, Views, and Opening to the Mystery

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:01

I've been noticing—not only in myself, but in all of us through the interviews, especially these last couple of weeks—so much insight, so much understanding opening up in a whole variety of ways, different for each person. It can be insights into impermanence, anatta, into dukkha, that level of nature. There are also many insights into how that manifests as our personality patterns, how we get caught, how we can be free. These are powerful and important aspects of freedom, of understanding, of liberation. And it's wonderful. It's so inspiring for us to witness this, even more so when you allow yourselves to recognize that it's happening for you too.

And then there's the other side of it, something I've also been noticing in many interviews. Not exactly a corollary, but it often comes along: a sense that the insights don't stay. You've probably noticed that. They change. And not always, but often, people can fall into a kind of confusion, discouragement, frustration, or even losing a sense of faith or confidence. You feel like you've really seen through your personality patterns. You've really understood deeply that craving that extra piece of candy isn't going to do it for you. You really let go of it. "Okay, I've got it. I've seen through craving." And in that moment, you really did. In that moment, you really did.

But it's so striking when it changes. We see very clearly, and the mind intellectually knows craving brings suffering, and yet the hand goes out, takes the thing, shoves it in your mouth, you swallow it down, you go get another one—and you're watching the whole thing. Watching it, which only makes it worse, really, right? Because then you can add self-judgment on top of it. "What the heck? Two minutes ago, I was so awakened."

I want to address some aspects of this, because it's a misunderstanding to think that you've somehow fallen away. It's a misunderstanding to feel that way. We're so impatient. And in some ways it's our culture, though not only our culture. There's a famous story Sharon tells: many years ago she got a letter addressed to the "Instant Meditation Society." We see it, we see it once—boss, that should be enough. I'm joking a little, but it can really be quite deeply painful, confusing. It can lead, at times, to a crisis of confidence or just a sense of frustration.

So I want to talk about a few aspects of this—not comprehensive by any means, but just some different things that have come to mind, which I hope are helpful.

One thing to remind you: when you're seeing yourself caught again in a particular pattern that you've really seen, when you know the pain of it and the pattern seems so huge and what you're doing—having that third piece of candy or whatever—seems so enormous, I want to remind you all that you're in a very

protected environment. Things are exaggerated in your mind. That helps us see the patterns more clearly. But Sayadaw U Tejaniya loves to say that samādhi magnifies experience, and kilesa exaggerates experience. Put them together—whoa, it's huge.

"I felt this anger at this person. I mean, I felt anger. I really wished them ill."

"Did you do anything?"

"No, no, no. But it's horrible. It's horrible. I'm so greedy."

So just to give you a little bit of a reality check—I heard this on the radio this morning. The day after Thanksgiving is a huge shopping day, right? They were talking about some Best Buy, an electronics store, in Virginia or somewhere. It's a chain. The store was going to open at 5 AM this morning. Five in the morning. You might think, who in their right mind is going to be there at 5 AM? So they sent a reporter to interview people. They interviewed one man who got in line—the store opened at 5 AM this morning, and he got in line at 10 AM yesterday morning. He stayed in line all day and through the night until 5 AM when he could go in and buy stuff.

You know, it's scary, right?

So then she's interviewing him. What are you buying? Oh, you must have really wanted to get stuff for your family and friends. And he just roared with laughter. He goes, "Are you kidding? I'm getting stuff for me. Who would stand in line that long to get stuff for somebody else?" So really, you could cut yourself some slack. That's just one thing I wanted to say about it.

In terms of really cultivating wisdom and insight, there's a constant deepening. I'm sure you've seen it—it's a spiral. It's not that we see through one thing, that's done, and we see something new. I'm still seeing, and this isn't going to be too inspiring, but I'm still seeing the same old personality pattern from different, more subtle points of view. You know how I'm caught. They're more empty. But it keeps spiraling. "Oh, this again" versus "*this* again." "Oh, now I see." But then we're not really getting the levels of wisdom we think every time. "Now I've got it. Now I see." Oh, this again. It keeps going.

So they talk in the commentaries about three types, three aspects of wisdom. The first is called in Pali *suta mayā paññā. Paññā* is wisdom. *Suta* means—it's the same root that the word "suttas" comes from. *Suta* means what is heard. So *sutamayā paññā* is wisdom that we get from hearing or reading the words of others—wisdom that comes in from outside. It's important. You could call it borrowed wisdom. It inspires us.

The second one is called *cintāmayā paññā—cintā* like from *citta,* the mind. This is roughly translated as intellectual wisdom. With our thinking mind, with our reasoning, with our logic, we kind of look over, we contemplate, we test. Does the stuff that we've heard, the *suta*, the heard wisdom—does this seem true? Does it seem real in my experience? We're contemplating it. And that's very useful.

But both of those don't really take us into the depth, into ourselves, so to speak. So the third type of wisdom they talk about is *bhāvanāmayā paññā*, or experiential wisdom. *Bhāvanā*—the word that's used for meditation, for cultivation of mind. So that's experiential wisdom, what's really based on our own experience.

All three of these are useful. Only the *bhāvanāmayā paññā* is liberating.

So when we talk about—when we here talk about—oh, you had a deep insight or a shallow insight or some insight, what do we mean by insight, really? Insight really is on this *bhāvanāmayā paññā* level, this real internal experiential level of knowing, of wisdom. What we call an insight is not thinking about something. We will think later, up the wazoo. But at the moment of insight, it's not thinking. It's a kind of aha moment. Really what it is, is the perception shifts. It's a shift in perception.

I actually really like the translation of Sammā Diṭṭhi as "right view," thinking of view as how you see something. It's almost literal—the perception that allows an insight just shifts. We recognize that the perception, the interpretation, the understanding of an experience, of ourselves, of a situation in life, an interpersonal relationship, or the nature of things—impermanence, for example, or not-self—the way the mind is perceiving just suddenly shifts, and we see it from a completely different angle. You can't make that happen. It happens through the process of steady awareness.

What's so cool is that if the perception shifts, the reality hasn't changed. So it's not that we're creating some new reality. It's more like, "Oh, it's like this." You all know that. We all see that. And when that happens, that shift of perception, we may perceive that way for some moments, for some time. It may not last very long, and the more habitual way of perceiving may reemerge in the next moments, which is fine.

But when you really see—take the example I was giving about eating candy and craving. Intellectually, we may have heard that craving is a cause of suffering. Yeah, yeah, okay, maybe let's look at it. We explore it. We really think about it. We say, "That makes sense." You study the dependent origination. You think about it. That really makes sense. And as we know, that still doesn't end the craving.

Then you have an experience like I mentioned, where there's the wanting, the wanting. You're dying for that candy. You sit there. You be with it. It goes. And it's like, "Oh." The peace, the happiness—it's here. I didn't need the candy. That was a smokescreen. Craving holds out—someone said, I forget who, one of you in an interview said—it's like a false promise. It holds out the promise that it'll make you happy. But you were happy before the craving started. You'll be fine after it ends. Craving itself is the thing.

So you see that really deeply. That's an insight. It's a shift of perception. You really see craving from a different point of view. Even though two minutes later or three days later you have that intellectual memory, the craving catches us again. But having really experienced that perception from another angle, even though it doesn't stay, it has an effect. It has an effect on our mind stream. It has an effect on how we relate. At the very least, it gives us more faith. Okay, craving has really caught me now, but I know there

are other possibilities.

We may lose the immediacy of the insight, but even having recognized it and opened to it, it opens up the possibilities. It opens up the box we've been living in without realizing it—the box of what's possible, the box of how we think things are. And that's very powerful.

This shift can be a little thing. I mean, craving is not a little thing, but it can be a little instant. Or it can be a huge shift of perception. For example, times when you're sitting and the whole sense of body falls away. The sense of anything permanent is gone. You just experience for moments, maybe for hours, things simply coming and going. There's nothing steady anywhere. The mind might be afraid. It might be relaxed and happy with it.

But it's real—it goes on, and there's a sense of: "Oh, wow, this is really how it is." That's the place I want to go next. The mind goes, "This is really how it is." But for a while, that shift of perception feels definitive—oh yes, that other was one way, this is another way.

And then we get caught in our black and white minds. If this is true, that can't be true. If this is true, that can't be true, right? Why can't they both be? Different perceptions of things—relative and absolute. This is one way we get confused.

So this point of insight, this aha, this shift of perception—that's really what liberates our hearts and minds. We come to understand, "Oh, that's how things are." There's not the struggle. There's not the trying to make things fit some idea. And this is because that perception may change, may fade. The more familiar sense of solidity of body comes back—we've perceived moments of that all our life, and we'll perceive moments of that again. It's useful.

If we get caught in thinking, "But it was like this, and now it's like that, and I've fallen away, I've lost it"—just as I said in the beginning—this is a place where deep and really transformative insight, which it has been, gets disrespected or shoved away, or we start to doubt because we don't understand the depth and breadth and length of the path. Can the other be okay too when it comes back?

We can fall into a lot of confusion, a lot of views. Now, how do we get there, into that confusion, into those views? Just that thing I said—the thought, "Oh, so this is how it is." Papañca. The definition in the commentary says: what one perceives, one thinks about. That's just normal—what one perceives, one thinks about. An accurate perception, an inaccurate perception.

So when there is an insight—"Wow, maybe things aren't so solid"—it's natural, it's normal that we're going to think about it, that thoughts will come and try to explain and help, because that's the way we hold information, the way we process. There's nothing wrong with thinking about it. That's going to happen.

It turns into papañca—I'd give it two thoughts, and then it's turned. Papañca goes on: what one thinks about, one complicates. One complicates with associations, with memories, with ideas. And then these

notions assail and overwhelm a person. This is from the commentaries.

This can happen with the most beautiful insight or with the completely stupidest perception you ever had. It doesn't really matter. Once it turns to "Wow, this is how it really is. So now I know that everything's impermanent. Now I know that I'm not so... How am I going to live the rest of my life? How am I going to explain this to people? No, but now my body feels solid. It feels solid. How can it be?"—whatever way you go, you get the drift.

And if we can do that with a really accurate perception and insight, well, I don't need to tell you where we can go from the thought, "I can't do this right." From the thought, "My breath is ragged and heavy—it means something is wrong." Boom.

So what happens with insight? Often when there's an insight, there's a huge release of energy. We feel it as a kind of happiness, pīti. It's a wholesome release of energy. Often that can just turn back into mindfulness—we're just practicing with it. Often it leads to some thoughts about the insight. That's fine.

But sometimes we get a little carried away in the energy and forget about the mindfulness. And that's when it can go really fast from insight into real exuberant spinning, and then suddenly crash. And you think, "Did I make that whole thing up? Now I'm just back in the soup. How did that happen?"

No problem, because you'll be out of the soup again too. Nothing's permanent. But just to notice this movement from insight into thought. Thought is useful—chintamaya pañña, that level of intellectual understanding—but not to be confused with bhavanamaya pañña, with insight. They're not the same thing.

Simply because a thought arises together with strong energy or strong emotion, wholesome or unwholesome, that doesn't make the thought more accurate. This is really important. In fact, I would tend in the other direction. The thoughts arising with really strong emotion and punch—hmm, check it out. Don't land in that story. Just come back and feel the energy that's underneath it.

So this is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking. It's the result of the long process of conscious awareness." Just what we've been saying. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding. That's not to say thoughts are bad. It's just recognizing how we can use them but not mistake them to be able to do more than they can.

One of the ways—or maybe the main way—that we get tricked by thoughts, that they are rigid and limiting, is when there's this papañca, this whole proliferating story. What we perceive, we think about, and we use the perceptions and the thinking to define our world, as Guy and Sally have talked about. That can be useful if we know what we're doing. The bell rings and we know it's lunchtime—that's a perception, that's a thought, time to go eat, totally helpful. You hear "meditate," all those thoughts, totally helpful.

But when it becomes a problem is when the thoughts, the explanation, the defining of our world becomes a view, an explanation. Without recognizing it, views are one of the main fields of attachment, one of the main fields of grasping. We've mentioned this too. And views are so seductive and can be so subtle.

The Buddha describes a view as when the mind thinks, "This alone is true and everything else is false." But what I've found is that views rarely signal themselves that clearly. In fact, often I don't even realize I'm holding a view. This is how we think the world is, or this is how we think I am. The whole idea of personality view, as Guy described—it so clearly arises just with a moment of craving and clinging to any of the aggregates. But it really strengthens into this view of "this is how I am, this is who I am, this is mine," and then the rest of the thoughts that lead to papañca.

A view is like a box that our idea of ourselves and the world is bouncing around inside, but it's a completely illusory box that we don't know is there. It defines, it limits our world. And we often don't even know we have it until some perception arises. Well, you know, the view kind of shrinks our perception. So when you're thinking "I'm doing this wrong" and you're really believing that, any perception that comes in just shows that you're doing it wrong. We've talked about this before—the selective perception. And often the way we know there's even a view there is when we start to feel somehow threatened or fearful or uneasy, when some perception is coming in that doesn't fit the view but that we can't completely block.

A friend of mine was telling me a story about a Tibetan lama he was with a long time ago, Lama Gendun. Seeing through views, this opening into the moment, just having the possibility that how we think things are is just an idea—it's really about this willingness to open into the mystery, into the unknown, into unknowing, you could say. And so often we're not comfortable there.

So he was telling me this story in relation to this idea, on a retreat or a teaching with Lama Gendun. The lama was going on in a really, really long description and explanation about one of the deva worlds in the Tibetan system called the Pure Land, the Dewachen, which is where the Amitabha Buddha resides in that system. It's said that if you want to aspire for another realm to be born into in your next life—this is just a tip—this is a really good realm to aspire to, because it's a deva realm. So it's not too horribly suffering, but it's one where there's dharma teaching, so you don't get totally lost in the pleasure. Can't hurt. Aspire. Aspire isn't the same as greed. Anyway, he's going on and on describing the realm, the Buddha, a very happy realm of practice, very intricate.

And after quite a while, he looked up at this skeptical audience of Westerners, just kind of sitting there, okay, the teacher was on his trip. And he just looked at them and said, "If you think I'm making this up, I've been there." And then he went on with his description.

So just what do we do with that? It's really interesting. That's just an example. Wow. Could be great if I could just let go. Just to see when something kind of rattles our cage, and see how quickly our views spring up over nothing—over nothing.

I was with some friends in Germany at a retreat, and we were having lunch. Two of the people were cooks, and there were mushrooms for lunch somehow. One of them said, "Mushrooms, you know, they're the most easy food to digest." The other one goes, "No, mushrooms are the most difficult food to digest." So that was just starting what could have been an easy conversation, and they each had readings and things that they'd read. We could just see with what intensity—but we could all see it. Okay, who knows? For some people, it's easy. For some people, it's hard. Let's just put it down. But just to see how quickly that can happen about something completely inconsequential—unless you're lethally allergic to mushrooms, then it matters.

So, never mind that the strongest, most seductive, and most limiting view that we get caught in over and over and over is this sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. And it's when we're caught in sakkāya-diṭṭhi, in our view of personality, that we're going to believe these thoughts of discouragement or frustration—that I can't do it, or it should be better by now, or any way that it goes, doubting the practice. It's coming from belief at that moment in sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

It's the habit, as Guy said, of perceiving and thus interpreting any particular moment of nāma-rūpa—mind and matter—as me or mine. And we do this all the time. If we're aware of what's arising in the moment, that's fine. As you know, it goes like that.

I think I used this example last year, but I was doing something that required doing some little thing with my hands, putting something together in the house. And I was having a bit of a hard time, kind of fumbling around. It didn't just go easily. It wasn't a horrible thing, just a little bit of fumbling. And it was unpleasant. So there's a little bit of aversion and impatience in my mind. "You're so clumsy." This is true—I don't have good eye-hand coordination. And from that moment, "You're so clumsy," the aversion to it immediately flowered into this whole view, which didn't feel like a view. It just felt like that's me. That's Carol. She's clumsy. She always has been. She can't play sports. That's why I meditate, because I can't do anything active. You can pick everything wholesome I've ever done in my life, and it all comes from compensating for being a total klutz. And believing it at that moment—that is who I am. That's Carol. It goes so far, so fast.

And then the selective memory, picking out the fifth grade gym class for losers, which I was put into because I couldn't throw a softball further than thirty-three feet when we had the President Kennedy physical fitness tests. These things are deeply traumatic.

This is where, when we see it, it's funny—it's just empty thoughts, it's not a problem, it's not bothering me now. But when we don't see it, we're believing that papañca. That's all papañca. We're mistaking it for what's happening in the moment. I mean, the papañca is happening, but we're believing the content is accurately describing reality.

And this is where we just need to recognize: I don't need to fix it. I don't need to go out and suddenly, after all these years, find some way to become more coordinated eye to hand. I don't have to go to therapy to

get over the trauma of not being good at sports. I mean, I could do any of those things.

That's fine. There's nothing wrong with any of those things. But in that moment, it's just, oh, unpleasant feeling. Unpleasant memories. Unpleasant experience of trying to do this. Basically frustration because I don't want to be doing this—I want to be doing something more enjoyable. Let's cut to the chase here. And you just see, okay, it's like this. You just feel that.

This is where the power of our awareness, our mindfulness, our confidence in that, is what we can come to rely on. Not having confidence in our personality. First of all, there is no solid-state personality, which I hope to show. But also, if I was having confidence in my personality, I would have given up a long time ago.

What we see with awareness is that personality is nothing solid-state there. It's just a bunch of thoughts and memories and feelings at this particular moment. At another moment, it's something completely different. That's what we really need to see. And when we see that we're confusing the story, we're making a view and putting it onto the openness, the ever-changing nature of this moment's mental and physical experiences—oh! You don't have to change your personality. You don't have to get rid of it. Oh, it's like this. Physical, mental experience.

Sometimes the story is too complex. The papancha has moved way too far too fast, and you're in the really core personality story of your life, right? We've talked about this before. You're at your core thing, and you can't think it through and dissect it. But I love Ajahn Sumedho's approach. He just says, "Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like this." You know you're caught in sakkāya-diṭṭhi. You can't go any further than that. Oh, sakkāya-diṭṭhi is like this. That's fine. I've done that a lot. It's wonderful, because it's that little shift from believing the papancha, believing the view, to recognizing a view is happening. Recognizing that even there's belief, but already the perception has shifted. And that's really the place of freedom.

The real support is the awareness, the mindfulness, but the real support is the steadiness of it. Thich Nhat Hanh said that wisdom comes from the long process of continuous mindfulness. Continuous means continuous intention. Of course we know we all space out—that's a given. But the willingness, no matter what we're doing, the moment we realize, "Oh, here I am," to just notice what's happening—that steadiness, that continuity of awareness is what really allows for the perception of impermanence, for the perception of anicca.

Because otherwise, I was just doing my clumsy thing and then I space out for a while and I don't notice all the other moments when something completely different was going on. I come back and notice the clumsy thing three days later. "Oh yeah, I'm a clumsy person. That's who I am."

A good friend of mine who has been a cook here and at Spirit Rock for many years, a long, long-term practitioner, was telling me one day about sitting on a retreat at Spirit Rock. She said, you know, she self-identifies as an aversive person. And her self-identity is supported by her friends—you could put it

that way. "Yes, you are an aversive person," right? Sometimes she's fine with it, sometimes not.

But she was sitting, and she was just really feeling bad about herself. I think she'd just had some aversive interaction or something. But she was really feeling badly about herself. And she said, "I'm sitting. Let me not get lost in the story. Let me just stay steady with my awareness and notice what's happening."

And she said, yes, there were quite a few aversive thoughts. But she said ninety percent—maybe ninety percent—of the thoughts and ideas that came up weren't aversive at all. They were neutral, they were compassionate, they were loving, they were generous, they were interested, they were equanimous. She said, "Oh, so this view, this selective perception was picking out the ten percent and saying this is who I am."

She didn't identify herself as a generous person, although plenty of generous motivations and thoughts came through. Plenty of loving, plenty of creative. You see what I mean?

So the steadiness is really what helps us see the impermanence of the view. It's what lets in the perceptions that don't support the view. And that's why sometimes practice is rather uncomfortable, even though it's opening us to much more comfort and ease in the world, a much more spacious and free way of being. But the intersection—we don't like that so much. It's uncomfortable.

The Buddha said, "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated"—developed and cultivated, he doesn't say have it once and you're done—"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.'"

That's a pretty powerful statement. You recognize those as meaning a completely enlightened person by the end of that. But it's a powerful statement—the perception of impermanence developed and cultivated over and over and over and over.

So this is where we really need to find the trust, the confidence, the re-inspiration for ourselves over and over and over. That yes, something as simple as the perception of impermanence—and that's just one example—that it really has to be perceived over and over and over. And to have the patience, the faith, not get so lost in either discouragement or our stories we tell ourselves or that sense of hitting the wall. "That's enough already, I'm never going to get there, this whole thing's a waste of time, I saw impermanence and it didn't do it."

I mean, a lot of people have moments—I've had it myself, people have said it here—"I almost wish I never started on a path if I knew it was going to be this"—whatever it is—hard or long, or if I had to open to this, or whatever. I think those are interesting moments. They're just moments, but I think they're really interesting moments. The times when our faith might not be challenged, our trust in our own personal ability. Or we're caught in our views, or our aspiration—we can't quite find it. We just get discouraged.

I just want to talk about a few different ways I've seen that happen, and I'm sure you can think of many more. But it's all those times when we need to at least have enough trust to reconnect with our motivation, to have the patience not to just give up.

Now the thing is, I actually think at this point none of us could give up if we wanted to. That's what some people mean by, "Oh, I almost wish I didn't start—I could go back to ignorance." But it's too late. That's the good news. So we can even fall into discouragement and despair and give it up for a while. Something always happens to wake us up again. That's what's so great. Usually it's dukkha. Usually it's suffering. Usually. It doesn't have to be, though.

But there are different ways this discouragement arises. One is just that feeling: "I can't do this. Enlightenment is not possible for me." What I just read about—what the perception of impermanence opens us to—and people say, "That's not possible for me." Or, "To be rid of all sensual lust, to be rid of all lust for existence? I didn't sign up for that. I'm not actually sure I want that."

Don't you sometimes have times when you hear certain teachings and you think, "That can't be right"? I mean, I'm not claiming everything we say is. But I'm saying you think, "Enlightenment? Like that—all dull, gray, nothing?"

I don't know if I want to keep going with that. Or we have a kind of attachment to a particular view that we don't even realize.

I want to give a few examples of this. I call it "hitting the wall." And we will hit the wall over and over and over. That's okay—that's part of it. We have to learn not to take it so personally.

Here's one from the time of the Buddha that I really like. It illustrates when we've had deep insight and understanding, but a view has constructed around it that we don't realize, and then we think we can't get it back, that we can't do it, that it's gone.

There's a monk named Asaji who is very ill and dying. The Buddha comes to talk to him—he does this in a lot of different suttas. He comes and says, "Are you getting better?" And the monk says, "No, I'm not getting better. I'm dying."

The Buddha says, "Well, I hope you're not troubled by remorse and regret."

And Asaji says, "No, I am. I have quite a lot of remorse and regret."

The Buddha asks, "Why? Is it your virtue, your sīla? Have you acted wrongly?"

"No, no, no—my sīla is fine."

"Well, then what do you have remorse and regret about?"

And the monk says, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I was able to keep on tranquilizing the bodily

formations. I was able to obtain concentration. And now I cannot obtain concentration. And the thought occurs to me—this thought of fear—let me not fall away."

So he's dying, and he's in a panic because he can't get the samādhi back that he used to have. The Buddha then goes through a whole talk: this is impermanent, that's impermanent. Basically what he's saying is, "Haven't I told you everything is impermanent? Nothing to have remorse about."

I find this quite touching—the Buddha with a monk who's lived his whole life practicing, and still we can so easily fall into that. Remorse and regret. "I can't get concentration back. Let me not die." Confused. And the Buddha just takes him through: everything's impermanent. Nothing. No problem. Just see that.

Sometimes we don't have the Buddha there to remind us, but we might just know when we feel that sense of panic—"Don't let me fall away. Don't let me lose it. I can't get what I used to have." Let that be a little light bulb going off. Wait a minute. I can't get what I used to have. Formerly I could, but now I can't. Impermanence. Perception of impermanence.

Then maybe you can even see what the view is. Sometimes when we put the view into words, it becomes so obvious. When we haven't put it into words, we don't even know we're fighting against it. "Oh, the view is I should have this. Now that I've obtained samādhi, it should be like this all the time." As soon as we say it, we know it can't be that way. So it's helpful sometimes. That's the thinking aspect that can be useful.

Another way we sometimes hit a wall—and we all hit this at times, though sometimes the times seem to last quite a bit—is when it just feels like too much. Too much pain, physical pain. Too much emotional pain. We all hit moments of that, when our mindfulness, our viriya, our energy just isn't as strong as the intensity of the emotional and physical pain. We're worn down.

And then it's skillful means. We need to pull back, regroup, balance. That's fine—I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about something deeper, not just on retreat but in our lives, when somebody hits that moment of "Whoa, this is too much. I don't want to see it anymore. I don't want to know about this anymore."

And we can fall into a great discouragement—not quite denial, because it's too far from denial, but really deep discouragement. That usually spirals into the blanket view that I'm not good enough, I can't do it, I should have been able to work through this, or if I'd really had insight it wouldn't happen. All of those stories about how it should be.

Another similar thing is fear—it's not actually a pain or a sorrow or a loss, but the intimation of something. Do you ever get the sense that something really hellish is about to open up? It hasn't, and you actually don't know that it will. But sometimes there's this sense that some deeply held view holding the world in place is about to be maha-challenged, and I don't want to go there.

On retreat you might notice yourself suddenly getting into distractibility, doing all these important things,

a kind of restlessness, a kind of anxiety. In our daily life it happens too. It might be hidden longer or acted out over more time. But still, it can lead to doubt, to self-doubt, lack of confidence, losing your aspiration, a lack of courage.

And those are views you don't need to hold onto because this happens to everybody.

At this point it's really helpful if you can remember and actually call up your deep aspiration. But when we're really falling into "I can't handle this pain, I don't want to know from this pain," and we try to call up our aspiration, the tendency is not to believe it. "Yeah, right, that's really my aspiration. I don't think so. My aspiration is get me out of here." Or: "I'm not good enough to have that aspiration. If I could really have that aspiration, I wouldn't be running from this or hiding from this."

Sakkāya-diṭṭhi, sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

Call up your aspiration and just take your stand there—not to make everything better, not to fix the painful thing. Just that. Yes, the aspiration, and the former insight that's feeding our mind stream now, will give us the courage in its own way, in its own time, to show up, to be a witness to whatever's happening, to see through it.

We don't have to stick with comfort, with the known. That's where my mind goes: "Let me just stay where it's comfortable, where I know. I'm just being kind to myself." You know that one. And that stepping outside of the cage can be scary, can be uncomfortable. And we think, "Well, I can't do it. I'm just this puny little old lady. I can't do it. Maybe I could do it when I was nineteen—that was amazing what I did when I was nineteen. Now I'm old and sick."

Just personality view.

This is like a kind of allegory. Recently, a couple of months ago, I had the flu, which is unusual for me, and I was kind of laid out for a couple of weeks at home. Thank God I was home. And I was basically useless—I could just lie around. So one way I passed the evenings, for three evenings in a row, was I watched again the three-part movie, The Lord of the Rings trilogy, which probably some of you know.

And I was really struck—actually quite profoundly—by how the whole story of Frodo felt like a really deep allegory for our practice and for how we keep having to rediscover within ourselves the courage. We have to remake our commitment and remake our motivation. We set our foot on the path and we're wholeheartedly committed. But we don't get to just do that once and then it flies. Over and over.

And so, just a little bit of the story: he's this sweet little hobbit in a kind of perfect world where people are kind. And most of the people there have no sense of an outer world of confusion and violence and evil.

He has a little bit of a sense because of his uncle and the wizard who knows the whole world. And so this evil ring of power comes to him. The wizard, whom he trusts deeply, says, "You have to take it. You have to leave your home turf, the Shire, and go to this nearby place where you've never been, and deliver it. I'll

meet you there, and then we'll figure it out."

So that was really scary for him. That was more challenging than anything he had done in his life. But he saw that it needed to be done, out of his basic goodness. He brought up his courage. He trusted the wizard. And he went and did this thing.

Good things happened in that friends came to support him—a kind of mutual goodness and courage. But it was also more scary and dangerous than anything he could have imagined. Those dark riders were trying to kill him. And it really was horrible. They barely made it there. Like, "Wow, thank God. That was an adventure."

And then, of course, it turns out Gandalf isn't there. Black riders tried to kill them there. They have to end up trusting somebody they've never met who seems kind of seedy and sinister. And not only is it not over then, they have to follow this guy Aragorn on a much, much more difficult path to where the elves are—for days, not knowing if they can trust him. And so Frodo has to make that decision. He could have made the decision not to do it. He could have made the decision to go back. But he has a sense it's about more than him.

So they do that. And then he's really almost killed. He's stabbed. And they're having fights much, much closer. And the elves come and take him. And finally, they get to Rivendell, which is like the most beautiful place—like a deva realm, more beautiful than they could ever imagine. Thank God. Here's Gandalf. Everything's okay. "I've done more than I ever could have done. I feel good now. I can go home."

And then, of course, it turns out that's only the beginning. And he has to find in himself the courage when he sees that this ring has to go all the way to the evilest place in the land, and he has no clue where that is or how to get there. He knows by now that he has no clue actually of the danger he's going into. He knows enough to know how really vast the journey is—which he didn't know at the beginning.

And that's like us now. We know enough to know how vast the journey is, and that we really don't have a clue, although we'd like to.

And he has to make that decision. And out of that comes the friendship of all the other beings that go with him—the loyalty and the courage and the humility and the strength and the wisdom. And it keeps going. He finds finally he can't trust anybody. He has to make the decision to go off completely alone, having no clue how he'll get there, how he'll do it. And his friend Sam comes with him.

So over and over, he's having to make more profound, difficult decisions to move toward the difficulty, not away from it. But it's not the same decision, because each time he has a much greater sense of wisdom, a greater sense of faith, a greater sense of the importance of what he's doing. It's less and less about him and more and more about beings in the world. But it never gets easier. In fact, it gets harder. The love between the friends gets stronger. His sense of goodness gets stronger.

But then, even as he gets closer to Mordor—to the really bad place where he must put the ring in the fire it came from—the evil stops being just out there, and it starts to eat him up from the inside. So it really shows that his courage and stamina almost break, almost break. But somehow there's also support and help where it's unexpected.

You never know how it's going to go, and somehow he manages to complete the task—which doesn't, of course, end the growing or end the love or end life.

I just thought that was so great. I really feel like our whole practice is like that. We think, "I really can't do this anymore. This is harder than anything I ever thought I'd have to face." But then we need to turn around and recognize the wisdom, the courage, the compassion, the equanimity. All of that is so much greater than we ever knew we had before. And it's really important to recognize that too.

So when you're in your life and you think, "This again? This pattern, this anger—I see it, I'm still blasting my little kids and I ought to know better," and you feel the shame even more... you think it's just worse than it ever was. What's the point of practice if it's worse than it ever was? But it's not worse. The seeing of it is already a huge shift. The openness to actually feel the pain of the anger, and the shame, the pain of the shame, and the immediate feedback of the pain from somebody else—that's a much deeper level of sensitivity and non-separation than we started out with.

If we stay focused on "this feels worse than ever and I'm still doing this," we're lost. If we let ourselves expand the view and say, "Wow, yes, it's a deeper step into the interconnectedness of all, into the power of habits of kilesa, but also the power of awareness and the importance and power of patience and our motivation and commitment to keep on bearing witness"—at some point, it does happen, over and over. It shifts from just feeling hopelessly caught in the pattern to there's a moment of, "Oh, right now I don't have to do this. I can turn and walk away just for this moment." Maybe next time you're caught again. But that shift comes from the openness to all of the interconnectedness and the deeper sensitivity to the suffering that comes from acting and thinking from greed, from hatred, from confusion. And that's a great courage, that we have to keep opening in this way. It's important to recognize it, because we tend to sometimes just notice how it's going wrong.

Another way we get caught—briefly—is what Sayadaw U Pandita calls "stopping within." It's actually when things are going really well, on retreat or in our life. I've seen it in myself a lot when there's been quite some insight, or I leave retreat in a really balanced place, feeling really alive. The kilesas don't feel so sticky, and the personality view doesn't feel so sticky. Not reactive, more connected. And it's just, "Wow, this is great." After my first retreat, it was like that more or less for a year. I don't wish that on anybody, because there's this feeling, "Well, now that's it. I can just coast." You don't even think you're coasting. You think, "Now that's it."

So that's called stopping within—"Okay, now I got it." Not that we have to try, try, try all the time, but just have that willingness to be awake no matter what's happening. At first, when you're stopping within, the

wakefulness is natural. The momentum of awareness is there. You know those times when it's just going by itself? Well, anicca rears its head usually here too. And what seemed so natural stops being so natural. You can't find it.

Stopping within is "this is cool, this is it." Sometimes it's not even that, but just "this is good enough. This is pleasant. I'm not suffering so much. I don't want to rock the boat. I can live like this. This is okay. Good enough." Unlike the Buddha, who resolved never to settle for less than total awakening.

But the problem with stopping within—I don't need to tell you, do I? Nothing is steady state. "This is good enough. I can live like this." Well, you won't live like that forever.

I can promise you that.

Another place we encounter resistance is really around our personality view, what people have mentioned—a fear or resistance at moving out of the familiar. It's really more an idea of losing something familiar about ourselves or about our lives. It's the kind of questions we all ask: Does freedom from clinging mean I don't care about my family anymore? Does freedom from clinging mean I don't appreciate the beauty of nature? Does freedom from clinging mean I can't tell pleasant from unpleasant, can't appreciate art? Fill in your blanks. Freedom from clinging means I don't have a personality anymore. What about my irritability—I like my irritability, I'm comfortable with that. That seems crazy, but we're comfortable with our patterns.

So you might just notice if there's that sense of, "If it means this goes away, I'm not so sure I'm signed on for this." You don't have to land in that either. But just notice—that's another place where we can hit a wall. Or that nostalgia for samsara that Guy talked about. I've felt that often, and really very powerfully sometimes. I don't even know what for, sometimes. Nostalgia is something that's been the fabric of my whole life, and I couldn't even put a word on it. Something is dissolving, going to go away, and I'm going to be thrust into the unfamiliar—and with unfamiliar, read whatever projection: cold, distant, disconnected, inhuman, whatever it is. And this huge nostalgia, this poignancy, this real sadness.

I've seen, especially in intensive practice over years at different points—I could say it's been like a series of deaths. A sense of death. And it really feels like a death of some particular aspect of my personality or some particular way I held myself. Not even how my personality manifests, but some view or some way I related to myself, to my life, to the people in my life, how I thought about myself. When I say it, it probably sounds clear that it's no great loss. And that's actually the truth. But in the moment of seeing it, seeing through it—that isn't who I am, that isn't really accurate, that isn't really how I relate to whatever it is—it's been experienced internally for me like a kind of death, a real giving up.

On the other side of that, it's freedom. It's really freedom. But not to deny or belittle or think it shouldn't be that way. There's sadness, there's poignancy, there's a sense of loss or fear that this is going to go. Fine. Notice that. There's room in awareness for that too. It doesn't have to be a problem.

But in the big picture, which includes everything of our life, awakening—the liberation of heart, of non-clinging—it's radical. It's uncompromising. And we can't know. The mind can't know what that's like because the mind can only know the thoughts that it already knows. It can only know the views that it's expressed. But awakening—enlightenment's not a self-improvement project. It's the standpoint of "me" that gets seen through. So we don't personally get gratified by having some kind of enlightenment experience. It's not about that. That's what creates the sense of loss or death, these little blips—it's like, "Oh, that meaning, not just having so much meaning right now."

Stephen Batchelor says emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all our strategies of self-interest, of self-centeredness, of seeming protection. And although freeing—it is freeing—it also can evoke a great sense of disconcertion, of dis-ease, even fear. Sort of like being in no man's land without our familiar reference points.

When we see this, there's no stasis. One of my invited teachers, Poonjaji, used to say, "Pick up your foot and then don't put it down again anywhere." I didn't used to understand it, but now I realize that you pick up your foot and there is nowhere to put it down. Because there's no stasis. You put it down, but there's nothing stable there. You pick it up, you put it down—there's nothing stable there. Disconcerting at times, but that's okay. We find a willingness to rest in the confusion, as Joko Beck says. And then we see that this disconcertion actually opens up our cage of view, of self-interest, and—ah, it's like this. It's just like this, as Guy said from the Bāhiya Sutta.

So simple. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking. Just like this. It's so simple we can't stand it.

But when "we" isn't what's being held to, a friend of mine calls it the place of no problem—coming and going.

So over and over, just finding that willingness to commit, to surrender to the unknown. We don't have to know. We can't know what should happen. If we think we know what should happen, that's the trap. Oh, not knowing. It's like this.

And what can really help—just one thing to end with that I find helps me a lot—is a Tibetan practice. It's very simple. They call it purifying our aspiration. Just reminding us of our aspiration, our motivation. And they say, just to cultivate the correct motivation within your own experience, it turns into bodhicitta all by itself. Are we touching, finding our aspiration by itself? That'll give us the courage to keep going, like poor Frodo, ending up for all beings.

So it's a very simple practice. They call it the three excellences. In any practice period—which could be a sitting or a walking or the whole day—you always start with taking refuge, really connecting with your refuge. For the Tibetans, they would cultivate bodhicitta. But I'd say, cultivate your deepest aspiration while you're practicing. Then you just forget it and practice, just being moment-to-moment awareness. Then at the end, when the bell rings or you stop the walking or you finish eating—whatever is your

practice period—you complete it by briefly dedicating the merit of your practice to all sentient beings.

I just want to say for this: if there's the feeling "my practice isn't worth dedicating any merit to anybody"—sakkāya-diṭṭhi.

And along with dedicating the merit, again, making a really pure aspiration. This is something that's interesting to me. If I would dedicate the merit—good. But they say, make the merit a pure aspiration for my own awakening and the awakening of all. So that the merit doesn't just fly out there and get you a nice comfortable job, or you don't have back pain tomorrow, or something.

But anyway, the point of it is it really connects us again to our deepest aspiration. And I've done this a lot, and I go through all that stuff about "Oh no, I'm not good enough, nothing to me, bodhicitta." Just let that blab on. Connect to the motivation. It really does strengthen and deepen by itself. And then in times when you're hitting a wall, you'll remember it. You'll be able to call it up. And it'll give us the faith, the confidence to just surrender into not knowing.

And that's really all we need to do.

So let's sit quietly for a moment.

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