Perception & Awareness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:33

We've been talking often about trusting in mindfulness, trusting in awareness. Jack mentioned it this morning. And how is this going to help? Not that I can answer this all in one talk, but how is trusting in mindfulness, how is moment-to-moment mindfulness going to help us unravel this whole confusing mass of concept that we find ourselves in, maybe without even knowing it? Where do we think we need to go? That's the question. How is moment-to-moment mindfulness going to free our heart and mind from confusion?

Often people might think—I often used to think and still do sometimes, maybe without even realizing it—having the expectation that awakening, insight (this is insight meditation after all) is going to take me to some new world or create some new and better self. Not just personality, like someone said the other night; I also always thought I'll get a better personality. It doesn't work that way. But we expect some new experience or something different, something definitely ecstatic or pretty significant and far out.

Actually, insight and awakening work in quite a different way. I don't want to say mundane, but on a much more simple and direct level. I want to talk about that very simple moment-to-moment level of experience where awareness can come in and actually shift our relationship to life because it shifts our understanding. That's what insight is.

This basic moment-to-moment level of experience where I want to start is perception, which was brought up a little bit this morning in the questions and answers. It's really interesting—insight isn't about something new being created. It's simply a shift of perception and the resultant understanding of our experience. When we perceive inaccurately, all the stories we make up are inaccurate. Well, that's basically our position. And so insight begins on the level of perceiving our moment-to-moment experience accurately.

I want to talk a little bit about perception, which is really fun to explore. In terms of the way the Buddha described our moment-to-moment experience, perception is a mental experience that he says is arising in every moment whenever there's sense door contact. The senses are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, physical sensation of the body, and the sixth sense is the mind—thinking, emotions, mental states. Basically, the way he describes experience is that these six sense experiences are happening over and over and over.

You might have noticed in your meditation: you're seeing, hearing, thinking, seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking. What's the point of this? When is something new going to happen? Seeing, hearing, thinking. We don't notice that something new is happening every instant, but it's just within that range of seeing,

hearing, thinking, feeling.

Perception is this: when there's sense contact—an eye that works, a visual form, consciousness—those three come together; that's contact. If we're not conscious, we're not going to see. We're asleep. So they come together, that's contact. And then the very normal, natural thing that arises in contact is this quality that the Buddha called perception—that recognition. It's what Meredith asked about this morning: there's a sound, we hear it, and automatically the mind just kind of knows it's a bird call or the bell. It may say the word, it may not, but the perception is simply that quality of recognition. That's based in our previous experience and in the habits of mind.

A sound arises—a bell. We know it's a bell. What we perceive, we think about. And this is where it gets both interesting and wild. What we perceive, we think about. And through those thoughts, if we're not aware that these are just thoughts, we're constructing our world.

For example, when you heard the bell a little while ago, first, in some way, through perception you knew it was the bell. You knew whatever time it was—7:20 or whenever—it's time to go to the talk. Implicit in all of that is the construction of the world: that you're here, you're being a yogi, you're on a Vipassana retreat, we're at Yucca Valley, it's evening, you're coming to a talk. A whole bunch of stuff, just coming from that perception of bell—it constructs our world.

And that's useful. Nothing wrong with that. This is what we call conventional reality, and conventional reality is extremely useful. If that sound went off and every single time, if you didn't have memory, if you didn't have perception—what is that? It's not even memory; you don't even know it's a bell. Bell, but what does it mean?

What do I have to do? If we had to go through that process every time, it would be unbearable. So perception is useful.

But we're so used to it, and it happens so fast, that without really cultivating moment-to-moment awareness—without getting interested in how the mind works—we don't really recognize all that's happening, do we? We just kind of come and sit down, plunk down and wait for the talk, which is fine. I'm glad I'm talking and you're listening. That helps; it places us in a context.

But a couple of things arise here. Sometimes we perceive what's happening, and the thoughts that come—we take those thoughts to be the actual, accurate, total reality, which may or may not be the case.

So you're sitting here, you're feeling the breath, and you're accurately perceiving pressure, tightness, a little difficulty taking a deep breath. It's an accurate perception. And the thoughts that come from it are: the breath should be deep and relaxed; it's not; it's tight; it's unpleasant. Maybe you don't notice the unpleasant part. Then comes: there's something wrong with me; I'm stressed; I'm too type A; I can't do this right; I'm hiding; I'm suppressing some emotion; there's something wrong with me. No, never had that experience.

And maybe we might recognize frustration, but not actually realize that all of those thoughts and descriptions—guess what—they may not be true. It's just a slight possibility that those aren't the accurate descriptions.

The Buddha said what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we then complicate with associations and memories and likes and dislikes. And that happens in the blink of an eye, right? We don't realize that's happening, and we take it all to be an accurate description.

So just in this simple breath example, the power of awareness lies in simply receiving the experience. Tightness is like this. That's it. Just awareness that is not making pre-assumptions. You might notice it's unpleasant. You might notice a thought arises: I can't do this right. But awareness receives that thought.

Without moment-to-moment awareness of the thinking, the mood, the sense experience of the tightness, we might notice the tightness and then all the—papañca is the word the Buddha used for these thoughts and assumptions, these notions that we add on to every sense experience. He says they then assail and overwhelm a person.

So we start from some simple sense door experience: tightness, unpleasant. A few thoughts arise—it's tight, I'm too stressed, I can't do this right, what to do, how can I fix it, I shouldn't be—boom, we're assailed, we're completely overwhelmed in that amount of time. This goes on more than once or twice a day. And not just here, not just here.

But the power of mindfulness lies in the willingness to simply meet what's happening. Oh, tightness. Not liking it. That's what's happening. It doesn't have to go anywhere else.

So that's one big complication that can come from perception when we don't see how fast the whole thing is moving. But even more—or in addition, or along with the whole package—perception itself, the recognition itself, sometimes it's not so accurate. Have you ever noticed that? That moment of perceiving—you know, there's a sound, there's the contact, there's the consciousness, the knowing of sound.

But why do we keep talking about noticing the attitude in the mind that's being aware? Because in that moment of perception, the perception can really be colored, affected by the qualities that are in the mind at that moment.

So for example—and I know at least one or two people have had this experience since they've been here—you start to notice that maybe not everybody here, but a whole lot of people coming through your line of vision, there's something wrong with them. They just bug you. They're walking funny. They're eating funny. You don't like their clothes. They're too close. They're too far. They're too good yogis. They're too bad yogis. And this can go on for a while. And suddenly—oh, maybe there's aversion in the consciousness. And when that aversion is there unseen, it just colors our perception. When we don't recognize that, we take the perception to be accurate.

Or if you're really falling in love with someone—or as we call it here on retreat, we won't dignify it by "falling in love." On retreat, you develop being drawn to somebody who you know nothing about, so they're a great field for projection. And through that desire, they look beautiful. They look fascinating. Even their shoes, even their shirts are so interesting. The Tibetans have a saying that desire puts feathers on the object, kind of paints it up. Then at the end of the retreat, you talk to that person and you go, "What was that all about?" It's gone. And you just see a lot more accurately.

So there can be, and there often is—this is why we're so much pointing to what's in the mind—this misperception based on the qualities that are in the mind stream at that moment. And then that misperception leads to the same thoughts and assumptions, and the whole show is created, but it's not even accurate to begin with.

A friend of mine told me this great story. I've used it a lot, but it's so perfect. She was many years ago in Switzerland—a Swiss woman. She's on a meditation retreat like this in Switzerland, I think with Ajahn Sumedho. And at that time, they would rent facilities like this. In Switzerland, they have these big old camp houses that kids go to for summer camp. So they're really big with a lot of rooms, but they're just wood, no insulation, very kind of old and creaky. So they were having this retreat in a house like that, the kind where the walls creak with the wind and the floor creaks when you walk on it.

She said the room they were using for the meditation hall was on the second floor, and immediately beneath it was the room they were using for the walking hall. So of course, in the walking, it made quite a racket with everyone walking back and forth. But this being Switzerland, when it was sitting time, you sat. When it was walking time, you walked. And people just do that.

So she was sitting in the sitting time, being with the breath—in, out, in, out—being with the breath, getting really concentrated, having a really good sitting. And then she started to hear this creaking. Somebody walking downstairs. And it was really ruining her concentration. I'm sure you can relate. So she'd be sitting—creak, creak—instead of just bringing mindful awareness with sati-paññā, mindfulness-wisdom, to the sound of hearing, which could be no problem.

It was annoying her, the sense of, "This is the sitting time. What's that person doing walking? They know you can hear every single creak up here." In, out, in, out—creak, creak, creak. And she was really getting worked up, going into a whole spin about how she had to go down and tell the person. They needed to start announcing the whole thing. We've got to regulate this better.

And then she said, "Okay, let's just try receiving my moment-to-moment experience with awareness." And she just dropped her thinking, came back to the breath, and really felt completely surrendered into the unknown of this one breath, totally present with that. And as she breathed in and her chest expanded, she realized that she was leaning against the wall. And whenever she breathed in, it made the wall creak. And that was the sound.

Well, as you can imagine, the whole story and all the anger just vanished with that accurate perception, right? You could call that an insight, but that's really the way it works. When the perception is accurate—just what's happening now—all the confusing mixed-up stories and our reactions and our emotions, our engagements, they fall away because they don't make sense based in reality.

That's the shift that happens. When we recognize in a moment ourselves, experience what's happening more accurately, then the reactivity, the dislike, the wanting, the self-blinding—all that stuff doesn't make sense in that moment.

It's not like we have to surmount it, dig it out, root it out, do all kinds of things to become a better person. A lot of our pain and confusion and reactivity is based simply on not perceiving accurately. And so the power of correct perception is huge.

Even on the deep levels—impermanence, no lasting sense of self—it's not as if things are permanent and then you have some big experience and suddenly everything starts to be impermanent. It's not that. You're sitting here with it already. There isn't a lasting, solid self that somehow, if you have the right experience, is going to break into pieces, and then you won't have a self anymore. That's why people get scared: "How am I going to function without a self?" Well, guess what? It's already like that.

To me, this is hugely reassuring. Hugely. The problems are really like a round peg in a square hole—they exist because we're not recognizing accurately. And so this process is at the heart of our spiritual practice, certainly of our meditation here: cultivating moment-to-moment receptive awareness.

It really isn't about getting the right object of awareness or the right experience. That's just based on what we know and what we think, on the assumptions we've made, the views we've created. It's about opening into receiving the unknown experience of each moment, because we never know what's going to arise next. We assume, "I'm going to pay attention to the breath for this sitting." Well, you already know that's a joke if you think you're going to sit down and just be with the breath, right? But we still hold that idea. And when something else happens, we think, "I did something wrong because I decided only the breath is going to arise in this sitting. There should be no sounds. There should be no pain. I should have no emotions coming up because I've decided I'm going to just be with the breath."

Instead of settling in and letting awareness receive all the different things happening, we glom onto this idea of how it should be, and all this other stuff arises. We don't even let in the perception that there's constant change, things rising and falling. "No, this is all wrong. This is all a mistake because I think this should be happening." Do you ever notice your mind doing that in the practice here? And what's the effect? Suffering, right? It doesn't bring a sense of harmony with the world. It doesn't bring a sense of confidence in awareness or in oneself. It's a sense of struggle, a sense of square peg in a round hole, or vice versa.

So this power of perception—really getting interested in how the mind works and noticing what's coloring

the mind in moments of perception—it's fascinating. And it's a huge aspect of freeing us from confusion.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, said: "When our sense organs encounter an object, the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. When your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, and whatever you do is in accordance with the way things are, you experience everything as primordially pure."

Now, have you had experiences of that? I think you probably have, because it's normal, it's natural. In any moment when the mind, the awareness, is not distorted by greed, by confusion, by hatred or fear—when there's just present moment receiving, pure conscious perception—we do experience the world as primordially pure. You might not use those words. But when you're just standing looking at the desert, it's like, "Oh, it's so..."—whatever word you use. Peaceful, beautiful, lovely. Just that. Isness.

We tend to give the power out to the object. "The desert's so peaceful. The desert's so beautiful." We forget to turn around and notice: Oh, the mind is pure right now. The heart is pure. Just for a moment.

Well, my heart isn't pure. Five minutes ago, I was filled with rage. Next week, I know when I get back home, my heart isn't pure. We shrink away from using that word in relationship to ourselves.

But what if it's moment to moment? What's arising in the heart and mind in this moment?

So go out, look at a cactus, just look at the sky, and when you notice that feeling of ease, wakefulness, cleanness, purity—whatever the heck—turn around and notice: in this moment the perception isn't distorted by these states. Get familiar with that, because it happens all the time.

Ajahn Chah, who was so pragmatic in the way he described things, held up a vase and said, "Look at this vase. You think it's nice or beautiful or ugly, but the vase itself is just indifferent. It's we who are making ourselves insane."

Sogyal Rinpoche describes how all this papancha, this proliferating thought, works. We get into so much confusion by letting ourselves get lost in thoughts about whatever happens. It's fine that the thoughts are there. We can recognize them as thoughts. It's when we get lost in them.

He says we project a thought—like that thing with the breath, there's tightness, and we project the thought, "My breath is too tight, there's something wrong." Then the second thought believes the first. "That's true. There is something wrong. And what is it?" Then the third, fourth, and fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is by this time already a reality. By the time the tenth one comes, it believes that the fifth thought has always been an actuality.

That's how it works.

But starting to see that, you also see we can play with it. We can see what it's doing and shift around the stories we tell about a perception. It's kind of fun to play with this malleability when you're on retreat and see that as the story changes, the mood changes, the whole thing changes. It's not so solid.

I'll read you this poem that speaks of that to me, by Billy Collins. The title is "Another Reason Why I Don't Keep a Gun in the House":

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbor's dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast,
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking.

And now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section, barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor
who is entreating him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful silence
to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.

We don't have to feel so gripped. We can notice when we're really locked in. But the understanding of what's happening—just, "Oh, this is how the mind works"—sometimes we can play with the story. Sometimes we can come back and really notice with simple awareness: what is coloring the perception in this moment?

When we say, "Just check your attitude," this is what we're talking about. It's as if you're wearing red-colored glasses or blue-colored glasses, and you forget they're on, so everything you see is blue and you start reacting to the world as if it's that. You like it, you don't, you get frustrated. But then when you bring your attention in a little closer, you go, "Oh, blue glasses. That's what's going on." Everything still looks blue, but you're understanding what's happening.

And in fact, with turning around and noticing the distortions of greed—"I've got to have this"—or aversion or fear or confusion, sometimes just the noticing... well, it stops being so strong. It's not that you're trying to get rid of it. You're just noticing it. But sometimes in the noticing, it's as if the glasses start to come off. Very interesting. And we see more clearly.

The next step, the next solidification of these thoughts—as Sogyal Rinpoche said, the fifth, the tenth—by the time of the tenth, you totally believe the fifth. This is what the Buddha talked about as views and opinions: what we perceive, we think about; what we think about, we complicate.

We complicate. And without realizing it, there can be a clinging.

As the Buddha described, one of the four fields of grasping that really causes us to get very lost and brings about a great deal of suffering is this description of reality. "My breath is tight, therefore there's something wrong with me." Or "That barking dog is driving me crazy. The neighbors are sick. I'm going to go nuts if something doesn't change." Whatever it might be. "That sound in the hall is completely ruining my practice. It shouldn't be here. That person should be told to shape up." Because that's how it should be.

And we don't even recognize that the thoughts have solidified into a view, into a description of ourselves, the world, the way things should be—something we absolutely believe, take to be the truth, the truth of how things are.

It's insidious, because mostly the descriptions, the views we take to be the truth, they're so familiar. We so believe them. It's not like we know we're holding them. Some of them we know. When my friend recognized that the sound was her leaning against the wall, that was so clear. That view went away—the view that there was a guy downstairs walking, making noise. Now, her view that nobody should be walking during a sitting period might not have gone away. But maybe.

We use these concepts, you know, like the way I said earlier: the bell rings, and there's that whole perception. It defines and conceptualizes and contextualizes ourselves, our day, our whole world. If we know that's a concept, a conventional reality, that's fine, that's useful. But if we don't recognize it, so often the descriptions harden into views that limit us, that define us, define our world, that bring us into conflict with ourselves. When my breath is tight and my view is that this means I'm not doing it right. That brings us into conflict with others.

I mean, look at the world. How much of the struggle, the prejudice, the suffering, the war is based in different people absolutely knowing "this is how it should be, this is how people should behave, this is how people should believe, this is what I own, this is what you should own"? How much of cultural misunderstanding is based in the way we're brought up, the views and the ways that we imbibed as children—how you relate to people, what this means, what that means—and then you come into another culture that is different? If we don't even know we're holding the view, there's so much suffering, so much struggle.

It really is the basis, I think, for so much of the pain and confusion in the world. Racism, religious fundamentalism, cultural differences. Look at politics. Let's not go down that road too far, but opinions are fine. Views are fine. We need views. We need to vote. We need to make choices. And I won't go into any specifics, but politics is a gripping one, right? Can you even really openly listen to someone holding in a very strong way the totally opposite view from yourself? Can you listen and be open?

I have a lot of trouble. I remember back—I won't talk about this time, but back years ago—there were certain politicians that would come on the TV and I couldn't stand to listen to the person. I didn't want to know one good thing. There couldn't be a good thing about anything that person said.

This is what happens when there's attachment to views. It's as if our perceptions snap shut. It's so interesting. It's like we don't even know we're holding to this view. And because any alternative view is troubling, shakes our ground, our certainty, it's almost as if we don't even let it in.

This example happened on a retreat some years ago. It was a big retreat like this, and we were going along. It was about the fifth or sixth day of the retreat.

A woman came up to me during that retreat. I was sitting in a chair then, as I do now. She told me it was her first big retreat, and she had been in agony—absolute agony—sitting cross-legged on the floor. We had said the same things we say here, yet she was just dying inside because it was so clear to her that you couldn't meditate if you couldn't sit cross-legged on the floor. That was the only way to do it, and she was suffering terribly. All her sittings weren't about any kind of balance or learning from pain. It was just aversion and dying.

Then on the fifth day, she's sitting there, and suddenly she goes, "Oh. Carol's sitting in a chair." Literally, that perception hadn't made it in. It's amazing. Truly amazing.

This is the kind of insight where steady moment-to-moment mindfulness does its work. The continuity of mindfulness breaks down our unconscious selective perception. You see, unconsciously we choose to pay attention to perceptions that feed and support the beliefs we're holding. And we don't even realize it because we think those views are true.

For instance, on retreat, often the prevailing view is deeply self-judgmental, self-negative. So many of us carry this—a sense of worthlessness, a sense of "I'm not good enough," or "I don't deserve to exist on this planet," or fear of bothering people. All that stuff. And what will we notice? We'll notice perceptions that feed that view. We're completely oblivious to all the times when nothing like that is going on—when we're doing fine, not bothering anyone, or even receiving positive cues. That doesn't count. Only the perceptions that fit our view are let in.

On retreat, in our life, in the world—this is what's going on. So can we even hold the possibility, on a very deep level, that there might be views, assumptions, descriptions of myself and the world that I'm holding without even knowing it?

Sometimes when you get shaken up on a retreat, it's because some of those views are being challenged. And that's great. When you feel confused, when you feel ill at ease, when you feel a little scared—I don't mean lost in terror, just a little scared—that's wonderful. Something's getting pushed at, something that seems so solid, where we think we know how it all is. Well, if this really were how it all is, what we think we know... my goodness, let's open to something new.

A friend of mine told me this story. Just listen and see if we can open to the possibility. He was with a Tibetan teacher many years ago, Lama Gendun. Lama Gendun was giving a talk to a group of Western students, speaking about the different realms of existence. He was describing the pure land, Dewachen, a realm of gods where Amitabha Buddha resides. He went on with this very long, intricate description of this happy realm of practice—what it looks like, what the devas are like, what the Amitabha Buddha is teaching.

After quite a while, he stopped and looked at his skeptical Western audience. And he said, "If you think I'm making this up—I've been there."

That's all. What does your mind do with that?

At another level, I heard on public radio that they just had elections in Bhutan, which is a Buddhist country and a kingdom. The king decided to try bringing in more of a parliamentary system. So they held elections, and one person being interviewed said—let me get this right—"I was really surprised at how aggressive democracy can be. It's not in our way to criticize one another publicly." And that's what the parliamentary system is all about. Well, that's really interesting.

Our deep habits of clinging to views we don't even know, descriptions of the world we totally abide by and then move and act and react from—not seeing these is truly one of the greatest sources, as the Buddha described it, of our confusion and suffering. It's the source of the confusion and suffering we cause in our relationships, in our reactions, in our responses to other people.

What awareness does—the steady, simple continuity of moment-to-moment awareness of whatever presents itself—is allow us to begin to see, to even recognize, "Ah, this view is here." To see it being constructed in a moment, to see it going away. To begin not to get rid of it, but to see through it.

At the very subtlest level of our moment-to-moment experience in the mind, in the way the Buddha talked about it, some of the most subtle, insidious, deeply-felt-to-be-true views we hold are perceptions—starting with misperception. He calls these the distortions, the perversions of perception.

Three perversions of perception in particular I want to mention, and you'll recognize where they are. One is that in what is constantly changing and impermanent, we perceive permanence. We perceive permanence. Remember, what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate and turn into a view. And so on an unconscious level, when we perceive permanence, it moves just like that to a kind of unacknowledged view that, yes, things are not changing. I'm talking about this on a deep level. We

might say in our mind, "I know things are changing," but what are we really acting from?

The second is seeing in what is unreliable, in what cannot give us any long-term lasting pleasure, seeing happiness, seeing pleasure. Of course there's pleasure in the world, but it's like thinking that this donut is really going to do it. This relationship is going to solve everything, whatever it is.

And the third is seeing a lasting, separate self where there's not one.

These perceptions—and a perception is just in a moment—lead to how we think about things, lead to the view, and that view leads to how we respond, how we are in the world.

So this is really where awareness begins to show up in all its simple beauty. It's incredibly simple. It's just: what's happening right now? Awareness just receiving whatever's happening on whatever level, open to the mystery, not assuming. Not looking to see through the perception of impermanence, thinking "Now I'm going to see impermanence. Now I'm going to understand not-self. I'm not going to see self." That doesn't work. That's just another view.

But when we can trust enough—this is what the Dalai Lama said, that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perceptions. That's a big statement. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. That's the power of awareness.

As Ajahn Sumedho likes to talk about, just awareness receiving. The language he uses is, "It's like this." So in the moment, not saying "I want to look for no-self," just: what's happening right now? It's like this. Sadness feels like this. Anger feels like this. "I don't know what the heck's going on"—confusion feels like this. Subtle sensation of pressure feels like this. Coolness feels like this. Purity feels... just whatever's happening moment to moment to moment. The thought, "Oh, now that's a moment where the perception's really clear and this feels like purity"—oh, thinking is like this. Wanting is like this. Constructing an incredibly elaborate story and you're lost down there—oh, being caught up in a story is like this.

It's like a little Tai Chi move, I like to say, where it's not that awareness is changing experience or manipulating it or fixing it or trying to move it in the direction of impermanence or not-self or purity. When we talk about trusting mindfulness—and I'm using awareness and mindfulness synonymously at this point, meaning that moment of awareness is that knowing, that conscious perceiving of what's happening, the knowing of it—it's not colored in that moment by greed or confusion or hatred. Awareness receiving.

We trust it. We learn to trust it. We don't have to manipulate or fix or understand or figure it out or come to a conclusion or have an insight. We don't have to do anything. Which is so great, because basically whatever we do most of the time is stemming from misperception, confused thought, and wrong view.

Trusting awareness is something Sayadaw U Pandita spoke of. He was a very fierce Burmese meditation teacher. He could be very demanding, but I always felt a tremendous trust when I'd go into interviews. In

one interview—I can't remember the specifics—but you would describe very carefully what's going on, and then you'd start to interpret.

You're out of there.

If I went into him and said, "I had a really good sitting..." Out. What are you talking about? Just describe what's happening.

Well, that's an amazing training because you're just trusting awareness. There's pressure. There's tightness. There's aversion. There's thinking. I don't like it. I notice aversion. I'm feeling tight. There's sadness. I'm crying. I'm noticing crying. You're just noticing each thing. That's awareness receiving. No comment. No problem. No hierarchy. No preference.

And he said to me—I was having something difficult going on, I don't even remember what—he said, "You know, with awareness, you don't have to be afraid of anything." Because awareness—now I'm moving to Tsemedo's language—awareness is a point that includes. Awareness can receive anything. There's nothing that can't be received in awareness, in our experience.

But mostly we're so focused on what's happening and our reactions and the stories and what it means about me. That's the third misperception: what it means about me. Notice, just notice over the next day or so, if such a thought should arise, how quickly does the thought bring anything that's going on back to what does it mean about me?

Somebody drops something all the way across the cafeteria. "Oh, good thing it wasn't me." Or you do something. "Oh, I hope nobody saw that." Or you feel like you're having this great sitting and you get up and you're in the flow and you're walking out. "I hope they're seeing me." Or somebody else is walking by and you can tell they're really with it—yesterday they were all jangling, today they dropped in. "Wow, how can I get like that?"

Just notice. The tortoise. I know a lot of you probably saw the tortoise. And it's beautiful. It's so great to see. Well, I'm seeing the tortoise. Just noticing that. It's a hoot. It's incredible. What does it mean about me?

But awareness just receives all of that. No judgment, no problem, no trying to pull away. And through that, steadiness—steadiness and non-preferential noting. Awareness can receive anything. We don't need to be afraid of anything.

And through the steadiness and the kindness and the willingness to just surrender into the unknown in this moment, in this moment, in this moment—actually, that's what allows our mistaken perceptions to begin to shift. It happens by itself. We can't make insight happen.

So real insight is simply a shift of perception. It's not that the world changes, but how we perceive it and how we understand it—and thus how we respond and act in the world—does change.

An example I like to use often, in terms of how this works, even with something like anattā or impermanence: you know those Magic Eye books that were very popular a few years ago? They would have graphic designs of two or three different colors that were completely abstract. If you just look at it, it's just abstract. There's nothing there. But if you stay with it steadily, in a kind of unfocused way—so it's steady but gentle—and you just stay with it for a while, somehow the perception shifts and a design emerges that looks three-dimensional. It's an elephant in the jungle or a spaceship or whatever. It really doesn't matter what the image is. But that experience is very obvious. You can really see it.

Now, was that not there before, and then something happened and it appeared? No, it was there all along. And then your eyes kind of go into staring, and you look away and look back, and it's not there anymore. So in a way, both of those ways of perceiving exist. Just the abstract design and colors is there. Or you perceive in a different way and the three-dimensional thing springs out. And after you've seen it, it doesn't have to stay as the three-dimensional thing.

It's rather like how we normally experience everything with a sense of "me" experiencing it. Time all comes from me, space all comes from me, I'm the one seeing, I'm the one meditating. And then there's just a sense of—oh, in the perceiving, there's only perceiving. In the hearing, there's just hearing. In the knowing, there's just knowing. And then, trust me, the next minute it's me perceiving, me knowing, me wanting to have that insight again, me needing to think about it, me needing to figure it out, me needing to tell all my friends.

What's changed? The way reality is hasn't really changed. But knowing it—knowing that the three-dimensional image springs out—even when you don't see it, you understand. It changes something in your understanding, and you can relate differently.

If you've never seen it, and you've tried and tried and tried—my mother was like this, it drove her nuts. She could never see it. And it would make her crazy. So doesn't it, when somebody's talking about some insight they've had and you haven't—doesn't it make you crazy? "I want to see that. I want to see that." We get tight. And the tighter you get, the less likely you're going to see anything, except tightness.

But that's the answer, you see? Oh, tightness is like this. The way into the awakening of insight is simply to relax into what's actually happening. "I can't see this goddamn thing"—that tightness is like this. That's awareness receiving.

And as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, awareness is the doorway to freedom. Just that simple, steady awareness, on its own, without our forcing, without our effort, without our willpower—the awareness shifts.

It's okay if it shifts back. I mean, the perception shifts—it's okay if it shifts back. But that knowing, it changes something in our mind stream, in our relation. And that's why just a little moment of awareness, compared to a lot of moments of just plodding along on retreat, has a huge effect. Have you noticed that?

One of my teachers used to say, a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. So it doesn't have to be time equal, which is good news also.

So insight really happens on its own through the steady, kind, non-judging awareness—the real trusting of awareness, that the way things really are will reveal itself on all levels, our psychological problems, on the level of Dhamma. And we can't make it happen. We don't need to make it happen. But something that we didn't even know we were holding to gets released. And it's like, *ah, that's how that is.* That little aha moment—that's insight. It's not a thought, and then yes, we'll think about it. That's sort of how we know things, but the thought isn't the same as the insight.

From Thich Nhat Hanh: "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It is a result of the long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

Thoughts are great. Thoughts are useful. We need them, and we can understand them and use them. But not let them define and constrict and confine our idea of ourself, our views of the world. Thoughts are useful, but insight and awareness—they're bigger than thoughts. Thoughts are included in awareness. They're fine. We don't have to fight them, but we don't have to be them.

And so, really, in this way, through the trusting of awareness, we get first to recognize just that simple knowing of whatever's happening. Recognize, get interested in: is there anything coloring the awareness at this moment? Just gently, gently, gently. And the trust that comes is that we get more and more content with the awareness itself, less and less looking to a particular experience to do it for us—because we know every experience that comes is going to go.

And this, again—when we don't perceive impermanence, we think we know impermanence, but we don't. Talking to a lot of people, you know, they have a beautiful emotional state, and one part of the mind, the thought says, "Oh, I know it's going to pass." But on another level, quietly, the mind's thinking, "Oh, this is how it's going to be now, finally." And the next day is really difficult and painful. We go, "Oh no, how am I going to get through the rest of the retreat with this state of mind?" Then when we settle back and look, we've had fifty-seven states of mind in the last two hours. And each one was *it*. Each one was going to last.

But we get more and more interested in the awareness. It matters less and less which state of mind, because awareness can receive all of them. And when it's like that, it's interesting—awareness is just so accessible. Again, it can be no matter what's going on. As much as you've got yourself worked up, all worked up is like this. You don't have to go anywhere else. It just takes that willingness, a total commitment really, to surrender to the unknown in this moment, and the trust that awareness can receive that.

It's really what we're practicing moment to moment. We're not trying to figure it all out and get the knowledge and get the answer and wrap it all up in a nice little box. We're seeing there is no box. That all

it is is just: What's happening now? Awareness can receive it. And that whole definition and sense of me and who I am and what I am and how it has to change—in that moment, not even there. It's not relevant or irrelevant.

It's just not there. Sure, next moment it's there. Don't worry. You can retrieve it when you need it, and it'll come when you don't need it also. But you can recognize, "Oh, that's right. That's just a description right now. It's what's happening now."

Awareness is the doorway to freedom, as Ajahn Sumedho says. And any experience in any moment is the doorway to awareness. Anything. The sound of the doves cooing, the heat of the sun, the pain in your back, the frustration arising, the peacefulness of clear seeing, the gurgling of your stomach. Any experience is a doorway to remind us to move into awareness. And the awareness itself is the doorway to clear seeing and the freedom that releases our heart and mind from the need to struggle and fight and react and contend with experience.

And we don't lose the conventional. We don't get into some kind of airy-fairy "who knows what's happening." In fact, when we're just in that purity of awareness receiving—"Oh, it's like this"—when the mind isn't colored in that moment (and it's all just moments) by greed, by hatred, by confusion, then if it's a moment that calls for response, the wise, compassionate response naturally emerges. The natural response of the non-tormented, non-distracted mind and heart will be metta or compassion, whichever is appropriate, or wisdom, or equanimity. It's not that we have to create those. They naturally emerge. So we don't lose the conventional reality. We still function—better, if anything. And we can kind of move between the worlds.

So I just want to end with this little passage from Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, speaking about both aspects, the conventional and the ultimate. He says:

"When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be, spontaneously, an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me. When watching its nature of innate simplicity as it really is, I cannot help but feel wonder and break out in laughter. When watching the one who feels pity and the one who is laughing, both disappear and cannot be found. Now what to do?"

So let's just sit for a while.

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