Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:57

Tonight I want to talk about one of the famous three characteristics of existence that the Buddha spoke of so often: impermanence, or anicca.

If you read any of the suttas at all, you see how incredibly often the Buddha speaks about the importance, really the centrality, of coming to understand and truly to have insight into this truth of impermanence. One way he says it: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit of 'I am' when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated."

So those four things are basically saying that's complete liberation of heart and mind: eliminating lust, lust for existence, uprooting ignorance, uprooting all conceit of "I am."

But what I think is really interesting about this particular quotation is the way he says it's the perception of impermanence that we need to develop and cultivate—the emphasis on perception. So I want to talk a little bit about perception, and how accurate perception is really the nature of insight. Then we'll explore the perception of impermanence and ask: why don't we perceive it, if that's how things are?

Perception is one of the five aggregates that arise in every moment, which the Buddha talked about as comprising a human being. The aggregates are a whole other talk, but briefly: rupa is form, and then the mental qualities arising every moment are consciousness, perception, vedana, and sankhara.

Consciousness is simply the knowing. When there's an ear and there's a sound, consciousness—the knowing of the sound—comes together. Perception is that moment of recognition based on memory and experience. So say, if you hear this sound of a bell: there's hearing, and just "bell"—knowing it's a bell. That's the perception. It might be stronger: "Oh, that's the bell in the meditation hall, that's the Spirit Rock bell," or just knowing "bell." It may be in words or not, but that knowing of what it is—that's what's called perception. This arises, as the Buddha said, with every consciousness.

The third mental quality is vedana, this feeling tone, this feeling experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. It's a mental feeling activity. And then the fourth is all the other mental formations—sankhara.

So perception arises in every moment of conscious experience, and perception is really key. Remember the other night I mentioned how the Eightfold Path begins with right view, often translated as wise understanding. But personally, I really like the way it works in English as "right view"—like actually seeing. We use "see" to cover all the senses when we mean to understand: seeing accurately, perceiving accurately.

So right view—for example, the perception of anicca, the perception of impermanence—would be when in a moment we're actually perceiving the constant flux, the constantly changing nature of things.

Of course, we're not constantly perceiving this, are we? We're not always even aware of what we're perceiving. Often the perceiving is just assumed in the background, because it's happening every moment. But when we talk about the nature of insight—after all, this is translated as insight meditation, so some of you might be waiting, "When's it going to happen?" It's happening all the time. It's not such a big thing.

Insight isn't that, for instance, until you have it, everything is kind of static and unchanging, but when you finally achieve a certain depth of practice, then impermanence opens up to you and everything starts moving and flowing where before it was static. You know that doesn't make sense, right? The perception shifts, but reality or the nature of things hasn't changed at all. We're just perceiving differently.

So the nature of insight is not a thinking about, not intellectualizing, but it's on the level of "Oh, it's like this." You know when you've been mulling over a problem, trying to figure it out—whether it's in math, or how to do three things you have to do in your day, or any kind of problem? You're thinking, you're figuring, you're writing it down, you just can't figure it out. Then you let go, you put it down, and that's when all of a sudden something goes on in the background, and suddenly you see a possibility that never came to the thinking mind. That's an insight.

A Dharma insight works in the same way, but it's just seeing the nature of things as they really are. It doesn't have to stay, but it changes at least a little bit how we think about things and our view of things—like those trompe l'oeil images, the classic kind of drawing where if you look at it one way, it looks like a vase.

The vase is dark and the outlines around it are white. And then when you shift the other way, it's a profile of two faces looking at each other. Both are there, aren't they, in the thing? It just depends how you look. When you've only seen one and the mind hasn't kind of relaxed, the eyes haven't relaxed and you don't see the other, you only see the one. Once you've seen them both, you've seen them both. And even if you can only look at one at a time, you know the other one's there. It has an effect on how you think about that drawing, how you understand it, the assumptions you make, the decisions you might make. I mean, no big decisions from that, hopefully, but you get a sense of what I mean. So that's how it is with insights.

Taking insight into impermanence as an example—these will be just on some moments, and they can arise in a gross way or in a subtle way in your practice. It's no one way. These kinds of shifts happen all the time. But suddenly you just notice, oh, my moods are changing all the time, things are changing all the time, there's nothing really solid here. When you're really seeing it as an insight, on a deep insight level, there's not fear because it's just, oh, that's just how it is. There's just not a question about it. That's just how it is. When we're first intimating into it—and I'll talk about that later—but when the insight isn't quite there, then sometimes fear does come.

But this level of perception is so key. The Buddha also talked about how it affects our thought and our views. He talks about inverted or perverted, upside-down perceptions that we have a habit of. One of which is the inverted perception that uninstructed worldlings—which is a word they use a lot, *puthujjana*, uninstructed worldlings, not completely enlightened yet—have a tendency to perceive what is *anicca*, what is constantly changing, as unchanging, as steady.

This distortion of perception that we think about leads to distortion, inversion of *citta*, of mind—how we think about it. Maybe not even consciously, but we're kind of assuming permanence and then that's how we think about stuff. Oh, in two years this is what I'm going to be doing next May. I mean, we do that. Now, we can do that by assuming permanence, or we can do it knowing, as Ajahn Chah says, "This is not certain." Two different ways of relating. But when we're assuming permanence, we're perceiving permanence, we think about it as permanent, and then how we think about things leads to *diṭṭhi*, or view.

Remember, the first step of the Eightfold Path is *sammādiṭṭhi*, wise view. Wise also compares with *micchād iṭṭhi*, wrong view. Wrong in that it's mistaken, thinking that there's permanence.

So in a moment of insight, even a little moment of seeing the face and the vase and seeing, oh, there's two different ways of looking here—that shifts how we think about that picture, and that'll shift our larger view. You wouldn't get into an argument with someone, "No, it's only this way, I know it's this way," because you know it's both ways.

And so when insight arises in this way, it's not that that particular way of viewing, say, impermanence, is then with us forever. Because why is it not with us forever? Nothing is forever, including us. But it has an effect on the thinking, on the mindstream, and on the view. It changes something fundamentally.

But that's also why those of you who've been in practice quite a long time, after a while you think, "I keep having the same insights. When am I going to have an insight into something new? All right, I've seen impermanence, I've seen *anattā*, let's move it along." And there's not really that much new to have insight into. Our personality, please, it just keeps on cycling. But again and again, from different angles, it goes deeper. It cuts through the wrong view, the wrong conceptions, the mistaken perceptions more and more. And the more accurate perceptions become more accessible.

So, on that level, when the Buddha is talking about how it's the perception of impermanence that really liberates our hearts, our minds, from clinging—clinging to sense pleasures, clinging to wanting to become, wanting to become a certain state, wanting to have a certain thing—that eliminates ignorance, that eliminates *māna*, the conceit "I am," which can be very, very subtle. Just, "I am the one who sees impermanence." You know? The mind does that.

And then we go, "Oh, my mind does that." It's just the conceit "I am." The perception.

And this is why practice is so important—because this perception is not something we can talk ourselves into. And we've all, I would imagine, of the three characteristics—of impermanence, of dukkha, of

unreliability, of anatta, of not-self—the most intellectually accessible seems to be impermanence. We've all heard ten million talks on it. We could all give ten million talks on it. We could all make a million lists of how everything's impermanent. How much difference has that made in terms of freeing our hearts and minds?

It doesn't work on an intellectual level. That's helpful information. Everything's impermanent—I know that. How come I don't live from that? Maybe you do live from that. How come I don't live from that? Because on a cellular level, I don't always get it. Sometimes I do. But sometimes that perception of impermanence isn't accessible, and the mind is acting and making decisions from—not really recognizing it—the wrong view of assuming permanence.

So we can't talk ourselves into it intellectually. But the intellectual information might give us the stimulus to keep looking, to see what's going on. So I'm not going to give you a million examples about how things are impermanent, because I think we all know that. I just want to talk about other aspects that come up in my mind.

One thing that's always interesting to me—and I'm not trying to tell you anything, I'm just hoping that if any of this is interesting, it sparks investigation, a moment-to-moment investigation into your own experience. You don't necessarily believe anything I say. But what's always of interest to me is: even intellectually knowing everything's changing, sitting and walking and being in our life with so much change, why do we cling? Why is there this habit in the mind of clinging?

We know the classical dependent origination, the one of vedana—when there's not mindfulness and there's pleasant feeling, the mind tilts into it, begins to cling. That's true, that's on one level. But I'm talking on a little more psychological level, maybe, just from my own experience. Because I find it really poignant.

I think Sally said something like this last night—it kind of all blends for us, just like it does for you. It's something about how even if what we're doing doesn't really lead to freedom from suffering, on some level the motivation for our thoughts and actions, and really the motivation for clinging, is this deep yearning for happiness, for peace. We're not setting out to make ourselves suffer. We don't say, "How can I spin in samsara a few more endless eons?" The clinging is an expression of our deep yearning for happiness, for peace. It's an unfortunate expression, but that's where it's coming from. It's not because we're stupid jerks—it's because somehow we're really trying to find fulfillment and peace and ease in this life. And it's so poignant, because of course it's the thing that keeps the dis-ease going.

Something I've seen in myself—you might see different things in yourself—but someone brought it up also in an interview, just mentioning how the mind likes a feeling of stability. The mind likes familiarity. The mind likes comfort. It doesn't like the sense that everything's constantly changing and there's nowhere to land, and as soon as you notice one thing, the next thing, and the next thing. This sense of everything so erratic and nowhere to land and everything so up in the air—the mind doesn't really like that. Unreliability. You want something to land in. You want something to just take a breath and say, "Let's just

stay like this for a few minutes."

Even if it's an unpleasant personality pattern—I think Sally said this too last night—at least, my God, it's familiar. Let's just hang out here for a few minutes. Our response to the unreliability of life is to hold on.

And of course, a lot of our practice is just to turn around and explore how the holding on actually strengthens the sense of dis-ease and the sense of fear. Holding on—"it better not go, it better not go"—clinging and fear, they're right close together. But I find it not a judgment, but really quite poignant. Clinging to any moment, as if for a sense of something to hide the passing, to hide the impermanence.

We actually don't want to see that—the passing of things, the impermanence. Or we cling to our illusion of control, the sense that we know what's going to happen, that at least we know the next thing. We don't want to have this constant opening into the unknown. Give me a break. Let me just know what's going to happen next. Look at the schedule. Know what we're going to do.

Have you kind of sussed out how you spend your day? What's the best time to go to lunch? How's it going to be? When do you take your shower? And it gets totally thrown off if someone gets off rhythm and they're in the shower at the time you decided to take yours. It happened the other morning—"No, no, this is my shower time. No one's supposed to be in." Everyone gets their little sense of familiarity. We do it in life, and we do the same thing in practice.

There's a quotation I love from somewhere in the suttas that I've not been able to find now. People always ask me, and I'm just telling you I can't find it, but I didn't make it up. Somewhere, the Buddha says: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." The search for the resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful.

There's a lovely poem by Galway Kinnell—I'll only read a little of it because I just love how he phrases it. It's called "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You scream, waking from a nightmare. When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard, as if clinging could save us.

As if clinging could save us. That's how it feels, isn't it? As if clinging could save us. But really, it's more that clinging creates us. That's actually the thing. I have a good friend who said, "I want, I need, therefore I am." Look and see.

So when I examine why we don't perceive impermanence, why this perception is so hidden from us, one reason is what I was just talking about—a kind of denial, a discomfort with constant change, and looking to the wrong thing for security, looking to clinging.

Another factor, and this is just something I've noticed in myself, this isn't some Buddhist list: When we completely die into the perception of impermanence, then it's just freedom. It's no problem. But when we're perceiving it a little, kind of back and forth, then for many of us at times there's fear. Or even more

often, when something we were really counting on, something familiar, goes away—someone dies, things change—there's often a real sense of grief, sadness, poignancy. And our general habit of resisting unpleasant or painful emotions comes right into the experience.

You see things changing, there's a sense of sadness about it, and then right away comes the micchā-diṭṭhi, the wrong view: "Oh, it must be wrong, because I feel sad. It can't be right. There's something wrong with this scenario." Sometimes we can get caught in that, hiding a little bit from the sadness rather than opening and seeing, "Yeah, it's ending. That's how things are."

But sadness is just part of life too. It's just another arising emotional, physical experience. When we're not afraid of sadness—and I think for most of us humans, until we're really completely free from clinging—many times when some major aspect of life goes away, a person, a situation, or sometimes even an aspect of our personality we were really comfortable with, there's almost a sense of grieving, a longing, a sadness. If we simply open to that, it's fine. It doesn't have to block our perception of impermanence. But if we recoil and shut down attention when the sadness or grief comes, then we've shut down noticing.

I want to read a couple of examples because this is really normal. It's what happens to everyone, this sense of sadness at great change. There's a lovely passage in the suttas when the Buddha has announced that he's going to die in three months.

Ananda was the Buddha's devoted attendant for twenty-five years. He's a lovely figure in the suttas—partly enlightened, but not completely enlightened. Yet he's always with the Buddha. He's the one who remembers verbatim all of the Buddha's sermons. In some of the suttas, if you read them, whenever the text begins "thus have I heard," it's said that that's Ananda's voice, actually, speaking after the Buddha died. Perhaps I'll talk about him another time. I really like Ananda. He's very human. He kind of humanizes things.

So at this point, the Buddha has announced he's going to die, and he's sitting giving a talk when he notices that somehow Ananda has disappeared. He says to the other monks, "Where's Ananda?"—although of course he knew where Ananda had gone. The text says, "Ananda, overpowered by grief, went aside and clasped the doorjamb and wept." He was weeping, saying, "My teacher, who I've been with so long, is leaving. My teacher is leaving us. How will I go on without my teacher?" It's really very touching. This famous scene is often depicted in Buddhist art.

Of course the Buddha called him back. "Ananda, come back." And then he said just what you'd expect him to say: "Do not sorrow, Ananda. Have I not told you many times that everything changes and vanishes? How could something that has come into being not be destroyed? It is not possible."

But it's not like he's chastising him. He's just telling him this is really how it is. And then he goes on to deeply appreciate Ananda: "For a long time you've attended on the Tathagata gladly, sensitively, sincerely, without reserve, with deeds, speech, and thoughts of loving kindness. You've made great merit, Ananda,

and you will soon be free." So he's not saying Ananda is foolish, but rather, "Ananda, how many times have I said?" There are other examples of this too that I might mention later.

It's just human nature. When confronted with loss, when confronted with change, sorrow and clinging and fear may come up. We don't need to be afraid of that. That's not a problem. And when we can allow and open into the sorrow, into the fear, a kind of tenderness comes—a tenderness and appreciation for the fragility and vulnerability of all of life, and for ourselves. At times, it transmutes from sorrow into this tenderness that is open to all of life. All of life.

That's only possible when clinging isn't trying to pick out one thing and say, "This one has to stay. The rest can go, but this one's got to stay." That kind of grasping shuts us down, hardens our heart.

So for me, when I notice sadness, I try to let it be a wake-up call. What's not okay in this moment? What's changing? What am I resisting? Not to say, "Oh, you should know better"—not like that. But more like the Buddha said to Ananda: it's not possible that any conditions that came together won't go apart. That's how nature is. And sadness also will come together and go apart. It's just another arising aspect of nature. I use that as a way to help me wake up.

Another way that we don't perceive accurately is just plain misperception—just perceiving wrongly. This isn't always due to clinging, but sometimes due to not really careful presence, not careful moment-to-moment presence. Like I was saying, if we're not used to perceiving impermanence, then the thought that things are permanent operates as a view in the background. We're not consciously thinking that, but for instance, there's an assumption that when I get up in the morning—which is already an assumption, that I'm going to get up in the morning—this hall will still be here. And we walk up and it's still here. Mostly stuff like that happens.

I do have my schedule for 2010. It's a trip. And very often, maybe more often than not, things actually happen as planned. That kind of blows me away. I remember once making an appointment to meet my friend at the Bangkok airport at midnight on some date. And it happened. I flew from Hawaii and he came from God knows where, and we met at the airport in Bangkok at midnight.

How does this happen? Knowing that we don't know it's going to happen is very different from assuming permanence.

So we don't notice—this is the point I was trying to get to—that there's something the Dalai Lama said once in a talk I was hearing: we don't actually notice moment to moment the momentariness of change. So even when we are thinking, or thinking that we're noticing change, it's more like, "Well, this came into being, it lasts a while, and then it goes away." Right? That's change. Okay, this lasts a while—time in the middle? No, there's no "lasts a while." Nothing lasts a while. There's absolutely no stasis. That's what the Dalai Lama was saying. We're really surprised when something ends because we were perceiving it as steady in the meantime. And that's misperception. That's not really seeing the perception of

impermanence.

I was having a conversation with someone today just about this. It was a lovely conversation. And the person was saying that they were really noticing there's absolutely no stasis. And what they were remembering—it was like a metaphor for this—was having seen in the past a time-lapse film of something like a flower beginning to grow, and growing, and opening, and budding, and dying. When the film is speeded up, you get to see the whole process. But what was so obvious in that process is it's not like it grows a little and then it stops. Then it's bud, and then there's bud. And then all of a sudden it goes from bud, and then it's flower. So there's bud and stability, then flower and stability, then dead. No—completely opening, opening, opening, opening every single moment. There is no stasis whatsoever. And in every opening you could say that's the ending of something else, but you can't even say "this is the ending and this is the beginning." That's too solid. That's too separate. It's just opening, opening, opening, opening. That's what really is the perception of impermanence.

And the sense of watching the time-lapse film from here is also not quite accurate. We're watching everything changing, right? What's wrong with this picture? A friend said—I remember quite some years ago, someone who'd been doing a lot of practice for many, many years—she said, "Yeah, for years I've been seeing that everything around is changing. And suddenly, this time I suddenly got it: Oh, I'm also part of that constant opening flow. There's no me standing outside watching it. It's just this. This. All of us, every moment."

When I was trying to describe a moment of citta the other night—just a moment of consciousness, mind arising and everything that's happening within it—that's it. It's just this. There's no inside, there's no outside, there's no this watching that. It's just constant opening, opening, opening, opening. That's it.

From that perception, in that perception, there's no problem. How could there be a problem? What's the problem? What's to want? Wanting doesn't arise at all because it just doesn't make any sense whatsoever. Aversion to what? And what is there solid to have aversion? You're not thinking these things. It's just so obvious how it is.

That perception of anicca really does shift something. Yeah, it goes away again, and then there's me, and there's you, and it's solid, and it's time, and "Is she going to go over time talking?" and "I need my shower," and all of that. And there's wanting again, and there's aversion again.

But then there's the recognition that it was a real perception of nature as it is. This too is nature as it is, but it's not the only way. And that perception—we can't make it happen, but we can remember it. Sometimes just the memory is enough. This is where faith comes in, where verified faith comes in. When it's not like that anymore, when you can't perceive it that way, if your mind starts going, "I made that up"—well, you didn't make it up. You didn't make it up. Just remember: oh yeah, sometimes it's like that. And it's always like that, but sometimes we perceive that it's like that. And that starts to have an effect on the mind stream, on the solidity of our views and assumptions.

So that's part of how we misperceive—by not seeing that there is no stasis, the absolute absoluteness really, of change, of opening.

The third thing I wanted to mention that supports misperception, that supports not perceiving impermanence, is actually inattention. Just how we are. We pay attention for a little while, we're mindful for a little while, and then we're not. Then we come back again, and then we don't. There's a reason we're all talking all the time about continuity, continuity, continuity. It's not just because we want to keep you quiet and working hard. Continuity doesn't mean you don't space out—of course we can't control that. But it's more that willingness to just notice. Notice, notice, notice, very steadily. Because it's lack of continuity of mindfulness—not continuity of slowness, not continuity of any particular experience, but continuity, steadiness of mindfulness—lack of that continuity is what hides impermanence. It's what feeds the perception of permanence, because we don't really notice so much.

Let me give some examples. And again, explore this. Don't believe me or not believe me—well, you do whatever you do—but explore it. Please, I beg you, explore it.

Take emotion. You're having a day, or a couple of days, where a really difficult emotional knot has been coming up, as does happen in practice. Maybe some memories come and you start to open to a particular feeling of rage or pain or memories that hadn't come before—or maybe they had come all too often before, so you couple the emotional knot with total self-judgment and disgust that it's still here. Or maybe it's some kind of happy feeling, some real lightness. It doesn't have to be difficult. But something's coming, quite frequently arising.

And you come in to talk, and sometimes it'll show up—it often can show up when you're talking in an interview. You say, "The last day was just so filled with negativity and self-judgment. The last day I've just been spinning in arrogance and pride." When we think about it back, we really feel like that's an accurate description, because it was frequently there. And then as we think of it—oh yeah, arrogance is like this—as if it's the same way all the time.

Arrogance comes up, some thought comes, and then a different thought comes, and we'll say, "But it's still—don't get into the content, it's all still arrogance." We'll say that, right? But it is different thought, different conditions, different feeling in the body, different intensity, different way it comes, different way it goes. Even if we're really mindful of all that, at some point we get distracted, or we get bored, or we get fed up with it. "I think I just—this is enough with the arrogance. I really need to calm down. I need to shift my attention." Sometimes we do need to, but sometimes it's just: eh, enough already with this. And then we go for a walk, or we open to seeing, or it's mealtime and we go and eat. And we didn't really have this moment-to-moment steadiness of awareness.

So we're eating, and we're back, and during all that time there was no arrogance, but we're not really paying that much attention. Then we come back, we sit down, and after two seconds—oh, there's that arrogance. My God, all day with the arrogance. But we didn't really notice. If you stay steady, you'll see at

some point it really fades, it really goes, and it's really not there. It's really not there when it's not there. Instead, there was hunger, or greed, or happiness, or neutrality, or just hearing. And if we're really present in that moment, we see: others hearing. You don't have to think "there's no arrogance"—you don't have to think that—but you might just notice: oh, that's not here now.

And sometimes we're almost afraid to look. "Oh no, if I look I know it's really lurking underneath." Don't you think that sometimes? "I didn't notice it during the meal, but that's just because I was avoiding it. It was sitting there in a big lump, and as soon as I came and sat again, there it was." So then we assume it was here all day.

Does this sound at all familiar?

And so if we're staying steady, you'll notice actually when you were eating or whatever, it wasn't there. And the thought, "oh, there's arrogance there"—that's a thought, that's not the arrogance.

So with steadiness, we really see the conditions come together, the arrogance comes, but it's a little different every time. It starts to fade away, and we're afraid to look because we don't want to see it again, so we space out. But if you kept looking, you'd notice it really does go away. And when it's gone, it's really gone. And then it comes back. That's okay. The more you know it comes and goes, the less horrific it is when it's there, because you really know it's going to go.

Even though with mental states—I think James kind of talked about this, and I've noticed it myself—one of the qualities of many mental states, really pleasant ones too, but the strong ones, is that from within that mental state, it feels as if it's going to last forever. Doesn't it? I have a certain mental state where I just feel overwhelmed. I just can't. I can't do this another minute. It comes up in my life or it comes up in practice. And the quality of that mental state is that it's really unbearable. Whatever it is, I can't. And I used to totally believe it. It just gave such a good line. It was so convincing. And now when it starts—"oh no, it's unbearable, there's no way"—my mind goes, "oh, this is a mental state." It still feels the same, but as soon as I can say this is a mental state, I do absolutely know from all these years of watching that no mental state stays. I mean, really. You just have to reflect on one day. How many mental states have you had today?

Although I have a joke with Joseph, I have to say—it just came into my mind, it's so here. Once we were teaching together at a retreat, and we just have very different temperaments. Joseph and I were talking privately, and he said—we'd just been sitting—"So how many mental states or how many moves did you have in that last sitting?" And I thought, well, I don't know, maybe fifteen or twenty. And he goes, "Oh my God." He said, "Maybe I had one." And so we have this joke. If I said, "No mental state lasts—how many have you had all day?" he would have cracked up because he would have thought, "Maybe none. I don't really have any mental states today."

So maybe you didn't have many mental states today. Maybe you're like that. But look back over the last

year. Even he, over the last year, right? You had some mental states. Definitely some mental states came. Have they lasted? That's my point, anyway. Have they lasted? Has any mental state lasted your whole life? Even a week? I want to challenge you to say if it even lasts a day, if it even lasts an hour, if it even lasts five minutes without changing.

And so the steadiness, the willingness to keep coming back, keep coming back just to this moment, the steadiness of mindfulness, the continuity—that's when I said the wisdom arises, paññā comes by itself. It does. It's not like you have to spend every minute thinking, "Let's see the beginning, let's see the end, let's see the change." That drives me crazy. But if you just stay steady, steady, steady—what's happening now? What's happening now?

What's the mind noticing now? Anicca is simply how things are. That's how nature is. We can't help but notice it—that's just how things are, if we give awareness a chance by cultivating the steadiness of it.

When I talk about awareness, about mindfulness, it's that sense of not looking for impermanence, not looking for anything, but that bare attention that's willing to just die into this present moment. Whether it's burning, whether it's arrogance, whether it's thinking, whether it's fear, whether it's joy, whether it's boredom, whether it's just sensation, whether it's hearing—just now, free of concept, free of the story. If there's story, it's all about me. That's the next arising thought. So nothing's extra but just that immediacy of present moment bare experience.

Sometimes I think of that as actually the ultimate renunciation, moment to moment. Just renouncing all the stories about me and our descriptions and what's more interesting and what I should do—just burning. Just lifting if you're walking. Just rising if you're breathing. Just hearing. Just that. Just that. Just that.

That quality of present moment, open, surrendered attention is what allows nature to reveal itself. When we're looking for something, when we think we know, all of that just gets in the way. You know Krishnamurti's famous line—that's really what awareness practice is about. In any moment, freedom from the known. Just that willingness to die into whatever's arising now and let nature reveal itself.

This sense of continuity and the willingness to look can show us—using arrogance as an example—but it can be very interesting when we come to see the ideas and the views and the opinions we hold about ourselves, our whole personality belief system. That's called identity view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi in the Pali. I think it was Sally who was saying how often we hold on to even a negative or suffering idea about ourselves just because it's familiar. Often I've seen people wonder, who would I be without my restlessness?

As I said, I've seen often in practice over many years that there are times when a particular view or image or idea I'm holding about myself—that I didn't even know I was holding—becomes visible. "Oh, I'm this kind of a person," or "I'm that kind of a person," or "I couldn't possibly ever be awakened because I'm too

hopeless." That's a big one. And when some certain view, just through the steadiness of attention, you see how often it's not there, and it starts to fall apart. At times I've really felt like it's a series of small deaths, really, and it's like a mourning—back to that sense of sadness or poignancy. Mourning some stupid idea I have about myself that only causes suffering, but still, it's who I am. You know—who I am. The steadiness of mindfulness can reveal this stuff.

A friend who was working here one time gave us a great example. A person who self-identified as being an aversive type person, an angry type person. And not only did she self-identify that way, other people said, "Yeah, it's true. You are an aversive type person. You are an angry type person." A long, long-term meditator. She said one time she actually came in here and was sitting during one of these retreats, and it was just this: I'm just going to watch my thoughts. And it was in the back of her mind, "Yeah, I'm really an angry, aversive type person."

So just through one sitting, she just stayed very steady without blaming herself or judging, but just watching moment to moment to moment what was coming up in her mind—the emotions, the thoughts, the moods. And she said, yeah, there was aversion, maybe ten percent of the stuff that came up. There were also many thoughts of generosity, many just kind of neutral thoughts, many thoughts of kindness, of mettā, of compassion. And she came out saying, "Well, that self—I'm an aversive person—completely inaccurate. Limited, wrong view." That's a kind of assuming a solidity, a permanence that just isn't there. We write these stories for ourselves and put ourselves in like the cage of this idea of who we are based on selective perception.

A lot of people, not everybody, but a lot of people, especially in this culture, tend to notice there's a lot of self-judging. I don't know if any of you have ever noticed that, but sometimes we can really get into self-judging. And that's like being hypervigilant for whatever particular thing your mind has decided to judge yourself about. Every time anything remotely touching on that comes up—"Oh yeah, jerk again, oh yeah, again, again." Then you walk out and there are moments of peace, moments of joy.

You go, well, that was nice. That was a pleasant little fluke. But back to the self-judging—that's who I am.

That's what we call selective perception. Picking out the perceptions—not consciously, of course—but picking out the perceptions that fit the unconsciously held view while completely ignoring or overlooking or discounting other ones.

This is the power of moment-to-moment bare attention. We're not picking and choosing, because we can't trust how we would pick and choose. It's just what's happening now, happening now, happening now. That willingness to be present, the insight, the shift of perception, the wisdom—it comes by itself. It really does. We have to do so much less than we think we have to do. But what we do have to do is keep showing up, keep being willing. Can I just meet this moment? And sometimes we can't. That's okay.

Another way we perceive permanence—and this comes about through lack of continuity of awareness,

but also because some of the constant change is very subtle and fine. Mahasi Sayadaw speaks of a word in Pali called *santati*, which refers to the continuity of phenomena. He says we mistake a series of successive phenomena for a single phenomenon. Things happen so fast that they seem like one thing, not changing. We think we're seeing one thing and don't recognize that it's constantly changing.

I'll give an example. If I'm not really making seeing the main focus of my interest, of my awareness at a certain time—just walking around—seeing seems kind of steady state. Seeing, seeing, seeing. It appears fairly continuous. But if I tune into seeing, like we sometimes tune into hearing, actually every single second the visual field is different. It's like a different seeing arising in every single second. It's not the same for two fractions of a second together. But we mostly don't look that closely. It's kind of in the background, taken for granted. And so the assumption we're not even aware of is this steady state of seeing.

Or with sound—this is one you can really notice—where a sound might seem very steady and lasting. When we really tune in, you can feel how it breaks up, rises and falls. You hear the vibrations, feel the vibrations, and you really hear. It's a completely changing, moving phenomenon, even as it seems to be the same sound lasting.

So explore where you might notice this: the sense of phenomena happening seemingly so steady that we don't notice—because we're not looking that carefully—that it's changing.

How do we cultivate the perception of impermanence? The main thing is what I just said: the moment-to-moment willingness to just meet this moment with bare attention. You might also notice, sometimes with a little reflection—not too much thinking, but a little bit reflective from time to time—when we're assuming permanence.

You might look back over the day. How did your mind relate to different experiences? If something comes up and we get locked in fear or dread—oh no, this is going to be going on all day, I can't do two more weeks of this, no way—in that moment, we're assuming permanence. Or we cling to something pleasant and assume ownership of it. Now this is how my practice is. Now this is who I am. Now I'm the person who can concentrate. Assuming permanence. And even if we don't think we're clinging, if when it goes away we suffer, then we know: clinging was there. That's okay, but just knowing what's happening.

Or do we try to repeat a particular experience? Now I've figured out how to meditate. If I come into the hall early in the morning before everybody's here and sit down, then when they come in I can really tune into the hearing and go into this peaceful place, and if no one turns on the lights and if no one coughs, then I can get back into that real... you know what I mean?

As if you could ever replicate all the conditions. Conditions are constantly changing because it's that endlessly opening flow.

And again, even this happened in the time of the Buddha. There's a sutta where a monk who was quite

well practiced, named Asaji, was very ill to the point of being about to die. The Buddha went and asked him—it was kind of a common thing they asked—"I hope you're not troubled with remorse or regret in terms of your sila, in terms of your morality."

And he said, "No, not my sila, but I am troubled."

"What are you troubled by?"

He said, "Well, formerly when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations. In other words, I could get really concentrated. But now I cannot obtain concentration. And as I cannot obtain concentration, it occurs to me, 'Oh no, let me not fall away. Let me not fall away from the path.' I can't get concentrated." It's really upsetting. The guy's dying.

And the Buddha basically said, "Haven't I told you that conditions are always changing? If you think awakening is based on concentration, it's not." I'm paraphrasing here, but this is basically what he's saying. "Is form permanent or impermanent? Are mental factors permanent or impermanent?" Basically, the conditions are different. Now you can't get concentrated. That's not the point. Insight is the point. So notice the conditions are always changing. Can we just die into this moment's conditions with awareness? Oh, now it's like this. Now it's like this. Now it's like this.

Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche says, "Watch the changeable nature of the mind." Using vedana is a good example. Just notice how much vedana changes—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—and watch how a pleasant vedana can come along and sweep us so quickly into a whole world of thought and pleasure and imagination. Just notice that. And notice how an unpleasant vedana can come along and we're swept into a whole world of judgment and recrimination and disappointment. All just based on this little moment of pleasant or unpleasant.

Now if you can not judge it but just watch how that happens, the constant changing—that's samsara. But you really see there's nothing steady state.

Ajahn Chah has a great practice: to just go through your day gently saying to yourself, "This is uncertain. This is uncertain." Okay, tomorrow I'll get up and I'll come here and sit early in the morning—and this is uncertain. Not to get all intense about it, but just, yes, this too is uncertain. You really never know.

When I was going to Burma, I got an email from a good friend. He said he was really sick and in the hospital, but he'd be better soon and go to Hawaii. I got home and got an email that he died. You know, this is uncertain.

A good friend, long-term marriage, very happy. His wife went out shopping. Her car skidded on ice and she was killed. I mean, you just wake up in the morning and go shopping. This is uncertain.

We all know a million stories like this. Not that we get lost in fear, but just the knowing of we don't know.

So the last question might come up: Why would we want to perceive in this way? Why would we want to live a life where every time our partner's going out shopping, we think, "What if they skid and die?"

No, that's with fear. That's with negativity. But opening to the reality of this perception is not opening into fear and trauma and nowhere to land and "I can't bear it." It frees our hearts and minds to really land with openness, with appreciation, with love—as I said—for the fragility of life, for the beauty of life, for whatever it is that's arising in this moment. Because this is all there is. This is life, in this moment.

It's a kind of radical trust that just right here is the only place truth can be. It's actually a much more alive and tender and connected way to live. Of course it's connected, because there's nothing separate. It's the clinging and the fear that makes it so hard. So we need the willingness to go through that. But really, it's not opening to some horrific "oh my god, everything's just going to die." It's opening to a great appreciation for life as it is.

I want to end with this poem that a yogi reminded me of at the three-month retreat, by Mary Oliver. It sort of gives the feeling—it's not exactly, but it gives the feeling:

Oh, to love what is lovely and will not last.
What a task to ask of anything, or anyone.
Yet it is ours,
and not by the century or the year, but by the hours.

One fall day I heard above me,
and above the sting of the wind,
a sound I did not know,
and my look shot upward.
It was a flock of snow geese,
winging it faster than the ones we usually see,
and, being the color of snow, catching the sun
so they were, in part at least, golden.
I held my breath
as we do sometimes to stop time
when something wonderful has touched us,
as with a match which is lit and bright
but does not hurt in the common way,
but delightfully,
as if delight were the most serious thing you ever felt.

The geese flew on.
I have never seen them again.
Maybe I will someday, somewhere.

Maybe I won't.
It doesn't matter.
What matters is that when I saw them,
I saw them
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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