Insight

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:16

Tonight, what I want to talk about is a little bit of Vipassana 101, so I hope you can bear with me. I want to offer some reflections on the nature of insight and what supports the arising of insight. This is, after all, insight practice, vipassana practice.

A lot of times people come and say, "So where are the insights already?" There's a real sense of struggle, of looking for something, waiting for something, practicing in order to acquire. So let's look at what is actually the nature of insight. What are we talking about when we talk about insight?

In the suttas and also the commentaries, three levels or three types of knowledge are spoken of, all of which are valid and useful when we know how to use them together.

The first level or type is what you could call information—in Pali, *suta maya paññā*, that which is heard, that which is learned. This is important; we need the right information to begin to do anything, to support us in what we're doing.

The second level, called *cinta maya paññā* in Pali, means really using that knowledge with our intelligence through thinking, reflection, and contemplation. This is also extremely useful and helpful. The information isn't just something that's retained without any meaning, but rather we've really reflected and contemplated, coming to have a deeper intellectual understanding of it. *Cinta* still means using thought.

Now, for many of us, that thought level, that reflection level of *cinta maya paññā*, presents a challenge. Either we've grown up basically thinking that this is how you learn everything, so we're really stuck there. Then we come to practice and see that we're stuck there, so we start to hate that level and think we don't want to contemplate, we're not supposed to think. Both of those, of course, are exaggerated reactions. To understand how to use thought, reflection, and contemplation with accurate information is very helpful.

The third level, *bhavana maya paññā*—where *bhavana* really means mental cultivation—is the level of insight, of insight knowledge, of deeply understanding what is true.

You can see in this way of delineating three different levels, three different ways of understanding, that insight knowledge is different from thinking about, contemplating, or using our intelligence. We often think of insight as either some experience to get or some kind of knowledge or information that we acquire, understand, and can hold on to.

But I like the translation of *sammā diṭṭhi* as "right view." To me, it's quite literal: viewing accurately,

perceiving accurately. It's not holding some idea that everyone else agrees with, but actually perceiving in a moment things the way they are. This shift of perception is one of the ways I like to describe insight, and it's been very helpful to me. It's not a result of thinking.

You all know those moments—you could call them "aha" moments—where suddenly you just perceive something from another angle, in a different way. You didn't get there by thinking about it, though of course we think about it afterwards, which is fine.

So it's some knot or tangle or view in our mind—how we're looking at something, perceiving an experience without even knowing it—that somehow unknots. And it's, "Oh!" You're trying to solve a problem in life, and suddenly you see it from a different angle. That's a moment of insight. It's a radical shift of perspective that then may have an effect on our mindstream, on how we understand, and on how we respond to situations. It doesn't mean that moment of shift of perspective stays that way. But it's opened another door, another way of perceiving that maybe we didn't even suspect was possible. And it can change everything.

A very simple example that I like to use—no example is ever quite full enough, but this gives a sense. You know those Magic Eye graphic drawings? They have whole books of them, just different colored graphic designs. If you look at it long enough in the right way, suddenly out of this graphic design a specific image will spring out, appearing like a 3D image. What was just graphics and nothing special suddenly becomes two hockey players, or a dinosaur, or a flying saucer.

How do you do that? You can open the book and say, "I want to see the dinosaur." It doesn't work. When you first try to do it, we're trying, we're looking, we're trying to see—and we don't see it. In fact, my mother, bless her, could never see those things. It used to make her so crazy because she'd keep trying. "What's in that one? I can't see it, I can't see it." And she'd get tighter, tighter, tighter. Does that sound familiar?

And how does it work? When there's a steady attention—you can't look away and look back, look away and look back. It has to be a steady, connected attention, but relaxed. Without trying, without looking for a particular thing. Just relaxed, steady, focused attention, without any wanting, without any assumptions. And suddenly—boom—there's the dinosaur.

Now, what I find interesting, the way it relates to Dhamma insight: the dinosaur was always there, right? This shift of perception didn't make something be there that wasn't there. Did it? Or did it? I don't know. Don't believe me. But then when we stop looking in that way, it goes away again, and there's just the graphics—red and yellow, whatever it is. But having seen that, we know there are at least two different ways of perceiving that particular flat piece of paper and colors. And if someone else comes and says, "No, you're crazy," you don't have to get upset about it. You know there are two different ways.

So it doesn't have to stay. The insight doesn't mean it has to stay that way. In fact, it won't stay that way all

the time. But seeing that there's another reality, maybe a more accurate way of perceiving—that's the "Oh, that's what impermanence is like!" That's "Oh, that's how I could solve this problem." You all know this, right?

And part of our problem is we then think it should stick, it should stay. Because of course, even though, as I said this morning, we talk about impermanence, really we think, "I've had one insight, I've seen it—okay, that's it." You've seen through that personality pattern, well, maybe a hundred times by now. Aren't you convinced? It's enough already. It should go away. You've seen how painful craving can be, and I'm sure more than once. Sometimes on some level it can keep being a surprise that we get caught again, because there's a sense that once we've seen it, we're finished.

Or else there's the fear that if I really perceive the impermanent, unsolid nature of everything, every moment—how am I going to function?

If I really perceive that there's no intrinsic, unchanging, self-existent being here, how am I going to be able to find the bathroom when this ends? I'm not going to be able to function in the world.

But that's what's kind of cool about the way insight works. Both levels of reality, if you will, are still perceivable. It's just that mostly we've been going through our life only perceiving in the one way, not even having a clue on a deep level of what other perceptions are possible. If there are only two—though there are many millions.

So we can't hold on to the actual perception of insight. As soon as we start trying to hold on, the clinging in the mind tightens everything up. As soon as you try to hold on to seeing that dinosaur, everything just clocks back into how it used to be.

But it has an effect. That clear seeing has a deep effect on our mindstream. And we trust it. We know it. This is really what we call verified faith. We know for ourselves, this is how it is—even when that's not our perception.

I know for myself that one way of perceiving this body is as a completely fluid arising and passing of moments of sensation, with no shape, no boundaries, no self at all. I know that. Is that my experience right now? Definitely not. It's really very solid, all too solid, all too here. But I know this is one perception, and that reality is not bound up in or limited by that perception.

So it has a very strong effect. Something has changed. With each moment of insight, our views, our assumptions, our unconscious description of ourselves and reality is not quite so fixed. And there might be more of a possibility to respond appropriately in the next situation.

Now, of course, when an insight arises like that, often a huge amount of energy comes with it. It's quite natural, and nothing's wrong, that then the mind tends to think about it, describe the insight, explain it, connect it with things in the past and the future. To some extent, that's fine—that's just normal.

But it's helpful to keep aware of the energy and the thoughts, and notice when it's turned from the useful quality of wisdom, of reflection and contemplation, where the thoughts are really in service of understanding the insight better—and when it shifts to just energy spinning. If you're paying attention, you can feel the difference. "Wow, yeah, everything's impermanent! Oh wow!" It starts to get disconnected, the energy is all over, you're actually not perceiving impermanence at all. You're just spinning. "Oh, that was an incredibly neat insight! How can I explain it to my friends? Let me get on the email..." Wait a minute. What's happening now?

So the thing with insight, that aha moment, just like anything, is to be fully present with it. Notice the effects. Notice how it affects the mindstream. And let it go.

I mean, it's going to go. It's already gone. Letting it go really is a misnomer. We talk about letting something go that's been gone forever. How long? Let go of the idea of thinking it's still here, and wake up again in this moment.

In terms of insight, of course, this can happen with anything. In terms of the Dhamma, it's all in support of what the Buddha said: he taught suffering and the end of suffering, dukkha and the end of dukkha. One of his proclamations, one of his ways of describing that, very familiar to all of you: "The supreme state of sublime peace that has been discovered by the Tathagata—namely, liberation through non-clinging."

That state of heart and mind, a moment of citta, that in that moment is minimally free from clinging, but also supported by mindfulness, by perseverance, by energy, and by samādhi, by collectedness of mind. Those are the three particular supports I want to talk about tonight.

But a moment of insight—that sudden seeing differently—is only possible in a moment of mind that is not clinging, that doesn't already know what it's looking for, that doesn't already know what it wants. There's a great line from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Nothing of value can happen to the mind that knows exactly what it wants." Hard to trust that, though, isn't it?

In terms of our practice here—and I know people are doing all different forms of practice, and that's fine—one place where this sense of non-clinging, of trust, of seeing how this quality of insight arises, is to recognize that it's not dependent on having a particular experience or situation. It's not that insight is only the deep, deep opening into anattā, and anything else is just some little nothing, unimportant. The place where we can see clearly how the mind works, how suffering is created and how it's released through clear seeing—that kind of insight can arise with any experience as its object.

Now, we get a little highfalutin sometimes and really down on ourselves when our experience isn't subtle enough, when we're spending our time spinning out in our personality patterns. Well, the spinning-out part isn't so helpful. But when the main object of our meditation through the day is sometimes our historical personality patterns, we think, "Well, I've got to get over this to get to the possibility for insight, freeing insight."

I've got to get to subtlety. But the insight can reveal how the mind works in all kinds of situations, anything through the day.

One example I love: a woman told me this on a retreat a few years ago. It was a two-week retreat in a pretty crowded room in another country. It was set up sort of like this, except the door would be behind me and no door there. A really crowded room, and she was at the back, having an extremely restless, uncomfortable sitting. She was sleepy. She was tired. Her body was physically uncomfortable—not like pain, but that restlessness and jumpy legs and unpleasant feeling, which she was very aware of.

She just couldn't stand it, so she stood up. Well, once she was standing, of course the thought came: why don't I just leave? That would solve the problem. The problem is I can't be here with this unpleasant, restless mind and unpleasant physical sensations. And the only way to fix it, to get rid of that suffering, is to get the heck out of here.

But because it was so crowded and not with good pathways... social embarrassment often keeps us staying with something long enough to actually see it in a different way, which is what happened to her. That's what the structure of retreat can be helpful for. We don't just run on our habits. The only way out of unpleasant? Get the heck out of here. That's what we know.

So she stood there. And then because she didn't feel comfortable to leave, she started paying attention. And all of a sudden—just that simplicity of steady paying attention, being mindful of what was there, instead of just thinking, how can I leave? How can I leave?—she said, okay, what's happening? Unpleasant sensation, aversion in the mind, and suddenly: oh, it's just uncomfortable sensation. What's the problem?

You can't talk your way into that. You can't really think your way into that. And you can't make it happen again when it's happened before, as I'm sure you've all tried. But we can when there's just that steady mindfulness that let go of the clinging to wanting it different, that let go of the view—probably unspoken in her mind—that the only way, only freedom from this suffering is to get rid of the unpleasant experience. She was able to just rest at ease in the arising of that unpleasant situation. Oh, uncomfortable sensation is like this. No problem.

She told me this because it was really a huge insight for her, really very liberating. And you see, that kind of liberation is not really about just liberating one from the unpleasantness of the moment. It's so easy to slide back into the almost subconscious idea or view that freedom or liberation basically means getting away from that which we don't like. And then that which we don't like becomes the problem. We get into struggle with that. And then our whole practice becomes how to get rid of this so I can experience some insight. Or maybe you don't even want insight—maybe you really just want to only have pleasant feelings. Good luck.

So, in terms of the possibility of insight arising, I just want to make this point again: it can arise through any experience. You practice, and you'll know this. Those of you who've been here for some time or who

will be here for some time might see how the practice can go in so many different directions. Sometimes each retreat has its own flavor. Sometimes if you're on a long retreat, just as you're settling in and thinking, ah, now this is how it's going to be—it's pretty calm, I'm just with the breath, there's not much emotion, and now I've got the sense of it—

And suddenly, from out of nowhere, something happens—or nothing happens. Just some memory comes up and you're thrown into really deep-seated and painful historical personality patterns. And you think, "Well, this is hindrances. I just need to get rid of this, get back to the breath, and get calm again." And we're caught in the struggle. "This is in the way of my practice. I came to this really refined retreat center for a couple of months to experience subtlety, to experience calm, to finally get somewhere in my practice. If I just wanted to spin in my stories about my childhood and being hurt and how much I'm striving and how worthless I am, I could have stayed home and done that very well at home."

You know the drill. It's easy not to trust that. But it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's not about getting past anything.

Insight arises into seeing how the mind and heart work to create suffering in this moment when it's seen accurately—whether that's seeing impermanence, whether those personality patterns come and go due to conditions. We don't need to fight them or hate them or own them. We stop struggling and just see: "Ah, it's another arising experience. I can see why this personality pattern arises. I know my whole history. It comes up in this situation. When it comes up, there's fear. Fear feels like this." Mindful. And it goes away. And then it's lunchtime and I'm hungry. That's the next thing to notice.

Huge liberating insight can arise from just being willing to rest at ease in our old familiar personality patterns. Often they come up not about the past but in relationship to the meditation experience itself. And this is often where we see them really deeply—our patterns of striving, our patterns of discouragement, our patterns of not even realizing we're trying to make a certain thing happen until we've hit our head against the wall for three months and realize it's not happening and something finally lets go. "Oh, that's what it's like to relax." We can't make it happen. But in any context, it can happen.

There are many examples. This one I'm making up from another retreat—no one here said this. Just so, in case it happens to match your experience, you don't have to feel like I'm using your story, because I'm not using anyone's story. But where someone is just feeling, every time they see somebody, a huge aversion at the way someone walks or at a particular behavior that person does. And maybe noticing the aversion and trying to work with it—which means maybe noting it, trying to feel it, or maybe more likely judging it, or trying to pretend they don't feel it, or trying to send mettā, or all the different things we do that sometimes work to get rid of the aversion and sometimes don't.

Until finally there's that moment of, "Oh, aversion's like this." You feel it, and unbidden comes a huge and really deep rush of compassion, of connection—a sense of that person, the sense (of course it's a projection, but the felt sense) of the suffering that would lead to such behavior that's driving you crazy.

And in that compassion, there's no driving you crazy. It's connectedness. It's non-separation. It's just so clearly a truer way to be in the world. It's not even about me and other anymore. That's a huge insight that arises quite spontaneously through the willingness to be present with something that we think we should be beyond by now.

That's just one of a million examples. I don't have to give more. I want to talk a little bit about what supports this arising of insight. There are many things. As I said, I just want to briefly touch on sati, samādhi, and viriya—mindfulness, collectedness, and energy. The meditation aggregate of the Eightfold Path, you could say. But there are other things that also support insight arising in different situations. I'm not going to go any more into it tonight because there's not enough time. But remembering that the insight is in the service of understanding suffering and what leads to the release of suffering.

Suffering is based on confusion, on delusion—on recognizing inaccurately and responding inappropriately in ways that we think will make us happy, but that actually increase our confusion and delusion. That's samsara.

A big part of our habit, and I've already alluded to this quite a few times, is that we tend to look outward—to the content of our experience, to the subtlety or grossness of our experience, to the depth of our experience, to getting our practice to match a certain idea. If we came to cultivate one-pointed concentration and what we're getting is something different, it's so easy to fall into thinking, "I can't progress, I can't cultivate wisdom and insight until I get it back in line with the idea I had." It's so easy to look outward, thinking a better object will give us deeper insight.

But insight has nothing to do with the object.

Our whole practice is really about the purification of heart and mind, isn't it? The definition of a completely awakened being is one in whose heart and mind there's no more arising of greed, of hatred, of delusion. And all the various techniques of our so-called meditation practice—but really of our life of spiritual awareness, not just meditation practice—all the different skillful means exist to incline our mind more towards non-hatred, non-greed, and non-delusion, rather than reinforcing the habits of wanting, the habits of dislike or fear, the habits of delusion. Delusion shows up as either not knowing what's going on, or else imputing everything that's going on to being about me—two forms of confusion.

So our practice isn't about getting the correct object. It's not about trying to see the object more clearly. It's not about looking out at what's happening at all, but about learning to recognize and trust. This is where awareness, mindfulness itself, is our indispensable support and tool—recognizing the quality of the citta, of the mind itself, in any one moment.

We may not be arhats—probably we're not. It's only imagination, perhaps, what it would be to live without greed, hatred, and delusion. But for sure, we all experience many, many moments of heart and mind, of citta, of conscious awareness that are not colored by wanting, not colored by hatred or fear, not

colored by confusion or fogginess or making everything revolve around me.

We may not notice those moments so much. We may tend to notice the greed, the confusion, the aversion more. That's okay—the noticing of it is also mindfulness. The real problem is when we not only don't notice the moments of pure heart and mind, but we also don't notice the moments of kilesa, of the afflictions—greed, hatred, delusion. Then we're looking at experience through a conscious moment that's colored by that. Colored by wanting. Colored by "it's all about me." Colored by fear. And when we don't recognize that our consciousness is colored in that moment, our perceptions are off.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya has an interesting way of talking about this that I like very much. He uses very down-to-earth language. He says the quality of the mind is matched with the object that it recognizes. In other words, insight comes to the deserving mind. I know that feeds into "I'm good" and "I'm bad," so try and throw that away. But what he's saying is really interesting: a mind that is colored by kilesa—by greed, by hatred, by confusion—that we're not recognizing, that moment of mind, of citta, that moment of recognition will observe through the kilesa. And so that mind, he calls it kilesa mind, will only see concept, will take the concept to be reality.

So when that woman was standing and feeling like she couldn't stand it—thinking her problem was this unpleasant feeling and the only way out was to get away from it—that's taking the concept to be reality. When I'm sitting and there's a burning sensation in my knee and I think, "My knee is killing me, I can't bear this another moment, and that's just the way it is"—that's kilesa mind taking concept to be reality.

Now, concepts are useful. But taking the concept to be reality—that's what the Buddha talks about in his inverted perceptions. There are three, really four, where we see what is changing, what is impermanent, and we perceive it as permanent. We perceive what is not satisfying as being satisfying. We perceive what is dukkha as being reliable, as not dukkha. We perceive what has no intrinsic self-existence as being me or mine. We actually perceive the world this way. And it really seems true, right? We know that it seems true.

And we may have the heard information that everything's changing. We may have the *cintā mayā paññā*, the level of reflection and contemplation, where it really makes total sense—we really do know everything's changing. We wouldn't have an argument with someone who said, "No, everything's not changing." We'd say, "No, it's changing." And we've even had insight on the third level of the constant change, but the insight comes and goes.

So in the moments when there's delusion, not seeing accurately, when there's some clinging to sense of self or wanting stability or comfort—and this clinging can be on a subtle level, we don't even know it's there sometimes because we're looking out—that's when we perceive permanence. And that's seeing concept.

The second level, what he calls *vipassanā* mind, I would call a mind with clear mindfulness. Just a moment

of awake mind, awake consciousness. There's mindfulness, there's energy, and there's not greed or wanting, and we're not telling a story about me. In that moment, then we see things the way they are. We can see the concept, but we also can see underneath it, recognize. I'm just using "see" as a way to talk about all different modes of perception with all the different senses.

So he says *vipassanā* mind, without greed, without hatred, without delusion, observes things as they are. And that's a moment you could call *vipassanā* mind, a moment when insight is possible.

So what supports that? Again, I've talked about mindfulness and what I mean by it—you all know what mindfulness is. I'll just say very simply, that power of a moment of awareness, in a moment of consciousness, knowing what's happening without assumption or judgment or comparing. That willingness—it really just feels like a willingness to be. As Ajahn Sumedho says, his language is so great: "Oh, it's like this," whatever it is. Resting at ease in whatever arises. Oh, burning is like this. Fear is like this. Discouragement, thinking my practice is no good—thoughts are like this. Discouragement feels like this. Subtle, subtle *sukha* is like this. *Mettā* is like this. Words of the *mettā* just spinning, spinning, spinning in my mind and feeling aversion—is like this. Memories from my past—is like this. Whatever.

That quality of mindfulness brings that sense of trust and freshness to whatever's arising. Not looking for anything, but as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, awareness receiving experience. No clue what the next moment's experience will be. As soon as there's a sense of leaning into what we're looking for in the next moment, there's a little subtle wanting there, a little subtle judgment. It's like all the freshness, all the openness, all the mystery snaps shut.

It's fascinating to explore that. Fascinating. And then we get interested in it, because even that's just another moment of wanting, and awareness snapping shut—it's like this. There's nothing that awareness, a moment of mindfulness, cannot be present with.

And so when we get, at times, kind of caught up in seeing the *kilesas*, the defilements—I don't like that word—the afflictions, seeing greed, seeing how much aversion there is, seeing how every second thought is about me, we can actually get reactive to that, thinking, "Oh no, it's hopeless." Or we can just bring mindfulness to that. Oh, wanting feels like this. And in that moment, the wanting is simply another arising appearance. Aversion is just another arising appearance. The sense of self, another arising appearance. No problem. Nothing awareness can't be with.

So that's the mindfulness. I'm just very brief on these three, because each of them is like three whole talks. The mindfulness, and then the way I want to talk about *viriya* tonight in this simple context, in this really broad context—*viriya* in the sense of energy. It's not a physical energy, it's a mental energy, but *viriya* in the sense of gentle, patient persistence. Really the aspect that we often talk about in our practice as continuity.

But try not to jump when you hear "continuity" to thinking that means I have to be mindful every

moment, and if I'm not, I'm not continuous, and therefore I'm a failure. I don't mean that. But the intention, the willingness to just—every moment we wake up, no matter what you're doing all day, twenty-four seven—to just show up with mindfulness for this moment.

Relaxed yet persistent awareness.

This is really huge because it's this continuity of awareness that allows a natural momentum of mindfulness to begin to develop. You know how, as you practice, at first it's remembering to bring awareness to this, bring awareness to this, bring awareness to this—and it gets easier, right? You've all experienced that it does get easier. I'm not saying it stays easier, but it gets easier. And there are times when that momentum actually takes off on its own and you don't feel like you are putting in any effort at all.

It's the steady, gentle continuity that allows this momentum to happen. And it also allows the opportunity to be here for the completion as a whole process unfolds, where we actually might see—this is what allows insight to arise—see a process begin, go through all its moves, and actually end. See the effects of that process. See the causes of that process. It's only continuity of awareness that allows this aspect of reality to present itself.

So in terms, for example, of anicca, these vipalasas, these inverted perceptions that the Buddha talked about—take anicca. It's kind of the most obvious one: seeing permanence where there is no permanence. Even though we know the mind is doing that, it's still so difficult to see through. Because the habit of imputing permanence and the perceptions of imputing permanence are just so deeply habituated that it's easy to miss the impermanence.

And one of the really strong supports for the insight into impermanence—for all the insights—is the continuity of awareness, the steadiness of awareness. We don't have the conscious power, would that we did, to decide "Now I'm going to see impermanence." Or "Today I'm going to work on anatta, and by this evening I will be perceiving moment-to-moment arising and passing away of all phenomena." Would that that worked! I'm sure we've all tried it one way or another. It doesn't work. "Now I will move into deep samādhi. I have the deep intention not to move from my breath." Good luck.

It takes effort, but not the effort of striving. Not at all. When I'm talking about virya here, I mean patience, persistence, the willingness to keep showing up—this moment, this moment, this moment. But virya in terms of wise energy is patience. You really have to see what's the attitude in the mind that's feeding that energy. And this is where we so often get into knots in our life and here in our meditation practice.

Again, this is the way Tejaniya talks about it because it's very simple. Wise virya, when it's coupled with mindfulness, when it's coupled with a moment of mind and heart that isn't fed by, colored by confusion, wanting, or greed—and it's actually really simple to notice if we remember to notice.

So when this energy of gentle, persistent patience, willingness to be with what is, whatever is—that's real

virya. That leads to continuity. When we have enormous energy, we're pulling it up, it feels like resolution, it's really strong willpower, you're here for every moment—but you check. And all that energy trying to focus, trying to see clearly, when you really look: what's feeding it? You see that you're wanting something particular to happen. You're expecting something particular to happen, or you're looking for something.

One thing I've seen myself do a lot—and I even think I'm just being mindful of whatever's arising, whatever arises is fine—but I need to see it more clearly. Behind that needing to see it more clearly, I spent a whole retreat discovering: wow, that's nothing but craving. I thought I was completely choiceless, whatever arises, but "see it clear, that's not clear enough." Lots of virya. Wise virya? No. Craving.

Ah, that's craving. Craving is like this. Unclear is like this. And there's no problem. That's the insight.

That's the release of suffering in that moment.

Or the reverse. We're bringing up all our commitment and we're kidding ourselves. We don't quite let ourselves see that we're being with this experience to make something stop happening—to get rid of something. Okay, pretty clear. That's aversion. That's dosa.

Or confusion. Well, confusion—we forget to check because that's the nature of confusion. At one level, the basic level, you don't even know what's going on. You don't know what mindfulness is being with. You don't know what awareness is with. Okay, that's confusion. That's moha, delusion.

But also, the more subtle and even deeper level of moha is making it about me. What's happening is either me or mine. Wrong view. That's another level of confusion that will lead us into one of the other two. Because it's me or mine, it either needs to get better or it needs to go away. So you don't have greed or aversion without confusion. You can have confusion without greed or aversion—just like, "Duh, I don't know what's going on."

So this quality of virya—not trying to make things turn out the way you want them to be, but this total willingness to be totally present with this moment, every moment, without expectation—that's an enormous and amazing power that leads to the steadiness of awareness that actually allows us to see through these inverted, these confused perceptions about sense of self. Which is a great place to see it: ideas we have about ourselves, ideas we have about our practice.

A story I tell a lot. A friend who was a cook—well, she cooked a lot, she used to cook a lot at retreats—and she was known by herself and by her friends as being, quote, an "aversive person." A lot of anger, a lot of critical mind. And so she came one day and was saying to the other cooks what an aversive personality she has. And they were all going, "Yeah, it's true, you really are." Even though that was her sakkāya-diṭṭhi, her personality view, it was still a little demoralizing to have everyone agreeing so fervently.

So she came to one of the sittings on the retreat—it was just a one-hour sitting. She told me this later and said she sat down. She'd done years and years of practice. So she sat down and said, "Okay, I have this

view: I'm aversive. I'm just going to be present moment by moment by moment with everything that comes up"—watching her mind, watching her emotions, watching her ideas.

And she said it was fascinating. She said, yeah, quite a few aversive, critical thoughts came up about herself, about others, about what was arising in the moment. She said, but that was maybe only ten percent. There were plenty of generous thoughts. There were moments of love. There were lots of times of calm and concentration. There were moments of all kinds of stuff. She said, how come she picked those ten percent of aversive thoughts—and they weren't all in a block either, you know—and said, "That's who I am"?

What allowed her to see through that was just the mindfulness and the virya in the sense of patient, persistent willingness to be here, be here, be here for whatever's arising, without judgment.

That quality of virya—and one other definition of virya I'd like to add—is courage. Courage meaning not shrinking back from the difficult. It's actually one of the commentarial descriptions of virya: not shrinking back from the difficult. You know, we kind of go, "Ah, that's too much." That moves into sloth and torpor, actually. It's just a little too hard. But virya—that doesn't mean get out a hammer and hit what's happening.

It just means that willingness to be here. So mindfulness supported by virya is not discriminatory, not choosing "I'll be with this and not with that." The steadiness of continuity is what allows for deeper aspects of reality to reveal themselves.

I read a line by Colette recently where she said, "Look long at what pleases you, and even longer at what pains you." I like that. I just feel like if you add "and also at what you don't notice as being pleasant or not," it becomes a lovely description of mindfulness—non-discriminatory, non-hierarchical, just what's happening now.

And the steadiness of virya and the steadiness of mindfulness, when they start to get that momentum, cultivate and turn into samadhi, often translated as concentration. But here again, in this broader context, I want to talk about it not only as the kind of absorption-focused, one-pointed deep samadhi. That's often what we think about when we talk about concentration.

In all these years of talking to people who meditate, I couldn't even begin to say how often—out of all the qualities being cultivated in the practice, all the experiences, all the insights—how much people pick out this one factor of concentration. And I'm using the English word on purpose because it has all kinds of connotations for different people. How often people come in and say, "My concentration isn't good," which tells us basically, as a teacher, nothing except that the person is judging. That's about all it tells you. Or "My concentration is good"—that also tells you very little. Good compared to what? Bad compared to what? And why is that the one thing we single out?

I'm saying this because often concentration is thought about only in terms of absorption, in terms of deep

one-pointedness. In this level of samadhi that I'm talking about, in terms of feeding insight, it isn't always necessary for that deep level of one-pointedness. Samadhi is also translated as a stability of mind, a collectedness. But the collectedness can be a steadiness, a stability that doesn't fall into reactivity with whatever's arising—that steadiness of awareness on objects that can be changing with greater or lesser rapidity.

The Pali word that Mahasi Sayadaw used was khanika samadhi, momentary samadhi. In terms of the mindfulness and that gentle perseverance of no matter what's happening through the day, it cultivates quite naturally the steadiness, a peaceful, relaxed quality of mind, but one that is stable—stable in that things don't throw it off so much. You can feel it. It takes a little longer to develop because you can't develop it by forcing. And so just that moment to moment to moment to moment. After a while, the mind becomes non-distractable in that nothing is a distraction; everything can be included.

As Ajahn Sumedho says about mindfulness, mindfulness is the point that includes. This quality of samadhi is a flexible, light, stable quality of mind that just isn't thrown off. It's not fragile, it's not brittle, it's not heavy. And when we do get thrown off, it comes back really quickly.

Just a quick example: I was practicing with U Tejaniya in Burma, and in his meditation center there's not silence. People can come up and talk to you, and you're practicing in a very open way with just whatever's arising, not deliberately focusing on any anchor at all. I was doing walking meditation and just being with whatever, and someone came up to me and started talking. I'd been there long enough that at least I didn't get into aversion. It really takes us Western heavy-duty vipassana meditators a little bit of time to get over the sense that my practice is being bothered when someone comes up to talk. So I was past that. They came up and talked. I turned and talked and then went back.

And very interesting—my mind actually was more present and settled after the talking rather than less. I really got this sense of this flexible yet stable, non-distractable quality of samadhi that develops.

These qualities of mindfulness, of this flexible samadhi, and of continuity, persistence, patience, that steadiness of awareness—these are qualities that allow for this non-clinging shift of perception, what we call insight, to arise.

I'll just end with a short quotation from Francisco Varela, the scientist: "The purpose of calming the mind in Buddhism is to render the mind able to be present with itself long enough to gain insight into its own nature and functioning."

Just learning to be present with our mind, no matter what it's doing. Wisdom arises by itself. We don't have to create it—in fact, we can't. If we can just trust the steadiness of awareness, wisdom arises by itself.

It's actually a huge relief.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment, and then we'll close with chanting together.

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