Perception Of Impermanence Leads To Awakening

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:40

I think when I spoke about the First Noble Truth last week, I may have mentioned that the Buddha described three characteristics to all phenomenal existence, to all experience. One is dukkha, the unsatisfactory quality or nature of experience. One is impermanence, the constant change and flux. And the third is not-self, anatta.

So tonight I want to talk about anicca, impermanence. Sometimes these are called three Dhamma doors, you could say. Sometimes anicca is the experience, the perception that's just much more obvious to you, showing up frequently, and that becomes your way into reality. Sometimes it's the unreliable, the dukkha aspect. Sometimes it's the not-self aspect. Not to worry, because they all come together in how things really are. They're all connected. But tonight I want to talk about anicca in particular—the perception of impermanence—because this is really how the Buddha spoke about it, about how it's freeing.

Here are two quotations from the Buddha, from the Samyutta Nikaya. "Bhikkhus," he's talking to practitioners, "there is no form, no rupa, no feeling tone, no perception, no volitional formation, no sankharas, and no moment of consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, that will remain the same just like eternity." Nothing, he's saying.

Then he took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail—like the handful of leaves teaching—and said, "There's not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change. If there was just this much form that was permanent, this living of the holy life for the complete ending of dukkha could not be seen, could not be understood. But because there is not even this much form that is stable, permanent, unchanging, this living of the holy life for the complete abandoning of dukkha is understood, is discerned."

That's a powerful statement. And in the big picture, as we go through life, of those three characteristics—the change, the unreliability, the not-self—the aspect of change, of impermanence, in a way seems the most obvious. Probably no one's going to really argue that things change. So I'm not here to give you all these examples of how things change and talk you into it, because that doesn't work.

This is the next statement from the Buddha, a little farther on: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, this perception eliminates all sensual cravings. It eliminates all craving for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all mana, all the conceit of 'I am.'"

Those four things mean completely awakened. When the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

This, to me, is really the way in, the avenue to really explore both why it is that we don't recognize impermanence, and why it is that if we really understood it, it's not transforming our understanding, it's not uprooting all of these things. As the Buddha says, it's really not that things are permanent and then if we have a great opening experience, everything starts changing. Obviously, there's not even this much that's permanent. But we don't perceive.

Perception—and Annie's going to talk about this in much more detail in a couple of nights—but perception, the way the Buddha talks about it, is a very specific function of mind arising in every moment of sensed consciousness. Perception is that quality that recognizes what's occurring. If I ring this bell, we recognize hearing, and then the mind knows it's a bell. That's based on memory, based on culture, based on a lot of things, which I'm not going to go into because I'm sure Annie will. But it just arises naturally. We name it bell, but maybe we don't recognize what that is. We hear a sound and we don't know. Half the time when we don't know, our mind just makes something up, and we think that's accurate. We don't really recognize how frequently our perceptions are not accurate.

Just to stick to impermanence, that's what the Buddha is saying. When the perception, moment to moment, of change, of constant change—when that perception is developed and cultivated—that opens us up into recognizing reality as it is. And that recognition, that wisdom, is the doorway to freedom, to liberation from dukkha, from confusion. That's what the Buddha is saying.

I want to talk tonight about some personal ruminations on the perception of impermanence and some of my own musings about perhaps some of the aspects that get in the way of our accurate perception at times.

The nature of insight, really one of the ways insight occurs, is simply that the perception shifts and we recognize things as they are. The Buddha spoke about three levels of wisdom, all of them useful, but different levels.

The first one, called sutta maya paññā—paññā means wisdom—is wisdom of what is heard, what is learned. This is helpful. If we never heard the Dhamma, we wouldn't be here. It's some information. I'm here talking to you; that's what is heard. To some extent, that's a level of wisdom. When we take it in and hear it, when we're able to hear.

The second level, cinta maya paññā, is described as our intelligence. The teaching goes in, and we mull it over. Not just thinking about things, but it's rolling around in our system. Like about impermanence—maybe you're thinking, "Well, yeah, I know things change, and that makes sense," and maybe you're not listening to me anymore, and you're clicking through your mind how things change. It goes in, and so it's a deeper level of using our intelligence, our experience. We understand it. But this is a

level where often we think we know something. We all think we know impermanence, and it's not changing a thing in the way that we crave, the way we react.

Because it's not the third level of wisdom, *bhavana maya pañña*, which is really the insight level. *Bhavana*, you may recognize—I think Guy mentioned that's the word for mental development, mental cultivation. So we can't think our way into *bhavana maya pañña*. And if you could just believe that, you would save yourself so much agony in the next four to ten weeks.

Guess what opens up *bhavana maya pañña*? Just guess. What could it possibly be? Moment to moment, steady awareness of just what's arising in the whole field of experience.

So *bhavana maya pañña* is transformative. To me, it's like this insight where suddenly something shifts and we actually recognize on a deeper level. I kind of think of it like a cellular level. Wow. Everything's changing. Everything's moving around. And I don't like it very much. But it's a different level.

All three levels work together. But I think the confusion between the second and the third is when we think we really know something, but we keep getting caught: "I know, I understood that. How come I'm still craving? It doesn't make sense." We're impatient. That's another thing. Very impatient. It's been two weeks, folks. If you're already thinking, "Where am I? What's going on?"—put it down. Save yourself some grief and just be present here and now. The momentum's just beginning to build. Use that. Use that just to relax into this moment now. The next moment's going to be different. That's the rest of the talk.

So of course the misperception arises because of delusion. One of the ways I've noticed delusion shows up is in regard to not recognizing change and impermanence. On one level, change is obvious—disease, death, old age, losing things, winter. It's obvious, and still we're taken by surprise sometimes. This is where our mind knows it, but still it's like, "What? Now? Me? Can't be."

Especially for large changes that we feel as loss, as grief, I've noticed that part of the resistance comes out of what I spoke about last week: our habitual resistance, our instinctive pulling back from the unpleasant, the difficult. So we have this resistance to really feeling loss, to really letting in even the possibility of loss and change—not in a way of whipping it up, but just the loss, the sadness. There's a resistance to that, as if feeling sad is a bad thing. It's part of life.

So there's the misperception, the actively perceiving permanence in something that's changing. And there's just the inattention, this moment-to-moment inattention. The Buddha talks about this—perceiving permanence in what is changing. We actually perceive it wrong. And then on that perception we base how we think about things, the decisions we make, how we act.

And this is how we get so confused in life, and why we're suffering needlessly—because we're responding to what isn't really true and wondering why it doesn't work.

So I just want to share some thoughts on those three areas.

The first one: the sense of impermanence. It's so clear—this is what I talked about last week—that everybody in this world suffers loss. Grief, sadness. People and things we love go away for a whole variety of reasons, not just sickness and death. Circumstances change, things fall apart, and we really experience grief and loss.

And there's such a tendency that we don't want to know about that, that we just pretend it's never, never going to change. Then suddenly it's over and we're just thrown back. But this is really part of being human. To think that if I don't understand impermanence—because I feel grief when my partner and I split, or when I know someone is ill and going to die—or to pull back from that and think, "Well, if I was really a good Buddhist, I would just say, 'They will not be seen by me again,'" which is what the Buddha could say. And you think, "I can't do that." And so this whole thing seems crazy, twisted.

Of course we feel sadness. We do. It's human. It's human. And I actually personally feel that until we're complete arahants, there's going to be sadness. There's going to be grief at loss. We don't need to be afraid of that or resist it. It's simply an arising, really understandable experience of mind and heart.

And in some ways—I mean, it's because we're not completely awakened—but when we really can allow it, in my experience, when I could really allow grief, it has a kind of purity to it. Not the grief of "I shouldn't" or "they shouldn't," but just absolute loss. It's like this. You can't pretend it didn't happen. The grief comes. When there's no resistance, you just let it move through. There's a kind of sense of... it comes also out of the love that was there, and it just moves out again because it's also impermanent.

I experienced that a lot when my sister died quite suddenly. It was one of those things—you can't pretend it didn't happen. You can't get into wishing. That's just how it is. And so for some reason I had no resistance to the grief at all. It would come really strong at all different times of day for months and months, but I would just let it move through. I can't say it was sweet. Grief is grief. It's not pleasant. But there was really a sense that it was just an expression of the love. Sure, it had attachment, but that's okay. And it would move out. It never lasted that long. I could be laughing and happy the next minute. It would come and go. It's just part of life.

One of my favorite stories from the suttas is about Ānanda, who, as many of you know, was for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life his devoted attendant. Ānanda—he's a lovely guy in the suttas. You can really identify with him. He makes mistakes. He isn't completely awakened. He's friendly. He's relational. I don't mean to imply others aren't, but you just get a sense that you can relate to him. He's pretty up there—I mean, he's not a doofus.

One of the stories I like is in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, when the Buddha is telling his monks and nuns that he is going to die in a certain amount of time, three months or so. They're all having this big discussion about how to carry on the Sangha, what they should do with his remains, all of this. They're sitting there talking, and then all of a sudden the Buddha looks around and says, "Where's Ānanda?"

Ananda was always there when the Buddha was giving a talk. Where's Ananda? And he sent a brother, "Please go find Ananda."

And Ananda had gone to his lodging, and they describe it—he was lamenting, leaning on the doorpost. He was lamenting and crying: "Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away who is so compassionate to me."

Andy Olinsky told me—I didn't know this yet—this is a very well-known image. Later, when images were drawn of the Buddha's passing, there was Ananda lamenting against the doorpost, just crying.

So the Buddha of course said, "Go, monk, and say to Ananda: 'Friend Ananda, the teacher summons you.'" So Ananda comes to the Buddha, and the Buddha said—kindly enough—"Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So how could it be, Ananda—since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away?"

But he's saying this with great compassion. He's not dismissing him. He's saying, "How could it be, Ananda? Haven't I said?"

And then he goes on to really uplift his mind. He says, "For a long time, Ananda, you have been in the Tathāgata's presence, showing loving-kindness in act of body, speech, and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly, and unstintingly." So he's saying, just make effort, trust—in a short time you also will be free. And then he goes on and on to praise Ananda some more.

I share this to get that sense of how human it all is. And the Buddha knows that. But it's not like, "Oh, it's okay, it's okay, go ahead and cry." He'll never say that. He'll always say, "This is how it really is." And yes, you're crying now, but just have a look at how it really is, and your mind and heart will open to freedom.

I just love that story because we're all in it together. We're all human. So not to flinch away, or pretend we don't feel sadness or grief, or be afraid to really look unflinchingly at what's going on because it might change. It not *might* change—it *will* change. But in this moment, just in this moment, it's how it is. Not to be afraid to love something because it might change. It will change. But if we're afraid of grief, then we're afraid to love. And he's not saying that. He's saying just see how it is, but still be human.

This understanding can really lead us to a much deeper acceptance of life, and a flexibility and openness. We don't stop caring. Maybe there's a more deeply held, less attached caring—but a more deeply connected caring—when we can really respond, when we're not trying to hold on and keep everything static. There's more flexibility to respond in an appropriate way.

This is from a book from some years ago called *Streets In* by Issan Dorsey. He was opening a Zen hospice in the heart of the city where many people with AIDS were coming. He writes:

We have always dealt with whatever came to the door. We had no formal plan for starting this hospice. We

started the hospice because death came to the door.

People who were dying of HIV would come to the door. So he said:

You can deal with a complex, changing situation because you don't have to control it. You don't have to force it into an ideal pattern. You can actually allow it to be whatever it is, and allow yourself to adapt to what it becomes. Because this is the way we proceed, we have the ability to respond to the immediacy of the situation. And therefore, we have to be very practical. We can be very practical.

So that's taking this understanding into the world, starting a hospice. But this comes down to our moment-to-moment experience as well. And I'll get into it a little bit more, but how much are we trying to control our sitting to meet some ideal—whatever that is, whatever your mind has made up as the way it's supposed to be—and trying to force it into that mold? And then when it shifts, when we talk about skillful means, that's exactly this adaptability: "Oh, before it was like this, now it's like this. What's helpful?" Rather than, "No, before it was like this, and that's how it's supposed to be."

Let's get back there. Something's wrong. We don't recognize it. We're not open to how things actually are.

There's another sutta from another monk, just so you know they had to go through the same thing. This monk's name is Asaji. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove, and Venerable Asaji, who was a long-term bhikkhu, was sick, afflicted, gravely ill—basically, when they describe it like that, he was sick and dying. And he was really upset. He said he was filled with regret and remorse.

So the Buddha went to visit him and asked, "Are you reproaching yourself? Have you been lax in virtue, lax in your practice?"

He said, "No, no, no."

The Buddha said, "Well, if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to your virtue, in regard to your life, Asaji, why are you so troubled by remorse and regret?"

And Asaji said, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations." In other words, he could get concentrated. "But now I do not obtain concentration. And so it occurs to me—let me not fall away."

Can you relate to that? He's filled with remorse because before, when he was sick, he could get concentrated, and now he can't. "Let me not fall away" basically means, "Oh my God, I've lost it all. It's all gone."

Have you ever had that feeling here? "I've worked for two weeks and now all these thoughts—it's all gone. It's over. Let me not fall away." This is just that same experience on a bigger scale.

The Buddha responded, again, "Have I not told you? All that is subject to coming together is subject to

falling apart." And he gave Asaji a whole discourse on anicca. The conditions are different now. And he says—I'm paraphrasing here—"By the way, in my teaching, concentration is not the essence. The essence is the insight, the path, the fruition of wisdom, of understanding."

So, get over it. It's like this now. The situation is different. Of course the conditions for concentration aren't present. But the conditions for wisdom are—seeing what's really true, recognizing the fact of change.

Change is inevitable. Whatever arises, arises due to conditions. All those conditions are constantly changing. They change, the effect changes, and then that changes into the next moment. There's no way to avoid this.

One of the good things about retreat is that in moment-to-moment practice, we have more chance to notice this on a more subtle level. Right now I was talking on the larger level of death and loss. It's a good place to start, because already, even in the most obvious cases, we don't really, really cellularly know it—or we wouldn't resist it.

Sometimes we wonder, why do we cling? When we see more and more frequently throughout a retreat—going in on the middle level and even on the bhavana-maya-pañña level—the fact that clinging is suffering, many people notice this. They're saying, "I keep clinging onto this, and actually it's just suffering. Why does the mind keep doing it?"

There are many ways to explore this, and we'll talk about it from different angles. For now, I'll address it in relationship to what I'm discussing tonight. This clinging, in terms of impermanence—impermanence is really the sense of constant flux and change, really no solid ground any time, anywhere.

And most of our little minds don't like that too much. We want the clinging—yes, we want the pleasant to stay, of course, and we don't want the unpleasant. But for me, I find underneath that, there's this sense of wanting some stability, looking for that stability in some external or internal experience, some sense experience, including experience of the mind—even though we see that they're changing moment to moment.

But a good one comes along, and it's like, "Okay, shut up. This is it. Steady, steady. This is peace. Now I've got it. Before I was confused, but now I understand." Don't you see how the mind does that? It's such a trip. "Oh, that was a view. I see through that. But now I know. It's like this."

But again, I feel the clinging in one way is a subconscious response to the unreliability of life, the out-of-controlness, the wanting somewhere stable. There's this from the Buddha in the Sutta Nipata, I believe: "The search for a resting place is burning." We burn from that search. "Not to need one is cool and peaceful." The search for a resting place—that's this: "This is it. This is it." The resting place means it keeps on not changing. Not to need one is cool and peaceful.

There's a Tibetan instruction: just rest at ease in whatever arises. Sometimes I think of that as our

choiceless attention instruction. You're really recognizing and resting at ease in whatever arises. And just let whatever arises keep changing, because it will.

I just want to read you two short little stanzas from a poem by Galway Kinnell:

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.

I love that line: "You cling to me hard as if clinging could save us."

I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down.
I've stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die.
And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry,
this the nightmare you wake screaming from,
being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

And that's how it is to the mind that's looking for something to be stable—we are in the pre-trembling of a house that falls, and there's a kind of "I don't want to know," that resistance.

But when there's just the openness to this moment as it is, there's like a—it's not even surrender. It's just the ability, like with Issan Dorsey, to respond appropriately, to be as it is, and change comes as it will. The presence is with that. If there's some resistance, the presence is with that. That's simply another arising experience. Just not so trying to control, not so fearful.

But we can't do this with an act of will, by thinking about it. This is really where our practice, our moment-to-moment practice, takes us to explore this. And we all have moments of it, with this choiceless attention. Just a moment where, as the Buddha says, "One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." One abides—abides means to rest, to stay, to live; I'm saying that for non-English speakers. One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere. So we say, "Oh, here I am living"—it's already moving into the next. But we can't talk our way into it; just see.

This doesn't mean we don't care.

It doesn't mean that when we sense the pre-trembling of a house about to fall, we don't want to feel it. As I said before, you don't pull back, you don't stop loving, you don't stop caring. Actually, you become much more present, much more responsive.

The Buddha often used these images—the sense of impermanence, of death—as a way to wake us up, but not to suggest we don't care. Because we're really not fighting, not trying to control, no longer shrinking away from the possibility of tenderness or loss, that actually takes us more deeply into connection and caring. We're not so afraid of it, and we know it will go.

One short haiku that I really love, from Issa—he wrote this on the death of his young daughter. He said: "This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet." I just love that. That's how it is. And yet. It's dewdrop, gone like that. And yet. And that's, to me, our paradox as human beings. I don't know what it's like to be an arhat, but this is our paradox as human beings.

But with the courage and the wisdom that comes from the Dhamma, from really knowing and trusting, recognizing accurately the way it is—this only leads us into more ease and freedom. We don't have to land in "I don't want to know about impermanence." We don't have to land there. We can trust. We can open. Just meet this moment. Let the next one take care of itself.

So another way we don't quite perceive impermanence accurately, or we assume permanence, is partly from misperception and partly from inattention. I was once at a talk by the Dalai Lama, and he was talking about impermanence. He said—this is obvious, but I remember how he said it—he said, one of the reasons we keep being surprised by the endings of things is because we don't notice the momentariness of change. We think things arise due to conditions, last for a while, and then go away. But no, there's no "last for a while." Things arise due to conditions and every mind moment they're changing, but we don't quite recognize that. This is what I'm talking about—shaky ground. Not just everything's nice for a while and then it goes away. When we think that way, we really are shocked by the ending, because we didn't see the flux as it was going on.

So this is just what we start to explore. You don't think your way into it, but this is one of the great benefits of a long mindfulness retreat. We're just being mindful, bringing attention to whatever arises. And as you saw in the instructions the other morning, when the mind's somewhat stable and just unhooking from any particular experience, attending to whatever arises—keep on with this: sitting, walking, eating. There is no way, if there's any kind of steady mindfulness, that you can't notice stuff is changing all the time. There's no way.

You say, there is a way. Denial is a powerful force. People come in—no one's done it so far now—but I'll be on a retreat and someone comes in and says, "Oh, I'm just sleepy all the time. It's unbearable." And you know, it's really suffering. I'll say, "Really, all the time? Every sitting?" "Well, it was the sitting early before breakfast and then after lunch a little bit." Right, that was "all day." "Oh, no, maybe. But sometimes it was really a lot."

Or someone says, "I'm just having this emotion." And emotions can be strong. Part of what difficult emotions tell us is: "This is how it is. Even though I wasn't here before, I'm here now, and I'm going to be here for the rest of your life." Right? Doesn't it feel like that? "This is how it is. It's never going to change. Get used to it." We're going to be in disappointment, in grief, in fear, in heaviness from now until the end of November. How can we bear it?

I'm not exaggerating when I say that's what the mind starts to think.

So we begin to really look and see. We don't even have to look for endings—just stay present. How many sense objects arise and pass in just one sitting, just in one walking? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, thinking, seeing, hearing, feeling. How many in one sitting?

Sometimes people come and say, "Oh, there's too much going on." Too much for what? Something's wrong? There's so many things happening—it's supposed to just be quiet. Is it? Is it?

Once I went to Sayadaw U Pandita when I was sitting with him and all this stuff was happening. I knew—I don't know how I knew it from other retreats—that he would tell other people to keep coming back to the breath, to keep coming back to the breath. And I would go in and I would take one breath and then all these things would be happening. I would just be noting, noting, noting, noting everything that was arising. I was afraid he'd tell me to go back to the breath because it would have been really difficult with all this stuff happening. I was so afraid that I finally brought it up to him. I said, "You know, should I be at the breath more? I'm noting all this stuff. It's so much."

And he just looked at me and said, "Are you making this stuff happen?"

I said, "No."

He said, "That's anattā—out of control. That's what's happening. Note it."

This is part of what we start to notice. I think Guy mentioned just tuning in from time to time to seeing, awareness of seeing—not so much caught in the object that's being seen, but awareness of seeing. To me, that has been so helpful moving around through the day. Don't make a big deal about it. Just relax and notice that seeing is the process. Don't make it a big thing. It's really easy. But if I'm walking and just aware of seeing as the process, every moment it's different. You're just walking, and every moment the object seen is different. We don't notice that change because we stay with a sense of permanence, a sense of me, or we string it together with a story. But it's changing every moment.

When we're in this immediacy of mindfulness, just with what's happening now, this change, this momentary change starts to reveal itself. It's just how it is. No stasis, ever. No stasis, ever.

Some years ago on retreat, in a teaching with Joseph, a woman who was a longtime meditator with a lot of insight said to us, "Oh, I've been seeing for a while that everything changes all around me. All the experience is always changing. For years I've seen that. But I finally got it—oh, I'm part of that." On this side of things too, it's constantly changing. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking—constantly arising and passing, different experiences.

I think of it like time-lapse photography. Say you're having a time lapse—they had one this spring, a camera pointed at that center garden there the whole time I was teaching. What is that doing there? They told me it was filming one of the plants.

I never got to see what they did with that. But that kind of time-lapse photography—if you plant a bulb

and then just leave it, and it's slowly growing but looks fast, it comes up and little leaves emerge and it shoots and then the stem and the blossom and then it falls, dies, and goes back into the earth. There's never one moment where it's just this one thing. Each moment different, the preceding moment leading into how this moment can be, and this moment leads into the next moment. It's all part of the same process, but there's no moment that *this* is the thing. In constant flux, in constant change. That's us. That's everything.

There's no solid—see, this is how it leads into *anattā*, no separate self-existing entity, constant arising and changing. Thinking about it, that's where the mind might not be so happy. That's when the clinging comes in: "No, I want something steady." But not thinking about it, just being aware—it's like this, it's like this, it's like this.

The Buddha said the perception of impermanence, when it's developed, when one perceives impermanence, the perception of not-self is stabilized. And when the perception of not-self becomes stabilized, one who perceives not-self uproots the conceit "I am"—the *māna*, the comparing "I am"—which is nirvana in this very life.

So the perception of impermanence, not something you have to think about or make happen, is just a natural effect of perceiving impermanence again and again and again. It stabilizes the perception of not-self.

I've been talking about a moment-to-moment level of arising sense experience. On the slightly larger level of our personality, it's the same. This is from Mae Chee Kaew, who was a Thai nun from the last century, really a student of Ajahn Mun, which means she was a tough cookie, extremely. She says: "Everything that makes a person unique changes continually and eventually disintegrates. Each personality is constantly ceasing to be what it was and becoming something new. Those factors one tends to conceive of as self are impermanent and fleeting. Everything about bodily form and the mind's thoughts and feelings is without intrinsic stability and bound to dissolve." Everything bound to dissolve. For that reason, clinging to body and mind is a major source of pain and suffering.

That last part we know. But it's all bound to change.

Years ago—I always tell this story, but I like it—a friend of ours was a long-term practitioner. She used to cook a lot on retreats. So on this one retreat she was cooking, and she had a day off, so she was going to sit for that day. She told me later that the other cooks, who all knew each other well, were basically telling her what an aversive personality she was. Which she also agreed with—often aversion came up. But that's how we tend to do: "I have an aversive personality." So that's what she's being told. And we think, "I'm a fearful person," whatever our stories are. We might have a couple of them.

So she went to sit for this one day, and she said, "I'm just going to look really carefully." Because she knew how to practice. So she was just being present with her aversion—really steady with her mindfulness, not

trying to pretend she wasn't aversive, but just being steady. Just sit down and walk and let whatever arises arise, just as we're doing here. And noticing, as she's being careful, what kind of thoughts and emotions came up.

She said, yeah, some aversive ones came up. But as she looked carefully, there were many, many kind, generous thoughts, many moments of generosity, many calm moments, many loving moments, many just spaced-out whatever moments, and then some aversive times. That's how it is. But then we take certain ones and go, "This is me." And other ones we completely ignore. "Well, that was a moment of *mettā*, but that was some weird freak of nature that had nothing to do with me, just because we practiced it. Left to my own devices, it's back to the aversion. It's back to the fear. It's back to the hopelessly dull, torpor-ridden, hopeless meditator." That's who I am.

This is why steady awareness matters. This is why continuity is your friend. Continuity is what allows clear recognition. And so yes, at times there's nothing to hold to, shaky ground. But more times than we realize—thank God you don't have to hold on to this. It's moving, it's changing.

Just notice how it is. Resting at ease in whatever arises, not having to take ownership.

In myself, I think when practicing—or not—but particularly when we're mindful yet caught up in a personality-driven scenario: "Oh, my aversion, what can I do?" We're mindful of it, but kind of caught in it, like we've talked about before. We think we have to think our way through it. Again, I know I've said this five times, but I'm going to say it again: you never have to think your way through it. You have to stay with it.

Sometimes the great renunciation is just to bring your attention into the simplicity of what's happening in this present moment. Just feel the foot on the ground. Just feel the breath. Just notice, "Oh, there's all this grief." Just notice the heaviness in the chest. Just this renunciation of surrendering into this moment. The story can just hang out there, but just let it be. That's like the great renunciation into freedom—taking refuge in awareness rather than keeping refuge in these stories we tell ourselves.

Ajahn Sumedho—I love the way he describes things—at one point he's talking about how we have ideals about what reality is, but reality... he was chuckling, and he goes, "The real isn't what you're expecting, I tell you." Just really look. And he says, "With steady awareness, we do recognize the nature of conditioned phenomena. Conditions are continually arising and ceasing in consciousness." Continually arising and ceasing in consciousness. And when with awareness we recognize this, we start to awaken out of our confusion and our delusion to the way things really are.

So here we're noticing again and again: conditions arising and ceasing and known in consciousness. This is arising and it's known. It's gone and it's known. This is known. This is known. Notice the endings. Notice the comings. Notice the constant change. And it's known. Taking refuge in the awareness, not in the story, not in the object.

In many of the suttas, when someone first awakens, becomes what's called a stream-enterer, there are different things they say—specific lines that indicate that. And one of the most well-known is, as they wake up: "I really see whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation." That's like the lion's roar of awakening, knowing it. "Oh, I see. Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation." It's a lion's roar of freedom.

So just a couple of ideas that come to my mind. Just noticing when you're assuming permanence. Because we have this misperception—we're saying notice the perception of impermanence, but notice when you're perceiving, assuming permanence. Anything you experience today: fear, anxiety, self-doubt in the mind—"How am I going to deal with this in the next sitting?" Any pain that came up: "Oh no, five more hours of this." Or when you had a good sitting yesterday and now it's not like that, and we spend, even though we pretend we're not, we spend very subtly trying to guide it back to how it was yesterday, because that was the right way, the better way. Never noticing that the conditions are completely different right now. Like Āsaji—he's sick and dying and he wants to be like how he was when he was twenty-five, sitting for fourteen hours at a stretch. Okay, I made up that specific detail, but the conditions are how they are now. Assuming permanence.

Ajahn Chah used to say, just say for whatever you're doing: "This is uncertain." When we think, "Oh, I wonder how I'll like lunch"—this is uncertain. "Tomorrow I'm going to be practice leader"—this is uncertain. "I wonder whether I'll sleep tonight"—this is uncertain. "Will I even get up and make it back to the room?"—this is uncertain. I mean, don't go nuts with it, but just have that sense, to notice when we're just assuming.

And yet we plan. It's not that we pretend, "Oh no, I'm just in the moment. Don't ask me to plan." No, we plan. We ring the bell. We come in here. We know what's going on, and we know it's uncertain. Anything can happen at any time.

To me, the more amazing thing is that I have all my stuff booked out for 2021. I mean, what a joke. It's uncertain that I'll even be alive in 2021, right? But still, we do that. We work with the relative, but we know this is uncertain. Just noticing that.

Another thing I notice sometimes is when you've been with something—difficult or pleasant, doesn't matter—and it leaves. We don't always notice the endings of things. Sometimes we do. But when you've been with something a while and it's gone, notice it's gone and kind of stay with noticing the gone-ness.

This is an example I always give. It seems silly, but actually it was a big insight for me. I was being really mindful while eating—being mindful and chewing, chewing, chewing, that kind of very slow, steady mindfulness. And if you notice, it doesn't taste good after about two bites, right? It's mush, mush, chew, chew, chew. Neutral, neutral, unpleasant. Just being with it, swallowing it, following it all the way down, feeling this movement. Then I said, "Oh, that was a concept." My mind was saying that's the food going all the way—that's a concept. The experience in the mouth when I swallowed, that was gone. It wasn't "this is

an experience that's now down in my stomach." That's an idea. The sensations in the mouth were completely and totally gone. Notice that. That seems silly, but notice that. Notice how we assume permanence by creating these constructs of thought, saying, "Oh, this is all the same thing moving along"—like that time-lapse of the flower. It's different every moment.

So sometimes just notice gone-ness. When you go to bed thinking, "Thank God this day is over. It has been such a heavy dukkha day"—take a moment, if you can, to move aside from that aversive lens. Just reflect on it. And you'll notice all kinds of neutral, pleasant, other kinds of moments that went on. Just break that assumption of solidity and permanence.

The last thing I want to say is what I alluded to before—how when there's really this deep perception of impermanence, it's far from making us think, "Oh well, everything's impermanent, who cares? Whatever." It's almost the opposite of that. When there's really the understanding of things as they are, instead of this resistance to life, resistance to experience, fear of the unpleasant, there's a complete ability to just open—just open fully into this is how it is in this moment. There's a real sense of opening to the wonder, the mystery, to vibrant presence. There's nothing to try and hold onto in the past or fear in the future, just totally here. As Byron Katie says, loving what is—just in this moment, awareness of what is and loving it. And from that, the response to life can actually give us much more responsiveness, the Brahma Viharas that Jill talked about, courage or willingness to meet in a much more flexible and sometimes courageous way because of the understanding.

I want to end with a little quotation from Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne from Sri Lanka. He's in his eighties now, his high eighties, but since the fifties he's been running a project called the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, which is really working in rural areas based on Buddhist understanding. Working with really poor people in rural areas, it's based on the Four Noble Truths, nonviolence, anicca, anatta. And he says it's based on the realization that "the impermanence and interdependence of selves in society and nature entails the deepest respect for all."

So he's really basing this work that he does, which he describes as political empowerment of villages—and these are really poor village people, rural people in Sri Lanka—on rural development through Buddhist principles, a nonviolent spiritual revolution to replace the structural violence and inequality that forms the basis of social order. He's really quite radical, but he's basing it on helping the poor rural people from a sense of understanding our interconnectedness, from understanding impermanence.

And I give you all that just so you understand this quotation from him:

"In 1952, a gangster was asked to kill me. I was just trying to be of service to students in our communities who were in need, and some people's financial or other interests were threatened, so they gave a contract killer some money. I heard about it, so I went to him. And I told him, 'This is what I'm doing. If you want to kill me, do it now, not in my school or with my students, because those places would have a bad name after that.' I didn't want other people's blood to be shed.

"So at that time, and even now, I have that courage. To let others live, if necessary, you sacrifice. It's a spiritual motivation. Because every moment we are born, we exist, and we pass away. Every moment. In our mind or body, is there anything that is permanent for two seconds? And when you understand that, when you practice it, you get a lot of courage. And even in death, you see life.

"So the killer, he was so good. Not only did he say, 'Oh, what a crime I would have done.' And one lesson he taught me: against our conscience, we don't kill. 'I was told that you are a very bad person, misleading students. Because we didn't have teachers like you, we became criminals.' And he changed from that day."

I just love that story. But that's really the sense of it—when we really understand anicca, the suffering of holding and clinging and narrow self-interest is seen through. It's really the doorway to freedom.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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