Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:58

Tonight, following on Roxanne's talk last night, I want to talk about impermanence—particularly the perception of impermanence.

We've mentioned quite a few times the three characteristics: impermanence, not-self, and dukkha, unreliability. Intellectually, it would seem to me that understanding impermanence would be the most accessible. Probably none of us would argue with the fact that things change and nothing is going to stay the same. So how come we don't live that way? Why don't we really understand it?

If we did really understand it—the Buddha talked about the centrality of understanding impermanence. This is from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual craving. It eliminates all craving for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'" That's basically the way he describes complete awakening: when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

I really appreciate that emphasis on the *perception* of impermanence, because to my way of thinking, perception is at the heart of insight. When we think of what an insight is, really, it's not that reality has changed. The nature of insight—all different kinds of insight—is that suddenly our perception shifts; we're able to perceive in a different way, which, according to the Buddha's teaching, when it's an insight, that new way of perceiving is more in accordance with the way things are. So there's not such a sense of struggle.

There are all levels of insight, from a personal problem to awakening—like what he's talking about with the perception of impermanence. When Roxanne talked about the five aggregates, I think this is one of the reasons perception is broken out from sankhara: because it's so key to see how and why we don't perceive impermanence if it's all around us.

I want to talk a little bit about some personal reflections on things that prevent us—or why we don't always, or even often, really perceive impermanence on a level that's transformative.

Back to the Buddha, and this is from what Roxanne was talking about last night—again, the centrality of impermanence, the ubiquity of it: "Bhikkhus, there is no form, no feeling tone, no perception, no volitional formations, no consciousness"—you recognize that list; short memory time, only last night—"that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself."

Then he took up a little bit of soil in his fingernail and said to the bhikkhus, "There's not even this much form"—and he went through all of the khandhas—"not even this much form, the amount under my

fingernail, that is not subject to change and that will remain the same. If there was this much form that was permanent, this living of the holy life for the complete abandoning of suffering could not be seen, could not be understood." Basically saying: not this much. So that's serious perception of impermanence.

"But because there is not even this much form in all the five khandhas that is permanent, this living of the holy life for the complete abandoning of suffering is possible, is discerned."

That's a really powerful statement.

So I want to talk a bit about impermanence and, in my mind, some of the things that get in the way of accurate perception. None of this will be new to you. I'm just putting it together in this particular form.

The first thing that comes to my mind that blocks our perception of impermanence is our instinctive resistance or reaction to unpleasant, unhappy feelings—the first noble truth—or instinctive fear of loss and grief, instinctive resistance to loss and grief, or the idea that something's wrong, this shouldn't be happening. The first noble truth. I'll talk about that in a moment.

The second and third go together: we misperceive. This is the vipallasa, the distortion of perception—we perceive what is constantly changing as being unchanging, and we don't quite recognize that level. Part of that misperception comes about because of inattention. Delusion, but inattention—lack of steady awareness. Those are some of the things I want to touch into tonight.

Just again reminding us: when a moment of insight occurs, a shift of perception, reality doesn't change. It's not like if you finally have some big blowout insight—I talked about anattā the other week, now I'm talking about anicca—then suddenly everything's changing, whereas before it was all steady state, and so now that everything's changing, there's no way you can function because there's no ground anywhere. Well, that's what we think. But it's already always changing. That's how it is.

When our perception actually comes in line with reality, at first it shakes us up because it's uncomfortable. But when we're not in conflict with it, that's what opens our heart and mind to really living fully.

I say a lot of stuff, but it's coming to that.

So, first, just to talk about particularly when we think of impermanence on the bigger level—of course, loss, grief, death, separation, those are the first obvious ones. And I imagine none of us can really get behind saying this sense of separation and change is not going to happen. But still, when someone we care for goes away or dies or gets sick, or we lose something that's really important, being human and not completely awake, it's really natural that we feel sorrow or we feel grief.

And it's also a really deep habit that we don't want to feel sorrow or grief. This is the whole first noble truth of the unreliability—that we tend to think the unpleasant is wrong and bad, and we recoil from it. But this grief, the sorrow at loss, it's part of being human. It's part of being human. And so our trying to

push it away, or even unconsciously thinking something's wrong with it, is actually what blocks just opening into the fact of change. That is human.

There's a very famous story from the suttas, and probably most of you have heard it, and you're going to hear it again now, with Ananda, who was the Buddha's cousin and his attendant the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. In general, Ananda is really a very friendly presence in the suttas. He is very kind. He really took great care of the Buddha, but he didn't try to keep people away. He would always try to help people come and hear the Dhamma. He was a great proponent of sharing the Dhamma.

And he had this amazing memory. He could remember word for word every discourse the Buddha gave. In fact, when you're listening or reading any of the discourses that begin, "Thus have I heard," that's meant to be from Ananda reciting it. And there's a lot like that. In fact, when he first agreed to become the Buddha's attendant, he made some stipulations, and one of them was that any Dharma talk of the Buddha's he didn't hear, the Buddha would repeat to him later so that he could remember it. So he was a great guy. He's more accessible to us. He's not like this amazing arhat.

So anyway, the story: The Buddha, when he knew he was going to die—I think it was about three months before—he told Ananda, he told his close disciples that this was going to happen. And then he was sitting, talking with disciples, and he noticed Ananda wasn't there. So he says to the other bhikkhus, "Where is Ananda? Please go find friend Ananda." And it's said, of course, that he knew where he was because he could see. But anyway, they found him leaning against a doorframe, weeping, weeping.

And they said, "Friend, the Blessed One calls you. And why are you weeping?"

And he said, "Because the Blessed One is leaving us. I am still a learner with much to do. How can we go on? How can we teach?" And he was just so overcome with sorrow and grief.

So just know this is our natural response. The Buddha called him, and of course, in a kind way, he said, "Ananda"—first he asked what was going on, and Ananda told him what I just said. He said, "Ananda, haven't I told you, everything that's subject to arising is subject to cessation, to coming apart? How could it possibly be that this doesn't happen?"

But it wasn't chastising him, because then he went on to really talk about Ananda's faith and Ananda's kindness, and he really brightened his heart and mind. He didn't just leave him with, "You stupid Ananda, haven't I told you, get over it." That's not what he was saying. He said, "I've told you, that's the teaching." But he brightened his mind, appreciated him and his kindness and his faith so that he could keep on going. "And soon you will also understand completely."

I love that story because it just makes it human. It's part of our path. It's part of life. Grief, sorrow—it's not something wrong. It's going to happen, and it doesn't help to push it away, and it doesn't help to think, "I should, as a good Buddhist, say, 'They will not be seen by me again.'"

No, we feel sorrow. Feel it. Open into it. Allow it.

This is a little personal, but I'll share it. Some time ago—maybe ten or eleven years ago—my only sister died unexpectedly. Well, not entirely unexpectedly. She had been ill, but it was still very sudden. We were close, and yes, I felt a lot of grief for quite a while.

It was surprising how strong the grief was. But also, in a way, because of the circumstances—her death was unexpected, yet there was nothing to do about it—there was nothing to make me think I shouldn't feel grief. It was obvious that of course I would feel it. There wasn't anything to try to go back and change the past so I wouldn't feel the grief, or to pretend things would change in the future. That's something about death: the person is really gone. You can't pretend.

And so I just, for some reason, was totally open to it. For months and months, the grief would come really strong. I'd feel it. It would go. It wasn't every day for months, but when the grief would arise, I just wasn't pushing it away or in denial. I really allowed it.

Sometimes it was just grief. Sometimes I could really feel—without even thinking about it—that by not pushing it away, it would move into compassion. Not for anyone in particular, but just for the suffering of the world. This is how samsara is, you know? And I really felt, not at the lofty level of the Buddha, but on our personal level, a kind of purity of grief in just allowing it. I felt that for me, it also reflected the love. Sure, there's attachment, or we wouldn't feel grief. But I felt that allowing it was also honoring the love.

It was a profound experience. I learned a lot from that. By not trying to do anything—just recognizing "this is what's happening"—the grief would come through strong and go away. It didn't last all day. It came and went at any particular time, and that was okay. I really learned about how whatever is arising, that's what's happening. Opening into it is the way of opening into life, not shutting things out. It doesn't deny love. It was a really deep learning for me.

The Buddha often used impermanence, change, as a powerful teaching tool—kind of letting the resistance or the sadness or the difficulty be a wake-up call to pay attention.

Now I'm shifting gears here. This is Ajahn Chah talking to people in Thailand, using impermanence, using life as a wake-up call—the suffering of change. But he's funny.

First he starts talking about how meditation is easy for old people, and then he goes into why:

"Meditation is hard for youngsters. Their teeth are strong, so they can enjoy their food. They sleep soundly. Their faculties are intact, and the world is fun and exciting to them, so they get deluded in a big way. For the old ones, when they chew on something hard, they're soon in pain. Right there, the divine messengers are talking to them. They're teaching them every day. When they open their eyes, their sight is fuzzy. In the morning, their backs ache. In the evening, their legs hurt. That's it! This is really an excellent subject to study. This is seeing the body in the body and sensation in sensation. Are you seeing these, or

are you running away?"

And he goes on and on. I'm skipping around. But he said, you have to see it within yourself. When you sit, it's true. When you stand up, it's true.

And this isn't only old people. So you young people don't think you're getting a pass. It's happening now, right? That's what retreats show us. Everything is a hassle. Everything is presenting obstacles. And everything is teaching you.

When you're young, you can just stand up and walk, going on your way. When you're old, every time you stand up, it's *oy*. Isn't that what you say? *Oy, oy.* Every time you move, you learn something. So how can you say it's difficult to meditate? Where else is there to look? Divine messengers are telling you something. It's most clear. Sankhara are telling you that they are not stable or permanent, not you or yours. They are telling you this every moment.

He's funny, but he's getting right in there. They are telling us this every moment. Why don't we notice? Why do we think that something's wrong when we notice? This is where we're starting to trust the actual perception rather than all our ideas and our interpretations.

So maybe that concept sounds familiar—bringing attention to the actual experience as opposed to all the interpretations. Have you heard that since you've been here? That's why we're practicing that moment after moment after moment. You think nothing special is going on. You're just feeling sensation. You're just feeling this. We want some big insight right now.

But every moment that the mindfulness and the mind is being really present just with what is, without adding some story, without mistaking our concept for the reality—that's practicing inclining the mind towards more accurate perception. We spend the rest of our life practicing inaccurate perception. Really? So here we're learning to have that. And then suddenly, it feels like an insight. Suddenly it shifts and you recognize, oh my gosh, everything's changing. And then it goes back again. That's why we have to keep practicing.

So Ajahn Chah used this as a powerful teaching tool. Powerful.

There's a sense of denial on the big level. But even on the smaller level, just the habit—we talked about this a lot—the habit of clinging as the way to lead to happiness. It's so poignant. I said that a couple of weeks ago: Why do we cling?

In terms of this perception of impermanence, this is my take. Part of the clinging is, yes, for pleasant experience, for happiness, but also wanting some sense of stability, some sense of permanence, some sense of somewhere to land, something steady. So our strategy for happiness is to cling to sense experience, to ideas, to views about things, about people, about the situation, about ourselves, about our personality—to any experience, to give some sense of landing somewhere.

But that's what the impermanence is pointing to. There's nowhere to land but this moment, and then it's changing, changing, changing. But our systems don't really like that so much.

Sally was there. I can't remember if Guy was there. And actually, I was giving a dhamma talk when there was an earthquake. It was a fairly strong one, but not overwhelming. Then a couple of hours later came a much stronger one. I'd never been in an earthquake before, and it's unsettling, right? It's unsettling.

But the more unsettling thing to me—because I was in a safe place when the bigger one came, I was outside, so that wasn't traumatic. It was more difficult for people who were trapped inside; that was a little more scary, though no one was really hurt. But the next couple of days, there were all these aftershocks. So you'd just be settling down to sleep at night, and of course the radio was announcing, "Ninety-two percent chance of the big one"—this is Southern California—"eighty percent, eighty-five percent chance of the big one." So helpful.

And so you'd just be settling down to sleep, you'd hear the radiator go *shhhh*—do we have to get up and run outside? Is this the big one? No, okay, it's over. And an hour later—do we have to get up and run outside? Just this sense of... the Earth is supposed to be stable. We take refuge on the Earth, but even that.

It was interesting. Now I can say this, right? I didn't like it so much at the time. But that is how I relate to this sense of response to unreliability—to hold on, even just for a moment. Even to something unpleasant: "It's going to be like this. It's going to be like this." Even though I hate it and it's miserable, I cling: "No, it's going to be like this. Not like that."

I'm going to read just part of a long poem by Galway Kinnell, an American poet. I read it a lot; I love it, about clinging. 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.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down."
I have stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die,"
little Maud.
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.

It's like that. And it doesn't have to be horrible. We don't have to wake screaming from a nightmare when

we're not fighting it, when we're not resisting it.

This is from the suttas. Somewhere—I've never been able to find it again, the location, but I know I saw it somewhere, I think it's probably the Sutta Nipāta: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful."

And a Tibetan saying: "Resting at ease in whatever arises."

Another teaching moment, using the reality of change as teaching. This is a more true story. Again, some years ago—I don't know, maybe fifteen years ago—I was helping teach a retreat in Burma, in a small village near Sagaing, in the Sagaing Hills. The monastery where we teach is along the Irrawaddy River, and there are some different nunneries nearby that we know; the nuns would go and visit. So one day the teachers—this is Westerners teaching together with the Burmese, teaching Westerners—we were walking along.

The teachers and our friend translator were walking along the river, and at one place just down in front of the nunnery, two doors down, there was a whole crowd of people sitting on the wall looking into the river. That was unusual. So we said, "Well, what happened?"

And then a little nun that we knew—Haiti was her name, is her name—came running up to us and could talk to us because our translator friend was there. She was about maybe six years old, something like that. And she said, "Oh, it's the three young novices." These are young boys who are ordained as novice monks, maybe eleven, twelve, thirteen years old. They had gone out in a boat swimming in the river, and one of them had fallen out, and they couldn't find him. People were looking in the river, assuming he had drowned because it had been an hour since he disappeared. And so they were all there.

We had to go back, but eventually they did find his body and brought it up. And this is the teaching point.

He had only been in that area a week or two. He wasn't used to the river, whereas the other young boys were. He came from somewhere that was a long twelve, twenty-hour journey away. So they sent for his parents, the monks and the nuns did. He was from a monastery a little higher up, but this part of the river was right outside the nunnery. They all took his body to this sala that was just across the street at the foot of the nunnery. A sala is like a big open room with a roof and no walls—a large place where they might do chanting or have different kinds of meetings.

So they took him into this large open sala and put him on a nice bed, went and got him a change of clothes. And then the nuns and the monks and all different villagers, including the little nuns—and Haiti's not the only young nun—they all went and, well, they sent for his parents. It was going to take them a day to get there. They spent the time chanting metta, sending metta—just the whole community. People would do shifts.

It was just so natural. It wasn't like calling 911, having them brought away in an ambulance where you

don't see it. And they didn't tell the little nuns, "Oh, you shouldn't see this, go back to the nunnery." They were there. They were part of it. It's part of life.

It was really a powerful teaching for us, so different from the way we had always seen it in our culture here, how I had been brought up and also the other teacher. Yes, it was really a powerful teaching to look and see—this is part of life. It's being met with love and openness, not hidden away or something to hide from or to protect the kids from knowing about. But it's done with love.

So that one aspect of our tendency—wanting to shy away from seeing unpleasant things, or change, or loss, or feeling it in ourselves—really opening into it is what opens us to the truth.

The other aspect of misperception comes from inattention as well. We assume permanence, or we don't notice the momentariness of change. There was a teaching once with the Dalai Lama—I think Guy was there—where he was talking about the momentariness of change. He said we tend to think, even when we understand that everything's impermanent, that something arises, it abides for a while, and then it passes away. He said there's no "abides for a while." Change is momentary.

This thinking—"Oh, it's going to last," whatever it is—we think things arise due to conditions and then hang around for a while. My knee pain—solid state. Birth—I was born, I'll last all these years, and then I'll die. As if there are two moments together that are exactly the same.

So it's just this not seeing the momentariness. Part of that is that it's happening so quickly we don't actually perceive it. Having the quiet and more steady awareness allows us to recognize the subtlety. But it's not only that. Part of it is just our habit of assuming permanence, of not really looking carefully, of inattention.

So you might notice as you go through the day, or you have a sensation, just noticing it. Really, the more present with it, you see it's changing all the time. But when concept takes over, it feels the same.

He said once—I don't know if you'll get it—he said there's two things that don't change: Nibbana and a concept. So look at that. "Oh, this pain's been the same all day." Total concept. I mean, nothing's even there all day, right? Notice how often we do that.

Another place I play with it sometimes is seeing. When we're walking around, we just think "seeing"—steady state seeing. But the actual seeing is different every single second. Not that you have to get lost in the content of seeing, but it's never the same two seconds. But we just go, "Oh yeah, seeing. I'm always seeing." Or we just don't really notice.

You know when you see time-lapse photography? Those nature programs with a time-lapse of a bulb being planted, and then it pushes up through the earth and grows into the flower or the tree or whatever, and then the leaves fall off and it dies and goes back to the earth. When you see it all moving like that, you see that there's never any place you could stop it and say there's a stasis—that now it's bulb and now it's

flower. It's just changing every moment. But it's slower than our normal eyes can see. Speeding it up like that gives a sense of how it really is.

It's not just outside. It's also inside. A friend, a longtime meditator, was saying, "For years I've seen everything's changing, everything's changing. Why don't I get it?" And suddenly she saw, "Oh, I was thinking everything around me is changing. But also here, inside me, I'm constantly changing too." And that's the thing. There's actually not really any insight outside like that.

Once there were five of us—it must have been at a retreat teaching—and we would meet for dinner every night. Once we were just laughing about it and saying, "We feel like the same five of us are meeting every night. But actually, it's a different five every night." We're always different. You're in a different mood, or your body feels different. It's a completely different bringing together. But we just assume we're all the same. We don't look at it.

So this is where it gets really interesting—this lack of continuity of awareness. When people come into interviews at retreats, they say things like, "I'm just sleeping all the time," or "I've been sad all day." And we really think that. That's how our mind assumes permanence. It draws this veil over everything. "It's always been like this. It's always going to be like this." And we don't notice the arising and passing, the coming and the going.

There was something else, but I don't know what it was—so that's change. The mind doesn't hold things anymore.

I was reading a short description of a meeting some years ago between Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche.

And it said they were just sitting somewhere quietly for hours, just sitting. And then suddenly one of them pointed to a tree and said, "They call that a tree." And then they both just laughed uproariously. They said, "Everything is a verb." Everything is a verb. So we go "tree." I mean, it's functional—don't get me wrong, it's functional. But this assumption of permanence is where we get stuck. So just seeing that.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." So just noticing that.

I read somewhere a very simple description of right view. It's very simple, but it's very helpful to simplify. Right view simply means a view that's in alignment with things as they are.

In terms of different kinds of insights, there's one I like to talk about in Pali: *yathā-bhūta-ñāna-dassana*. That's a particular insight that could be translated as insight seeing clearly into things as they have come to be in this moment. And that's considered a very profound insight—recognizing things as they have come to be in this moment. "Have come to be" rather than "are." Someone made that distinction to me in terms of the translation. "Things as they are"—again, we're back into unchanging steady state. "Things as

they have come to be" gives me that sense of conditions coming together, and they change, and they go away again. But in this moment, that alignment of perception with things as they have come to be is actually a powerful insight.

How does that happen? Steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness. That's really why continuity, why we talk about it so much. As soon as there's not the continuity of mindfulness, we don't see the arising, we don't notice the endings, never mind the momentary change.

The steadiness of awareness and then, you know, *sammā-sati*—right mindfulness, meaning mindfulness that isn't clouded by wanting or aversion, because then we don't recognize accurately what's going on. But just steady, steady, moment-to-moment mindfulness. Why we're always talking about continuity so much.

I ask a lot of times in interviews, "How is it in the in-between times?" It's not to judge you like a teacher—it's nothing like that. Because we all space out a lot. That spacing out, that not having steady awareness, is exactly what prevents accurate recognition of impermanence. Because in the space out, we come back: "Oh, yeah, I'm sad. And I've been sad all day." We forget. You were hungry. You were tired. You were sleepy. You were bored. You were this. You were that. Now I'm sad. And so with the steadiness, we see it changing all the time, all the time.

It's like a tip I often give people wondering about effort in practice and all different things. And you can't really tell. Rather than trying to tighten up in the sitting or the walking, have a wider view. Kind of cast your balanced mind—not your aversive striving mind, but your balanced mind—over the day. And just see, are there places you're just kind of ever so subtly blowing it off? Not meaning to, but just thinking... When I'm wondering if I'm really being one hundred percent, I just look at my continuity. Not that you can control the continuity of mindfulness. Of course you can't.

But I can control my physical action to some extent. I can control how much—if I'm sitting, if I'm walking, if I'm going to my room—am I really doing it? Am I including it as part of the practice? Where am I saying, "Enough of this already"? Or there are just subtle things that I think don't count. So that's the place we can always look.

And a lot of times, things change. Have you noticed in the practice you don't get to have the same wonderful experience all the time? So when it goes away and you start thinking, "What did I do wrong? How can I get it back?"—don't go there. I just look and see, okay, am I staying steady? Sitting, walking, in activities? That's what I can do. That's not striving. Trying to get it back—that only causes suffering. Because nothing ever comes back. It's gone. It's over. Every moment's new. You can't get the last moment back. Maybe a better moment will come, whatever "better" means to you. And that'll go too. Because that's how it is.

The suffering isn't that it goes—it's that we think it shouldn't. Or we wish it went sooner. Either one.

So the Buddha said, cultivate a perception of impermanence, of anicca. Just a few little tips come to mind.

Not going around crazily looking for it. Not striving. "Oh, I see the ending." Little things at times.

One is something from Ajahn Chah, which is just at times—broadly, when you're going through life, when you're going through the day—noticing from time to time: "This is uncertain." Just, "Oh, this is uncertain." When you find yourself thinking, "I'm going to get banana for breakfast today," you just might go, "This is uncertain." When you think, "I'm going to go in the refrigerator and get some eggs," you think, "This is uncertain." We never know.

That's not to make a big deal, but just to remind ourselves. And if you do that, it kind of highlights, "Ah, I was assuming. I know how it's going to be." So that's just something to lightly look at.

Another thing I like to notice is when we're assuming permanence. This, of course, we've talked about. You can see it in your practice here all the time. Just today—just today—if you think back later, how did you relate to different experiences in the last couple of days? Difficult experiences: fear, anxiety, self-doubt, the difficult ones. Were there times when part of that emotional quality, even if you're kind of mindful, was like, "It's going to be like this always"?

It's kind of part of what some difficult emotions say. They say, "It's going to be like this always." And we know it's not true, but we kind of believe it. Just noticing that—assuming permanence.

Or it goes away. You don't quite notice the going, but you notice it's gone. Yet we think, "Well, I'm not noticing it right now, but it's down there waiting." And when it comes back, you say, "Yeah, I knew it. It was always there. I just wasn't mindful enough. Here it is again. It's always like this."

Notice that. Because it isn't always like this.

And then with the beautiful or the positive or the ones that you like—with the clinging, you try to hold onto it, of course. Do you try to get it back again?

Now I know how to meditate. They talked about there being a path to samadhi. This is it. This is how I sat. This is how much I slept. This is what I ate. This is how I held my hands. How can I get it back again?

Just noticing that—don't make yourself bitter about it, but that's assuming permanence. It's really gone. How much more suffering is there in trying to get something back than just letting it go and being fully present here in this moment? That's so much easier, but we can't stand it. We can't do it. We just can't be that simple. We've got to complicate everything, hold on to something that's over, and project this pain in the knee into the future, into the rest of our lives. How can I ever do anything again with this pain in my back, with this sadness, with this crick in my neck, with this headache, with whatever it is? It's over. It's always going to be this way.

And then it ends and we think, "Yeah, right, everything's impermanent," la la la. And then something else comes and we do the same thing again.

So not to judge ourselves—this is just human nature. Steady awareness starts to show us this. And it can be fun, you know? It can be. We don't take ourselves so seriously. "Yeah, right—assuming permanence again."

And then when something we've been holding onto goes, really notice the gone-ness. It's really gone.

I use this example. I know it seems silly, but somehow it was a big insight. Sometimes the big insights come through little things that are happening. I was eating lunch very slowly and mindfully. You take the bite. You feel the burst of flavor. You're chewing. In two bites, the flavor's gone, and you're just masticating this glob of stuff. Then you swallow and you're feeling it going down. I noticed my mind was saying—as I felt the swallowing—that's the food going down. But then I went to the direct experience. That wasn't experience; that was concept. The sense of the food in the mouth was gone. It was really gone. There was a sensation in the stomach, but to think "that's the food in the mouth" was just some idea that gives a sense of permanence. When I really looked, the food was totally gone. And now there was just this experience.

I know this seems silly, but actually noticing that gone-ness is really interesting—noticing cessation just of little things like that. I don't mean go around being crazy, looking for endings of everything. I'm really not trying to say that. Or "I've got to see the beginning, I've got to see the ending." No. Notice what you're actually noticing. That's good enough.

When we bring continuity of awareness, we can't help but notice impermanence. Why? Because that's how it is. But looking for something we're not exactly seeing, we're stuck in concept and striving again.

So I'm dropping these in as things to notice when they're actually noticeable, not to make you crazy trying to see something that isn't here.

And then again, noticing how conditions change, how conditions affect other conditions—like noticing how the weather changes. Maybe your mood changes. I certainly notice that. And some of you think, well, no, who am I to be affected by the weather? We're not different from the weather. Notice that. A gray, cold, cloudy day, a beautiful sunny day with the leaves—the mood might be different. How does the breath feel when you have a cold, when you don't have a cold, when you're tired, when you're not? The conditions that come together and create experience are always changing. This is how conditionality works, and again, steady state awareness really reveals that.

There's another story from the suttas about this, a monk named Asaji, who had apparently had really good practice and concentration, and he was very sick. On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Rajagaha in the bamboo grove, and Venerable Asaji was sick, afflicted, gravely ill. So the Buddha went to him and was talking to him. Asaji was quite upset and really feeling regret. The Buddha was asking him about his virtue, his sila—are you regretting, having remorse? And he said, no, no. So the Buddha said, well, if you have nothing for which to reproach yourself in regard to your virtue, Asaji, why are you

troubled by remorse and regret?

And he said, formally, venerable sir, when I was ill in previous times, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations—in other words, getting really concentrated. But now I do not obtain concentration. So it occurs to me, let me not fall away. The conditions have changed, he can't get concentrated, and he's really upset about it. The guy's dying, and he's upset.

And the Buddha, of course, gave him a whole talk on impermanence—on the fact that, first, the impermanence of form, the impermanence of vedana. He said that in his teaching, concentration is not the essence; the essence is insight, path, and fruit. And so really seeing—with form when it's changing, when vedana is changing—he understands: it's changing, it's going away. When he feels a feeling tone terminating with the body, he understands: this feeling tone is ending with the body. When it's terminating with life, he understands: it's ending. He understands this is just what's happening. It's not about trying to get that concentration because that's not possible under the present conditions. But the freedom is from the understanding. Everything's changing.

This discernment, this understanding of impermanence on the visceral, cellular level—not intellectual understanding; we all have that, thinking about it. The middle level of understanding, yes, we ponder it, we go deeper. But the transformative level of insight—I really think of it as cellular level, when we really perceive again and again.

It's not suffering. There are moments, yes, that shaky ground we don't like, fear can come up on the way. But don't be afraid of that. Really, the deep understanding, as Roxanne was saying, opens us to the wonder, to the mystery, to the beauty of life. It releases our mind, our heart, from the habit of obsessing with looking for happiness, fulfillment, self-confirmation in any experience. That's like a huge relief. Not to need experience to confirm your sense of self or value, not needing experience to do anything, but just to open fully, moment to moment, into this vibrant presence—totally here. It's not like you don't care about everything. You're totally in everything.

Many of you probably know this little poem, but I like it because it feels like just what I'm saying. It's attributed to a Zen nun named Tejitsu.

Whether that's true, I'm not sure. She says:

Standing on the small porch of Hakujuan, she saw the shadow of a little bird cross the footpath, followed by the shadow of a hungry crow. And she saw that the little bird arose, abided, and fell away. And then she saw that arising arose, abided, and fell away. Abiding arose, abided, and fell away. Falling away arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this—no ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane she held, nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

Into the midst of everything. That's really how it feels—not like nothing matters, but totally in the midst of everything. The beauty, the mystery, the wonder of just this moment, nothing needing to block. And this brings us a great flexibility of response to situation. It doesn't mean "who cares?" You're totally present. Without holding to prior concepts, you can really see what's appropriate, what might need to happen.

I'll end with a little story illustrating this, from a book called *Street Zen* by Issan Dorsey, who was a Zen master. First he was a drag queen in San Francisco, then he practiced Zen for twenty years, and then he founded the Hartford Street Zen Center. He meant it as a Zen center, but he said men with AIDS kept showing up at the door, so he turned it into a hospice—Maitri Hospice—for AIDS patients.

Just this little line of how that happened, because he never meant it to be a hospice. He said: "We always dealt with whatever came to the door. We started the hospice because death came to the door."

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 respond to the immediacy of the situation, and therefore we're very practical.

Opening into everything, falling into the midst of everything, allows for truly appropriate response to everything. We don't need to be afraid of impermanence. It really allows us so much freedom to appreciate the beauty in life, as well as opening to the difficulty.

Thank you for your attention. Let's just sit quietly a moment.

So assuming permanence, we assume that in thirty or thirty-five minutes you'll do walking meditation, the bell will ring, we'll all come back in and chant. What's amazing is how often that really happens. But notice—we never really know.

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