The Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:03

So tonight, I wanted to talk about anicca, impermanence. I was thinking with the weather lately, I hardly need to talk about it—it's really quite obvious. But I want to talk about it from the point of view of how the Buddha speaks about accurate perception being the doorway to liberation, to understanding.

When he talks about the nature of insight, freeing insight, the nature of insight is not about creating some new reality—that if we meditate hard enough or study hard enough, somehow we create a different world that's better and impermanent and not-self and all. It's not like we're moving from permanence to impermanence. We just don't recognize accurately. And the nature of perception, when the Buddha talks about right view, the translation into English—right view—I like that translation because it's almost literal. We're viewing accurately the way things are. We're recognizing the way things already are.

In terms of the three characteristics, as you know: anicca, impermanence; dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness, unreliability; anatta, not-self. All three of them—and I think I'm going to give a talk on each of them this month—but all three of them, the way we're caught and why we suffer is that we resist them, we don't understand them. But on the deepest level, we don't understand them because we don't recognize accurately.

And what gets in the way of recognizing accurately? Our old friends, the kilesas, you know: greed, wanting, hatred, aversion, and delusion—both not having a clue what's going on, not paying any attention, or making it all about me.

So I want to start by talking about the perception of impermanence. These distortions of perception, the Buddha talked about them. He calls them vipallasa, distortions of the mind. There are four. I'm only going to talk about three this month.

"These four, O monks, are distortions of perception, distortions of thought, and distortions of view: sensing no change in the changing, sensing pleasure in what is unsatisfying, assuming self where there is no self, sensing the unlovely as lovely. Gone astray with wrong views, beings misperceive with distorted minds. Bound in the bondage of Mara, these people are far from safety. They're beings that go on flowing, going again from death to birth."

This is Andrew Olendzki's translation, "Distortions of Mind." I'll go into it a little more specifically in a moment.

But I find it fascinating—in particular about impermanence of the three characteristics. To me, it seems like on an intellectual understanding level, impermanence is the most obvious. People here wouldn't

really argue that our bodies and minds are permanent. In an intellectual discussion, I'm assuming we could agree: yeah, stuff's changing all the time. That's right. And I may or may not be comfortable with it, but it's something that intellectually we can get.

But do we really? What would it mean if we were actually living from the cellular knowing of the way things are in terms of impermanence—the fact that no experience of mind or body lasts for more than a split second? That's the level at which impermanence is how things are. What would it mean to live from that?

And our mind that isn't quite there isn't really thrilled about that idea. Even when I think, "Yes, I understand impermanence," if I then think, "What would it be to live from it?"—the Buddha often said that whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying. If we really recognize the changing, impermanent nature of something, we so deeply see it that we can't cling to it to satisfy our hearts and minds, because it just doesn't make any sense. He says that often. Do I really believe that? He doesn't say you hate everything because it's impermanent, just that we know it's inherently unsatisfying.

And he also says over and over: can whatever is impermanent, can that be self? He says this in many suttas, and the monks and nuns always respond, "No, Revered Sir, it cannot be self." And that's always presented as proof that there's no self. But I think, do we actually live from that? Do we believe that? Just because the Buddha said it, do we believe it?

So I think part of our practice, our exploration, is not to try and make ourselves believe another view. That's not freeing or helpful. But instead, to look and see what we do believe, how we do act, and then start to explore and cultivate what the Buddha calls the perception of impermanence. We do cultivate the perception of permanence all the time.

Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for existence—all wanting for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'

That's a really powerful statement. Those four things are equivalent to arhatship, complete liberation in the Buddha's teaching. The perception of impermanence, when developed and cultivated, eliminates sensual lust, lust for becoming, ignorance, and uproots all conceit of "I am." That's incredibly powerful.

And what I love about it—I love exploring perception anyway. I think it's a fascinating place of study. What we mean by perception is simply this: with any sense contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, moods in the mind—the perception, *saññā* in Pali, is what the Buddha described as the recognition faculty. On a gross level, perception would be "paper." I see this as paper. Knowing I'm seeing is a kind of perception. Seeing people is a perception. A name is a perception. Those are obvious perceptions.

But he's talking on a subtle level—that we don't perceive, we don't recognize, the constant subtle changing

nature of experience. We literally perceive things to be solid and permanent. I could do a whole other talk on perception itself, but I'm not going to tonight. Instead, let's explore the power of this perception of permanence and perception of impermanence, and start to bring mindfulness to this area—not to make ourselves right or wrong, but to recognize: what are we perceiving?

The Buddha talks about distortions of perception, of thought, and of view. This is another thing I love about exploring perception. How we perceive—like perceiving paper, or perceiving a certain person—that's *saññā*. And the distortion of perception, say, perceiving permanence, leads to how we think about something. That's what he calls a distortion of thought. We don't recognize that we're thinking about something as permanent, but that's how we perceive it.

See if this happens to you at all, ever in the day: "Oh no, this terrible mood. How am I going to get through the rest of the day with this mood like this? How am I going to get through the rest of the retreat if it keeps on raining like this?" Or: "Finally, finally I've hit that place of smooth samādhi, and now it's going to be smooth sailing for the rest of the time." Or we try to recreate an experience. All these thoughts become distortions of thinking.

And that then leads to distortions of view, of *diṭṭhi*, which would be wrong view rather than right view, where we don't even recognize that we're assuming the permanence of anything. Perception is quick and subtle, but it's extremely powerful when we don't recognize it. It's a fascinating place to explore. That's why he's saying: cultivate the perception.

Again, the Buddha: "There is no form, no feeling tone, no *vedanā*, no perception, no volitional formation—meaning intention or any of the actions of our mind—and no consciousness that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself. None."

Then he took up a little bit of dirt in his fingernail, and he said to the bhikkhus, "There's not even this much form"—the amount of dirt in his fingernail—"not even this much form that is stable, that is permanent, that will not change." He said, "If there was even this much form that was permanent, that was stable, that was eternal, then this living of the holy life for the destruction of suffering could not be discerned."

So there can't be even a little bit. Not that there can't be—there isn't. There simply isn't. Or we couldn't see through. Because what frees our heart and mind is seeing how things really are. And then clinging, for example, doesn't make any sense.

The stuff that we really know—like this sunset—pretty much all of us have seen quite a few sunsets in our life, right? Pretty much, we let it go. You may cry because it's so beautiful, but you're not like, "Oh no, come back, come back, come back, sunset."

No, don't go, don't go.

We were talking today about this changing of season and how hard it might be for some of you who are from warmer, sunnier climes to come here in the fall when the days are getting shorter and shorter and shorter. And we started thinking, what must it be like in northern Sweden? You know, or Finland or something like that. So now I was just thinking, based on that conversation, maybe on the last day that the sun's going to show up for four months, maybe you do go, "No, no, no, no, don't go away." But you know it's hopeless.

So I want to talk a little bit—just various thoughts I have—about how the delusion that gets in the way of perceiving accurately in terms of impermanence, some of the ways it shows up, some of the ways it manifests. And I'm sure you can come up with other examples and other ways it manifests in your own experience. I'm by no means thinking this is exhaustive.

But I saw an interesting list somewhere. I can't remember where—I've looked—but I like it. It seems true wherever I found it. Three ways that *moha*, or delusion, can manifest in our experience, particularly in terms of impermanence.

The first is just plain inattention. Delusion—we're just not even noticing what's going on. La, la, la, la. This is what mindfulness is really here to help us with. I've noticed personally, I have an aversive type temperament, which really notices everything. What's wrong, what's right, how it should be. And that's been getting less. And guess what? Delusion's coming up. I walk into a room: "Oh, has that picture been here? Is that a new picture?" I say to people. And they look at me and say, "No, Carol, it's been here ten years." I mean, I'm not making this up. It's embarrassing, you know? But that kind of just inattention—and I gather you might be familiar with that sometimes happening. We just don't really notice what's happening, accurately or inaccurately.

The second is denial, the quality in our mind. Sometimes we can even see ourselves doing it and pretend it's not happening. But the mind is basically going, "No, that's not true. It's not like that." That's on the most gross level. In terms of what I notice with impermanence, especially in the bigger aspects—of things we love going away—is both the denial in terms of "This shouldn't be this way, it's not supposed to happen," and the resistance that can come with that. The resistance to the change itself, or the resistance to the sadness or the loss or whatever way that comes up for us. I'll talk about that in a minute.

And the third, on that level of *vipalasas* that I was talking about, the distortions of perception—the third way that delusion, that *moha*, manifests in our experience is by misperceiving, by just recognizing wrongly. Someone was telling me today about his experience, giving me funny little examples of how he saw somebody and his mind completely made it up: "I know this person. This person's sick. This is all going on with this person." And then recognizing later that he was completely and totally wrong. His mind had just made it up. Well, I love it when we can at least see that, to see how that process works. Because until we're really awakened, when we're suffering, that process of really just recognizing wrongly is going on a lot of the time.

So I want to talk about these ways for a moment, how they might show up in our experience with impermanence. The not recognizing impermanence, or even more the resistance, the denial, the sadness—I don't think this is news to anybody. The kind of strategy that seems to be the habit of our mind, and is certainly what the Buddha was pointing to in the Four Noble Truths: our strategy in the face of the fact that there actually is no stability anywhere, that there is no steadfast reliability of anything. And when we hear this and we're still looking for reliability, mostly we don't like that too much.

This is actually an interesting thing to me about all three of the characteristics—that when we're not quite seeing through them... and we all have moments of seeing through them. It's not like you see through them once and it's over. We see through them.

Everyone here has seen through them all. You wouldn't be here. And then we get back in the misperception again.

But what's interesting to me is that all three of them—impermanence or unreliability or not-self—the times we're not seeing through them, the thought of them, it's not pleasant. It's not uplifting. It's not, "Oh yeah, great, there's no reliability or stability anywhere. Let's hear more about that. That's great. Nothing in this world gives satisfaction. Wonderful. That's why I came to practice."

But when we understand them, they're the source of freedom and joy and a much deeper way of being—like living in three dimensions instead of living in two. That's how I think of it. That's how it seems to me. The seeing through them, the accurate perception, is the source of a much more beautiful, sensitive, connected, free life. But we resist it with every cell in our body half the time.

The main way we resist—this isn't news to anybody—with impermanence is through fear, denial, and clinging. It seems to be, as the Buddha pointed out in the Second Noble Truth, that our strategy to find some stability, to try and hide from impermanence, or deny it, or at least somehow find a place of safety within it, is to cling. The mind that tries to hold on to anything—to sense pleasures. We all know that; that's the obvious one. To views, to ideas, to experiences, to relationships, to family, to situations, to comfort in our body, to whatever, to our ideas about who we are, to our personality. We may hate our personality, but we'll cling to it come hell or high water. Don't give me someone else's personality; I just want to hate my own.

But it's so poignant to me, really touching, because the clinging—in a way, the deepest clinging, I feel, is this clinging to really be free, this yearning for wholeness, for connectedness. And what we experience with impermanence is the constancy of loss, as long as there's a sense of me trying to hold myself separate from all the changing experience. It gets like that sometimes with impermanence—everything else around me is changing. But then it's just constant loss. We forget to turn it around and say, "Oh, this part's changing too."

But it's so poignant because it can really be a response of deepest yearning—for understanding, for

freedom, at least for peace. And that's the misperception: that the peace will come if I can just hold on to this, whatever. And you all know whatever it is in your life. It could be something really simple. It can be something really complex.

Again, I know you know this, but I just need to say it. Seeing that clinging brings suffering because it's based on recognizing wrongly does not mean that we hate the things that we cling to. It's the clinging that's the source of suffering because it keeps us from recognizing accurately. But it doesn't mean, "Oh, I shouldn't cling to relationships, so forget about relationship. What do you mean not cling to family? Are you saying I shouldn't love my family? What do you mean?" That's not what I'm saying at all. It's not the object. It's the process of trying to hold on to what's already gone by the time we notice it and think, "Oh yeah, this is going to make me happy."

And of course—duh—this is the same pattern that we bring into our meditation, don't we? You've probably noticed that, all the ups and downs. By the time the thought comes, "Now I've figured out how to have a good sitting," it's over. By the time you've had that thought, you're into wanting. You may not notice it for a while because you want to pretend you're still back in that really peaceful sitting. But as soon as it's, "How can I make this happen again?" it's gone.

That's why we're saying: What's here now? What's here now? What's here now? And clinging, when we don't recognize it, is what freezes our perception, freezes our experience, is what keeps us from recognizing what's here now. It's so poignant because really the clinging is in the service of bringing us peace and happiness.

I read somewhere in the suttas that the search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful. But we cling, thinking it will bring us happiness.

This is a fragment of a poem from Galway Kinnell 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.

I love that because I get the poignancy and the love and that subtle undercurrent. We're all in the pre-trembling of a house that falls—whether it's about sense experience, whether it's about our external situation, whether it's about our body, our life itself. And this denial, this clinging, is a kind of pretense: just hold on, hold on, hold on.

So when we can't resist or avoid acknowledging change, we're just overwhelmed by the sadness, by the suffering. The mind doesn't like uncertainty. I heard on the radio today something that really made me laugh. They were talking about the European debt crisis—ongoing, not fixed somehow yet—and the news person was discussing the effect of this on politics and governments. This is a quotation of what they were saying: "Politics now in Europe is being driven by the stock markets. And the stock markets hate uncertainty."

Like, what world do they live in?

So they pressure this or that government, this or that political figure to stay in office or resign or to do this or that. And I just was cracking up thinking, what do they expect? They hate uncertainty, so they think if this happens, there'll be no more uncertainty? If this political figure resigns, if this bank does this, if this government decides that, then there will be no more uncertainty? It's nuts. And it was said so straight-faced: "Oh, they hate uncertainty, so they try to do this to stop it from being uncertain."

It's just so poignant, this clinging. And then there's the other aspect: opening to change when we can no longer hide from it, in whatever form it's taking. Usually when it's a problem—we don't mind change when something we really hate is going away, do we? Then we all go, "Yeah, impermanence, that's great." So I'm talking about the denial that arises when change comes in ways that are really hard for us—the loss, the sadness, the fear.

Again, why does the stock market—not that the stock market is a thing—why do people on the stock market hate uncertainty? Okay, because of greed; they want money, that's true. But on a deeper level, we don't want to face the truth that every step is into the unknown, that every moment we don't know what's going to happen next. And that is just so unsettling to us.

But when we start to really get it cellularly, it doesn't mean—as far as I can tell, until we're completely awakened—it doesn't mean we don't feel the poignancy, the sadness, the sense of loss. This is only my own personal feeling about it, but I actually think part of our practice, part of opening to the truth of things, is to also open into the sense of loss. When someone dear to us becomes ill and dies, it's not like we can simply say, "Okay, they will not be seen by me again." Maybe the Buddha could say that, but we're most likely going to really feel a lot of things—sadness, loss, anger, whatever.

That's okay. What we've been saying in this whole practice of mindfulness is simply to bring kind, non-judging attention to whatever is happening. So when there's loss and there's sadness, we can be with the sadness. It's part of our humanness.

But we tend to be so resistant to the unpleasant, right? Unpleasant means something's wrong. So this shouldn't have happened. This illness shouldn't have happened. This loss shouldn't have happened. This death shouldn't have happened. Something's wrong. Instead of saying, no, this is life. There's beauty. There's love.

There's beautiful things coming. And there's loss. There's beautiful things going. And there's sadness. And all of this—opening to all of this—is what opening into impermanence is about.

Even in the suttas, I'm sure most of you know this story about Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant for the last twenty-five years of the Buddha's life. I haven't read all the suttas, but in many of them, different monks and nuns appear, and you start to get a little sense of their personalities. They pop up. Some of the main ones pop up a lot. And Ananda, being the Buddha's attendant for twenty-five years, and also having been present for and remembering every discourse the Buddha gave, is very present in the suttas.

He's partly awakened, but he's not a complete arhat for all those twenty-five years. And with Ananda, one often gets a sense of just his humanness. You can almost feel like he's a stand-in for us in some way. Maybe he's a better stand-in. But anyway, you can relate to him often. He'll make mistakes, and the Buddha will go, "No, Ananda, that's not so." One time he was saying, "Oh, I understand dependent origination. It's so obvious. It's so simple." The Buddha goes, "No, Ananda, it is not simple. Do not say that."

So when the Buddha was announcing that he was going to die in a certain amount of time—this was when he was eighty years old, and I couldn't find the sutta, but I can paraphrase it, I remember it—he's sitting there talking to people, and suddenly he realized Ananda had disappeared. He says, "Friend, go find Ananda and ask him to come here." So the other monks go and find Ananda.

There's this image, which Andy Olendzki tells me appears in Buddhist art often, although I haven't actually seen it myself. But it's described in the sutta very specifically: Ananda is standing in the doorway of his hut, leaning up against the door frame, just weeping in such deep sorrow, saying, "The teacher who has done so much for me is leaving. What will I do? And I still have so much work to do." He was just weeping from sadness that the Buddha was going to pass away. This is after twenty-five years of listening to all the Buddha's teachings—so we can cut ourselves a little slack that we're not perfect yet.

The Buddha, of course, calls him—and you can imagine—says, "Ananda, Ananda, what's going on?" Of course, he knew what was going on. And he just says, very kindly but very directly, "Enough, Ananda. Have I not told you? Everything that is subject to arising, everything that comes together by conditions, is going to pass away when the conditions change. Enough of your grief. That's just how it is. Not good, not bad. That's just how it is."

I love that about Ananda, because it's just—yes, that's our human reaction. We don't need to be ashamed of it, and we don't need to push it away. Because when we try, "Oh no, no, I don't want to feel sadness, so

let's not acknowledge that change is happening, let's not even go there"—but no, we can actually, I find, use the sadness, use the resistance when you become aware of it, as a wake-up call. Oh, something's not quite... what's actually happening now?

It is said that when the Buddha's two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, died within a week of one another, and when they were gone, he looked out—he could tell the difference. It wasn't like he didn't know the difference. He looked out over the assembly and said, "This assembly feels empty to me now, empty of Sariputta and Moggallana."

So loss is part of life, and we can use it as a wake-up call. You all know Steve Jobs died recently, right? Oh, right, you've been on retreat for three months. He did. Anyway, he had cancer for several years.

And she was kind of shocked, you know. And she was saying, "Why did this happen?" And I said, "This is called life." And she said, "I know, I know." But you can feel the shock of it.

So we can use all of that just as another opportunity to see more clearly, to open. We don't have to be afraid of those experiences. The sadness, the compassion, the tenderness of heart—these are beautiful qualities. They're part of being fully alive.

And when we stop running from impermanence, when we stop trying to freeze reality into something permanent and controllable, something wonderful happens. We start to taste life directly. Not through the filter of our fears and preferences, not through that constant comparing and grasping, but just—this moment, as it is.

Every moment is new. Every moment is fresh. That's really how it is.

When we cling, we actually can't see clearly. The clinging creates a kind of fog, a distortion. We're so busy trying to hold on to what we want or push away what we don't want that we miss what's actually here. But when we relax that clinging, even a little bit, the world becomes vivid again. Colors are brighter. Sounds are clearer. People's faces are more alive.

This is what Deepa Ma was pointing to. It's not that awakened beings live in some special realm. They're seeing the same world we're seeing. But they're seeing it without the distortion of greed, hatred, and delusion. They're seeing it fresh, moment by moment, without the film of habitual reactivity.

So use whatever is arising in your life—the changes in your body, the losses, the uncertainties—not as problems to be solved, but as doorways. Doorways into this direct perception of how things actually are. That's the practice. That's what we're doing here.

And she said, now it's getting to where every week, people in the group are putting up on the blog, "Oh, add to your metta prayers my cousin, or my partner, or my mother who's in the hospital, or my niece who has this disease," or whatever. And she's starting to see—she's like, every week there's something new.

I was just thinking about it and thinking how most of us, there's periods in our life when we see it, but most of us have a smaller circle of intimates. So we can go for a fair amount of time without it being so immediate. We hear about it on the news all the time—and for sure, sometimes it's too much—but it's not like every week another intimate person got cancer or got sick, or their child had some accident, and on and on. And that's what my friend's experiencing right now.

So when we have the strength of mindfulness—not to get overwhelmed by it, not to get lost in negativity, but the strength to see, "Oh yes, that's how this life is"—we really, really never know. It can take us in the direction that Dipa Ma was talking about. Or as Steve Jobs said, that we can make the decisions that are important to us, or that we realize this moment now is the only thing I really know and can really count on. And as Dogen said, "If you can't see the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?"

So that's one aspect of our resistance and denial, of not recognizing our perception of permanence as a perception of impermanence—because it's just painful, scary, unsettling, and we're not comfortable with that. The other side, of course, is the beauty and the mystery. I'll talk about that again in a minute.

The third aspect of misperceiving is the level where we don't even know. Not even denial or resistance, but we don't even know that we're perceiving permanence. I just want to talk about that a little bit in terms of our practice here. This is one of the gifts of having the interest and the time to come on an intensive retreat. We can also bring this into our life, but this gets kind of subtle sometimes, and that's why intensive retreat can be helpful.

One way we assume permanence—I heard this from a talk that the Dalai Lama was giving once—we tend to think, "I know things are impermanent. Like, I'm impermanent. I was born, I lived for a while, and even though I can see changes, I feel like it's still been me all this time, and then I'll die." So things come together, they exist for a while, and then they go apart. And we think that's impermanence.

But the Dalai Lama was saying, no, no, no. What we don't recognize is what I've alluded to—the momentariness of change. There's no "exists for a while, the same, and then goes away." Change is happening every moment, every moment.

One place you can see that is in the experience of seeing. If you were really just paying attention to the eye door, to seeing, it's different every single instant, just slightly different. But it's useful conceptually, in order to function, for our mind to put it together in a way that looks steady, that looks solid. Actually, everything's changing every single instant, and we don't notice it.

Just today—and I don't know brain science, so I'm sure this is extremely superficial, and if any of you know it, please don't be offended by my superficiality—but someone told me this yesterday. We were talking about change, we were talking about death. It was somebody's birthday party, so what else do we talk about? Change and death. Then we started apologizing, and she, the person whose birthday it was, said, "No, no, I love to talk about death. What else is there?"

But anyway, in this conversation, one of the guys who's done a lot of study about brain science and the way the brain perceives things—not from the Buddhist perspective, but from a scientist's perspective—said specifically about sight and about thoughts that from various experiments, these scientists have come to believe that the way consciousness or the brain can perceive, can actually see, is only because of the change. That if there was absolutely no change, if there was no movement whatsoever, the eye could see, but the brain couldn't interpret it as seeing. And they've done some experiments—I don't know what, I don't want to know what. And the same thing with thoughts: if it's just a thought that never moves, that never changes, we don't even recognize it.

I, as I said, don't know how they figured that out.

Because we'll never know a thought that doesn't change, will we? And the sight that doesn't change—it's changing every second. That's the only way that we can perceive.

But because the change is so rapid, our mind puts it together in some way that makes it look like a steady state. That's useful. It's not that this perception is so wrong that we want to throw it out. It's not that when we open to impermanence, we can't tell anything apart anymore.

You know what I mean? Sometimes people get afraid of that. "Well, if I see there's no solidity to this body..." And there are times in meditation when that's your actual perceptual, physical experience—there's no solid anything. There's just sensations arising in space. And then you think, "How can I function? How can I stand up? How can I eat? If there's just sensation and there's no solidity, where's the food going to go?" We can go into all kinds of stuff about that.

So in one way, conventional reality is useful. It works. That doesn't have to go away. But we can recognize, when we perceive the actual changing nature, that this is a conventional way that works, but it's not the way things always are. So you can kind of see both—like those images where if you look at it one way, you see a profile, and if you look at it another way, you see two vases. Both ways of seeing are in that same picture. It's like that.

And so really, the impermanence that the Dalai Lama is talking about, and the impermanence that it's so hard for us to see in our speedy lives, is the fact that there is no stasis ever.

Someone mentioned this at a retreat a couple of years ago. I thought it was a great image. She was seeing it herself. She said it's like time-lapse photography. If you see a time-lapse of a plant growing—there's just the dirt, and then you see the little leaf begin to push up from the soil, and the whole plant grows, and then the flower blooms, and then it goes away, and then the flower drops, and the fruit, all of this. They're making that fast, so you see the whole thing. But in that you also see there is no place where it's just the flower or just the leaf or just that. There is no place where it stops and says, "Now we're just going to be flower for a while." It's always the conditions coming together, and they make the condition for this moment. And then this moment is the condition for the next moment.

A phrase I use a lot—it's one of the insights in the Vipassana—is *yatha bhuta ñana dassana*. It's in the suttas a lot, usually translated as "knowledge and vision of things as they are," which gives a kind of solid feeling to things. But friends who know Pali better than I have said that a much better translation is "things as they have come to be just in this moment." Knowledge and vision means recognizing accurately things as they have come to be in this moment. They've come to be, and only for an instant is it like this. And then it's changing, and then it's changing, and then it's changing. There's no—as they say—there's no there there.

And that to me isn't scary. That opens into the mystery. What else is there to do but really appreciate, as best we can, the mystery and the wonder of right now? And the fact that everything that's happening right now is part of the condition for things having come to be as they are right now. Nothing can be left out.

You start to think about what conditions came together for things as they have come to be right now—that we're all sitting here together in this room. If we start enumerating conditions, you can never stop, can you? Just the conditions that kept each one of us alive, and the food that we've eaten, and the people that supported us, and the farmers that grew the food, and the drivers that drove the trucks, and the people who owned the farm, and their parents who gave birth to them. It can't ever come to an end. There's no separation anywhere.

I hope this makes sense. It does to me, but sometimes the language is a little complicated.

Ajahn Pasanno is talking about the experience of stream entry, *sotāpanna*, and one of the lines that's often given in the suttas when somebody recognizes the Dhamma. The phrase is, "The eye of Dhamma is open," and the line often continues, "I see all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing."

Ajahn Pasanno goes into a more accurate translation. He says what would be more accurate from the Pali to the English, instead of "all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing," would be "whatever arising dhamma, cessation dhamma"—dhamma meaning thing.

He goes on to say it's not good English, but it's great Dhamma, because English grammar requires a subject and a verb. So we say "all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation"—something arises and ceases in English. So dhamma comes across as a thing that arises and ceases. "I've seen the Dhamma, this thing that arises, and then this thing goes away."

Do you get it? If there's a thing, there's that moment in there where there's that thingness that the Dalai Lama is saying no, that's not so. A thing has existence in time. So whatever thing arises or is subject to arising then subsequently ceases. But if we consider stream entry as something profound, it would be useful to consider the experience to be one in which the very process that brings things into awareness is seen into. In other words, the mind is experiencing an event stream, a dynamic of arising and ceasing that rules out substantiality.

Really, in talking about emptiness, it's this emptiness of thingness, this emptiness of unchanging existence

in time. And that is what impermanence opens us into.

So, cultivating the perception of impermanence. A very simple but profound teaching from Ajahn Chah:

"With everything, just recognize to yourself: it is uncertain. This is uncertain. Sustain this reflection on impermanence as you meditate. Every single sense object and mental state you experience is impermanent, without exception. In the course of meditation, reflect that the distracted mind is uncertain. When the mind does become calm with samādhi, it's uncertain just the same. The reflection on impermanence is the thing you can really hold on to. You don't need to give too much importance to anything else. Don't get involved with the things that arise in the mind. Let go. Even if you are peaceful, you don't need to think too much about it. Don't take it too seriously. Don't take it too seriously if you're not peaceful either."

Viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ—have you ever read that anywhere? It means sense consciousness is impermanent. Have you ever heard that before? How can you train yourself in relation to this truth? How can you contemplate when you find that both peaceful and agitated mind states are transient? The important thing is to sustain awareness of the way things are.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Just sustaining awareness moment to moment on the way things are. Reality is how it is. It reveals itself. We don't have to think, "Now I'm going to go out and really see impermanence." Just sustain awareness on the way things are, and you'll notice when we're assuming permanence—when we're assuming now it's going to be like this for the next hour, for the next day, for the next moment. When we're trying to repeat an experience, thinking, "Let's get all the conditions exactly the same as they were yesterday at this time"—knowing that's impossible. Every moment is just its own perfect moment, and it's gone. Can't recreate it. Conditions are always changing.

Notice when we can just rest at ease in whatever arises. So just explore this: it's uncertain.

When the mind's in reaction, don't take it too seriously, but meet it with awareness. When we're seeing that things are always changing, a sense of that willingness to open into the mystery. Don't take that too seriously either, but just notice it.

I want to end with a poem by Hafiz, the fourteenth-century Persian poet, about this. This translation is called "Deepening the Wonder."

Death is a favor to us,
but our scales have lost their balance.
The impermanence of the body should give us great clarity,
deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes
of this mysterious existence we share
and are surely just traveling through.

If I were in the tavern tonight,
Hafez would call for drinks,
and as the master poured,
I would be reminded that all I know of life and myself
is that we are just a mid-air flight of golden wine
between his pitcher and his cup.

If I were in the tavern tonight,
I would buy freely for everyone in this world,
because our marriage with the cruel beauty of time and space
cannot endure very long.

Death is a favor to us,
but our minds have lost their balance.
The miraculous existence and impermanence of form
always makes the illumined ones laugh and sing.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. Or you can laugh and sing internally.

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