Perception, Thought and Views

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:43

Since what we're talking about is mindfulness of mind—the third foundation of the four foundations of mindfulness—as Steve said, with the mind you're aware of everything, all four foundations. But I thought I'd talk tonight about an aspect of our mental experience that I'm pretty sure you've all been noticing pretty steadily, and that's thinking, thought. Because it takes up a lot of our air time sometimes, doesn't it?

Thinking is a really interesting phenomenon. It's just one of the six sense experiences—one of the mental sense experiences, along with emotions and other things. And it's so interesting because, well, for many reasons. But I know from talking to people here, and in all the retreats I've taught, and in my own experience, it can at times be the case that we get caught in feeling like our meditation practice is some kind of struggle with thought. Ever had that feeling? That thought's a problem somehow?

So why is that so? Some of it comes from certain forms of practice where we're really trying to get absorbed, where there's a feeling we're supposed to get rid of thoughts—that thoughts shouldn't be there. Now, you know we haven't said that on this retreat, right? I'm just checking. Because this is where perception comes in.

What's really important is when we talk about *yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be in this moment—the accurate recognition, as Steve was talking about with right view. The accurate recognition of experience moment to moment, the steadiness of it, is what creates the condition for wisdom to arise. And the wisdom that recognizes accurately is what liberates our heart and mind from confusion, from suffering.

Thinking and emotions are natural phenomena, part of our experience. So what's the big problem with thought? It comes down to this accurate recognition—recognizing the nature of thought, bringing attention, awareness, meeting it with awareness of the nature of thought itself. But often we're really kind of sucked into the story. We're lost in the story of thought. You get a sense of the difference, right? And that difference is huge in terms of our experience.

When we're seeing thought as a thought—right now, deliberately think a thought. "Elephants are gray." Think that thought. Where is it now? Is that thought gone? It dissolved, but I brought it up so it's back, right? You're hanging on to it. But does that thought have a lot of oomph to it? "Elephants are gray." It's nothing. It's not even as solid as smoke. A thought is just a little blip of mental energy, gone. Can you get a little sense of that? It just arises from who knows where, it's here, and it dissolves back into emptiness.

When the steadiness of mindfulness awareness is just noticing that whole process, how can a thought

possibly harm us? So we say, "Well, okay, that thought—that was a stupid thought. Pick an important thought." But the thought energy isn't different.

So how do we get so lost in it? I'm going to describe some of the ways, some of the process—not to give you information that you now have to go and make a list, but hopefully to continue to pique our interest. So that when thinking or thought is the predominant arising experience, which it often is, instead of making it a problem or wishing something better was coming up or judging the thoughts, we recognize: what's arising? Thinking. It's like this. And then we get interested in exploring: why is it so clear that thought is just poof? What's going on? What's the actual process happening?

Because if we were trying to get rid of thought, it would be a little hard to function in the world. Thought is really useful. No one here is putting down thought. It's useful when we understand it and we can use it. When we can recognize what's appropriate thought, we can pick it up. When thought has some hopeful bearing on reality—which I hate to say how rare that is—but when it has some bearing on what's really going on, when we want to put something together: incredible, creative, wonderful. But we've got to learn how to tell the difference.

And when we're not using thought, when thought's running us, aren't there times—maybe not for you—but you can feel like you're a victim of thought? Some people say, "Oh no, I don't want that thought to come back again because it's so horrible," and there's just that obsessive quality of thinking.

So here I want to just explore it, to see thought simply as another object of nature arising. But because we're so used to getting into the content, we just need practice. That's all. We just need practice in how to bring mindfulness to thoughts.

This is from Utajaniya: remember that a thought is just another object which helps us to develop awareness, perseverance, and balance of mind. As we've been saying, awareness doesn't care. A thought, a sound, a subtle sensation—it doesn't matter. But if you don't recognize thought as an object, then you will get carried away by the train of thoughts, by the content, and you lose yourself in the story. That's exactly what happens.

So can we even notice that process without any blame or judgment, but see how does that happen? What's the difference? How do we get lost in the story? What's going on? How does it feel so real? I mean, it's fascinating, really. These little blips of energy, and they're making us nuts. It's fascinating to explore. Hopefully you will pick up that it can be fascinating to explore. That's my hope.

So I want to talk about a few aspects of the process of thoughts arising in our mind, the way the Buddha described. It's all happening fast, but all the time, and some of this stuff we can see.

Back to the fact that there are six sense experiences arising and passing over and over. We've honed in on that the last two nights. The way the Buddha talks about our experience: there's a sense experience arising. Let's take seeing. Sight arises, there's an eye that works, that consciousness. Those coming together

is called contact, that moment of seeing happening. Then if there's mindfulness awareness, that's almost the next moment—knowing that seeing is occurring. But leaving that out, I'm not talking about awareness right now. I'm just talking about the process of conscious knowing as we go through our lives.

So seeing occurs, hearing occurs. It could be a thought, but say seeing. The way the Buddha describes it, as soon as there's any of the six—seeing—the mind feels it as pleasant or unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant. And then, right then, there's a perception, saññā in Pali, and this is very specific, what the Buddha means by perception. A quality in our mind that occurs with every contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, whatever. The perception is like a function of recognition. If I hold this up and you see it, whether your mind says it or not, you'd probably recognize paper. A piece of paper. You might have more specifics—Carol holding the paper, well, that's a whole thing. But piece of paper, that would be perception. Pretty simple, right? This is going on all the time.

Now, as the Buddha said, what we perceive, we think about. We describe. Okay, not we—descriptions happen. And it doesn't have to be. There could just be seeing, paper, boom. The mind is kind of quiet. And we like those times. That's part of what it feels like when the mind is quiet, but you're not comatose. There's the perception—deer—and you don't go into the whole story of Bambi. There's just deer, and there's space around it, space where you don't have to make up a story. Then there are other times the perception turns into descriptions. We use the perceptions to describe and define our world, and that is very useful and essential.

So when you, most of you, heard the kind of gonging sound about ten minutes ago, you didn't say it, but you recognized "bell." And then there would be a further perception and even a description: "That's the bell just before the talk, that means I come in to go to the talk." And it sets you in your whole world. Here I am at Spirit Rock. Maybe you don't know what day it is, but you know it's nighttime and time to come to the talk.

Unless you were taking a nap and you heard that gong and you wake up and you have no clue—do you know how that is? The perception doesn't quite come in. You don't know if it's day or night. You don't know what time it is. Sometimes that's fun and sometimes it's disorienting.

So perception is just another aspect of nature occurring with every contact, every contact with the mind too. It's not a problem. It's something we don't often notice because it goes right into liking, disliking, thinking, our judgments about it. But description—that's useful. When we're all on the same page with the perception and the description, then it works. If we just rang the bell at 3 a.m. and didn't give you anything—what the heck? Your mind would make up some reason that bell was being rung because you wouldn't have that information. So perception is very helpful. It helps us describe our world. It's useful in that way, just as thinking is useful. What we perceive, we think about, we describe, the Buddha says.

Now, where it starts to get tricky—before we even get to the thinking—is that perception is quite frequently not accurate. And so much we don't even question. I'll get to where the inaccuracy comes

about, often when the consciousness, the mind at that moment, is veiled with greed or confusion or wanting or aversion. But even prior to that, even our ignorance—we just don't know. Isn't there often a sense of "this is just how it is"?

A funny example: I used this last fall. I was at a friend's house, someone I know really well. We're in her living room, and over the couch there was a throw, a blanket over the back of the couch. I said something about, "Well, put it on that blue throw, that blue blanket." She goes, "What blue blanket?" I said, "What do you mean, what blue blanket? It's your house—the blue blanket." She said, "That's not blue, that's green."

Simple little thing. We were talking about it, but I could not see green. She could not see blue. Even trying. I said, "Well, isn't that interesting? I would go to my deathbed saying that thing was blue." And she, that it's green.

So right there's a little nugget: the perception isn't absolutely irrevocable, absolute truth. It's all subjective in that way. That simplicity—what we do with the perception—we think about it, we believe our perception, it becomes a view, really. We think about it and then "this is how it is, that's what blue looks like. How could she think green? What's the matter with her?" And you see how quick we go there. How quick.

So that's a simple thing, and we had fun with it because then it takes us into where our practice is most flourishing. The quality of open awareness is just the moment experience arises into the mind—of not knowing. Mindfulness awareness isn't about "I know what this is." That comes after, even if you're using labeling. The perception comes: "Oh, that's a bell, hearing." But first, it's just that open presence of awareness, the not knowing.

But with the perception and the thinking hardening into views, there's this sense of an unconscious "this is how it is." And when something upsets that, or someone else has a different "this is how it is," there can be big trouble. But first, let's just stay with ourselves.

Perception—we often don't recognize it. We implicitly believe it. Steve's example of what we perceive is the sun going around the earth, right? That's what we perceive. We can't perceive it any other way. And we read all this. I was thinking as he was talking and now he said, "Now we all know it does." I thought, well, I've read that. I believe that, but I don't actually know that. I just know that everybody says it, and they know more than me, so I'll believe it. But I don't actually know that in terms of what our actual perception is.

This is what the Buddha described. What we perceive, we feel. What we feel, we perceive. What we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate with associations, interpretations, memories, comparisons. And then—okay, I won't make it up, I'll quote it—these notions assail and overwhelm a person. And as Joseph Goldstein, a good friend of ours, a long-term Vipassana teacher, has said—he has a lot of very pithy sayings—one of them is: "We're making it all up." So a lot of the time, we

are.

Let me give you an example of how this works in a kind of funny way. Sometimes perception we just don't know accurately—like blue-green, who knows what's the ultimate truth? You hear a sound and you don't know what it is. But that leads to the thoughts and the emotions and the views and the whole story. And we totally, implicitly believe that.

So a friend of mine, a good friend, was telling me about her first ten-day meditation retreat many years ago in Switzerland with Ajahn Sumedho, who is a really wonderful teacher—I mentioned him the other night. At that time there were no meditation centers, so the group rented an old house. They have these old houses in Switzerland that they use for summer camps for kids. They're really big with a lot of rooms, built without much insulation since they only use them in the summer. Wood, so they're really noisy. The kind of thing where anytime you're walking on the floor, it creaks, it bangs, you can hear the person breathing in the next room—but there's six people in a room anyway. That kind of place.

In this place, the big meditation room was upstairs, and the room used for walking, the same size, was immediately below it on the ground floor. And there was a schedule—you sit, you walk, according to schedule. And she would acknowledge herself as being very Swiss. You follow the schedule.

So it was a sitting time. She was sitting on her first retreat. Those of you on your first retreat, you know, it's tough. The third or fourth day, have you noticed your mind's getting a little cranky? It starts a little: this isn't what I signed up for. Third or fourth day, it's time for that. Don't take it personally. And it'll change, because everything does.

Anyway, she's sitting, and she said finally, just following the breath, the mind got a little peaceful. She's like, basically, thank God, you know, finally, for two minutes or three minutes, it's peaceful. And then she could hear this creak, creak, creak of somebody walking downstairs. Creak, creak. She says, "Oh my, they're completely ruining my meditation, and it's the sitting time! How can they be walking downstairs?" And she just got into, you know, sitting, looking like an angel, but in an incredible rage. How can this person creak, creak, creak? Each time she'd hear the creak, anger would come shooting up. And another thought: How can they do it? Should I get up and go? No, they're wrecking my meditation.

You can relate, right?

So the stories are getting stronger. The emotion is coming with the stories. The negativity is getting stronger. And finally she realized, what can I do? Because I'm not allowed to leave the sitting anyway—she wasn't the manager. So out of desperation, which is what we usually do, she decided to go back and see if she could feel her breath. Finally, it's like, what else is there to do? Try and be with what's actually happening.

She didn't know how to watch her mind, so she went back and just felt the breath. She took another breath, took another breath, and then with the next breath, because she was just present, noticing, she

recognized she was leaning against the wall. First retreat, can't sit up straight. She was leaning against the wall, and every time she took a breath, her back went into the wall, and it made this creak. That's what she was hearing. There was nobody walking downstairs.

So that's an example of when the accurate perception comes in, that whole story vanishes. The whole story of someone walking—you really can't sustain it when the accurate perception arrives. And the anger? Well, there's nothing to get angry at. It's all gone. It just vanishes.

That's an example of the difference between misperception—inaccurate perception leading to thinking and emotion and self-story, a huge amount of suffering, completely lost in it—and then accurate perception, where the whole thing vanishes. You get a sense of how fast that goes, how quickly, and the power of correct perception to free our mind from all that suffering.

Now, she went back to feel the breath, but it doesn't have to be the breath. And that's what we're going to practice here. One could also notice, say, wow, look at this aversion in the mind, and bring awareness to that as it is in the moment. Look at these thoughts—but different from jumping in and believing the thoughts. That's what the Buddha called papañca, proliferation. You just jump in with this one thought, and how are they walking? How can they be doing this? We get really caught.

Sogyal Rinpoche describes this very well. He says we get into so much pain and confusion by letting ourselves get lost in whatever happens. You project a thought, then the second thought believes the first one. Then a third, fourth, fifth thoughts are projected. The first thought is by this time already an absolute reality. By the time the tenth one comes, it believes that the fifth one has always been an actuality.

Can you relate to that at all? We totally believe. And until we practice stepping back—oh wow, thinking is like this, this is a thought—we miss the moment of just sensing the nature of thought, which is just this poof. Instead, we're totally in the content and the associated moods and emotions and reactions and self-story, let's face it, that comes along with it.

And if I came and tapped you on the shoulder and said, "It's just a thought," you'd probably want to punch me. What do you mean it's just a thought? Don't you know what's going on? Yeah. Upset is going on. Upset feels like this. The thought is so solid.

It's interesting to see how when the perception is inaccurate—and when it's accurate too, we can have an accurate perception and also get wigged out about it—but when it's inaccurate and it really feeds into that, we get completely gone, out of touch with reality.

One of my definitions of insight is actually a shift of perception—accurate perception. The Dalai Lama says that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge.

And Thich Nhat Hanh says something I find very important: "Understanding does not arise as the result of

thinking." Let me read that again. Understanding—Dhamma wisdom, he means—does not arise as the result of thinking. It is the result of a long process of conscious awareness.

It's the steadiness, the process of conscious awareness, that allows us to see—like that whole process with the noise in the Swiss house. It was the steadiness of awareness that let that be revealed. She couldn't think her way into that. She didn't have that information.

Thich Nhat Hanh continues: sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts. That's how thoughts are useful. But often thoughts are too limited to really carry all the understanding, to encompass all the understanding. That's one of the reasons we get into confusion when we're trying to talk about things—no matter what we say, it has a limitation. That's just the nature of things.

So I want to talk just for a moment again about what distorts perception, the qualities that can arise in our mind. We've discussed them before. I just want to give some examples, because then with steady awareness, we can start to notice. You can start to tune in. Sometimes the thoughts can be a clue that you're coming from a distorted perception. You can pause and think, "Wait, maybe I don't really know what's going on here." And that can be quite interesting.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was really a wonderful teacher, describes this beautifully. He says that when our sense organs meet an object, the only part the object itself plays—say this sight—is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. So the seeing: bell. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences—because that's what influences perception; if you never saw a bell like this, you might not know what it was—influenced by all of that, the whole process is entirely subjective. Blue-green, who knows?

He continues: when your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. When your mind is peaceful, free from any clinging or fixation, you experience everything as primordially pure, or lovely. You get a sense of that sometimes?

I want to give simple examples here because this is what goes on. Our awareness, our just natural being with experience, can notice at any point of it. But the steadiness sometimes lets us see the whole process. And once we start to see it's a natural process and don't take it so personally, it's kind of fun to watch.

What gets in the way, what distorts, what are the veils? Our old friends: desire, greed, aversion, ill will, fear, and delusion—which is sometimes also just not knowing. Delusion can make something up completely, but sometimes it's simply not knowing. We don't have all the information.

Here's another example, a little Zen story. In ancient times, a samurai warrior went to a Zen master. This samurai was very aggressive, wild—not really a practitioner. He runs into the Zen master with a sword and roughly starts yelling, "You're a pig! You're a pig!"

And the Zen master, of course, as they do, just bowed and said, "And you, sir, are a Buddha."

That stopped the man for a minute. "A Buddha? How can you say I'm a Buddha?" Even he knew better.

And the Zen master said, "Well, a pig sees a pig. A Buddha sees a Buddha."

It's a little bit like that. We take it all so personally, you know? So you can start to explore this in your own experience.

I'm just introducing this to begin exploring. One thing to notice: when there's wanting in the mind, when there's greed, just in the moment of the mind's arising, if we notice it, then it becomes simply the next object of awareness. We've talked about that. But when we don't notice it—and often we don't—later we might say, "Yes, there was wanting." But when it's distorting perception, we don't quite see it.

The Tibetans have a phrase I love: desire puts feathers on the object. It pretties it up. Have you noticed when you really want something—whatever it might be, a piece of chocolate cake, or going for a walk, or in your mind you're planning your next vacation—isn't it just so wonderful, so amazing? Check at the end of the retreat when it's over and you go home. Think back to all the amazing fantasies you had of what was going to happen. Just tell me if any one of them comes anywhere close to how amazingly wonderful and beautiful it seemed to the mind filled with wanting. That's just what wanting does.

When we recognize it—have you ever gone to the supermarket when you're hungry? We all know not to do that, right? Don't go to the supermarket when you're hungry. You end up buying all this junk and you get home thinking, what am I doing with this?

Here's a little example so you can get interested without taking it personally. The apartment I'm staying in, I had to buy some rugs because it's all tile floor. I have this one rug I bought on eBay, and I really liked it. It's cheerful. It cheers me up. I can feel there's a little wanting there—not a huge desire, but a bit of liking. I look at it and think, I like it.

So Franz came up just to check things out the other day, and he had a different perception. Not bad, just different. He didn't have what one of my friends calls "the love eyes." She was talking about when you first get in a relationship with someone, and she said they'd been married for fifteen years and were working through something—not bad, but you know, the love eyes aren't on anymore. The hate eyes weren't on either. You just see more accurately.

So Franz was looking at the rug saying, "Yeah, well, you know, it's like this, but..." He just saw other things about it, perceived it in a different way that I hadn't seen. It wasn't critical, just a different perception without that "Oh, isn't it so lovely?"

After he left, I was looking at the rug. I wasn't upset, but I noticed something. At first, we like wanting. So when the wanting is gone, we think, "Well, it's all flat. I don't want to live like that." That's aversion. But when the wanting is truly gone, you're just seeing clearly. I could see what he meant. But no, I still like it. I still think it's kind of cheerful. That quality of "it's so wonderful" simply wasn't there anymore. Just little

things like that.

Wanting also gives us tunnel vision. We see the thing we want and everything else is in the way, or we just don't notice. Pay attention to that.

My brother used to have a hound dog—they're bred for hunting. My brother didn't hunt, and it was a lovely dog, very sweet, but that dog's nose was so highly developed that the poor thing would come into the house and whatever new smell was there, he couldn't not go to it. Nose on the ground, straight to the smell. If there was any kind of dirty tin can, they had to hide everything. I always had to keep my suitcase zipped because any smell of dirty clothes and he'd be in the suitcase pulling things out. If you let him out in the backyard, he'd just run around the perimeter of the fence with his nose on the ground. He couldn't not do it. No way.

That's how wanting drives the bus when it has taken over our mind and we don't see it. We think, "Yeah, this smell on the ground is so great. This smell is so fantastic."

Let me smell this new one. This one's okay, but this new one over here—that'll be even better. And then we think about it and get into a whole story, and we believe it.

The wanting goes unnoticed. But what am I doing here? Andrea Levine—I just saw him speak, and he was so funny about this. When we recognize that perception, that the mind in the moment is affected—the perception may be distorted, you don't know, but maybe by wanting or ill will or delusion—know this, and really know this: you cannot rely on the thoughts that are being generated. You can't assess if they're accurate. You really can't trust them. You can't believe them.

Andrea gave a simple example with wanting. You're sitting there with this big piece of chocolate cake, and your mind says, "Have another. You'll like it. It's good for you." So you eat that other one. Then as soon as you're done, your mind goes, "I wouldn't have done that if I were you." Which one is me? And then we get into the whole thing. But it's just different mental factors coloring thoughts. So we start to see that.

And even more—maybe not even more, but more immediately obvious—is the suffering with aversion. With wanting, we kind of delude ourselves. We think it's good because we think we're going to get something nice. We skip over the fact that we're really miserable right now in the wanting, because we tell ourselves we're going to get something nice. With ill will, aversion, fear, you can't really skip over it because it's telling you not only is it bad now, it's only going to get worse.

When ill will, aversion, dislike is affecting the mind, it really leads to so much thought, so much assessment. Self-judging is a form of this. I know this one very well. And it's been so freeing that when I recognize self-judging, I know it has a feeling, a quality—it's an emotion by this point. By the time it's self-judging, it's really stronger than just a thought. It has a whole feeling for me, like a cloud coming over my mind and tightness in the body and a heavy mood.

You can recognize it. It arises due to natural causes and conditions. I could therapeutically trace back all the conditions in my life. Let me tell you, you only need to do that once. Then you know. The next time it comes up, you can just meet it as it is. You know there are causes and conditions. You don't have to go, "But that's right, my mother did do that, my father did do that..." Yeah, you know that. Good. Now it's arising now, and you can really be present with it. Knowing this helps because it makes it not so personal. There are causes and conditions.

And in certain situations, I know not only the past but the present conditions. For example, if I'm really tired and my mind is fatigued, or if I've had a series of difficult and unpleasant interactions—I'm balanced, balanced, balanced, balanced—and then all of a sudden, boom: "You really blew that one, kiddo." And I can feel it coming in.

So what's been so helpful is once I recognize, "Oh, self-judging is up, ill will is up, aversion's up"—the mind is throwing out, projecting all these thoughts—and I really know I cannot rely on them. Those thoughts are unreliable. They're based on inaccurate perception. I can't try to tease out which is right: that I'm really a worm on the earth because of what I said to that person, or because of what my mother did. Or maybe I'm not really a worm, I'm just kind of so-so. No, no—I'm really great, really incredible.

You know, forget it. Just forget it. The mind can keep on spewing that stuff, but you just see: oh, thought is just thought. It's just thought coming in. You feel the mood, the feeling of the self. That's what's arising now—causes and conditions. But you just know perception's off. The thoughts are based on inaccuracy. They're not to be relied on.

Do you get a sense of how when we start to tune into this in our life, it can be so helpful in making decisions, even split-second ones? When we start to notice—and this has been so helpful to me the last few years in my daily life—I'm doing something or saying something, and I think, "Oh, I really want to go do this." It doesn't matter what. It doesn't have to be a big deal. And then I just notice, because I'm used to just noticing my mind, what's going on in the mind. And I notice it's filled with wanting.

It doesn't mean the thing I want is bad or good. It means I can't tell. It means I have no clear way, no clear perception to assess. So if I can wait, I do.

Same with ill will. If I'm really negative—"Let me go tell that person how this last interaction affected me, with all the love in my heart, because they really need to know"—and then I can feel it: oh yeah, there's a lot of ill will. I don't have to judge it. It's not about judging. Just: this is what's up now. And with the practice of watching our mind, you can see how when there's ill will or aversion, it leads to these thoughts. And if I believe it and feed it, it gets stronger and stronger and stronger. Then I'll act from it.

Seeing that—not as a should, but just watching it—this is what Steve said: the wisdom comes by itself. The wisdom of "Oh yeah, I don't want to do that." It's not like I have to go back and study the *Visuddhimagga* to see that I don't want to go and yell at that person out of anger. When I'm just paying attention, it becomes

clear. But if you start judging the anger, that's just more ill will reverberating on itself.

It's from the Buddha. Again: "When one is dwelling with a mind oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both." He's not saying that as a criticism. He just says: oh, that's how it is.

You know, if your mind's obsessed and oppressed by wanting, and you see that in the moment—sometimes just noticing wanting arises, sometimes you can see there's enough awareness that you know it's here, you know ill will's here, but we still can tell we're identified. You can tell that. That's awareness. So then you know: okay, I can't see my own good or the good of another or the good of both. So don't trust it right now.

With wanting. With ill will. And with delusion.

Delusion is sometimes just not having all the information. And we often don't know we don't have all the information. So then we have to act, but just—this is in the kind of mundane way I'm talking now—when we act from this quality of delusion, which is both not having enough information, just plain ignorance in that way, or the delusion of misperceiving and then building a whole life story on it. And there's a kind of delusion which is making assumptions. I've noticed in my own mind, on the level of perception, I don't really have enough information—that quality of just beginner's mind, just "Oh, I don't know what this is." But notice how the memory banks, the perception, will fill in something that's kind of close, and then we're sure that's what it is.

Like, one time I was teaching a retreat in Switzerland, a different place years ago, and walking in the woods—remember walking meditation? Walking in the forest with a friend, without my glasses, which is a really great way to play with that kind of delusion and misperception in the mind, because I really can't see very well. I see enough that I can get around, and so then I think I know what's going on. I don't have a clue. And I don't know I don't have a clue, because I'm used to it. That's delusion. So I was walking in the forest—it's kind of a nice, tidy forest—with a friend.

And I looked over and saw this big gray and yellow, white-striped thing. I said, "Wow, what's a circus tent doing here?" That's what I saw—a circus tent. And I went, "Oh, a circus tent in the woods, wrecking the whole place like that." And my friend just looked at me. "Carol, go over there and look." So I go over, and it was a big rock covered with yellow lichen. But I literally saw a circus tent. That's delusion. And so much of the time we just don't know that, and we can actually build a lot more on such misperceptions than that quick moment allowed.

In terms of right view, as Steve was talking about, even in more profound ways—the liberating, accurate recognition, the *yathā-bhūta* that really frees the mind and heart, the accurate perception—the Buddha talks about four particular hallucinations of perception, or inverted perception, where we perceive

something opposite from how it actually is. And then we believe it, and we build our thoughts and our views and our world on that. Seeing through those inversions over and over and over is really the source of liberating insight. How do we see through? Steady, steady, steady awareness of just what's occurring. Not looking for it—if you look for something, that's wanting.

Any of you who've read any Buddhism are very familiar with these. One is seeing permanence where there is not permanence. *Anicca*—the word for impermanence, for constant change. But the perception we often have is of permanence where there's not permanence.

Another is not seeing the first noble truth, *dukkha*—the unreliability, the unsatisfactoriness of experience. It doesn't mean every experience is unpleasant, but the unreliability to make us truly happy. We don't see that. We see potential for happiness. We see "this is going to make me happy." We see a sense of happiness where that isn't there, where it's *dukkha*, where it's unreliable, where it's intrinsically—I don't like to use "suffering" because we tend to go into aversion with that word, and it's not about aversion. It's about looking for reliability and stability where there is none.

And the third one is seeing a discrete, separate, permanent self in any moment of experience where that is not the case. It's like taking something personal where it's just conditions of nature coming together, as we've been talking about. But talking about it doesn't shift our perception. That's why, as Steve was saying, with right view we need to hear it or read it or get some sense. You think, "Okay, let's pick impermanence." You think, "Well, I know things change." You ask somebody, and they'll say, "I know things change on a big level." But if you just start dropping in from time to time—don't go crazy looking for it—how often is the perception that things aren't changing?

We know "I change." Do I look the same as when I was three? No. But that's all on an intellectual level. You get up and think, "How come I'm sick today? It shouldn't be different." We think we're just kind of the same me, whatever that is. We think we're all sitting here, kind of the same. But when the mind is quiet, in moment-to-moment awareness, no two moments are the same. They're not.

When you're lost, like we were talking about in a group with some strong, difficult emotion—it was really strong, and the person was really with it. And then noticing: it's gone. There was just a moment of happiness, noticing it's really gone. But the tendency of the mind is to think, "Well, I'm not noticing it now, but it's really here lurking around because this is who I really am." It's permanent.

So these misperceptions—and don't believe me because believing doesn't help—there are so many moments, because perception is occurring every conscious moment, so many moments in our life where the perception, unrecognized, is of permanence, is of a sense of self, is of reliability. And then all our thoughts and views of ourselves and views of the world are built on that perception. And when things don't quite mesh, like a round peg in a square hole—do you know what I mean?

One of the definitions of dukkha—the actual etymological meaning, which points to unreliability, to things

not quite working—comes from the old days. It refers to the axle, the wooden rod that goes through the hole in the big wooden wheel of an ox cart. They still have those in Burma, very rough constructions. Just this round thing going through a hole in one solid wooden wheel, and it doesn't fit that well. It's rough. It's just kind of bumpy, and if you've ever ridden in an ox cart, believe me, it really is like that. It just doesn't quite go smoothly.

So the Buddha calls these inverted perceptions. And he talks about what we perceive—saññā, perception—and how we then think about it, citta. So there comes to be the hallucination of perception, the inverted perception. And then without realizing it, we're thinking from that distorted base. How many people have your date books filled up for next month? I'm having to plan for 2015. I'm having to answer questions about 2016. And if I'm not quite aware, there's this underlying assumption that I'll still be alive in 2016. Or we make a plan. I remember once Franz and I made a plan—I was flying in from the States, he was God knows where, one never knows where he is—and we were meeting in the Bangkok airport at midnight. And it really happened, which to me is even more amazing. But there are all these assumptions that everything is going to be steady.

And so we think from the point of view of this misperception, and that's the hallucination of thinking in citta. And then what we think about—as I was saying with my friend in the Swiss house—those thoughts kind of solidify, kind of coagulate into a view. A view meaning really a description of ourselves or the situation or the world. We may not enunciate it clearly, saying "this is what I believe"—it actually helps when we do because then we at least know what the view is. But it's more in the back of the mind. It's like, "this is what's true."

This is how the Buddha described view: "This is what's true and everything else is false." But we don't recognize that it's a view. If we don't recognize it, we hold to it, and then from those thoughts—just like when I'm in self-judgment and I believe the thoughts and then I start making assessments and actions from that—I just get more and more confused. It's more and more not working. That's what can go on for us until we start to understand how this is happening.

With views in particular—this sense of "this is how it is"—sometimes people talk about having some experience in meditation where everything's different from how it usually was. It's unfamiliar. Maybe a sense that the body falls away. Maybe suddenly everything's happening, but it doesn't feel like me. Nothing threatening, but it's just different. And often fear comes up because our solidity, our view—it's like the mind, the habit of mind, seems to like to be able to describe and know things. "This is how it is." Have you noticed that? We like to have it all figured out. "Okay, I know how it is." We like to have a clue.

And when we get locked into a view without realizing it, often we don't even let in consciously the perceptions that challenge that view. I call it selective perception. Think of politics—actually, don't think of politics—but I'm not going to mention anything specific. Many years ago, another president, many presidents of the United States back, one I was not fond of. And I just remember this one time, and of

course that's all views and you see how it goes. But I noticed in my own mind how this selective perception worked.

Someone I could hardly stand to look at, could hardly hear the voice on television—like that, right away. They never did anything good in their life. So someone was telling me something about this president that was kind of sweet and loving and very kind, and my mind was going, "Don't tell me that. I don't want to know. There's nothing good about that person. Don't tell me. That can't be true."

Like, whoa, that's really interesting. I don't want my view upset. It feels easy—this is good and this is bad. This is right and this is wrong, right?

We've been talking about in one of the groups today, different styles of practice, and thinking, "Well, I'm doing this style of practice—does that mean this other style is wrong, or good or bad?" And that's what our mind likes to do. But it's not like that. It's not like that.

So when we get caught in a view, we sometimes literally don't perceive what's actually in front of our face.

This is another story Franz told me. I'm assuming it's true—the ghost driver. In Germany, if somebody enters a divided freeway driving on the wrong side, that can happen once in a while. You know what I mean? So all the traffic's going north and somehow you went in the wrong exit and you're driving south on a divided freeway—you can't get off. They call that a ghost driver. Don't ask me why. Because they're going to be ghosts pretty soon, I suppose.

So the story goes: the person's driving the wrong way, and sometimes they'll say on the radio, you know, they'll come on and say there's a traffic jam in this area or whatever. And so it came on the radio, and the woman was listening to it: "Ghost driver on the Autobahn between München and Augsburg." And the woman's going, "One ghost driver? There are many!" We just don't let in the perception because we're so fixed in our views. I know I'm telling funny stories on purpose, but you get a drift of how it goes.

So this sense of "me"—noticing how, and I'm touching on a lot of things that we could go into a lot of depth—but notice how one of the misperceptions I mentioned that the Buddha points to is this sense of "me," how we take things so personally. A mood comes up—it's my fault, it's me, it's like this. A sound comes—it's bothering me, it's got to be fixed. You come feeling lonely—what's the matter with me? All of that.

So this sense of "me"—have you noticed that it gives rise to a lot of thoughts? A lot of the thoughts are describing me and how I feel and what's going on. I'm not saying good or bad, but again, if the perception's inaccurate, the thoughts are not trustworthy.

So here, what we want to do is not get rid of them, not even argue with them, not try to change them, not try to fix them—but get interested in watching the whole process. Perception, what arises, the thoughts, the sensations—just keep on watching.

Two little examples for me on retreat. I was on a long retreat, just watching, watching, watching, watching, and I had watched a movie just before the retreat. Did any of you make that mistake? So it was a three-month retreat, and it was this movie *The Fugitive*, from years ago. So I'm sitting and sitting and thoughts are coming, images are coming—Harrison Ford and this and that. And when I stopped resisting it and would just be noticing—thinking, liking, excitement—happening, happening, happening... then that would go away. And then the Carol story would start coming up. Carol's this and she's doing that.

And after a while, it was just thinking and seeing and feeling—the Carol story and *The Fugitive* story. There was no difference. In the moment, it was thoughts and emotions and internal images. That's all that was occurring. *The Fugitive* was more interesting. The Carol story I took more personally. But all that was happening was emotions and perceptions and thoughts and feelings and moods. It was really kind of funny to see.

And then to see how we land in some story, some thoughts, some mood during the day—like the example I gave the woman in the group where it really is a difficult thing—and then suddenly you notice it's completely gone.

But with selective perception, we just kind of ignore that it's completely gone. And then we're back to "I was so miserable all day."

Sometimes people say, "Oh, so... oh, really? Well, then in that first sitting, the whole sitting..." "Well, no, but there was about five minutes in the middle that was really..." "And then the whole day?" "Well, no, then I had this nice walk. I went up to the top of the hill, and lunch was really good." "But then in the afternoon I had this, you know, ten minutes and it was so..."

And we don't realize we're doing that—deciding "this is me" and all of that other stuff isn't me. But watch how it's just all cause and effect.

So another story. When I was on retreat, I was sitting in my room. I think it must have been just end of summer, early fall. Very present. And there's the sound of crickets. The perception was "crickets," and that was accurate. And then with that perception came a feeling—this feeling of nostalgia, that sadness of summer ending and fall beginning. A loneliness came. That is a habit my mind goes to when I hear crickets.

So that was happening. "Oh, sadness... and oh, it's ending... and I'm so lonely here, all alone in this room. Three-month retreat—I could die here, no one would know for three days until my next interview." So that's all going, and I was really mindfully watching, just watching the whole thing.

So I thought, let's just see. I'll do an experiment. I sat down and said, okay, bring the attention deliberately to hearing the sound of crickets. And then I deliberately thought a different thought. The perception was the same—crickets. I deliberately thought, "Oh, isn't that lovely here in nature? It's so silent. This lovely end of summer." That's all I did—deliberately thought that. And the whole story followed from that. I

started feeling really happy. "Oh, this peace is beautiful. How fortunate to be on this retreat, the exquisite stillness, hearing the crickets."

And that was just as real as the one before. Or not. Thinking, emotions, perception—it all comes. Watch it come, watch it go. Birth and death of a particular sense of me. It's really fun to play with that through the days.

I will end with a short passage from Ajahn Sumedho:

"Awareness is not about making value judgments about our thoughts or emotions or actions or speech. Awareness is about knowing these things fully, just as they are—that they are what they are in this moment. That is all."

That is all.

May our sincere intentions here, our efforts, the wholesome energy be shared with all beings everywhere as one of the causes for their awakening from suffering and confusion.

Thanks for listening. Thanks for your patience.

As you get up and go to walk, just notice what you're doing. Notice the mind, why it's doing it—without judgment.

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