Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:46

Tonight I want to talk about one of the key insights that liberates the heart and mind—one that we've mentioned in passing, but that the Buddha spoke about quite frequently. This is the insight, the clear seeing into impermanence, or the word *anicca* in the Pali language.

This is from the Buddha: "Bhikkhus"—bhikkhus means monks or those meditating, so all of us—"Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sense desire, all lust, all craving. It eliminates all craving for becoming. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all the confusion, the wrong view of 'I am.'" Those four things are like shorthand for a completely freed heart and mind.

I really like that quote because of the specificity of it: the perception of impermanence *when developed and cultivated*. Do you remember that we've been talking about perception? I talked about perception a few nights ago, and how one of the base, repetitive sources of our confusion is the repeated misperception. I mentioned the three inverted perceptions, one being that in what is impermanent, we perceive permanence. And we develop and repeatedly practice that without having a clue that that's what we're doing. So I really like it when the Buddha says "when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated." That's just what I want to talk a bit about tonight—pointing to different ideas about why we have this habit of perceiving permanence, and also what helps us see through it. And guess what? That thing is steady awareness.

Let me say something about this quotation I read, about eliminating all craving and all craving for becoming. That may not be familiar language to some of you. Craving eliminates ignorance, okay. The confusion of "I am," okay. But becoming—this is a very simple definition from Ajahn Chah: anything that we attach to and put a meaning on is becoming. Whenever we see anything as self or other or belonging to ourselves, without the wise discernment, without the wisdom to know that such is only a convention, that is becoming.

That sense of self experience—we become the person who wants the banana, the person who feels too hot, the person with the hurt leg. We've talked about this, but just that attaching to anything is becoming. And that becoming gives birth to the sense of self experiencing happiness or unhappiness. That's a whole other talk, but I just wanted to define what becoming is. For the simplicity of talking about it now, it's simply when there's that leaning forward, that clinging, attaching to anything—a sense desire, a view, an opinion, my leg—without the discernment to realize, "Oh, this is a convention." That's all. That's what becoming means.

Anyway, the perception of impermanence cuts through all this confusion. It's really the doorway to liberation, one of the main entryway doors. Seeing *dukkha* is another one—dukkha, the unreliable, suffering aspect—and the perception of *anatta*, of not-self, is another doorway. Different ones light up for each of us, but all three work together.

So tonight I want to talk about impermanence. In one way, it's kind of interesting because of those three, the fact that things change is really the most intellectually obvious, isn't it? I mean, no one would probably argue with that. So how is it that we don't see impermanence? Why is it so hard to see? And why do we need to cultivate the perception?

I think I talked the other night about how liberating insight is really not that reality changes, but that our perception shifts. We shift our perception and then we see, we recognize things differently, we understand more accurately, and thus we respond and react in a way that's commensurate with what's really going on.

The thing is with impermanence—the fact that everything is in constant flux—even if we intellectually may know this from our own experience to some extent, from reading science and such, it's an intellectual knowledge. And the perceptual shift that needs to come happens over and over and over; one time doesn't really do it.

I think of it as a cellular knowing, a cellular living from knowing impermanence. Not having to stop and think about it, but rather the plans, the ways that we respond as if things are going to stay the same—that just doesn't happen anymore. So that cellular knowing operates on a much more subtle level. And that's the nature of insight. That's how our understanding of reality changes.

But what's interesting to see is that when people start thinking really in depth about impermanence, it's not like the most cheery thought, usually. We may think, from the place of not really getting it on a cellular level, that it sounds a little scary or depressing. The question arises: what will it be like to live if everything's changing? How can I function? As if it's not impermanent now, right? And when we have the insight, suddenly we recognize that everything's already changing. That's what I was trying to say. This is how it already is. It's not like we're going to lose something by recognizing accurately—it can only help. It can only help.

I just want to point at three different ways I've noticed in my own mind the not recognizing, the not perceiving of impermanence—things that veer my mind away from wanting to see it.

One is our fear of the unpleasant, our habit of not being with it. When we're really opening to the fact that every meeting ends in parting, for example, there's this instinctive fear of loss, of grief, of sadness. We don't want to feel it. And we have the habit that something unpleasant is bad, right? The whole thing about learning to bring this equanimity and awareness to whatever's arising—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—but our habit is, when confronted with the potential of loss and sorrow and grief, to think "no,

bad." So we kind of shut it away a little bit, even though we can't avoid it. That can be a habit.

The second thing I want to point to is the misperception, the not recognizing impermanence right when it's in our face. And the third is the inattention, the lack of attention—all the spacing out, the lack of attention to just what's in front of us, to all the aspects of life.

In the culture I grew up in—and there are many cultures within this country—but in the culture I grew up in, old age is around, but even now it's kind of not so present. Not living in a multigenerational family or house. And death in particular is tidied up, kept minimal. You don't really have it. I didn't really have it in my face. So the society was also part of the conditions of just not really seeing all the aspects of life right in front of my face as life goes on.

I want to tell a little story about this. A few years ago, I was helping to teach a retreat in northern Burma, in the hills of Sagaing outside Mandalay. It was a retreat with a Burmese Sayadaw and a couple of Western teachers, but for foreigners—mostly Europeans, Americans, some Australians—along with Western teachers and managers. This is in the hills of Sagaing, right on the Irrawaddy River, a big river. Lots of nunneries and monasteries all around, in a small village.

So one afternoon, we—the staff of the retreat, the Westerners—were walking along the riverbank. We got down just a little bit, about maybe half a mile, not even. And right there by the river, there's the road, and then different nunneries and monasteries. We came even with a nunnery where we'd been visiting for a few years. We knew a lot of the nuns, a lot of the monks, and someone with us spoke Burmese.

As we got near there, along the wall which runs right along the river—and the river is very much part of people's lives there, the mode of transportation, people plant things along it—we saw the whole community. All the nuns from the nunnery we knew, all the monks, all the lay people, lined up along the wall, all looking over the river. This was very unusual, maybe eighty people or so.

We came up. What's going on?

They said three young novice monks, young boys of twelve or thirteen, had been out playing in the river, playing in a rowboat. And one of them had gone down and hadn't come back up again. He was a new monk from far away, not so used to the river, not from around there. Some men were down trying to find him, but it had been an hour already, so you knew he was going to be dead when they found him.

The whole community was there. Some little tiny girl nuns, four, five, six years old that we knew—everyone was there. And they found the young boy's body and brought it up.

What was so interesting to us was what proceeded from that. The whole community was there, and right by the road was a big *sālā*—a big platform with a roof but no walls, just sitting right there. They use it for all kinds of things. They brought his body in there. Someone went to inform his parents, a twenty-four-hour ride away, so it was going to be a while before they could come.

The whole community—the monks, the nuns—everyone gathered. The little boys who had been with him ran away, because of course they were scared. So some of the monks went to find them, to soothe them, to comfort them. There was this real sense of taking care of everybody. They took the young boy, wrapped him, ran up to the monastery, got clean robes, washed him, put him in his clean robes. The little girl nuns were there, and they knew him, and they were seeing the whole process. Everybody was part of it.

Then some of the nuns and monks sat down and were going to take turns chanting, staying with him until his parents came in another twenty-four, thirty hours. And it was just all right there. Everyone was sad, all the normal emotions, but it was all part of village life.

One of us, one of my friends who was managing the retreat at the time, said, "I'm forty-seven years old. I've never seen a dead body of a person." Just the difference from how we were brought up—and more, the naturalness of it all. Because really, when we talk about impermanence, death is the big one. I'm going to talk about it in smaller ways too, but just that sense of the naturalness. Because that's how it is.

When the way things are is hidden from us for various reasons, or we're just not in the habit of noticing, it feeds our inattention. It feeds our misapprehension, our misperception, without us even knowing it. And then we get uncomfortable, afraid, ill at ease—or think there's something wrong if we feel those things. Instead of seeing them as part of life. People were sad, people were crying, people were trying to soothe the kids, and that's all part of life. Nothing wrong with it. Nothing to avoid.

So let's call this kind of resistance or denial simply that: resistance. Two aspects I want to highlight are the resistance to the sadness of loss—trying to avoid that—and its corollary. That resistance is *dosa*, aversion. It always comes back, I hate to tell you, to the *kilesas*. They're just there when we're suffering. The resistance to the sadness, and the corollary is that our mind gets into clinging, holding on, all kinds of strategies to look for some security. It's not quite so obvious, but watch and see how we're doing it.

This is human. Death, loss, sorrow, grief—it's human. It's not that it shouldn't be happening. It's part of life. And so I feel, in terms of my experience in practice, we shouldn't have the idea that if I'm practicing correctly, I won't feel grief. Or if I'm practicing correctly, sadness won't come up. Rather, it's about not resisting or judging or blaming—just seeing these as natural functions of loss in this life. But met with awareness, they don't have to be any more than that. They come, you see them, they go.

We still see the impermanence even within that. But it's human.

There's a wonderful story from the time of the Buddha about his attendant, Ananda, who served him for the last twenty-five years of his life. If you read the suttas, the discourses of the Buddha that have come down to us, there are a lot of them, and Ananda appears in many because he was always with the Buddha. He was somewhat awakened, but not completely awakened. So he's kind of a humanizer, you could say, in terms of the suttas. His personality comes through as a really kind person, a loving person. He totally supports the Buddha and has deep faith, but his function, rather than trying to keep people away, is how

to get people to hear the teachings. He's just very kind.

So in this sutta—the sutta of the Buddha's death, his last days—he's talking to his close monks about the fact that he's going to die soon, and they're discussing the procedures and cremation and such things. Suddenly he realizes that Ananda has disappeared. He says, "Where has Ananda gone?" Although, of course, he knew. But he said, "Where has Ananda gone? Go find him for me."

Ananda had gone into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning against the doorpost. He was weeping and saying, "Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me." This man has heard every talk the Buddha gave for twenty-five years. He really loves him, and he's weeping. It's just really touching. This is life.

The Buddha said, "Go find friend Ananda." And when Ananda came and sat down, the Buddha said, "Enough, Ananda, do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? How could it be, Ananda—since whatever is born, become, compounded is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away? There is no other way."

It's not that it's bad to weep and feel grief. We do. That's just what's happening. But at the same time, we recognize there is no other way.

Then he goes on to say, "Ananda, you have been showing loving-kindness in body, speech, and mind—beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly, unstintedly. You have achieved much merit, Ananda. Make effort, and in a short time your mind will be free, your heart will be free of corruptions."

That's his way of expressing compassion, saying, "This is really how it is." I love that. When we might hear him saying, "Don't you get it? Everything changes," he's not saying it like, "You stupid jerk." He's saying it knowing that hearing the truth can cut through our delusion. He's saying with all the compassion in his heart, "How could it be otherwise?"

So we see that for ourselves, but without flinching away or fearing or judging the sorrow and the grief. It's going to come. It's part of how our minds and bodies work, as long as we still think there's some chance for it to be other. It's poignant.

For me, if the grief is strong, I let the sadness, let the resistance be a wake-up call. The Buddha often used this fact of impermanence as a teaching tool, as a way to just wake up and say, "Oh, I'm really upset. What's really going on here?" Not "I shouldn't be," but "What's really going on here?" And then we see how much there's a sense of wanting somewhere to land, wanting some stable ground, not wanting to lose things. But we don't need to run from that. We don't need to run from shaky ground.

This sense of using change as a teaching tool is something that's accessible to us. That's why I started with this story about the young guy dying—because death is always available.

When he knew he was having, I think, a liver transplant, he was giving a speech to graduating students at Stanford. I didn't hear the whole speech, but they said about a third of it he was talking about death, because it was imminent for him. I just want to share one quotation. He said, "Remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I have ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life." He's saying when we're looking at things the way they really are, we're naked.

Those of you who remember the sixties may remember Carlos Castaneda. It's kind of gone into obscurity now, but Don Juan was always saying, "Make death your advisor." Not death as your advisor in a heavy way, but it's like, yeah, when you look at that, then what's really important? We look at that in our lives.

So seeing the habit, the fear of the fear, the judgment that something's wrong—if we feel grief, something's wrong, this shouldn't be happening. But no, this is how it is. And awareness sees this is how it is. What comes up is the next arising experience we meet with awareness. We start to see clearly the steadiness of awareness.

This is where seeing impermanence frees the heart and mind from clinging, even just in a moment. The reaction to the fact that we can't really rely on anything—this doesn't make sense, although this is what we do. The fact that everything's changing, all meetings end in parting, we will all die, we will all lose, whatever—so we react to that by clinging like crazy to whatever comes up that might give us some sense of stability or security. The mind that wants some... I don't know about you, but my mind really hates uncertainty. Not knowing what's going to happen, shaky ground. But all of life is shaky ground.

I heard on the radio, probably a couple of years ago on the news, on NPR, talking about the European debt crisis at the time, when it was really big in the news. This was completely serious. They talked about the European debt crisis, its effect on politics and government, and said—this is the quotation—"Politics is being driven by the stock markets, and the markets hate uncertainty." So they pressure this or that government, this or that political figure, and they gave examples: this person should stay, or this person should resign, or this person should do X, Y, or Z so that there can be certainty in the stock markets.

What world do these guys think they're living in? Is there certainty in the stock market? "The stock markets hate uncertainty"—there's nothing but uncertainty. This was said with such seriousness, as if that made sense. It's completely insane. But that's really it: What can I do to get certainty? Where can I find some place to rest?

The Buddha said the search for a resting place is burning. It burns our heart and mind. Not to need one is cool and peaceful. That's just the clinging—"I've got to find something I can rely on." That's samsara. It's burning. When, okay, this moment is like this—you've had moments like that here, right? Just the space around, oh, cool and peaceful. Stepping under that nirvana tree, out of the burning.

But the habit of clinging, the sense of "if I just get something steady, it'll make me feel at ease"—it's so deeply in there.

I'll read a little bit of a poem from Galway Kinnell. I really like it. It's long, but I just picked out a couple of stanzas that speak to this. 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 that 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, 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 really like that. We are in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. But it doesn't have to be a nightmare. It doesn't have to be anything, because each moment can become so fresh and new when we're not holding on for dear life trying to keep things some way. I'll say more about that, but this holding on is what breeds the fear. Clinging breeds fear. Clinging breeds suffering.

I was just starting to notice this sense of how much we want to hold on. And this clinging is what keeps us from accurate perception—it's what gets in the way. Because we don't want to be in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. So first we don't think about the house that falls. It's somebody else's, or it was a mistake. We don't want to be in the pre-trembling. We don't want to be in the trembling. We actually just don't really want to know. Maybe this is going to be how it is—finally, I got to the safe place. I watched my mind do that so many times, just here, going through mental states, and finally you get to a nice one. Okay. Ah, I landed here. I finally got here. It's just such a habit of our minds.

So I started talking about noticing impermanence in the big things of death, but really the perception of impermanence is about moment to moment to moment. I once heard the Dalai Lama teaching about impermanence—I think he said this a lot. He was talking about how we think we see impermanence, but what we don't notice is how much we're assuming permanence, which is a kind of delusion. We don't notice the momentariness of change. We notice the big changes. Sometimes we don't even notice those. But we notice the big changes—when something begins, then it abides, and then it dissolves. That's sort of how we think about change. Maybe my life begins, it abides, and dissolves, even though we know we're different every moment. It feels like I'm here for these years—sixty-something, whatever—we're here, we're abiding, and then it'll go somewhere down the road. Or even the day starts, or even a sitting, or even a mood: here, it abides, it goes away.

But it's not like that. There's no abiding. There's nothing abiding for a period of time, staying the same. It's momentary. It's like nine billion plus nanoseconds in one second—I read that's some scientific measurement. And even the Buddha talked about so many mind moments in the blink of an eye, trillions. That's how fast things are changing. Changing so fast we can't literally perceive it. But then we get in the habit of our mind just stretching things out, because there is a lot of momentary change our senses can

perceive when we're really steady with the awareness. We think things arise due to conditions, stay a while, then go away. No. We're not the same in two seconds. It's not the same.

There's a kind of time-lapse photography—a yogi, a meditator, told me about this, the insight she had into impermanence.

I've loved that image ever since. She was watching a time-lapse video of a flower growing. We've all seen those—where the flower kind of bursts out of the ground, and the stem comes, and the leaves come, and the flower opens and then falls down. It's far out to see.

When you're watching that, we know it's all speeded up, but that's what's actually going on. And when we see it moving like that, there's not really a place where you could stop it and say, "That's the flower." It's all the dirt and the air and the sun and the water, and it's moving, and there's grass, and something starts to come, and it turns into the woody fiber of the thing. But when does it change from air and soil and water to woody fiber and leaves and flower and falling and rotting and back to the soil? Every second, it's different. And it's not just flower, right? You can't separate it from the environment, from the seeing of it. It's all constant. Every single minute is different. Continual opening, this constant flow.

That's impermanence. Things as they have come to be in this moment—but this moment is faster than that. Things as they have come to be isn't just that we're sitting here for nine days. How much has happened in your mind since you've been here? How many thoughts have arisen? You don't even want to know. How many moods? How many breaths? It's amazing. What's interesting is how we kind of shine on and don't really take that in, even though we're seeing it.

Somebody said once at the end of a month retreat here, "It's been twenty-eight days and absolutely nothing has happened. We've just been here for twenty-eight days." But on the other hand, every moment, so much is happening. She meant in the big picture, nothing has happened. You get up, you sit, you walk, you go back to bed. But really, nothing happened, right? You go home, people say, "What did you do?" "I got up, I sat, I walked." There's not that much you can really say to people who don't meditate about what it was like—so don't try. I'll tell you that tomorrow. But on the other hand, ten million things are happening in every hour.

Noticing that—a friend said on a retreat years ago, "I've been meditating for years and years," and she had. And she said, "I've known for years, I've seen impermanence, this fact that everything's changing, just like that flower. But this retreat, I'm suddenly getting it. Oh, me too. I'm not just sitting here watching everything else change. That's what I am. No difference. No separation." What we're calling "me" is different every second. Every nanosecond.

So it's the clinging, the holding on that we don't see—not a big clinging, but just that idea, a sensation, a memory. Now we're remembering. I could come in and, like in groups, you start talking about what's going on. If you really look, it's probably not going on anymore, right? It was going on, even if you think it

was going on five minutes before. I mean, that's what we have to do to talk, but it's not really happening anymore. Just changing like that.

So when we go to look for what's happening, the way we use thought usually is useful, but it distorts our perception. It can get in the way where we believe the thought rather than bringing our awareness back to the immediacy of perception—just this moment, this moment, this moment—seeing how fast everything is changing. You can't make really anything solid.

This is from Pema Chödrön.

She's talking about emptiness, but emptiness really meaning emptiness of intrinsic separate self-existence. So it doesn't mean nothing's there. You could say the flower is empty of separate flower-ness because it includes everything.

And so she says, you recognize this by not clinging, by not making a something of anything. That's what Ajahn Chah was saying. If I take the flower and make a flower of it, in that moment this is a subtle clinging. I've frozen everything. The flower has become separate from the dirt and the air and from me and from rotting. Now it's a flower. Later it'll rot, but now it's this unchanging thing.

So she says, we recognize this constant change by not resting in any experience, not making something, by keeping on going. She says everything is a verb. There's no thingness. Everything is a verb. Interesting, isn't it?

And then she told this funny story. With Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who was a great Tibetan master, and Trungpa Rinpoche when he was alive—they were together in Bodh Gaya or somewhere, sitting under some tree. They were sitting together, she said, for two or three hours, just in silence, but really together, just happy and silent and beaming. And after about three hours, Chögyam Trungpa broke the silence. With a huge smile, he looked at Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and pointed to a tree. With a huge smile, he said, "They call that a tree." And they both cracked up. Just totally cracked up.

The sense of it is that we do call it a tree—that's useful. But then we call it a tree and we think it's this solid thing when it's a verb. In constant change, in constant motion.

Not that you can try to see that way. We know it's not in our control. You can't say, "Now I'm going to see impermanence every time I look around." Because the misperception, the perceiving of permanence, is such a habit we don't even know we're doing it. But bringing it into our mind and just starting to tune in, you'll notice it more and more.

And this is where the most important thing is—guess what? Steadiness of awareness. Steadiness of awareness.

Nisargadatta Maharaj—have you heard of him? He was an Indian teacher. They wrote a book of conversations with him that was translated into English really well, called *I Am That*. It's a great book if

you ever feel like reading something non-Buddhist. Anyway, he says, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination."

Totally. So our job, if we start trying to think and look for something—"Let me see how everything's changing"—that's actually imagination, looking for something. We don't know how it should be. But lack of attention—that's what we're learning about. We're learning how to be interested in awareness, which is simply present one hundred percent with whatever's arising right now. That's all we've been practicing. It's profound.

That steadiness of awareness—just now, just now, just now—is how reality reveals itself. It's not like we have to figure out what we need to do to find impermanence. As I said in the beginning, that's how it is. We don't have to do anything to find it except keep showing up to what's happening right now with as much clarity and as little distortion as possible. The wisdom will reveal things for itself. We can notice when our habits of mind are falling into the habits of unwillingness to really show up. Those are habits.

They're going to come. Meet those with kindness—that's what we've been saying. Really see them. Notice them. And that's actually a clue. If I think I'm really present and I start to notice aversion in the mind, it's not like, "Oh, bad." It's more like, "Huh. That's interesting." What's the quality of not wanting to be with right now? You get interested: what's my mind not wanting to be with right now? Not a big psychological analysis, just what's happening right now? Interested to see.

So the steadiness of mindful awareness, moment after moment, is what's going to reveal impermanence over and over and over.

Just to give an example of how we draw things out and cling for stability, making steady something that we don't see change—going back to my friend who said, "Oh, everything's changing, and now I realize it's me too." We've mentioned this in terms of our idea of ourself. There's a word in Pali, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, which means identity view or personality view. That word *diṭṭhi*, view, is like a description we've made that we don't even realize is a description—we think it's true.

Just to see how the steadiness of awareness breaks this down, it gets really interesting. One Burmese Sayadaw, Sayadaw U Lakana, who was the Sayadaw I was teaching with in Burma that year, describes the momentary construction of personality view. Because everything's momentarily constructed and falling apart—that's the thing with difficult stuff too. It's not arising, staying, staying, staying, and then going away. It's not just the pleasant stuff that's arising and going away quickly. The unpleasant stuff also isn't staying, staying, staying. It's constantly being created and falling, created and falling.

So this personality view—the way you can see it begin in a moment is this: back to the six sense objects, the six experiences. Sometimes when you feel like there's a momentum of awareness and you're not feeling too caught in everything, you notice how there's seeing, or you're hearing, and a mood comes, a thought comes. It's just kind of coming and going, faster or slower, and there's not really a problem. You

have a sense of that? You're not saying, "Oh God, everything's changing. Oh God, I need something to land." And you're not even thinking "I" anything in particular. You're not going, "Oh great, that's me." Stuff is just happening in awareness. Thinking back, you can get a sense of the peace of that.

You notice that's going along, and suddenly some particular thing arises, and—whop! That's me. We usually don't say "that's me," but that's how it feels. Something's been kind of pulled out. "I don't like that sight. I don't like this mood. What is that person doing?" We don't even realize that's a perception and a thought that we're glomming onto, or a memory. But you get a sense of how it's kind of pulled out of the flow—or really, the mind just clings, wrapping around it. And that's "me" or "mine," right in that moment. Birth of personality view.

When the awareness kind of stops then, that's when it starts to feel permanent. Steve pointed to this—how actually what we're thinking of as me, the way we're describing ourself, is changing all the time. But when we don't have steady awareness, we don't notice that. Even though it's a completely different experience, we still think it's the same me. You know what I mean?

I'll give an example. A very simple one, of a friend who used to cook here on retreats.

A very dear friend and longtime practitioner, she used to cook here on retreats. She told me one time she came to sit for the day after she'd been working and talking with friends. She was a cook, and her friends were discussing—well, basically saying—she said, "I think I'm a really aversive type person. I have a lot of aversion." And all her colleagues and friends said, "Yeah, that's right, you really do."

So she was in a stew. This wasn't really new information for her, I have to say, but on this particular day she came to sit, she was in a real stew about it. Has anybody here gotten in a stew about anything you thought about yourself since you've been here? You know how it really feels like *this is what I am*. I'm an aversive person.

So she came to sit down, her and her aversive person. But because she'd done a lot of practice, the sitting reminded her to have steady awareness. The reason we haven't had a schedule here is because we want you to remember steady awareness everywhere, not just sitting. But anyway, the sitting reminded her.

So she starts watching the aversion and the thoughts in her mind, the images of how the aversion was manifesting. But then she just watched what came. And she said, "You know what? Yeah, there were some aversive thoughts—maybe ten percent. But there were also some really loving thoughts. There were times of no thoughts and just moods of compassion. There were times when there was nothing to do with me at all—just hearing and seeing and sensing in the body. And then there were times of generosity." All kinds of stuff was arising, and none of it was any more her than any of the rest of it.

She saw how the clinging to the aversive thoughts and the idea—the view, the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—"I am an aversive person"—that's a clinging. There were still no more or less aversive thoughts than before. When she was just watching with awareness, aversive thoughts came, the mood was there, and then they would

go. Sure, they arise. There was conditioning that led to a fair amount of aversive thoughts. That doesn't make it her. It's conditioning that comes and goes.

So with steady awareness, if you really start to have steady awareness, there's no way you can stick to the idea of "I am this" or "I am that" or "I am this type of person." You just can't. We try hard. But you can't help but see the change. And this isn't a suffering thing to see—this is incredibly freeing. All these different aspects I'm talking about, it's incredibly freeing.

The question comes up a lot: Why would I want to see things this way? Why would I want to recognize consciously, moment to moment, the instability in the world, in my life, in my body?

It's because that's the way it is. That's the way it is.

Joseph Goldstein, one of his little remarks: "Anything can happen at any time." It's really true. And then there's that reaction of, "But oh my god..."—I think you can feel it. Why would I want to live like that? Live in fear? Anything can happen at any time?

But that's not awareness. That's fear. And the fear comes up because we're looking ahead and thinking, "What if this happens? What if that happens?" We have no clue what's going to happen. We have no clue what's going to happen in the next moment. But we think we do, right? You think I'm going to keep on talking, and you're wondering how much longer.

And you're going to be sitting here and then the bell's going to ring, and then we'll say something and you'll walk out or whatever. And it's actually kind of scary that more or less that happens, because that can lock us into assuming permanence.

So one thing I like to play with when I have the space on retreat is to just start to notice not only when there's change, but how am I assuming permanence? I don't mean thinking about this a lot, but just noticing it. Notice how the mind assumes permanence when you sit down—and I just pick sitting, it could be walking or anything. You sit down and your back's hurting, you're restless, and right away the mind goes, "Forty-five more minutes." Right then, we think it's going to go forever.

People have told me, various people here just on their retreat, having some really intense physical or emotional states going on for quite a while, and suddenly there's a shift in the relationship in the mind, a shift into awareness, and it's gone like that. Gone like that. How could that be? And it's almost like we can start wondering *how* could it be, instead of really noticing the gone-ness. So really notice when something is gone.

This is silly, but it was like a big insight. And sometimes you get big insights with little mundane stuff. I was eating on a retreat. Very careful mindfulness. Chewing, chewing, chewing—which we can do in a style of practice where we're really being focused. Chewing, chewing. You feel the food, you taste the taste. By the way, after two chews, the taste is gone. Did you ever notice that? Chewing, chewing, chewing, and it

isn't so pleasant. So you chew in a hurry so you can take the next taste. Notice it sometime.

Chewing, chewing, feeling it, swallowing, you feel it going down. And I noticed I was feeling, "Oh, here, whatever it was I was eating is going down," feeling the sensation, the food's going down. But then I saw so clearly—it was a story in my mind: "The food is going down." That was the story. The experience was chewing, chewing, there was the mashed-up food, and then I swallowed, and what I was calling "food"—that was gone. Completely gone. There was some feeling in my esophagus, but calling it the food I was chewing was just an idea.

I know, it seems silly. But these are the stuff that insights are made of. And I just kept seeing that each moment was completely different. And my mind calling it "food," doing all this stuff, was giving this solidity to things. Just—moment—what's it now? What's the experience now? What's the experience now? Noticing the gone-ness.

Noticing how you assume permanence in any way here, as I just mentioned—with mind states, with thinking we know what's going to happen, assuming we know. And noticing how when you sit down, you don't know how your body's going to feel in the next second. Do you have one clue what your next thought is going to be? What the next feeling's going to come up in the body? What sound's going to come? What sight's going to be there? Every moment is completely new and fresh.

And seeing that isn't scary. That's where the interest is, where the aliveness is. We really land in the middle of life. It's our thinking we know that keeps us in that—when someone says they're talking about the routine, you know, you go on and on and on—because we're not awake in it. And so somehow we can want that soothing of the same, the same, the same. But really, no two minutes are ever the same. You can't eat the same brownie—the second bite's a different bite.

It's usually not quite as good as the first bite. Every moment is different.

So noticing gone-ness, noticing you never know what's going to happen, but notice when we think we know what's going to happen. And just noticing how the conditions are changing so that nothing can ever stay exactly the same.

And cause and effect—how our mental states are affected by the weather. Have you noticed that? I remember one retreat years ago in England, in Wales, and I was talking to the teacher. I can't remember what my mental state was, but obviously, it was England and Wales. It had rained like twenty-seven days out of twenty-nine. It was a month-long retreat. And it was cold. Polish scout house. It was this house with freezing rooms and one bathtub for the thirty of us. And it was in our young days. You guys have no clue. And that's nothing compared to Burma.

Anyway, I was complaining, whining obviously, about my mental state, and taking it so seriously—what's the matter with me, why am I... it must have been a negative one, right? Why am I so depressed, or why don't I have energy, or why is my head heavy? He just looks at me and goes, "It's the weather." You can't

claim everything as being you, you know? It's all affected by each other, and none of it's personal. Just looking and seeing that.

So noticing this. Notice when we try to repeat a beautiful state, when we try to repeat an experience and then blame ourselves because we couldn't. Nothing's ever the same, ever the same.

As I said, why would we want to perceive this constant change? The perception of anicca, impermanence, cultivated, just noticed, and repeatedly noticed—it cuts through the habit of clinging and fear. It's what really moves our perceptions, what moves our heart beyond clinging and fear. It releases us from that.

The Buddha spoke of liberation of heart, of mind, through non-clinging. It's the non-clinging heart and mind that recognizes reality accurately that frees us from fear and confusion. And recognizing, even just for a moment, how much stuff is changing—this flow, this conditioning, everything's a verb. There can be moments of fear. Let's just have it. Fear just comes and goes as conditions too. But I find it opens us to the mystery, to the wonder of life, to the sense of there's only this moment, and we just appreciate it so much more. It's not about adding to our suffering. It really releases us, even just in a moment, to so much more appreciation and contentment, really.

Contentment, because this is all there is. Ajahn Sumedho said once, "Contentment and gratitude are very supportive states for awakening." They're also reflective of the heart and mind that's really resting at ease—as the Tibetans say, resting at ease in whatever arises. So it's resting at ease, but only for the second. Just in this, in this, in this, in this.

And it really opens us into the possibility, even for a moment, of radical trust in awareness, in the Dhamma. Life is just as it is in this moment, can't be any different, doesn't need to be any different. And the freedom of heart and mind that manifests as compassion, as love, is available only in radical trust in this moment. However this moment is doesn't matter. And out of that, really the wonder, the opening to the mystery—it's not that we can't function.

Guy Armstrong has a quotation he likes to give of a Zen master who was asked, "What is the effect of a lifetime of practice?" And his answer was, "An appropriate response." When we're not distorting our perception, when we're really opening into the wonder, into the mystery, into just the sensitivity of this moment, whatever arises can be met with appropriateness. Doing the obvious—whether it's a compassionate action, whether it's equanimity, whether it's just being present, whatever it may be, whether it's getting yourself out of the way of harm. An appropriate response.

So I will just end with a little poem from Hafiz, the Persian poet, 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, Hafiz 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 moment.

We are just a mid-air flight of golden wine between his pitcher and his cup.

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