Vedanā, Saññā, and the Power of Awareness (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:16

Deep in the middle of a retreat like this, it's always kind of amazing to me. I rediscover it each retreat, whether I'm taking the retreat or helping to support it—how much stuff goes on for everybody, how much comes up for people. You think you're just going to come and sit and walk, and it seems simple enough. Just be aware of whatever happens, or you could even just watch your breath.

And really, so many people have talked about the roller coaster. So much mental anguish and grief. People are describing deep suffering, habits of mind and heart that are coming up. At other times, real experiences of joy or peace or some kind of insight—and then two seconds later it's different again. It's amazing, really, just sitting there and walking, and all this is going on.

And so, does it ever come up? We say, whatever happens, okay, great. Are you aware of it? Good. That's basically all we say. Did you notice it? Great, that's the practice. You start to wonder: why, really? What's the point?

It reminded me—a teacher of mine said years ago, not a Buddhist teacher, but he said, kind of joking: in the light of steady awareness, all of the snakes come out of their holes. And you notice real snakes are coming out too. Apparently there have been rattlesnakes sighted all over the place here. I don't know if it's our steady awareness or if it was the sun's steady awareness, but anyway—beautiful snakes, weird looking snakes, snakes you'd really rather not see. Come on up, join the party, come into the light of awareness.

So what's the point? Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche said: the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind-heart, as well as how the deluded mind-heart works. Meditation practices work to uncover our innate wisdom and purity by recognizing the obscurations—which we've been talking about—for the changing, insubstantial appearances they are, thus revealing what has always been present.

These two processes I want to give some ideas about, certainly not exhaustive. One is how the confused, the deluded mind works. A lot of what is going on in this retreat—and it's all meditation, not formal versus informal, even if our mind makes that distinction—a lot of what's happening, when we're noticing all the things I mentioned earlier with steady awareness, we're starting to see, or continuing to see, if you've been practicing for forty years, how the confused mind and heart works. And the other half is starting to get a taste, a glimpse of what the non-confused heart-mind is like. This innate wisdom that is always available,

but unnoticed so much of the time.

Last year sometime, I did a month of self-retreat just in my apartment. I have one note I wrote down that I actually reread. Usually I write notes in a retreat and never reread them—just in case you're writing up tons of notes, see how much you really reread them. But what I wrote was that I noticed, and I realized, when I first started practice years ago, my motivation—which seems very reasonable—was to get away from, to somehow change, all the difficult, unwanted aspects of my life, my mind, my heart, my personality patterns, and to really change that, get rid of it, get away from it. As well as somehow—and how this was going to happen was never too clear—get away from all the unpleasant things in the rest of my life as well.

And we laugh, but really, bottom line, why else would we do this? Because that's what we know. That's what we know from the deluded mind: go from the unpleasant to the pleasant and everything's going to be great. So that's where I started. But I never would have been able to know—it wouldn't have made any sense, I couldn't have imagined from there—that the intimation of freedom, the touching of it, just not complete peace but moments where you recognize, you get a glimpse of what's available, arises in a completely different way. Nothing to do with getting away from the things we don't like. Nothing to do with somehow rearranging all the things so the world works better. Although we keep trying, and we can still act appropriately, but nothing to do with that.

I never would have known that the way to the release in the moment of the heart is actually this, what we've been talking about—just this complete being with whatever it is, even through the difficult, not in spite of but because of. This is what's happening. The way to peace and freedom is opening into it with just this fullness of presence without deluded interpretations.

And not just once, I'm sorry to tell you, but again and again and again. But it gets easier because the trust is there. We really know: the running away from this is actually the source of the suffering and confusion.

Opening into this moment with fullness of presence is what allows an intimation of what peace of mind and heart is truly like. But hearing that isn't going to make any difference to any of us. That's really what this steady awareness practice can, again and again, lead us into noticing, knowing, beginning to trust for ourselves.

This is from Ajahn Chah, a very well-known quotation. I kept thinking about it and couldn't find it, but it sums up what I want to talk about tonight. I'm sure many of you who've been in this scene have heard it a million times, but that doesn't make it less true:

About this mind, in truth there is nothing really wrong with it. It is intrinsically pure. Within itself, this mind, this heart—same word—it's already peaceful. That the heart is not peaceful these days is because it follows moods. The real heart-mind is simply an aspect of nature. It becomes peaceful or agitated because moods deceive it. The untrained mind-heart is stupid. Sense impressions come and trick it into happiness, suffering,

gladness, and sorrow. But the mind, the heart's true nature is none of these things. That gladness or sadness is not the mind, but only a mood coming to deceive us. The untrained mind gets lost and follows these things. It forgets itself.

So I want to talk about two of the very core ways—there are many—but deep, deep habits, subtle habits of the mind, of how we get tricked and lost into moods and emotions and reactions. There are two mental qualities that the Buddha spoke about very clearly. He picked these out of all the different mental experiences to highlight as something to notice, as arising in every single mind moment—which is like every millisecond. A millisecond is a mind moment. The mind is just arising and passing. It's not a steady-state thing. Mind is an activity. Arising and passing, every millisecond, with different qualities arising in it. That's the only way change is possible.

These two qualities are *vedanā*, which is translated as feeling tone, and *saññā*, which is translated as perception. I want to give a little description of each and some examples of how these subtle but always arising, every-moment experiences, when not recognized, so easily take the mind and heart into getting confused and misinterpreting—into moods and everything, the whole nine yards.

Talking about *vedanā*, which I'm sure most of you are familiar with, though some perhaps not. The Buddha described that our whole experience is these six sense experiences, just arising and passing. We've talked about that. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body, and all the mental experience. Each arising sense experience, including the mental experience—take this sound, our trusty bell. In that moment, in each of our mind streams, that hearing is experienced in the mind. It's a mental experience of having a subtle pleasant quality, or unpleasant quality, or neutral quality. It's really quick and fast.

To me, this is one of the many reasons that when I've been studying what the Buddha taught, I think he was an incredible genius. Because this is so fast. He's saying it's happening, occurring in every mind moment, but it's so fast we mostly don't even notice it. I'm pretty sure I never in my whole life would have ever picked that up if I hadn't heard and read about it and been taught about it.

And that sound—say you heard that as pleasant—that's not inherent in that sound. It's a quality of how the mind is receiving it in that moment. It might have been pleasant in my mind and unpleasant in Francis's. Tomorrow, different conditions applying in my mind, I might hear what was not the same sound—you can't step in the same river twice—but hit the bell again tomorrow and the experience might be unpleasant in my mind. So it's not a steady-state thing. He's saying this is happening with every sense experience. So how many times is that a day? A trillion, right? How many sense experiences are happening all the time?

And this is the rub. This is where we get into trouble. Because it's so quick and we don't really notice it, the tendency is, when it's pleasant, just to kind of lean into it. We want more.

When something's unpleasant, we lean back from it. We want less. And when it's neutral? Any neutral today? No, we just space right out.

The Buddha talked about this in really interesting terms—I could discuss this all day, but I won't. He talked about how this tendency, when unrecognized, is what seeds the really deep habits of craving for the pleasant, aversion to the unpleasant, and delusion. These are the habits we've been talking about that so underlie and distort our perception and interpretation of things, because it just seems right.

In one sutta, he starts out by asking: what do you think is the difference between a completely awakened person and someone who's not? That gets the attention. And he said the difference is this: an awakened person experiences pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral vedana, feeling tones. An unawakened person also does. So just in case you thought when you get enlightened there's no more unpleasant vedana—forget about it. The same is experienced by all people.

So what's the difference? This is really interesting to me, because it describes how these habits come to be in our heart and mind.

When an untaught worldling—that's an unawakened person—is touched by a painful bodily feeling, let's start with physical because it's easier, the tendency is to worry, to grieve, to lament, to beat your breast, to weep and be distraught. Can you relate to that? He's not saying you get a little bit upset. He's really laying it on, because that's what we do.

He says it's as if you were hit with an arrow—one arrow, the physical arrow—and then we shoot ourselves with a second arrow. "Oh my God, what happened? How can this be? My knee's going to break!" And on and on and on. This is the first thing: we shoot ourselves with a second arrow when we experience an unpleasant experience.

Then we don't stop there. That person experiences two arrows. Then having been touched by that unpleasant or painful feeling, the mind resists and resents it. In one who resists and resents that painful feeling, the underlying tendency, the underlying habit of resistance against unpleasant feeling comes to underlie the heart, the mind.

He's describing the process. It doesn't happen once in a while—it comes to be an unconscious habit. A painful, unpleasant experience comes, there's this lamenting, beating the breast, the resistance. And so the resistance comes to be a habit we don't even notice. It just feels right, doesn't it? When something's unpleasant, you think, "Well, of course I move away from it. What, are we here to hurt ourselves?" It just seems absolutely true and right.

Then he goes on, and this is even more interesting to me. Under the impact of that unpleasant, painful feeling, a person then proceeds to search out sensual happiness. Why? Because an unawakened person does not know of any other escape from painful, unpleasant feeling except the enjoyment of sense happiness. So then in such a person, the underlying tendency, the underlying habit to crave, to lust for

pleasant feelings comes to underlie the mind, the heart.

Do you get a sense of that? Can you relate in yourself how when there's something unpleasant, it seems like the natural thing to do is to go and have a pleasant experience? Just have that in mind as you go through the next days and see how that works.

He says the person does not know, according to facts, the arising and ending of these feelings, the pleasant and the unpleasant. We don't understand the arising and ending of the feelings. And we don't understand the gratification, the danger, and the escape connected with these feelings. And so delusion comes to be a habit underlying the mind.

I'll just finish with the sutta, then talk about it.

In the case of a well-taught noble disciple, an awakened person, when they're touched by a painful feeling, they simply don't do anything else. They don't worry. They don't grieve. They don't lament. They don't need to go looking for sense happiness to avoid feeling the unpleasant feeling. It is one kind of feeling they experience—a bodily one—but not a second one.

Those of us in this habit of resisting the unpleasant and craving for the pleasant, the Buddha said, experience these feelings as if chained to them, as if joined to them. We really suffer from them. Someone who is awakened feels the feeling, and it's just that. Nothing else is created in the mind or heart around it. Pleasant, unpleasant—it's just this. And so they experience that feeling as one who is not chained to it, who is not bound to it, who is not joined to it. It's just this.

And that's the gratification, the danger, the escape. The gratification is yes, pleasant is pleasant. We enjoy it. He's not saying pleasant is wrong. A lot of times people think the Buddhist teaching is that we shouldn't appreciate or enjoy the pleasant because then we start craving. That's not what he's saying. Yes, we may start craving, but we can bring in awareness and be aware of that. It's okay. We don't have to live in mortal fear of craving because, for one thing, it's going to come. For the second thing, fear isn't any better than craving. You trade craving for fear—you didn't really get anywhere with that one. But what we can do is bring in awareness.

So there is gratification in the pleasant. The danger, of course, is that these feelings last only that amount of time. It's so quick, the pleasant and the unpleasant. They may keep coming back, but they last that amount of time. There's no steady state to put our trust in for any kind of ongoing gratification. That's the danger. If you could have an unpleasant feeling, search for the pleasant, get a hold of it, and then be happy with everything okay from then on, there would be no problem. It doesn't work that way—but we tend not to notice until we're really looking.

The escape, he says, is realizing and abandoning the craving for the pleasant and the resistance to the unpleasant. And that's not an act of will. When awareness sees what's really going on in that moment, just for one moment, the craving dissipates because it doesn't make sense.

The habits that come from this go really far, really fast. There's a moment of pleasant, and—correct me if you don't relate to this—the sense of pleasant as good, as right, as the way things are supposed to go, and unpleasant as wrong, as bad, as a mistake, just seems so normal, so obvious.

When many of us, or at many times, are evaluating an experience or evaluating something in life, how much of the rightness of it is really around because it's pleasant? How much of the wrongness of it, how much of the stuff that even during this day you find your mind has been raging against in myriad ways—all the complex good stories that we can really buy into—how much, if you really look underneath, did it start from an unpleasant feeling, an unpleasant experience? And it's so obvious to us that that's wrong. Because this has been such a habit through our whole life, and it's certainly inculcated from all the different avenues in society. So it's just accepted.

When I say I came to practice with the sense that I wanted to get away from all this unpleasant stuff in my personality, and that clearly it was all a mistake, and that it ought to be possible to do that—I know I'm not the only one with that delusion. What I didn't know is that the freedom would be from seeing through that delusion. It's not that achieving constant pleasant is actually impossible—though it is impossible in this world, in these bodies, with this mind and heart to always have pleasant. It's just impossible. You won't believe me, and that's okay. Keep looking. This is the power of mindful awareness: to look and see what's going on.

But this is what keeps us caught—because the fact is, the feeling tone is so quick. It just moves like that.

Ajahn Buddhadasa was a wonderful Thai forest monk who died in the late 1990s. He had a forest monastery in southern Thailand called Wat Suan Mok, where practitioners would mostly just stay out in nature. He didn't do a lot of formal meditation teaching but let the silence and stillness of nature teach, which I think is pretty far out. I spent some time there when I was a nun. I know Fran spent some time there too.

Anyway, he was very learned as well, and he says to just explore in your steady awareness practice. You start to tune into vedana. Explore the fleetingness of it, how quickly it comes and goes—pleasant feeling, how quick. And then sometimes just reflect on your life a little bit. Think of some of the big choices you've made, the big things you've chosen in your life. How much of it came down to thinking this way is going to bring more pleasant feeling? I mean, we don't think it quite that clearly, but how much of it comes down to that? It's really interesting just to look. This is not to look at it with judgment, just to look and see what's going on.

But because the mind opens and changes so quickly, and our habit is not to bring simple, steady awareness to the process—our habit is so deep to move away from the unpleasant, just like that. It's so obvious that as soon as there's an unpleasant thing, the craving comes up for something pleasant. And if there's any way possible, as soon as that craving, that leaning in, that tanha, that thirst comes up, we act on it if we can. Whatever little thing it might be, we act on it. And that acting keeps us from recognizing

the process.

The danger, of course, is that even if you get what you want—like people were talking about, this yearning for a cup of tea and noticing the wanting to go down and have the tea—you have the tea. Maybe it was as pleasant as you thought it was going to be. But no matter how pleasant that tea is, at some point it's over. Then you're left with your mind and heart again. The tea's gone.

And if you're really paying attention, how long does food stay pleasant when you're eating it? Really pay attention. How many chews does it stay pleasant? It just turns into mush, and you've got to swallow fast to get to the next pleasant moment. But that's the thing—there's always the possibility of leaning into the next pleasant moment, the next pleasant moment, the next pleasant moment. And so this hides what's really going on.

We don't really stop and look at it until we either do something like come on a meditation retreat where we're forced to sit and take away our usual escapes, or something big happens in life and we can't get to a pleasant moment that hides the unpleasant. But then we're thrown for a loop because we don't know how to be with the unpleasant without being bound by it. We don't know how to be with the pleasant without being bound by it—bound by craving, bound by aversion.

So here, part of what's going on when some of these snakes are coming out of the hole—and pick the littler ones—is that we're learning how to find in the heart and the mind the willingness to rest with this unpleasant for a minute. When we talk about just a simple moment of awareness that isn't distorted by aversion or greed, it's just for that moment touching the unpleasant. That's huge. That's a real shift, just for that moment—starting to be an intimation that there's another way.

There's another way of being in this world, in this mind and body, that doesn't entail having to get so reactive every time something's unpleasant. It doesn't entail being afraid of it. And when the mind isn't so distorted, if something is unpleasant, difficult, and harmful, and we can move to change it, well, that's quite obvious and we do so. So it's not stupid awareness where you have to stay and never move. We can move out of intelligence, not out of craving that just hides the whole process. Do you get a sense of what I mean?

So this is a whole different way of being. To me, when I first read that discourse—that line that the unawakened person doesn't know of any other escape from unpleasant feeling tone except to lust after pleasant—I find that so sad, so poignant, because it just describes so many of us in this world. If you look at the world, this is really what the whole concept of samsara points to: just the cycles of existence, of unhappiness and wanting and getting, and then it's gone away and wanting again and getting and it's gone away, and it just keeps going.

We're so used to that cycle that it's really common for people to say, when we're talking in retreats, in different kinds of ways, "Well, if there's no craving, if there's no aversion, then what?" I remember

someone saying years ago in a three-month retreat, "Well, if there's no craving and aversion, what—I just sit in my room and never act for the rest of my life?"

That's what breaks my heart—as if craving and aversion are the only mental states, the only motivation for action. That's how ubiquitous they can be in our experience when we're not really looking.

We think... how much of this is part of the reason we keep emphasizing relaxed awareness? Have you noticed that we say that once in a while? I'm glad you noticed. We're going to keep on saying it too. We're not going to stop saying it.

Because mostly—I mean, we're not all the same—but many of us bring our same habits of mind to meditation as we do to anything. And how do we know how to do something with full intention? You buy in, you just strive, do, strive, push. We're really putting in a hundred percent effort, very sincerely, and not noticing the craving, the trying to make something happen. You wonder why you get headaches, why we feel like our body's snapping in two, why you think "I never want to meditate again" once the bell rings. "Let me out of here." But then luckily the mind changes and you find yourself coming back to the next sitting. Here today, you got a lot of time in between, but you're coming back to the next retreat, right? Now, about the fourth day—now is the time to think, "Oh, now why did I come again? Now I remember what the beginning of the retreat was like, why I never wanted to come to another retreat. I'm remembering that now." But then it'll change.

So thinking desire is the only way we can do something... What about compassion? What about simple wisdom? What about a neutral willingness to act? The body's hungry and we go to eat. It doesn't have to be a frenzy of craving every time we go to eat. Sometimes it's just time to go eat and we eat and we can enjoy it. It doesn't mean it's always craving when you appreciate the pleasant. But we can learn to recognize the difference, because when the craving is there, it really feels like this going forward, and it really narrows the vision. It's all about the craving, as Steve said the other night—it only sees the pleasant aspect. The aversion only sees the unpleasant aspect. And it doesn't just lead to craving; it leads into moods and emotions and reactions. It completely distorts our perception—which is where I'm going to go now, into saññā.

But the process of steady awareness, what we're really trying to give ourselves the time and space to explore here over and over... because you can see how quick and subtle this process of vedanā and the aversion and clinging can be, how much you just need to practice the awareness as an alternate way. But what starts to happen—it really does start to happen, and I've heard it in a lot of you already, even if you don't recognize it—is that where the attention goes, where the trust starts to move... it shifts from craving and aversion. Because really, in a lot of ways, you could say that's our refuge. That's where our trust is. When the chips are down, you crave, you avert, whatever. That's what we know how to do.

But it starts to switch to a trust in awareness. And for me, it's really like a love of awareness. I can be with the wanting and see the wanting for something, or the aversion, the fear of something. Okay, awareness of

it. And there's a sense of appreciating the awareness more than I'm believing in the aversion and the craving. It really lets the awareness become stronger. It starts to get its own momentum, and we start to see more clearly, start to recognize these things happening. The steady awareness allows wisdom to see what's happening.

And in those moments where you really see it—for example, dying to go get a cup of tea—pick the simple things. It's good to start with the simple things. Don't start with the most complicated thing in your life. Just the little simple things here. Or someone gave a great example in the group today of just seeing anger come up about such a simple little thing. And really, the thing that the anger came up about was so simple they couldn't take it seriously. So you see how the process is working in the mind. And that's really where insight begins—where we see, "Oh, this is a habit."

This is the process. It's not really about this little thing that happened.

So like the cup of tea. How many times would I be walking and think, "I really have to go have a cup of tea." It's so strong. And just stop and be with the wanting. That doesn't occur to us in daily life that we could do that, but you can. Just be with the wanting and see how it is for you.

Sometimes people think wanting or experience wanting as being actually pleasant. So maybe it is for you. Look and see. For me, the actual wanting itself—not the idea of the thing wanted, the actual wanting—is extremely unpleasant. You're off balance and want to go get the thing. Why? So the wanting will stop. When the wanting stops, it's peaceful. It's nice. We think, "Well, that tea was so great. I'm so peaceful." It's because the wanting stopped.

So if you just keep walking and noticing wanting, wanting, wanting, sooner or later—I promise—the wanting will dissipate. Because everything dissipates. I'm not saying it won't come back in a tenth of a second. I'm not saying how long it'll be till it dissipates, but it will dissipate. Keep awareness going and notice the difference. And notice, wanting doesn't kill us. It's just an unpleasant experience. We're so in the habit of "unpleasant—jump away" that we don't stop and look at it. So, okay, wanting's like this. It's not so bad.

I play with it sometimes. Go into a supermarket when you're really hungry, but don't buy anything. Just go in and play with the wanting and then walk out. It's not going to kill you. Just play with it, little things like that.

Okay, so then moving to saññā, perception. And this is equally interesting to me. Perception—we've talked about that, right? Again, it's another mental quality arising in every moment of consciousness with every sense door experience. And the Buddhist understanding of perception is just that moment of recognition. It's based on memory and our past experiences. So I'd recognize this as a bell. You can see that perception is conditioned because someone could come in here from somewhere else and have no clue this was a bell. Our perception—we think our perception is accurate, but it's not necessarily accurate at all. It can be

distorted by confusion, by delusion, by not having enough information.

So for instance, someone coming in here and not knowing what this is—what I notice is the mind likes to know, so it makes something up. It kind of fills in the gap. "That's a really big begging bowl. I don't know how the monk could walk around with that"—because it's kind of shaped like the begging bowls they carry around in Thailand. You just make it up.

I've seen my mind do that. Somebody's walking by over there. If I don't have my glasses on, I can tell it's a person—about. But that's it. But there'll be some little flick of some sign or something, and the mind goes, "Oh, that's so-and-so." Now, the chances it's so-and-so are slim, but you think it's so-and-so, and then the mind goes on from there—all the reactions and the thoughts and everything. That's a perception distorted by delusion.

Perception can also be distorted by wanting, by craving, by seeing only the pleasant, as Steve was saying the other night. I'm reminded of a friend who was talking about the second or third year of her marriage. I was a good friend with both of them, and I said, "Well, how's it going?"

She said, "Well, it's going, but you know, the work's starting now because the love glasses are off."

You know how that is. You think, "What? How come I didn't see all this other stuff that was going on before? It's so obvious now." You just hope that the hate glasses don't go on, right? That's when it's divorce time, and all of a sudden you only see the negative stuff. But this is perception that's distorted by the kilesas.

So the habit of wanting the pleasant, of craving—it can really distort perception. But perception doesn't just stop with that recognition. As the Buddha said, what we perceive, we think about. What we think about, we complicate with associations and memories and projections. And then these complications and these thoughts become out of control and assail a person, attack a person. Have you ever had that experience? You're just sitting here and your thoughts are attacking you. Go back to the beginning of perception. And it can go into moods and a whole world.

Perception describes and defines our world. It's a useful tool. We need it. It's good that I know I'm Carol and my job is to get up here and talk. It's good you don't all think you're Carol and we're all trying to get up here and talk. That doesn't work. We take turns. It's good you come in, you know the zafu, you know where you sit. That's all very useful, especially when our perceptions agree with each other. When they don't agree with each other and they harden into views, that's when there's big trouble.

So I'll tell you this little story—I often tell it because it's a great example of how perception goes right away into a description of the world, into mood and emotion and suffering. A friend told me this. She was sitting on a retreat, her first retreat, many years ago in Switzerland. There weren't any centers then, so they rented old summer camp houses up in the mountains. These were old wooden houses, not well built, with no insulation, because they weren't used in the winter.

It was a very structured sitting and walking retreat. The sitting room they were in was on the second floor, and right below it was the walking room. Because it was an old wooden house, it was really creaky. Every time anyone moved around, it made really loud creaking, popping sounds.

So she was sitting—everyone was sitting—and she was really finally, finally getting into her breath, having a good sitting. Then there started to be all these creaking, popping sounds. And she thought, "Oh, somebody's walking downstairs." Right away it was unpleasant. She wasn't tracking all of that, just thinking, "They're ruining my meditation. They're walking downstairs, and this is the sitting time. Everyone's supposed to be sitting. How dare they be walking downstairs during the sitting time." Crack, crack, pop, pop—really getting angry and upset and self-righteous, the whole nine yards.

This takes like a tenth of a second, right, from the perception of someone walking. But there was nothing to do, because she also wouldn't dare get up during the sitting and go down and yell at the person. Social pressure is sometimes a good thing. So she sat there. There was nothing else to do. She thought, "Okay." Somehow awareness came back in.

And just notice the whole thing. Okay, okay, just let it go. Just come back and be with the breath, just as it is. So awareness, this beginner's mind, awareness is just fresh and new, not carrying anything, but just meeting this breath completely new and fresh.

So she was doing that, just feeling the breath, really present with it. And as the breath came in and her chest expanded, she noticed she was leaning against the wall. And every time she breathed in, the wall started cracking and popping, and that was the noise she was hearing that she thought was someone walking.

So miraculously, the anger all went away. That's actually how insight works. With accurate perception, all the stories and the aversion and the mood—it all just vanishes because it doesn't make any sense.

This is what's going on in our minds and hearts an incredible amount of the time. And don't believe me, if you think I'm projecting—okay, just keep looking and seeing. When we're suffering from wanting, from aversion, from spinning, from what that person is doing, from what I'm doing and why can't I be different—we mostly don't, without awareness, even have the ability to see the whole chain.

Perception is really quick. Vedanā is really quick. Sometimes we're already way down the road. But even being able to—she was way down the road, all upset and angry—but awareness could come back. Don't try to retract, but just land with awareness right here, right now, just as it is. With that freshness, reality reveals itself.

As Dōgen Zenji said, if you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it? This is the power of awareness, this simple awareness when it's not distorted by wanting, by aversion, by delusion. We can't always tell when it is distorted, but we can keep remembering, keep re-accessing.

And this is the second part of the practice, where the meditation is revealing these habits. I'm just touching on them, but really explore these. These are fun, especially perception and watching the whole story. That's really fun to explore if you don't take it personally. See how fast, how far the mind gets, and how upset you get. And then sometimes you can even play with it.

I've done this on retreat. I remember one retreat years ago, I was sitting in my room, and there was this sound of crickets. It was in the autumn. There's something about crickets that's a real autumnal sound to me, and something about that, plus I was long into a retreat, that led to a real nostalgia. That sense of autumn and the summer going—and mind you, this is New England, so winter's really coming in—and things are dying, and then I'm dying, and you know the whole deal. Crickets, crickets, hearing, hearing, and all the mood and the sadness and the whole nine yards.

So then I thought, let's just change that. The crickets. And then I had a thought: isn't that lovely? I'm out here in nature and there's the crickets and the peace. And then all these happy feelings came in about nature. We're just making it all up, you know? So you can really just play with this and see. It's kind of fun. See if it's really true. Perception—that's the beginning of how it goes.

But because it's so fast and so quick, and the habit of our mind is that we kind of like to know—like I said, I'll see somebody in my mind and I'll go, "It's so-and-so." Why can't the mind just go, "Don't know"? Why does someone come in and have to say, "This is a bell" or "This is a begging bowl"? Why can't we come in and go, "Don't know"?

We can, but there's this sense of liking to settle, of not being so comfortable hanging out in the not knowing. Maybe that's not true for you. But the Korean Zen teacher used to say, "Only don't know. Only don't know." But we like to know better.

What we perceive, we think about. And what we think about then hardens into views—this is how it is. This is a bell and nothing else. This is that person and nothing else. This is how my mind is. I'm an aversive type of person. I'm an impatient type of person. This is how it is. It just gets solidified, and we don't even recognize that.

And then that gets carried over. This is what's really interesting: when something hardens into a view that we don't recognize as a view, we believe it. Often, then, the awareness isn't quite open to recognize perceptions that run counter to the view. I call it selective perception.

So notice, for example, if you happen to be caught in the pattern of self-judging. A lot of people have mentioned that. Notice when that's the thought—that negativity, that aversion—that's distorting the perception. And the perception is that whatever's coming up in your mind and heart is proof of what's wrong with you, in whatever way your mind does that.

Notice at that time: do memories start to come up of all the wonderful things you've done? If you're walking down the path and someone smiles at you, do you say, "Oh, that's so nice"? Or do you think, "Oh

boy, that deluded person is smiling at me. If they knew what was really going on in here, they'd never look at me again." Whatever perception doesn't fit, sometimes we don't even let it in.

Once I was teaching a retreat years ago, and as you see, I sit in a chair. I've done that for years. This was six days into the retreat or something. A woman was talking to us, the other teacher and me, and she was just dying of pain on the cushion—forty-five minute sit, forty-five minutes of dying of pain, sitting cross-legged. Not just a little pain and exploring it, but really beyond the beyond.

So I said to her, "Well, why don't you sit in a chair?"

She said, "Sit in a chair? You can't sit in a chair. You're supposed to sit on a cushion. Everyone's sitting on a cushion."

And the other teacher said, "Carol's sitting in a chair."

And it was like she had never noticed that. This was five days in, not two minutes into it. You could see her whole face shift—"Oh. Oh, she's sitting in a chair." This was before the days when half the room was sitting in a chair. But still, how can we so not see what's right in front of us? And we trust our perception so implicitly.

So let's plant that there. The hallucinations of perception that we don't see, that really keep us spinning—and each of these is a talk in itself—are these: we don't perceive the changing nature of things. We perceive permanence. We may intellectually say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know everything changes." But on the perception level, we don't actually see it.

The three characteristics—we don't perceive impermanence. We don't perceive the unsatisfactory quality of conditioned things, the dukkha. That's why craving keeps leading us by the nose. We keep thinking it's going to satisfy us. We don't perceive the impersonal nature of things, the lack of control. We keep thinking somehow we're going to get this mind and body doing what we want. We just don't perceive that.

That's why thinking about it isn't enough.

That can get us looking, that can get us to trust the awareness, but it's not enough to change the perception. Because perception is below the level of thought. It can trigger thought, but it's actually below the level of thought.

These are two of the ways—subtle but really quite profound—that as we cultivate steady awareness, we're starting to see how the deluded mind works.

The second part then is starting to recognize, to uncover, the innate wisdom, the innate purity. This is the piece I want to end by pointing to: the steadiness of awareness, why this simple everyday awareness is actually so profound and transformative.

It's so kind of ordinary. You're starting to really notice it. You're getting a sense of how ordinary it is, how

easy it is to overlook. But this is the shift that will start to really allow the intrinsic purity to come more and more into knowing, into perception, into our heart and mind—the real intrinsic purity that allows wisdom to arise.

So instead of being overly involved in all the objects of experience—the pleasant and unpleasant—and enamored of our reactions to them, which is also an experience, our perceptions, what I think about this, what I think about that, what I think about me, what I think about you, just so engaged with our reactions, over-involved with experience in a way... we're switching the real trust to the awareness. The awareness and the object coming together. It's not exactly a foreground-background shift, but it's kind of like a trust shift. We still know what the objects are, we know what's happening, but it's like: awareness of, awareness of, awareness of.

And this simple awareness—without looking, don't go looking for something, that's just wanting—but the more we're letting it in, there's awareness and object, awareness and object, not just object, object, object. The more it starts to spread out and make itself known: a moment of awareness. It's not a thing, it's really an activity. But we can feel into it. It has different kinds of senses, but it's a knowing—awake, alert. When it's not distorted by greed or craving, it's just this... someone described it as squeaky clean. The lenses of our heart and mind are squeaky clean. Whatever's arising arises, does its thing, and goes away. We're just really right there with it. It's not off at a distance. It knows what's happening. It's feeling it fully. It arises, does its thing, goes away. And we're not fettered by it. We're not chained to it in either direction.

So starting to get more interested in this, more trusting of this. One way I find helpful is to plant a seed in the back of your mind and heart to recognize in those moments—not just the big things I've been talking about, the difficulties, seeing the deluded habits—but I'm sure you must have had at least one moment, not that you had it, but there was a moment somewhere where nothing special was happening, and it was just feeling either peaceful or calm.

Nature's very helpful for that. You could put different words on it. Sometimes the word is just cool—the coolness of no kilesa acting out, the coolness of not reaching out to experience and getting all involved. Or peace. It could be joyful. It could be calm. It could be cooled out. Equanimous. Different words. The words are already too much. But noticing that.

Nature helps a lot because we tend not to... you can get involved in wanting and disliking, but it's a little easier just to feel that. I noticed on my first few retreats there would be lots of moments like that. But then I would go with the old habit of attributing that.

And it's kind of pleasant, but it's not exactly pleasant. It's really more like the peace of not getting caught up in things.

But I would attribute it. I'd go, "This is really pleasant," and I would attribute it to the beauty of nature, the fact that I'm silent, something to do with a particular experience. So I'd always attribute it back to the

object, or back to the particular mood I was in, which is also an object—not really noticing, because awareness is just so available, so nothing special. Not noticing that what was actually going on was the peace of simple awareness not getting all involved in whatever was occurring, but knowing what was occurring.

I would have loved it if someone had mentioned that to me fifteen years ago, but it probably wouldn't have made any difference. You just notice it when you notice it.

So here—don't grab a hold of something, but also not just bringing in awareness when we're suffering, not just bringing in awareness when you're sitting and trying to do something or trying to see these patterns, which is interesting, that's far out. But the times when nothing special is going on—Steve's been saying over and over, just the mundane things. Fine. The things are mundane. Awareness is never mundane. Awareness is fresh and new in every moment.

It's something that Dipa Ma said. Dipa Ma—she was this amazing little Bengali lady, a grandma when we knew her, maybe four feet tall, literally. And very, very profound practice and understanding. She said her mind was filled with love and concentration and peace. That was it. But she's living a life—she's a widow with a daughter and grandson to support in a tiny little apartment in Calcutta. And she was a bundle of energy, I tell you.

Once we went to visit her in Bodh Gaya, just the year before she died, a bunch of us. We were with Joseph Goldstein, who was a long-term student of hers. And she says to him, "Joseph, you should sit for the weekend." And he's going, "Oh, well, you know, I'm busy. Maybe next weekend I'll sit." She goes, "No, sit down for the weekend and get up at the end of the weekend." Joseph just laughed. And she just looked at him and goes, "Don't be lazy." She was totally serious. To her, that was nothing.

So anyway, she said, "Nothing is mundane. Awareness is always fresh and clean. It includes everything without being distorted by anything." Like Ajahn Sumedho says, awareness is the point that includes. So far from being dull because we're not all involved—who cares, you don't know what's happening—it's just the opposite of that. Like she says: alive, fresh, clean. It's not like not caring. It's more like Byron Katie says—it's like loving what is. What is, is. What is not, is not. Don't add anything extra. I got that from Guy Armstrong's new book. I'll just put in a plug for that—it's a very nice book on emptiness.

So I just want to end with this from Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche:

Unfabricated ordinary awareness, unadulterated by effort and modification—naked, fresh, vivid, and totally natural. What could be simpler than this? To rest at home and at ease in total naturalness. What could be simpler? Apparently a lot of things, but this is one's birthright, one's true nature. It's not something missing to be sought for and obtained, but it's at the very heart of our being. It is actually inseparable from our uncontrived everyday awareness.

What could be simpler than this? To rest at home and at ease in total naturalness.

So let's just sit for a moment. Whatever posture you're in for the next half hour, just hang out in total, uncontrived naturalness. And if you're awake—

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