Cultivating the Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:46

The subject I want to speak about tonight is cultivating the perception of impermanence. *Anicca*.

As you know, the Buddha spoke frequently about the centrality of really understanding the fact of impermanence—one of the three Dhamma doors. Guy spoke the other night about the five aggregates in terms of seeing *anattā*, the insubstantiality of sense of self. That's one Dhamma door. Really getting an understanding of the truth of *dukkha*, like the first noble truth, is another Dhamma door. And then sometimes the perception keys into the truth of impermanence, *anicca*—the three characteristics. Of course, as we proceed with our spiritual journey, we're going to see and understand all three of these because they're just three different aspects of how things are. It's not like it's some insight that changes anything except how we relate to life. But it's said that sometimes a person might just more naturally tend to recognize, to have an accurate perception of, one or the other of these three.

So tonight we'll talk about *anicca*, the power of the perception of it.

This fall I did about a month of self-retreat. I did a few self-retreats last year—I took a sabbatical from teaching. So I did about a month of self-retreat in a really beautiful spot, and for some reason this sense of impermanence arose strongly. Sometimes it's kind of terrifying in the implacability of it. This is how it is, and nothing can change that. But also, when the mind isn't caught in clinging and resistance, when it's really just recognizing this is how it is, it opens us into this tenderness of the immediacy of this moment of life, because it's all there is. It's so poignant and so beautiful at the same time, in my experience.

One very famous haiku kept running through my mind and heart that whole month. I'm sure many of you are familiar with it. Issa, a Japanese priest from the 18th century, wrote: "This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet..."

I just love that. It is a dewdrop world. It vanishes as soon as the sun comes out, and yet it's so beautiful. It's so poignant. It's so tender. It's said that he wrote that after the death of his young daughter.

So this opening to the perception of impermanence is really what frees our hearts and minds from the stasis of clinging. And it's not a dread, horrible thing—it opens us to the wonder and the mystery at the same time.

But here's what's interesting. Of the three characteristics, intellectually, when we speak about them, impermanence seems to me the most intellectually obvious, easy to understand. Probably no one here is going to argue about it, right? But there's some way that knowing it intellectually isn't freeing us from clinging. Or am I wrong about that?

So what is it that changes? And this is where the Buddha talks about the perception. He said: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, this perception eliminates all sensual desire. It eliminates all lust for existence, for becoming, for turning into some new form in mind or body. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'"

Those four things mean complete awakening.

The perception of impermanence, when it's developed and cultivated—I'm taking that as the key for what I want to talk about tonight: how we can begin to develop, or continue to develop, this perception.

Because it's not that things are permanent and then, if we have some kind of insight, things start to change. This is how it already is. So how come we don't see it? Why is it so hard to perceive this?

On some level, this is the nature of all insight. It's not creating a new reality, but shifting our inaccurate, confused, basically wrong perception of what's occurring, of what we're experiencing. Because how we perceive is how we think about things, and how we think about things becomes the views, the construction our mind puts onto life through thought, and that then determines how we're going to respond to experience.

So even if intellectually we know everything's changing, when we have a really hard, difficult mood—everything's changing, but not *this*. This is going to be here forever, right? That's just kind of how it feels. And then we start reacting as if it's going to be here forever, because that's the perception in that moment. The nature of insight is not that actuality changes, but that perception shifts.

The Buddha spoke about three different levels of wisdom, of paññā. They're all wisdom, and we're taking in and working on all three levels at various times. It's not simply linear.

The first level is *suta maya paññā*—in English it would be "heard understanding." Understanding that someone says, or that we read, or that we intellectually take in. So when you read "yes, everything's impermanent," that's heard understanding. Or I say that tonight. And that's not nothing—it's useful. We can sometimes use those thoughts just to help us remember. When you're in the middle of that really difficult, horrible mood and your mind goes, "Oh yeah, right, I think I heard somewhere that everything's impermanent"—it doesn't really shift our understanding, but it might just give us the strength or the courage to hang with it a little bit more. So that's the first level of wisdom, and it's important. Without that, there's no right view, no wise understanding.

The second level is *cintā maya paññā*, which is really using our thinking, wise reflection, our intellectual understanding. We kind of think about it: everything really is impermanent. And we might intellectually go through the day—it's not really the gut-level perception, but we're kind of saying to ourselves, "Oh yes, the leaves on the trees are turning yellow, everything's impermanent, things change." Now that's true, and that's a reflection that can help us come back into our own experience. But even that, unless it's on the third level... Oh yes, the autumn, the leaves are falling, the leaves die—we can say the whole thing, and it's

like, okay, maybe it mellows us out a little bit. But it isn't really the depth of insight into anicca, into impermanence, that really shifts our understanding in a moment. You know what I mean? It's important, and we really use this. It kind of softens us up to start perceiving things in a more accurate way.

And the third level—this is really the level of insight, not thinking but just an aha moment—is when the conditions are ripe such that the perception actually shifts. We have little or big insights frequently about all kinds of things. In terms of impermanence, it can be anything going on. It's not that you have to be in some kind of deep state of practice. It can be with anything. But suddenly, you're washing your hands, and as you're washing your hands you just see the soap disappearing, and it's like—oh my gosh, everything just disappears. Everything just... And it could sound really silly when you're saying it, but when it goes in, it's on a cellular, visceral level. Do you know what I mean? You've had insights like that. *Oh. Wow.* And then the mind will think about it and we'll talk.

And that's fine, knowing the mind's thinking. Usually two thoughts is enough. You know, we got it. Okay, you don't have to write a novel about it. But the energy of the insight usually goes into thinking. Yet you can feel, wow, yeah, everything's changing. And if someone came to you and said, "That's not true," you don't have to get in an argument. You see, the perception has aligned in that moment. That's really how it is.

Of course, as with everything, perception lasts a fraction of a second. So again, we may have that insight, it goes in, it makes a difference. It has an effect on our understanding going forward, on our mind stream. But it doesn't mean that once we have an insight on impermanence or anything, then from that moment on, every single moment is going to be accurate perception. Right? Because what blocks it? We know—our old friends, especially delusion. Delusion leading to greed leading to aversion, resistance.

So this is what I want to talk about: just how we can explore this in this situation we have here, which is a great situation for exploring this. The perception of anicca is so liberating, as the Buddha said, because in that moment, just in that moment of that accurate perception, the heart, the mind is liberated. In that moment, it's freed from clinging. Because clinging doesn't make any sense. It just doesn't arise in a moment of really recognizing that there's no solidity, no stability anywhere. It just doesn't make sense. And then with that wisdom, the heart, the mind, you really get that sense of freedom, of liberation from the constriction, the limitation that comes with the trying to hold on, with the trying to push away, with the trying to keep everything in its nice little box so we can feel safe and secure.

So I wanted to talk about three different ways that came into my mind that moha, delusion, manifests—ways that we can explore here. This is to be interested in how delusion manifests as a kind of block, not allowing the accurate perception of impermanence. And sometimes we can see these manifestations coming up too.

And again, as I talk about forms of delusion or clinging, remembering, just to plop it in there, that we're exploring these with interest, with wise attitude. These are not three more ways of delusion that show

what a really hopeless, stupid person you are and you might as well give it up. This is like, "Wow, let's see how this works. It's really fascinating." And if you think you're going to see anicca once and then the delusion is going to stop—hello, wake up. What are we all doing here? Why are we spending our life? This is a lifetime process.

And if we're interested in it—I've talked to a lot of people in the meetings, not everyone and no one all the time, but quite a few people are just starting to get this sense of interest in seeing what's going on. Like someone said, "Aversion comes up in my mind and it's like, okay, it's aversion. It's the next thing arising." You can kind of watch it. So just to put that in there.

The three ways I want to talk about are: a kind of denial, avoidance of change or what comes with change; the misperception, recognizing wrongly even when we're present; and the third—you see they all link together—is simple inattention, lack of continuity. The inattention means we just don't notice what on some level we're not keyed up to notice. And that actually hides the perception of impermanence.

So, just to start by talking about denial. This is a bit coming off what I was talking about last week. It's not a quiz, I don't really expect you to remember, but I was talking about the two darts, the two arrows. The Buddha is saying that the habit of our mind when unpleasant experience arises is resistance. That comes to be the underlying habit of the mind, resistance. So that's denial—a refusal to look at change. And then under the influence of the habit of resistance, the other habit that comes up is clinging, looking for pleasure. So that's the second way, the misperception, looking for something to make us happy where it can't happen.

So this is one of the ways, on a very subtle and profound level, that this habit of resistance to unpleasant and clinging to the pleasant actually operates. It's not only just about it feeling uncomfortable in the moment.

This is one of the habits that actually obscures the recognition of reality. In that obscuration of things as they are lies what keeps us wandering in confusion and suffering. So on this level, the habit of resistance and clinging—it's not that it's bad, and it's not just about big things. On these subtle levels, it's really deep. This is such a great opportunity to explore it while we're here in the silence together.

I want to say a little bit from my own experience about the sense of resistance. One of the resistances that comes up—and this can be on the macro level of change as well as the smaller one—is simply seeing things that we are attached to, things that we love, particularly people that we love, or situations that are important to us. When we see them vanish, go away, it opens us into a great deal of sadness for most of us—a sense of loss, grief. And then what can come in so quickly, in the sense of denial, is not really deeply understanding the First Noble Truth.

So the loss comes, the grief comes, and there's that sense in the back: "Well, something's wrong. It's not supposed to be this way. I shouldn't be feeling this." Or basically, "I don't want to feel it"—that's what it

really is. I'm feeling grief, and I don't want to feel the grief. Therefore, there's something wrong with the way the universe is working. They shouldn't have gotten sick. I shouldn't have lost my job. This person shouldn't have died.

The denial, I think, is really a turning away from simply opening with tenderness to the pain, to the sadness, to the sense of grief or loss or change or confusion or instability—and really seeing that this is part of our human life. When we talk about opening to the truth of impermanence and really freeing our hearts and minds from this confusion, from always reacting and responding in a way that's inaccurate... Sure, I have no idea what an arahant experiences. Maybe they don't really experience grief, but they do notice absence.

There's some sutta—I'm paraphrasing because I couldn't find it—after the Buddha was really old, and his two closest disciples who'd been with him all the time, Sariputta and Moggallana, had both passed away. He's looking out at the assembly and saying, "This assembly is empty. It is empty of Sariputta and Moggallana." He noticed the difference. He wasn't weeping and wailing, but he noticed the difference.

But another sutta that I actually love, because it really touches me, is from Ananda, who was the Buddha's attendant and cousin for his last twenty-five years. He is a really lovable figure throughout all the suttas, all the discourses. He's in very many of them because every discourse that starts "Thus have I heard" is meant to have been recited by Ananda, who was with the Buddha for twenty-five years, had an incredible memory, and remembered every discourse that he heard. So he pops up a lot.

But he's very human. He's kind of like the human touchstone. Sometimes he would make mistakes, and the Buddha would chide him: "Haven't I told you, Ananda?" He was very kind, very inclusive. In terms of being the Buddha's attendant, it wasn't like you see with some masters, where the attendants are trying to keep the crowd away. Ananda was there because he loved the Dhamma. His job was to help everyone who wanted to hear the Dhamma come and hear the Buddha. He was a great supporter of the nuns. He spent a lot of time teaching the nuns, sharing with the nuns—anyway, I'm getting off on a whole other talk. But he's a kind of way in for us.

There's one lovely sutta, the Parinibbana Sutta, which is very long. At this point, the Buddha has told his disciples that he's going to die in a certain amount of time, and then they're talking about other things. And then it says, all of a sudden, Ananda left. "The venerable Ananda went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost: 'Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away, who was so compassionate to me.'"

Andy Olendzki, who's a Pali scholar and was the director of the Study Center for many years, told me something I didn't know—that this is a very well-known image in Buddhist art and iconography: the sense of Ananda leaning against the doorframe and weeping at the coming loss. And the Buddha was still around at this point, mind you—at the coming loss. I love that this is in the suttas, because it shows that this is part of being human. If we shy away from feeling that, we'll never see things as they are.

The story goes on. The Buddha inquired where Ananda was, and they told him, so he told a monk to bring Ananda to him. When Ananda came, he 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? So 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?"

But he's not saying this harshly. He's saying this out of love and wisdom and compassion. This is how it is. This is how it is. Let it in. Let it in.

And then he went on to really praise Ananda and bring up his confidence in Ananda's understanding and practice, saying, "Continue to practice, and you will come to full understanding." He's really saying: This is how it is. You have the confidence, you have the understanding, you have the ability. Keep practicing.

And so I just love that, because I feel like that's saying: yes, this is how it is for us. Don't run away from it. Don't hide from it. This is part of life.

Personally, I found that even opening to the grief of a loved one's death without resistance kind of deepened the sense of love and connectedness. About five or six years ago, my younger sister died quite suddenly and relatively unexpectedly. I was her closest person, so it hit me harder than I expected—my parents had died in the years before that, but this was just different.

It was so interesting to me. I couldn't have talked about it like this in the couple of years after, but now it's become part of my psyche. It was like: this had happened. There's no way to argue with that. You can't say, "Oh, no," or "Maybe," or "We could change it." There's nothing to do. This is how it is. And so somehow my heart was just able to say yes, this is how it is, and was just able to be—for quite some months—totally present.

At times this really strong sense of grief or sorrow would just well up in the middle of whatever I was doing—you know how it is—and the heart and mind would simply respond: "Yes, this is how it is now." I would just really let it be there. It would move through, last a little while, be gone, then come again a few times a day. But the sense of clarity remained: No, this is just how it is. And also that it's fine to feel the grief. Actually, I felt that it came connected with the deep love I felt for her. Trying to shut it out was like trying to shut out the whole world, in a way.

I feel like I learned a lot about the human nature of change, of death, of coming together and going apart. How could it be otherwise? The only way it could be otherwise is if I went first. There's no other way it's going to happen. And yet this sense of subtle denial and fear of just feeling is something that can keep us locked.

The Buddha often used an opening to the reality of death as a powerful teaching tool. There are many stories like that. Just one brief one—I'm sure you know it, it's the most famous one—of the woman who came to him after her young child had died. She was completely distraught and begging the Buddha to

somehow bring the child back to life. He said, "Okay, if you go and collect a cup of sesame seeds from houses that have not experienced death." Of course, she went, and every single house had experienced death. After however long, the mind gets it. She comes back and says, "Okay, I get it." And then the heart-mind is open to really hearing the truth, and the Buddha could teach, the Buddha could share.

So I'll tell one more story about this, because it's just life. Some years ago—I don't know, maybe ten years ago—I was teaching a retreat in the Sagaing Hills in Burma with friends, including Sayadaw U Lakkhana. It was all Western yogis, about thirty of them, but with a Burmese teacher and us, another teacher and me, along with Western translators. We were friends with people there. There are three nunneries in a row next door, and we're friends with those nuns. The retreat center is right on the Irrawaddy River, kind of up high, but you walk down to the road and you're walking along the river.

So one day, we were just out walking along the river—me and the other teachers and the translator friends—and about two nunneries down, there was a huge gathering: the whole group of the nunnery, some monks, and many of the people who live there, all standing by the river. I said, "What's going on?" They told us that three young novices—little boy monks, ten, eleven, twelve years old—had gone out in the river to play. Somehow one of them had drowned. The other two had lived there for a long time, but this one who had drowned had just come last week from far away. He wasn't used to being in the river, and I guess he didn't know how to swim. Everyone was standing there, and they had just recovered his body.

And then—the learning is what happened next.

They had to send for his family, who lived far away. There weren't cell phones there yet, so it was a long journey to reach them, and then they had to take buses to come. It was going to take twenty-four to forty-eight hours for his family to arrive. So the nuns and the monks from his monastery came down, just up the hill, and they took his little body up to a big sala right on the side of the road. A sala is like a big open room without walls—a large roof, big teak pillars, open space. They set up a really lovely little bed and put him in clean robes and brought down nice blankets. Then all the nuns and monks gathered. And many of the nuns are really young—there's this one little nun...

At that point, she was probably around six or seven. We know her now—she's sixteen, seventeen. It's wonderful to see. She came running up to us, holding our hand, and Jake was with us. He could talk to her; he speaks Burmese. So she was part of it too. They didn't say, "Oh, you're too little. Go hide in the back."

They put him on the bed, and then everyone from the community—the laypeople, the monks, the nuns—all set up what we would call a wake. They were staying with him for the twenty-four to forty-eight hours, chanting suttas and metta, taking turns. The whole community just staying there with him, including the little nunlets and the little novices. And the two little boys who had been with him—they took care of them too. The monks came down and made sure they were okay, not too lost or caught in blame. It was just this sense of the whole community coming around and saying, "Yes, this is what happens. And here we are, dealing with it."

One of my Western friends said, "I'm forty-seven years old. I've never seen a dead body before." And I thought, yes, that's kind of how it is here in this culture.

I thought it was beautiful—I mean, sad. It was really sad. Even when I saw Yeti just last year, we were walking right by the river and we both kind of pointed, reminding each other of that time. It has a resonance. But there was this sense of: this is how life is. Let's see it. Let's not hide from it. Feel the sadness—that's part of how life is. We don't stop caring, but we can respond in a much more appropriate way.

So that's the denial piece. And then, as I was talking last week, out of the denial—or out of "I shouldn't feel sad" or "this is too much"—we tend to cling, as we know.

One time I asked myself: Why? Why do we cling? What are we clinging to? This sense of instability—something about it, I don't know about your mind, but my mind, which of course doesn't exist, but the mind seems to hate it. It hates instability. Unless you don't like what's happening, then it wants instability. And it doesn't seem to notice the contradiction between those two different ways.

Just this sense of shaky ground, the sense of not knowing what's happening. Have you noticed that in your practice? We want to get it all figured out. "Tell me how to do it right so it'll always be nice, balanced, open, choiceless awareness and no striving. How do I get it so it stays like that?" Right? Isn't that what we think we're trying to do?

But it's so poignant. Our strategy for happiness: cling to an experience, cling to ideas, cling to views—views of ourselves, clinging to views of our personality. Even when we think we have a disgusting personality, still it's *my* personality and we hold on to it. Views about anything.

This sense of clinging—like how to find stability in an unstable world—and not quite noticing that it's the clinging that's creating the dissonance, the ill-at-easiness, the suffering.

I heard this on public radio a few years ago. It was a financial program, or maybe the news, and they were talking about the European debt crisis. Very seriously talking about it, discussing the stock market and what effect the European debt crisis would have on politics and governments. And they said, "Politics is being driven by the stock market, and the markets hate uncertainty." So they pressure this or that government, this or that political figure to stay or resign or do this or that—so there won't be uncertainty in the stock market.

This was said with all utmost seriousness.

Stock market uncertainty. That goes together, right? Uncertainty and the stock market go together. "Stock market uncertainty" is like an oxymoron. It doesn't happen. They said this with all seriousness. If this figure resigns, if this government does that, then the market will be happy because there will be no uncertainty. And I thought, this is how we live in this world. We don't even notice when we're doing that

for ourselves—this response to the unreliability of life.

Hold on, let me share this. It's a fragment of a long poem by Galway Kinnell, an American poet, called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You scream, waking from a nightmare.
When I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me hard
as if clinging could save us.
I think you think I will never die.
I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars
even as my broken arms heal themselves around you.
I have heard you tell the sun, "Don't go down."
I have stood by as you told the flower, "Don't grow old, don't die."
Little Maude, 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.

And so, that's how it is. And sadness is okay. Actually, when we're not trying to stop from falling, when we're not resisting the trembling, there's so much beauty and love and tenderness for the moment. When our minds and hearts become more flexible, more flowing—not caught in that "oh no, it's going to go, it's going to go"—we can recognize: it hasn't gone right now. It's just this. There's so much tenderness and freedom in that.

From the Buddha: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful. One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere."

This comes back to realizing there's not one to abide. It's the clinging that makes us look for somewhere to abide.

One way we can open to this—just to remind ourselves, it's a practice Ajahn Chah mentions often—is simply going through the day, and when something comes up, you remind yourself: this is uncertain. Not some heavy "oh my god, this is uncertain." But just when you notice your mind saying, "I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that," then simply: oh yeah, this is uncertain. That's all. And then we go on. I think what's more amazing is how much things seem to keep going the way we think they're going to. This is uncertain—just not putting that clinging in. As we saw, anything can occur in the next moment.

The other *moha* I want to talk about is the misperceiving of impermanence. We think of it like this: something's here, here, here, then suddenly something can happen in the next moment. Someone's here, here, here—suddenly they die. But that's the misperception. We're not perceiving the momentariness of change. As the Dalai Lama said, the sense of impermanence is not that something arises, exists, exists,

exists, and then goes away. That is not perceiving accurately. That's misperception. That's perceiving a sense of permanence—that it's hanging out for a while and then goes away. Not really seeing the constant nature, the momentariness of change.

Someone mentioned today, in terms of our practice, in terms of seeing, for example—when we're not quite mindful of seeing, it's one of the things that gives us a sense of permanence. The room and the people seem the same as last time, and seeing is always occurring. But there can be a moment when you tune in and every second the actual seeing is different. As you're walking, it's different images, different images, different images, changing every second. But mostly we don't perceive that. It's not that we're going to go through life perceiving little layers—you can't function that way. But there are moments when the perception shifts and we see: oh yeah, it is like that.

It isn't like it's just all the same, the same, and all of a sudden it crumbles. It's not like that.

A friend was telling me about watching a time-lapse video—you know time-lapse, right? It was a time-lapse video of a flower bulb that was planted and then growing. You've probably seen things like that. When you see that, starting from the bulb and then the little shoot comes up through the earth and it grows into the leaves and the flower and then the flower decays and falls, you just see it's moving the whole time when the time is speeded up.

Where can you stop it and say, "Now that's just a flower existing"? Now that's just a bulb existing, separate from anything else, self-existent. It's not. Every single instant it's changing. The conditions are changing and the so-called self-existent thing is changing, and there's no way to just stop and say it's static. There's nowhere to land and say, "Now it's going to be like this," even for a second.

And then, as we start to turn around—someone years ago said on a retreat, "Oh, I finally got it. I've been seeing for years that everything around me is changing, but suddenly I see, oh, that includes me." So it's not only like some static me is watching the bulb growing and everything changing, but the so-called me, as Guy was talking about, is also constantly changing. The five aggregates are rising and shifting and changing and coming together in different ways. That's all that's going on.

So part of our misperception is that we don't recognize that aspect. And it's true—on some level we need some sense of steadiness to get through the day, absolutely. But one of the great things about being on a retreat like this, at times when you don't have very many responsibilities, is that you can even just sit in your room if it gets all kind of too weird for a little while. You can just sit in your room for a while and watch molecules dance. It won't stay that way very long, believe me. You don't have to worry. You don't have to hold it all together so much.

So one way we don't perceive accurately then is inattention. Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." I love that. It's going on all the time. We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination.

This is why we put so much emphasis on gently cultivating a sense of continuity, just whenever you remember, bringing the mindful awareness to whatever's going on. Because lack of continuity is something that really masks anicca, that really hides impermanence. We don't really see the constant shifting and change. We might notice something's here, and then later we might notice it's gone, or we might just be more caught up in another thing. But we don't quite see the whole process—we absolutely don't see the whole process without some continuity of mindfulness, even in chunks.

A great place to explore that here on retreat is with your mood, with your sense of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, with your sense of your personality. The moods that come through the day. How many moods, how many emotions have you had today? You probably didn't count them. More than one?

If Joseph was here, we'd have a joke, but he's not here, so I'll tell you. One time we were teaching a retreat together, and after we left the sitting, he said, "Carol, how many emotions did you have in that sitting?" I thought, I don't know. I must say mental states, not just strong emotions, but mental states. I don't know, fifteen, twenty, something like that. I said, "How about you?" He goes, "I don't think I had any. Maybe one." This is like a real joke between us now all the time. I go, "How many mental states did you have?" So we're all different. There's not a right way.

But notice how the lack of continuity masks impermanence. We've all known being in a really strong emotion and thinking, "Now it's going to be like this forever." You know that. We think that. Then somehow it goes away. Or I think I mentioned in another talk, someone comes in and says, "Oh my God, I was so upset." Really, the whole day?

No, well, not this time, not that time, not when I was sleeping, not when I was bathing—but it comes down to like one sitting or a sitting and a walking. But then the mind is thinking, and this is three days later, "I was so upset." And it assumes a permanence. We assume permanence so much of the time.

A story from a friend of mine. I was teaching a retreat at Spirit Rock and she was cooking there. It was a long time ago. And she was telling me—she's a longtime meditator—that she saw herself, and other people saw her, as an aversive type personality. So she'd been having this conversation with the other cooks and they were saying, "Yeah, you're really aversive." And she thought, "Yeah, I am really aversive."

But then she had a day to just be silent on retreat. So she was sitting and walking, and she said, "I'm just going to be really steady and mindful and watch the mental state, watch the mind, just be really continuous." And she said it was amazing, because the idea she had been clinging to was "I'm aversive." And when we're not steady with our mindfulness—which is just noticing what's happening—when we're not being steady, we tend to fall into what I call selective perception. We have a view, "I'm aversive," and then the selective perception tends to notice everything that substantiates that view. Have you noticed that? When you're in a bad mood, everything seems to prove, "Yes, I am in a bad mood, and this is why I ought to be." We don't notice the other stuff.

So she was just being steady, and she noticed—oh, when I look carefully—there were many moments where her mind was kind, generous. She really had a lot of faith, loving the Dharma. She was having joy, a heart of generosity in cooking for all the yogis. There were many neutral moments. There were some loving moments. There were all kinds of things. She said about ten percent of the thoughts and moods were aversion. Ten percent. But without the steady, mindful awareness, we don't notice that. We fall into these assumptions that it always is like this.

So notice, as you're going through the days, not only with moods—though moods and thoughts are a good way to do it. People often say, "I have this particular habit. This is my personality. I always tend to have this loneliness." And I ask, "So you're feeling that?" "No, no. I had this joy. I looked out and there was this joy. But then the loneliness, I know, was just gone in the background because I wasn't paying attention to it. But when the joy went away and I thought about it, then of course I could feel the loneliness again."

And no one has said that specific thing to me. But do you hear that sense of "this unpleasant thing, whatever I'm identifying with, is always here—it's underground"? When you don't notice it, you're still assuming permanence, that it's always here. And we do that.

So what we're saying with steady mindfulness is: just letting go of the clinging to ideas and surrendering into what's occurring now, just like this. When the loneliness is here, it's like this. Not the stories, but how does it feel? And stay with it, stay with it, stay with it—and then it changes. It goes away. Something else arises. Stay steady and notice that.

So often we don't quite notice the actual gone-ness of something. We lean into the next thing. "Okay, the loneliness is gone. That's over. I don't have to worry about that anymore. Now what's next?" And then we're all caught up in the next thing. Really notice when it's gone.

Really notice when you're having an experience of bliss and it goes away. Really notice that it's gone. I don't mean just notice calmly that it's gone—notice what comes next, how something else begins. When we really stay steady, we can't hide from the ephemeral, changing nature of things.

Notice how conditions change and affect the experience we're having. Notice how you feel emotionally might affect how the breath comes and goes. Notice, as many people point out, how the weather might have an effect on your mood. But we don't tend to just see it as changing conditions, like the bulb growing with the sun and the water. We think, "What's the matter with me? I was in such a good mood yesterday and it rained a little bit and now I feel like crap. What's the matter with me? Why can't I stay steady? Why can't I stay in this open, loving space? Isn't that what I'm here for—to always be open and loving?"

Good luck. It would be nice. But the weather changed and the barometer dropped and you got a headache and now you're in an aversive mood. That's how it is now. Notice it coming together. Notice the conditions coming together. Notice how they change, and notice when the aversion is gone. It's gone. Don't assume it's hiding underground. It's gone. Really notice what's here now and stay really steady with it. We can't

hide from it.

This is silly, but this is where I really saw this: one time I was eating on a retreat. Eating is really interesting. I think if you're really mindful of all that goes on in eating—for one thing, how many chews is it while the food still tastes good? Not many. One chew, two chews, and then blah. That's why we're going for the next forkload before we even finish, because it stopped tasting good. But that's another thing—a whole other talk.

So I was being really quite aware, feeling the sensations and watching it go down the throat, and then feeling the sensations, when it suddenly hit me: the food in the mouth was "the food," but these sensations were just sensations. It was a thought in my mind calling these sensations "the food" that was giving the sense of permanence, of something unchanging. It was a completely different experience. Sensations in this area was very different from chewing and feeling "the thing." But the mind says, "Oh no, this is the food, and now it's that," and then I visualize the esophagus or whatever. We create the unreal by excess of imagination. What's really happening? Sensations. That food was so gone. You go back to your mouth and see there's no food there. It's gone.

It seems silly, but we're so into the next thing that we don't give ourselves time to notice. So maybe there are ways you can play with this on retreat—just give yourself time to notice. In activities, see if as soon as you eat one bite, you're shoveling in the next. Give it a little bit of space. Or as soon as you finish eating, you jump up to go do the next thing. Give it a little bit of space. Just let something end. Or notice how the mind jumps into the next thing, but notice that's what's happening. Notice when you're assuming permanence—whenever we think, "This is what's going to happen," or we assume we know what's going to happen next. The bell rings and we all come in here. It's amazing that most of the time that works.

It is amazing.

So just bring in that Ajahn Chah teaching: "Okay, this is uncertain. This is uncertain."

For me it feels like really great renunciation when I'm on retreat—off-retreat too, but on retreat you can notice it more clearly—the difference between when I'm simply really present with whatever's happening in this moment, or when I'm walking around or sitting, really living in the constructed world of thought, of whatever's going on. Not that thought should stop, but when we're really living in that world.

And the great renunciation is to just simply let those thoughts hang there in space. Just come out of living in that constructed world and drop with total surrender and presence into the reality of this moment. It's like this now. Just feeling the sensations of the lifting, or the coolness of the rice when you're chewing, whatever it is. That complete coming into the present moment. The renunciation of all the stories and the thoughts just for that moment. Ah, peace.

Not needing somewhere to rest, but the resting at ease in whatever's arising. There is resting at ease—it's just in this moment. We can't hold it, we can't keep it, we can't keep it going. But when we're not trying to

make something to rest in, whatever is occurring right now, this is the place where total ease, the totality of presence, is possible.

So just play with this as you go through the days, noticing when you're assuming permanence. Notice when you're not. Notice when something's gone and you think, "Oh, but it's gonna—" Wait. How is it right now? Just drop into that.

And yes, some of the time we do open to that fragility—that being in the pre-trembling of a house that falls. And because we're not completely awakened, sometimes we're going to fall into some fear or some resistance or whatever. That's fine. That's just the habits of the mind and heart. We can be with that too.

When we really start to have some—or continue to deepen—our confidence in our perception of change, of impermanence, we get much less afraid of life, of change, because we know this is how it is. This is all there is. It doesn't take us into a kind of "well, who cares" disconnect—"it's all changing, to hell with it all." At least in my experience, it doesn't do that. It actually opens into the potential to really appreciate the wonder and the mystery. It's just this. It's so amazing. And then now it's this. We don't need to make it anything in particular. Somehow this moment is everything.

I just want to end with a poem I really like from Hafiz, the Persian Sufi poet.

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, thank you. Let's just sit quietly a moment.

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