Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:08

In the particular style of practice we've been offering here, we've been speaking about how the steadiness of mindfulness, of awareness, is the condition for wisdom to arise in the heart, in the mind. And when wisdom arises, it's wisdom that does the work of freeing habits of our mind, of freeing us from confusion, from suffering.

So I want to try and explain how that works a little bit, using steady awareness of impermanence—how wisdom into really understanding this aspect of all existence arises.

All of the path, all of the different techniques that may be offered, not only here but in all aspects of the Buddha's practice that I'm familiar with—they may come from different angles, accentuate different aspects of our experience, but they're all in service of releasing the habits of our heart and mind from the obsessive relationship to objects and experience, from the suffering of wanting and aversion and confusion that arises from this obsessive reaction. It's like the chicken and the egg kind of thing. It just keeps going.

So all the aspects of practice are to help us see through wisdom. When wisdom recognizes the fallacy, when it senses that this clinging, this aversion, this confusion is based on inaccurate understanding, then wisdom allows it to basically drop away, evaporate.

As Steve said at the end of his talk last night, he was talking about seeing with steady awareness these strong torments of heart and mind. But that same process of steady, non-judging, non-engaged, non-involved awareness is what brings our heart-mind the wisdom to see, to understand the aspects of impermanence, of anattā or not-self, and of unreliability—the three aspects of all conditioned phenomena. Recognizing that accurately isn't depressing. It frees us from reacting and responding and trying to make ourselves happy in a way that completely doesn't work because we're misperceiving the world.

I want to use anicca, or impermanence, as a jumping off place to talk about this. The Buddha said: "Bhikkhus"—bhikkhus is the Pali word for monks, but really it means anyone who's engaged in practice, so it's us—"Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual lust. It eliminates all lust for becoming, for getting, for becoming another existence. It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all conceit, 'I am.'"

Those things—that's a description of a completely awakened person who's no longer caught in the grips of self-involvement, of greed, of aversion. To me that's an incredibly powerful statement: when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

If you turn it around, it's saying that when we don't perceive impermanence, that leads to this habit of lusting for sense pleasures, of trying to become something different, something better, the sense of self that feeds the sense of "I am."

So how can just this perception of impermanence have such a powerful effect? This perception of impermanence is pointing to the nature of insight. When we talk about insight understanding, it's really about a shift of perception. It's not that when there's insight, somehow we understand intellectually. There could be insight into all kinds of things, into personal experiences in your life. You're sitting and some problem in your life is going on and suddenly you see it in a different way. Another way to deal with it you hadn't thought about. That's the shift of perception.

What the Buddha is saying with this is not that when there's deep insight understanding, the world has changed. When the Buddha awoke under the Bodhi tree, free from suffering in his mind, in his heart, he didn't wake up into a different world. It's the same old world, with the same old problems, same old people running around doing the same old stupid things. And also nice things, also compassionate things, but the same world.

When we talk about the awakening, the insight that comes through our steady practice, it's not that we become different. It's that the perception becomes accurate. It aligns with how things actually are. This is really the shift that is insight.

A simple example: you know those visual things, they used to have books called the Magic Eye, where you'd have all these blocks of color that didn't look like anything, and if you looked at it with a steady, steady gaze, but soft gaze, not trying to see, at some point all of a sudden an image would jump out like 3D soccer players. And it's still just the same blocks. Then you'd go to the next page and you think, well, let me see the 3D soccer players, and you're looking for it hard, and you don't see it. You have to just relax, but be steady. If you look and relax and then look away and then come back, it doesn't work either. But once you've seen the 3D soccer players in there, even though the next time you look you don't see it right away, you know it was there.

Because you saw it, you know it was there. So there are these two ways of perceiving, and in a way they both have their accuracy. But if you never saw the 3D soccer player—like for instance, my mother. We were in a mall one time and they had big posters of this, and she just couldn't see it. It was driving her crazy. She's like, "Come on, come on." And the tighter she got, of course, the harder it was to see it, because she's bugging her eyes out trying to see. "Relax, Ma, relax." She never did see it.

That's how it is with us and impermanence a lot of the time. This is the really powerful level of insight—the level of perception.

We've talked about perception, right? It's that simple recognition of a sense experience happening in every mind moment. Useful! It's just neutral, but it's extremely useful. If we didn't have perception, you'd

walk in—well first of all, why would you walk in? You'd hear the bell ring and go, "What's that sound? What does it mean? What am I supposed to do now? Where am I? What the heck is going on?" So perception is extremely helpful.

And the second there's perception, the whole world arises around it. What we perceive, this is from the Buddha, we think about. And what we think about, we often complicate with associations and memories. This is when we get off track. But it all starts with perception, and that's extremely useful.

However, as Dilgo Khyentse said, when the sense organs encounter an object—a sound, for example, in the ear—the only part the object itself plays is to initiate the process of perception in your consciousness. From then on, as your mind reacts to the object, influenced by all your accumulated habits and past experiences, the whole process is entirely subjective. So when your mind is full of anger, the whole world seems to be a hell realm. Have you ever noticed that? When your mind is peaceful, when your heart is peaceful, free from clinging or fixation or reactivity, then you experience everything as primordially pure.

The thing is, pretty much until we start really exploring this, the tendency is we believe our perceptions. We think this is really how it is.

I'll give a simple example. I was with a friend at her house, and there was just a blanket thrown over the back of the couch. I said, "Oh, could you hand me that blue blanket?" She says, "What blue blanket?" "That blue blanket on the back of your couch." She says, "That's not blue, that's green." And we're both—I could not see it as green. She could not see it as blue. Luckily, that's pretty benign, right? We didn't come to blows or have an argument or whatever. But it's really interesting to see how quickly the whole world can come up based on perception.

There was a great example Alexis gave the other day when he was meditating in Burma and he heard that sound. Really, the accurate perception was that he didn't know what it was. But with one perception—the sound outside—came all the responses and reactions of mind, the compassion for the poor worker suffering. All of that is what we perceive, we think about, we complicate based on our experience, right? And if we don't question it, we believe this is really what's happening. Then it's so fun to be able to shift to, "No, it's the guy snoring"—and a whole different series of thoughts arise. The thoughts lead to reactions, to moods, to how we respond to the world. If they'd been talking, Alexis might have turned around and said, "Wake up, you're wasting your life, wake up!" But luckily we're in silence. And that's why we're in silence here, folks.

Perception is really powerful, and the whole world comes out just like that.

I picked up a Dharma book that I was looking for something in it. And I found a little note in this book. It had been lying around for years. I picked it up and looked at it. "Wow, that's my handwriting. This is right in the place I was looking for." So I thought, "Oh yeah, right, okay, some things don't change."

But the sense of just looking at it and seeing my handwriting in a flash—this whole sense of me and my

life and my past and teaching—it just came up like that. Sense of self, my whole history, like a whole blanket of self arose. Just from the perception of seeing pencil on paper.

So it's just so interesting. With steady awareness we watch how this process works. Nothing right or wrong, we just really watch how it works. Without the steady awareness, we can so easily get caught in just totally believing our perceptions.

So, back to perception of impermanence and to the aspect of insight. The Buddha spoke about three levels of wisdom, three levels of understanding. Sayadaw U Tejaniya talks about it frequently. They're all useful, and we kind of bounce back and forth between them, but it explains why we think we know something, but it doesn't really change how we live our life.

The first level is called *sutamayā paññā*, and it's really heard wisdom. When Steve was talking about Right View the first night and saying from the suttas that the Buddha said the first thing you need is to hear—hear it somehow—that's heard wisdom. So, say we're talking about impermanence. We've read about impermanence, we all can go, "Yeah, we hear that, everything's changing." That's heard wisdom. We may or may not believe it, but even when we do, it's still on that level.

But it's something. When Steve was talking about injecting right view, sometimes even on that level it can help. If I'm in the middle of a strong emotion, really caught in it, and I can remind myself, "Right, this is an emotion"—in that moment, I'm still really caught in it. But I'm injecting the first level of wisdom, heard wisdom, which reminds me still: it's an emotion, this isn't the whole world.

The second level grows from that first level. We really think about it. We use our intelligence, we explore it, we start noticing in our life. So in terms of impermanence—the first level, that things are changing—probably you wouldn't argue with that. Would anyone here argue with that? You wouldn't dare, would you?

This is why I wanted to pick impermanence to talk about, because on the level of the first level of wisdom, it's the most obvious one. We think, "Yeah, we know everything's changing." So why am I talking about it as this big insight that can free our heart and mind if we perceive it? We think, "I know it." But it's just that first level, and it doesn't change anything.

The second level is really thinking about it, analyzing it. You mull it over, you start to notice things. You can go outside—the sun's setting, it's impermanent. You're consciously trying to notice. And it's going a little deeper. This is important. Bringing it up might make us inquire, might give us the energy to keep cultivating awareness. But you think, "Well, okay, I'm really getting it. I'm noticing every day the sun goes down, every morning it comes back again. I notice people are wearing different clothes today, some days your hair's different—a good hair day, a bad hair day." You notice these things, unless you have no hair—then you're saved from that. But you have to shave every day, so that's a drag too.

But somehow it doesn't really change stuff.

The third level, *bhāvanāmayā paññā*, is really insight-level wisdom. That's the level where our perception—not just our thinking about it, but the moment-to-moment spontaneous perception—actually shifts, comes into alignment. You could say in a way we cellularly know, even just for a moment, that nothing is static for one fraction of a second.

And I can say that, and I've experienced that in the past, but I'm not experiencing that right now. So when I say it, that's the second level. But once there's a shift of perception where impermanence is really perceived on that immediate level—not thinking your way into it, you can't think your way into it—the perception shifts.

Of course, then it shifts back, like those magic eye things. But knowing it, having experienced it cellularly in lots of different ways, it changes something. You know somehow that the perception we don't even realize we're perceiving—that things don't change—has shifted.

We don't even recognize that—and that's what I want to talk about. But on some level, a shift occurs, and we know something in a cellular way that we didn't know before.

That's the third level of insight. Insight isn't like intellectual knowledge; it's an understanding, you could say. It's not like knowing information—those are the first two levels—but it's an understanding that simply happens. And then, in that perception that has arisen from being accurately aligned with how things are, what we perceive becomes what we think about. What we think about becomes complicated; it hardens into view.

Instead of the perception being off—actually a misperception leading to thoughts and views that are not in alignment with how things really are, taking us far away—the perception is accurate. And this is really when the perception matches experience. Then how we think about things, the response to the experience, to the situation, is appropriate.

So what happens is that wisdom abandons the strategy of clinging in the face of the perception of impermanence—not because clinging is bad, but because it doesn't make any sense. I mean, when you see the sun going down, do you break out in tears? Because it's beautiful, that's a different kind of tears, okay. But if you see the sun going down, you're not like, "Oh no! Oh no! Oh my god, it's gone!" Maybe if you're in a certain mood, but mostly probably not, right? Because it doesn't make any sense. The thought doesn't even really arise. It just doesn't make sense.

Well, that's how it works. It's not like, "Wow, everything's impermanent!" No, no, no. It's like—oh, the clinging just doesn't arise. And we're just really present, so aligned with how things are. It's not that we don't care about things. We're actually able to care. Care and attachment aren't the same thing.

When we're not attached—when it's not "I need the sun"—it's just, okay, it's beautiful. It's gone. Now it's like this. That's got its own beauty. We can just be so present when the clinging isn't there. But it's not something we can talk ourselves into.

So what allows for this shift of perception? What sets the conditions for it? Guess what it could possibly be? The steady awareness that we've been talking about. Not looking for impermanence. Not looking for anything. But this—well, we've talked about it non-stop, I don't have to say it again, but I will. The sense of settling into, relaxing into: it's like this now. It's like this now. But steady, steady, steady. Without a supposition, without an assumption of what it should be, then the truth of things reveals itself over and over and over.

So why is it so complicated? Does it seem complicated? Why is it? It's so clear—everything's changing all the time. It's so clear. Obviously, it isn't so clear, or we'd all be free.

Why is it not so clear? I want to talk a little bit about these habits of mind—the same ones Steve was talking about in all their full-blooming mess—but in a more subtle way that they show up.

What blocks the accurate perception, put it that way. So it is, of course, our old friends—visitors, but they're there a lot. The three, the big three: greed, hatred, and delusion. Delusion, confusion, greed or the tendency to cling, and resistance, fear, aversion—those three.

This is how I want to talk about it in terms of impermanence and perception. The three ways these habits show up—the habits in the heart-mind of relating to experience, particularly in terms of things changing and going away.

The first is that of denial, avoiding, leading into clinging. That's basically resistance and clinging to change, a kind of block to the clear perception of "this is gone now."

Another one is misperception—recognizing wrongly, the inaccurate perception.

And the third is inattention. Lack of steady attention feeds the perception of permanence.

So let me talk a little bit about each of these.

The first one, the kind of denial. Denial that things change. Do you ever have any experience of that at all? When something changes and you feel, "Well, this shouldn't be happening"?

There's a sutta about Assaji, who was a very well-practiced monk at the time of the Buddha. He'd had good practice, good concentration, and he's basically dying—he's sick and dying. The Buddha hears that Assaji is really upset, feeling that he's falling away, filled with remorse and fear.

The Buddha comes to him and says, "What's the problem? Are you feeling remorse and fear? Have you been harming yourself or others? Have you been breaking the precepts?"

"No, not at all."

"Well then, what's the matter?"

Assaji explains, "Formerly, when I would be meditating, when I'd be paying attention, I could really achieve stability of mind, concentration of mind, steadiness of mind. But now I can't. When I try to do it, I can't, and I'm afraid I'm just going to fall away."

And the Buddha says, basically: Hello. You're dying. Your energy, your physical experience is completely different from how it was before. The conditions that were present when you could easily get concentrated are not present now. It's not that you're falling away. And besides, concentration, focusing, isn't the liberating aspect of the path anyway. So it's not about that.

But even someone with as much understanding as Assaji—and he had the Buddha around to help him, while we're floundering around on our own—even he didn't notice. Completely different conditions are here. Of course the effect is different than before.

Have you ever noticed here, you have one day where you go for a walk in the woods and you're so clear and present and mindful? So the next day what do you do? You go walk in the woods at the same time, with the same idea that it's going to be clear and present and mindful. And it's not. You trip over roots, everything's a mess, the black flies are out, you're filled with aversion, it's raining, and you think: What happened? I had it, I knew, and it's gone. I blew it.

I'm not really exaggerating that much, am I? Yes, it's a shame, but that's how it is. And we don't really notice. It's a completely different set of experiences. You're not the same person even, and everything else is different.

These are simple examples, but denial. I read an article, a little snippet in a newspaper years ago, from some little town in Spain where the mayor said the cemeteries were completely full. There was no room to bury anyone else. So he sent out a memo to the people in the town that nobody should die until they could find more cemetery space.

That was major denial.

But the denial comes in many ways. One of the ways it comes, in my experience, is through the habit that is so deeply ingrained in all of us—this habit of resistance to unpleasant experience and leaning into the pleasant, which leads to not even noticing the neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

This is something I could give a whole talk about, but I've got to condense it to two minutes. I think this is the genius, one of the genius things of the Buddha, where he says—and this is really clear in his teachings—that all these sense door experiences we're having, seeing, smelling, tasting, thinking, whatever the six are, you know them, you're experiencing them all day, constantly changing. When each one arises, just like saññā, perception, arises quite naturally in the mind, what also arises is that each experience, say a sound, is experienced by the mind as having a quality of pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

It's quite quick and quite subtle. It's not inherent in the sound—it's again conditioned, how it's perceived in our particular mind stream. So this sound, one time it could be pleasant in your mind, another time it could be neutral or unpleasant. It might be pleasant for you in that moment and unpleasant for me. It's not inherent, but it's just another mental experience. And this is happening with every sense door experience of all six senses.

To me, this is genius because I never would have noticed that if I hadn't read about it, if I hadn't practiced and gotten in the habit of looking at it. And what's so brilliant is that in the not noticing, the habit comes.

He says, what's the difference between an awakened person and an unawakened person? Both types of people experience painful feelings, pleasurable feelings, and neutral feelings. It's the same. It's not that when you get awakened all the unpleasant stuff stops. I would just like to say that again—it doesn't stop. The same amount of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral keeps happening.

So what's the difference? He's saying, and I'm shortening it, the tendency in the mind when we're not recognizing—and he starts with the unpleasant—when we don't recognize unpleasant experience, say a physical unpleasant experience, then the tendency of the unawakened person is as if they were shot by an arrow that sticks you in the leg. And on top of that, he says, you yell and scream and beat your breast and pull your hair and lament. That's the language. So basically we get all upset because it hurts. Can you relate to that so far? Yeah, a little bit, right.

So it's as if we shoot ourselves with a second arrow. And that goes on, and it just seems normal. I mean, it is normal. It's, unfortunately, our habit. Then it becomes a tendency, a habit that underlies the mind—resistance to unpleasant experience. That just feels normal.

And then, in the presence of unpleasant experience, the only escape a worldling knows, someone who doesn't really see clearly, the only escape we know from unpleasant feeling is to go try and get a pleasant feeling. So we lust after pleasure. We move away from the unpleasant and go look for something pleasant. Again, can you relate to this at all, even a little? I'm not saying good or bad—I'm saying this becomes the habit.

And so underlying the mind becomes this habit of craving for pleasant. We don't realize as it really is the nature of what's going on, or the nature of the feelings themselves. They come, they go. They just last for a second. But in a way we're putting all our eggs in the basket of getting more pleasant feeling, thinking that's going to make us happy.

This is where the whole dynamic of craving for pleasant and pushing away unpleasant arises. And it's so deeply in us.

I mean, it's just so deeply in us. I'm not saying this is good or bad. If you had a choice, you could tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant. Neutral—maybe you would notice neutral once in a while. The Buddha's not saying who cares, you can tell the difference. If you had a choice, you wouldn't go for the

unpleasant.

But so often this is arising in every moment, and when we don't know it, we're just on this ping-pong—oh, get me away from that, go to this. And the whole way that we tend to perceive what's good and what's bad tends to be based on what's pleasant and what's unpleasant.

Check it out. If you're having a good sitting, it's rare—unless you've really been playing with this for a long time—it's rare that there was a lot of unpleasant stuff going on. Right? Usually, it was pleasant. As you go on and on, though, and as mindfulness and awareness get stronger, awareness doesn't need to be touched. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—equal. Awareness can meet it equally. When we can start to take refuge in that steady awareness, rather than taking refuge in running away from unpleasant and needing to get more pleasant—that's been our refuge so much, you know. Even just to the point of, I don't know, you're a little bored, you go to the refrigerator. Pick up the phone. None of these things are bad. The things aren't bad necessarily. But just watch. I'll talk more about this tomorrow morning, but watch as you go through the day. How much of what we pick is to have more pleasant feeling?

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was a great Thai meditation master, a forest monk who died in the late 1990s—he said, just first, just notice pleasant feeling, how ephemeral. A feeling tone just lasts like that, you know? And then just kind of contemplate all the decisions you've made in your life. How many of them have been based on moving towards more pleasant feeling? He says his guess was ninety-five percent. Now it's not saying bad; it's just that we're giving pleasant feeling a power it doesn't have to make us happy. And in terms of our understanding of what's right or wrong, good and bad, it's so based on pleasant and unpleasant.

So back to the denial of change. So often, when something beautiful or someone we love dies or goes away, or something that's important to us changes, or our body changes, or we get sick, or your car gets wrecked—or even down to, you know, you didn't get the second piece of pizza. I mean, it can range from really life-changing to little. But let's go big. It brings up a lot of sadness, you know, a lot of grief often. Especially when someone we love dies, it brings up grief. And grief and sadness are pretty unpleasant.

And if we're not aware, if we don't have steady mindfulness, the habit is to try and move away from that, to not be at ease with just resting at ease in the sadness. And even deep underneath it, almost an unconscious interpretation sometimes: something's wrong because I feel sad. Right? This shouldn't be happening in some way. Even though we all know everything ends and everyone gets sick and everyone dies. We all know that. But as if when we feel grief about it, there's something wrong, and there's a subtle moving away—let's not look at it, let's not look at it.

So for me, I feel like grief, sadness—if we can open to that as part of life... You know, it's not that "Oh yes, she will not be seen by me again." I mean, the Buddha could say that maybe. But for me, when someone I love is gone, there's a deep sadness. But we don't have to be in denial, thinking either there's something wrong with us or something wrong with that situation. It's like this now. And being able to just, with

gentle awareness—sadness is like this. Grief is like this; it's part of being human. You know, it's a sign of love, the love really, in some ways.

So then we don't have to go into denial, try and resist—that's the resistance to the unpleasant—and then the craving for the pleasant, you know: okay, let me go party so I don't have to feel unhappy.

This is kind of weird, but I just read this headline yesterday about the English royal family. Not like I follow them so much, but I just read this headline about Prince Harry, whose mother, Princess Diana, died almost twenty years ago. He was just saying how when she died—I guess he was twelve or something—he just basically pretended like nothing had happened.

He just couldn't deal. So now he's speaking out for mental health. He's in his late twenties or something, but he said for years and years, up until just a few years ago, he basically said, "Well, okay, that happened." Boom, now everything's fine, and I'm going to play and be a boy and fly planes and do all this stuff, and everything's great. And that's the other way—completely going after pleasure and just pretending this never happened. Until now, you know, the stuff he's starting to get in touch with, the grief and the sadness, and he has to learn how to be with it. That it's quite okay. It's part of life.

There's a lovely story in the suttas when the Buddha was dying. He announced he was going to die in three months or something, and his attendant Ananda, who had been his attendant for twenty-five years, his cousin, very close—and if you haven't read any of the Buddha's suttas and you do, Ananda is like this really lovable human character. He humanizes things. He's not perfect. He makes mistakes. He's very friendly. He's always trying to help people get access to the Buddha. You can't help but like Ananda. A lot of the other monks and some of the nuns too, they're kind of remote, but Ananda feels really human.

So the Buddha's announced this, and then he's giving a Dhamma talk to a bunch of monks, and he looks around and goes, "Where's Ananda?" And it turned out, they went and found him—Ananda had gone to his hut. And Andy Olinsky, who was the director of the study center for many years, a Pali scholar, tells me this is a famous artistic rendering of Ananda: he was standing in his doorway, just leaning against the doorpost and weeping and weeping and saying, "Oh, what's going to become of me? My teacher, who's been so compassionate to me, he's going away. What will I do without him?"

So this image of Ananda's grief is very famous. And of course the Buddha calls him back. "Ananda, haven't I told you? Everything that comes together goes apart. All conditions change." But with so much compassion—not "you stupid jerk"—but with total, total love and compassion. I love that because it's like, this is human. It's our conditioning.

And if we can really understand there's pleasant, there's unpleasant, neutral, we don't need to run from the unpleasant. When we just—it's like this now. It's unpleasant, but we're present, we're alive, we're whole, we're really completely in tune with this is how it is in this moment. And it again will change. It's not like, "Oh, I know, I'm sad now, and then it'll change." That's a resistance. Just like this now. And it will

change.

So when we notice that resistance, let it be a wake-up call. And then it's not that we stop caring—we're really much more present, more free to respond in an appropriate, kind, compassionate way.

That's one way, I think, that perception of impermanence isn't seen—because we're lost in that reactivity, the fear of the unpleasant, going for the pleasant, and thinking that's just the natural response. It's steady awareness that lets us see through that. And that simple willingness to just, as the Tibetans say, rest at ease in whatever arises. So what we're saying is just relax. It's just like this now. You don't have to think about the past, the future—just this moment. It's like this now. And the way things really are shows itself.

The Buddha said at one point, "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." I love that. Cool and peaceful—kind of neutral.

We're still in that wanting the pleasant, away from the unpleasant. Cool and peaceful sometimes isn't so attractive. So see where you are with that.

That's one way to start noticing how the perception of impermanence gets blocked. The second level where we misperceive—where we actually are perceiving something, where even intellectually on the first level we might think we're seeing it as impermanent—is this: we see something, we see its beginning, and then we see it end. So we say everything's impermanent. This retreat had a beginning, and soon it's going to have an end. Maybe not soon enough for some of you in a particular mood. In another mood you might say, "Oh, I could do this forever." And five minutes later it's, "Please God, get me out of here." We tend not to notice how that changes.

But we see that something has a beginning and an end, and we think, "Oh, I see change." But what we don't notice—the misperception—is that we're not noticing the momentariness of change. I remember hearing a talk by the Dalai Lama once where he really accented this. He said, "We see something arise, then it exists for a while, and then it passes away." I thought, wait a minute—come back. This "exists for a while"? No. There's no existing for a while. Everything is changing momentarily.

This perception of "it's like this, and then it's going to change"—this has been my life, I've been like this for sixty-six years, and at some point I'm going to die, so I know there's change. But my perception might be, you know, even though I look pretty different from how I looked when I was five years old, every day is different—but we don't notice that so much. So we have the intellectual sense that we're perceiving impermanence, but we're not. We're seeing this steadiness, and then we're really surprised when suddenly it ends. That's a misperception. Endings take us by surprise.

The Buddha said once, picking up a little bit of dirt underneath his fingernail, "There's not even this much of form, of mind, that is permanent, that is stable, that is not subject to change, that will remain the same. Not even this much." He said, "If there was even this much form, mind, perception—anything that was this permanent—this living of the holy life for the complete destruction of suffering could not be seen. But

there isn't even that much that's stable, that's permanent."

We don't like that too much. The mind that's looking for ease—this habit of looking for ease in the pleasant, in the comfortable, in knowing how it is—we tend to like that. I tend to like that. I want to settle down and not be shaken up all the time. I want to rest at ease. Not in whatever arises—I want it to stop arising. I want it to just be kind of mellow, and I'll rest at ease. So there's that clinging that comes in, even to just a particular moment. We don't notice how it arises, how the conditions are always changing.

Someone was describing to me what I think is a great example. A time-lapse video of a plant growing—you see the plant growing, it turns, the buds come and the flower comes and the leaves come and the fruit comes, and it all just keeps going. There's no one moment that it's stable. There's not a moment saying, "Now this is the plant, now this is the flower, now this is the bud." It's always one thing morphing and transmuting into the next, into the next, into the next. There's no way you can extract something out and say it's discrete, that it's just that. And even so, how can you separate the plant from the soil or the air or the sun or the water, even if you're not seeing all of that?

It's all coming together all the time. Same with us. I mean, that is exactly the same with us.

On the actual visual level, walking through our daily life, we don't really see that so much. But sometimes in the quietness of meditation, when you're just sitting and feeling sensations, sometimes you can notice. It's ch-ch-ch-ch—lots of sensations. Some of you have mentioned not just sensations, but the whole six sense doors. You know, there's seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, thinking, thinking, thinking, sensation—and stuff's just coming, coming, coming. Someone said in a group, "Is it going to stop?" No, it's not going to stop. This is it.

We start to see sakkāya—just the constant morphing, arising and passing, arising and passing, every instant. This is what's going on in our life. When we're fighting it, you know, the search for a resting place—"Please, God, let it stop"—there are times it feels like that. That's burning. But when we can meet it with "It's just like this now," and then "The next is like this now"—when the clinging goes away, the trying to stop it, trying to slow it down, trying to just make it be what it is for a certain amount of time—when that goes away, the sense of dissonance, the sense of being at odds and in contention with life, with experience, that also is gone. And we can really respond in an appropriate manner with sensitivity, with tenderness, with seeing things the way they are rather than the way we wish they could be.

The third level of delusion, of moha, which supports not recognizing impermanence, the perception, is inattention. So this is really where the steady awareness comes in. The steadiness, the continuity of awareness, the continuity of mindfulness, is actually the tool—it's the tool that reveals life as it is. Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "We miss the real by lack of attention and create the unreal by excess of imagination." I love that.

So we're paying attention, we're really cultivating. It's not in our power to be aware every moment, but

the amount of clear aspiration and intention each of us is putting in, the fact that you're still here—that's how we know there's a deep commitment. Because, you know, if you're not really trying to cultivate awareness, it's pretty unbearable hanging out here. You're just eating and you can't talk to anybody and there's nothing to do. It's not really what you would choose. So we know—plus we talk to you all every day too, and it's really quite inspiring.

The steadiness of awareness starts to reveal ways that we've been assuming permanence without realizing it. One big way in our experience through the day is the sense of our personality—sakkāya-diṭṭhi, personality view. Steve was talking a little bit about this. People say, "Oh, I'm such an angry person," for example. And you think about all the times you've been angry. There's an assumption of permanence about that. Remembering the past, imagining the future, but not really a sensitive moment-to-moment-to-moment awareness. Because if we cultivate that, we see there's no statement like that we can make that's really true, except for in this particular moment.

A good friend was describing an experiment she did. She'd been practicing for a long time and she was working somewhere with other people. She was a cook, and they were telling her, "You know, you're such an aversive person. You're a real aversive personality and you're just aversive all the time." And she was like, "Yeah, I am an aversive person. I know I'm an angry person." But she said, "Let me check." So she took one day to just sit and not work. She said, "I'm just going to watch the mind. Just watch what's coming up in the mind."

And of course, this is how it's going to be when you're just steady with it. She said, yeah, angry thoughts came up—a lot of them. But she said, maybe it was ten percent of the day. There were plenty of moments of appreciation, moments of just being neutral, being hungry. There were lots of generous moments in the heart and mind. There were lots of moments of love and compassion. How could she say she's an angry person, you know?

But think back on the day-to-day. Or if you go to bed at night, do you ever go to bed at the end of the day and go, "Oh, this has been such a hard day"? Or "I've been sleepy all day." A lot of times people come in and say they've been sleepy all day in an individual interview.

I say, "Really? What about at lunch?" "Well, no, I wasn't sleepy then." "Were you sleepy every single sitting? Were you sleeping?" "No." "When?" "Well, the sitting before breakfast I was sleepy. And at four o'clock I was a little bit sleepy." "And?" "Well, that was it."

But without the steady awareness, we make these assumptions. We think, "I'm angry," like my friend. So even if it's not manifesting, we think it's lurking under there. We believe it's our true nature—it just isn't showing up right now. Maybe I'm feeling compassionate, but that's a scam. What's really under there is this angry, worthless person. And I know it's going to show up again.

This is assuming permanence. This is misperception. What's happening right now? This is where we can

start to trust the simplicity of awareness rather than the assumptions we make about everything.

I want to offer some ways of noticing when you're assuming permanence. If you're relating to any experience that comes up in the day with the thought, "Oh no, how is it going to be like this for the rest of the retreat?"—have you ever had that thought? Whether it's a beautiful experience or a difficult one. Often it doesn't even last five minutes. "How am I going to get through the day feeling like this?" Or a little twinge comes in your knee and it's, "Oh my God, this is it for the rest of the retreat. I might as well hang it up." And it doesn't even turn into anything. Notice how you relate to experiences like that.

With steady awareness, you can start to see the habit of assuming permanence—fear, anxiety, self-doubt projected into the future, brought up from the past. It's just a particular moment that we notice and highlight. Notice when you do that. Notice when you try to repeat a beautiful experience, like I talked about going into the woods, where we think we just have to do that and that's how it's going to be—not seeing that conditions are constantly changing.

You can't step in the same river twice. The same person can't step in the same river twice, because you're not the same person from one second to the next.

During the last three-month course, the five teachers would have dinner together every night in the dining room. We know each other for years—thirty years. We know each other so well. But every night it's different. We're each in a different mood. We've had different experiences. We come together as a team and might think it's all the same, but every year it's different because we're never the same person. All five of us are five different people with five different experiences. You can't have the same thing twice. Really noticing that all causes and conditions are constantly changing—physical, mental, environmental.

Also notice when you're experiencing something difficult and waiting for it to go away. Or something beautiful—the beautiful ones you notice when they go, because you suffer. The difficult ones, say you're anxious, and then suddenly it's lunchtime. You're having a nice lunch, thinking about this and that, taking a walk. Then later you realize, "Oh, I was so anxious before. What happened to it?" You didn't notice it was gone.

But when you do notice it's gone, take a moment to really register the gone-ness with awareness.

To me, that's really important. Not just, "Oh yeah, it's gone, that's fine, la la la." Register that it really isn't here. Not that idea that it's under there somewhere, but you don't want to look for it because surely you'll see it—you know it's there. Register: it really isn't here now. It's like this now. It's really different and constantly changing. Let it in. Conditions are always changing.

Ajahn Chah had a great practice. He would just say to anything going through the day: "And this is uncertain." So, this is uncertain. How we assume—you know, you assume I'm going to stop at 8:30? You don't know. It's uncertain. I don't know either. They're hoping, but... I've got to talk fast. But it's more amazing that the schedule actually goes on as we think, because this is uncertain. We never know. And we

all know a million stories about sudden amazing things—horrible or beautiful things that happen. I'm not going to tell any. But just: this is uncertain. I wonder, it says on the menu what lunch is going to be tomorrow, but this is uncertain. Maybe it'll be tempeh again. It's uncertain.

Anyway. All right, I am going to stop at 8:30—you're lucky.

But the thing I want to say is that these are just some ways that the perception of anicca, of impermanence, is blocked by the habits of mind—of misperception, delusion, not recognizing accurately—fed by the habits of greed, of clinging, and avoidance of unpleasantness. From that deep, deep habits of not recognizing unpleasant, pleasant, and neutral. All of that seen through with the simple steadiness of moment-to-moment awareness. Not trying to see through, just the willingness to drop into this moment just as it is, free from expectation, free from judgment. That's what we're practicing.

And that's what's so beautiful to me—not just about the Dharma, but about the way things are. When we recognize accurately what arises, it isn't like, "Oh well, who cares, everything's changing, the hell with it." And that's what people are often afraid of. If I really realize things are changing and I'm not attached, I won't care about anything. But it's just the reverse. Like I was saying with the sunset—the sense of when we're not afraid something's going to go, when we know it's going to go. So the clinging doesn't come, and we're free to just be fully present with tenderness, appreciating. The beauty, the poignancy—even in the sadness there's a sense of being fully present and alive in it. Kind of like really opening to the wonder and the mystery, rather than just trying to keep it all copacetic and as comfortable as we can, and when a big change comes maybe I'll be ready for it.

Just this. Just this.

I want to end with this poem that expresses that to me, from Hafiz:

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.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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