Perception of Impermanence Stabilizes Understanding - Aniccā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:57

So we've spoken quite a few times about right view. Alexis described it some more now—the sense of just understanding in the beginning of our practice that we're simply perceiving nature without taking it personally, without adding an assumption on top of it. But in another way, right view simply means recognizing things as they are already, living in alignment, understanding in alignment with life as it actually is.

Right view, as it continues to cycle and grow with wisdom—wisdom is simply recognizing accurately what's occurring, as we've said. Steady awareness is what leads to, is the condition that allows for this clarity of wisdom to arise.

What I want to talk about a bit tonight is what the insight is, what it is that right view recognizes. This is not new information to anyone who's been practicing, on the intellectual level. But of course, right view, the real cellular understanding of things as they are, is not just on the intellectual level. So we keep on bringing awareness to whatever's occurring.

What is it that wisdom recognizes? There are different ways it could be talked about. Tonight I want to talk about it in terms of how the Buddha described all conditioned experience as having certain characteristics. All conditioned experience, without exception, has the characteristic of being impermanent—*anicca*—constant change and flow. Of being *dukkha*, the word in Pali, meaning unreliable, unsatisfactory, nothing one can place one's trust in as a way to happiness or peace. It will always disappoint. And *anatta*—that no conditioned experience has an intrinsic sense of self. There is no steady self. It's about all things, but of course, what we care about is me. So there's this quality of not-self.

These three qualities are just how things are. It's not that as wisdom develops, suddenly the world shifts and everything starts to change, whereas before it was steady state. It's not that the nature of insight is, "Oh, now that I've moved through that black hole into the alternate universe, everything's unreliable and shifting and not-self. Before, it was really solid and didn't change. It just somehow—I wasn't happy about that."

The nature of insight comes back again to the literal meaning of right view: accurate recognition. The nature of insight actually begins with perception, with the shift of perception.

Perception, *saññā* in Pali, refers to a very specific state of mind—that quality of whenever there's a sense

contact, like hearing, the mind has a recognition of it. Hands clapping. It just happens. It's not right or wrong. It just happens. We're not trying to stop it, but we can recognize it happens. It's based on memory. If you've never heard that sound before, the mind might not know it's hands clapping. But the habit of perception, what the mind tends to do more often than not, is make something up. Rather than, "Oh, I don't know what that sound is," the mind goes, "Oh, that's such and so." It may be right, it may be wrong. So even a very simple perception like that can be inaccurate, and we don't know unless we come back and look carefully.

Some inaccurate perceptions are very simple to recognize. But the perception of impermanence, the perception of the unreliability and unsatisfactoriness of particular experience, the perception of not-self—these are not so easy to recognize.

The Buddha talks about it as inverted perception, the distortions, the hallucinations of perception. So much of the time, the perception of impermanence isn't there. We may even think, "Sure, I know everything's impermanent," but our perception is actually pretty solid. I look at that zabuton. I'm not thinking about it, but I'm not seeing change going on there. My mind, without thinking, assumes that's the same as it was yesterday, the same as it's going to be tomorrow. There's this whole assumption of permanence without even recognizing that's going on or questioning it.

Reality doesn't change, but insight starts with perception. The shift of perception into alignment with how things are is really the movement of insight. Perception is so important because it doesn't just stop there. The Buddha talks about the distortions of perception, or accurate perception, and how perception gives rise to *citta*—how we think about things.

And then that gives rise to *diṭṭhi*, or view—wise view or inaccurate view. So perception gives rise to thought, which gives rise to view. "This is how it is." We think this is how it is. And all the accompanying thoughts and moods and actions arise from that, just in the blink of an eye.

A simple example. I was reminded of this by Alexis's experience two nights ago with the chirping, which hopefully didn't happen again. So it's a story Joseph told—I'm allowed to tell it, but it's his story. Very possessive, dharma teachers are of their stories. Although it didn't happen to him. I mentioned it at the table and he goes, "That's my story." I said, "Well, I heard you give a talk where it wasn't only my story, it actually happened to me, and you were using it and you didn't ask me." So, payback time. This is what goes on. It's really highbrow stuff.

Anyway, this couple—and we can't remember who it was, so I hope there's no one in this room because we can't remember who it actually happened to; it was a long time ago—a couple of our friends moved into a new house, and they were settling in, and then they started hearing this little chirping from the basement. It sounded like a little nest of birdlings. Isn't that sweet? And they'd hear the chirping. "That's so sweet." This went on for a couple of days, and the thoughts—so nice—and all the happy emotions, all this stuff going on.

After a couple of days, they thought, "You know, it's a little too regular. I don't really..." So they actually went down and looked, which can help. And of course it was—Alexis is chirping—it was the fire alarm thing. Chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp. So then that was accurate recognition. And all the thoughts changed, and all the moods changed, and all the story around it changed. Deflated, unhappy. It wasn't like the end of their life, but everything around it changed, just from the perception becoming accurate. You get a sense of that.

So: perception to thinking to view. And then once there's a view—"Oh, it's like this"—we have views all the time. Once there's attachment to it, and most of the time we don't even recognize it's a view, never mind that we're attached to it. We won't say, "Oh, it's a view that that chirping sound is birds, and I really love it." It's like, no, that's what it is. That's basically how views are.

So when we're talking about perception—accurate perception or inaccurate perception—inaccurate perception takes us into the realm of looking for ease and happiness in experience that's changing, that's unreliable, that has no steady, stable self-core, and then not understanding why it isn't working. Why doesn't *saṃsāra* work? Because we're looking in the wrong way at the wrong thing.

So just to go into this a little tonight, I want to pick *anicca*, because I could talk all night about each of them, and to try and do all three at once... let's just stick with *anicca*. They all come together anyway.

The reason experiences are unsatisfactory and unreliable is essentially because they're constantly changing. And the reason that there's not a steady, stable self is because there's no steady, stable *nothing* to be a steady, stable self. So it's really kind of just roped around together—three angles of the same reality.

So I'm just going to talk about impermanence. This is from the Buddha:

Bhikkhus—which really means practitioners—*bhikkhus*, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, it eliminates all sensual craving. It eliminates all craving for becoming—for becoming any particular state, any particular experience.

It eliminates all ignorance. It uproots all of the conceit, all of the view of "I am."

This is shorthand for complete awakening—those four things. The perception of impermanence, when basically really deeply known, uproots, eliminates, dissolves the craving and the confusion that comes from the view, the conceit, "I am."

Well, that's a pretty powerful statement, in my opinion. Really powerful. And it's not saying you've got to go out and get rid of it. It's just coming back to the power of accurate perception.

And probably I could just say this next point, and that could be the rest of the talk. What do you think gives us accurate perception? Have a guess. Based on what we've been talking about ad infinitum this whole retreat—steady awareness. Steady awareness reveals what's already so.

Okay, that's enough. Go do it.

Basically, it is. Everything else I'm saying is just intellectual information to kind of encourage you to be willing to keep coming back into steady awareness and exploring why we don't. And it's not because we're recalcitrant and stupid—just because of the habits of mind. That's a powerful statement, the power of perception.

I pick impermanence also because on an intellectual level, of those three characteristics, I think for most people the concept of impermanence isn't really rocket science. I mean, the fact that everything comes to an end at some point—is anyone going to dispute that? Yeah, I get it. We get it. We think we get it.

But remember—do you remember?—that Alexis mentioned three types of wisdom, three levels of paññā, you could say. And they're all important. They work on different levels.

So one, what he talked about as heard—information, data that's coming in. On that level, I'm talking about perception of impermanence. That's information coming into your mind. And it's useful. We know we can't really learn without hearing correct information. It's useful to us.

And it circles around in our own experience, our own mind. It kind of deepens to the next level of *cintā mayā paññā*—thinking about it, not just analyzing, but kind of owning it, feeling it, noticing change, for example. It's not just disconnected information. We're really understanding it, thinking it through. But it isn't yet really transformative.

And the third level, *bhāvanā mayā paññā*—bhāvanā means mental development—I would say that's the insight level. That's the level I'm talking about of insight, of like a shift. It's like, "Oh!" You know, that aha moment when something really changes, something really shifts. Like I talked about the little kid with the blocks. Remember that night? "Oh, that's how it works!" It's a shift of perception that immediately leads to a change in how we think and the view. And that's the level of insight. That's what's transformative.

And it's not like you just have one insight and it's all over, okay? It keeps on going, keeps on going, keeps on going. Because as much as there's that—say the perception of impermanence is suddenly really deep in that moment, wow—there are moments where you just, not even thinking, it's so clear there's nothing stable and solid. And half an hour later, you know, that's all gone and it's really solid again.

That's not like you did something wrong.

But how fast the mind moves! A new mind moment arising every moment, and we're back to the perception of permanence—permanence, permanence—it keeps being fed. Without what? Right, without steady awareness. We fall back into the habits.

So yes, I've been pointing to this lack of steady awareness, or awareness kind of checking out. And that's assuming we're interested in awareness in the first place. Without it, in normal life, we're not even really looking at things. We're just assuming our perceptions are accurate, and we get all ruffled and confused.

But here, where we're starting to bring steady awareness, what are some of the aspects—and there are many—but just some that I want to highlight? These are natural habits we all have that may condition awareness to check out, for us to look in the other direction.

One is the fact that it's so much a habit to place our sense of what's going to make us happy or peaceful on some kind of stability, on some particular experience—either getting it or having it. It can be something really beautiful and important: a relationship, family, the job we have. Just that you can walk outside and the earth isn't going to rumble and move. We can walk out thinking it's more or less peaceful here, that at the moment we're not in a war zone. Whatever it might be. Or just the fact that my back isn't hurting and it hasn't hurt—may it never hurt again! Holding on to that for dear life, but not quite recognizing that we're doing so.

The habit of moving toward or feeling comfortable in the pleasant, trusting in what's familiar, finding the place where we feel we can let down and relax and feel at ease—does that make sense? Can you relate to that? It's rare that we go, "Wow, this really feels awful. Let me relax and feel it." We've been saying that, right? But it's not our natural tendency. The natural tendency is to recoil in the face of unpleasant or difficult experience. Just that habit of resistance and aversion to the unpleasant, which we've talked about.

Remember, Alexis mentioned in his talk that sutta about the dart. Everybody, whether awakened or not, experiences pleasant and unpleasant and neutral experience. That's just happening to all of us. The difference between one who's at peace and one who's not is that the one who's not gets reactive around the unpleasant. And the Buddha said the only escape a normal person knows—one not on a path of waking up—the only escape such a one knows from unpleasant experience is to crave after something pleasant.

So it becomes a habit of mind, he says: resistance and unhappiness underlie the experience of unpleasant. And that craving, going toward something pleasant as a way to escape the unpleasant—that becomes habitual. You can see this being acted out in our mind and experience so much of the time. I want to say all the time, but nothing's all the time. Except impermanence is all the time. But all the time, it just is, of course.

This is unpleasant—let's go to the pleasant. We're not saying you should run from the pleasant to the unpleasant. But the Buddha is pointing out: knowing no other escape. That's so poignant to me. That's so sad. Because that escape isn't an escape. That's what keeps us bound in the cycle of fearing the unpleasant and wanting the pleasant. And because both of those are impermanent, unreliable, and without intrinsic self-existence, that pleasant one can't do it. So then we go to the next pleasant, the next pleasant, the next pleasant—and that's the whole cycle.

The real reason we're saying on retreat, "Okay, it hurts a little bit, don't run away right away," is because there is an escape, but it's not just going to the pleasant. The escape is the shift into wisdom that comes from accurate perception. The effect of accurate perception is that the mind-heart releases the clinging. It

really knows, "This isn't going to do it," and just releases the clinging. It's not an intellectual thing. And that's the escape. The escape is the release of the clinging, the release of the aversion. It's not getting into happy pleasant-land.

It doesn't happen.

So anyway, I think one of the common experiences that happens when we don't quite recognize or accept the naturalness of impermanence, of change, is this sense of recoiling from the unpleasant. Even with the big movements of impermanence—even though of course we know everything at some point goes away, every car is going to fall apart, every meeting ends in parting, as the Tibetans say—we really know we're all going to get sick and die, as is everyone we know and love. Just on the first knowledge level, right? But still, when something ends, it's sad. It's painful. The sense of loss, the sense of pain, the sense of "this shouldn't be happening."

And so this natural habit of recoiling, of resisting the unpleasant—it could manifest as denial, it could manifest as rage, but for sure we're going to feel sadness at loss. But sadness is often experienced as an unpleasant experience, right? So there can even be a recoil from the sadness.

What I've found in myself, and in talking to people, is that this sense of not recognizing or just being at ease with things going away—even though obviously they've gone, you can't really deny it when something's gone—but there's a pulling back from the sense of loss, the sadness, the grief, as if that's a problem. And this is where, again, the escape isn't to get rid of the sadness. It's just that sadness is okay. That's part of our being human. That might be part of what's going to arise on the emotional level in a time of something we care about falling apart, going away.

We don't have to—if we have enough steady awareness, this kind, non-preferential awareness—okay, sadness is like this. It's okay. It's just part of being human. All the emotions are part of being human. The awareness can keep on being here, and you'll see the sadness itself changes. When we pull back, it kind of freezes things, and we're back in this sense of contention with things as they are.

And just to say, this is part of humanity. There are different stories in the suttas, but the one I really love the most, quite famous, shows that this was the same back in the time of the Buddha. It's the story of Ananda, who, as most of you know, was the Buddha's cousin and loving attendant for the last twenty-five years of his life.

Ananda was a very personable person. In the suttas he's kind of like someone you can relate to—he's not a completely awakened being, so sometimes he makes mistakes. He says something that isn't exactly accurate, and the Buddha will go, "Not so, Ananda." And you think, "Oh great, I can be like Ananda!" But he's extremely kind. He has incredible memory—he could remember every single discourse he ever heard the Buddha give. And he made a deal with the Buddha when the Buddha asked him to be his attendant. One of the things he asked for was that if he wasn't present for a discourse, the Buddha would give it to

him again later so he could remember it. So if you're ever reading the suttas, the suttas that start "Thus have I heard"—that's Ananda's voice. Thus have I heard, and then he goes on with the sutta. Just to give you a sense of a real person.

So anyway, in this one story, the Buddha had announced to his Sangha that he was going to pass away in three months. And then he's sitting talking to the monks and nuns, and he looks around and says, "Where's Ananda?" They all said, "Well, Ananda's gone back to his hut."

There's an image that Andy Olendzki, who was the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies and a Pali scholar, told me about later. They weren't visual images at the time of the Buddha, but much later it became a known image in Buddhist imagery: Ananda leaning against the frame of his door, weeping, weeping, and saying, "Oh, how shall I go on? The teacher who's been so kind to me, the teacher who's so wonderful, who I've been with all these years, is going to leave, and I'm still a learner with much to do." Just weeping from sadness. It's just so human, right? I love it.

So the Buddha, of course—"Okay, get Ananda, come on Ananda, come back." And he says—and you can't tell the tone from reading it—but he says, "Ananda, haven't I told you? Everything that comes together, when the conditions change, must go apart. How can it be otherwise? It cannot be otherwise."

But then he goes on to actually cultivate wholesome qualities in Ananda's mind state at that moment. He says, "You've been so many years so faithful, so generous, so kind. You have all these really wonderful, generous qualities. Really recognize them, and don't worry."

You're on the path, and you'll wake up.

So he's not like, "You stupid jerk, Ananda." He's like, "Ah, you know, it's so sad. But really, look at all the wholesome qualities. Look at all the wisdom. Incline the mind to that, and awakening will surely occur."

I just love that, because this is our path. This is what it's like to be human. We don't need to recoil from sadness or grief or whatever, or take it as a sign that change shouldn't be happening or that we did something wrong. It's just part of the whole bigger picture.

But again, this tendency to pull back is a place where the steady awareness drops out, isn't it? Because we don't want to feel it. And it's a habit—that deep habit. We're not even purposely thinking, "I don't want to feel it." We're just gone, looking for pleasure. That's the big picture. So that's just one way of recognizing that.

In this way, clinging to anything is such a poignant strategy for happiness, right? Because it so doesn't work. It actually keeps us spinning in the dissatisfaction, in the sense of dis-ease.

Why do we cling? One reason is what I said the Buddha taught—to escape from the unpleasant. But I also think one of the things that perhaps many of us experience, though not everyone, is that what we're wanting is that sense of ease, which we can equate with a sense of stability or familiarity or control. I

don't know—many of you may notice in the meditation this sense of trying to control something, just because God forbid what might happen if I don't have it all tightly together. Something great might happen, but I don't know—I'd rather know and just have it in this nice little packet so nothing bad could surprise me.

This sense of stability, this reaction to the unreliability—the fact of dukkha, the fact of constant change—is the mind somehow looking for something steady to hold on to. Whether it's a sense experience, whether it's a relationship, an idea, a view about things, a particular comfort with the level of people you're with, whether it's our ideas or views about ourself, a view about our personality. And it may not even be a nice view, but it's familiar. I know that's what I'm like. Don't try to tell me otherwise. It's familiar.

And that just increases the dis-ease, the disjunct, the being in contention with things as they are. The peace that comes from wise view is that we're no longer fighting with reality. It's just doing its thing. It's like this, and it's not a problem.

You know the teacher Byron Katie? She says, "When you fight with reality, you lose." I love that. When I feel like I'm struggling, I'm fighting with reality, and I'm losing.

There's a line from one of the suttas: "The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." Not needing a place to rest. Can you imagine that?

One Tibetan saying—it's like a meditation instruction: "Resting at ease in whatever arises." Just, it's this now. That's all. That's all. No sense of past, future, changing, not changing. Just resting at ease in whatever arises.

Again, "One abides in peace who does not abide anywhere." Abiding—having that sense of landing and trying to stay and hold and settle.

Now, I don't know how this is landing for you all, but I know my intellectual thinking mind doesn't like that very much. It's like, "What do you mean?"

Nothing, no abiding. One rests in peace who doesn't rest anywhere.

I want to rest. I like to be comfortable. And comfortable means I rest. I don't have to every single moment be changing and not abiding. This and this and this—it's exhausting!

But what's exhausting is the mind going on about that with aversion. That's what's exhausting. You don't even have to think about it at all. It's just how it already is.

So that's one way I just wanted to point out how the steady awareness can fall away and the perception of impermanence isn't perceived—because of the deep habit of recoiling, pulling back, denying, resisting, going to the pleasant in the face of discomfort, unfamiliarity, dis-ease.

Another way, again, is that we may not recognize—often we don't—the momentariness of change.

For example, once I was hearing a talk from the Dalai Lama. He was talking about this and said, "Well, everything changes, like my body. It came into existence, it's here for a while, and then it goes away." So it's changing, but it's kind of a steady state—the zabuton, steady state, whatever.

Then he said, "We're seeing change," but he clarified, "No, that's not really it, because that still is assuming a kind of permanence." What's not being recognized is the momentariness, the incredible rapidity of change.

It's said somewhere in the suttas that the Buddha talked about how many mind moments arise—a moment of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Whatever measurement they used then translates to something enormous, like seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye. We're talking fast.

And so when perceptions are happening this quickly, it's so fast that it can look permanent. The example often given is if you have a torch, a fiery torch, and you spin it really fast in the dark—if you spin it fast enough, it looks like a solid circle of flame. Have you ever seen that? That's the rapidity, and then it looks solid.

In a way, that's what's going on with us. And of course, you can't sit down and say, "I'm going to notice seventeen trillion mind moments in the blink of an eye." That's just an idea. But it's meant to point in a direction.

What does it bring us back to? The steadiness of awareness—here, here, here, here, here. And various aspects of this change reveal themselves. How can they not? That's what's happening.

Sometimes I play with awareness of seeing. We talked about seeing—it's not that you don't have the concepts. It's more that seeing is like the awareness of the process that seeing has happened. And looking is more like being out in the content of what's being seen. Sort of like the difference between being lost in thought and being aware of thought. When you can be aware of a thought, you still might know the content, but you're not in there mucking around with it. Same with looking and seeing.

As we're walking around, first notice how often seeing is occurring, which we don't notice a lot. But if you start just playing with it, not worrying about the content—for every single instant, the seeing is different. It's never exactly the same. Even if I just sit still like this, this shows up, that shows up, different things are coming to the forefront. It's always different. And that's just one of the sense doors—never mind how fast the mind door is moving.

So just start to notice the momentariness of change. Don't make a big deal about it. Just let that go in. But as the awareness is getting more and more naturally steady, this starts to reveal itself. You see then how much the perception is really of permanence. And that's not a problem, but just noticing that—how many moments the perception is actually of permanence—it's interesting. It doesn't take an equal number of moments of perception of impermanence for insight to really come. Because how much of our life—

has the perception been of permanence, and it keeps on being.

So for example, in your time here today, in your practice today, whatever you were doing—sitting, walking, having an emotion—was there ever, did it ever happen at all today that something occurred and there's a thought: "Oh no, now I'm going to be with this the whole sitting." "Oh no, here comes this again. I'm going to have to deal with this mental thing again all day. I was with it all day yesterday, and here it is again today." Did that ever happen to anybody?

And then it's often that we don't—not always—but there's a kind of selective attention. Again, this is why we talk about non-preferential awareness. We don't even realize it, but the selective attention often skips over the neutral. So even this thing—"Oh no, it's going to be here all day, and it's really a pain, and we don't like it"—but it's got some juice to it, so we notice. Awareness notices when that comes up. It somehow doesn't notice all those moments that there was boredom, that you were hearing the tree frogs, that you were wondering what was for lunch, that you were just a little bit sleepy, that you were thinking about last week, and then: "Oh God, here's this thing. It's been here all day. It's going to be here all day. I can't bear it."

Just notice that. Nothing is here all day. There may be—maybe there's only a fraction of a second that that pain wasn't there. But there was a moment. "No, it was there. I just didn't notice it, but it was there." That's what we do. Just check it out. Don't believe me. Check it out.

Really, sometimes we start to see there is no stasis anywhere. That's what His Holiness the Dalai Lama was pointing to. Sometimes I talk about the example of a time-lapse film of a flower growing. And we just found out yesterday that the camera set up in the front—I don't know if you've noticed it—they're actually doing time-lapse filming of the tulips growing. Don't ask me what they're going to do with it. That's going to go up on the website. This is what you can see if you come to a retreat—five weeks of watching the tulip grow. That'll pack the house.

But anyway, it's fortuitous, so I can use it in this talk. You can imagine, right, a time-lapse—you see it on nature shows—and the plant coming up through the dirt, so it's speeded up. But if you see that, it's continually changing. It's just speeded up. There's no moment that you can stop it and say, "That's the bulb," and it stopped. The next moment, it's changing a little bit, changing a little bit. You can't say, "Now this is the stem, now that's the flower," and it stopped. It never completely stops, becomes a thing isolated in itself. The conditions are coming together and changing and making it every instant. That's nature.

Guess what? Right view, right? Guess what we are? Nature. That's what's going on. Conditions coming together in every moment. They're slightly different in the body, in the mind, in all the different sense doors that are arising. Always different.

So the steady awareness isn't like—we don't have to think about this stuff. But the more we really pay attention, it starts to be highlighted. A friend many years ago was saying on retreat—she'd been sitting for

like twenty years, years and years—

"You know, I really have gotten it," she said. "I've known for years, really known in my gut, cellularly—like insight—that everything around is constantly changing. But suddenly now I'm getting it: oh, me too. I'm part of that. Before it was like I'm here, solid, watching everything constantly change." Doesn't it feel like that? But she said, "Oh no, it's not like that at all. I'm completely part of it. There's no separation."

This is from the Buddha: "When one perceives impermanence, the perception of not-self is stabilized. And when the perception of not-self is stabilized, that perception eradicates the conceit 'I am,' the view 'I am'"—the same thing he said before—"which is Nibbana in this very life." Nibbana means liberation of heart-mind through non-clinging.

So you see, they work together. That perception of impermanence really stabilizes the perception of not-self. Because with that sense of constant change held within steady awareness, you don't have to think about it. That's just what presents itself.

Sometimes in sitting meditation—and I think both Alexis and Mark talked about how sometimes it's wild—people say sometimes it's nice and calm and we can stay with the breath, which is fine. But one of the things that can be a trap, if it becomes a trap—it doesn't have to be, it can be very useful—is when we feel like we need to go back there. Why? Because it's calm. Because it gives the illusion of stability. And when we open up, we think, "No, there's just stuff going on all over the place. This, this, this, and that. That's not good meditation. I'm not stabilized. I'm not concentrated. I've got to go back to the breath." Right? It happens a lot.

What are we opening up to? The thought arises: "Something's wrong. Everything's changing, and it's not in my control. Something's wrong. How can I fix it?" That's not meditation. If you're trying to fix that, well, keep trying until you notice how much suffering is increasing. Then just let go into it. You can't force letting go, but just notice it's like this and don't believe that it's wrong. Steady awareness is just noticing it's like this now.

When there's a wrong view—an unrecognized view—that's what happens when you think, "This is wrong. It shouldn't be so changing. There's something out of control. I'm doing something wrong." That's the result of the wrong view that things aren't supposed to change, that we should be able to be stable, that everything should be copacetic somehow. But steady awareness that isn't adhering to any view—not even right view—just noticing what is... you simply observe, "Oh, that's wild. It's like this now." And awareness is steady, and it's like this now.

Awareness isn't stained or damaged by difficult, unpleasant experience. Awareness isn't better or purer or clearer if the experience is pleasant or one we like or really subtle. Awareness is just receiving whatever arises. The meaning that this is good and this is bad is all put on by our thinking.

Nisargadatta Maharaj once said that we miss the real by lack of attention and we create the unreal by

excess of imagination. I love that. So that's what we're doing.

This sense of the perception of impermanence stabilizing the perception, the recognition of not-self—we can see that. It doesn't have to be super subtle. We can just begin to notice it as we go through the days here in retreat. That's what's nice about a retreat: we have the space to notice what's going on anyway, but with a little more subtlety because we're not quite so distracted.

But just as I was mentioning before, in terms of physical sensations and mental states—a friend of mine said he noticed on retreat that he was really frustrated, but then he recognized it's impossible to be frustrated all day, even if you try. It's just impossible to be frustrated all day. So we notice the presence and the absence of mind states.

We can also notice the views, the personality view we have of ourselves. And it can be helpful to first recognize: "I'm a depressive person," or "I'm someone who can't meditate," or "I'm angry a lot"—whatever it is. We have a good friend who is a self-confessed aversive type. Not only self-confessed—all her friends are on her case: "You're aversive, you're aversive." She got kind of fed up, and she was sitting one day and she said, "I'm just going to really pay attention, just be really steady in awareness of all the mental activity, all the mental states that go on through the day, just out of interest."

And so she saw—of course, one can't help but see—that they're constantly changing. She said, "Yeah, there are a lot of aversive mental states. And there's a lot of generosity arising. And there was a lot of mettā arising. And there was a lot of just concentration or just equanimity or just being normal, doing whatever." So to come back and say, "I'm an aversive person," is again picking and choosing and just ignoring everything else that's occurring. Maybe something comes up frequently, but we don't have to land on it. Just staying with steady awareness, you'll see everything's changing. We can't land anywhere—good, bad, or in between. It's always in flux. So we simply need to notice what's actually going on.

In a way, it's taking refuge in the awareness rather than taking refuge in pleasant, unpleasant, our ideas about ourselves, good ideas, bad ideas. Just that willingness: "Okay, it's like this now." Let the steadiness of awareness, the willingness to just relax back into awareness, be the refuge, and let life reveal itself.

This actually has the effect of really opening and freeing the heart-mind. It really does release the clinging, the grasping. Because when we're grasping, trying to hold something, we recognize there's nothing to be held—it's all moving and there's nothing solid there anyway. The lack of struggle and the real presence opens us to the beauty and mystery and real presence in life, rather than this constant push-pull.

But it's true that there can be times along the way when maybe we first open in a deep way, one time or another, to the unreliability of experience, or to the fact that there really isn't some steady-state "me" that we thought there was. Just a moment when it's not there. Recognizing that at a deep level is peace.

But this is from Ajahn Sumedho, and I think this can be quite helpful: As one begins to realize or recognize

non-grasping as the way—non-grasping at anything including self and ideas—then sometimes, not always, but sometimes, emotionally one can feel quite frightened by this. You know that everything's changing and there's no me, there's nowhere to rest. It can seem like a kind of annihilation is taking place. All that I think I am in the world, all that I regard as stable and real, starts falling apart, and it can be frightening. It doesn't have to be, but it can be.

But if we have the faith to continue bearing with these emotional reactions—what Alexis talked about last night, the faith, just the willingness to be here with kind awareness with these emotional reactions—and allow things that arise to cease, to appear and disappear according to their nature, then we find stability not in achievement or attaining, but in being awake, in being aware. The stability of just this moment of being aware. That's it. Not thinking about it.

So this refuge in awareness releases the struggle, even just for that one moment. It really opens us into a fullness of presence. But it's not a disconnected fullness of presence at all. Sometimes people say, "Why would I want to perceive this constant change? Why would I want to open to this? It sounds dreadful, this instability, and it sounds like maybe knowing everything's changing, you wouldn't care."

But it's just the opposite. Because it's a caring that doesn't come from a need to reify or justify or make myself okay.

It's a caring that's like… this is just how it is. The beautiful, the difficult, the poignant. The sense of presence and being alive becomes even more vivid. We don't stop caring.

Two examples. One is from the Dalai Lama. I read about him once—you know, he meets so many people, right? Every day. All the Tibetan refugees. You hear so many really heartbreaking, unbearable stories of people suffering. And then he meets people who are happy, and all kinds of people. Many people have said—and I've read this—that when he's meeting someone, when he's shaking their hand and talking to them, they always say they feel like he's just so totally with you. Like this is the high point of his day, meeting you. Whoever it is, he's 100 percent there.

And they can watch him. He's with someone telling a horrible refugee story, and he's crying with them. He's totally feeling with them. And then that's gone. The next person comes. He turns to that person. It's a whole different world. He's not weeping anymore. He's totally there with that person. Maybe they're laughing. Maybe he's just talking about some business.

Some say, "Well, how do you do that? How can you just drop it?"

He goes, "Well, it's totally present. That's what's happening—the sadness. But there's no holding on. It doesn't reverberate. It's this. Then it's gone. And the next thing occurs."

That can really be like that. It doesn't mean we don't care. We're able to be fully there because we're not held back by this fear of, "Oh my God, it's going to overwhelm me." Just to explore that possibility.

And to notice, in terms of impermanence—notice when your mental states, when a difficult one is gone. Sometimes we don't quite have the steadiness to notice it's gone. We jump into the next thing. Notice the absence of difficult mental states. Notice the presence of wholesome states. And notice the absence of wholesome. Because that really helps us.

You know, you've been so frustrated all day, and then you're not. Notice the absence. Not assuming, "Well, it's under there. I'm just not clear enough to see it." That's just some idea. You look around. It's really gone. It's gone. Sure, it'll come back. The conditions will change. But notice that.

And then the other thing—the other way of just saying this—the sensitivity, the tenderness to be with life as it is, I think is stronger, is deeper. It can really open to the mystery and the wonder.

I just wanted to read two poems to end. One is this very short haiku by Issa, which to me is just knowing the ephemeral nature of the world, and still, we're humans. It's written on the year anniversary of the death of his young child. And it's just very simple:

This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world. And yet, and yet.

And that's how it is for us.

And this is Hafiz. "Deepening the Wonder":

Death is a favor to us

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.

The miraculous existence and impermanence of form always makes the illumined ones laugh and sing.

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you.

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