In The Seen, There Is Only The Seen

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:10

I'd like to wish you all a happy Easter Sunday, this day of death and transformation, which is a wonderful thing to be aware of—not just on a retreat, of course, but any time in our life. To be aware of the fact that really every moment of our life is a moment of death and transformation. And that's not a scary or a sad thing. It's actually an incredible gift of being able to surrender into the newness of each moment, into the unknowability of what's going to happen next. And the only way that can happen is if we're willing to let go of whatever ideas and perceptions and concepts we've constructed about the meaning of this moment. That's not so easy.

What I want to speak about tonight is just that. We're slowly working our way in these talks through the four foundations of mindfulness. Ana spoke about awareness of aspects of the body, which is the first foundation. Jack spoke about mindfulness of feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—which is the second, and of emotions, states of mind and heart, which is the third. Tonight I want to speak in part about the fourth foundation, which is more contents of mind, or our old friend and sometimes foe: thoughts, the process of thinking, which is really such an amazing, fantastic tool, isn't it, thought? And at the same time, when it's not a tool, when it's in charge, it's a horrific master. It's just torment. And it all comes down to our being able to bring wise attention to the experience of thought itself.

Once we understand thought as a thought, it's really no problem. So how come we're so tormented by our thought processes? Just talking to people in the last couple of days—it's not just our thought processes that torment us, but they can really do a good job of catching us up.

Beginning by just looking at thought itself: in the meditation that Jack led this morning, that sense of the vastness of mind, as vast as the sky, things, sensations, sounds, thoughts arising and passing—did you have a moment where there was just a thought coming and going like a cloud, just empty, transparent nature, nothing to it? What's the problem?

Well, all thoughts are just that transparent. There is no thought that is anything more than a thought. They're like nothing, like that rainbow the other day. Beautiful, incredible, we've got all our reactions, and it's just ephemeral. It comes with conditions, the conditions go away, and it's gone. Thought is just the same.

So how do we get at times so completely caught up in this? Mark Epstein's book, the title of it, is *Thoughts Without a Thinker*. That's all you need to know. The thoughts aren't the problem; it's the thinker that we construct out of thoughts that seems to make it a problem.

How can we relate to thoughts with wisdom, from wisdom, rather than making our meditation into some kind of goal where the fewer thoughts we have, the better, or thinking we have to change the kind of thoughts we have? Or don't you have those certain thoughts that you're really afraid to have come up? It's like, "Oh no, anything rather than that thought. I can't bear the road it's going to take me down." But it's not the thought. It's all the constructions around it.

This is another really important thing, if you can really believe it: just because a thought arises frequently and together with a lot of emotion or force doesn't make it more true. It doesn't make it more accurate. It just makes it more forceful. There's more of a tendency to identify with it. The thought is me, or it's about me, or it says something about me, or I have to own it. And that's where the suffering comes.

Back to this thoughts without a thinker. One of our colleagues, Joseph Goldstein, has a great line, which if you really could apply it, you'd see that it's not the thoughts. He said: take a sitting and imagine that every thought that arises in your mind comes from the person behind you. It really changes it, doesn't it? "My, what a sicko that person is!" But since it's them and not me, it's really not a problem. If you can relate to your thoughts in that way, you're back in space.

When there's the space, when the thought's just a bird flying through the sky, fine. Then you're really recognizing the nature of thought, and then there's no problem. Thought arises like sounds arise, no problem.

Of course, the rest of the time when it is a problem—that's what I want to talk about now for the rest of the talk. If you can hang out in open sky mind, do so, please. You don't need to get into all this deconstructing where we get caught in thought. But for the times that we are caught, I'm going to talk about some helpful ways to bring in our awareness that might help to deconstruct where we're caught.

Hopefully this won't be thought-provoking, but will be a guide for how to pay attention to what's really happening as opposed to what we think is happening. Sometimes those two things are worlds apart—what we think is happening and what's really happening. Our practice is to recognize what's really happening.

One place that these two things, what's really happening and what we think is happening, begin to diverge is at the point of basic perception.

So I'll explain what we mean by that in Buddhist psychology. We've talked about—Annas especially has discussed—the five sense experiences and the sixth sense experience, which is the mind. There's seeing, tasting, smelling, feeling, sensing, hearing. And the sixth sense door is the mind, so thoughts and emotions.

These basic sense experiences—a sight, a smell, a taste, a thought, an emotion, a sound—that's all that's happening, over and over, in all different orders. That's all that's happening. And in a moment of its arising, say a sound, what we call perception is that first recognition: "Oh, that's a bird call," or "That's a car." It doesn't even have to be in words, but it's that perceptive recognition. It's based somewhat on memory, so of course it comes out of our past experience. For instance, sometimes there will be a sound

and you hear it, but you don't know what it is. There's that moment of no recognition. Perception hasn't come in yet.

Now, what often happens at this point of perception is that we actually recognize incorrectly. There's a sound and we don't know what it is. Well, we don't like to not know what it is, so we just make something up. And we don't necessarily know we're making it up. This is really a function of delusion operating in that moment.

I'll give an example. A few years ago, Franz and I were walking in the woods in Switzerland. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a big yellow and white thing. Immediately my mind said, "Oh, that's a yellow and white striped circus tent." I said to Franz, "That's odd, a circus tent here in the woods." He looked at me like I was out of my mind. Because it wasn't a circus tent. I had just taken in some visual perception without really turning and meeting the experience, and my mind put together "circus tent." When I turned and looked, it was a big rock with some streaked lichen, some yellow and some white. It didn't bear any resemblance to a circus tent as soon as I actually looked at it.

That's an easy misperception to correct. You just turn and really look. I had Franz there to say, "Are you nuts?" which made me turn and really look. But a lot of the time we don't realize that we're doing that.

There's the classic Buddhist story about walking in the forest at twilight and seeing something hanging down. Immediately the mind goes, "Snake!" You've heard all the stories about people being bitten by snakes in Thailand if they walk out at night without their flashlight. You know there are poisonous snakes. Fear arises, a sense of vulnerability and unsafety. We react both with thoughts constructing the story and with the appropriate emotions—all our memory, all our history in relationship to snakes, everything we've seen or ever had to do with snakes. Until someone comes along with a flashlight and you see it's a vine. "Oh, okay, excuse me," and all that vanishes. But until we know, we are basing our whole perception of reality on that one basic misperception.

So this happens when there's ignorance and we don't have all the information. It also happens when our perception, the way we're meeting experience, is veiled by a state of mind—specifically our friends craving, aversion, and self-identification. Comparing is a form of that.

There's a great word for this in the Pali language: *papañca*. I love the definition in the commentaries. It means that the projection of the mental state distorts our basic perception so we don't see what's really happening.

For example, once I was in the hospital, very sick, in a lot of pain. A nurse came and woke me up at five in the morning to weigh me. I had to get out of bed so she could weigh me. Very important. I'd been there two days—what, had I lost twenty pounds? I was actually seeing her visually through the mental state of fear.

I visually saw her as sort of demonic, and I reacted—the poor lady—I reacted in that way through the veil

of fear and aversion, seeing this really distorted-looking woman. I just lashed out at her.

The next day, five in the morning, the same lady was on the same rotation. She comes to wake me up. But I didn't have that veil of fear and aversion, and I just saw a very nice-looking, somewhat nervous woman kindly waking me up. I was seeing clearly then.

So it's at this level where, when we're not aware of the mental state, it completely distorts our reality and we don't know it. This papañca—the projection of the mental state distorting our perception—is further fueled by the resultant emotions, the thoughts, the descriptions, the reactions. It just takes hold and runs. In fact, they say these are "the notions that assail and overwhelm a person." Or as the commentary says, papañca is "the tendency of the imagination to break loose and run riot."

Can you relate? That's what's going on half the time. And we wonder why we feel a little out of sync with things, why we're a little out of sync with ourselves—because we're way down the road from the basic perception.

This distortion can happen through fear, and it can happen through craving. Like that incredible story the other night about the man with the weather balloons. He didn't just recognize a pleasant thought; with his view distorted by craving, he really got out there, way down the road.

You can see this phenomenon we often talk about in retreats: either vipassana romance or vipassana vendetta. The mind becomes veiled with craving, with desire, or with hatred, vitriolic judgment and hatred. With romance, you'll see at the end this person who will "stay nice forever"—the most incredible person. Everything they do is just so right on. You can't believe such a specimen of humanity has landed here, right here, sitting next to you. It's unbelievable! And if you met the person two months from now in Safeway, your mind would kind of go, "Yeah, they look nice enough, but what was that about?"

There's a Tibetan saying that craving puts feathers on the object. It decorates it up.

So these are very simple ways of understanding what we call papañca. The actual perception is not accurate. We don't recognize that because we're not even paying attention at the level of perception. And we are off and running.

That's one of the ways our constructions of thought operate—because what happens out of papañca is we construct a whole world of description and thought and knowledge: who we are, who you are, what the world is like, all based on our perceptions. And this can lead into forming what we call views and opinions.

Any sense of recognizing any views or opinions arising in your experience in the last couple days? No, none at all? Sure.

These views are based on our perception. And once we've formulated a view, it's fine if you notice it—just like any thought, it's fine, no problem. But when we don't notice it, attachment to views becomes one of

the big areas the Buddha spoke about as a cause of our suffering.

When he talked about attachment or craving, he talked about sense desire, which we've spoken of a lot as a big area of attachment. The second one he talked about is attachment to views and opinions as being absolutely suffering-inducing and confusion-inducing.

What we do is construct a view, a description, that explains things based on our perception. And once we're attached to that view, it's as if all of our mindful awareness is shut down. We don't even let in perceptions that counteract the view. We don't even notice them. And should you happen upon someone whose view is different, it can really lead to conflict.

The example Jack gave last night: the experiment where they put their hands into hot and cold water, and then put them into warm water. Well, imagine if that were two different people. They put their hands into the same bucket, and one says, "No, it's really hot." The other says, "No, it's really cold." And they're both absolutely convinced, due to their experience, that that's how it is.

Now, you could notice that's a view based on conditions and say, "Oh, that's interesting. You feel it as hot, I feel it as cold. That's interesting." How many of us can do that? How many of us didn't argue?

You're kind of weird. I am freezing in this bucket. This is attachment to views—when we don't realize it, it brings us into great conflict with other people, with ourselves, with our own experience. It's one of the ways that thought gets frozen into a construction that causes suffering. And it's easy not to notice until you actually notice the view.

A really good place to explore view is in work meditation, particularly if you have a job where three or four of you are doing the same task. A few people have mentioned to me noticing that clearly there's a best way to do it—and it's theirs. Luckily we ask you not to talk, because it can really come to blows.

You know the story of the two foreign monks in Burma? One was really hot and kept turning on the overhead fan, and the other found it noisy and distracting and kept turning it off. They actually did come to blows over this fan. They both got kicked out of the monastery.

So look in your work meditation. We can still prefer our own opinions—we're not saying we can't tell what our opinion is. Of course it's better if you line the things up like this, and you wash this first, and you dry it in this order, and you do the dirtiest things last because it gets the water dirtier, and anybody could tell that's how it's supposed to be. We can notice that without attaching to it as the only accurate description of the world, the only possibility.

Work meditation is a wonderful place to see if, as Pema Chödrön says, you can even let in the possibility that maybe this is just an opinion. It's not so easy.

I think I'll read what she writes: "When you are in meditation, you could begin to notice your opinions just as you notice thinking. This is an extremely helpful practice because we have a lot of opinions and we

tend to take them as truth. But actually, they're just our opinions. Opinions are opinions, nothing more or less. We notice them, we can label them as opinions, just as we label thoughts. By this simple exercise, we are introduced to the notion of egolessness. All ego really is, is our opinions, which we take to be solid, real, and the absolute truth about how things are. Even to have a few seconds of doubt about the solidity and absolute truth of our own opinions, even just to begin to see that we do in fact have opinions, begins to introduce us to the possibility of selflessness, of egolessness."

Now, we often actually don't like the possibility of being introduced to the notion of egolessness. We like our opinions because they're so obviously correct. It's really hard to make that space.

Here's an example from IMS: the power of our opinions about healthy food. This can be a big one. Take the notion that white sugar is not healthy—a lot of people might agree with that. We have a retreat at IMS in Barre every summer for young adults, young people between twelve and eighteen. One year, there were two or three kids from the inner city eating a diet very much like what we serve here—not much sweets, no white sugar or refined food at all. These kids were basically used to eating fast food and junk food. And it wasn't just a preference; they actually physically began to be ill, like withdrawing off of something, because there was no grease and no white sugar. The body can't just adjust like that.

So the teachers—I wasn't one of them—went to the cooks and said, "Look, you've got to put out some sugar for these kids." But the particular cooks at that time were so into their healthy food that they just couldn't do it. They finally prevailed on them to give the kids a little secret stash of white sugar, but they had to hide it. I thought, you know, that must have been so weird for these kids.

But this sense of not being able to expand beyond our view is a way that we use thought to freeze the world. And we don't just do it in things like food. A great way you can begin to explore views, attachment to views, and the way it freezes and solidifies experience and creates suffering is to notice what opinions may have arisen about what good meditation is in the days you've been here. Or if you're leaving, or even if you're not, as you approach the middle or the end, there might be some slight view arising as to what was supposed to happen and didn't—and how you feel about that.

It's really helpful to notice a view and notice how, when we're attached to it, we almost deny the perceptions that counteract it. And nowhere is it so obvious as in a group of people like this with opinions about what good meditation is. The questions in the morning in the hall—isn't that a great place to find out what your views are and how they get triggered? You hear someone crying, having a lot of emotion, and you're cool as a cucumber, and the view could go either way.

My God, what's the matter with me? You know, Ajahn Chah says, if you haven't really cried, you haven't really meditated. That is a line guaranteed to send about half the people through the roof and the other half to say, "Wow, I'm really doing great." It's a view either way. Sometimes you cry, sometimes you don't. One isn't better than the other. It's all about just being present for what's actually happening, free of the interpretations we put on top of it.

So you'll hear someone say it's better to just be with the breath, and anything else that comes up is a distraction. The more you're with the breath, the better you're doing. And the next person will say, "I'm not doing well because I'm hardly with the breath. There's thinking and emotions and sensations and sounds, and I'm noticing it all really clearly, but I should be with the breath."

There was a woman once at a retreat a few years ago who came about the fifth day and said she had been in absolute agony—not physical agony, though it was hurting because sitting cross-legged was really painful for her—but absolute despair because she couldn't do the practice, because she couldn't sit cross-legged. About the fifth day, she looked up at me and said, "Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe you can do the practice and sit in a chair." Five days to let in a perception. And she's not unusual. That's just one particular story. I've known times when people go for years and suddenly say, "Oh! You mean just being with whatever's arising is okay? It's okay to feel anxiety? It's okay not to feel anxiety? It's okay to just be with the walking? It's okay to be with the breath? It's okay not to be with the breath? You mean it's okay that it changes?" Whatever. It's fascinating.

And you don't have to listen to anyone else, because what I notice for myself is that as soon as I have one particular experience—a good experience, and a good experience usually means you like it, right? Have you ever come out of a sitting that was really unpleasant and said, "Wow, that was really a good meditation"? Probably not. Do you detect a little bias? There might be some bias going on in the way you evaluate meditation.

What's good practice? Notice how something happens that's completely unexpected—some strong energy movement, for example. It never happened before. You don't know what's going to happen, so you're really there. You're present. There's no expectation. There's no view or opinion. It's like, wow. And the next sitting, can you bring that beginner's mind? It's hard. The first twitch, and you're like, "Ah, here it goes again. Last time it was like this, this is what's going to happen." Or there's no twitch, and it's like, "Oh no, now this is really boring. Where's the juice? Where's the movement?"

That our mind does this is fine. It's no problem. It's just what it does. If we're aware of it, then it's just thoughts—it's funny. If we're not aware of it, we've solidified our experience. There's no freshness. There's no beginner's mind. And guess who's suffering?

That's a sign. When I'm suffering in meditation, one thing I do is ask, "What's happening now?" Often it's because I'm just not letting myself be with what's happening now. Or, if I see I'm really feeling what's happening but I'm still suffering, I back up and see: What's the view I'm holding to? What do I think should be happening? That's a real way in to see the view you're holding.

So, looking in your meditation, notice how thoughts coagulate experience into view and freeze it. And even though it's suffering, our tendency is to keep doing it because overall, we don't like shaky ground. Without a view, an opinion, a description that explains everything, we feel unmoored. We think, "Okay, now I know what that's about. Now I know what meditation is like. Now I know what sadness feels like.

Now I know how to work with pain. Now I know what impermanence is like."

So often people come after sitting for years, and I say the same thing to myself: "This is coming up again? I dealt with this in my last retreat. I dealt with this in therapy. What's it doing coming up again? I had it all figured out." It doesn't work that way. But it's almost as if we want to freeze experience because even if it's a suffering description, at least I'm familiar with it. I know where I stand. And I'd rather have concrete tight around my ankles and feet than to be able to dance in the mystery of constantly arising and passing experience, of never knowing what's going to arise next. We find it comfortable, but really it's not, if we really look.

Our whole practice is about actually looking instead of just coasting on our ideas and interpretations. Never take anything for granted in this practice. Never assume, "Now I know how this is." Look again. It's different now in this moment than it was in the last moment.

The Buddha said once, "Let one, calm and independent, not desire any resting place." Can you imagine that? Not desire any resting place. It sounds sometimes a little scary. I mean, we want a resting place. If there were one, and we could get there and rest, that would make a lot of sense. But because every moment is opening fresh and new, there isn't really a resting place that stays a resting place for more than this moment.

If we're not desiring a resting place, when we talk about taking refuge in the Dharma, taking refuge in the truth of this moment, for this moment, right here and now, whatever's happening—that is our resting place. But the challenge is, it's our resting place now, and when it changes, we don't hold on because there's a new resting place, a new resting place.

When we stop fighting that, it's just a dance of joy. It's like we're really living in harmony with life as it is. Thoughts are a part of that. When we see them as thoughts, they come, they go. Our descriptions of ourselves are constantly changing. But when we don't recognize that, then often one of the ways we try to create a resting place, a safe ground, is through our descriptions.

Just as I talked about our descriptions of our practice, the views we make of our practice, we do the same thing through thoughts. Thoughts is one way—that's the way I'm talking about tonight. We do it in our descriptions of who we are: our self-identity, our life stories, our moment to moment stories. Paying attention through the day to thoughts in this way, do you notice how you're sort of telling your identity story to yourself all day long? And without looking, it really feels real, right? Well, this is who I am. I recognize this story. It feels comfortable. It's awfully painful, but it's comfortable. I know it. It's safe somehow. And again, we don't like that shaky ground.

Do you remember, those of you who were here that year, when we had the earthquake?

And then the earthquake was okay, but it was the ten million aftershocks that went on all night and all the next day. It was just physically, cellularly unsettling. It was a great teaching for me because I realized, oh, I

always thought the earth was at least my solid ground. I guess not. I'm still holding on somewhere. Can I just go and dance? No, not too well.

So in a way, noticing through the day—pay attention tonight and tomorrow to the way that thoughts are constructing what seems like a solid, recognizable self. Me, my story that goes on. But really look, because what's fascinating is when we look, we see that there is no one story even. How many different "you" stories have you told yourself today? Really notice.

Because what we do is we have a view, an opinion of who we are—our basic story. "I'm a worthless, no-good meditator." That could be your story. Or your story might be, "I'm really hot stuff. Occasionally I don't do too well, but mostly I really got it together." Most people don't seem to believe that story, but some people do, and it really doesn't matter which one you believe. But notice—instead of buying the story, don't take it for granted. Pay attention.

Notice how from a basic perception, a basic sense perception—remember, all that's happening is the six sense experiences over and over and over, including thought. That's all that's happening. Everything else we're making up. This is really a radical aspect of awareness.

There's a sutta of the Buddha's that I really love because it says this quite directly. It's called the Advice to Bahiya of the Bark Cloth. Bahiya just came and stopped the Buddha on his alms round and said, "I'm in a real hurry. You've got to give me the basic teachings in five minutes." And the Buddha kept trying not to. "You just wait here. I'll go do my alms round. I'll have breakfast. I'll come back." But Bahiya just kept asking until, on the magic third time—usually if you asked the Buddha something, he would refuse twice, but then if it was something grantable, he would grant it on the third time.

So the Buddha gave him just this very succinct teaching. He said, "Okay, in the seen, there is only the seen. In what is heard, there is only the heard. In what is sensed in the body, there is only what is sensed"—so that includes the other physical senses—"and in what is cognized, the mental realm, there is only what is cognized. That is all."

That's all. It's so simple we can't stand it.

So you're out walking and somebody goes by looking really fast and spaced out and unhappy. And immediately you think, "Huh, I'm not doing so bad. I'm really feeling my sensations here." Now already we didn't notice what actually happened there. Seeing—seeing is all that was happening. Seeing, then a perception of a person. That was the perception: person walking quickly, looking unhappy. Then comparing arose in the mind. "I'm doing better than that person." And comparing is one of the big energies that gets papañca going.

So from that basic seeing, pretty soon you've become a high lama in Dharamsala. The Dalai Lama is consulting you about how to relate to the Chinese. This might have taken thirty seconds. Memories of all the past things in your life that really went well are coming up.

Selective memory, selective perception. You just notice all the things that feed that particular sense of self, and it feels like, "Yeah, that's who I am. That's true."

And then the next moment you trip over some cholla. You think, "God, am I unmindful or what? I'm really incredibly arrogant and conceited. Maybe that person was walking fast, but at least they probably knew what they were doing. Here I am making a fool of myself, stumbling over the cholla." It reminds you of fifth grade when they sent you to the remedial gym class. "I can't even walk properly. And that's showing up in the way I do the walking, just as it shows up in how I do the meditation and everything else."

This is in a five-minute period. Selective memory, selective perception—that other stuff didn't really happen. All those positive things, they didn't happen. That was just warped arrogance and conceit. And this feels really true.

Then five minutes later, the lunch bell rings. Both of those are forgotten. There's just hunger sensations and moving. "I have to wash the pots. I hope they didn't make a mess today in the kitchen." And now "I'm the pot washer."

Without examining it, we would say all of that was a steady stream of me, I, my self-story. But it's completely changing. There's not some solidity there. Each is a use of thoughts running off of perception and creating a description. It could be a viewer opinion or a description of the world that's unquestioned when we don't bring our attention back to what's really happening in this moment.

It's so fascinating to watch this once you just tune into it—how any basic sense experience can be the cause for a whole construction of a view and story of self. Just hearing the rain on the roof the other day, I could have gone back to my whole childhood and the smell of the desert and the sense of being cozy in a hurricane, and on and on.

Five minutes later, you can do this consciously sometimes—play. Take the same sense data. Bring up a memory or a feeling. Let the thoughts run. Notice how the emotion congruent with that story will come up and be real. "Oh, I feel so cozy. I had such a nice childhood. Isn't it lovely, all of the sangha here together in this room, the rain on the roof?"

And then switch it. "It's cold. It's so bleak. It's just how my heart feels—bleak and cold and barren like the desert. And here we are, 150 of us not speaking, not looking at each other." And you get so incredibly depressed you want to run out of here screaming.

The feelings, the emotions are just as real. The thoughts are thoughts. It's not like one is more true than the other, not necessarily. So you cannot think you have to believe either one. But like Pema Chödrön said, just maybe make this much space—maybe this is an opinion, a description, a view.

Even our really painful stories that come from our experiences in life—you know, they explain, like the story Jack told last night about the little girl whose father left her. There's always the possibility there's

another explanation. The same so-called facts could have a different story, a different explanation. We may or may not ever know the right one. But just holding the possibility that the thought construction isn't so solid opens up a potential for enormous freedom in our lives in the moment.

One of the ways we can play with that is back to the advice to Bāhiya: to come into our basic experience in any particular moment. Really see what is it that's actually happening right now. You don't have to understand it.

You don't have to have the whole story. You don't even have to name the emotion. You're walking in the desert, you're in that story, you're feeling like you're totally worthless. In the seen, there's only the seen. What's actually true right now? It might be sensations in the foot or the body. It might be smell. It might be hearing. It might be thinking. Thinking is true, but that doesn't mean the content is true.

It's like Munindraji used to always say: a thought of your mother is not your mother. It's a thought. There's a big difference there. So the thought might be "I'm completely worthless." It's a thought. That might be what's true in the moment—that there's a thought arising. Or a taste. Or an emotion.

But to have that radical simplicity that the Buddha was talking about to Bāhiya—that we are willing to just let go of our attachment to the construct and drop into whatever's presenting itself as sense data, as perception in this moment—that is, in that moment, a potential for enormous spaciousness and freedom.

It doesn't mean we can't use our concepts, our thoughts, our psychological understanding. We can use them when we don't have to be gripped around them. We say, "Well, maybe this is right. Let's try it on." Sort of like scientists with a hypothesis. They try it on until some data comes in that doesn't match it. And then they go, "Oh, maybe that wasn't correct"—if they're good scientists.

So we're doing the same thing. Instead of freezing it and saying, "Now I've got it," we recognize: we've never got it. We keep meeting new data in every single moment. That's the radical simplicity of this practice.

When I say this can open us to enormous freedom, I imagine everyone here must have had some moments of that during this retreat. We often don't notice them—where you're not particularly spinning out some big description. It might be there, but you're not really caught in it. And there's just what's happening. Maybe you caught a whiff of the creosote walking through the desert and it's just the smell. It's just so pure. Or just a sensation when you're walking. Or the taste of the tea. Or the sound of a bird. Or the smoothness of the breath. Or a moment of sadness. Just a moment of sadness. Or a thought going through the sky of your mind. "Ah, it's just a thought."

The simplicity of pure presence without all the falderal that we add on top of it—the layers that hide the basic experience.

Of course, not every moment is going to be, "Oh, just seeing, smelling, thinking, tasting. No constructions

whatsoever." We're still functioning. Sometimes people think, "Well, if that's all there is, how can I do anything? How can I work?"

How can I find my way home again? What we're doing is trying to let go of some of the glue that keeps us suffering, and then we can use the concepts. As James used to always quote Ram Dass: "Know your zip code." We know our zip code, but we don't think we *are* our zip code. Who are you? "I'm 01005." Who are you? It's the same with all of our mental constructions.

So when we talk about wise attention, it's being able to take that advice to Bahiya and know just what's happening—to come to rest in that, as opposed to jumping into and buying all the interpretation. And it's really interesting to watch when we don't do that.

I'll describe an experience I had, because it's fascinating to me to watch the mind do this. I was sitting once, and I'd had bronchitis a couple of times in the past year. The first couple of times I didn't really do anything about it and got really sick. So I was on a long retreat, pretty calm, and I was just being with bare perception. I started to realize I was noting: tickle, tickle, tickle, tickle, cough, tickle, cloudy, cloudy, heavy, heavy. Then the thought arose: "Oh my God, I've got bronchitis." And I was like—whoosh—into this total panic. What am I going to do? I'm on retreat. No, no, no. I've got all this work I have to do. I have to teach all these retreats. I can't afford to be sick. The retreat's about—I was just gone.

Luckily, I'd been sitting a while. I had some presence, and I said, "Oh yeah, I think this is panic." Okay, what's happening right now? Panic. Feel the sensations. Oh, yeah—tickle, tickle, cough, cough, tickle, tickle. And it was just gone with that. Then I watched the mind choose to go back into panic. Let me just get into the whole story of what might happen. Oh my God, I've got bronchitis.

Ajahn Buddhadasa has an expression he uses in a different context: volunteering for suffering. I felt that's what my mind was doing. I could stay with bare experience, but who wants to suffer? Me. Let's go into this story. Oh my God, I've got bronchitis.

Coming back over and over, after a while it was so much more obvious. There's peace in this. It doesn't deny that it was bronchitis. It didn't keep me from recognizing it and acting appropriately. The difference between just being with the sensation and the panic is that in the panic, I wasn't actually with the experience of the bare sense data. I was with the thoughts and the construction and the future and the past, drawing up all the selective memory—not with awareness. That was the truth of things.

So once I could come back and just be with the bare experience—okay, this really feels exactly like it felt a year ago. I think if I go to the doctor and get an antibiotic, that'll keep me from getting really sick. I'll do that. I did, and I got fine, and I didn't get really sick. So it doesn't keep us from acting intelligently. In fact, we act *more* intelligently, because I could have seen myself running around for days—oh my God, I've got bronchitis—and not really doing anything with any intelligence.

I think of this a lot: volunteering for suffering. Being willing to meet experience with that radical

simplicity the Buddha spoke to Bahiya takes a trust that actually, out of that, the appropriate response can arise. We have a better chance of recognizing what's actually happening when we're really turning around and meeting the experience, as opposed to constructing all our thoughts and imaginations and fears about it.

And there can be—often people say, when we talk about thought and attachment to views and descriptions as our self-identity, and people just approach the possibility of looking at that without taking it for granted, recognizing that it's just a story, that it's really as simple as the Buddha spoke to Bahiya—there can actually be a sense of, "I don't want it to be that way." Almost a sense of going back to that shaky ground, back to that death and transformation moment by moment, back to that wanting someplace to recognize ourselves.

But there is an ongoing natural letting go as we pay attention—not this letting go that we say is letting go but is really pushing away, throwing away, pretending something isn't happening. That's not letting go.

That's aversion. True letting go is when something really just falls away without will. We simply let go of the holding.

Throughout my whole practice, I've seen stories of Carol—levels of self-identification, aspects of personality, memories of who I thought I was. As I begin to see that they're nothing concrete, that they're nothing that isn't changing, the sense of identification with these different levels starts to go, little by little. And sometimes it really can feel like a little death.

I remember times in retreat where I would—okay, I was amping it up a little bit, some of it was the story of Carol, you know, letting go of her personality. But there really can be a feeling of, "Oh, that part of who I thought I was is going away." Really, it's not going away. It was never really there. But what's happening is we're seeing through what we thought was there. It feels like aspects of our personality, our self-story, are going away. And it's okay to feel a little sad about that.

I remember times in retreat where I would do a little puja, a little acknowledgment of, "Okay, that part of Carol's story might have to go now. And I feel like I'm going to miss it." But you know what? When it's really gone, we don't miss it. Because any construction of thoughts that we're holding to creates a sense of solidity, and actual fear comes from wanting to hold on to that. When we can truly let the construction go, we're not left in some nihilistic nothingness. It opens us up—it's the doorway to recognizing our vastness. It's a little bit what Wes was talking about in his talk the other night, seeing that we are nature.

As John Muir once said, "I find that if I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe." Anything. The twitch of an eyelid. A feeling of helplessness. The sound of a bird. The sadness at some idea of some part of my personality going away. The judgment that I shouldn't feel that sadness.

When we meet it, like the Buddha said to Bahiya, with that radical simplicity, we find that rather than nihilistic nothingness, it's our avenue into recognizing our vastness—that we are connected, we are part of

everything in the universe. And when we're resting even in that moment of simplicity, like when you just heard the bird, just the vividness of that. Or the smell of the creosote, or the sunset. Not all the stories about sunset, just the seeing. Or the tea. Or the sadness.

When there's just that—that moment of total presence—that's our opening into real peace. That's our resting place. Not the thing itself, because that's definitely going to change in the next moment. But that ability to bring awareness to whatever comes in its place—that's where we begin to find our real resting place.

And out of that, we find not this kind of indifference—"it doesn't matter what thoughts come and go, nothing matters, nobody matters, it's all just empty." Rather, from that place of connectedness, kind attention naturally expresses itself. Our connectedness manifests in actions of generosity, love, and compassion. It's just natural. In that place of nothing to protect, no construction to hold onto, of openness, we're open to really seeing what's true. And the natural expression of that is to feel, to know, and to act from the compassion and love that comes from knowing our interconnectedness.

I'm going to close by reading a poem that I really love because it expresses this to me—this sense of recoiling from something we don't like, something that doesn't meet our ideas or the way we want things to be. And how just the quality of bringing our attention to what is opens up the vastness of the universe in this one experience, and the experience of love and compassion.

This is by Mary Oliver:

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.
Disgust argued in my stomach,
and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.
A poem should always have birds in it,
kingfishers say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees,
a waterfall, or if that's not possible,
a fountain rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.
When the woman turned, I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together
and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled.
What kind of nonsense is this?

Everybody needs a job. Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem, but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She is washing the tops of airport ashtrays as big as hubcaps with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life. And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course it isn't.

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

Let's just sit quietly for a minute.

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