Views & Opinions

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:44

I'd like to talk about letting go of knowledge, or attachment to views and opinions.

I notice, talking to people and in myself, how easily this happens. Perhaps at this point in the retreat it starts to become more noticeable. We begin to think of practice differently—maybe we're beginning to get it that practice isn't about a quest for experience. We sort of get it. We keep trying, but we hear it enough.

What I find it turns to, for me after that, is a quest for knowledge, a quest for understanding. We want to get it and have it and hold on to it and have somewhere really solid to stand with this knowledge. And guess what? We suffer. We suffer.

Maybe it's wanting to understand the teachings. I know for me, for years I was practicing thinking I would attain some specific set of knowledge that somehow I could think it or have it. It would explain everything. And that would be the endpoint. Finished. Got it. Now I don't have to keep doing this anymore. It would explain impermanence. It would explain non-self. It would explain the whole show. Ultimate truth in two sentences. I don't know what I thought.

But sometimes if it's not that, then we want knowledge about the technique, or how to be a perfect mindfulness machine, or what exactly one should do in every particular moment of practice in every particular situation. Have the list, pull it out: "Okay, when the breath is like this and the noting's like this, then I should do that." And we forget—we really forget, or we don't like to remember—that practice takes us in just the opposite direction from thinking we're going to attain some knowledge. It's actually taking us into the ability to live in the mystery, in the fact that we don't have a clue. And that's okay.

When it's not okay that we don't have a clue what's going to happen in the next moment, then there's a lot of suffering. We try to limit and control that through our knowledge, and practice can become another quest for it.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: "Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking." If you could just take that in, it would really save a lot of grief. Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. Understanding is the result of a long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding. But we keep trying.

I want to talk about one of the ways we easily get trapped in rigid and limiting thoughts, and that's when the thoughts form a description, a view, an opinion of anything—and we get attached to it. Rigid and limiting. That attachment really limits what we know, limits what we think we know, limits what we look for. We can only experience what's within the realm of what we might be looking for based on what we

know. Anything else is either outside the realm of what should be happening, or we don't even let it in. Our lives become so constricted. Our minds and hearts are so constricted.

We go on and on about beginner's mind—that whole phrase: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few." But somehow we all want to be experts.

When we can really just look at what's presenting itself without our preconceptions—which is the whole of mindfulness practice—then what we discover over and over is the wonder of ourselves, of life, the mystery. And it's not fearsome. It's invigorating. It's amazing.

Someone was showing me a PBS science special. I think it was about something modest, like the creation of the universe. But it was very serious science. The only thing I remember from it is that they were saying, based on the theory of the Big Bang—that the universe as we know it all began as one massive explosion—that all the molecules in each of our bodies at one time came from the stars, because that's how everything started.

To think that all my molecules were once in a star kind of takes away any sense of ownership, doesn't it? It's all a mystery.

I have to read this. I've read it many times before, but it's just my perfect description of how the closer we look, the more we see we don't know. This is also a science article from The New York Times a few years ago, so maybe it's outdated—again about astronomy. They were announcing that astronomers had discovered the largest galaxy ever. It includes 100 trillion stars. 100 trillion. And it's more than 6 million light years in diameter—more than 60 times bigger than our galaxy, the Milky Way. You didn't know we owned a galaxy, did you? Sixty times bigger than our galaxy.

Now, this new galaxy, the biggest one ever discovered, is in the middle of an even larger clump—a clump of 1,000 galaxies called Abel 2029. But then comes the interesting part; that's only the buildup. The interesting part is that they hope that by studying what lets all this clumping happen in the universe, all these galaxies clumping together, why the universe is bunchy, they'll discover the role played by a mysterious substance called dark matter.

This means that there doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the huge gravitational forces that would seem necessary to cause all this clumping. So scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to the prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe consists of this invisible missing mass. This is serious science. This is not a joke. Ninety-nine percent consists of some invisible missing mass. And we think we know what's going on.

But so often in our practice, in our explorations, when we look, it's not so comfortable—this hanging out and absolutely not knowing, not having a place to rest. Our practice is a moment-to-moment opening into this unknown, as Kamala talked about a bit last night. It takes an enormous trust and confidence.

But one of the things our mind does as a way of countering this "who knows what's going on" is to contract and congeal around explanations, thoughts, views, and opinions, somehow thinking that's giving us security. We think we know, but that idea we are attached to without realizing it actually forms a veil over our perceptions, over the way we relate to our experience. And far from providing safety or security, it's like living in a prison.

I was thinking recently that it feels to me like living, trying to live within the realm of my views and opinions, my understandings of who I am in the world, is like living in two dimensions when three are available. You know Krishnamurti's famous saying: freedom from the known. It's really that. The known keeps us in a prison of our own devising. The possibilities are so vast, but if we limit them to what we can already think of, that's pretty puny. What about the other 99%?

So, grasping attachment to views and opinions. The Buddha considered this an extremely important area of investigation. When he speaks about the pain of grasping attachment, craving is that leaning towards, and grasping is when it hardens into "Aha, gotcha." He talked about four fields of grasping. One is sense pleasures. The second is views and opinions—and he talked about it a lot, how it limits possibilities, how it keeps us in bondage. I'm not going to talk about the others because somebody else is going to talk about them. Don't worry, you'll hear.

When we're attached to a view, it's really just a thought. The way they describe it in the commentaries is as a thought with the tendency of mind to think "this alone is true, everything else is false." Now, I wish my mind would think that when I'm attached to an opinion, because then at least I would know what was going on. But I think it's much more insidious when we don't even recognize it's an opinion—when we really do think, "Yeah, this is how it is."

I want to talk about some different ways we do that. It's obvious in the world, if we look at other people, how they get really attached to ideas, and how much suffering exists in this world through really clinging to views and opinions. Massive suffering. When you think of the famine in North Korea, which apparently is as bad or worse than ever, and how much of that could have been avoided, could continue to be avoided, if the government didn't have particular

Opinions of how they looked at themselves, how they wanted to present themselves to the world, how they think about the rest of the world—not allowing aid in, not allowing other people, not even admitting there's a famine going on. Unbelievable. But it happens all the time. Or politics—need we even mention?

What attachment to a view does, and this is what's really interesting, is that we see the world ourselves often through that veil, to the extent that we don't even consciously let in information or perceptions that challenge that particular opinion or view. We just completely dismiss them out of hand. We can see that in politics all the time. It's more interesting to see it in ourselves.

I can watch myself with particular American politicians who I just can't even stand to listen to. There's no

chance they could say anything worthwhile. And if they do, they're obviously insincere. There's no way my mind wants to let it in that certain people—who will remain unnamed—could have anything useful to be adding to the way this country is being run. And I see that—I don't let anything else in.

I read somewhere that in 1988, the Soviet Union—well, it wasn't the Soviet Union anymore—but the authorities canceled history exams because they said that the national heritage had become lost among the lies and official secrets of the past. Nobody had learned the real history, I guess, so they couldn't give exams on it. At least they admitted it. It's not like that doesn't go on here.

So in those ways, it's obvious pretty much when we look out there how really insidious and dangerous attachment to views can be. But look in our own behavior and in smaller areas. What do we think? We don't think it's a view—we think it's true. It's not really open to challenge. And how much anger and fearfulness really comes up when our view is challenged.

Work meditation, if you work with a team, that's a really good place. How things should be done. Or living with somebody. How the house should be kept. How cooking should be done. How the dishes should be done. How the chores should be divided up. Little things. Or food—what is healthy and appropriate food? Now that's a huge area of dissension.

And even looking in ourselves, can we find the place where we can acknowledge, okay, some of it's preference, but this is the line where I know this is true, and everyone else is sadly confused? It's also relative, but if we can even let that in, we're making a first step. Can we even think, maybe this is an opinion? Maybe this isn't true? It's hard.

And so often—just the other day, I said something to someone about a particular situation. I was absolutely convinced I was correct. There was no question in my mind. It was something that was checkable, you know, like a fact. So I went and checked it. I was totally wrong. Totally. There was no crossing of what I said and what was true. I was totally convinced. How often do we do that?

This is from Pema Chödrön: "Opinions are opinions, nothing more or less. We can begin to notice them and label them as opinions just as we label thoughts as thoughts." Opinions are also thoughts, by the way. "Just 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. To have even a few seconds of doubt about the solidity and absolute truth of our own opinions, just to begin to see that we do have opinions, introduces us to the possibility of egolessness." We don't have to make the opinions go away. That's important. We don't have to make them go away, and we don't have to criticize ourselves for having them.

We could just notice what we say to ourselves and see how so much of it is just our particular take on reality—which may or may not be shared by other people. Just to let in that possibility cracks the solidity of what we perceive and think our world is.

And that's the point. We don't like it to crack, really, and so we hold on tight. But it's also relative—seeing how much of our opinions, our views, how we really look at ourselves and the world comes from our conditioning: our family, our culture, our heritage, the particular education we had, the environment we grew up in. All of that forms our take, how we actually perceive the world. And yet we still take our opinions as so solid.

Just a funny example I experienced this summer—a little one about how strong the belief in "how things are" can be, and how it can be cultural. Again, it's about food. I was in Switzerland teaching a retreat. I go there a lot. And for some reason, my two friends Fred and Ursula, whom I was teaching with, got into this joke of singing this little Swiss ditty to me. I apologize to my Swiss friends—I know that my translation won't do justice to this—but it's something from their childhood, something about, "We're so happy living in the mountains," and it would end with—and this is what would crack us up—"We have butter and cheese, and that gives us good blood."

So this is serious, you know, and they're hiking till they're ninety. Well, if you're from this culture, or this segment of this culture, somewhat cholesterol-obsessed I would say, I cannot hear that. "We have butter and cheese and that gives us good blood"—I get cross-sections of arteries clogged with cholesterol. I think, "Yeah, really good blood." Could I even say, okay, it works for them? I can't be hiking up and down the mountain like they are. Something's working. But just to see the difference—it's views, it's opinions.

So it's fine when we can recognize we're holding an opinion, a description. What about when we can't? What about when someone tells us something, or some piece of information comes in that's so outside of our realm? Can we just hold open the possibility, or do we just forget it? "Forget it, that can't be true"—even if it's your own experience.

Again, my friend Fred was telling me about a Tibetan teacher of his who was teaching a whole group of Western students some time ago. He was going on and on about this really intricate description of the Pure Land, where Amitabha Buddha hangs out in one of the Deva realms. He was going on and on—the color of the walls, what it looked like. Finally he stops and looks at the Westerners, who were becoming more and more like, "Yeah, right, buddy." And he says, "If you think I'm making it up, I've been there." What do you do with that?

So it's really to look at: what are you holding as absolute truth? What's not open to discussion? It probably won't even come to mind right away because we take it so much for granted. But when it's challenged, when perceptions arise that don't fit—we're on shaky ground, and we don't like it. It's fearful. Often we get angry. Dispute comes up, or frustration.

This is one of my favorite quotations from the Buddha: "For one who is free from views, there are no ties. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no follies. But those who grasp after views and philosophical opinions, they wander about in the world annoying people." You can relate, huh? But which side are you relating from?

Okay, now I'm getting serious. I want to talk a minute about where a thought and a view, a description of reality, arises from in the beginning of a moment. Because remember, everything's moment to moment. And it really begins with perception. Perception, as Steve talked about, is one of the five skandhas. Perception is that quality when there's sense contact—it's that quality of recognition based in memory. So when seeing, I know that's a human being, I know that's a rug, I know it's red—that's perception.

The Dalai Lama once said that all of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there is so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge. Mistaken perception.

This is a very fascinating area of exploration, especially when you're sitting as you are now, when you're quiet, because there's a little more space to explore this. This recognition faculty, one of the five skandhas, arises with every sense contact. And it's not always accurate. It's not always correct. The memory, the recognition, occurs through the veil of whatever mental states happen to be present at the moment, whatever mental factors are there. If we're not aware of that coloring, the perception can be a little bit off—or completely wrong.

And we don't know that. From that recognition, we build an association and a memory and a liking and a disliking and a sense of self, and on and on and on—we're way down the road. When we talk about papañca, this proliferation of thoughts and ideas and associations, that's where it starts, right at that point of perception.

Let me give you a couple of examples of how perception can be inaccurate. You know how this happens—many people have reported this—they're just in a grumpy mood, and you don't recognize it at first. Then after a while you notice that everything happening and every person who crosses your view, there's something wrong with them. And suddenly you get it: "Oh, I see. There's aversion coloring my perception of everything."

There's a way that we can literally, literally think we see something that isn't there. I remember one time I was in the hospital and quite, you know, you get kind of out of it. This nurse would always wake me up around five in the morning to weigh me. She came in the first day when I was in a kind of altered state—not drugged exactly, but just a little out of it—and I literally perceived her as somewhat demonic, kind of evil. That's really how she looked to me, not quite like a normal human being. And of course I responded in an appropriate fashion, which I felt terrible about the next day when this same lady—a nice, kind of timid-looking lady—came to wake me up to weigh me, and it was just a regular nice-looking nurse. The mental state really colors the perception.

Now, one that we often don't recognize is delusion. A lot of people have been saying, "I don't ever see delusion." Well, that's its nature—you don't recognize what's going on. I've noticed in myself that there can be a perception, a sound or a sight, and basically you don't know what it is. You don't have all the information. But the mind doesn't like that, so it makes something up. Something similar, something close. And until we can come back and really recognize—"Oh, that sound wasn't really a bomb going off, it was

the radiator"—until we recognize that, we can go a long way down the road on this inaccurate perception.

One woman told me this summer—she had a lot of self-hatred and a lot of aversion, and she was really working with it in her practice and in her daily life. She said she noticed that when she'd come to work, one of her co-workers, a man, would come in frowning. Immediately she'd think he was frowning at her because he didn't like her. She'd get angry back, and she'd start going through her mind, kind of clicking through: "What have I done? What's he reacting to now?" This whole thing would get built up.

Through her continued practice, she really started to recognize: "Oh, he's frowning. I actually have no idea why. Maybe he had a fight with his wife. Maybe his shoes are too tight. I don't know." But she had been seeing his frown through the perception of her own worthlessness, her self-hatred—not just thinking maybe he didn't like her, but totally convinced that the frown was because he really disliked her. Totally convinced. And if you tried to talk her out of it, forget it.

How often do we do that? And we don't know it. That's holding a particular view, a construction of thought based on perception.

Can we just hold open the possibility? Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I don't actually know this.

It's not easy. It's not easy to do that. Because when we're not recognizing that the perception is inaccurate—which generally we don't—and the whole train of papañca, the stories, the views, the descriptions that are built on it, follows naturally, it's hard to hold open the possibility of doubt. We're saying, "No, no, this is just how it is." We don't even question.

Attachment to views really freezes our experience.

As the Buddha said, attachment to views brings us into conflict with others, but it also brings us into conflict within ourselves. When we're caught in an opinion, a construction like that, we tend to deny perceptions that don't fit our description. And because the experience is happening anyway, we find ourselves in this state of internal conflict.

A wonderful place to explore this is in how you're relating to your meditation practice. See if you notice, should it happen, that you form any views or opinions about what good practice is. Should you notice that arising in your mind, assume, please, that it's a view—no matter what you think good practice is. But really start to look and see.

We're lucky as teachers because we get to talk to so many different people. We really hear it all. Somebody will walk in and say the exact opposite of the person before, and both are really invested in their view. "This is what good practice is. My samādhi is no good because things are coming and going so quickly." The next person comes in and says, "My practice is no good because I'm not seeing beginnings and endings of things." Someone else comes in and says, "My practice is no good because I'm having so many emotions." And the next person goes, "What's the matter with me? I'm so shallow. I'm stuffing everything.

I'm not having a lot of emotions."

And it just goes on and on. A really common one involves whatever "good mindfulness" means to someone—choiceless awareness, being in the flow. "Now I've finally hit deep practice. And this thing that starts to happen, this is in the way of my deep practice. Somehow I've got to fix it, get rid of it, be mindful, because if I'm really mindful, it'll go away. Then I can go back to my deep practice." Whatever that means.

The question periods in the morning are a rich field for this. Or anything we say in instructions. You notice how you'll hear the particular instruction or question that fits into your view. "I knew I wasn't doing it right. I knew I don't know what the heck I'm doing here all this time." Or if it's a person you've formed some view about based on the fact that they walk faster than you, you say, "Oh well, they don't know what they're talking about anyway, so it doesn't matter what they say."

Just watch this stuff. We suffer from it so much, and we don't let in that things are changing all the time.

Here's an example of how much we cannot let it in. Once in a retreat—I was teaching a short retreat with a lot of beginners who'd never sat before—about the fifth day, a woman in an interview, maybe in her fifties or sixties, on her first retreat ever, came to me and said kind of sheepishly that she had been basically killing herself, sitting cross-legged in the proper lotus position every sitting, in excruciating pain. It was just awful. That was her whole retreat—the resistance and reaction to this self-torture. Because that's how you have to meditate.

It was the fifth day when she looked around and said, "Wait a minute, Carol's in a chair." It's really amazing. Maybe—and she was still sort of checking it out with me—maybe you could meditate in a chair.

We build some whole construction around a view, cling to it, and then suffer enormously. We compare everything that happens in our practice to this view of what it's supposed to be. It's unbearable, isn't it? But we keep on doing it.

And that's how doubt gets going. "Wait a minute. Good practice is like XYZ, but mine is like this. How can this fit into that? Or how can I change this to make that? Or maybe that's not really good practice. Maybe I have to change my view." That's doubt masquerading as analytical thinking. It does masquerade as analytical thinking.

Try to imagine having no view whatsoever of good practice. Know nothing. Not "this is good practice" and "this is bad practice." Can you imagine just starting the walking or starting the sitting with no opinion whatsoever of what should happen? Just let it rip. It doesn't matter what comes and goes. It doesn't matter how you pay attention. It doesn't matter what it looks like.

It's just all happening. It's such a relief. But it's so hard to do. It's so hard to do.

When I say attachment to views freezes experience, at first it doesn't recognize impermanence. Because how can any one thing or two things be good practice? Conditions are changing constantly. How can we

hold on to any idea as "this is always good practice"? It doesn't recognize impermanence. It doesn't recognize conditionality. It binds us in a box instead of letting us just open with vitality into whatever arises.

But it's still so kind of basic scary. We still would prefer, often, the security of some explanation or some idea or some knowledge than just, "Oh yeah, I have no idea what good practice is and I'm just practicing 100% and who cares what happens?" It's hard. We're more comfortable wanting an unchanging reference point. Even if it means we're constantly comparing ourselves detrimentally against that unchanging reference point, we'd rather have it than not.

The Buddha said once, "The desire for resting is burning. Not to need it, not to need a resting point, is cool and peaceful. Let one, calm and independent, not desire any resting place." Just not desire any resting place. It's lovely.

Now, the sense of inaccurate perception or misperception, and the descriptions, the views, the whole story that comes out of it—the basic core of our suffering, the basic misperception that comes and goes all the time, that's at the core of our wrong view, of our confusion—is the misperception that leads to the idea that we are a separate, unchanging, self-contained being.

It's not like it's some stupid, wrong idea. It's not like there's some ego we have to dig out and blast apart and break into little pieces. All we need to do is keep bringing our attention to what's actually happening. With that clear seeing of mindfulness, we begin to see through the misperception. But again, we need to have just that willingness to say, "Maybe the way I know it is isn't really that way." Just allowing that possibility.

You know the anthropologist Oliver Sacks, who does a lot of work with different people with different neurological conditions? He has this one article about a man who, I think at the time he was four or five, went blind. And in his forties they did an operation that could bring him back partial sight. And the thinking was, "Wow, he's going to be so happy. He can finally see."

And the experience was so other than that. Because when they finally took off the bandages, everyone's standing around, "Oh, great! What do you see?" Well, he saw, but nothing made any sense. Just blur. And he said something—he heard a voice and he turned his head and said, "Well, that must be a face," because he knew voices came out of faces. But it didn't look like a face that made any sense to him the way it would to those of us born with sight.

And in fact, his whole world, which he was actually doing fine in as a blind person—his main sense of getting around was through touch, and the world made sense to him that way—it really never got so it made good sense to him through sight. In fact, it was anxiety-producing and stressful. And in times when it got really hard, he would just close his eyes so he didn't have to see. He could go back to shaving or eating or everything through touch, which was more relaxed.

But it just goes to show how we think about how we see things. We don't question that it's just a perception that may or may not have much to do with what's really there. What about the other 99% we can't see?

My father recently, in the last year, has been having a lot of eye operations. And about a year ago, in order to save the retina, they rotated one of his retinas 40 degrees—and not the other one, which he couldn't see too well out of anyway. So what that meant was that he went around from this eye seeing everything as if it was at a 40-degree slant, while from this eye it was more straight up.

So as you can see, it's just the mechanism of how our eyes are that helps us see, and then memory. It's not like, "Oh yes, everything is really the way we see it." But you can imagine how unsettling that would be, to see everything at a 40-degree slant. The idea being that the brain would gradually overcome the way the eye was and see everything straight, even though that wasn't how the information was coming in. That was the theory. He's still waiting. It's getting closer, but it's been a year, and it still isn't quite there. It's very, very unsettling.

So that's just an example of something that just seems so given, so obvious, and it's not necessarily the way we perceive it.

It's the same with us, with our body, with our feelings, with our emotions. When Steve was talking about identification with the body, we might begin by exploring what we are even calling "the body." It feels solid. This feels like the same body I had three years ago—doesn't look the same though, does it? Feels like the same body we had when we were five. Sure doesn't look the same.

And if we really begin just noticing what happens in our meditation without always referencing it to this idea—"this is my solid body"—a lot of people report times when there are perceptual distortions of the body, or there's no sense of body at all, or the body is just sensations coming and going in space. Sometimes we like it, sometimes we don't like it. Then it goes back to being solid.

Do you think, as you were sitting there, your body really completely dissolved and no one could see you and there were just little dancing molecules in space, and then you came back together again? The perceptions are just changing. It's scary when we want our world solid again. But when we can just let go into that—oh great, fine, dancing sensations. Oh great, fine, solid concrete. Oh great, fine, body of light. Oh great, fine, heavy pressure in the head. Just whatever it is, without always referencing it to some solid idea.

Technically it's said, and it really seems true, that our sense of continuity—of the body being solid—is because things are coming and going so quickly that we don't see the gaps. As the mind gets more concentrated and refined in awareness, there are times where that solidity of perception begins to break down. And then it goes away again. But just to open to the possibility that things aren't the way we assume they are in us, as us.

And just as with the body, so too with the sense of ourselves as thought, as emotion. Watch your thoughts. I know when I look at mine, even going through a retreat, how often we're telling our self-story through experience as it's going on. And unquestioned, uninvestigated, it feels like the same self-story. The story is different, but it's the same self. But if you really look, it's just as discontinuous as the physical. In fact, you can even notice it more in a way.

What I notice happening is that from any particular sense experience—hearing, seeing, thinking—there's a perception, and from that an association, a memory, a liking, another feeling, and like this, a whole self-story. And like any construction of thought, any opinion, we use selective perception to tell that particular self-story, not really getting it that the next story five minutes later could be totally the opposite. And it can start from any little sense experience.

I'll give you some examples. They're just so obvious. Hearing the rain. Hearing, hearing. Now, it could stop right there. And in fact, there's a wonderful sutta of the Buddha called the *Bāhiya Sutta*—talking to Bāhiya of the Bark-cloth, who is begging him for a quick five-minute explanation of everything that will awaken him. And as so often happens, it did.

The Buddha says—it's classically translated as "in the seen, there is just the seen." Let me give you this translation. It's from Buddhadāsa, but translated into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu, a friend of ours. This is basically the Bāhiya Sutta put in a little more accessible language:

"O Bāhiya, whenever you see a form, let there be just the seeing. Whenever you hear a sound, let there be just the hearing. When you smell an odor, let there be just the smelling. When you taste a flavor, let there be just the tasting. When a thought arises, let it be just a natural phenomenon arising in the mind. When you practice like this, there will be no self, no 'I.' When there is no self, there will be no running that way and no coming this way and no stopping anywhere"—the stopping, you know, when we try to stop everything to get secure. "That is the end of dukkha."

So any sense experience—hearing the rain—and in the hearing, let there be just the hearing. It's so simple.

It's radical, and we can't stand it. We can't stand to let it be just hearing. It has to be hearing—oh yes, the rain, it's so cozy to stay in bed on a rainy day. My childhood and poignancy and how I felt as a child and me, I'm so solid—and a whole mood of nostalgia arises, all of this in a tenth of a second of hearing.

But where would we be without our stories?

So there's a kind of hearing, and the nostalgia goes into sadness, goes into loneliness. Here I am on a gray November day looking out at those dreary pine trees, and everyone in my family is off doing what they're doing, and I'm so alone here—and on and on it goes. Only sad, lonely memories and perceptions make it through the veil. Well, maybe I better go walk. We go walk. I'm so sad. I'm so lonely. I've always been like this. I always will be.

Then something happens—someone drops a cup, you get distracted—and you go back to lifting, moving, placing. Lifting, moving, placing. Oh yes, really present, really here, really clear. This is really just all there is. Lifting, moving, placing. It's so freeing.

And then we go off somewhere else. Even if you don't go off, there's just the sense of *me* lifting, moving, placing. Then we start thinking about what a good yogi we are, how much we love this, and we're going to sign up for the next three-month course. And then—oh God, I'm thinking again. I'm hopeless. I can't do this. Then we remember all the times we failed at things, and we think all of that is some kind of continuous self going on.

But it's nothing but isolating a particular sense contact, perception—whether it's the hearing, whether it's a particular feeling in your body, whether it's a particular thought of sadness or a feeling of pleasantness as you're lifting your foot, whether it's a self-judgment when you notice you're thinking again. That could just be noted as "thinking, thinking." It doesn't have to go into "I can't do this." Whichever particular idea we grasp at, it becomes who we are. Unexamined, that feels solid and continuous. And it's all nothing but opinions and thoughts and associations arising from some sense contact.

There was a line from Lily Tomlin that I really like. She said, "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific."

So inquire into this—the perception and the sense contact. Notice how when we're in a particular description of who we are, there's selective perception going on. We don't want to let in the perceptions, the memories, the experiences that don't fit that description. Just to notice this begins to break up the sense of solidity of who we are. But it also breaks up our illusion of security. And so sometimes that can be a little scary, a little shaky. It's sort of like if you've ever been in an earthquake—it's so unsettling, especially when the aftershocks keep coming, because somewhere we think the earth should be dependable. It's not supposed to move like that.

Coming back to Bahiya: in the hearing is just the hearing, in the thinking is just the thinking, in the feeling is just the feeling. As Nyoshō Kempō says, get out of the construction business. Just stay simple and easy with what's arising. We don't need to add to it.

The Buddha was so radical, because he goes on to include even views of his teaching, views of practice. Any description of the truth, at some point, has to be let go. You know the famous simile of the raft, where the teachings are the raft you build to get to the other shore, but when you get there, you don't carry the raft on your shoulder. Any of the opinions, the descriptions, the interpretations that we're holding to—they might be helpful for a while. Ideas about practice, senses of who we are. Sometimes when we get a new psychological insight into our past and why we have been doing things, that can be really helpful. And then at some point, holding on to it becomes a burden. It gets in the way, and we really have to let it go. Even the Buddhist teachings—and definitely any view or opinion about ourselves or who we are.

Any view or opinion. There's not some view you can kind of keep in reserve. The Buddha says there is no view of self we can take refuge in that will not cause anxiety, exhaustion, sorrow, and suffering. Those are powerful words. We try to take refuge in some solid sense of self, to have some sense of resting there. But remember, it's that desire for resting that's burning. *Let one, cool and independent, not desire any resting place.* It's our holding on to explanations and opinions that keeps us locked in a limited life, a limited potential of reality, of who we are. It keeps us living on the surface, as it were. It's like a cage.

And it's scary to let go of it because we want something better to grab onto. This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj, talking about the mental habits of longing for the known past and fearing the unknown future. You know, we want to know what the future holds, if it's better than the past. He says, "But when you know these are habits of the mind only, they're just habits, you can go beyond them. As long as you have all sorts of ideas about yourself, you know yourself through the mist of these ideas. To know yourself as you truly are, give up all ideas. You cannot imagine the taste of pure water. You can only discover it by abandoning all flavorings."

So it feels scary to abandon all flavorings, to abandon all ideas, because we want to know what it's going to be. But we can't. And as scary as it might seem, when we actually put down that burden of trying to control the uncontrollable, it's such a relief. Instead of living in fear and contraction, we can just open with all our vitality to be fully alive in the present. Because it's true—we never know what's going to happen in the next moment. It could be boring. It could be incredible. It could be horrific. But trying to control that doesn't work anyway.

We really never know. It was brought home to me this summer, again in Switzerland. The first full day of the retreat, one of our friends got a phone call that her mother, who was young and quite vigorous, had had a terrible accident. She'd fallen down some stairs, broken vertebrae in her neck, completely paralyzed. And it didn't look like they could do anything. Just from one moment to the next. Of course we all know this, but it takes really coming up against it to feel it fully. We don't know.

Now hearing that, it's easy to contract in fear. *Oh my God, I'm afraid to put down my foot in the next moment. What will happen?* But it's been this way anyway. That's not some new piece of information. And when we just realize, "Yeah, I don't know," then we can live with a vitality that releases us from this prison of our minds.

We can be like the mountain monkeys some friends told me about at Mount Arunachala—the sacred mountain of Ramana Maharshi in southern India. I was there last winter, and some friends of mine would climb up to the top real early in the morning, like three a.m. Just as the mist would clear and you could see, there were monkeys. There are monkeys that live down below, but the ones up on the top are a little different. These mountain monkeys, on this very stony terrain with lots of rocks and some little bushes, would be holding on somewhere and then completely let go and catapult themselves out into the air—as if they could fly. Either complete reckless abandon or total trust. My friend said they always did land again,

on a rock or on a bush somewhere. They never just launched out and crashed all the way down three thousand feet. They always landed somewhere. But they didn't sit there thinking, "I'll aim over there." They just threw themselves out.

That kind of perfect trust, opening into the moment—that's what we're practicing. That's what mindfulness practice really is. And if we think we know where we're going, then we can't see where we are. We'll never know the truth. But as we begin to just open in that way, life becomes so much richer, so much deeper, and we can actually be open to the possibility of living in a whole different way from how we've been living, relating to who we think we are in a whole different way. We never have existed in the way we may have believed.

Nothing changes except the way we perceive ourselves. It's like coming home.

Let's close with this poem by Rilke:

I live my life in widening circles
that reach out across the world.
I may not complete this last one,
but I give myself to it.
I circle around God,
around the primordial tower.
I've been circling for thousands of years,
and I still don't know.
Am I a falcon, a storm, or a great song?

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