Nature of Insight

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:13

For those who don't know me, my name is Carol Wilson. I'm the fifth of these five second string teachers, the second half. Tonight I want to talk about the process of insight and supports for that process to arise.

So this insight, this Vipassana, is usually translated as insight meditation. What is insight, actually, anyway? We come looking for insight, obviously, or we wouldn't put ourselves through this. We eagerly, impatiently await its arising. What is it? It's easy to have some idea or to think of insight as a certain state of mind, something we can produce or hang on to. But the nearest I could come in my experience to describing true insight is a shift of perception—spontaneous, out of our control. We just suddenly have that "aha," and we see something in a different way. The situation itself doesn't actually change, but the effect of that momentary shift of perception can have quite a radical effect on the way that we relate, a whole range from very little to really huge.

A good metaphor—not complete, of course, as metaphors are not, but a good one—for the way insight works in our Dharma understanding is those magic eye photos. They have some kind of geometric designs and colors, and when you look at it, it's nothing in particular. But if you look at it long enough and unfocus your eyes in just the right way, some magic 3D picture of dinosaurs, for example, springs out from the background. And once you see it, in that moment of seeing it, it's like, "Wow, dinosaurs! How could that be there in just these orange and blue triangles?" And then it's gone. Your eyes focus again and you start thinking about it, or you look away, and it's just the triangles again.

But the seeing of that has an effect, right? Even though it's momentary, it's shifted something radically. You know there's another way of perceiving that same geometric picture. You know something else is possible, even though you can't hold on to it. And if someone were to come to you and say, "No, you're out of your mind, there are no dinosaurs in that picture"—or you know how sometimes you meet someone who cannot see it? My mother is like that. She cannot see it, and it drives her crazy. Everyone's going, "Wow, dinosaurs! Spaceships!" And she's saying, "I want to see it." The tighter you get, the more you look for it—and of course, that sounds familiar, doesn't it? Forget about it. You're not going to see anything.

The seeing of it makes the next seeing a little easier. That momentary shift of perception doesn't stay with us, but it exerts an influence on the way that we meet the next similar experience. So you get the drift, right? You get the metaphor, how that works for insights in our life, as well as in our meditation practices, as well as in our Dharma understanding.

The insight isn't of thought. We can't hold onto it. Yet the fact of our perception having shifted exerts an influence on our mind stream, on our memory, on our readiness to hold a more open sense of possibility

in the next moment, in the next experience. We're never quite so fixed on thinking we know this is how it is. We're never quite so fixed. We could be pretty fixed—but there's a little teensy weensy nubbin of change that might slip in there. And that's only about seeing dinosaurs. When it comes to our life, actually, it's much more radical.

Obviously insight doesn't have to be dharmic—seeing dinosaurs or suddenly approaching a mathematical problem in a different way, seeing a different aspect of our personality, or having problems with somebody and suddenly realizing, "Oh, maybe that's what they meant." It's the same process. It changes everything.

What makes it dharmic? The type of insight we are looking for—although we'll tell you not to look for it—but the type of insight we find ourselves looking for here is the type that deals with the nature of suffering and the ending of suffering. It's the kind of shift in perception that takes us out of our lifelong habit of creating and perpetuating suffering by the way we relate to experience. Because we're perceiving ourselves, each other, the nature of life, in a way that isn't completely accurate. And often we don't even know. We not only don't know it's not accurate, half the time we don't actually know how we're perceiving or the kind of box that we're putting our experience in. The insights that arise in our practice are the kind that let us really move outside of that box, relate to ourselves and one another and life in a different way.

The Buddha said that he teaches suffering and the end of suffering. All of our practice, all of the teachings, the meditation, any so-called meditation experience, whatever goes on here—all of it is in the service of understanding suffering and experiencing moment by moment for ourselves the possibility of the ending of suffering. Or as the Buddha described it, the supreme state of sublime peace that has been discovered by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging.

Non-clinging and basic awareness, totality of open connected presence—these to me are really the two sides of the same thing, really at the heart of what allows any moment of pure insight to arise.

So the insights that we talk about, the momentary experiences that allow us to open and trust that we and life are not as we thought—these are at the heart of our practice. And it's from this that we really begin to experience, to trust the fact that the freedom, the peace, the happiness that the Buddha spoke of, that we can at moments experience, isn't about fixing ourselves or achieving a certain mind state or changing our inner or outer experience. It's really about that shift of perception that changes our attitude on deeper and more lasting levels.

I'll give you what I think is a good example. A woman at a retreat this summer shared with me that she was having a lot of very restless, physically uncomfortable sittings. I had told her that one thing you can do when it's that kind of restlessness, when you want to just run screaming out of the hall, is before you do that, to stand up. Just as we say stand up for sleepiness, stand up with restlessness.

So she was standing up and thinking, "This is horrible, this is so unpleasant, this is a waste of time, I can't stand it, I'm going to run out of the hall screaming." And this went on for some time. Then suddenly, just standing there feeling restless, restless, restless, for whatever reason, there was a moment of letting go of that story, and the shift came. "Oh, so this is just physically uncomfortable. Restlessness. So what? What's the problem? It's just physical, unpleasant, restless sensations."

And that—you can get the difference between having that thought, which does absolutely nothing useful, and the real insight, the perception of, "Oh yeah, this is just physical dukkha, so what?" In that moment, there was no problem. She was still physically restless and uncomfortable, but the sense of this being a problem was gone. That's a moment of the ending of suffering. As we know, it only lasts a moment. But that is, to me, a really good example of the power of insight and how it comes about.

From that moment that she described of seeing, "Oh, it's just physical unpleasant experience, so what?"—suffering falls away. We can extrapolate from that any number of the profound teachings of the Buddha. We could say that really points to the Four Noble Truths, and I could give a whole talk about the suffering, the craving, the ending of suffering, the path to the ending of suffering. We can see how it points to the three characteristics of impermanence, of suffering, of no-self. We can see how you can get the whole dependent origination—the relationship to pleasant and unpleasant feeling giving rise to clinging, giving rise to a sense of grasping, giving rise to a sense of being, of suffering—from a little experience like that.

All of that can be very useful, very helpful. It might be the way one thinks about that experience afterwards. But none of that is the insight itself. The insight itself is that wordless "ah." And I'm not putting down using the concepts, the constructs of the Buddha's teaching or other concepts or constructs that are useful to us to help us understand in a conceptual way, because that's one of our tools. But it's not the insight. The insight is that wordless, non-conceptual shift of the way we see and understand and experience. And it can change everything.

Now, the problem, which I'm sure you've run into, is that we can't control this process arising when we would like it to arise. I don't know if you've ever sat down or walked and said, "I really want to have an insight into impermanence now." Or, "This week I'm going to work on anatta. I really want to see anatta." Or, "This whole retreat, in fact, will be my anatta retreat." Usually that's a sign that anything else but that is going to be what comes up.

It's totally out of our control. The insight arises spontaneously, and it, of course, passes spontaneously. So, for example, that woman standing with her restlessness—probably, luckily for her, the bell rang and ended the sitting, because I would really have been surprised if she said that sense of freedom in relationship to the unpleasantness persisted for forty-five complete minutes. The insight's there. It's real. It exerts an influence in our mind stream. We know things can also be otherwise than they seem. But we can't hold on to it.

The concepts help us remember. If we could stop there it would be fine, but then they help us try to make it happen again, and then we're back in suffering because we're not in open awareness at all. We're in striving.

The factors I want to drill in—and they're not new—about the arising of insight are these qualities: what we've been talking about as sati, mindfulness, the open totality of presence without assumptions, without expectations, without judgments. And this pure presence in the moment is only possible when there is non-clinging of heart, of mind. Obviously, the two go together.

Now, you can have non-clinging and not have totality of presence. We can have non-clinging and be completely zoned out. That's also possible. So non-clinging also has to have non-delusion, some sense of wakefulness, totality of presence along with it. It's these two, minimally, that are helpful.

When there is a moment where there's the clear totality of connected awareness and non-clinging—sometimes the non-clinging is obvious, you know, not clinging to wanting the restlessness to go away, not clinging to wanting the weather to be different. But sometimes the clinging that's happening in that moment is much more subtle—to an idea, a description we have of ourselves or reality that might not even be a conscious thought. For us in that moment to be able to recognize in a different way, just as in the magic eye when we can suddenly recognize the dinosaurs behind there, there has to be that moment of non-clinging to the tight focus. But in that moment, you also can't be looking for the dinosaurs or looking for impermanence. There has to be that total steadiness of purpose and connectedness and the letting go of any particular.

When the clinging that has to be let go of in a moment is to an object, to a thought, it's easier to know what I'm talking about, so I'll give that as a first example.

Take the weather. I've been here most of the first six weeks. Those of you who just arrived today, this isn't going to help you to know, but it's been really lovely. Warm, one of the warmest Octobers I can remember. And suddenly, what was it, yesterday or the day before, literally between the morning and the afternoon, the temperature dropped twenty-five degrees. It was quite amazing.

If that doesn't bother you, you're lucky. You have something else to let go of. But if you find, as I do—I'm very sensitive to cold—doing walking or being outside, and not even obsessively, but just a little bit, that pulling back, that aversion to the coldness, that little subtle feeling: "Oh, so nice when it was warm. My practice was so much better. I could walk outside in this open, relaxed space without this contraction." This contraction of body leads to contraction of mind and contraction of heart. How are you supposed to do really open, spacious practice inside in the dark when you're all contracted and all these people are stomping around all over? It's impossible.

And it is possible to really attribute the suffering to the fact that the weather changed. It's possible to be lost in that for quite some time—or to the fact that different people are doing different things than the

other people were doing four days ago. We finally got used to the other people's stuff, and now we have to start over again. And it works both ways, I want you to know. The people that just arrived have to get used to your stuff too. It goes both ways.

Anyway, I got a little sidetracked. I haven't been sitting for six weeks. You'll have to excuse me. Soon I'll get to the concentration part. Maybe that'll bring it in.

One could really be thinking one is working quite mindfully, but there's just this little clinging to it: it would be better if it was warm again. And the moment when there's simply the willingness to bring the open attention without pre-assumption to the sensations of contraction, to the coldness, to whatever it is—in that moment of mindfulness, there isn't clinging. There's just letting go into what is, and suddenly, "Oh yeah, right, unpleasant sensation again." And that shifts the whole sense of the problem. A new problem will arise, no doubt, but that particular one is seen through.

It might not be the big "aha" you're waiting for to end all sense of self, but it is an insight. It is a shift of perception that in that moment is the end of that suffering. There was really a letting go and a clear connection to just what was happening, free of extra interpretation.

And of course, this kind of shift of perception is not dependent on being in a meditation retreat. It's not dependent on continuity of mindfulness and concentration. But what is so helpful about the meditation process, and about doing it with the commitment and steadiness and intensity with which we do it here—

is that it allows us to begin to see through some of the inaccurate—and some downright wrong and confused—perceptions that overlay our moment-to-moment experience. These perceptions are either so fast or so subtle or so continuous, and we're so used to them, that we really don't notice them without a steadiness and continuity of mindful awareness and letting go.

The clarity, the stillness of the concentration, the moment-to-moment nature of the mindfulness, and the power of the moment-to-moment doingness allow us at times to begin to see through certain ideas—they might be personal ideas that you've held about yourself. You don't even put it in words: "This is my personality. I could never do XYZ. I could never really experience pure loving-kindness. Maybe anattā is true for everybody else, but for me it's not, and I'll never be able to know that." Whatever it might be—certain views of who I am, how things are, that we don't even know we're holding.

Without the steadiness and subtlety of the meditation, it's very difficult to begin to notice that, to experience that momentary shift of perception. We're so fixed on how we think things are that it doesn't even allow perceptions in sometimes that are outside of the framework, outside of the box. We don't even know there's a box—we think this is all there is.

Fred actually told me a great story in this vein this summer. I'm not completely sure it's true, but it's a great story and it illustrates the point. He was talking about Captain Cook—when Captain Cook's ships, the tall-masted ships, first sailed into harbor. He wasn't clear on which harbor it was, whether it was Australia

or one of the Polynesian islands. But he said when the ships first sailed into the bay, there were many native peoples on the beach. And so the assumption of what they saw is based on the native people's behavior: that these weird, tall things sailed into the harbor, and there was absolutely no acknowledgment whatsoever that anything was there, that anything had happened. The people just kept going on completely about their everyday business.

You might have thought, well, they're just not very curious, they just don't care. But the assumption was that really it was because that was such a bizarre thing, outside of any range of experience that could be imagined, that they didn't even notice. Because as soon as the tall ships lowered their little rowboats and people got in and started rowing towards the shore—that fit into their experience, because the native peoples had boats and rowing. And so as soon as that started, they went nuts. They started running around and going wild and dropped what they were doing and ran down to the beach and started bringing gifts and rowing out to see the people rowing in.

It's really the sense that something we already know, we recognize, we know how to respond to—that fits into our world. But something so completely outside of what we've known or ever imagined, we can at times effectively not even perceive it. It's just not even happening. And we don't even know we're doing it. If someone told you, you'd think they were the nut.

That's really what's so fascinating to me in the whole process of perception—coming to discover through the meditation process that there are many, many different ways of perceiving the reality that we call mind and body, that we call this world. And who's to say this is the right one, that is the wrong one? After a while you realize you can't really grasp at any of them. "I think this is right"—I'm just shutting out other possibilities, and that's where we suffer.

When the Buddha spoke about wrong view, *diṭṭhi*, to me it's literal: wrong view. We're really perceiving in an inaccurate, incomplete way and completely grasping and constructing ourselves from that inaccurate understanding.

We can't decide from what we know what we should be looking for. If we could just extrapolate that into our meditation practice, think how much suffering we'd be saved. If you could just imagine not having an idea of what really good concentration is that you have to try and live up to, and just feel the breath—my God, what a relief that is when we can do that. Or if you have some idea or an experience—"Oh, this is open, flowing awareness. Now I know what it's supposed to be like"—it all slams shut again in that moment. Any idea of what emptiness is, of what enlightenment is, of what I'm looking for, immediately slams the box shut.

Krishnamurti's famous expression, "freedom from the known"—that's really what insight is. For that moment we're completely freed from any clinging to known thoughts, perceptions, ideas, and we're present with openness to discover, present with appreciation for the mystery. Really not even thinking, just with that openness that has no clue what's going to arise in the next moment, or what we're going to

think about it, or what it means about me as a human being. Just that presence and openness to discover. It's really quite a wonderful way to live, to practice.

In many ways I find the function of our meditation to stay quite classical with the three aspects of mindfulness, wise effort, and *samādhi*—collectedness, focus, steadiness of mind. The cultivation of these qualities of our presence is in the service of allowing this total presence without expectation, without any clinging to views, to opinions, to constructs. This makes possible the opening into another way of being, another way of living, another way of perceiving ourselves altogether—a way that is ultimately much more joyful and freeing than the little boxes of suffering that we seem to write and think ourselves into.

And I know that's what goes on in a meditation retreat. Someone was saying today—and I've often had this thought myself—how amazing it is that just coming back to feeling your breath, just coming back to feeling your footsteps, just coming back to sensations in your body, it seems quite a lot of the time rather mundane, not very esoteric, not very profound. And then there'll be a period where we're just seeing all these different things about what's going on, on different levels, and it's so amazing. And you think, how can that come about? Just from following my breath? Just from feeling pressure, pressure, pressure, and suddenly I'm seeing these subtle chains of cause and effect in my behavior that I never saw before.

Like someone was saying—just walking and suddenly realizing, feeling a little sensation of coldness, the unpleasantness of that, and seeing how immediately the mind was saying, "Oh, it's cold, it's unpleasant, I'm going to quit walking and go have some tea." And how before, we would have done that with no clue why we stopped walking. The memory of the last moment before that was really happy, really present, and suddenly we can't stand it and we're in the dining room having tea.

How did I get there? And you know, this isn't the first time in our life that that particular string of events has happened. And suddenly we see it. Oh! It's just a momentary reaction to unpleasant sensation. Wow, that's fascinating. And that comes about from the cultivation of the moment-to-moment mindfulness that develops into concentration, steadiness, collectedness of mind.

The classical description, of course, of the insights that tend to arise over and over again—the insights that cut through our unthinking, normal way of experiencing our life—are the three characteristics, which I'm sure you know: that of impermanence, the ceaseless changing nature of all experience; the characteristic of dukkha, or the unsatisfactory, unreliable nature of all phenomenal experience, including ourselves; which brings us to the third characteristic, that there is no permanent, reliable experience whatsoever that I can point to, hold on to, or think of as me or mine. Nothing whatsoever.

I want to use impermanence as I go on as an example, because I think it's a good illustration of the difference between conceptual understanding and insight. Impermanence, I think, is worth exploring in that way because conceptually, of those three characteristics, impermanence is rather accessible on a conceptual level, no? It makes sense. You usually don't have to explain much to people about impermanence, whereas when we talk about anatta, that just opens the floodgates. But

impermanence—most of us can conceptually say, "Yeah, I can see that. That's true."

And then we go about our lives, as we know, as if nothing that we like is ever going to change, including ourselves, including our moods—just completely overlooking the constant impermanence, which if someone came and asked us about, we'd completely agree with. Yes, everything's impermanent. But there will be times here, of course, more and more, when the fact of constant change isn't a concept but a real experience. It's a real sense of insight. And in those moments of insight, you're not fighting it. It isn't really scary. There's that sense of, "Right, what's the problem? Everything's changing." We let go of the struggle, and there's a real sense of harmony, of ease, of being with things as they are—an ending of the struggle in that moment. I'm sure you all know that experience.

What's interesting is how often—not always, but often—immediately afterward, or very soon afterward, when the insight has again changed, we have the memory of it, but it's not our living experience anymore. And in fact, it can have a feeling of dissonance. You know what I mean? Where you've been so in the flow, and suddenly everything's frozen solid again. Either you're clinging to something, or something unpleasant is happening, and instead of just letting it flow, you're really struggling against it. The fact that you knew a minute ago everything was changing just adds to the sense of suffering. And there's a whole struggle, a whole sense of dissonance, the friction between our actual experience and the clung-to, perceived idea of how the world is.

A great deal of the time, we might find ourselves in more or less subtle forms of this dissonance. And it can manifest in different ways. Sometimes the dissonance is that things are changing and we're clinging—we don't want it to go, and we're suffering. Other times it's that we remember that everything was changing, and we can't get there again. Then there's dissonance: "I know it's really wonderful that everything's changing, but actually I'm suffering like heck because I can't let go into it." The sense of dissonance arises because we know in one way, but we don't really quite get the strength and subtleties of the views that are keeping us bound, the views we are actually holding to.

So just using impermanence as an example—and this is all without judgment, this is just the nature of our life in these bodies on this planet—we keep getting tripped up on clinging to these ways of experiencing that don't quite match how things are. Because, for example, if impermanence is a characteristic, a fact of life, doesn't that mean it's always true? Not just when we perceive it, but always. And it doesn't mean that when we suddenly have an insight into impermanence, now things have changed—that before they weren't impermanent, but now they are. Or anatta, which is more likely to confuse us. It's not that once you have an insight into anatta there's no "I," but before there was. It's just seeing how things are in another way. But things have always been that way. We're just seeing it—like the dinosaurs. They're not only there or not there; it's just how we perceive.

So go, just taking impermanence as you go through tonight, as you go through the next couple of days, really without judging—or if you judge, just notice it, note it. Not as a way to make yourself wrong, but

really out of interest. Notice all the times that the mind and the heart clench when something changes, as if it shouldn't change. All the times that we really are coming from the place of, "No, things aren't impermanent."

In practice, you know, forget about it. As soon as it gets nice—and what is nice? That's different depending on your mood anyway. But this change over days, it's really interesting. Not for everybody, but for a lot of us, one way or another, it's just settling in, just getting in the groove, just getting to this peaceful place, and now there's all this aversion, there's all this thinking, there's all this emotion, there's all this whatever. Or I had my little walking path and now that person's on it, and I know it shouldn't matter, but boy does it. And on and on and on.

Underneath that, in some way, is this sense: "I lost it. I had it, and now I lost it." I did something wrong—or more like, IMS did something wrong by even allowing this to happen. It's their fault that my meditation is now ruined. "I lost it." Underneath that, we're somewhere thinking, "I hit the right place at which I'm going to cruise from now on," even though it doesn't last for more than a second. If you really look at some experience you're having in meditation that you think is really far out and great and "now this is it"—really look. How long does it stay the same, really stay the same? I'm willing to bet not much more than a second. Maybe it gets better, but it doesn't stay the same.

So every time you find yourself thinking it should have been like that, or trying to get back to how it was, or trying to move ahead to something you've heard or something you think is about to happen—every time you find yourself starting to feel disgruntled because it's nighttime and your energy dropped, because the weather changed and your mind got fuzzy along with the day, every time you find yourself thinking you know what's going to happen in the next moment—we're clinging to the idea of permanence.

It's more amazing that this stuff happens the way we think. That I'll talk for another ten minutes or so, and then I'll ring the bell, and then you'll get up and go walking, and then the bell will ring—maybe, if someone signed up. And then you'll come back in here and sit again. The fact that sometimes that stuff does happen lulls us into complacency. But really, we have no clue that there'll even be a next moment, never mind that we know what's going to happen in it.

And every time we notice that somehow we're taking for granted, somehow we're resisting change—in that moment, we're denying the truth of impermanence. In that moment, we're coming to look for rest in an unspoken, unclear idea of permanence.

That's the function, that's the role of mindfulness and concentration. We don't have to think, "I will now see through the idea of permanence." You know, forget about that. But the steadiness and the open-heartedness of mindfulness, and the concentration, the collectedness of mind that develops through continuity of mindfulness—this allows the truth to reveal itself, if we stop looking but remain willing to really be present.

From Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Discovery cannot come as long as you cling to the familiar. As long as you have all sorts of ideas about yourself, you know yourself only through the mist of these ideas. To know yourself as you are, give up all ideas. You cannot imagine the taste of pure water. You can only discover it by abandoning all flavorings."

So we can't even sit down and say, "I need to abandon the cherry flavoring," because we don't even know it's there. We don't know what flavorings are there. And we won't know, "Oh, now I've gotten to pure water, I can stop paying attention." We won't know that either. But it's that willingness to bring that open-hearted totality of presence that allows the truth to reveal itself on more refined and more subtle levels, moment to moment to moment.

So that's the quality of mindfulness, as you know, all of you—and I know the ones who've been here the first six weeks have heard a lot about it. This connected presence that's completely free in that moment of clinging or aversion, of judgments, of assumptions, of preconceptions—that allows us to just recognize what is as it is. "Oh, okay," without a lot of hullabaloo about it.

As an example, reading from the Buddha in the Satipatthana Sutta, as you know, he speaks about areas—just a way of dividing up experience so we can talk about it—areas to bring awareness to: the body, the feeling tone (that pleasant, unpleasant, neutral quality), the mind (the colorings, the flavorings of mind, the mental states), and then all the contents of mind.

Just to read from a moment from the third foundation, citta, the mind, the mental states—an example of how just knowing what is, without anything extra:

"When one's mind is desiring, one is aware the mind is desiring. When one's mind is not desiring, one is aware my mind is not desiring. When one's mind is hating something, one is aware my mind is hating. When there is not hatred in the mind, one is aware there is not hatred in the mind."

Now, do you hear anything in there about saying, "My mind is hating, which is proof of what a worthless, useless meditator I am"?

I don't read that either. "My mind is not hating—I finally surmounted all aversion and I'm about to move into the deva realm of compassionate loving-kindness." No, I don't hear that.

Simply moment to moment: hating is present, hating is not present. The mind is contracted, the mind is expansive. Finished. Just notice it, let it be, and notice when it changes. Why is that so impossible for us? That's the quality of mindfulness. And that's what allows us to notice, "Oh wow, I'm putting this cherry flavoring on, and it really doesn't need it."

Dudjom Rinpoche, describing mindfulness to a room full of Westerners, said it's that state you're in when you wake up in the morning in a strange motel in a strange city, and for a moment you don't know where you are. Just no clue. Your mind is empty of information and chit-chat, and you just sit there—alert, at

ease, and full of wonder. This sounds nice, doesn't it? Next time you come in and sit down, just sit down with your mind empty of chit-chat, alert, at ease, and full of wonder. No matter what comes up: alert, at ease, and full of wonder. That moment-to-moment mindfulness brings a kind of freshness, this openness to discovery that really does bring a sense of wonder.

My favorite story that conveys to me this sense of openness and wonder, this willingness to meet a situation freshly, comes from when I was in Germany. There was a documentary on television about Yo-Yo Ma, the famous classical cellist. Just the other day I heard a piece on NPR about how he had forgotten his cello in a cab on the way to a concert at Carnegie Hall or something—it's a two million dollar cello. Luckily he got it back. But this is just to let you know: he took this cello of his, and it's not nothing, and got on a little bush plane and went to visit a tribe in the Kalahari desert in Africa. He's really into comparing music across cultures.

In the documentary, he gets out with his cello and he's with this tribe of the bush people, and he asks through a translator for the main musicians. An old man comes and brings his instrument. Yo-Yo Ma seems like a really nice guy, and he's all excited. He sits down with this old bush musician to swap songs and play their instruments.

Now this man's instrument was literally a round empty oil can with a wooden stake that made a handle, and a couple of strings that went up off a little stand on it. That was it. He would pluck it or play it with a stick, but mostly he just plucked it and sang. We could hear that, and I couldn't approach it with anything like the openness that Yo-Yo Ma brought to it. I saw it, the guy was plucking it, and it sounded to me, with my tin ear, like an oil can with a couple of strings coming out of it. Plong, plong, plong. But Yo-Yo Ma—he was so happy. He goes, "Wow, that's incredible!"

After listening to the man sing and play, Yo-Yo Ma would play something, and then he says, "Let's trade instruments." He trades instruments with the guy, totally open, and the man is sawing away on this two million dollar cello. Yo-Yo Ma's plunking on the thing, saying, "I can't play this nearly as well as he can. He really makes beautiful sounds come out of it." Gives it back to him and has him play and sing some more. Totally heartfelt. It was really beautiful.

I think of that a lot in my life. It's easy to bring a kind of cynicism or "I know what this is about" to life, to experience, certainly to another sitting, to the breath, to lifting the foot, to that crunching pain in the lower abdomen that God knows I've experienced more than enough. Can we bring that quality of newness, openness to discovery? It's the first time. What a different way to live. That's the quality of mindfulness. Sure, we'll lose it. But I just think of Yo-Yo Ma, and for a moment it opens up my heart, my mind again. You're there fresh. And moment by moment is all we've got anyway. So meet this moment fresh.

That's the mindfulness piece—the continuity of mindfulness. I do assume that's been mentioned once or twice in the first six weeks. Once, years ago, a friend of mine who must have sat four three-month retreats

came to me after about the fourth one and said, "Wow, you guys were really stressing continuity."

I never remembered hearing that before. So I just thought I'd check. It's another example of selective perception, and we don't know when we're doing it. That's what's so interesting.

Anyway, the continuity of mindfulness is extremely important, both because it's what allows the steadiness, the concentration, the unification of mind and attention to develop, and also because the steadiness of mindfulness is what reveals impermanence. Lack of continuity hides impermanence. Have you noticed that?

I'll give examples, but the steadiness, the continuity—mindfulness moment after moment, not just when we like it, not just when we think something's worth paying attention to—that's the biggest trap. Because the things that aren't worth paying attention to are the things that are going to reveal a lot about life and ourselves.

The continuity matters because one moment informs the next. One moment of rage makes it a lot easier to be angry the next moment. One moment of metta makes the next moment of metta a lot easier. Same with mindfulness. One moment of open, wondrous presence makes us much more likely to be in the same space in the next moment.

This leads to a stability of attention. The kind of concentration we're cultivating here—khanika samadhi, momentary concentration—the objects may always be changing. We start with the breath or with hearing or with body, but at times there's sensation, sensation, the breath, hearing, sensation, thought—things changing, but there's a steadiness of meeting each experience where the mind isn't fluttering, it's not distracted by the pleasant or unpleasant, it's just there with what is. That's a real depth of unification, non-distractedness of mind and heart.

That in itself—have you noticed how satisfying it is? Nothing special may be going on, but just that undistracted quality of presence is really quite lovely, peaceful. It is just this rest from running all over the place in the mind. So that steadiness, the moment after moment after moment, allows the concentration of samadhi to develop. And this is what allows for the recognition, that shift of perception that's insight—to see our experience in a different way.

Using impermanence again as an example: lack of continuity hides impermanence. When we pay attention only to what we think is interesting, when it's strong enough to call us or we're simply caught in it, we tend to notice both the mind states we really like and are attached to—concentration, joy, feeling so high, so peaceful—and also the ones we don't like: the heaviness, the self-judging, the sadness. And there's a real tendency to think, when you're in a grief space or a self-judging space, "I've just been so self-judging all day" or "I've been grief-stricken all day" or "I've been dull and sleepy for the last three and a half weeks." That's selective perception again. There isn't just moment after moment of one thing.

I've noticed, even in the depths of really intense grief—the kind that feels like you're completely sucked

into a pit of grief—if I stay really present, somewhere in there my mind is going, "Is that pizza? I wonder if we're having pizza for lunch. I wonder if there's dessert." And then, "Oh my God, this grief is just too much to bear." Without the continuity, the undiscriminating quality of mindfulness, we just cut out that little piece. And then we think, "I am so filled with grief. It's steady, it's solid."

If you keep working with continuity, there is no way you can go on thinking that everything is permanent. There is no way. All we see is more and more how fast things are changing, whether we like it or not.

Another way the qualities we cultivate in meditation help us is not only through the steadiness, but through the depth of concentration that lets us begin to perceive experience on subtler levels than when we're really busy, when our mind is distracted. Again, to use the example someone gave in an interview: just walking, feeling really great about it, noticing a couple of moments of unpleasant cold sensation, and the mind saying, "Okay, I'm going to go have some tea." That's very fast. It's quite subtle. Without the concentration that can notice the rapidity of mind and body sensations coming and going, we wouldn't catch that cause and effect. We'd just be having the tea and not quite sure how we got there.

Or the times in practice when you're feeling quite present and focused, and the sensations in the body start to seem to come faster and faster, and there are moments when there is no real perception of a solid body at all. And it's as real as feeling solid right now. In that way, you really see for that moment: it's true. There's nothing solid. There is no body. There is no me. There are only sensations arising and passing in space, like points of light. And then we go into a whole thing and we're solid again.

But in that moment, that's absolutely the truth. It's a truth that's usually not accessible to us as a perception without the steadiness of mindfulness and concentration.

And if that's not your experience, let me also hasten to say, that doesn't last either. It's one of those perceptions that lets us know, "Oh, things aren't the way I always thought." And it changes something. We're not so fixed. But that perception also doesn't last. And the next moment, or the next week, or the next year, everything is really solid and you can't get back to that other perception.

But it doesn't really matter. You never really perceive so solidly again. Just opening that space of don't-know in the heart, in the mind, allows us to bring that freshness—like Yo-Yo Ma—allows the possibility to really, deeply perceive in another way altogether. And the more often we recognize a moment—"Ah, it really isn't what I thought. I'm really not the way I thought I am"—those are the moments that can change everything. You don't have to hold on to them. It's just that totality of presence, complete non-clinging in a moment, that allows the truth to present itself.

That, to me, is the whole point of our practice. And then, of course, we can't hold on to that either. Just this moment.

I want to close with this quotation from the late Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche:

Buddha nature, the essence of awakened enlightenment itself, is present in everyone. It cannot be improved upon. It cannot be changed or degenerated. Those who recognize their true nature are enlightened. Those who ignore or overlook it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and ordinary beings, and this is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives.

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