Attachment to Views

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:47

When I said earlier that I really liked asking opinions from fifty people, that's actually what I want to talk about tonight—the not-so-subtle tendency of mind.

Tonight is Passover, and in the staff dining room, we had a little mini, very reduced Seder, reduced from four hours to ten minutes. But that's okay. And me not being Jewish, it's really nice to hear the metaphorical explanation that it's really a celebration of coming out of bondage into liberation, and thinking of that not in the past, but as our heritage, as what we are doing right now in this moment—coming out of bondage into freedom, to liberation.

So tonight I'd like to talk about one way that without wisdom, without understanding what's happening in the moment, we relate to experience in a way that keeps us suffering, that keeps us in bondage—and how by a simple shift of perception, the whole relationship changes. What I want to talk about is basically centered around this experience we call thinking. I don't know if you've noticed how much power that experience can have, but that's what I want to talk about tonight.

At this point in the retreat, a little over halfway through, it's pretty common for a yogi, a meditator, to find yourself at times in a sort of self-assessment. How am I doing? Has this been a complete waste of time? Am I getting anywhere? Am I making progress? What have I learned? And most of this assessment comes in the form of thinking, doesn't it? Comparing how our experience meets some ideal we've read about or heard about or just made up ourselves. And you'd be surprised how much we're just making it up ourselves.

In the realm of thought, a lot of our practice, a lot of our spiritual journey can become about acquiring knowledge. If we get some particular set of knowledge—whether it's philosophical, whether it's understanding how to do the meditation so that you know the correct response in every situation—then we'll know. We'll be free.

For years—I hate to say how many years—my practice was really, I held in the back of my mind some idea that finally on one retreat (and I always thought it would be this retreat), I would suddenly acquire the particular piece of knowledge that explained everything. And then I would understand it all. Everything would make sense, all the paradox, all the mystery, and then I would be able to rest. Forget all this hard work and this confusion that gets going in the mind and trying to put it all together. Now I know. I understand. I have the knowledge.

I guess you know what I'm leading up to: the fact that it doesn't work this way. Actually, the more we

bring our attention into experience, the less hard and fast knowledge there is to hold onto. It's really about a willingness to open into the total mystery, the vastness of not knowing.

So I'll read my favorite scientific article, which I think serves as a perfect metaphor for what we really begin to discover as we inquire into our mind and body moment-to-moment experience. This is from the New York Times a few years ago about cosmology. It says, "One of the great unanswered questions of cosmology is why the universe is lumpy instead of smooth." I know you've been worrying about that in these days. Lumpy meaning why things cluster together instead of being evenly spaced out in the universe.

So these scientists discovered, in pursuit of understanding this, the largest galaxy ever detected. That galaxy has 100 trillion stars in it and is more than 6 million light years in diameter. That's big. It's sixty times bigger than the Milky Way, which they call the Earth's own galaxy. You didn't know that we, as Earthlings, own a galaxy, but we do—the Milky Way.

But this new galaxy, this huge one, is located in the center of an even larger clump of 1,000 galaxies. And this giant clump of galaxies is called by the poetic name of Abel 2029.

But that's just leading up to all this investigation to try and understand what all this matter is doing. The scientists still can't understand what holds all these galaxies together. There doesn't appear to be enough ordinary matter in the universe to account for the gravitational forces that cause all these galaxies to clump together like this. So scientists propose the existence of vast amounts of invisible matter that eludes detection because it emits no radiation. According to prevailing wisdom, 99% of the universe is made up of this missing, invisible matter. What's generally thought of as astronomy actually concerns only a tiny subset of particles that happen to be detectable by human nervous systems.

Now I think that's a very good metaphor for our practice. The willingness to simply bring our attention to what we can observe, to meet it as clearly as possible. Sure, we'll have ideas about it, things we want to understand, interpretations—but can we put that aside and simply open into the mystery and let this experience in this moment reveal itself? All too often the answer to that question is no. But what we're learning is that it's possible.

When we talk about beginner's mind—Suzuki Roshi's fantastic phrase that we've all been using—it's really this: to bring to each moment of experience a quality of attention that is free from preconception. When we meet just a moment of life in this way, rather than saying, "Oh, I know what this is. This is the desert. This is a bell. That's Anna. What do I know about Anna? I think I know Anna because I've known her for years"—can we bring a freshness instead? We don't really know anything, absolutely. And when we can open with this wonder, life is so mysterious. Everything is so... it just brings such an aliveness, such a presence, such a connectedness.

If I look out over the desert there, just walking up here, I think, how can I think I know anything? It's so

mysterious. And then when we think we know, the mind snaps shut. But this isn't normally the way we live.

One of the things I've noticed in thirty years I've spent really observing this mind and body closely is that our mind tends often not to be so comfortable with meeting every moment with this openness of "who knows?" We like to know, don't we? Do you really like thinking you're here, really working hard for ten days, and you're going to get absolutely no confirmation whatsoever whether it was worthwhile or not? Does that sit well with the mind? We like to have some sense of stability, some sense of security, of knowing where we are in comparison to yesterday and tomorrow. And I want to know where I am in comparison to Anna and Philip—we're constantly comparing. Am I better? Am I worse? Am I equal? Always wanting to have this sense of security.

The Buddha said one time, this desire for a resting place is burning in the heart and mind. Not to need a resting place is cool and peaceful. But to us, the sense of no resting place can be very unrestful, disturbing. We want some firm ground to stand on.

And one way—the way I want to talk about tonight—that this tendency of wanting to control and have security manifests is through the way we can relate to thought. As I think Jack said, and I thought it was a great line, thought is a wonderful tool and a terrible master.

Thought is great. It communicates. We use it to communicate, to describe, to explain, to encompass very complex things. We really can appreciate the power and the quality and the subtlety of thought. One way that it becomes a terrible master, that it brings us into conflict, confusion, and suffering with ourselves, with how things are, with one another, is when the descriptions or interpretations that we're putting on a moment of experience or ourselves or another harden and solidify, and that description or interpretation becomes a view or an opinion.

Even that's okay if we know it's a view and an opinion. But so often we get caught in really believing—to use the Buddhist terminology—grasping, clinging, attaching ourselves to that view, to that opinion, to that description of how things are or should be. And in that attachment, in that grasping, enormous suffering can arise in ourselves, and then we can inflict that on others and on the world.

This aspect of grasping at views the Buddha actually spoke about quite a bit, as one of the great sources of our confusion, of our not seeing things the way they are, of our not recognizing our potential for liberation.

The classical description of grasping at views is the tendency of mind to think, "This alone is true, everything else is false." Now, I always think if my mind would really say that, it would be a big help, because then I would know at least that a view is arising and I was grasping at it. Unfortunately, it's usually much more insidious. We really do think this is true, to the exclusion of being able to admit—often even the possibility—that maybe, perhaps, things could be another way.

So attachment to views really limits our world, our heart, our mind, our experience, our ability to be open and connected with one another. When we're caught in an opinion, in a view, what's really interesting is how our perception, our mind, snaps closed. We don't even let in, or want to let in, any information that might run counter to our view, because we're so sure this is how it is.

Let me give a few obvious examples. Politics, of course, is a great one, because at least we usually know we have a view. We believe it, of course. There's nothing wrong with that. We're going to have opinions, and we're going to act on them. Hopefully we'll vote. We'll have opinions on different issues. Nothing wrong with that. But you know how on television, when election campaigns are coming up and the candidates have so-called political debates? I find those debates a joke. I've never heard one where I felt like they were really interested in listening to each other and maybe hearing, "Oh, you have something different to say about that issue. Maybe there's something useful in what you say." You know, forget about it. They're just not even talking to each other.

I've noticed—back in '92, I won't go into specifics—but during the presidential election that year, there were a couple of politicians running for various things that I literally could not stand to listen to on television, or even see. This was my real attachment to my view. I knew that they were completely—what would I say—selfish, uncaring, had no one's interest in mind but themselves and rich people, that there was nothing good whatsoever about either of these two human beings. And if anyone told me something good, I didn't want to hear it, because then I would have to loosen my view.

I read in a newspaper—maybe it was in Thailand—about the recent presidential election in Taiwan. It was describing how completely, intensely the Taiwanese people were caught up in their opinions about who they wanted elected president. To the extent that before the election, the hospitals were, on a daily basis, having people brought into the emergency room. Usually it was men, brought in by their families. They developed a name for it: a kind of pre-election mania. This is true—I read it in the newspaper. So obsessed. I know, that really means it's true, right? That's another scary thing. But these men would come in so obsessed that they were in a kind of manic state, and this kept happening over and over, every day, different people. Such a manic state that all they could talk about was their candidate and how you should vote for him, and they couldn't stop talking about it. They weren't able to work. They wouldn't even let the doctors or nurses talk to them until they found out who they were going to vote for. It's very serious. And then after the election—I don't know if you recall—there were a lot of riots by the people whose candidate didn't win, because they were so upset.

So taking an opinion, a view of what we think is right, and attaching to it—we really want that—can lead to enormous suffering. These are minor examples. Minor examples.

A couple of others that are more personal: the views people can have about what is healthy to eat. Now, I'm from the East Coast. I don't want to cast aspersions on California, but I do notice the views are a little more strongly held here than in some parts of the world where I've been. But I'll tell a story from IMS in

Massachusetts. Every summer we have a retreat for young adults, for people between the ages of thirteen and eighteen. Every year it's grown until now there are about sixty people. Stephen Smith and Michelle McDonald-Smith have been doing this for years. It's a wonderful retreat.

In the beginning, it was just parents—you know, people who had been sitting and made their kids come. But the kids got into it, and now there are plenty of kids who come whose parents have nothing to do with it. They love it, and they tell their friends. One year, there were three or four fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds from New York City who lived a very different life from a meditation center out in the country in Massachusetts, and whose diet was very different. They didn't really eat vegetarian. Tofu wasn't big on their agenda. Mostly fast food and sweets and potato chips and like that. So the cooks would—

The cooks would try to make things the kids would like, but within vegetarian limits. At this particular time, we had a group of cooks who were not into sugar—very strong views about how bad sugar is. And some of these kids, the ones from the city, really had physical difficulty with the diet. If you go off eating a lot of sweets and a lot of fat very quickly, the digestive system doesn't adjust so well. These kids were really having trouble, and Michelle told me she wanted to at least get some sweets, some sugar. But the cooks didn't want them to have it. Finally, after quite some negotiation, the cooks agreed to let these kids have sugar—but they had to hide it. My God, I thought. These kids must think we're really nuts, making them hide sugar, coming from the city.

We can get so attached.

On the other end, I was teaching a retreat in Switzerland a couple of years ago with two very good Swiss friends. Just kidding around, they kept singing to me—every day they would sing me this little Swiss German song from their childhood. Don't worry, I cannot replicate a song in Swiss German. But the upshot of this song was: "We are so happy living in the mountains. We eat plenty of butter and cheese, and that gives us good blood." Well, that's different from what I hear over here.

We had another couple of friends from Germany who came to California for the first time, and they were reporting about their first experience in a supermarket. They just wanted to go in and buy some milk and some yogurt. And they said, "My God, what is with this country? You can't just find milk. There's 1%, 2%, no percent. There's lactaid 70%, lactaid 100%, 1% lactaid 70%, 2% lactaid 70%, skim milk lactaid." Finally they found regular milk. Then they would go to some inexpensive taco place in Palm Springs, and they said, "We're really hungry, let's order the jumbo." Franz said, "You better not." So they ordered the regular, which was, of course, gigantic—more than two people could eat. They said, "Why don't people here just eat half as much, and then they wouldn't need seventy-five different kinds of milk?"

So—views about what we eat. We can get very, very fixated on it. I've been in millions of conversations that got quite heated about what is really good to eat. Can we just let in the possibility that what we think is an opinion? It's not God's truth on this planet. It's an opinion.

And then it gets actually very painful and very scary. When we're holding an opinion and we don't know it's an opinion, really deeply—when we think it's the truth of how things are—in our personal life this causes suffering, and even more so it wreaks havoc on the social, economic, political, person-to-person, and nation-to-nation relationships on this planet.

Just look in your own relationships—in your intimate relationship or with your family. Aren't there ways that... maybe I should speak for myself. I see that my mind thinks certain people should behave in certain ways. For example, there's a certain way a house is supposed to be kept. And that's just the truth of the world. Now, the person I'm living with might think there's a different way the house is supposed to be kept. But I really notice in my mind that my way is the right way, and the other unnamed person's way is due to a woeful ignorance and lack of proper upbringing.

And it's not always funny either, right? It isn't always funny. It leads to real misunderstandings, to anger. If I come in and I'm really tired, and the house isn't the way I like it, I get really angry. But if I catch myself—all right, this is an opinion, it's an opinion—sure, I prefer it this way, and that's okay, as long as I know it's an opinion. And if it's not the way I want it, open up.

What about in the way we think the socioeconomic system should be dealt with? If you're into the environment, if you're working on any particular environmental issue, when you look at the injustices in our educational system, in the economic system, all the bigotry that goes on in this country and in other countries, the way different people, different neighbors can really hate each other just based on their cultural or family background...

A few years ago in Thailand, you meet a lot of young people traveling. We met a young guy who seemed like a lot of the young guys traveling, and he was from Croatia. This was right at the time of the big Croatian-Serbian war. He seemed like a normal guy—until he was reading the newspaper one day, and there was some article about how some Serbians had been blown up and killed on a bridge.

He started cheering, as if his football team had won. And he just said, "You know, I just hate all Serbs. Finished." And you could see there was nothing that would allow him to let in a perception of a Serbian person that would get through that barrier.

Now that's what's really scary about how, when we hold to an opinion or view and we don't know it, we shut our minds, we shut our hearts. We don't let in alternative information that might break that down. When our view is threatened, it feels frightening. Often it's scary. And so the tendency is much more to hold to it rather than to move back onto that shaky ground.

This is from the Buddha: "For one who is freed from holding to views, there is no entanglement. For one who is delivered by understanding, there are no more conflicts. But those who grasp after views and opinions, they wander about in the world, annoying people." But we also suffer.

Pema Chödrön says, "Opinions are opinions, nothing more and nothing less. We can begin to notice them.

We can begin to simply label them as opinions, just as we label thoughts as thoughts. By this simple exercise, we are introduced to the notion of egolessness."

And this is interesting, because it's not just that it saves us from conflict in the moment—it begins to take us right into the heart of the Buddha's teaching, into 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, and we don't criticize ourselves for having them. We 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. Doesn't that just open up a whole different possibility of relating? Which we may or may not like. It doesn't really matter if we like it.

So mindfulness is just cultivating this ability to see what's what—to meet an experience and tell the difference between that experience and our interpretation and our opinions about it. And this comes down to the basic level of perception. Perception is the recognition faculty in any moment of what's happening.

For example: you hear that, I'm assuming. The perception is when the mind goes, "Oh, bell." That's perception—very simple. It's based on memory, on prior experience. And from perception, we begin to think, we begin to cogitate, we begin to draw associations and interpretations and memory very, very quickly. From that, we very quickly can solidify into a view and an opinion. It's only through the willingness to see that there's a view and opinion, and to be willing to come back and have a direct perception, that we can reach out of the mental cage, the solidity, the disconnection from life and from others that getting caught in a view of someone or something creates.

The Dalai Lama said, "All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception." That's quite a statement. All of our difficulties stem from mistaken perception. That's why there's so much emphasis on direct experience, on true knowledge.

I want to share a life experience I read about that inspired me deeply—someone having the courage and the vision to reach outside of what could easily have been a closed view of someone else, and how that can really affect a shift. Then I want to talk about it in terms of our meditation practice here. This direct connection, this willingness to reach out of what could easily be a closed view, and how that direct experience shatters preconceptions and prejudice.

It's from a book by David Halberstam called *The Children*. He's talking about a man who really inspires me greatly. His name is Jim Lawson. This is about the sit-ins and the civil rights movement at the beginning of the 1960s. I don't know if you remember—I was quite young then—but in the 1960s in Nashville, there was a group of college students, and that's what *The Children* follows, about ten of these students who,

under the tutelage of Jim Lawson, were taking a series of nonviolent workshops.

Jim Lawson was a little older, an African American man who had been a deep disciple of nonviolence for many years. He was a conscientious objector in the Korean War and went to prison for that. He was a disciple of Gandhi. He was a Christian minister, but deeply inspired by Gandhi. After the Korean War, he spent three years in India on a mission, also studying Gandhian nonviolent philosophy. And so he was in Nashville teaching these nonviolent workshops.

In early 1960, they were beginning the demonstrations. This story is about one particular demonstration where the students were marching peaceably to sit in at lunch counters. At that time, African American people were not allowed to eat at the downtown lunch counters, although they were allowed to shop in the stores, of course—just not eat there.

It was a peaceful demonstration, just marching down the street, and some young white toughs, like motorcycle hooligans, at the end of the line attacked and knocked down two young men at the end of the peaceful demonstration line and were kicking them and beating on them—Bernard Lafayette and Solomon Gort.

Jim Lawson, who was there, just walked over. This is Bernard Lafayette describing it—he was one of the ones being beaten, but this is how he observed it: "Jim Lawson just walked over very calmly, as if every day he walked over to young white toughs who were beating up his friends." And so that brought the hooligans' attention to Jim Lawson.

And they were so enraged by his confidence and his calmness and his non-aggression—it just enraged them—that one of them spit on him. And so Jim Lawson just looked at this guy and said, "Could you give me a handkerchief?" And the guy was so stunned that he reached in his pocket, gave him a handkerchief. At which point Bernard Lafayette and Solomon Gort had gotten up, and they started getting back in line.

And then Jim Lawson—and I could see in my mind how my mind immediately tends to make divisions, tends to say, "Oh, these guys are just bad, they're stupid, they're ignorant," completely shutting them out of my heart. But Jim Lawson looked at the guy, he looked at what he was wearing, which was the prevailing uniform of the day for white toughs: black pants, black leather motorcycle jacket, that kind of greased-back haircut. And he looked at him and said, "Do you drive a motorcycle or a hot rod car?" And the guy said, "Oh, well, I drive a motorcycle."

And then they plunged into this conversation. Lawson asked him, "Well, how do you have it souped up?" He asked him a couple of technical questions. They got into this whole conversation about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. Meanwhile, the other two guys who had been attacked had gotten up, and the march had gone on. Jim Lawson just sat there talking for a while.

As Bernard Lafayette said, in that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject which they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them seem more human in the eyes of the

other. As they walked away, Jim waved to the man. The man remained still. He didn't wave back. He couldn't accept the friendship, but on the other hand, neither did he reject it.

Of course, that takes enormous courage, enormous vision in a situation like that—to be able to reach beyond the fear and the limitation that stereotypical views impose, and find that there's got to be some thread of humanness in there. And it's only by reaching beyond our views that we're able to do that.

So that's a huge life experience. And it takes a really exceptional person who can do that, I think. So I want to bring it back to here, to our meditation retreat. And the examples now may seem mundane. But remember, the way our mind latches onto experience, solidifies it, forms views here in this situation is just the same way our mind does it in more complex and confusing situations. This is where we can learn about it. This is where we can begin to see that perception can be different.

Just think a minute: have you noticed any views arising about what good practice means during this time? About what good practice would look like if you—God forbid—should ever experience a moment of it?

For us, talking to all of you, it's wonderful because we get to see, one after the other, the views. We get to see that there are views because one person will come in and say, "You know, my practice stinks. I try to stay with the breath, but all this other stuff keeps happening." The next person will come in and say, "I can't see impermanence. I'm just staying with the breath. And I really want to see impermanence, because that's what good practice is about." And one person thinks if you have a lot of emotions, that's good practice. And the next person says, "I don't have emotions, I'm just shallow and superficial." Another person says, "I just can't even feel the breath—I have no practice at all." Views about how you sit, how you walk, what good samadhi is.

When someone comes in to me and says, "My concentration is no good," that is one of the most uninformative remarks as far as having any idea what the person means. By samadhi, by good concentration, by bad concentration—we have so many views. And do you notice that as soon as you maybe have achieved what you think is good practice, then another view forms? Or we say something up here and you hear part of it and make a view about it. And we get stuck there, and we suffer, and we beat ourselves up because that's not what's happening. We don't let in other perceptions.

This is true. At one retreat some years ago, it was about the fifth day. A woman came in for an interview, and she said, "I have just been in agony trying to sit cross-legged here these five days. It's been so painful, but that's what you have to do. That's what good practice is." And it had just dawned on her that morning. She looked at me—I was sitting there the whole time in a chair. She looked at me and said, "Oh, Carol's sitting in a chair. Maybe that's okay." I mean, we had said it, of course, a million times.

Did we ever say you have to sit cross-legged or it's not good practice? Believe me, we never said that. And it took five days to let in that visual perception that, "Oh, maybe that's not true." We all do this, and it's so painful. I'll watch myself finally letting go—for example, just to take it that far is enough. "Oh, I don't have

to sit cross-legged, I can sit in a chair. But I can't move the whole sitting." Immediately we drop one view and make another one. This is how it has to be.

Can you imagine having no view, no opinion of what good practice is? Just like I said, having no confirmation at the end and just being willing to be with what arises. Have you heard us say that before? The thing is, we really meant it. Just be with what arises. That's where it's at.

Or the views I certainly have of what an enlightened being should be like, of what a spiritual life would look like. Philip reminded me of this story. I haven't told it in years, so I get to tell it again tonight. It's always nice to remember old stories—views of what it really means to live in a spiritual way.

Quite some years ago, almost twenty years ago now, I went to Thailand to ordain as a Buddhist nun, and I spent a year in that way. When I first got there and found the temple and an abbot who would agree to ordain me—that's the whole process—it was in a temple in northern Bangkok. The abbot was very, very well-known in Thailand, very famous, an older abbot, a good friend of Ajahn Buddhadasa's, so very respected.

He had me stay there first. You can't just walk off the street and have him say, "Sure, I'll ordain you." They need to check you out a little bit. So he had me stay there for some weeks as a layperson. My first night there, in a little hut they gave me, I had very long hair at that time. You just sleep on the floor on a thin straw mat. In the middle of the night, I found out that an army of ants had suddenly altered its path. You know how they walk in a path. And the path now went through where I was sleeping, and especially through my hair.

In the middle of the night I woke up with all these little ants in my hair. We take the precepts not to kill, of course. So I sweep them away, sweep them away, they come back. I really didn't know what to do. And that was just the introduction—I mean, you spend some time in the tropics, you develop many intimate relationships with all types of insects. But I really didn't know what to do.

So the next morning I went to the abbot and thought, well, they must deal with this all the time. He'll have the answer, how you deal with this in a spiritual way. I explained my dilemma—they're in my hair, and yada yada. So he had his assistant, Maha Chachai, another monk, and said, "Oh, okay, don't worry." Maha Chachai went off and came back and handed me a big can of Raid.

I said, "Huh." Okay. I personally didn't feel good about that, but I said, "Okay, I'm on my own." That's really what it comes down to.

You want to know the truth? I can't remember. That's really the truth. I can't remember if I squirted the Raid or not. My guess would be I probably did, because I was like, "Oh, these ants." I was really freaking out. But a year later, I was in another monastery, and it was part of my morning routine. I'd get up, I'd have my shower, I'd go to have my meal, I'd come back and spend half an hour trying to sweep out the ants. That just became part of the daily routine. But I was fresh. I hadn't adjusted to that yet.

But ultimately, it comes down—no one can tell you, really. We're on our own there. What's really true for me?

So, how the whole line of thought and opinion and view begins and gets so solidified.

It starts with this process of perception I mentioned, that recognition factor. The Buddha says that at the moment of contact with any of the sense doors—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking—something arises. We feel it as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We perceive it: "Oh, that's a bell, that's a rug, that's an owl baby." And then we proceed to think about it. The thinking is colored by all our memories and associations, and if we're not aware, those turn into the associations and notions that assail and overwhelm a person.

The word for this is *papañca*, which we love—it's called proliferation. The mind just proliferates and goes crazy, assails and overwhelms us.

Now what's interesting is that beginning with perception, what we perceive is often not even accurate. From that inaccurate perception, we proceed to build up all these memories and associations, and then we're really gone into opinions and views, relating to something that isn't even happening. We wonder why we feel confused and disconnected.

A simple example of misperception: when I walk around my house without my glasses on, I'll think, "Oh, everything looks really clean." And I'll feel happy. Then I put on my glasses and I go, "Oh my God, I didn't see all this." And I feel bothered. Difference in perception, colored by my desires and emotions.

Let me give you another example. A friend of mine told me about this at a retreat, and I think it's a very clear illustration. She goes to her office and she sees a co-worker come in. He looked in her direction and frowned. She thought, "Oh, he's frowning at me." Immediately she asked herself, "Why is he angry at me? We haven't even spoken today. What did I do wrong?" She spent the whole day alternating between fear, aversion, and anger. It brought up her feelings of worthlessness. She was running over everything that was going on between them—why was he angry at her? On and on. It put her in a rotten mood for the day.

The next day, she finally realized he wasn't even looking at her or frowning at her. He was having family problems and was just feeling down.

So her original perception, the original contact, was seeing somebody and an expression on his face. Her misperception was that he was frowning at her. Then that misperception was colored by her mood, by her tendency to feel worthless, and a little bit of fear. The day was spent with these notions proliferating—past, future, everything she could remember about him, all her feelings of worthlessness, the whole story—all based on something that wasn't even really happening in the first place.

Does that sound familiar to anybody? Have you ever noticed that? If you haven't, please pay attention the next few days.

There's a phenomenon we call "yogi mind," which is basically what she's describing: a particular perception happens—a desire, something we don't like, or we perceive something inaccurately—and our mind just goes to town. It really runs riot, as they say in the commentaries. We find ourselves running all over the campus, looking for something, trying to tell somebody something, trying to fix whatever. All the energy that we expend in our lives in distractedness, in all the stuff we do—because life is so simple here at retreat—when we lose mindfulness and get caught up in this proliferation, all that energy becomes available for craziness, basically. And our mind just takes it and runs.

So that's perception, which may be inaccurate. We rarely stop to let in the fact that perhaps what we perceived isn't actually what happened, that it could be different. Then all the proliferation comes on top of that. That's where most of our views form and solidify.

It's so valuable to know: "This is what I think, this is what I believe is true. Could it be another way?"

And this is where we get to selflessness, egolessness. The actual basic misperception that we're misperceiving in many different ways, over and over—one that often, without some form of self-inquiry, goes unquestioned—is the perception that there's a continuous, unchanging "I" or "me" somewhere in here running the show.

You may not think you're your body, or you may think you're your body, but somewhere back there, doesn't it feel like you're the same you you've always been, running the show? Maybe not doing such a great job of running the show, but really trying.

It's the most subtle and unrecognized view, interpretation, opinion of ourselves and the world. And it's the one from which all the rest of our confusion and trouble can spring. We don't question our perceptions—we assume how we perceive is true.

For instance, if you can see—I think everyone here can see, so I'll use sight—we all maybe know intellectually that somehow the way sight comes in, it's turned upside down and the brain turns it around or something. But really, the way we see things, when I open my eyes and look, I really unquestioningly, if I'm not paying attention, think that's how it is. But that's just how we're trained to see.

My father recently had an eye operation because he has macular degeneration, where they rotated one of his retinas forty or fifty degrees. And they said, "Oh, don't worry, it'll compensate." But it didn't. So he was walking around and one of his eyes saw everything leaning over this way, and one saw things straight but nothing in the middle. We're so used to depending on how we see as being how it is, that he really didn't feel comfortable walking on the sidewalk. He'd kind of be leaning over and keep walking off the edge because everything was tilting. It was a good reminder to me that I take visual perception as really how it is. But like that other ninety-nine percent of the universe that's undetectable—somehow we don't see it. Something's out there, or so they think.

It's like that with our physical experience, with our emotions, with our thoughts. What this practice is

helping us do is to keep meeting, moment by moment, our physical experience, emotions, thoughts, perceptions—each time fresh, rather than assuming continuity.

In the physical realm, sometimes as the mind gets quiet in meditation, the sense of solidity kind of falls away. Sometimes that's very scary. Sometimes it's very pleasant. Sometimes it's nothing special—just points of sensation arising. It's like the example they give in Asia: from a long distance you see a line of ants. From a distance it looks like one solid unbroken line. Then you come up closer and you see it's millions and millions of ants moving. But from a distance it looks solid. Our body feels solid, but as the attention gets finer, it's just sensation after sensation after sensation, arising and passing, arising and passing. Knowing that or hearing that doesn't make any difference. Experiencing it—it doesn't change everything, but it opens something: oh, maybe things are a different way. Some little clinging to "I think that's how it is" lets go.

The same with emotions, the same with thoughts. Have you noticed how thoughts tell you your self-story all day long? Now she's getting up, now she's turning around, I'm really not doing this very well, I'm not doing the walking well, other people are doing it better. And how the particular self-story is based on a perception—you might have the perception as you're walking that someone walks by looking so pure and mindful and present, and you're wobbling all over the place, looking at little bunnies and thinking about what's for lunch. And you think, "I just can't do this. I am no good."

So the perception was somebody walking slowly, colored by self-negativity, a sense of worthlessness, and comparing. And you start remembering everything you ever failed at in your life. I go back to remedial gym class in fifth grade. And now here I am, I can't even walk mindfully. Anything pleasant isn't noticed. Any other memory isn't accessed—only everything bad, until you've worked yourself into a total knot of disgust and failure. And that's me.

Then we don't notice that suddenly it changes. In the next sitting you walk in, having sort of forgotten that whole little knot. You're just walking in thinking about lunch. You sit down and—wow, the breath's right here. It's cool. It's present. I can really note every time the mind goes off. I am really something. I really am getting this. I think I have a deep, deep spiritual inclination. In fact, maybe I'm a tulku.

You know, I'm a reincarnation. I just haven't been discovered yet in some Tibetan tradition.

And then you remember everything positive, everything beautiful that ever happened. And you forget the other.

But the thing is, at the end of the day, you feel like that was one "I." It wasn't one "I." There was some positive, pleasant perception. There was all that papañca. That was the birth of "I." Then that "I" died. There was an unpleasant thing. There was all this papañca. Then that "I" died. Birth and death of self, constantly. And without examination, we think it's me.

You know Lily Tomlin's line? "I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific."

That's what we're doing.

Notice. Any sense experience—the sound of rain, boom, pleasant, rain in my childhood, the smell in the desert, isn't this beautiful, I'm one with nature, yada yada, all this "me," my whole life—from one hearing experience that's pleasant, from one smelling. Just notice that in the next moment. There's no judgment. But watch it come and go. And notice that it goes. It is not solid and continuous. Same with emotions. Same with sensations. Same with all experience.

And please don't believe me. Look and see.

We posit continuity through lack of inquiry, through lack of attention. Really look and see—there isn't something solid. There isn't an unchanging "me" here.

And that—it's the ultimate scary thought for that mind that's looking for security, that's looking for a resting place. But it is such a relief to put down that burden of thinking we're in charge of it all. Because frankly, if we're in charge of it all, we're not doing a very good job. We don't have to keep taking responsibility. Put it down. It's so freeing to be willing to simply meet the next moment with an air of "who knows? Let's just be here for it." I don't know if this is going to be my last breath. We really don't know that. Can I just be present?

And if that moment is a moment of interpretation, a moment of thought, fine. Thought is just thought. It doesn't have to drive us. It doesn't have to imprison us when we recognize it for what it is.

So that sense of—this is the last image I'll use—the sense of opening, throwing ourselves into the next moment, into the unknown, not with fear but with trust and faith. Because whatever happens, we can take refuge in this: that the truth is present in this moment if we can meet it free from all the baggage of what we think it is. Then the truth can reveal itself.

The image is one that Franz told me about—climbing up to the top of this mountain in India, Mount Arunachala, which is a sacred mountain for Ramana Maharshi. He climbed up to the top; it's not huge. And up at the top, there's a whole bunch of mountain monkeys that live there. It's very rocky, scraggly, with a few branches and bushes. He said these monkeys were so great to watch because they would be standing on the edge of a rock and they would just lean themselves out into space as if they thought they could fly. With total trust and total abandon, giving themselves into the moment. And they always landed on a rock, landed on a branch. But they didn't stand there first and look and go, "Okay, that one, I'm going for it," and "I don't go until I'm sure where I'm going to put my foot down." It's just—the universe will catch us.

That quality of full-hearted, open attention. Willingness to meet this moment. And you don't have to think about anything I said tonight, because it reveals itself to us when we can meet the moment free of preconceptions.

So let's just sit quietly.

Thank you for your attention.

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