Acceptance of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:41

Tonight I want to talk a bit about impermanence, the acceptance of impermanence as a doorway to liberation.

Impermanence is kind of an interesting fact to me, one of those paradoxes of our spiritual life, which is filled with paradoxes, of course. It's one of the facts of existence that conceptually is really fairly easy to comprehend. It doesn't really take a rocket scientist to say, yeah, things are changing. Impermanence, that makes sense.

But really, deep down, when I look at my life, when I really want to invite myself into an understanding of impermanence, I ask a couple of questions. One is, aside from the fact that it's so obvious, do I, do we truly believe that all phenomena are arising and passing? And not only believe, but really know. The second question is, if it were true, if I really do know that, if I do believe that, how would that look in my life? How would I live my life as a result of that knowledge?

That takes us into a lot of areas where we see, as is so often the case, our intellectual understanding, which is useful, but it can be miles ahead of our cellular understanding, so to speak. What would it mean to know in my cells that everything is arising and passing?

The way we act is that if things were really impermanent, it would be horrible. It's not like we say, oh yes, great. No, too much suffering. But the truth is that were we to live from that knowledge, we'd be living in freedom. Deep knowing is one of the gateways to liberation, to freeing our hearts and minds from clinging, from wrong view, from suffering, basically.

When I look in my own life at an example—it's both a very painful example because it's in my immediate family, but it's also one of the more obvious examples in which one would think if one had even a modicum of acceptance of impermanence, it would be active here. The example is my father, who is 83 and has been a very virile, healthy man all his life. In the last few years, he's developed Parkinson's disease. And at the same time, due to something else, he's losing his sight. The two together, it's a suffering experience, no question about that. To watch someone who's been so athletic and strong and clear in his mind be shuffling around and not able to do so much. The mind is still strong, but seeing how it gets harder and harder, and he's suffering from it.

What was my first reaction, and what is often my reaction when I think of him or go back again? Was the first reaction, well, the body decays, what is born suffers old age, sickness, and death, that's really how it is? Not in a callous way, but really that's how it is. Of course not. It took me ages to really be able to feel

with some equanimity that this is how it is.

The first reaction was actually not compassion. It was a kind of fear on the edge of panic. No, this can't be happening—slight denial of how things are. This can't be happening, and then at times almost an anger at him. You're not allowed to get old. You're not allowed to be different from the person I've been used to for the last 45 years. You're not allowed to suffer. Why? Because then I have to suffer.

When I saw I could open to my own suffering around it, the natural compassion comes. And the sadness, the sense of loss, the compassion—that's fine. It's not that those won't happen when we understand impermanence. That's natural. It's that denial on the edge of panic that I was feeling, the negativity and the underlying sense that there has to be something we can do to stop this from happening. You know that feeling.

It's very interesting to me to see that I've really been able to come into much more harmony, which means greater compassion, greater connectedness with my father, more ability to be there with him as he is, rather than colluding with him in his aversion and denial. That feels a lot better. But I still have to consciously keep bringing myself back here. When I'm not really aware, it's so easy for my mind to go into, no, can't be like this.

I find that fascinating in dharmic terms. Because at 83 years old, something has to happen. It's how it is. I'm 49 years old, something has to happen. And it could be tomorrow. I don't know.

As I say, that's a poignant, strong example, but also an obvious one. How often, in even the little things, when something that we like or are comfortable with or think that's the way it ought to be changes—how often are we really able to meet that with acceptance?

equanimous? Do we truly respond with "Well, of course, whatever arises is bound to pass"?

Let's just look at our meditation experience today. We really don't usually have to go much further than that—unless you're having a day of equanimity, and may you be happy. It happens. But just to look at the little things: how did you relate to something difficult or unpleasant that arose? Was there a sense that of course unpleasant arises, and that's fine, it will change? Or was it more like, "Yes, it'll change, and it better change fast"? Or perhaps fear that it will never change?

And when something pleasant happens, that's okay. We don't worry about impermanence when something pleasant is happening—only when it's about to leave. And then we say, "Well, of course it left." Intellectually, yes, we do tell ourselves that, like I did with my father. Sure, it left. It's changing. That's natural. But what's the real response so often, not always, but so often, underneath? "What did I do wrong? How can I get it back? How can I subtly shift my practice in order for that to happen more often?" Because that's better and this is worse. It's just so ingrained.

How would it be to really be awake, connected, and at peace with coming and going, coming and going,

coming and going? It's so peaceful, so connected, so much less struggle. But why are we often so afraid of it?

Of course, intellectually we know—and from experience too. That's what's even more mystifying. This isn't all intellectual. We do know this from our experience. Why do we forget it again so quickly? That's another mystery to me.

When we suffer from change, from loss, from not getting what we want—big ones or little ones—we know really that the anguish isn't in the fact of the change itself, the changing nature. That's just how it is. The anguish is in our clinging, in our fear, in our wanting things to be different, in our aversion.

Why do we cling so much? Why is it so hard for us to simply be with things as they are? Well, that's the question, isn't it, of our spiritual practice, which we approach in so many different ways. So I'll just talk about some of my takes, some of the ways I look at this.

In some ways, I feel—in looking at my own experience—that the clinging to pleasant, the fear and wanting unpleasant things to go away, this trying to stop the constant change, really is our deepest heart's response about wanting to be happy. As we know, as it's often been quoted, the Buddha said that everyone wants to be happy. We as human beings share this common bond: our deepest wish is to be happy, but we don't really know how to go about it. And I think one of the ways we keep creating suffering out of really wanting to be happy is through this clinging, trying to stop the flow of experience, trying to control.

As we continue in our practice, and as many of you are quite aware of experientially, aside from the obvious—of course everything is changing, we can see the seasons, we can see the days, we can see our bodies over time—but even on a microscopic level, there is no moment, really, that is not in constant flux. There are times when we experience this consciously, whether through concentrated meditation or just the way the mind is set. Some people on some days simply see the ending of things, the ending of things, the ending of things.

And often, not only when we first experience this but at other times too—and even when we don't experience it consciously—I think this sense can be underlying our reactions in a subconscious way. This constant flux is sensed as a deep unreliability to all phenomena. We want, at least I see that I want, my mind wants, somewhere to rest. Somewhere not subject to this constant arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing.

And in looking for someplace to rest, the habituated response of the mind and heart is to try to hold on to some particular moment of experience, whatever it may be, looking for that place of peace, that place of rest—because we tend to focus on experience. We lose sight of the fact that when we cling to this thing and it goes away and we really suffer, we forget in our daily life to look at the process and think, "Well, that thing didn't do it, but this next thing will." That particular job didn't do it, but this next one will be perfect. That particular rice gruel at breakfast didn't completely—

bring unending happiness, but maybe tomorrow's cornmeal will—you know, whatever it happens to be.

And to open with awareness to that "no place to rest" can at times be experienced—not always, but it can be experienced—as fearful, or at least wildly unsettling, to say the least.

It's like being in an earthquake. Eight years ago I was teaching a retreat in Yucca Valley in California, and we had an earthquake. Actually, it was in the middle of a talk I was giving. And that was just kind of cool—I'd never been in an earthquake before, and it wasn't a really bad one. Then later that night, a couple hours later, there was a stronger one. And even that, because I was outside just watching the ground ripple, was a little unsettling on a cellular level, but it was also kind of cool.

What wasn't so cool was the fact that for three days and nights, every five to ten minutes following that, there were aftershocks. One or two we can handle—that's cool. But every five or ten minutes, it was so profoundly unsettling, both mentally and physically. I mean, the body of the earth is supposed to support me. There's really nowhere to go.

So that experience has stayed with me very strongly as a metaphor for anicca, for impermanence—that there really is nowhere to go in this phenomenal world of appearances that isn't going to change.

And the shift that comes through our insight mind, through our wisdom mind, through our mindfulness practice that just allows us to see things as they are—the freedom, the ease—isn't about changing the fact of impermanence. It's about letting go of looking for some place, some thing that we can rest in that isn't going to change.

The Buddha said once that the search for a resting place is burning, burning. Not to need a resting place is cool and peaceful.

And so our whole practice with impermanence—opening to it, feeling it, seeing it, allowing it in more deeply—allows us to give up this search for some place to rest. And paradoxically, in that giving up, there's the peace. It was always here. We couldn't find it because we were looking for something somewhere that was going to give it to us. We just don't quite look in the right way.

Still, I say that. On some level, I know that. And still, the clinging is like second nature. It's really second nature. It isn't our first, most basic nature, although it may really feel like that a lot of the time. It isn't. But we're so used to it, and we cling because we think it'll make us happy.

It's so poignant to me. The very thing that keeps us spinning in confusion and suffering—we do it because we think it'll make us happy.

Another thing the Buddha says over and over when he's talking to monks or laypeople and bringing them into their experience—no matter what aspect of experience—he'll often say, "So you see that the body, for example, is impermanent?" And they'll always say yes, we can see it's impermanent. And then he'll say, "So what is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying." And they'll always say yes. And then: it cannot be

self.

So this is another question I pose to myself and to you, to see: Do we actually believe that? Do we actually buy that, deeply, deeply in our understanding—that if something's impermanent, it cannot be inherently satisfying? Again, if we really bought that, we'd let go. The clinging would stop, because we'd know that orange, that relationship, that meditation experience, that really peaceful breath isn't going to make me lastingly happy. It can be nice for the moment—nothing wrong with that. But I think as our response to the complete unreliability, we do tend to cling to a moment of ease, a temporary moment of pleasure, a moment of respite. And there's nothing wrong with that, except that clinging doesn't work.

It's just so poignant to me. There's a fragment of a poem by Galway Kinnell that I love because to me it expresses the beauty, really, and the poignancy as well of clinging—without judgment. It's called "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight":

You cry, waking from a nightmare,
when I sleepwalk into your room and pick you up
and hold you up in the moonlight.
You cling to me hard,
as if clinging could save us.

I think you think I will never die. I think I exude to you the permanence of smoke or stars, even as my broken arms heal themselves around you. I have heard you tell the sun, don't go down. I have stood by as you told the flower, don't grow old, don't die. And yet perhaps this is the reason you cry, this the nightmare you wake crying from, being forever in the pre-trembling of a house that falls.

And the only thing different about that is it's scary when we think we're the house, or when we think we're some steady state that needs that house to support us. But when we realize we're not the house, and there's nothing steady here that's experiencing change coming at it, but we let go into the change, there's just no problem. There's just no problem. When we stop trying to block the flow and things just are as they are, we wonder what all the problem ever was.

So I want to talk a little bit about this deep habit of our tendency to cling. And again, don't be discouraged by this. I think it's really important to recognize in your practice here, in our whole spiritual life, that we will have deep insight in many different ways into various forms of these truths—whether it's impermanence, no self, the unreliability, emptiness, whatever. And really, the insight is true. We are in that moment touching the truth. We're recognizing it. We're trusting it. And we'll forget again.

The conditioned habits of our mind are really strong. And just because we forget again doesn't mean it's gone, it's lost, we've failed. I think most of us—at least most of the people I talk to, and I'm including myself, especially here in the West with the speed of life these days—we have quite an incredible impatience. A sense that I've seen this already five times, so it should be over.

But if we just look at our life, and if we just stick with this lifetime—never mind the whole idea of countless lifetimes, just stick with this lifetime—how many mind moments has craving been conditioned, or aversion been conditioned, or delusion been conditioned? I'm not saying this to be discouraging, but no, really, you've got to look at things as they are. But I didn't finish. I'm not saying it to be discouraging because it's a lot, right? That's why you're laughing, I'm assuming. It's a lot.

How many moments has non-greed, non-craving, non-aversion, metta, friendliness, non-delusion been cultivated? Well, as you're practicing and as you've been practicing over your life, also quite a lot—although it's true, probably not nearly as many moments as the other. Yet it doesn't take as many moments. I think it was in an interview today with somebody, but just the power of a moment of truth. You can be suffering in something, wallowing in some knot of personality or frustration or whatever for days. And you have one moment when you just see through the whole thing and it's really gone. Really gone. And that moment sustains us, doesn't it? For really quite a long time. Hopefully it won't have to sustain us for too long before there's another moment like that.

But it does sustain us because the power of resting in the truth is so much stronger than the conditioning of greed or aversion or delusion. It's just that there are a lot more moments of those, and our mind falls into the habit. So that's why I'm saying it isn't really discouraging, but we tend to be a tad impatient. Five, six times—that should do it. And it just isn't like that. So if we can let go of that expectation, we just keep seeing the same things more and more deeply, more and more fully. And that's how the practice seems to work.

So this tendency to cling or to push away—it basically arises because of our not seeing and understanding experience accurately. In some ways, when the Buddha talks about wrong view and right view, that translation "view"—I like it because it really is that we're viewing experience incorrectly. That's why we respond in a way that doesn't fit.

Two of the ways we view it incorrectly: we don't really let in impermanence, anicca, so we continue to respond as if something could be held. And the deep habit that feeds from this is evaluating—often unconsciously—the value or the worth of our experience moment to moment in terms of its pleasantness or its unpleasantness or its neutrality. As you know, I'm sure, this is how the Buddha described our moment-to-moment experience. And as you look in your meditation here, as things are slowed down a little bit, all that's ever happening is the arising and passing of one of our sixth sense experiences: seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing, thinking.

One after the other after the other. All the mental is also one sense experience—thinking, emotions, and everything. And in each moment of consciousness of one of those, there's awareness. With that consciousness of hearing, we experience it, each of us, as being either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. And that's just, as it were, a fact of the experience, how we experience it. It's just a passing thing. Even pleasant or unpleasant, they're neutral in themselves. It doesn't have to have any emotional reaction

around it. So that's just kind of how we experience things. And don't believe me—look and see, because this is really a very fruitful and freeing area of exploration.

What's so fascinating about this is that when we don't have any awareness of the pleasant or unpleasant or neutral aspect of a moment of experience, this is where our deeply conditioned habits come in. So if it's pleasant, without thinking, we just lean towards it, want more, try to keep it going. Unpleasant? Well, that's bad. That clearly isn't what's supposed to be happening. Move away. Neutral? Have you ever noticed anything neutral? And if we do, quite often it equates to boring, or something's wrong, or let me fix it, or fall asleep.

These correlate with greed, hatred, and delusion, these three. They're not any kind of judgment. They're just habits of mind, and really fascinating to begin to pay attention to, because it's in really paying attention that we can begin to experience a different way of relating on a moment-to-moment level.

This is a little statement from Lama Yeshe, who was a Tibetan Lama who died quite some time ago. And this is from a little booklet I ran into the other day called *Becoming Your Own Therapist*. He was talking about vedana. Vedana is the Pali word for this pleasant, unpleasant, neutral sensation. It's sometimes translated as "feeling." I like "feeling tone" better, because we use, in English, "feeling" often to mean emotions.

So he says, "Many of our negative actions are reactions to feeling." Look and see for yourself. Feelings can come to see—if you really look at feelings—reactions to feelings are responsible for all the conflict in the world, whether it's two small children fighting, up to nations at war. "Without understanding the characteristic nature of your own feelings of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutrality, you will never discover the nature of your mental attitudes. And without discovering that, you'll never put an end to your emotional problems." This is Lama Yeshe.

And never mind emotional problems—without understanding the nature of these feelings in our experience, these feeling tones, and our reaction to them when we're not awake, we'll never understand the nature of clinging and aversion and delusion. But it's a wonderful place to explore, because just by looking at this, you can come right in on where experience changes from just being what it is to clinging, to aversion, and to the whole following field of suffering.

So I'll talk a little bit about just these three feeling tones. What's really interesting to me is, as I said before, how much unthinkingly, if we're not paying attention, we tend to evaluate really our whole life in terms of how much pleasant feeling there is.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who is a great Thai forest monk and meditation teacher, once said, really look in your life and the decisions you make and the things you do. He says, almost everything you do is for the sake of pleasant sensation. And how long does a pleasant sensation last? This is what's really interesting in terms of anicca. These feeling tones, they last about that long. Really. About a second. And so much of what we

do is to act out of not quite understanding that what we really want is more of that quick, flying-by pleasant feeling tone. And we do all kinds of things—some are lovely and some are really stupid—in order to get more of this pleasant feeling tone.

There's a story from the Buddha's time I like a lot, and one way you can look at the story is through this lens. It's about Ananda. He was the Buddha's attendant, his cousin. For twenty-five years he was the Buddha's attendant. He was an extremely kind-hearted, compassionate person. And in many of the suttas, the discourses and stories from the time of the Buddha, Ananda is very human. He shows a lot of human qualities. It's easy to identify with Ananda when the Buddha is expounding on something. He'll often ask the questions or intercede in a way that's very kind.

So once Ananda was out walking and he passed a well, and at this well was a woman of the untouchable caste. At that time there was a very strict caste system, and someone of the untouchable caste couldn't hand or give anything to someone of a higher caste. So he went by the well, and one of the few things a monk was allowed to ask for was water.

So he just said, "Oh woman, would you give me some water?" And she said, "Oh no, oh no, reverend sir, I'm from the lower caste, you don't want water from me." And he just said in his kind way, "I'm not really asking about your caste, I just really would like some water."

So she gave him some water, but she was so touched by his kindness that she secretly followed him back and saw that he was one of the Buddha's disciples. And then she went up to the Buddha and said, "Oh, Ananda is so wonderful. I want to follow him and serve him for the rest of my life. I love Ananda because he is so wonderful."

Part of me finds this story amusing, because somebody's nice to you and you're ready to give them your whole life, simply because it feels good. The Buddha, luckily, was very wise, and he could see what was really going on. He said, "You know, it's not Ananda that you love, but his kindness." It was really the pleasantness, the happiness she felt—and he didn't say this, but this is what I'm putting into it—it was simply how pleasant it felt to be treated that way.

So he said, "You don't need to follow Ananda. Just take the lesson of his kindness and go out and treat other people in the same kind way." I think that's a lovely story, but it also shows how we can misinterpret our experience and really, for the sake of pleasant feeling, get ourselves into all kinds of situations.

There's nothing wrong with pleasant feeling. It's nice, as long as we know what it is. We see that it's coming, we see that it's going. And probably an unpleasant feeling will come next, and it's out of our control. That's the big piece—it's out of our control.

With unpleasant feeling, it's just the reverse. How often do we evaluate our experience as wrong, or a mistake, or think we've got to do something to get rid of it when it's unpleasant? It's really easy to see both of these in our meditation practice. It's rare to be having a really painful, confused sitting and think, "Fine,

this is good practice." Then you come and tell us and describe it clearly, and we say, "Oh good, that was good practice"—and you think these guys are a little off.

But it's also rare for someone to come in and report a very pleasant sitting and say, "But I can see I was really spaced out. That was bad practice." Rare. But the quality of practice has got nothing to do with pleasant or unpleasant.

Just as we can get fixated on the pleasant, we can also get fixated on the unpleasant. Instead of bringing a balance of attention, sometimes we only notice the pleasant, sometimes we only notice the unpleasant. If you're eating lentils and there's a little rock in them—which, God forbid, will never happen here—but should that happen and your tooth cracks and you have a chip in your tooth, it doesn't even hurt, right? But there's that rough spot. Have you ever noticed how you can't keep your tongue away from that rough spot? All your other teeth are fine. The whole rest of your body is fine. But you go through the day just worrying that rough spot in the tooth.

This is what we do. And it can build up so that it's not just some relatively minor—or even major but singular—aspect of experience that's unpleasant. We get into reactivity, we get into comparing, we get into self-judgment, we get into thinking it should be different, and pretty soon we can be really lost in a morass of suffering and negativity, self-doubt, giving up—the whole thing. And it can all be starting from an unpleasant feeling tone that's arising that we don't quite notice.

And neutrality, as I said, we often really don't notice at all. A lot of times when things are relatively neutral, people will come in and say nothing's happening. The more we talk, it becomes clear that calm is happening, maybe even ease is happening, maybe peace is happening. But it's amazing how often, at first, we're really not comfortable with calm. We want a little more juice. Neutrality gets a little too close to not being alive somehow.

We've got to learn how to bring awareness into neutrality. Without that, we often either fall asleep or find ourselves bored, and then we get aversive to the boredom. So we manage to move from neutrality to aversion.

Other times—and people have reported this to me, not this retreat so far—they found themselves realizing they were experiencing calm. The breath, yes, they could feel the breath. It was there, kind of quiet, a little bit shallow. They were really with it.

But so what? You know, I want something else to happen here. And pretty soon the mind is off, creating even negative suffering fantasies. But we'd rather suffer than be in neutrality land. It's really an interesting phenomenon, just to notice if that happens to you.

So these three feeling tones—they're just what they are. In themselves, no problem. Pleasant arises, unpleasant arises, neutral arises. They're just constantly coming and going, coming and going. Where do they become a problem? Neutral is never a problem, but where we get lost is when we don't see the

feeling tone for what it is. The reactions, the responses of conditioning, come really quickly if we're not aware. They just come quickly.

Once we see the reaction, again, no problem. So there's clinging—you just notice it. That's no problem. It's when we don't notice it, and we follow Ananda all the way home and are ready to devote our lives, that there's a problem.

When we get caught up in the reactions to experience—and this is really very common—at times you might find that you're spending most of your energy involved in your reactions. Actually, we can get entranced by our reactions to what's happening, sometimes to the point where we don't even really know what's actually happening. We're completely lost in our reactions to it—like that woman following Ananda home.

Or a friend of mine: we were sitting in a little house, and the refrigerator kept going on and off, as refrigerators will do. This friend is from Europe, and he claims that in Europe refrigerators aren't as loud as refrigerators in the States, which might be true. The refrigerator would come on in the middle of the sitting, go off, come on again, go off. He said by the end of the sitting, he just wanted to get up and kick that refrigerator. He said it was like a modern torture chamber. Just a noise—that's all it is. That's an example of getting really entranced by our reactions. We don't know what's happening.

This is one of the ways the Buddha described the difference between an awakened being and an ordinary worldling—such as ourselves. I would assume it's ourselves; I don't want to put anything on you. Such as myself.

He talks about how someone asked him the question: basically, what's the difference between an awakened person and an ordinary worldling? He says an ordinary person, if they experience an unpleasant bodily feeling, feels that feeling and then worries about it, laments, grieves, beats his breast, weeps, and is distraught.

Does that strike a chord anywhere? That pain in the knee, that feeling in the chest, that arrow in the back? Weeps and is distraught. Thus, he says, it is as if being shot with an arrow, he shoots himself with another arrow. So instead of experiencing one unpleasant feeling, he experiences two—or it sounds like more than two. Once you worry and lament and beat your breast, it's escalating a bit.

What's very interesting is how the Buddha speaks to what follows from this over time, how the conditioning gets so entrenched. He says that having experienced that painful feeling and gotten involved in that lamenting, beating of the breast, and worrying, there comes to underlie in that person a tendency to resist the unpleasant. In other words, each time we get lost in that lamenting aversion, it strengthens a little bit the tendency to do it again with the next unpleasant experience.

And, he says, because ordinary people do not know of any other escape from painful feelings except to experience sense pleasure—because that's all we ordinarily know, we think that's the only way out of

unpleasant. So then, out of our resistance to the unpleasant feeling, we go after some sense pleasure. And then we're creating an underlying tendency to crave for sense pleasure.

It's really quite interesting. So just watch it in ourselves, not judgmentally. The cycle becomes: unpleasant, the tendency to resist, then going after the pleasant, thinking that will make us happy. The difference, the Buddha says, is that when we feel it like that, that's how we're fettered by pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. We're chained by it because we're caught in that cycle.

And an awakened person, when touched by a painful feeling, does not resist it or resent it. He's touched, shot with one arrow, and nothing happens. It's just unpleasant. And the same with pleasant. Fine, it's pleasant. There's no need to create anything else around it. It's just what it is.

In a way, this is the essence of our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice—to learn to bring our attention into the simplicity of what's arising, rather than getting lost in our reactions and interpretations of what's arising. On a simple level, to just feel the burning in the hip as opposed to all those visions of hip replacement and permanent trauma. We all do it. That's an easy, obvious example, but there are many much more subtle and complex examples. We just come back to the bare experience.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said that we miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination. That's one of my favorite quotations.

So when you notice you're all caught up in some kind of tangled reaction, the first thing is just to pull back a little and notice: what's happening? Tangle, reaction—that's fine. Just to notice that. And then see. Sometimes the triggering sense impression may actually still be going on. If that's the case, you can go right to it with awareness and see the whole chain. That's really the chain of dependent origination. Sometimes not, and then you just come in on the craving or the aversion or the boredom and simply be with that.

I'll give you an example of that chain of dependent origination. Today in the morning sitting they were scraping and painting outside. Now, that's hearing—sounds arising. And this also reveals the nature of feeling tone: it can be different for different people. It's not that that's an intrinsically unpleasant sound. Some people told me today that it really bugged them. Other people said they actually kind of liked it because there was something to hear and it brought them back to awareness. For other people it might have been quite neutral. For the same person, different moments of that sound might have been pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

But if there was any reaction, positive or negative, if the mind was going off—"I can't believe during the three-month course they have guys come here and scrape the windows! They have the whole year, don't they? And they're doing it today, for God's sake!"—that's the moment where, if it goes too far, when you notice it, and luckily the sound's still happening, that's so fortunate, because then you can go right back to the sound. In that moment you might notice if there's a pleasant or unpleasant quality. You might

not—sometimes it's subtle—but you might notice the flinching back of aversion right away. Great. You can notice that. And notice how it can change.

Thich Nhat Hanh says sometimes that even when we experience the feeling tone as unpleasant, if we know more about the bigger picture, it actually changes our relationship and we don't experience it as so unpleasant anymore. Joseph told me this—I didn't know it. He checked with the maintenance department: Why are they doing this today? And they said, you know how wood that's in the sun really rots if you don't paint it every couple of years. The contractors have been so busy this year that this is the only time they could come, and we were lucky to get them now. Otherwise, that wall would just be falling down around our ears. We should be blessing them for painting.

But anyway, you can think of mindfulness as what brings us out of our entrancement, all our stories, out of the reactivity, back to the bare experience. That's our mindfulness practice—to meet this moment, whatever's arising, in a non-preferential, non-judgmental way. The light of awareness doesn't say to only pay attention to what's pleasant or minimally neutral and try to ignore the unpleasant until it's so strong that you can't ignore it anymore.

We don't say that. We also don't say, if it's pleasant or neutral, that's okay, but it's not worth paying attention to. It only matters if it's really suffering, so go right to the suffering and stay there the whole complete sitting. There's nothing else happening but that. We don't say that either.

In other words, it's out of our control. You just sit here, or walk, or eat, and notice what's arising, and notice that it passes. And as much as we can do that—and really, you're doing it a lot in each day of practice—it's not like big fireworks going off. It's just a moment of feeling your foot lift. You might think, "So what? Big deal. What am I getting out of that?" You're being present, for a change, for what's actually happening.

We do that a lot in the day. What happens is the mindfulness gets clearer and brighter, but also more undiscriminating, in that our subtle, unconscious preferences stop running the show. So you begin to notice: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. What do you know? It keeps changing. What do you know? I'm not in control of it. What do you know? Everything keeps changing.

We start to really experience this more and more and more, on many levels. Sometimes it's intellectual. Sometimes it's so cellular it almost bypasses our conscious, mental, verbal understanding. But it's being learned in another way. And sometimes it all comes together at the same time.

As we begin to get it cellularly, impermanence becomes much more obvious. There are times in that obviousness that we see we really do have to open to that sadness, that sense of loss, that poignancy—like in that poem, "as if clinging could save us, being in the pre-trembling of a house that falls." There will be times when we experience that as solid me losing everything, and it's sad. There's loss. There's some aversion in that—we're not quite free in it—but it's okay to feel that. That's part of it.

And I actually think one of our problems with letting ourselves open into impermanence is that this unreliability, this sense of earth tremoring all the time, is generally an unpleasant experience. We don't like to be in this unsettledness. And so we're back in our habit: Unpleasant? Let's just avoid it. Let's go find something that doesn't look like it's changing.

But it's okay to hang out in unpleasant experience. We really learn that freedom, peace, real happiness—the happiness and peace of the Buddha—has nothing to do with pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. It's got nothing to do with things only being pleasant. And really look in yourself. I know when I look in me, when I'm thinking about what freedom would be like, what the unconditioned would be like, what enlightenment would be like—does it include much unpleasant experience? It's got nothing to do with pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. That all just keeps on coming, keeps on going.

If we can just begin to open into that, whether it's poignant or sad or freeing—but when you notice it, rather than hiding, let it be a wake-up call. Oh yeah, touching the edge of change. Great. This is where the letting go of clinging, the heart of non-clinging, can begin to be touched, can begin to become more familiar.

Acceptance of impermanence—it's not gloomy, or like, "Who cares about anything?" That kind of dispassion is a wrong understanding. "Well, everything's changing, so who cares anyway? It's all going to go, why get involved?"

It's not that at all.

When you're not trying to make something stay, it allows us to be so vividly present, to really appreciate this moment. The poignancy lets us really be here because we know it's not going to be the same the next moment. So instead of fighting that or grieving that or shedding tears, it's like, "Oh, this is so beautiful, just as it is now" — and now it's different.

Even the difficulties, because we're so alive in them, so present in them, can take on another context. With my father, when I'm really present in that sadness, in the poignancy of watching someone losing their faculties, when I'm present in it, there's compassion, love, a sense of aliveness. Paradoxically, it's so much sweeter than when I'm trying to make it be different.

And we never know, do we? We never really know what's going to happen next.

It's interesting to notice in your practice ways that you might find yourself assuming permanence. Because we do, don't we? I certainly find myself assuming permanence, and it's interesting to see. Usually when we're assuming permanence, we'll end up in some kind of discomfort or struggle because we're out of harmony with the way things are.

Assuming permanence might be when you find yourself getting frustrated or self-judging or filled with doubt because your practice keeps going up and down. Because you finally had some really good energy

and the next day it went away. When you find yourself thinking, "How can I get it back? What did I do wrong? How can I stabilize in this?" When you have a mood filled with gratitude and the next day you wake up just as cranky as ever, and you think, "What happened? I lost it." Pleasant, unpleasant, coming, going — but we posit permanence.

Whenever you assume that what's happening now is going to continue into the next moment, we're assuming permanence. Whenever we look at this retreat and think it should be like the last one, whenever we're comparing to something we've read or experienced or to someone else we see, we're assuming some kind of permanence. Whenever you find yourself looking for perfection — like there's some perfect mindfulness, some perfect way to walk, something that once you get there, that's how it's going to be — forget about it. We're assuming permanence.

Whenever we think we know what's going to happen in the next moment... it's really quite amazing to me, actually, how much does happen as we think it's going to. That's more what's amazing than how much things change. But once we're really getting it, even for a moment, the fact of impermanence — even if the moment is a pretty awful moment — there's a kind of letting go that really wakes us up to the truth. It's just so different from trying to hold on. And we appreciate just the simple things about not knowing what's going to happen.

Maybe some of you have read the book called *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by a French man who was the editor of *Elle* fashion magazine, a very high-flying guy. When he was about forty-one or forty-two, he got up one day feeling fine, living his life, and had a massive stroke — a cerebral hemorrhage or something. He went into a coma, and when he woke up, he was completely paralyzed except for one eyelid, and his mind was completely clear. It's called locked-in syndrome, where your mind is completely clear and you can't move at all.

He lived like this for about a year and a half before he died. During that time, with the help of a speech therapist, he wrote this book. She would point to the different letters of the French alphabet, and when it would get to the letter he wanted, he would blink the eyelid he could blink, and she'd write it down. He wrote the entire book that way.

It's really a lovely book. I just picked it up last night to look at one quote, and I found myself skimming through the whole thing. He wasn't a spiritual guy, and he didn't have some kind of spiritual transformation. But he's writing from the perspective of someone who got so hit in the face with impermanence that you can't deny it anymore. It's just a series of vignettes of his life — some horrible, some lovely — but reading it is so poignant and so filled with a love of life. I come away from it deeply touched.

The passage I wanted to read is about how being present to simple things really wakes us up. He's talking about letters he receives — people write to him and someone reads them aloud. He says: "Some letters relate the small events that punctuate the passage of time. Roses picked at dusk, the laziness of a rainy

Sunday, a child crying himself to sleep. Capturing the moment, these small slices of life, these small gusts of happiness, move me more deeply than anything else."

It just hits me, that sense of total presence. Just this moment. It doesn't matter really what it is — sitting and feeling your bum hurt, drinking a cup of tea, watching my father die. Whatever is happening, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, deeply sorrowful, joyously happy — it's all just part of the show.

begin to open to that, the peace that the Buddha spoke about emerges. When he says he has discovered the true liberation of heart, the peace of non-clinging—the heart, the mind, can let go.

And in that letting go, just of clinging to little things, just in a moment—think of it in a moment, not some whole vastness of life, just in a moment—when the heart lets go of that needing to change or hold on to or manipulate or control things, peace is here. It's always here. It's so simple.

You'll lose it again. That's okay. But just to trust enough to look, to meet this moment and allow the heart to let go. You can't even make it let go. Just by connecting, seeing things the way they are, really getting impermanence, it lets go by itself.

And this, really, in a moment, is the peace the Buddha talked about. Not the peace of some lasting state of mind or heart. Not the peace of some ongoing pleasant experience. But that relationship of non-clinging that allows us to be so fully here without being caught up in being here at all.

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