Nature of Insight

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:21

Tonight I want to talk about insight—the nature of insight and supports for insight. After all, this is called insight meditation. So you may have been wondering: when are you going to get an insight? What actually is an insight? What do we mean by insight?

In some ways, it's obvious. It's not a piece of knowledge that we somehow acquire and then have. It's not "Now I will understand impermanence, and I've got it." An insight is that kind of aha moment when we suddenly experience ourselves or a particular situation, or the way we understand a particular situation, just shifts by itself. It's nothing that we can make happen, which is, of course, endlessly frustrating to us.

The thing about insight is the situation itself doesn't necessarily change. It's not that somehow we fixed everything. It's just a sudden shift in perception that changes our whole attitude to and potential response within whatever the particular situation or issue happens to be going on. So it's not a result of thinking. Let me read from Thich Nhat Hanh:

"Understanding does not arise as a result of thinking. It is the result of a long process of conscious awareness. Sometimes understanding can be translated into thoughts, but often thoughts are too rigid and limited to carry much understanding."

Insight is just literally, in my experience, a shift of perception. When we translate what the Buddha talked about as understanding things in the wrong way, or wrong view, I really like that translation—wrong view—as not being metaphorical but being quite literal. We're viewing ourselves, we're viewing our moment-to-moment experience wrongly, inaccurately. And insight is when that perception, in various ways, makes a little sudden shift.

The example I use a lot for the shift of perception—it's pretty apt—is those magic eye graphic photos. They have whole books of them. You look at it and it's two or three or four colors of just different graphic design. There's no particular recognizable literal image. But the whole trick to the magic, as you know, is if you look at it steadily in a particular way, which I've found is actually sort of unfocused but steady, suddenly a 3D image of something recognizable is there. It's like it suddenly leaps out. Suddenly there's dinosaurs, where before it was just little green and red images. And you really see it. Dinosaurs. It's not a trick. And then if you look away or you start looking too hard, it's gone. Shift of perception.

Until you see it for yourself, you can be told day in, day out, up the wazoo, "There's dinosaurs there." And until you see it, you may believe it or not believe it. You may beat yourself over the head trying to see the dinosaurs, which as we know doesn't work. The more you try, the more you grasp at trying to see it, the

less likely you will see it.

Once you've seen it, then the next one that comes along, you don't know what's in it, but there's a shift in the mind stream, a shift in the understanding, and you know: "Oh, this looks like it could also be a magic eye." You don't know for sure. Maybe someone's tricking you and making a little graphic image and there isn't anything in it. That's possible. But you know it's possible to have that shift of perception, and it gets easier and easier. And it's also okay that it goes back. In a way, both of those ways of perceiving are possible.

That's really the kind of shift of perception that happens over and over in life, just in regular situations, but also—and particularly what I want to talk about tonight—in our meditation practice, in the way that we perceive and then understand our mind and body process.

That shift of perception comes with the magic eye, or maybe in daily life there's some problem you're mulling over, how to fix it, or something creative. We all know how when we let go of clinging so tightly to "what do I do," and just relax the whole thing and be present, often something unexpected springs up—whether we call it intuition or whatever. That comes from the heart, the mind, that lets go, that relaxes clinging to either a particular "I've got to know this," or "this is the way it is," or "I know," or trying to see what we think we need to see.

It's in the relaxing of the clinging, but with a continuing, steady, connected attention and awareness, that the shift of perception we call insight is possible. And as we all know, we can't hold on to the insight. We can't necessarily keep that shift of perception. And while the insight is not thought itself, of course we're going to think about it.

Thoughts will arise to explain it. Back to the 3D image, just the way I described it. "Oh, okay, there's something about optical illusion and the way it's arranged and a 3D image arises." There's nothing wrong with that. Just recognizing that's our use of thought to explain or describe something. But it isn't the same thing as the insight.

And we can't get back to hold on to always be perceiving in that new insightful way by continuing to hold on to the thoughts. So it's just seeing they're two different functions. Thought isn't bad. It's useful if we recognize it for what it is. But if we think we're going to grab a hold and think and think—you know, if I start thinking, "How can I look at these things in the correct way to see the soccer players? What is it?"—no, no, no, you completely lose it.

So the insights that come in practice, they're momentary, but they affect a change in the mind stream, don't they? It's like we see things in a different way, and it's never quite the same again. And they have varying degrees of effect.

A very common example would be sitting with pain—that's very common, we know that—and really bringing the attention over and over, gently, into the pain. Just seeing all the fluctuations the mind is going

through around the unbearableness: "I'll just stay with it, I'll grit my teeth, I'm going to break my leg," spacing out, going into fantasy, the suffering, the craziness, whatever. And somewhere in there, maybe somewhere down the line, there's a little moment where the whole awareness is just totally present with that pain. In that moment, it's just sensation. You're not thinking about it. You're totally present. There's a total surrender, a letting go of trying to fix it, of trying to describe it, of trying to get away from it—of anything. Just total presence. And in that moment, it's like, oh, it's no longer suffering. You don't even think that. It's just, "Oh, okay, what's the problem?"

It doesn't last, does it? And that not lasting may just be that the attention wavers, or it may be that some thoughts start to come in, or there's a grasping of "Wow, this is great, how can I keep it?" The situation, the circumstance changes because it's always changing. And we're back in the suffering. Maybe the suffering seems worse because there's that thought in our mind: "Wait a minute. A minute ago, this was all okay. Now it's suffering. It's so much worse. I wish I never knew it could be okay. I wish I never heard of this dharma. I was much better off when I was ignorant."

But it's too late. It's not really a conscious option that we can take very well anymore—to just dull ourselves out. Even though I'm making a joke, you know, the suffering seems worse, but there's a shift in the mind stream. We've had a touch of, "Oh, right. Where is the suffering here?"

We can then think about it. You can extrapolate from an insight like that all the Buddhist teachings, really—the whole Four Noble Truths. There's suffering, which we would have said was "my knee is killing me, that's the suffering"—no surprise there. But in that shift of perception, that insight, we see that the suffering is the reactive mind. There was an ending, a cessation of that suffering. The mind let go into total presence—no more suffering. And the path out of suffering, in this case, is the path of clear awareness, not clinging, but steady, connected attention.

That's thinking. It's useful to help us understand and sort of digest what happens, and it can give us a guideline for how to meet pain the next time, but it can't hold on to that insight for us. But it's okay, because we learn to really trust that this understanding which comes from insight affects change on a cellular level—the way I like to put it. Like we're learning on a level below the level of conscious thought. And we learn to trust that.

So in that moment of insight, what really happens is we've seen through, you could say, wrong view. The wrong view that "I'm really suffering because my knee's hurting, and if the pain would stop, then everything would be okay. And it can only be okay if the pain stops." One woman on a retreat told me this little example. I love it because it's so perfect.

In the middle of a long sitting during an afternoon, it was very hot—a retreat in summer, a crowded room, kind of stifling. She was really restless, that kind of restlessness where you feel you're going to jump out of your skin. "I cannot bear this another minute." So she stood up. The hall was crowded, she was in the back, and to get out she would have been walking through people, creaking across the floor, and so on.

Sometimes social pressure keeps you there. And sometimes that's good. In this case, it was good.

So she was standing there—"I can't bear this, it's so unpleasant"—the agitation, the restlessness, so unpleasant. And suddenly, just as she was about to leave, she said, she had the thought: "Oh, right. This is just uncomfortable sensation. What's the problem? I can be with uncomfortable sensation." And the whole huge thing just fell away.

Now, it continued to be uncomfortable sensation. It's not that suddenly she was floating on a cloud of bliss. But the whole sense of struggle and suffering and needing to get out was gone. And she really was awake in that shift. Sometimes it happens and we just kind of zone out and don't notice—it isn't really quite an insight then because we don't really take it in. But she really noticed. "Ah, wow." Nothing changed but the perception, almost the way of relating, the way of describing what's going on in that situation. But it changes everything.

And it was really a profound moment for her because it then affects our mind stream. It affects the habits of mind. Nothing is quite as solid the way we thought it was. And that's really what is going on in a meditation retreat—why we have so much emphasis on the moment-to-moment continuity of mindfulness throughout all the sitting and walking in the day. To really begin to allow our attention to get clear, connected, but not clinging, not holding to preconceived notions. Open for discovery. Because we can't decide, as I said, we can't make insight happen. Even when we've had it before, we can't make it happen again. All we can do is set up supporting conditions, and then pray to God some spontaneous insight arises before we get too discouraged. I'm kidding—it's just to set up supportive conditions. That's what we're doing here.

The main factors that I would say support the arising of these shifts of perception are exactly what we're doing here: learning how to bring a totality of attention together, of awareness of all our mental and physical energy, how to collect that in a moment and the next moment and bring it wholeheartedly to whatever is arising by itself. We meet it with bare attention. What Rodney talked about the other night is caring attention. It's an attention that has no preconceived notions, no preference, no underlying subtle conceptual ideas of "if I pay attention to this emotion, I will learn X, Y, Z." "If I bring non-judging, total attention to this pain, it's bound to go away because we know how things dissolve in the light of awareness." "That happened yesterday, so that meant I was doing it right—how to get there again."

You see how quickly, how quickly the non-clinging, non-judging, non-conceptual attention gets the subtle overlay of some notion, some idea, something we think we know or want to learn. But pure awareness, open for discovery, not even trying to discover—just to meet whatever's arising, totally, totally present. And in that, there's the possibility for perception to shift. Just the possibility for something other than what we expect, or think we already know, or don't even know we think we already know, to emerge.

Some perceptions, some ways we view reality—either the reality of who we are, what a human being is, what's going on in our mind and body, or the reality of what's happening in a particular situation—some

of these we hold with such certainty. Yet it's easy, if we simply pay clear attention, for that perception to shift.

Sometimes the ideas, the views, the certainties we're holding to—we don't even know they're views or certainties. We just know that's how the world is.

Let me give you an example of how perception can shift easily. A friend told me this story. She was on a retreat some years ago with Ajahn Sumedho in Switzerland. At that time, to put on a retreat in Switzerland, they would rent these really huge old houses. All over Switzerland there are these big, big houses that youth groups rent in the summer, up in the mountains—fifty, a hundred kids can come and spend a week. So they're old, old, creaky houses with no insulation. You think there are little creaks on the floors here, but every time you'd walk anywhere in those houses, enormous creaks.

So she was sitting during a sitting period, a schedule like this, and the meditation hall was upstairs. As I said, it was really creaky. She was just starting to get focused on her breath, quiet, concentrated, and then she starts hearing: creak, creak, snap, creak. Somebody's walking downstairs. The walking room was downstairs under the meditation hall.

And the aversion that can just spring up immediately from an unpleasant sound! But also the immediate reaction: How can they be walking? You know it's a sitting period. There's a reason we have a schedule so we don't bother one another. And on and on. How do they expect me to get concentrated when this jerk is walking downstairs? Creak, creak, creak.

So this went on for some time during the sitting period. And as long as you're lost in that thought, you're lost in it. There's no chance for anything else to happen. Then she really committed: okay, let me just come back and be with the breath. Just try and be with the breath. So she came back and was feeling her breath. And lo and behold, she noticed that she was sitting with her back leaning against the wall. Every time she took a breath and her back moved out, it hit the wall and made a creak. She was hearing herself breathing against the wall and creaking—and getting completely incensed at this person walking downstairs.

That's a good example. Once you've seen that, there's no going back. But she could only see it by letting go of the story and her anger in the moment. Not even working through it, but just saying, okay, never mind, let me just come back and meet what's happening in the moment, this breath. And something completely unexpected is able to be perceived.

Okay, that's relatively easy, but it does take the same qualities of effort: the commitment to be present, the willingness to come with your full attention to whatever is, the non-clinging, the non-grasping to our ideas of things, and just the willingness to meet this moment fresh. We use the breath, we use the body, we use whatever's arising as a way to bring ourselves into the moment. But it's not really so important which thing she was meeting fresh—just something arising here and now.

So that's easier. But sometimes we can get so locked into not even knowing that we're clinging to a

description of reality that we don't even notice information that shows us we're holding to some very limited idea.

Another example: some years ago I was teaching a retreat in California, about fifty people. It was like five days into the retreat, and I was meeting with a woman. It was her first retreat. There were a lot of people there whose first retreat it was. So when there are a lot of first-timers, we give a lot of very basic instructions, starting from sitting and posture and everything.

She came in, and she was just in agony sitting cross-legged on the floor. Not just some pains, not just some sittings where it hurts—but really in so much agony that nothing was happening except unbearable pain through all her sittings. Which isn't really the most helpful way to begin practice. You're just fighting with willpower.

She came in, and actually I saw her just at the end of this ordeal. She said she had spent four or five days like that because it was clear to her that's what you had to do. You couldn't meditate other than sitting cross-legged. About the fifth day, she looked up. I was sitting on a chair, like I always sit on a chair. She looked up while I was giving instructions or something, and it went in. Five days it took.

It went in. Oh. *Oh*, she's sitting in a chair. And she meditates sitting in a chair. Maybe it's possible to meditate without being cross-legged. It's amazing what our minds can do. And once that was in, of course, it changed. And I encouraged her in that, naturally.

So that's to give you a sense of how, even though we think we're really open and not bringing any baggage, we can be so sure of something—like that woman, so sure that's how you have to meditate—that we don't even have the space to notice something other. We just know this is how it is, and we don't even know we know it. We just... it *is* how it is. You'd argue to the death with someone: this is how it is.

In our practice here, one way that people can suffer a lot is in relationship to how they're evaluating or judging themselves in meditation practice. Sort of like this woman in the example I gave—"I'm not doing it right because I have to sit cross-legged and I'm dying with pain. I can't follow any of the instructions."

One of the things that people get caught up in a lot, in terms of relationship to insight in their practice, is ideas. And each of you can check for yourself: what are the ideas rolling around in there, in your mind, in your heart, that you don't recognize as ideas but that are your beliefs, your descriptions of what either good practice would look like or what kind of state you have to be having in order to have a useful, genuine, liberating insight?

And often it's, "I really want an insight into anatta, into no-self." And the imagination of that is either "I have to be so incredibly concentrated in samadhi that I can get to the eighth formless jhana of neither perception nor non-perception, and then maybe I'll have a blowaway insight into no-self, which will never go away again. It will completely and forever change the way that I perceive myself in life." No more suffering, no more unpleasant feelings, no more self-consciousness, God knows. Certainly no more greed.

That's what we expect from insight.

Okay, I'm exaggerating a little. Maybe. I hope I'm exaggerating a little. But take it down however many notches and then look at your own practice and see if you're writing off what's happening now as something you've got to get through, get over, move out of—to get to a decent enough state that you can begin to really see something useful about life, about practice, about yourself, about liberation, about impermanence, about anatta.

So the thing about insight, this spontaneous shift of perception—it can happen any time, in the midst of any situation, throughout the day, whatever you're doing. I have some of my best insights in the in-between times, you know? Just walking into the toilet booth. I'm still present, but that little bit of extra trying to get somewhere has dropped away. And you're just present without the clinging, and *ah*, something comes up into awareness that I hadn't noticed before.

So really looking—sometimes practice is very subtle. Very subtle sensations of breath, subtle sensations of body. There's not much emotion and you're just really noticing the fine movements of attention. Generally, we like that. Generally, we think it's good, unless it bores you. Unless what you think should be going on is really strong emotional release, having something interesting to talk about, or at least to look at, or at least to feed a sense of, "We're really working on something here. We're really getting to the bottom of something now. Now I'm about to have the ultimate experience of my sadness, my grief, my rage." Ultimate meaning it's going to be gone, right? And then I'm free from it. So good, let's bring it on and have an insight.

And when it doesn't come, and it's just subtle breath, sensations, and you come in and go, "But this is so boring. There's nothing useful going on here."

But it doesn't matter what's happening. Whatever you're thinking needs to be gotten through in order to get to the level where you can have insight—that's a big mistake. Big mistake. Anything that's happening, just the mind being all over the place—it's the rich field of insight. The insight's not about what's happening; it's about our relationship to it.

When you're holding to anything as me, and suddenly that shifts, and you see, "Oh, this is just conditions arising"—that's insight into anatta. Like someone told me last retreat. They were having so much fear. They'd be afraid of the people in the hall. They'd walk out into the dining room and just be afraid of that. They'd walk outside and feel afraid of the space. They'd go to their room at night and be afraid.

And, you know, having – of course it's not pleasant – so some resistance to the fear, and also a kind of focusing while trying to tell themselves there's nothing going on in this room, there's nothing to be afraid of. This is a nice place in the country, there's nothing to be afraid of. The people in the dining room are minding their own business, there's nothing to be afraid of. Like that.

And suddenly they said, "Oh, I don't have to focus on all the objects – it's just fear. Awareness can be aware

of fear." Fear. And it's just fear arising in the space of awareness. And it was really fine. Still fear, but not that sense of me and other and fix it and what do I do, and each new fear being a whole new gestalt to work through. Just: ah, fear.

That's a powerful insight into anatta, into the fact that fear arises due to conditions. You don't always know what they are. Awareness can be aware of fears like this. It doesn't have to refer back to me. And in that, there's so much space and not so much suffering. You can't hold on to relating in that way permanently, but it really changes the mind stream. You know it's possible.

Or I remember someone else was saying they were filled – there was some other yogi there who was driving them crazy. I know that's not happening here with anybody, but it was a different retreat. Some yogi was just driving this person crazy, doing what they thought were inappropriate things. Anyway, the person was filled with rage and anger, really trying to work with it, trying not to buy in, but really filled with rage. And they would come to the interview and say, "I can't believe it – and they spoke to me, and they did this, and they did that. I'm trying to feel the anger," you know, underlying that sense of, "Well, really, they are being a jerk" – that kind of self-righteous meanness.

But anyway, he said all of a sudden, after some days – a couple of days of this, not steady state, that's another thing – somehow there was a moment when he wasn't holding on to either the anger or the sense of himself as righteous or the judging himself for being angry, which is also holding on, right? Just a moment of pure attention. I think he must have been working with this person; there was some reason they were in proximity. And he just looked, saw this person's face – not trying to look, but just an open, completely present, non-clinging-to-any-view moment. And in that seeing of the face, he felt such a movement of compassion for that person.

You just get an intuitive sense of their suffering, and such a movement of compassion. It was so powerful that it just blew this guy out of the water in terms of his whole belief system – not only about what was going on in relation to how completely inappropriate that person was, but his own belief system about himself. Because he never would have thought he could feel that level of compassion, which only arises through open-hearted connection. Compassion doesn't arise when we're pushing away pain, others or ourselves. It's a connection.

And it just blew him away to see, to feel that possibility, that completely other way of relating in a situation. It really showed him a whole other possibility in his own assessment of his own internal experience and what was possible for himself. He would have previously not thought that was possible for him. "I'm a person who can't feel that level of compassion." The ideas we hold about ourselves based on non-continuous attention, based on not really seeing the truth of how things are.

So we don't have the conscious power really to decide what we want to see. And some of you have even said that in a different way coming into the interviews – "I came here with the idea that I was going to work on this particular issue." Maybe it's a huge issue in your life, or maybe it's the way practice was. Like

someone said, "I always want to come to retreat and pick up right where I left off at the last retreat." We do that. Good place. We forgot. We forgot the first days, right? Which is a good function of bad memory, because it gets us back... Every retreat I start, it's like, "Oh God, right – that first day. I forgot."

But anyway, people come and think, "I'm going to work on my grief" or whatever, or this situation in life. But it's not coming up. It's not coming up. And we decide, "I think I really want to work on seeing impermanence today."

We might decide, "I'm going to see impermanence wherever I look." And you can sort of do that, incline your mind in that direction. But it may be a day when judging and aversion is what's actually up. Yes, you can see the impermanence of judging and aversion—you can. But we can't control what we're going to see. We don't have that conscious power. And that wanting to control is actually a clinging that again freezes experience, that doesn't allow for the unexpected insight, the shift of perception to arise.

So, for example, we can read about emptiness, get some idea of it, and then we start looking in our practice for that. That looking alone, I can guarantee, is going to preclude noticing emptiness—whatever the heck that is—because whatever idea we have about it is already too much, and then we're looking for that idea on top of it. Looking for is the best way not to see anything.

Krishnamurti's phrase "freedom from the known" speaks to this so truly. That's what mindfulness, bare attention, just a moment of it, truly is: a total presence that's free from the known and so open for fresh discovery. Open just to meet this moment completely new and fresh, completely free from the known.

The deepest patterns or misperceptions—I would say—that the Buddha spoke of often, the ones that are hardest to see through because we misperceive so steadily, are what the Buddha often talked of as the three characteristics. We perceive what is constantly changing, what is impermanent, as permanent or lasting. We all know we do this intellectually, but this misperception is on a cellular level almost. Or we perceive what is constantly changing, what can never give us any lasting satisfaction or happiness, as satisfying, as what's going to make us happy. And we perceive what is not self, what is basically out of control, as somehow being me—a lasting, permanent me—or belonging to me, and thus in some way subject to control.

Now all of these things—what is changing, what is essentially unsatisfying because it's changing, what is out of control, not self—that's everything that we can experience, mind and body. Everything fits those three characteristics. All phenomena that come and go.

And because we don't just hold on to those perceptions—they're arising moment to moment—and we don't even notice they're arising because it's so familiar, we generally just don't even think about it. It's just how things are.

All the struggle with the sense of self, and "How can there be no self?"—as soon as we talk about anattā, the questions arise: "Well, if I'm not self, who decided to come here? If there's no self, who's eating? How

would I go to work? How would I know which family to go back to if there's no self?" All that kind of questioning arises because it's such a foreign concept to us, because we're continually, unconsciously reinforcing the sense of permanence, the sense of me back here driving the show, the sense that somewhere there's some experience that is reliable and comfortable, that's going to give me ease and peace, some experience that I can hold on to for satisfaction.

That's just so much an unconscious part of us until we begin to meet our moment-to-moment experience freshly, that it's really hard to see through. And just deciding, "I know intellectually that things change, so I'm ready to see through it. I'm ready now. I get it. I'm ready to put down my misperceptions of permanence. From now on, I'm living in the now. Constant change!"—we've probably tried that. It might work for a moment or two. But then it's just so habitual that we perceive the other way.

And sometimes on retreat, this is why the continuity of attention, of awareness, is so important—because it's in the steadiness moment after moment that constant change begins to reveal itself. You can't hide from it.

The fact that things are out of control—is that a big surprise when you think about it? If you think about any sitting you've had, is it news that the experience of the sitting was out of your control? Have you ever, ever been able to sit down and totally control what happened in a sitting? But have you given up somewhere? No?

When your sitting's going really well and then suddenly it goes south—I'm not sure why that's an expression for bad; I apologize to Southerners, my parents are Southerners too—but anyway, when the sitting goes south, do we still tend to think, "What did I do wrong?" Or do we go, "Of course, everything's in constant change and flux, so it's changed. Next moment." Once in a while, maybe. But generally, the first thought is, "I should be able to control it, and I've done something wrong." Hence, the pleasantness has changed.

And so the steadiness of attention begins to allow more and more opportunities for an alternate, more accurate perception.

Sometimes that perception—say, of *anicca*—I'll use *anicca* as an example because it's a good one. Intellectually, conceptually, the fact that things are in constant change isn't really a hard concept to wrap around, is it? It's not like *anattā*. Basically, we would all agree. But cellularly, the way we actually live—what would it mean to really, really live knowing that every moment is in constant change? To really live from that, not clinging to something that we know is already changing. That would be so different.

Many experiences, many insights can come into impermanence, and they can be at times very peaceful, very energizing. Sometimes after an insight you get a lot of energy, really inspired. And sometimes it can actually be quite frightening. It can go all ways.

One example: just this last retreat I was sitting, eating and chewing very carefully. I wasn't looking for insights into impermanence or anything. I was just really present with eating and enjoying whatever it was. Chewing it, and then I swallowed it. It was just one of those moments where as soon as I swallowed, it was so clearly gone. Do you know what I mean? It was just gone. It wasn't there. It wasn't anywhere. It was gone. I know it sounds silly, but then I thought, "Well, not gone—you can feel it in the throat." No, that's a thought. That actual food taste, that moment, is totally, irrevocably gone. Can't be back.

And that's how it is with every moment. It's there, and then that moment is irrevocably gone. The next moment, maybe I could feel something here, but that's not the food that was in my mouth. That's not the taste I was tasting. It's just a thought that says, "Oh, that's the food now working with the saliva and going down into my throat." And that thought, if we don't see it as a thought arising in the moment, we don't see impermanence. We see there's the food and now it's changed and it's going down my throat, and there's this whole nice sense of continuity, and behind it all is me experiencing that.

So just that moment of gone-ness—it was great. I loved it. Wow. And without thinking a lot about it, I just naturally started to notice how one moment just falls away and the next moment falls away. It didn't last all day or anything, but it was a real insight, the kind that is just peaceful and so obviously true that we're resting. It's easy.

But often, sometimes people have an experience when there's some concentration where the sense of the form of the body falls away, and it's just sensations arising in space, or no sense of the body at all. Or some really difficult emotions are there, and it's so "me," and then it just vanishes, and it's so confusing to have it gone. Even though at first it's far out, there's such a dissonance with our normal way of being that really quickly the normal views and opinions, the normal way of perceiving things, come back in with a vengeance. You've had this opening, and then fear, fear. Or the fear has the function of shutting the mind down, and everything's solid again right away. Nothing you can do about it. It just happens. Then you spend three weeks trying to get to that place where the body's open and it's just sensation. So what? But that kind of dissonance—because we don't really realize how subtle and deep these misperceptions are, how deeply entrained in the process of noticing.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama pointed out once, when I was listening to a teaching of his on impermanence, one of the reasons that even though on an intellectual level we get it—why is it that we still get so shocked when things change? Why is it we still keep holding on? It's that on some level, we tend to think of impermanence as: things arise, they last for a while, and then they pass away. So it can be: my life arises, lasts for a while, and passes away.

The sitting starts, lasts for a while, it passes away. Or this emotion, or my knee pain, or whatever—this day. But really, if it's something we like, it's just that the passing away happens before we were ready for it to. So I know it's going to pass, but it has this much more time it should go before it passes. Then I can let it go, but not now.

My parents are quite elderly, and when they started to really decline—my father got Parkinson's—it was such a shock. And I saw how really, on one level, I could say, well, of course, you turn eighty-three, stuff happens. But on another level, emotionally, cellularly, my body and mind wasn't quite accepting it. How can this be? It's like a kind of shock.

So his point, His Holiness's point, is that there isn't some steady state time between when something arises and when it passes. Change is momentary. Every moment is flux. Every moment of life is arising and passing, arising and passing. And like someone pointed out to me after I said this in a talk, there's nine billion plus nanoseconds in one second. That's a lot. Nine billion plus in one second. That's a lot of moments coming and going.

One of the things that happens in retreat as the mind gets quieter is that sometimes you start to see. One of the first insights is how fast the mind moves. If you're feeling overwhelmed by how many thoughts there are and how fast they're moving and how out of control they are—that's insight into impermanence, into dukkha, and into anattā. Right there. Welcome to insight. Your mind is out of control. It moves at an unbelievable rate of speed. It's changing faster than we can notice it. And that's not a mistake. That's the way life is. Not just now, not just because your mind's a little quieter. It's always how it is. It's not that once we have an insight into impermanence, things change and get impermanent. They've always been. It's always in constant flux. It's always out of control.

That feeling we get of being a square peg in a round hole, that dissonance when we have an insight—that dissonance is because of our kind of unconscious holding on. No, no, no. Let it change, but not so fast. Let this sense of being out of control... I know there's some way I can get to a place where it's controlled.

Personally, in my own experience, I find this in terms of anicca—staying with anicca, the fact that even as much as we know it intellectually, and as much as we experience the complexity, the unceasing change, how fast things are moving. And I know that, cellularly. I've experienced it in many different ways, millions of times, on and off retreat. I know it. It's the kind of thing I know. And still, still, when something unexpected happens or something I really love goes away or changes, there's a shorter or longer period of time where I think, no, this can't go. Why?

So why do we cling? It's so poignant because it's the clinging in service of trying to be happy that's actually keeping the suffering going. It's keeping us in delusion, the confusion of seeing ourselves and the world all wrong. And it's as if we believe that if we really see how much things change, the sadness will be too unbearable. The pain is too much. But it's just the opposite, isn't it? It's the refusing, the trying to deny it, that keeps the pain going. But it's so hard.

It's so poignant. Looking in myself and talking to people, my sense is that the clinging—whether it's to sense experience, to objects, or to having a particular internal experience, or to people in our lives, or to images we hold of ourselves, even suffering ones, particularly suffering ones—we really hold on. "This is who I am. This self-conscious person, this shameful person, this aversive person. I know this is who I am. I

could never feel compassion like that. Maybe that guy did, but I never could. I just beat myself up all the time."

Why do we cling? And I see that sense of really letting go into the total flux. Once we've actually totally let go into it, there's not a me resisting. It's not a problem. It's just opening to the mystery of each moment. It's wonderful. But on the way, that shaky ground, that place of unreliability—I find for myself it's so scary on some level that the clinging is like looking for somewhere to rest.

Have you ever been in an earthquake? It's strange, because you want to hold on to something to find solidity, but it's the earth that's moving. There's nothing anywhere to hold on to. It's like, "Well, this isn't supposed to happen. The earth, at least, is supposed to be reliable. Something, somewhere." And it was really like a cellular experience of, "Oh my God, everything's all topsy-turvy." The mind doesn't like it too much. And we put so much reliance and identification into our mind, into our thoughts, into our descriptions.

So I find this grasping for something—a moment of pleasure, a description of the world, a description of myself, a view, an opinion, a sense of knowing what this means. As soon as your practice changes: "Oh, I was holding on to that, but now it's like this. Now I know what good mindfulness is like." Looking for somewhere to rest.

The Buddha said—I love this quotation—"The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful." The search for a resting place is burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful.

So we can't decide to see impermanence. But we can have the willingness to use the tools of the meditation practice and the continuity, the willingness to keep bringing that clear attention back moment after moment just to what's happening. And guess what? You can't not notice impermanence, because nothing lasts very long.

That really intense pain that's been there all day—if you really look, even if the pain seems to stay when you bring the attention into it, it's not steady state. There's changing in it. That bad mood, that anguish or that fear—if you really moment after moment look, it's there. Then it changes. The fear slides into impatience. It slides into terror. It slides into some whole story about the past, and it's not fear at all. It slides into wondering what's for lunch. It slides into boredom. It slides into—three hours later—"this fear." "Oh yes, this fear's been here all day. That's who I am, a fearful person."

Without a continuity of mindfulness, we don't notice how fast these thoughts and emotions come and go. And we just, without the steadiness of attention, don't realize how we kind of subconsciously dance away from the dissonance, the discomfort, the poignance, or the sadness of the changing nature of things, of seeing that there's nothing to hold on to.

But touching that poignance, that sadness, is what opens us up to the totality of life, to really living. I feel like it's living in three dimensions rather than in two—opening into the total mysteriousness that we

never know what's going to happen in the next moment. Do we ever, really? It's more amazing that we have this schedule and ring the bells and you all show up and it sort of happens. That's actually more amazing, you know.

But really, we never know what's going to happen in the next moment. And opening to the poignance, opening to the willingness to feel the movement of things, the changing of things, the moving away of things—it actually opens us into love. Love of the moment. Love of this moment of life. Appreciation for all aspects. A real celebration of the mystery that we never know what is going to happen. Appreciation and love for each other—not the appreciation of holding on because your presence is going to make me happy, but just the appreciation of here we are, and who knows what's going to happen in the next moment.

I just want to close by reading some stanzas from a poem by Galway Kinnell, because to me it really expresses the feeling of impermanence—the sadness, the denial, and how the acceptance of it opens us to the exquisite wonder and beauty of life and love.

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 that 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," little maud. 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.

Yes, you cling because I, like you, only sooner than you, will go down the path of vanished alphabets, the roadlessness to the other side of the darkness, your arms like the shoes left behind, like the adjectives in the halting speech of very old men, which used to be able to call up the forgotten nouns.

Back you go into your crib. The last blackbird lights up his gold wings. Farewell.

Your eyes close inside your head in sleep. Already in your dreams the hours begin to sing.

Little sleep's head sprouting hair in the moonlight, when I come back, we will go out together. We will walk out together among the ten thousand things, each scratched in time with such knowledge—the wages of dying is love.

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