Perception of Impermanence

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:20

One of the three marks of existence in the way the Buddha speaks about things is that of impermanence, *a nicca* in the Pali—the fact that things change.

The Buddha spoke so often about the centrality of this insight, this understanding of the nature of conditioned existence, of the power, the freeing power, of our really coming to know this as a truth.

I want to read you a couple of quotations from him. He was talking to a monk, and he said: "Bhikkhu, there is no form, no *vedana*, no feeling tone, no perception, no volitional formation, no consciousness"—that's the five aggregates that make up a human being—"none of any of those five that is permanent, stable, eternal, that is not subject to change, and that will remain the same just like eternity itself."

Then the Blessed One took up a little bit of dirt in his fingernail, a tiny little bit of dirt, and he said, "There's not even this much form that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change. Not even this little bit under my fingernail of all the form in the world. If there were this much form that were stable, eternal, not subject to change, that was permanent, then this living of the holy life where the complete destruction of suffering could not be discerned—it wouldn't be possible. But because there is not even this much form, and all the five aggregates, this much form, this much feeling, *vedana*, feeling tone, this much perception, mental formations, consciousness that is stable, that is permanent—then there is the living of this holy life for the complete destruction of suffering."

It's a powerful statement. Not even that much that is unchanging, that is permanent. That's quite radical.

One other statement from him: "Bhikkhus, when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated, that perception eliminates all sensual lust, it eliminates all lust for existence, it eliminates all ignorance, it uproots all conceit 'I am.'" That basically means a completely enlightened human being. Those are different ways of describing it—when the perception of impermanence is developed and cultivated.

I think that's a really interesting way to point to it: the perception of impermanence. Remember, perception, *saññā* in Pali, is that recognition of what is. It's one of the five aggregates. It's arising in every moment of contact. It's just that simple recognition. When I ring the bell, you hear the sound—"bell" just comes up in the mind. Perception.

So the perception of impermanence. Why should that be something we need to develop? If impermanence is the way it is, and that's what he's telling us, why should we have to develop and cultivate the perception

of it? Why don't we, if in fact we don't, really truly know in our guts, in our cells, however you want to put it? I like to think of it as knowing it cellularly. Why don't we? And if you think you do, is that how you live? Really knowing that there's not even this much under your fingernail of something that's stable and permanent?

I think it's interesting. Of the three characteristics—*anicca*, the fact of change; *dukkha*, the unreliability or sometimes suffering aspect; and non-self—conceptually, intellectually, to me, the fact of impermanence is the easiest to comprehend. It's not so abstruse, really, is it? It's not so abstract. We can get it with our mind. And probably we wouldn't really argue about the fact that things change.

But when it comes to this level of perception, there's some way that we tend at times not to perceive the actuality of impermanence, but rather to perceive permanence—and proceed then to construct our thoughts, our views, our lives, how we relate, around this perception that things aren't really changing. At least not right now. At least, somewhere in the future they'll change, but I don't have to worry about that yet.

There's a huge amount of denial, which is not necessarily conscious. Maybe in another talk I'll explore how denial fascinates me as a power of mind. It's amazing. But I won't go too much into it other than denial of impermanence, which is big enough in itself.

The big picture—in some cultures it's not as hidden as it is here. Life and death, the change of seasons, tides coming and going—we're pretty clear that these things happen, that these changes happen. But still, when it actually happens to us or someone we're close to, there's this response: "Wait, wait, this isn't supposed to happen." There's a kind of denial, at least in the culture I grew up in, a way that these big changes aren't included as a natural part of life.

When I was in Burma this January, helping to teach a three-week retreat in Sagaing, near Mandalay, we stayed at the Chanmyay Monastery, a beautiful spot right above the Irrawaddy River. One day, the other teachers and managers—five or six of us—were taking a walk along the river. Just down from the monastery, about a five-minute walk, there was a whole bunch of people gathered, maybe a hundred people, up on the wall looking down at the river, going down into the river. There were some nuns from the neighboring nunnery that we're friends with, and they came running toward us.

We went up and asked them what was going on. One of our friends is the translator, so he speaks fluent Burmese. They explained that four or five young novice monks had been playing down in the river. A lot of young boys, from age eight or nine up to their early teens, become novice monks and live in monasteries. For some of them, it's the only way they get to go to school. So there are a lot of them, and they're always playing.

Several of them had been playing down in the river, and one of them—who it turned out had only come to this town from far away a week ago, so he wasn't used to the river—had gone under and hadn't come back

up. It had been quite a while, like an hour, and they were all looking for him.

While we waited there, a small little nun named Yeti came running over. She's about six years old now, and they wear pink robes in Burma. She's so cute—she's the cutest nun in the world. We've known her for a few years, so she recognized us. She was there with some of the nuns who had gathered.

They found the boy, brought him up, and took him across the road to a big sala—a large open-air pavilion. It had been an hour; pretty clearly he was dead. They tried to revive him but couldn't. Then they brought a bed, laid him on this really nice wooden frame, brought down clean cloth to lay him on, put him in clean robes, and covered him. And monks sat there with him, chanting.

It was this very natural part of life. Yes, it was sad. People were upset. The little nun Yeti was upset—she knew him. And then some of the elder nuns came and got her and talked to her, and she was there too, chanting. His family lived about 24 hours away, so someone was going to stay there with him all night. Different people stayed and took turns through the night.

They also noticed that the other young boys who had been playing with him had, of course, gotten scared and run away. So they worried about them and went off looking for them because they knew they'd also be upset.

There was just this sense of—it was as sad as it would be for anybody. It was really sad, but it was included as part of life.

I thought about how here, if we pulled a young boy out of the water after an hour and he was clearly dead, we would still have to call 911, and there would be sirens and flashing lights and police, and they'd whisk him off. Don't let the little kids see. Such a different feeling. Whereas actually, the way that everyone stayed there for the 24 hours, taking turns and chanting, was really beautiful. It was really beautiful—the care and just the naturalness of it.

One of our friends we were with said, "You know, I'm 47 years old. I've never seen a dead person." And for some people in our culture, that's the truth. I was struck by the difference, by the way death and change could be more integrated into life. It hasn't been integrated so much in my own life.

So that's kind of the big picture. And there are, of course, finer and finer and finer pictures of the immediacy of change, and I'll talk about that too.

In my mind—I'm sure you can think of more—but two different supports for our denial system come to mind that I want to speak about tonight.

One is, especially with big-picture change like this, a kind of instinctive fear or resistance, a pulling back from sadness. The loss and death and change of things we love brings about sadness, grief, or a sense that something's wrong.

Basically, it comes back to the first noble truth that we've talked about. When things happen that we don't like, our instinctive sense is: this is wrong, how can I fix it? And if I get enlightened, then nothing wrong is ever going to happen anymore. There's this kind of shrinking back, a way of not quite even consciously recognizing—somehow it's a way of just not quite opening wholly to the fact of constant change.

Or if we feel sorrow or sadness, it's as if there's something wrong with us.

And yes, from reading the Buddha, from how he talks, if you were completely, 100% knowing the truth of impermanence, the mind wouldn't cling. There wouldn't be that sadness. But still, we don't have to judge or hate or fear the sadness. That's also simply a part of life.

In the suttas, in the stories of the Buddha, there's one place with Ananda, who is so lovable—if you could use that word for a monk who was the attendant of the Buddha for 25 years and quite austere. But he comes across as very human, very kind. In a lot of the suttas, he's the person that we can project onto: "Oh, I could imagine being like that." It kind of humanizes the suttas a little bit for me.

So Ananda, who's been with the Buddha for 25 years as his devoted attendant—when the Buddha basically announces that he's going to die within three months, he and Ananda get involved in a discussion about what to do with the funeral and such. And then Ananda kind of disappears. "He went into his lodging and stood lamenting, leaning on the doorpost: 'Alas, I am still a learner with much to do, and the teacher is passing away who is so compassionate to me.'" He's basically leaning in the door crying: "My teacher's leaving, what am I going to do?"

And the Buddha, of course, with his all-knowing mind, inquired of the monks, "Where's Ananda?" Of course, he knew. And so they told him, and he said, "Please tell him to come here." Then it says, "Friend Ananda, the Buddha summons you."

So Ananda comes, and the Buddha says, "Enough, Ananda. Do not weep and wail. Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? So how could it be, Ananda—since whatever is born, become, compounded, is subject to decay—how could it be that it should not pass away?"

This is Ananda, who's been listening to the Buddha for 25 years and remembers every single one of his sermons by heart. So take heart. It just goes so deep: "You can't leave me. What am I going to do?" It's just part of our human nature. We don't need to flinch away from that sadness sometimes, that poignancy. We can open to it, and then it allows us also to see the truth.

So the nature of insight, the perception of impermanence—actually all insight really—it's not that with insight into impermanence, things change. It's not that things don't change until you have the perception of impermanence and then things start to change. It's already like that. It's like that right now. Everything—there's not that little bit of dirt under the fingernail that's exempt. It's already like that.

It's not like if you start perceiving impermanence, everything's going to descend into chaos and you're not going to be able to function. It's already like that. It's so interesting that we kind of know, but it's too scary: "I don't want to know that. It's going to wreck everything." Actually... I mean, we're getting through life, but how well are we really functioning with our trying to hold on to things and imagining that stuff's permanent when it really isn't?

So the shift in perception that happens—that's the insight, whether it's into impermanence or non-self or whatever—is just seeing things in a different way. It doesn't change how things are. It's just like when you have a problem and you're trying to figure it out, and suddenly from left field something hits you: "Oh, I could look at it that way." That's what it's like. Just a shift in perception. The actuality doesn't change. How we understand changes, and thus how we relate to experience, to ourselves, to life—that's what changes dramatically.

That's what affects liberation of mind and heart: the way we relate to experience. We're spending all our time trying to get different experience, but we're still relating to it in the same way. We're just spinning in the same circle. If you're spending your time trying to get to that one big blowout—peaceful or concentrated or empty or whatever you're looking for—experience, and somewhere in an unspoken way back there is the belief (we're pretending we don't have it, but we really do) that "I'm going to get here and it's going to stay, it's always going to be like this," then we're just functioning in the same old way. We've just changed objects.

We're holding the possibility of permanence in that way. So looking at how we relate—that's what changes with our understanding.

Let's examine the perception of impermanence and the perception of permanence. Perception is really an interesting thing to explore. I find it fascinating. The Buddha spoke about inverted perceptions, distorted perceptions—*vipallāsa*. It's like we see things upside down or backwards.

In terms of *anicca*, he says we tend to see the permanent in what is impermanent. That's the inverted or distorted perception. We look at our whole life and think, well, we might give lip service to "it's going to end," but the way we're really relating is: I'm here now, I'm going to be here tomorrow, I have my day book for what I'm going to be doing. In fact, I've been working on the summer of 2008 this afternoon, writing it down and assuming it's going to happen. Perception of permanence.

And the Buddha says the *saññā*, the inverted perception—and it can be just that quick perception of permanence or anything else—that perception leads to *citta*, to thought. So if we perceive permanence, we tend to think in that way. And then the way we think leads to *diṭṭhi*, to view. If we're having the perception of permanence, then we'll think about the experience as if it's permanent. And then the thoughts kind of harden into a view, like a belief we hold, which may not even be that clear in our mind. This is how things are. And that can be really broad—it can be in politics, it can be your idea about your personality—and it can be very subtle, like views of impermanence.

Our mind tends to interpret our perceptions and thoughts according to what's familiar, and then we use those thoughts to describe ourselves and the world, and then we believe that description. What's so interesting about perception is that our mind will tend to just look for the familiar, for what it already knows. It doesn't really tend to like opening into the unknown every moment. Often, if there's not a ready recognition of what's going on, the mind just fills it in with what it knows. So our perception is quite often inaccurate.

It's fun to watch this on retreat. When I was sitting in Burma recently, most of the people there were from many other countries. And it's a place where it's not dead silent, so there's a lot of talking. I'd be sitting in my room or walking outside, and I'd hear a whole conversation going on. It could be in the most likely languages—Korean, Vietnamese, Burmese, or Chinese—of which I understand not a word of any of them. And people would be going on, just talking, and all of a sudden I would hear a total sentence or phrase of perfect English in the middle of this conversation. Really a very complex phrase, and this happened over and over and over. I'd think, "Oh, it must be a couple of English speakers walking out there." I'd go look, and it wasn't. It was two Vietnamese nuns who didn't know any English. And then I'd realize they hadn't said anything in English at all. They'd said just some phrases and my perception turned it into what my mind was familiar with—some English phrase like, "Well, let's go down to the meditation hall now." All kinds of confabulation. This happened over and over. And it's not like I really heard that. I would swear that's exactly what I heard. We do this all the time. It's fascinating to see.

Have you ever had a time—this happens to me a lot—I'll be sitting in the dining room here, and by now, almost without even really looking, you kind of have a sense of who everybody is. Just have a sense of their energy as they walk past, or their feet, or their clothes, or you've run into them here or there. And if your mind is like mine, you have some little judgment going. You might not have a name for everybody, but you have some little judgment. It's just what our mind does.

So I'll be sitting there with my eyes closed, and someone comes and sits down near me, and I just know it's such and such a person. My whole story—whatever my story is, good, bad, indifferent—starts with that person. I have the reactions that go with that story. I have the self-judgment that goes with having those reactions to this poor person just living their life. And then I open my eyes. The person I thought it was is walking in at the other door. This person near me is completely different, had nothing to do with everything I'd been thinking. And I would have sworn I knew it was that person.

So just play with this possibility. The perception leads to thought, leads to view. I know it's that person, and I know my judgments about that person are accurate. I know what they did, and that's what they were feeling, and that's what they meant by it, and this is what they should have done. We believe all of that. All of us, all hundred of us, are running around making up stories like that and believing it all, from every perception.

So in terms of anicca, one of the reasons I heard the Dalai Lama giving a talk once, and he was talking

about perception of impermanence. He said it's hard enough to see impermanence—to really see that things begin and things end. Even that's hard enough for us. But we think once we see that—oh, this arises, it lasts a while, it goes away—that's impermanence.

But this is the trick about perception: that it lasts for a while in the middle. No, there's no lasting for a while without changing. There's not even this much of anything that's stable, that's permanent, that's unchanging, that lasts for a while. Nothing's lasting without changing from second to second. Now that's a level of perception of impermanence that can really start to shake up our worldview.

And the idea of it isn't the same as perception of it. I'm saying it now, but it doesn't really make any difference, does it? You think whatever you think about what I'm saying, and I'm saying it. But right now, my perception isn't really in that moment-to-moment level. It's not that it has to be all the time, though. But perceiving that subtlety, that radical nature of change—which is something that can happen at times on a meditation retreat, it can happen off of meditation retreat—it's not that we stay in this moment-to-moment where you don't know what's going on, how are you going to function in the world if you can't recognize who you are from moment to moment. It's not like that.

But the perception of that radical nature of change really shifts something in how we relate to ourselves in the world, because we understand ourselves and the world differently. And when we really understand the radicalness of change, the clinging—the holding on to experience, to objects, to people, to ideas for security, for self-fulfillment, for self-confirmation—when we really are getting it, that amount of change, the holding on... it's not that we have to say "stop." It just doesn't make any sense. Like trying to hold on to sand draining through. It doesn't make sense, so we stop trying.

And instead of that being some horrible thing, it's like: oh, wow, what a lot of energy was going into trying to hold together this view of solidity, when it wasn't necessary to do that at all. So freeing. Oh, it's like this. I know, that's easy to say.

But what we can explore in retreat is the ways that we uphold and support our inverted perception. We can notice when we're perceiving permanence, when we're assuming permanence, and then that can begin to shift. That requires a willingness to see—like what I was describing about the language—how the tendency of mind, of perception, is to look for what it already knows.

Have you noticed that in your practice? You have a new experience—oh, emptiness! It's like this. A new view has been formed, perception of emptiness, thoughts about it: it's like this. And then that's our idea of what we need to strive for. All freshness, all openness to the unknown in that moment is gone, because now we know what emptiness or samadhi or mindfulness or clear comprehension or choiceless awareness or whatever the heck feels like, looks like, is like. And the impermanence, the fact of constant shifting, changing conditions—we're not seeing that. We're assuming permanence.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said: "As long as you're interested in your present way of living, as long as you're

holding on to it, you won't abandon it. Discovery cannot come as long as you cling to the familiar. When you have all sorts of ideas about yourself, you know yourself through the mist of these ideas. To know yourself as you are, give up all ideas. You cannot imagine the taste of pure water. You can only discover it by abandoning all flavorings."

So that's what we're doing—exploring the flavorings in our mind and heart. Just seeing them, seeing them. And when we stop feeding them by holding on to them, they're abandoned. We don't have to abandon them. They just naturally drop away. And we can begin to discover things in a different way.

The Buddha said over and over—it's one of the refrains in many, many of his suttas—when he's talking to someone, he would say: feelings change, form changes, the whole litany I gave before. And people would say, yes, it's impermanent. And he would then say: Is what is impermanent satisfying? Can that be seen as self? And they'd always say no.

He's basically saying whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying. Whatever is impermanent cannot be seen or held to as me or mine. He says that over and over. And in the suttas, when he says that, everyone agrees—yes, that's right.

Well, I just pose it as a question. I've put this to myself many times: Do I even believe that? Really? Not on an intellectual level, because at this point—I mean, that's a start, because the intellectual understanding helps us look. But at the level of how we're actually relating to experience: whatever is impermanent is inherently unsatisfying, not worth clinging to as me or mine. Do we, never mind if we really *know* that—do we even *believe* that?

Just look and see if it ever happens in your experience that something you really like goes away, it's really gone, and you cling to it, wanting it to come back. Does that ever happen? Because we're still not getting it, you know? Just look and see. It's not that we're bad or stupid. It's not about judgment—just about seeing: where's the suffering in that scenario? Is there suffering in that scenario?

First of all, if you don't think there's suffering, if you like doing that, there's certainly no motivation to look more carefully. If we don't look carefully, we think the suffering is that the thing went away, and if we can get it back, we'll be okay. If we think that's the suffering, then we're motivated to keep clinging, to keep trying to get the thing back.

If we really have the perception over and over—oh, whatever arises in my experience is going to go away, probably sooner rather than later, no exception whatsoever—does that actually bring us... I mean, that's often a fearful thought when it first comes up, a fearful experience. But really, deeply seen, does that perception bring fear and sorrow? Or does it bring a real freedom? An ease, an ability to be really here now, open to whatever might arise next—the real possibility of living a life that's so vibrant, so appreciative, so present.

The Buddha said, "The search for a resting place is burning, burning. Not to need one is cool and peaceful."

Not to need a resting place—it is cool and peaceful.

Ajahn Chah said in one of his books, speaking about worldly knowledge and accomplishments: "Whatever worldly knowledge and accomplishments you have still leave you in this realm of suffering. Whatever happiness there may be—and there is happiness, sure—it comes about in dependence on external things. It's not the happiness of freedom, the happiness that does not depend on anything. What is it we depend on? We depend on possessions, on pleasure, on reputation, on praise, on wealth. We lean on all these things like leaning on a rotting old tree trunk. After we lean for too long, it breaks and falls, and we fall with it. Such is worldly happiness."

I just love that image somehow—breaks and falls, and we fall with it. He's talking about external things. But here in our meditative experience, we can have that same kind of trying to hold, trying to find a resting place with internal experiences, with beautiful meditative states. There can be that same habit of leaning on. Maybe it doesn't feel like a rotting old tree trunk—it feels like an incredibly beautiful, flowering, blissful, golden tree. We're still leaning on it. And it can still fall.

There's another sutta—I'm into the suttas tonight—where again, even a very accomplished, awakened monk still got caught in this clinging, in this not really seeing how things change. I find this inspiring, actually, that it still happens with these monks, because it says: okay, we expect so much so soon. It's so easy not to have patience for appreciating the depth and subtlety of our habits of mind, of our habit of perceiving permanence, of assuming permanence. That's a really deeply ingrained habit. So have a little compassion for ourselves, some patience.

Anyway, this is a monk named Assaji, and he was very sick.

In fact, he was about to die, and he wanted to see the Buddha. The Buddha came to see him and asked, "Well, are you getting better? Are you bearing up?" And the monk said, "No, I'm not getting better." He was basically dying.

The Buddha said, "Well, I hope you're not troubled by any remorse or regret." And the monk replied, "Actually, I have a lot of remorse and regret." The Buddha said, "Well, I hope it's not in regard to any of your actions or virtue. I hope you haven't done something horrible." The monk said, "No, no remorse about my actions, about my virtue."

The Buddha then asked, "Well, if you have nothing to reproach yourself with, why are you troubled by remorse and regret?"

And Asaji said—I'll paraphrase—"Formerly, Venerable Sir, when I was really ill, I could keep on tranquilizing." He could attain deep concentration even when ill, tranquilize the body formations, tranquilize the mind. And now he couldn't do that. Before, even when he was sick, he could reach this deep concentration. Now he couldn't, and he was filled with regret, remorse, with fear. "Let me not fall away. I cannot obtain concentration. Let me not fall away." Basically, "Let me not lose the Dhamma." He

was really scared about this.

The Buddha responded, first saying, "Asaji, to regard concentration as the essence of the ascetic life is not accurate. That is not what I'm teaching as the essence of our holy life. It's about insight. It's about freedom."

Then he asked, "What do you think, Asaji? Is form permanent or impermanent? Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?" Basically he was saying, "Look, the conditions have changed. Your consciousness is impermanent, your body is impermanent, feelings are impermanent. Yes, the conditions are different and now you can't obtain concentration. So what? That's not what freedom is about."

And this was when Asaji became an arahant, just before he died. It always happens like that. So maybe if we're lucky, we'll have a Buddha come to us at the end... But again, this just shows that even with someone who was a very sincere, well-practiced monk, fear can come up. "Oh my God, I've lost this state. What am I going to do?" Equating that state with the Dhamma. Equating it with freedom.

You get the sense that "everything changes" is so radical that there's nothing—nothing—to hold on to. Not even that really beautiful state of emptiness, not even that free-flowing choiceless awareness, not even the way I feel when I'm really understanding impermanence. That's going to go away too, you know?

Can we really get it that not needing a resting place is cool and peaceful? Don't try to hold on to that understanding. Just let it go through. Let it go through. It's in the not holding on that the ease and freedom is discernible. There's not a "me" there to appreciate it. That's the thing.

So the Buddha says, cultivate and develop the perception of anicca. I just want to offer a couple of hints here. My mind goes in two directions when I give hints like this, because they're just meant for those times when it's appropriate, when this is what's coming up in your experience. Maybe the hint will just help us to notice. But sometimes impermanence isn't the thing that's showing up. So if you all go out of here thinking, "Now, by golly, I'm going to see the beginnings and endings of everything"—please don't do that. You'll be twisted in no time. It's just like when we talk about vedanā or intentions; sometimes that's not the obvious thing.

So these hints are like something to put back there in the intelligence, in the attitude that we bring to our mindfulness practice. But in a moment of mindfulness, we let go of all referencing and just completely open with full attention into the actuality of the experience. Don't try to put an overlay of impermanence or an overlay of anattā or an overlay of anything, because that's just thinking. Does that make sense?

So, to the hints. Mindfulness versus confusing our concepts for mindfulness. Just the simplicity of attention that simply meets what's happening, just as it is. A simple sensation—burning—versus "the pain in my back that's been here since the beginning of the retreat." You see how we do that? "It's forty more minutes in this sitting. How am I going to get through this sitting with this pain?" Is that a familiar thought? That's just a thought. That doesn't have to be assuming permanence if you see that's just a

thought, and that thought is now gone.

But do you see how easy it is for us to take that thought—this pain in my knee or my back and forty more minutes in this sitting—and add it up to a whole lot of dukkha for forty more minutes? That's taking the concept. The reality is: burning, thinking, fear. Just noticing—fear feels like this. Thinking is like this. Burning is like this. "She says it's like this. I can't do that. That's so—" Oh, is like this. There's really no way you can get away from it, because whatever it is, struggle is like this. And each of those is a new experience arising. If we just have that simplicity of mindfulness, we see each one as a new experience as arising. When we're caught in the concept, all of that is bundled up into one big mass of dukkha, which is about "my back hurts and this sitting has forty more minutes to go." And in fact, that was about ten different things coming and going. And that can happen in less than a minute. Incredible change. Incredible impermanence.

One thing that masks anicca, that hides anicca in our time here, is this: as diligent as you all are in really noticing moment to moment—the sitting and the walking and through the day—many of us at least have some moments in the day when we're not totally mindful. Could I fairly say that might be true for some people? Sometimes. Sometimes the gaps are bigger than others.

One of the reasons we encourage continuity—not heavy continuity, but just that willingness to be here, to show up moment after moment—is that the lack of continuity of awareness hides impermanence. We assume so much. Say there's a big emotional knot of loneliness or grief or feeling abandoned, and it comes up and you're really with it, you're feeling it. Then the bell rings for lunch. "Oh, I wonder what's for lunch." And you go to lunch and you're going through all of that and come back to the next sitting. "Oh, here we are again. And this knot—this is really quite my day's work, at least, if not my lifetime. I reckon this is my life. This is the core of who I am."

We're pretty lot assuming permanence. And I've talked to a lot of people in interviews where I'll say, "Did you notice it really wasn't there at lunch?" "Well, I wasn't aware of it because I was eating, but—" You're laughing because you know what I'm going to say, right? "It's there underneath. It just wasn't what I was paying attention to at that time."

And isn't it often a belief you have? This core, like this pile of whatever you have in there—loneliness or greed or trauma or sadness. When we talk about purification, well, every time it comes up maybe a little chip of it's purified away, but there's this big glob of it sitting there and I've got to work it all out. And even when it's not there, we think it's there.

So I would like you to really notice when things are gone. Not "Oh, I'm not aware of it, but I know it's under there."

That's perception of permanence leading to thought of permanence, leading to a view: "I have to work out all this loneliness." Really notice the gone-ness of things—beautiful things, difficult things, neutral things.

You may not notice the moment it ends, and that's okay. But what we tend to do is jump into getting involved with the next object or the next experience.

Say you have a train of thought, and finally it ends. Thank God, let's get back to the breath. But just notice for a second the space before the next thought, before the next thing. You don't have to jump to fill it up. Something will come—you don't have to do anything. Something will come quickly. But just notice: that one is over.

This sounds silly, but somehow this was a big insight for me. I was eating on retreat, kind of mindfully chewing, chewing, chewing, and then I swallowed. As I swallowed, I saw what I usually do—I feel the sensations going down my throat, I can really track it, and so that's "the food going down my throat." But this time, I was really chewing, and then I swallowed, and it was in my mouth, and then—it was really gone. I mean, the food was gone. It wasn't there anymore. It was totally gone. And yes, there were sensations here, but that wasn't the food in my mouth. That was just sensations here, and the idea that it was the food was just an idea. You know what I mean? It's really, totally gone.

So notice that. Notice that with your knee pain. When it goes away, we tend to say, "Well, I didn't notice it for that moment, but now it's back." But it was really gone. Just notice. And for this, the simplicity of continuity is what really allows us to see that.

Sometimes with something difficult, we're afraid to look and notice it's gone because we think, you know, kind of that's bad luck—it's going to make it come back. But just notice. Loneliness isn't here. What's here is hunger. I'm not feeling abandoned. What's here is real annoyance at that person who's doing X, Y, and Z across the room.

So just pay attention.

Another way is to notice how changing conditions really change things. Like with Assaji—he was really sick, he was dying, and he expected to have the same concentration he'd had other times. Well, duh! The same thing happens here. Some days the energy's not so good. Some days the weather changes. You'd be amazed—maybe you wouldn't—but how much the weather seems to affect us. When we have nice days and then suddenly it gets really stormy and oppressive, it's really quite amazing how, not everyone, but a significant percentage of yogis that come in are cranky or tired. And we take it all personally. "What's the matter with me?" It's just the weather. We're not really separate from the weather. It changes. We think we can hold on and keep it the same.

So they say notice when things are over. Also notice when something new is beginning.

That's also change. And then you might also notice how we assume permanence, which I've been giving examples of – assuming into 2008, assuming that this pain is going to last the whole sitting, assuming that anything that's happening now is going to be happening in the next sitting. Never mind assuming that you finally got it right and so now your next sitting is going to be like this sitting and it's just going to keep on

going like that, right? And then when it isn't like that, you think you did something wrong. That's a complete assumption. Denying cause and effect, denying the fact that all the causes and all the conditions are changing – how can it stay the same all the time? It's actually more amazing when your sittings are similar than when they're different. Just notice, that's all, the assumption of permanence. When we assume we have any clue what's going to happen in the next moment, we're assuming permanence.

It's actually amazing to me that so much of the plans we make actually do happen. That I did two years ago plan that this summer I would be in Switzerland and Holland and here and there – and it really happened. And you send someone an email and they meet you at the airport at the right time. I mean, that's amazing. And everyone's still alive to do it. The plane kind of went on time. They didn't change their schedule and that airline still exists. There are just so many different conditions that could change. It's amazing. So that's part of what lulls us into thinking things don't change.

Why would we want to cultivate this perception of radical, constant change? That there's nowhere to rest? That the search for a resting place is burning? I mean, that could be a valid question. Why do I want to look at life this way? Obviously I would say because the other way doesn't really work, but you have to see if that's true for you. Why would we want to perceive this radical instability in ourselves, in others, in our emotions, in our thoughts, in our bodies, in conditions, in life?

The Buddha said, "The supreme state of sublime peace, which has been discovered by him, by the Tathagata, namely liberation through non-clinging." The supreme state of sublime peace – resting at ease in whatever arises. So we're not looking for a resting place, but each moment, each arising experience is the resting place because we don't need to look for something other or something to stay.

This sense of opening to the perception of impermanence – my experience in the times that I'm really in tune with it, when that clinging isn't happening so strongly in the mind and the heart, it opens our heart, our mind, our consciousness, just opens it to a kind of vitality of presence here and now. This looking to something to confirm ourselves, to give us a steadiness, to feel safe – it constricts the mind, it constricts the heart, it limits us. It's what breeds fear. It's what breeds needing to know, needing to control.

One or two of you have mentioned a little bit of a struggle with wanting to control everything. It's dukkha. It doesn't work. I mean, we were never in control. See, that's the thing. You're so afraid of losing control – you don't have any control. None of us has control. Why are we beating ourselves up at the thought of losing it? This is one of the mysteries, the paradoxes to me of the spiritual life.

But the supreme state of sublime peace – just that letting go, even for a moment, of needing to restrict ourselves to the known, of clinging to something for security, of needing something to stay the same to feel comfortable. And I'm a big comfort wallah, you know. I like to be comfortable. Our idea of constant change isn't comfort. But resting at ease in whatever arises allows us to meet whatever's happening now with a fullness of presence, a vitality, a tenderness, an appreciation that is so different from this kind of: Is this going to mess up the boat? Is this going to... I've got everything carefully arranged.

Is this going to mess it up? What's happening now?

A kind of flexibility becomes possible in our response to others, in our response to life, because we're really able to not drag the past with us, but to be here for whatever moment is arising now. This is not only in meditation, but in regular life.

I read a biography of Issan Dorsey. He was a Zen master in San Francisco in the eighties. He started a zendo, I think it was in the Castro district, really at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the late eighties when in that area of San Francisco so many gay men were dying. He was a gay man too, who had AIDS. And he started a zendo there with no big plans, but just being very responsive to how things happened as they happened. And so it ended up that their zendo turned into a hospice.

But he says here that it wasn't any plan that they had. He says, "We dealt with whatever came to the door. We started the hospice because death came to the door." You can deal with a complex, changing situation because you don't have to control it. You don't have to force it into an ideal pattern. You can actually allow it to be whatever it is and allow yourself to adapt to what it becomes. Because this is the way we proceed—we respond to the immediacy of the situation—and therefore we end up being very practical.

You get a sense of that. It can be in a more complex situation like that, a zendo turning into a hospice, just because of that presence, that immediacy with what's showing up right now that allows for the ceaseless responsiveness. The way the Tibetans talk about manifestation of the emptiness of heart and mind—ceaselessly responsive—because we're not holding to some preconceived notion. That can be in a complex situation like starting a hospice. That can simply be in the way you meet the next moment of your experience in the sitting, in the walking, as you go outside.

It's a kind of opening into the unknown that really frees our heart and mind from fear, from clinging. It's not that we have to uproot clinging, but clinging just doesn't make sense when we're really perceiving this fact of constant change, how much things shift. Clinging just keeps us from being totally present here and now.

And that sense of appreciation, of surrender into the immediacy of life—it's so poignant, lovely, peaceful, whatever it is for you. You all know those moments when there's just no reference to past or future. There's just no reference to how it should be or what does this mean about me. There's just that simplicity of total presence without clinging, resting at ease in whatever arises. And it doesn't really matter what it is that arises in that moment. Resting at ease, and then it's gone, and resting at ease in the next moment.

That's really the gift of the perception of *anicca*, the perception of impermanence. So far from being a fearful, destructive perception, it opens our minds, our hearts, our lives to so much more sensitivity and so much more appreciation than is otherwise possible.

I'll just end with this one line from Nisargadatta Maharaj. He says, "Be quiet, free from the obsession with 'what next.' In the silence, something may be heard which is ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception."

So just be quiet, free from the obsession with what next.

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